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Children of Working Moms Face More Health Problems, Study Suggests

Children of working mothers are significantly more likely to experience health problems, including asthma and accidents, than children of mothers who don't work outside the home, according to new research from North Carolina State University.

"I don't think anyone should make sweeping value judgments based on a mother's decision to work or not work," says Dr. Melinda Morrill, Research Assistant Professor of Economics at NC State and Author of the study. "But, it is important that we are aware of the costs and benefits associated with a mother's decision to work."

The study looked at the health of school-age children who have at least one younger sibling. When a mother works, the study found, it leads to a 200 percent increase in the child's risk of having each of three different adverse health events: overnight hospitalizations, asthma episodes, and injuries or poisonings.

Previous studies have shown that, on average, children have better health outcomes when the mother works. Those findings have been attributed to factors such as increased income, availability of health insurance and an increase in the mother's self-esteem.

However, Morrill found that was not the case. Morrill used advanced statistical techniques to focus specifically on the causal relationship between mothers working and children's health. Morrill's approach accounts for a number of confounding factors, such as how a child's health affects

the mother's ability to work. For example, if a child is very sick, the mother may be more likely to stay at home.

"I wanted to look at mothers whose decision to work was not based on their children's health," Morrill says, explaining that a woman's youngest child's eligibility for kindergarten can influence her ability to return to the workforce. In assessing health outcomes, Morrill looked solely at older children already enrolled in school, between the ages of 7 and 17, whose youngest sibling was around kindergarten age.

The study examined 20 years worth of data covering approximately 89,000 children from the CDC's National Health Interview Survey. The data were collected between 1985 and 2004.

The research was funded by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, which is within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Source: Melinda Sandler Morrill. The effects of maternal employment on the health of school-age children. *Journal of Health Economics*, 2011; DOI: 10.1016/j.jhealeco.2011.01.001