

More Benefits Than Just a Paycheck for Moms: Working Moms Are Healthier Than Stay-At-Home Moms

ScienceDaily (Aug. 19, 2012) — Working moms striving to "have it all" now can add another perk to their list of benefits -- health. New research from University of Akron Assistant Sociology Professor Adrienne Frech finds that moms who work full time are healthier at age 40 than stay-at-home moms, moms who work part time, or moms who have some work history, but are repeatedly unemployed.

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Frech and co-author Sarah Damaske of Pennsylvania State University examined longitudinal data from 2,540 women who became mothers between 1978 and 1995. Accounting for pre-pregnancy employment, race/ethnicity, cognitive ability, single motherhood, prior health conditions and age at first birth, the research reveals that the choices women make early in their professional careers can affect their health later in life. Women who return full time to the workforce shortly after having children report better mental and physical health, i.e. greater mobility, more energy, less depression, etc. at age 40.

"Work is good for your health, both mentally and physically," says Frech. "It gives women a sense of purpose, self-efficacy, control and autonomy. They have a place where they are an expert on something, and they're paid a wage."

Rather than fueling the "Mommy Wars" debate, which pits stay-at-home moms against working moms, Frech believes that a recently identified group -- she calls this group "persistently unemployed" -- deserves further attention, as they appear to be the least healthy at age 40. These women are in and out of the workforce, often not by choice, and experience the highs and lows of finding rewarding work only to lose it and start the cycle again.

"Struggling to hold onto a job or being in constant job search mode wears on their health, especially mentally, but also physically," says Frech.

According to Frech, working full time has myriad benefits, while part-time work offers lower pay, poor chances of promotion, less job security and fewer benefits. Mothers who stay at home may face financial dependence and greater social isolation. Persistent unemployment is a health risk for women, as stress from work instability can cause physical health problems.

"Women with interrupted employment face more job-related barriers than other women, or cumulative disadvantages over time," says Frech. "If women can make good choices before their first pregnancy, they likely will be better off health-wise later. Examples of good choices could be delaying your first birth until you're married and done with your education, or not waiting a long time before returning to the workforce."

Frech says there is hope for young women. She advises young women to get an education and build a work history before having a first child.

"Don't let critical life transitions like marriage and parenthood mean that you invest any less in your education and work aspirations, because women are the ones who end up making more trade-offs for family" Frech says. "Work makes you healthier. You will have the opportunity to save a nest egg. Also, should a divorce happen, it is harder to enter the workforce if you don't have a solid work history. Don't give up on work and education."

From a societal perspective, Frech says that offering childcare and transportation resources to single mothers could result in better employment options for that population. This research was presented at the 2012 American Sociological Association's annual meeting in Denver, Colorado.

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