

“The Effect of Shift Work on Parental Interaction  
with Children, Marital Quality, and Depression.”

Extended abstract submitted for presentation at the 2007 annual  
meeting of the Population Association of America

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September 2006

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## *Introduction*

In this paper, we analyze whether couples' combined work schedules—namely, whether one or both partners works nonstandard hours—are associated with how frequently family members interact with infant children. We also explore whether shift work by one or both partners impacts marital quality and respondents' level of depression. In addition to exploring marital quality and depression as outcomes in their own right, we consider whether they mediate the relationship between work schedules and parent-child interaction. This paper is unique in part because it considers the work shifts of *both* parents. Looking at one parent's work shift prevents a full accounting of the importance of the dynamics between each partner's work schedule.

This analysis is timely because of ongoing changes in parent work schedules. It is particularly important because of the link that has been found between even simple parent-infant interactions and children's cognitive outcomes and social and emotional development (Landry et al. 1997, Letourneau 1997). Understanding how trends in parent work schedules affect cognitive outcomes comments on how the family's role in cognitive development might evolve. Of course, depression and marital quality are also important—in terms of life satisfaction and because of their implications for marriage, divorce, and family structure.

## *Background*

Evidence suggests that shift work may hinder parent-infant interaction. Data show that few shift workers opted for such hours because of child care or other non-work responsibilities (Beers 2000). Many shift workers report they are unhappy with their parenting situations (Grosswald 2003, Yount and Hoogstra 2005).

Research has found that there is a relationship between whether parents work shifts and their time spent with children, although that relationship is somewhat complex. Presser's (2003) found that parents working certain nonstandard shifts were less likely to eat dinner with their children; the effect depended in part on which shift parents worked. Meanwhile, some nonstandard shifts had a positive correlation with whether parents had breakfast with their children.

The relationship between shift work and the likelihood of parent-child interaction in several different activities—including leisure activities away from home, working on projects or playing together at home, and having private talks—was mixed. This relationship also was contingent on several factors, as discussed below. More generally, Finn (1981), reviewing existing research at the time, reported that shift workers spent less time with their children, especially younger children who had early bedtimes.

The fact that most parents don't opt for shift work—rather, they do it for economic gain, due to lack of other opportunities, and other reasons (Beers 2000), also suggests a negative relationship between shift work and marital quality and depression. Indeed, research has found negative impacts of shift work on worker mental health and marital happiness (e.g., Presser 2003, Simon 1990).

In this paper, we focus on infants and study how shift work influences parent-infant interaction, in addition to its effects on marital quality and mental health. We include non-working mothers in the sample to permit a comparison between these women and women who work in the labor market. The infancy period is crucial to child development; research shows that even simple interactions during this time influence

child cognitive outcomes and social and emotional development (Landry et al. 1997, Letourneau 1997).

*Shift work and the outcomes variables: Complicating factors*

The relationship between shift work and family relations is complex. Whether there is a relationship and the nature of that relationship have been found to depend on a number of factors. These factors include marital status, spouse's work schedule (including the number of overlapping work hours), type of shift (e.g., evening, night, rotating), parent's gender, age of children, reason for choosing shift work, and income/social class (e.g., Crouter and McHale 2005 and Presser 2003).

*Methods*

We use data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort, which contains information on parent-child interaction, work schedules, and spouses' work schedules, thus permitting analyses of work schedules at the couple level. We explore such parent-infant interactions as whether the respondent or other family member reads books to the child; tells stories; sings songs; takes her/him while doing errands such as bank, post office, or store; plays peek-a-boo; moves their arms/legs around in a playful way; or takes the child outside for walk or to play in yard/park/playground. We also focus specifically on fathers by exploring the frequency with which fathers change diapers, prepare meals/bottles, feed, hold, put to bed, wash, or dress their infants.

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they engaged in each activity more than once a day, about once a day, a few times a week, a few times a month, rarely, or not at all. Couples are classified by their work schedules into the following groups: both working standard hours, both working the same nonstandard shift, partners working

different shifts, father working standard shift and wife not working, and father working nonstandard shift and wife not working. The sample size for this analysis is approximately 7,500 respondents. Because we measure couple-level schedules, the sample is limited to co-resident parents with a working father.

We begin with descriptive tables comparing differences in the frequency of these activities by couples' work schedules. Next, we look at the incidence of depression by couples' work schedules, and marital happiness by couples' work schedules. Finally, we perform a multivariate analysis to gauge these relationships. This allows us to control for a variety of individual, family, and work characteristics. It also allows us to test whether marital quality and depression mediate the association between work schedules and parent-infant interaction.

### *Results*

This section presents a very brief review of the descriptive results. The strongest association found was between shift work and depression. There was a particularly strong relationship between work shifts and mothers' depression—mothers in couples where both partners work standard shifts report being more depressed than mothers in other circumstances. As we will note in the full paper, this is consistent with past research showing that men take on more child-related and domestic tasks when they work different hours than their partners.

Our results show some differences by shift in parent-infant interaction, although the patterns are complex. Controlling for other factors may—or may not—cause more consistent patterns to emerge. The relationship between shift work and marital quality was statistically significant but substantively weak.

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