Employment, Parenting, and Well-Being Among Mothers of Children With Disabilities

Marji Erickson Warfield

Abstract
The influence of employment on parenting stress among mothers of 5-year-old children with developmental disabilities and the influence of parenting demands (i.e., caregiving difficulty and behavior problems) and family support on their work quality and absenteeism from work was examined. No significant associations were found between employment status and parenting demands, family support, or stress for the sample as a whole. Among employed mothers, those who rated their jobs as interesting reported significantly less parenting stress when they experienced low or mean levels of parenting demands. Mothers’ interest in work did not moderate the negative influence of high levels of parenting demands on stress. Finally, parenting demands increased absenteeism but had no effect on work quality. Implications of these findings are discussed.

The large-scale entrance of women with young children into the work force over the last several decades has precipitated a deluge of discussion and analysis in the scholarly literature and mainstream media on the interplay between family and work roles and their influence on parental stress, family well-being, and work productivity (Barnett & Rivers, 1996; Hochschild, 1997). Numerous journal and magazine articles as well as news and talk shows have been devoted to assessing the strategies used by parents (mostly mothers) to manage the array of complex day-to-day tasks involved in building both a nurturing and cohesive family life and a satisfying work life.

The association between work, parenting, and well-being, however, has rarely been studied among mothers of children with disabilities. Related literature indicates that these mothers face greater caregiving challenges (Erickson & Upshur, 1989) and have fewer sources of reliable child care (Warfield & Hauser-Cram, 1996) than do mothers of typically developing children. These findings suggest that becoming employed and maintaining employment may place extra burdens on mothers of children with disabilities. In contrast, mothers reported in another study that once they are employed, work provides respite and that the skills they develop in parenting their children with special needs are valuable in the workplace (Freedman, Litchfield, & Warfield, 1995). Thus, employment may be either a stressor or a buffer of stress for mothers of children with disabilities.

In the first part of the present study, I have examined whether the parenting demands and stress reported by mothers of young children with disabilities influence their employment status. In two papers published in the early 1980s, researchers found that caring for a child with a disability lowered the probability of maternal employment and the number of hours of employment (Baldwin & Glendinning, 1983; Breslau, Salkovev, & Staruch, 1982). More recently, Booth and Kelly (1999) examined the influence of different child characteristics on maternal employment decisions within a sample of mothers of infants with disabilities. The impact on work plans was greatest for mothers of infants with lower mental, motor, and adaptive functioning as well as mothers of infants with chronic health problems and those who require adaptive equipment. Thus, there is some evidence that employment status may be influenced by the parenting demands associated with caring for a child with disabilities.

Parenting demands, however, do not prevent
all mothers of children with disabilities from being employed. In fact, Landis (1992) found that mothers of such children entered the labor force at the same rate as the general population. Fewell (1993) has estimated that 1.3 million children under 6 years of age who had special needs had mothers in the workforce in 1990. Therefore, in the second part of the present analysis, I have focused on employed mothers of young children with disabilities and built on previous work in two areas of research: (a) work/family studies conducted on the general population and (b) studies in which investigators examined parental adaptation to caring for a child with a disability. Figure 1 outlines the conceptual framework that will guide the analysis.

As shown, characteristics of the parenting role are examined as predictors of well-being on the job, whereas characteristics of the work role are investigated as predictors of parenting well-being. Both rewarding (i.e., family support and work interest) and difficult (i.e., child demands and work demands) aspects of each role are investigated. Well-being in the role of employee is defined by examining what employers look for in a worker (i.e., someone who reports to work consistently and produces high quality work). Well-being for the role of parent is defined by examining the personal impacts associated with the challenges of the parenting role. Mothers who are doing well in the parenting role have lower stress associated with their attachment to their child, their sense of competence as a parent, and their feelings of social isolation.

Work/family studies of employees in large corporations have analyzed how child demands relate to aspects of work productivity, such as absenteeism. For example, unexpected caregiving demands encountered when a child gets sick have been associated with such measures of productivity as missing work, leaving work early, coming in late, and getting interrupted at work (Fernandez, 1986; Goff, Mount, & Jamison, 1990). Because mothers of children with disabilities report greater caregiving challenges than do mothers of children developing typically, they may face added difficulties around work attendance. For example, in comparison to mothers of children without disabilities, mothers of children with special needs missed more days of work (Neal, Chapman, Ingersoll-Dayton, & Emlen, 1993). Participants in a focus group study on work and family issues for parents of children with disabilities confirmed this finding by acknowledging that their family responsibilities can disrupt their work schedules (Freedman et al., 1995). They reported taking unscheduled time off and making personal phone calls from work to coordinate services for their children.

In contrast, however, these parents did not feel

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**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework for study analysis.
that the quality of their work was affected negatively by their parenting responsibilities. Focus group parents reported that they would “bend over backwards” and do whatever was necessary to make up for the time lost due to parenting distractions. Their extra efforts resulted in their work being done well and on time. In this way they felt they maintained high work performance standards.

Despite the evidence that aspects of the parenting role influence an employee’s well-being at work, little systematic evidence exists linking work role characteristics to parenting well-being. Within the disability literature, investigators studying maternal adaptation to caring for a child with a disability have not examined the employment role. These analyses have focused only on identifying how different types of parenting demands influence well-being and stress. For example, significant relations between more unusual caregiving requirements and greater stress and depression have been found (Harris & McHale, 1989; Herman & Marcenko, 1997; Wallander, Pitt, & Mellins, 1990). In addition, mothers have reported greater difficulty in coping with their preschool-age child with a disability when the child also has behavior problems (Marcovitch, Goldberg, Lojekasek, & Macgregor, 1987). Once these parenting demands are controlled for, however, different types of supports have been found to predict positive adaptation. For example, Warfield, Krauss, Hauser-Cram, Upshur, and Shonkoff (1999) found that greater familial support is associated with less parenting stress, over and above the influence of the severity of the child’s disability.

Because employment status and work conditions have been left out of studies of maternal adaptation, little is known about their influence on stress. Within the general population, however, job conditions such as greater time pressures and workload have been correlated with increased depression, anxiety, and poorer physical health (Goldberg, Greenberger, Hamill, & O’Neil, 1992; Karasek, 1979; Marshall & Barnett, 1992), whereas job satisfaction has been associated with lower depression (Olson & DiBrignida, 1994). Preliminary evidence from a focus group study suggests that employment provides respite for mothers of children with disabilities, especially those with children who also have behavior problems (Freedman et al., 1995).

Therefore, my purpose in this study was to examine systematically the relations between employment, parenting, and well-being among mothers of children with disabilities. First, both mothers who were and who were not employed were examined together to determine whether parent role characteristics and parenting stress are associated with employment status. Second, for those mothers who were employed, the interplay between work and family roles was investigated through testing whether work conditions influenced parental stress and whether different aspects of the parenting role influenced well-being on the job. Specifically, the following two hypotheses were tested among employed mothers: (a) Over and above characteristics of the parenting role, work role characteristics will influence parenting stress and (b) over and above work conditions, parenting role characteristics will influence absenteeism and work quality.

Method

Sample

Mothers in the study were enrolled in the Early Intervention Collaborative Study, which is a longitudinal investigation of the predictors of resilience and vulnerability in the emerging competencies of young children with disabilities and the adaptive capacities of their families (Shonkoff, Hauser-Cram, Krauss, & Upshur, 1992). Families were recruited for the study at the time of their enrollment in 1 of 29 early intervention programs in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Families with a child who met specific criteria in one of the following three groups were eligible to participate in the research: (a) children with Down syndrome (confirmed through medical record review), (b) children with motor impairments who demonstrated evidence of abnormal muscle tone (hypotonia or hypertonia) or coordination deficit along with delayed or deviant motor development with or without other areas of delays, and (c) children who demonstrated evidence of delays in two or more areas of development, with no established diagnosis or cause that implied a specific prognosis. In addition, all children had to be 2 years of age or less at the time of their referral to early intervention to be eligible to participate.

The data used in the present analysis were gathered within one month of each child’s fifth birthday. Although a total of 156 mothers participated in this phase of the study, complete data on the key analysis variables were available for 122 mothers (78.2%). Comparisons between these 122 cases and the 34 cases excluded due to missing data.
revealed no significant differences in mothers' employment status, years of education, family income and size, or child cognitive performance, type of disability, and gender.

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the sample by maternal employment status. Mothers who worked 35 hours per week or more were defined as full-time employees, whereas mothers working between 15 and 34 hours per week were considered part-time employees.

Approximately one-half of the sample mothers (n = 56, 45.9%) were employed either full-time (n = 26, 21.3%) or part-time (n = 30, 24.6%). No significant demographic differences were found by employment status. The mothers in the sample were predominantly European American and married. They were 34 years of age and had completed 14 years of education. The families were primarily middle class and included 3 children. Approximately one half of the sample children were female, and they were evenly distributed across the three diagnostic categories. About two thirds of the children met the American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR) definition of mental retardation at age 5 years (Luckasson et al., 1992).

The subsample of employed mothers (n = 56) worked an average of 31.4 hours per week (standard deviation [SD] = 10.2, range = 15 to 55). They were employed in a wide range of jobs. The majority of the working mothers (85.6%) were employed in the following seven job categories. Almost one fourth (21.4%) could be categorized as business women. This group included underwriters, auditors, office managers, administrators, systems analysts, bookkeepers, and career counselors. Four other job categories each included 12.5% of the sample: (a) nurses and nurses aides, medical and biomedical technologists (e.g., ultrasound technician, cytotechnologist), (b) human service personnel (e.g., clinical social worker, home health aide), and (c) retail workers (e.g., cashiers, clerks). Two additional job categories (i.e., teachers and day care providers) each included 7.1% of the sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Full time (n = 26)</th>
<th>Part time (n = 30)</th>
<th>Not employed (n = 66)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of disability (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Down syndrome</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor impaired</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>31.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental delay</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>37.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive performance&lt;sup&gt;a,b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>58.0 (21.3)</td>
<td>62.4 (22.7)</td>
<td>61.4 (24.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental retardation&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt; (%)</td>
<td>80.8</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (%)</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>43.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>33.6 (4.7)</td>
<td>34.8 (3.6)</td>
<td>34.1 (5.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of education&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>13.8 (2.2)</td>
<td>14.7 (2.4)</td>
<td>13.9 (2.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race (European-American, %)</td>
<td>84.6</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>93.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Married (%)</td>
<td>68.0</td>
<td>86.7</td>
<td>79.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size&lt;sup&gt;b,d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>3.1 (0.8)</td>
<td>3.1 (0.7)</td>
<td>3.3 (0.7)</td>
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<td>Income (%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>&lt;$20,000</td>
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<td>10.7</td>
<td>32.3</td>
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<td>$20,000-$39,999</td>
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<tr>
<td>$40,000+</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>36.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Measured by the General Cognitive Index (GCI) of the McCarthy Scales of Children's Abilities. <sup>b</sup>Results are means (SDs). <sup>c</sup>Children were assessed as to whether they met the AAMR definition of mental retardation. <sup>d</sup>Size was measured as the number of children in the family.
Procedure

Home visits were conducted when the children were within one month of their fifth birthday by two research staff members who were not aware of the study hypotheses. An in-depth interview was conducted with the mother, and a standardized cognitive and functional assessment was conducted with the child. After the home visit, packets of self-administered questionnaires were completed by the mothers and returned to the study office.

Measures

Parenting well-being. Higher levels of parenting well-being were defined as lower levels of parenting stress. The Parenting Stress Index (Abidin, 1995) was completed by mothers after the home visit. This index is a measure of the magnitude of stress in the parent–child system that consists of 101 items with primarily 5-point Likert scale responses. The Parenting Domain score was used in the analysis. It includes seven subscales that measure parent attachment to the child, sense of competence in the parenting role, parental depression, parent health, social isolation, restrictions in role, and relations with spouse. Higher scores indicate greater parenting stress. The mean score for the sample was 122.7 (SD = 24.2). The Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient was .94. The Parenting Stress Index has been used extensively in research and clinical settings to determine parental adaptation patterns (McKinney & Peterson, 1987; Noh, Dumas, Wolf, & Fisman, 1989; Shonkoff et al., 1992).

Employer well-being. Employee well-being is conceptualized in terms of absenteeism and work quality. Successful employees can be relied on to show up consistently and produce high quality work. Absenteeism is commonly used as one gauge of work productivity (Goff et al., 1990; Neal et al., 1993). Absenteeism was measured using one item from the Impact on Family Scale (Stein & Reisman, 1980). Mothers were asked to rate on a 4-point scale the extent to which they agreed with the following statement: “Time is lost from work because of service/medical appointments.” Almost one third (30.4%) of the sample agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Thus, higher scores indicate greater absenteeism.

Work quality can be assessed either by supervisors or by employees themselves (Fedor & Rowland, 1989). In this study, mothers were asked to evaluate the quality of their work using a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (poorly done) to 7 (well done). The average rating was 4.6 (SD = 1.7). Almost one-quarter of the sample (23.2%) gave themselves a rating below the mid-point of the range (i.e., a 1, 2, or 3 rating), whereas slightly more than one third (35.7%) gave themselves one of the top two ratings (i.e., a 6 or 7). Higher scores indicate higher work quality.

Parenting role. The parenting role involves both meeting the child’s demands for care and nurturing and garnering support in providing that care from other members of the family. Child demands include both perceptions of caregiving burden and characteristics of the child with disabilities that are likely to make caregiving more challenging. Caregiving difficulty was assessed using a scale in which mothers were asked to rate the difficulty of 12 different caregiving tasks on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (not difficult) to 4 (extremely difficult) (Shonkoff et al., 1992). The tasks were bathing, feeding, toileting, getting the child to sleep, dressing, daily health, organizing play, comforting, supervising, dealing with school or day care, taking the child to the doctor, and assisting the child to move. The difficulty ratings were summed across the 12 tasks so that higher scores indicate more caregiving difficulty. The mean score for the sample was 18.7 (SD = 4.2). The Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient was .66.

Second, behavior problems were assessed using the Child Behavior Checklist for Ages 2–3 (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983). Although the children in the sample were 5 years of age, the Child Behavior Checklist for ages 2 to 3 was used because the mental ages of the children in the sample make the items in the age 2 to 3 version more appropriate (Warfield, 1995). The total behavior problems score was used. The mean score for the sample was 50.7 (SD = 9.4). The Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient was .91. Higher scores indicate more behavior problems. An analysis of the relation between caregiving difficulty and behavior problems revealed that they are highly correlated, r = .70(1, 55), p < .001. Therefore, a composite variable representing parenting demands was created by transforming each variable into a z score and summing the two z scores.

Finally, the third child demand characteristic, cognitive performance, was measured using the McCarthy Scales of Children’s Abilities (McCarthy, 1972). Higher scores indicate greater cognitive abilities.

Family support was measured based on three
individual items. A rating for the degree of helpfulness of the respondent's spouse, other relatives, and spouse's relatives was determined using a 5-point Likert scale. The sum of these ratings was used in the analysis. Higher scores indicate greater levels of support. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was .72.

Work role. Both work demands and rewards constitute employment conditions that have been related to various measures of well-being in other studies (Goldberg et al., 1992; Marshall & Barnett, 1992; Olson & DiBrigida, 1994). Two measures of work demands were assessed: the number of hours worked per week and work intensity. Work intensity was assessed by asking mothers to rate their job on a scale from 1 to 7 to indicate the extent to which the job was manageable versus overwhelming. Higher scores indicated a more demanding job. The mean rating was 3.6 (SD = 1.6). Two fifths of the sample (42.9%) rated their job on the "manageable" end of the scale (i.e., a 1, 2, or 3 rating), whereas one quarter (25%) rated it on the "overwhelming" end of the scale (i.e., a 5, 6, or 7 rating).

The extent to which respondents found their work to be interesting was considered to be a work reward. Being interested in the work one does is one element of job satisfaction (Weiss, Dawis, England, & Lofquist, 1967). Work interest was assessed by asking mothers to rate their job on a scale from 1 to 7 to indicate the extent to which it was boring versus interesting. Higher scores indicate greater interest. The average rating was 3.2 (SD = 1.5). Slightly more than one half of the sample (58.9%) rated their job toward the "boring" end of the scale (i.e., a 1, 2, or 3 rating) and one quarter (23.2%) rated their job at the midpoint (i.e., a 4 rating). Only 17.9% rated their job toward the "interesting" end of the scale (i.e., a 5, 6, or 7 rating).

Family characteristics. Three characteristics of the study families were also analyzed as potential control variables: income, structure (i.e., two-parent vs. single parent households), and family size measured as the number of children in the family. Previous researchers have found that these variables influence well-being (Neal et al., 1993; Voydanoff, 1988).

Statistical Analysis

One-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were performed on the full sample to test for significant differences in child demands, family support, and stress by employment status. For the subsample of employed mothers, correlation analyses were conducted to identify significant associations between the three dependent variables (i.e., parenting stress, absenteeism, and work quality) and the parenting role, work role, and family characteristics variables. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were then conducted to test the two hypotheses. Interaction variables were created between specific combinations of parenting and work role variables. Prior to creating the interaction terms, each main effect variable was centered to reduce the collinearity of interaction terms with the main effects (Aiken & West, 1991).

Results

The one-way ANOVA conducted on the full sample revealed no significant differences in either parenting demands (i.e., the composite of caregiving difficulty and behavior problems), cognitive performance, or family support by employment status. In addition, no significant difference was found in parenting stress by employment status.

The correlations between the work and family variables and each of the three dependent variables conducted on the subsample of employed mothers are presented in Table 2.

Parenting stress was significantly correlated with several parenting and work role measures but was not associated with any family characteristics. Specifically, greater parenting demands and less family support were associated with greater stress, whereas child cognitive performance was not related to stress. Further, greater work interest and less work intensity were significantly correlated with lower parenting stress, and the number of hours worked per week was not. Interestingly, hours of employment were also not associated with work interest or work intensity, rs = .06 and .25, respectively. Work interest and work intensity were also not related, r = -.12. Absenteeism was significantly correlated with both parenting and work role variables, whereas work quality was only associated with one work role measure. Greater parenting demands and greater work intensity were significantly correlated with more absenteeism, and greater work intensity was related to lower work quality. The different correlates of absenteeism and work quality indicate that these are different constructs. In fact, absenteeism and work quality were not significantly
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Parenting stress</th>
<th>Absenteeism</th>
<th>Work quality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income$^a$</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household structure$^b$</td>
<td>-.21</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size$^c$</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting role</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting demands</td>
<td>.53***</td>
<td>.46***</td>
<td>-.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive performance</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.26</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family support</td>
<td>-.46***</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work conditions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours per week</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work intensity</td>
<td>.28*</td>
<td>.33*</td>
<td>-.45***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work interest</td>
<td>-.30*</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^a$Income had values of 1 through 10 representing income categories: (1) $0 to $4,999, (2) $5,000 to $7,499, (3) $7,500 to $9,999, (4) $10,000 to $14,999, (5) $15,000 to $19,999, (6) $20,000 to $24,999, (7) $25,000 to $29,999, (8) $30,000 to $34,999, (9) $35,000 to $39,999, (10) $40,000 or greater. $^b$Household structure is a dummy variable coded as (1) for a two-parent household and as (0) for a single-parent household. $^c$Size was measured as the number of children in the family.

$p < .05$. ***$p < .001.$

correlated, $r = -.14$. In addition, parenting stress was not associated with work quality, $r = -.19$, but was correlated significantly with absenteeism, $r(1, 55) = .29$ $p < .05$.

The hierarchical multiple regression models used to test the study hypotheses built on these findings. For the parenting stress outcome, two parenting role variables were entered on the first step: parenting demands and family support. Next, two work role variables were entered on the second step: work intensity and work interest. For the absenteeism and work quality outcomes, the same variables were entered, but the steps were reversed; the work role variables were entered on the first step and the parenting role variables were entered on the second step. In both models, interaction terms were also tested and entered on the third step.

The first hypothesis stated that over and above characteristics of the parenting role, work role characteristics will influence parenting stress (see Table 3). Both parenting demands and family support predicted parenting stress. When I controlled for these parenting role characteristics, being interested in the work one does predicted significantly lower parenting stress. Work intensity was not a significant predictor of parenting stress.

Given these findings, interaction terms between both parenting demands and work interest and family support and work interest were entered into the model, separately, on the final step. Only the interaction between parenting demands and work interest was found to be significant. Figure 2 shows parenting stress plotted at three levels of

Table 3 Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses: Predictors of Parenting Stress Among Employed Mothers (n = 56)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor variable$^a$</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>$R^2$ change$^b$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Parenting role</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting demands</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family support</td>
<td>.46***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Work role</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work intensity</td>
<td>-.36**</td>
<td>.08*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work interest</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Work interest × par-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enting demands</td>
<td>-.27*</td>
<td>.04*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^a$The predictor variables were entered as a block on each of the first two steps. $^b$Adjusted $R^2 = .49$. $^p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$. 

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parenting demands: low (i.e., one SD below the mean), mean and high (i.e., one SD above the mean). The middle line on the figure shows how parenting stress increased when parenting demands increased for the sample of employed mothers as a whole. The other two lines show how parenting stress changed when work interest was considered.

Regression methods outlined by Aiken and West (1991) were utilized to test the differences in parenting stress at each level of parenting demands. At low levels, mothers with a high level of work interest reported significantly less parenting stress than mothers who reported low or mean levels of work interest (Ms = 99.8, 119.4, and 109.6, respectively). Similarly, at the mean level of parenting demands, mothers in interesting jobs (i.e., high work interest) reported significantly less parenting stress than did mothers who reported low or mean levels of work interest (Ms = 115.3, 128.9, and 122.1, respectively). At high levels of parenting demands, however, mothers in interesting jobs (i.e., high work interest) reported more similar levels of parenting stress in comparison to mothers who reported low and mean levels of work interest (Ms = 130.9, 138.4, and 134.6, respectively).

The second hypothesis was that over and above work role characteristics, parenting role characteristics will influence absenteeism and work quality. This hypothesis was partially supported (see Table 4). Work intensity but not work interest predicted more absenteeism and less work quality. When work role characteristics were controlled for, greater parenting demands predicted more absenteeism. Family support was not a significant predictor of absenteeism.

In terms of perceived work quality, neither parenting demands nor family support were significant predictors. Finally, no interaction terms were significant in predicting either absenteeism or work quality.

**Discussion**

There are four important findings from this research. First, no differences were found in child de-

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**Table 4** Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses: Predictors of Absenteeism and Work Quality Among Employed Mothers (n = 56)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor variable</th>
<th>Absenteeism</th>
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<th>Work quality</th>
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<th></th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>$R^2$ change$^b$</td>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>$R^2$ change$^c$</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Work role</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Work intensity</td>
<td>.32$^*$</td>
<td>.11$^*$</td>
<td>-.44$^{**}$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work interest</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td></td>
<td>.07</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>2. Parenting role</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting demands</td>
<td>.41$^{**}$</td>
<td>.16$^{**}$</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family support</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

$^a$The predictor variables were entered as a block on each of the two steps. $^b$Adjusted $R^2$ = .22. $^c$ Adjusted $R^2$ = .16.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. 

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mands, family support, or stress by employment status. Mothers employed full-time faced the same types of demands and reported the same level of stress as did mothers employed part-time and those not employed. Thus, mothers’ decisions about work were not driven by the challenges they faced as parents or the support they received from their families. This sample, however, included only mothers of 5-year-old children. Most children this age are in school for at least part of the day. The employment decisions of mothers of infants with disabilities who need to find day care in order to work were found to be influenced by the child’s characteristics (Booth & Kelly, 1999). Future researchers should examine a variety of factors that may predict employment status. The availability of before- and after-school care and day care for younger children, workplace supports, and individual beliefs and preferences, are likely to be important.

Second, a complicated relation among parenting demands, work interest, and parenting stress was found. Work interest moderated the negative influence of parenting demands on stress when parenting demands were at a low or mean level. Being interested in one’s work is one aspect of job satisfaction, and job satisfaction has been found to produce positive benefits in the general population (Olson & DiBregida, 1994).

At high levels of parenting demands, however, stress levels were also high despite level of work interest. Findings from a focus group study of employed parents of children with disabilities may help explain this result (Freedman et al., 1995). One mother reported that her 6-year-old son’s caregiving and behavior problems made it impossible for her to find after-school care for him. She had to leave her satisfying and rewarding career as a partner in a law firm to work part-time as a writer of law textbooks. This suggests that limitations in child-care services for children with serious behavior problems and caregiving demands drive decisions mothers make about employment. They may be forced into less desirable jobs and, thus, not benefit from the buffering effects of interesting work. In future studies, researchers should investigate how parenting a child with disabilities influences employment history and career development.

Third, greater parenting demands were found to increase absenteeism but had no effect on work quality. Parents whose 5-year-old children need help with basic caregiving functions that are usually associated with younger children or who may resist this help due to behavioral issues are more likely to report that they lost time from work due to service/medical appointments. Five-year-old children who have difficulty performing caregiving tasks on their own are likely to be those with multiple disabilities who may require different types of therapies. In addition, parents of children with more behavioral problems may require more time to get the child to cooperable in order to get them to and from the appointment and may spend more time at the appointment getting the child evaluated. These children may also need to see a variety of specialists for behavioral issues as well as for regular physical health issues.

Not surprisingly, mothers of young children with greater parenting demands face more challenges in combining work and family. For example, it is more difficult to find dependable child care for children with more significant disabilities. Mothers of children with disabilities face limited availability of child care due to the inability or unwillingness of providers to accept children with special needs, the lack of structurally accessible child-care settings, requirements that children be toilet trained and independently mobile, and the lack of staff training for caring for children with disabilities and behavior problems (Chang & Teramoto, 1987; Crowley, 1990; Dineen, McNerney, Fox, & Juchertz-Perdry, 1998). The difficulty in finding care is greater for mothers whose children have lower levels of cognitive functioning, fewer adaptive behavior skills, and more externalizing behavior problems (Warfield & Hauser-Cram, 1996). Specialized training for caregivers is essential if child-care options for children with disabilities are to be increased (Booth & Kelly, 1998). Although not examined in this study, in the general population, child-care difficulty has been found to be related to increased absenteeism, tardiness, and unproductive time at work (Hughes & Galinsky, 1994).

Despite these challenges, however, parenting demands did not influence mothers’ ratings of their perceived work quality. Related literature suggests two explanations for this. First, in Freedman et al.’s (1995) study, parents not only described their need to coordinate care for their child while on the job but also discussed how they worked during off-hours in order to produce quality work that was completed on time. Therefore, they felt that their performance at work did not suffer because of their unique parental responsibilities. The ability of parents to make-up for lost
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work time, however, is dependent on their employer’s willingness to let them have a flexible schedule and allow them to work outside the office. Employers who support alternative work schedules have more productive employees (Harriuk, Vanek, & Michlitsch, 1986).

Studies from the gerontology literature on caregiving mastery among working women who provide care to older relatives suggest a different explanation for the nonsignificant relation between parenting demands and work quality. These researchers have acknowledged the positive aspects of caregiving and have found that family members derive many rewards from caregiving, such as comfort in knowing that one’s parent is well-cared for and an increased sense of mastery from meeting the challenges of caregiving (Motenko, 1989; Scharlach, 1994). These analyses propose that caregiving mastery, more than caregiving demands, predicts work performance. In fact, rewards experienced in caregiving have been shown to be related to less depression and better physical health, even when the demands of that role and the roles of mother and employee are controlled (Martire, Stephens, & Atienza, 1997; Stephens, Frank, & Townsend, 1994). Although never studied systematically among parents of children with disabilities, there is some evidence that these mothers also experience feelings of mastery in gaining the skills required to meet their child’s unusual caregiving demands (Featherstone, 1980; Kaufman, 1988) and that these feelings empower them in the workplace, making them more confident and successful employees (Freedman et al., 1995). Research is needed to understand the association between parenting demands and caregiving mastery and how that relation influences absenteeism and work quality.

Fourth, greater work intensity was a significant predictor of both more absenteeism and less work quality, even though absenteeism and work quality were not related, $r = -0.14$. Greater work intensity was also significantly associated with more parenting stress, $r (1, 55) = .28$, $p < .05$ These findings suggest that employers need to be aware of the negative impacts at work and at home of jobs perceived to be overwhelming. Work intensity seems to be an important, yet specific attribute of employment because it is not significantly related to work interest. Further, analyses used to investigate the relation between work intensity and parenting role characteristics found that perceptions of work difficulty are not significantly related to perceptions of parenting demands or family support. Thus, mothers’ perceptions of work are not tied to their perceptions of parenting.

There are several limitations to this study. First, the key variables were derived primarily from self-report instruments. Observational measures and data provided by employers and co-workers would be useful in testing the validity of the study’s findings. Second, multi-item scales completed by both employee and employer on absenteeism, work quality, work interest, and intensity would increase the reliability and validity with which these domains can be measured and increase our knowledge of the broader concepts they represent, such as work productivity, work performance, and job satisfaction.

Third, because the analysis is based on cross-sectional data, the direction of the relations between parenting role characteristics, work role characteristics, parenting stress, absenteeism, and work quality is not certain. Longitudinal research is needed to specify the direction of these associations. Data collected over multiple time points are also needed because the predictors of stress vary over time (Warfield et al., 1999).

Fourth, the sample was comprised of mothers in primarily middle-class families and was predominantly nonminority. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to mothers in poorer families whose working conditions may be different or to mothers of different cultural backgrounds.

Finally, the analysis was focused on mothers only. Studies of parental adaptation to raising a child with disabilities should also include fathers because the predictors of well-being differ between mothers and fathers of young children with disabilities (Krauss, 1993). The work and family predictors of absenteeism and work quality are also likely to differ between parents because fathers have been found to be less involved in caregiving in families of children with disabilities (Erickson & Upshur, 1989).

Despite these limitations, however, this analysis is the only study in which the influence of employment on well-being and parenting demands on absenteeism and work quality was examined for mothers of children with disabilities. The findings expand the literature on maternal adaptation to parenting a child with disabilities and broaden the focus of the generic work-family field. Future studies are needed to further explore the interplay between family and work roles for
mothers and fathers who face atypical parenting challenges.

References


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Author:
Marji Erickson Warfield, PhD, Department of Pediatrics, UMass Medical School, 55 Lake Ave., N., Worcester, MA 01655. (E-mail: Marjorie.Warfield@umassmed.edu)