

Children in low-income homes do better in kindergarten if moms work when they are babies

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Kindergarteners from lower-income families who were babies when their mothers went to work outside the home fare as well as or even better than children who had stay-at-home moms, according to new research published by the American Psychological Association.

This finding, in a study published in APA's journal *Developmental Psychology*, is contrary to the findings of previous studies of children born two to three decades ago. Family income is apparently a key factor, with the new research finding children from low-income families had slightly higher cognitive skills if their mothers went back to work before they were 9 months old, and fewer conduct problems if their mothers went back to work when they were between 9 and 24 months old. For children in middle-income households, there were no ill effects if their mothers worked when they were babies. However, for children in high-income households, the study found small detrimental

effects. The results showed no significant differences across racial and ethnic groups.

"Moms going back to work when children are still babies may affect the children differently in contemporary society because there are so many more working women today with greater responsibility for their families' income," said lead author Caitlin McPherran Lombardi, PhD, of Boston College. "Different cultural attitudes, more readily available and higher-quality child care and more fathers participating in childrearing are other possible reasons for the difference."

The study used data from a National Center for Education Statistics longitudinal survey that followed 10,700 children born in the United States in 2001. Prior research that found a negative link between early maternal [employment](#) and children's later development was based on data from large-scale U.S. studies of children born in 1982, 1991 and 1993, the study said. For the more recent survey, 31 percent of mothers reported no employment in the two years following the child's birth, while 58 percent of mothers were employed before the child was 9 months old and 11 percent were employed when their child was between 9 and 24 months. These numbers are similar to those reported in national employment statistics from the same year, the study said.

The NCES survey collected data about the children when they were 9 months, 2 years and 4 years old, and when they entered kindergarten. Their households ran the gamut of incomes from low to high, and the families spoke not only English or Spanish, but other languages as well to ensure a nationally representative sample.

Time, stress and money were the main factors the researchers examined to determine the effects of

mothers' employment on children. Mothers reported how many hours they worked, their wages and other sources of [family income](#) and described their stress levels. Children's [cognitive skills](#) at the start of kindergarten were measured using standardized tests of vocabulary, early reading and early mathematical ability. The children's behavior in kindergarten was assessed via teacher reports on a commonly used rating scale for preschool and kindergarten behavior that included attention skills and interaction with peers.

"Most mothers today return to full-time work soon after childbirth, and they are also likely to remain in the labor market five years later, suggesting the employment decisions soon after childbirth are pivotal to determining mothers' long-term employment," said Lombardi. "Our findings suggest that [children](#) from families with limited economic resources may benefit from paid maternal leave policies that have been found to encourage [mothers](#)' employment after childbearing."

More information: "Early Maternal Employment and Children's School Readiness in Contemporary Families," Caitlin McPherran Lombardi, PhD, and Rebekah Levine Coley, PhD, Boston College, *Developmental Psychology*, online June 9, 2014.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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