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Research Links Fathers' Job Stress, Other Risk Factors to Parents' Knowledge about Children's Daily Experiences

Keeping up with the kids gets even tougher when fathers' job stress is combined with the additional challenges of dealing with a less than harmonious marriage and an active young son, according to researchers at Pennsylvania State University. Their study, which provides insight into the seldom-examined area of employment circumstances and family dynamics during the middle childhood years, is published in the May edition of the national *Journal of Marriage and the Family*.

On its own, work stress does not necessarily make parents less knowledgeable, but fathers' high job pressure in combination with certain other conditions, might interfere with parents' abilities to stay informed about who their children are spending time with and what they are doing on a daily basis, the research shows.

The overriding message is that parents need to be knowledgeable about their children's activities, but won't be able to acquire the information on their own. Parents' knowledge of their children's daily activities is not just a matter of tracking or monitoring, the researchers say. Children must reveal information, a two-way process that can be jeopardized by certain circumstances within the family.

The findings represent the first wave of data from an on-going project to examine how parents' work affects family life and, in turn, child and adolescent development. The Penn State Family Relationships Project, in the journal article, reports initial findings from a three-year study of approximately 200 working parents and the two oldest children in the family. The older children were either in the fourth or fifth grade.

Middle childhood -- after preschool and before adolescence -- is a crucial period as children increase participation in activities and with peers outside the family. It's a time when parental monitoring becomes more important but direct supervision less feasible,

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according to Project Co-Directors Ann C. Crouter and Susan M. McHale, both professors of Human Development, and Matthew F. Bumpus, a doctoral candidate in Human Development at Penn State. Bumpus is the lead author of the article, "Work Demands of Dual-Earner Couples: Implications for Parents' Knowledge about Children's Daily Lives in Middle Childhood."

It's well documented that parental monitoring is important for children's development and that low levels of parental involvement and control are a risk factor for delinquency, drug use and other problem behaviors. The new study focuses on the related concept of parental knowledge, which taps how much parents know about their children's daily experiences, whereabouts and companions. Funded by the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development, it is one of only a few studies to look at underlying conditions related to how well parents monitor their children or how aware they are of their children's activities.

The study supports existing research reflecting the prevailing influence of fathers' negative emotions and stress-related social withdrawal on the family, and suggests other risk factors that seem to hamper parents' knowledge about their children's activities, including the indirect effect of a sibling on overall awareness.

"We found that fathers' work demands were related to lower levels of parental knowledge, under certain conditions, with marital happiness being an important factor," Bumpus says.

High paternal work demands, in combination with a less happy marriage, were associated with lower levels of parental knowledge. "Happy marriages are more likely to be communicative marriages, and perhaps overworked spouses in positive relationships indirectly keep track of their children's daily lives via conversations," Bumpus explains.

The average age of the older children in the study was 10 years. They had at least one sibling one to three years younger, lived in their family of origin, with both parents employed at least part-time. Fathers' annual income averaged \$40,170, and mothers' income averaged \$19,559. The mean level of job prestige included occupations such as real estate agent, farm manager and public relations specialist. Couples were classified as either happily or less happily married.

The relation of the younger child's gender to parental knowledge surprised the researchers. In families with high job demands on fathers, parental knowledge about both

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children was higher if the younger siblings were female. The sex of the older child made no difference. Both parents in all work demand categories rated younger boys more active than younger girls.

A possible explanation is that parents must work harder to track young boys, and boys don't tend to disclose information about themselves as easily as girls, says Crouter. "If parents are happy and the father is not in a particularly stressed situation, boys may spend more time with the family in a more relaxed atmosphere, making it easier for parents to find out what's going on," she explains.

In any event, the gender association is disconcerting, the researchers agree, especially considering research evidence that suggests boys are particularly susceptible to poor outcomes when inadequately monitored.

"This is another example of the power of marital relationships to either strengthen or jeopardize parenting. The challenge -- and hard work -- is to develop and model a close, trusting relationship that allows a child to be open," says Crouter.

Parents' attitudes, although not specifically addressed in the study, may also hold a clue as to why fathers who worked more hours, made more money and held more prestigious jobs, under certain conditions, tended to know less about their children. These fathers may be more likely to view their main responsibility as that of breadwinner, with other roles as less important. Also marital power may make fathers' participation in family activities more optional, according to the researchers.

"Even though more and more mothers work full-time, fathers in many families are still seen as the primary economic supporter and therefore more important," says Crouter. "His work stress would have more influence because of his status in the family."

Research also shows that men and women handle stress differently. "It's harder for men to recover from stress, which may mean they come home in a more stressed, preoccupied condition," says Crouter. "Women, on the other hand, may be more able to compartmentalize stressful situations."

Mothers typically are more involved in day-to-day child rearing and generally are more knowledgeable about their children's experiences, even when faced with their own high demands at work, Crouter points out. However, mothers in the study did not compensate for fathers' lack of awareness by being extra vigilant.

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The researchers say it is less clear why mothers in unhappy marriages or with younger sons are less knowledgeable when their husbands face high demands at work. But the findings suggest that fathers' work stress exerts a more negative influence than mothers' work demands and is more likely to invade the home.

The study indicates some important messages about the complexities of how families work and perhaps can work better, the researchers emphasize. For example:

- Society has tended to be very concerned about the effect of mothers' work on their children. The new research signals that fathers and their work circumstances are also significant in the

developmental process. Both parents need to pay attention to the nature of their work and its possible consequences on other areas of family life.

- Many parents aren't aware of the various ways unhappiness may seep out of the marriage and influence other members and functioning of the family. Even if the father is very stressed, but in a harmonious relationship, that negative spillover doesn't appear to happen.
- Children's characteristics, such as activity and expression levels, as well as the sex of the younger child, may help shape the impact of work and parental demands on families. The finding that the younger child's gender might be related to the type of parenting the other child receives if the father is stressed reveals the complexity of the challenges families face.
- It is extremely important that parents stay informed about their children's daily experiences. It takes two-way communication, and children are more likely to talk about their experiences when parents have a solid, honest and expressive relationship. This appears to be easier to achieve when fathers are not in highly demanding jobs and when parents' marriages are harmonious.

The researchers plan to continue studying the same families over the next few years, providing rare information about the effect of middle childhood family situations and experiences as the children transition into adolescence.

The Journal of Marriage and the Family is the quarterly publication of the National Council on Family Relations, headquartered in Minneapolis. The Journal is edited by Robert Milardo, professor of Human Development at the University of Maine.

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Media notes

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