



ParentingNI  
Supporting Families

Working Mothers:  
Should I try to balance  
being a mother and an  
employee?

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## Introduction

Women make up half of the working-age population in Northern Ireland. However, only 65% of women are employed, and 39% of those work part time. Almost an equal amount are economically “inactive” due to family/home commitments. Some mothers choose not to work, or to work less hours while they are raising children. However, for many other women, they effectively have little or no choice. If they did not work, they would not be able to bring enough income to support their families.

Despite these realities, the truth is that many mothers worry about the impact of their employment on their children. They are concerned that they might miss out on important developmental milestones or feel guilty that they are “putting work ahead of family”. In the past, this was a mainstream view. In 1984, 49% of those surveyed agreed with the statement: “A man’s job is to earn money; a woman’s job is to look after the home and family”. However notably in 2017, just 8% of respondents agreed.

Although this suggests that society has collectively begun to see working mothers as normal, many of the structural barriers continue to exist. In some ways, the focus has shifted in such a way that women are under dual pressures – whereas historically they would have only been expected to look after a home and family, they now quite often have a job as well. While society may have accepted that women ought to have the right to work, the majority of childcare and house work is still undertaken by women. In 2016 the ONS found that women spent around 40% more time on unpaid chores than men.

This article will examine what some academic sources say about the impact that working has on mothers and their children. It will give advice on how to potentially avoid unnecessary stresses, and to minimise any negative outcomes for children.

## Is it good for children to have a working mother?

As previously mentioned, many mothers do not have the privilege of deciding if they wish to work or not. This can be particularly challenging for single-parent households where the other parent is not involved, or where there is limited familial support. However, what does the evidence say about children having a working mother?

We know that there are there some older studies which note that there may be some negative impacts. A 2010 Australian study noted that there was a link between mothers working longer hours and children watching more television. In turn, this led to increased weight gain in children and decreased exercise. The study found that women who worked longer hours had less direct supervision of their children. Because of this, they often felt uncomfortable letting their children play outdoors, and preferred them to amuse themselves in a relatively safer indoor space. This in turn led to more time spent watching TV. Additionally, less time to cook meals caused an increase in the amount of “junk” food consumed.

Additionally, a study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) in 2001 found that when mothers returned to full-time work before their child was 5 years old, risks of lower

outcomes for their children increased. They suggested such children had lower educational attainment and more unemployment. The reason suggested in this report for these outcomes was that mothers would have less time for direct interaction with their children during these crucial periods. However, the report was not unequivocal in its warning. It noted that there significantly less negative outcomes for mothers who work part time as opposed to full-time. Additionally, it suggested that when women work, it increases the household income which is likely to have positive impacts on children that were not measured in the report. Given the deleterious effects poverty has on families and children, it was proposed that any negative impacts of working could be outweighed by a mother's work avoiding financial strain in later life.

Additionally, a study conducted by LSA and the University of Oxford in 2016 found that children whose mothers worked had better social and "everyday" skills. These results included children who were considered to be "very young". By comparison, it suggested that children whose mothers are not working had lower outcomes in social, mobility, talking and "everyday" skills. They found that where mothers (and fathers) were active and engaged in their parenting, children's outcomes improved. Therefore, it can be suggested that a mother working is not necessarily negative for even young children. Rather, it can be positive provided that mothers are careful not to allow work to interfere with having an engaged parenting style.

A more recent study, conducted in 2018 looked at the positives for children of having a working mother. This extensive report looked at the impacts across a very large number of countries including the UK, France, Finland and the USA. Overall, it found a positive link particularly between daughters of mothers who worked and:

- Higher levels of employment;
- Higher pay in employment;
- More supervisory roles

They also found that sons of working mothers had significantly more egalitarian gender attitudes, and were more supportive of women's engagement in the labour market. They also shared responsibilities better in household work. This report found that children are often influenced by the employment choices of their parents, in particular the same-sex parent. Importantly, the report also found no evidence that positive impacts for daughters translated to negative outcomes for sons. While girls were more likely to benefit, boys did not experience any negative impact from having a working mother.

Many mothers are concerned not only about the later outcomes of their children, but their emotional wellbeing as well. The feeling of guilt associated with working and missing time with children, particularly younger children is a major motivating factor of many mothers seeking to leave employment. However, a report by Harvard Business school found that children of working mothers are just as happy as adults as those whose mothers did not work.

A study in 2014 by the University of Wollongong in Australia found that children whose mothers worked more than 35 hours a week were more likely to pursue higher education as well. Unlike the earlier report by the JRF, this report focused on teenage children. It found that teens whose mothers worked full time were less likely to leave school at 16 as well.

In summary, some older studies suggest there may be challenges for children whose mothers work very long hours compared to part time-work and these challenges are most significant when the child is aged 5 or under. However, there is a range of evidence, which suggests that there are many positive outcomes for children when their mothers work later in their lives, or if they work part-time.

Additionally, the impact of financial hardship is much greater (in a negative sense) than any associated effects or impacts of working mothers. Therefore, if mothers choose to work or feel that they must work for financial reasons, they should not feel guilt. Instead, it's important that mothers recognise all the positives that their work is bringing to them and their children.

### Is it good for me?

Mothers will naturally worry most about the effects their work will have on their children first. However, it is important that they also consider the impact of going back to work will have on themselves. Parents who are stressed often find it more difficult to parent effectively, and being a working mother is likely to cause stress. So presuming that a mother has the means to choose if and when she wants to work as well as how much, what is best for her?

Naturally, this will depend on each individual. Some women will be very keen to return to a career they are passionate about. Others will be less enthusiastic about going back to full time work. A study in the United States looked at the impact on mood and happiness working had on mothers. It found that both positive and negative impacts are possible. Women who went back to work often felt more accomplished and self-confident, but also more stressed. The source of this stress was found to be inter-role conflicts. In other words, difficulties between juggling being a mother and an employee. Additionally, the researchers suggested that these stresses may be more heightened for mothers than for fathers, because they found that women were more likely to process their role as a mother and an employee at the same time. Fathers on the other hand tended to deal with these roles one at a time. This is at least partially because mothers are more likely to be called in the event of a family problem – such as a sick child.

The Working Mother Research Institute conducted a survey in 2015 of working mothers asking how they felt. They found some unsurprising findings – that mothers that make less money are less satisfied for example. They also found that mothers tend to de-prioritise self-care when there are high levels of stress between work and home life. The biggest single contributing factor to satisfaction for working mothers was flexible working.

This conclusion was supported by a survey of mid-career working mothers in Ireland. They found that family structure and parenting responsibilities were central to predicting levels of stress. The more support working mothers had, the less likely it was for them to experience burnout. They also described the centrality of flexible working, and divided it into two forms:

- “Formal” flexibility – this was things like flexi-time, part time working or other contractual arrangements that allowed working mothers to predict when they would be able to take more (or less) parental responsibilities;
- “Informal” flexibility – this referred to employers being more or less willing to allow for sudden changes in circumstances (like a child needing to come home early from school).

Both types of flexibility were considered helpful, but whereas mothers felt they should be entitled to formal flexibility, they felt they needed to earn informal flexibility. Either way, it is clear that the more flexible the working pattern, the better outcomes for working mothers would be. As such, when a mother is considering returning to work, she should seek out flexible working patterns if at all possible. The good news is that the law in the UK provides the right to ask for flexible working as long as you:

- Are an employee, but not an agency worker (other than those returning from a period of parental leave) or in the armed forces;
- Have worked for your employer for 26 weeks continuously before applying;
- Have not made another application to work flexibly under the right during the past 12 month.

If you meet their criteria, your employer must legally consider your request seriously, and only reject it if there are good business reasons for doing so.

## Conclusion

It is clear that there are potential negatives and positives relating to being a working mother. It is inevitable that lower levels of supervision provide more opportunities for undesirable behaviour. However, the positives are significant – especially for daughters and for women themselves. Mothers who are already working should not feel guilty, and can reduce stress on themselves by considering any possibilities for flexible working. The best way to safeguard against any negative outcomes, while still enjoying the benefits of the positive aspects is to ensure that your parenting is not affected. If a working mother is careful to continue to parent in an engaged and active manner, there are few meaningful negative consequences to working.

The good news for mothers is that the evidence suggests that working or not working is not determinative. Research suggests that both can have positives or negatives, and that those negatives are not set in stone. Therefore, women should feel empowered to do what they feel is right for their children, their families and themselves. If they choose

to stay at home, or to return to work, they should not feel guilt or fear about the impact it will have on their children. Instead, they should simply be aware of the realities and adjust their choices accordingly.

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