

# Welfare Reform

## The Relationship Between Maternal Work Goals, Welfare Policy, and Children's Outcomes

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Previous research on the effects of maternal employment on children suggest that among low-income families, there are positive or at least non-detrimental effects on children's cognitive skills and socioemotional development as a result of maternal employment (Hoffman & Youngblade, 1999; Vandell & Ramanan, 1992; Zaslow & Emig, 1997). However, these studies have focused on mothers who voluntarily engaged in employment; there could be differences between this group and mothers who are mandated to work by new welfare policies (Zaslow & Emig, 1997). The present study uses data from a welfare-to-work program to study the relationship between maternal work goals, participation in a program that focuses on employment, and children's academic and behavioral outcomes.

According to person-environment fit theory, when a person's characteristics are in affinity with the demands of their setting, more favorable outcomes occur (Eccles, Midgley, Buchanan, Flanagan, Mac Iver, Reuman, 1993; Moos, 1984; Thomas & Chess, 1977, 1980, 1981). In the context of this study, a fit between mothers' work goals and the demands created by a work-focused program may be associated with better child outcomes. This study aims to answer the following questions:

What are the effects of congruence between mothers' work goals and welfare-to-work program participation on children's academic and behavioral outcomes?

If there is an effect of congruence, can this relationship be explained by employment and maternal warmth?

Data for this study come from the Minnesota Family Investment Program, a welfare-to-work program implemented in Minnesota that randomly assigned long-term welfare recipients to three groups: a group required to work and offered a financial incentive to work (Full MFIP); a group only offered a financial incentive to work (MFIP Incentives only); and a control group. Multi-item scales tapped mothers' value of work and maternal warmth. Data for children's outcomes come from mothers' report of their children's behavior and academic performance at a three year follow up.

Multiple regression analyses (for continuous outcomes) and logistic regressions (for dichotomous ones) were used to predict children's outcomes from the work goals by program participation interaction, controlling for baseline covariates. The results indicate that congruence between work goals and the MFIP Full program, as represented by the interaction between these two variables, had a significant effect on maternal warmth. When maternal work goals were high, MFIP Full produced an increase in parental warmth. When work goals were low, in

contrast, MFIP Full brought about a decrease in warmth. Maternal warmth in turn, significantly predicted students' academic engagement, academic performance, behavior problems in school, special education, compliance, and social competence. There was a significant indirect effect of the goals by program interaction on academic performance, engagement, social competence, compliance, and behavior problems in school through warmth.

There was a significant effect of program assignment and goal congruency on employment. MFIP Full program buffered the negative effects of having low work goals at program entry. These preliminary results may encourage policymakers to increase flexibility in programs in order to meet the needs of people with different goals and interests.

### **References**

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