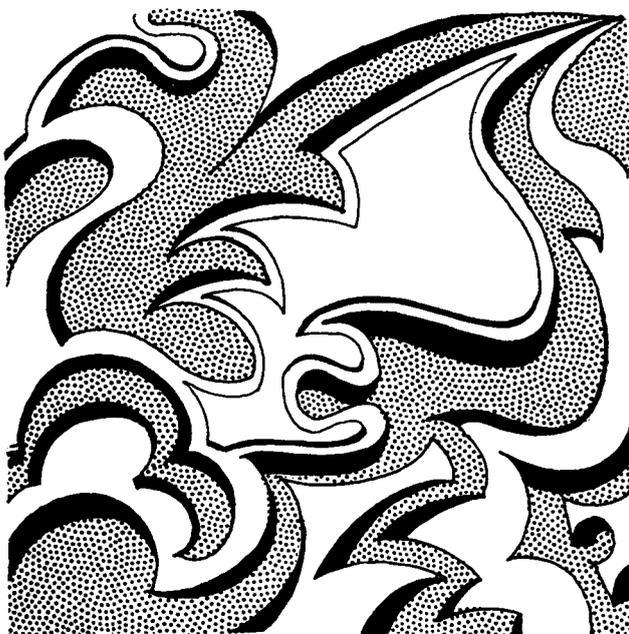
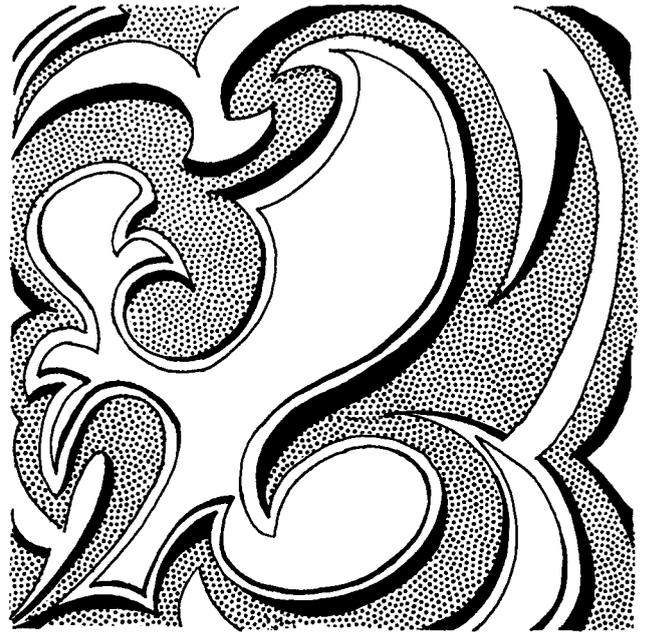


# **Full-Time Employment of Mothers in Relation to their Ten-Year Old Children**

**by Dolores Gold**



The conception of maternal employment as a single, powerful variable that dominates children's development, usually in a detrimental fashion, is no longer adequate. Critical examinations of the research on the development of children with employed mothers have indicated that the variable of maternal employment is heterogeneous and that it interacts with other variables such as the sex of child, the socioeconomic status of the family, the attitudes, motivation and behaviours of the parents, the children's age, and other factors to influence the development of the children. (Etaugh, 1974; Hoffman, 1974; Wallston, 1973) The material reported in this paper is based on a series of projects examining the develop-

ment of boys and girls at different ages with employed and nonemployed mothers from middle and working-class Anglophone and Francophone families.

The theoretical background for the studies is derived from the socialization theories of David Lynn.(1969) Lynn has argued that since girls are primarily socialized by a same-sex adult and boys by an opposite-sex adult, the processes and content of sex-role identification differ for girls and boys. These differences lead to the development of differing cognitive abilities and personality characteristics in girls and boys. The constant presence of mothers makes sex-role identification easier for girls, who identify simply by imitating their mothers. Consequently, the identification process requires and develops less problem-solving skills and less initiative and independence in girls. In addition, the traditional female model does not emphasize intellectual achievement and independence and so these characteristics are not made salient to girls. The situation is different for boys. Since fathers have much less contact with their children than do mothers, boys also initially identify with their mothers and then must transfer their identification to a male role, a role exemplified by usually absent fathers. The achieving of this transfer leads boys to make a polarization of sex roles, with male roles becoming valued posi-

tively and female roles, negatively. The successful solution of this problem of sex-role identification requires and helps develop problem solving skills in the young boy.(Lynn, 1969)

Employed mothers change both the models and processes of sex-role identification and these changes have different effects on children of different sex and background. The process of sex-role identification for girls in homes with employed mothers becomes somewhat more akin to the process usually experienced by boys. The employed mothers present a more active and independent model engaged in a broader range of activities than the traditional housewife model. The mothers necessarily have less physical proximity to their children, which might also lead to the greater mother-daughter distance that is associated with better cognitive abilities in daughters. (Lynn, 1969) Therefore, daughters of employed mothers compared to daughters of nonemployed mothers should have less traditionally feminine views of their own roles and of sex roles in general and should also have enhanced cognitive abilities. However, the effects of maternal employment on the daughters' sex identification process should be mitigated by the fact that the substitute care givers are almost invariably female and by the fact that most employed mothers still spend a great deal of time with and assume major responsibility for the children.

Maternal employment should be associated with different effects on boys' development. The jobs of the mothers should raise their status, lower the relative status of the fathers compared to the mothers, make the two roles more similar and so hinder the usual polarization of sex roles by boys. The increased difficulty of solving the identification problem for sons of employed mothers should hinder their development of cognitive skills compared to sons of non-employed mothers. However, if the husbands of employed mothers become more involved in child-care activity, the greater contact with male models should lessen the difficulty of the sons forming the appropriate sex-role identification. Father-son activity should therefore be positively associated with the sons' masculine identity and cognitive development.

The greater role similarity of the parents associated with maternal employment leads both sons and daughters to have broader conceptions of their own sex roles than children with nonemployed mothers. This is beneficial for daughters, but it does not appear to be so for sons at an early stage in their development. The benefit for daughters stems from their being able to expand their sex role, which is solidly based upon contact with their mothers and other females, by adopting characteristics considered masculine and of greater social prestige. The disadvantage for sons of the greater parental role similarity is due to their not having

the same-sex parent and other male-models as available to them as do daughters and therefore not having as immediate and direct a way of establishing their sex identity. The greater flexibility of sex roles then increases the sons' difficulty in differentiating their roles from that of the less socially prestigious female role. The sons of employed mothers do not benefit from the clearly distinguished and superior status of the male to the same extent as do sons of non-employed mothers.

The main hypotheses of the study are therefore that both sons and daughters of employed mothers should have broader conceptions of sex-roles than children of nonemployed mothers but that the sons should have poorer cognitive development while the daughters should have enhanced cognitive development compared to their counterparts with nonemployed mothers. The adjustment of the children was also examined. Since working-class families express more strongly sex-typed roles (Hess, 1970), maternal employment should not influence the parents' roles in these families as greatly as in middle-class families. Therefore, it was predicted that maternal employment should be associated with stronger effects in middle than in working-class families. Finally, it was predicted that the closer the father-son relationship, the more favourable the development of the boys.

## Procedure

The cooperation of families was obtained with the assistance of four school boards. Children in grades four and five, whose parents had consented to participate in the study, completed a series of questionnaires in the schools. The questionnaires examined their sex-role concepts (Lambert, 1969), their educational achievements and aspirations and their adjustment. (Thorpe, Clarke and Trigs, 1953) Achievement test scores were obtained for some of the children from school records. The parents were sent questionnaires to complete and mail to the university. The questionnaires assessed the parent's work history, childcare arrangements (Woods, 1968, 1972), motivation and satisfaction with parental roles, sex-role concepts (Kirkpatrick, 1967), behaviours in the home (Lambert, 1969), attitudes towards childrearing (Hurley and Hohn, 1971) and descriptions of their children.

Only the data from two-parent, Anglophone families with no history of divorce or parental death and in which the mothers had been employed or non-employed on an uninterrupted basis for at least four years were used in this study. Table 1 describes the characteristics of the sample. The analyses for this study used the data of the child, mother and father from 223 families who met these criteria. The families were classed as either middle or working-class according to the rating

of the father's occupation on the Blishen scale. (Blishen, 1967) The 223 families comprised eight groups according to the employment status of the mother, the socioeconomic class of the family and the sex of the child.

## Results

Although the data were subjected to statistical analysis, this paper will present the results in nonstatistical terms. It should be understood that when differences in the children's or parent's scores are reported, these refer to statistically significant differences in scores between groups.

Children's Data: Analysis of the children's sex-role concepts indicates that the children of employed mothers differentiate less in their descriptions of males and females. They describe the behaviour and characteristics of the two sexes, the kinds of jobs that are suitable for them, the appropriate way for boys and girls to interact with adults and with their friends, in more similar terms than do the children with nonemployed mothers. The only exception to this finding occurs in the case of working-class sons with employed mothers, who perceive the roles of boys and girls when interacting with adults as being very different.

The adjustment of the children at this age is relatively little affected by maternal employment status. The sex of the child and the social class of the family are much more closely related to

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DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE OF 10-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN AND PARENTS

Table 1

Maternal Employment Status	<u>Employed</u>				<u>Nonemployed</u>			
	Middle		Working		Middle		Working	
Social Class of Family	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Sex of Child	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Mean Blishen Rating	2.1	2.4	4.6	4.3	2.0	1.9	4.5	4.4
Mean Age	10.3	10.2	9.8	10.2	10.1	10.2	9.7	10.1
Mean School Grade	4.6	5.0	4.4	4.7	4.8	5.0	4.6	4.7
Mean Mother's Age	37.8	37.0	35.8	36.7	37.1	36.9	35.8	36.6
Mean Father's Age	41.3	42.6	40.8	39.9	39.4	41.2	42.3	40.2
Mean Education of Mother	14.0	13.1	11.5	11.9	12.5	12.3	10.4	10.2
Mean Education of Father	14.9	13.2	11.7	11.6	13.4	13.4	10.4	10.9
Mean Number of Years Mother Employed or Nonemployed	7.7	6.8	8.0	5.8	12.1	11.1	11.0	11.1
Total n per group	30	25	20	22	36	36	28	26

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the children's social and personality adjustment scores. However, maternal employment status does show some association to the adjustment of working-class boys with employed mothers. These boys have the poorest school relations scores. In addition, the fathers of these boys report having more problems with their children's behaviour. These fathers also describe their children least favourably on an adjective check list compared to the other fathers.

There are two types of academic data in this study. Scores on a standardized achievement test (King, Lindquist and Hieronymus, 1968) were available for 145 children who had participated in the study. In addition, there are also the children's responses to the academic items on the children's questionnaires.

Two out of four academic achievement test results were related to maternal employment status. Middle-class sons with employed mothers have lower language and mathematics achievement scores than do the middle-class sons with nonemployed mothers. Middle-class daughters with employed mothers consistently attain the highest scores but do not differ significantly from middle-class daughters of nonemployed mothers.

The only other finding in the academic data is consistent with the results of the adjustment data. Working-class boys with employed mothers report greater

dislike of school and poorer grades than do the other working-class children.

**Parental Data:** When the mothers are employed, their husbands participate more in supervising the children, although the mothers still have the greater responsibility for care of the children. Very few children receive supervision that appears inadequate even by the most stringent criterion but of those who are relatively unsupervised most are boys. The boys were classed as supervised or unsupervised and their adjustment and academic scores were compared. The unsupervised boys scored consistently lower but none of these differences were statistically significant.

The parental data concerning the parents' own roles and attitudes indicate that both the employed mothers and their husbands are much happier with the mothers' roles than the nonemployed mothers and their husbands. Also the employed mothers and their husbands describe themselves as behaving in a less sex-typed and in a more similar fashion in domestic and childcare activities at home. This is caused by the fathers' increasing their participation in domestic activity, although both parents report that the mother is more active in domestic activities. The employed mothers and their husbands have much more pro-feminist attitudes than do the nonemployed mothers and their husbands. Finally, the parents' attitudes towards their children do not

vary with maternal employment status. There are no significant differences among the groups of parents in their scores assessing their tendencies to reject or overprotect their children or to put pressure on the children to achieve.

Relations between Parental and Child Data: The correlations between the parents' behaviours and attitudes and the children's scores were examined. The correlations are of moderate strength at most and, as expected, vary both in strength and direction with the employment status of the mother, the social class of the family and the sex of the child.

The sex-role concepts of the children do not appear to be greatly influenced by parental attitudes, although daughters tend to have more stereotyped sex-role concepts if the parents describe their domestic activities in a sex-typed fashion. The adjustment of the children is more closely associated with parental attitudes, with greater paternal involvement in the home relating to better adjustment scores for children with employed mothers. Parental attitudes of rejection and achievement pressure generally are negatively related to the children's adjustment. The strongest association between the children's adjustment and a parental variable occurs for the number of years middle-class mothers have been employed and their son's adjustment scores. The association is consistently negative

and does not vary with the type of supervisory arrangement made.

The children's academic data is most strongly associated with the amount of the father's interaction with the children. For children with employed mothers, the more the father is involved in activities with the children, the higher the child reports his or her grades and educational aspirations.

#### Discussion

The results of this study indicate that at this age maternal employment has few effects on the development of girls, except to broaden their concepts of sex roles. Maternal employment status is more strongly associated with the development of boys, with some effects being positive and some, negative. The associations between maternal employment status and the son's development also vary somewhat with social class. The present findings indicate that fathers have an important influence on the development of children of employed mothers. More participation in family and household activities by the fathers is linked favourably with the children's adjustment and academic development.

Although the attitudes and behaviours of the parents are involved in mediating the effects of maternal employment on these children, the parental attitudes are not as strongly related to the children's behaviour as they have been found to be in families where the

parents and children are younger. A comparison of the parents in this study with the parents of nursery aged children indicates that employment of mothers of nursery aged children is associated with more changes in parental behaviour than is employment of mothers of 10-year-old children. The parents of the younger children show less traditional sex-typed role behaviour in the home where the mother is employed.

The results of this study also indicate that the nonemployment of mothers has effects on the development of children. The children with nonemployed mothers adhere to a greater extent to narrower, more traditional conceptions of sex-roles.

No simple conclusions or recommendations can emerge from the study's findings. The effects of maternal employment on children's development are complex and vary not only with the sex of child, age of child and social class of family but also with the developmental area studied. Furthermore, it can be predicted that effects found presently in children will likely be altered in the future. As the frequency of employed mothers increases and attitudes towards maternal employment change, the effects of maternal employment on children, both positive and negative, should be reduced.

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