



Conversations with the Experts

Effects of Early Parental Employment on Children

An Interview with Lisa Harvey

Bio: Elizabeth (Lisa) Harvey recently published "Short-Term and Long-Term Effects of Early Parental Employment on Children of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth" in *Developmental Psychology*, 1999, 35(2), 445-459. The findings, which suggested minimal effects of early parental employment on children, provoked a firestorm in the media. Lisa Harvey shared some thoughts about the research process and the reaction to her article.

Sloan Work and Family Research Network: Studying the effects of early parental employment on children is somewhat of a departure from your previous research. What led you to choose this topic?

Harvey: My interest in the work-family area started with my previous research within the context of families who had children with behavior problems. Part of where that came from was working initially with mothers and realizing how stressed out the mothers were; and then thinking about fathers' involvement and thinking about juggling work and family commitments. I came across it clinically as well. I saw a mother of an ADHD child who quit her job because she felt that maybe her working was part of what contributed to her child's behavior problem. And so I was seeing it as an important clinical and research issue.

Having reviewed the literature, I knew that the literature on early maternal employment was pretty mixed and that there was still some debate about the findings. Within the field of psychology there wasn't much debate about employment when kids were older, but there was still some debate about employment when kids were younger.

When I was at the University of Connecticut I had a colleague in the Economics department who was interested in these issues from an economic perspective. We were talking about our research interests, when he mentioned that the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) had some variables that might be relevant. He lent me a copy of what he had and I looked through it, and it jumped out at me that it was a great data set (with a large sample) for the questions I was asking. So I went out and bought my own copy of it, and started working and looked more in depth at the other studies that had used the data set earlier, many years earlier, and that's what led up to the paper.

SWFRN: Following a review of the key studies in the parental employment debate, I noticed that you focused on the studies that used the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) data set. I think that by restricting your analysis, it made for a stronger framework and more convincing findings.

Harvey: Actually, to be honest, the first draft didn't talk as much about those studies. It was the reviewers who suggested that I tease apart what's going on, by asking -- why the past studies got such mixed results. So on a revision of the manuscript, that's when I really went into a lot of detail on studies using NLSY data. I agree that made for a clearer picture of what was going on and gave a clearer context of what I was doing.

SWFRN: Would you like to highlight any of those comparisons?

Harvey: I think what struck me was not any one study in particular, but just how consistently different the research was. The process of comparison was very complicated, and it took me several days of wading through the research studies, several intense days! I created this big table of what the researchers did and what they found. And I was just struck by how on any given dimension, there was no consistency across the studies....

There were a few things that were done fairly consistently that I actually thought should be done differently. I was

finding inconsistencies between the way I thought it should be done versus how other researchers had done it. For example, I thought it would be better to look at the variables on a continuum rather than creating artificial categories, as many of the researchers had done. Looking at the variables on a continuum makes it harder to think about, but I think statistically is a better approach.

Another comparison worth highlighting is that almost all of the researchers had controlled for income after the child was born, which obviously is incredibly confounded with maternal employment status. I argue that by controlling for parents' income after the child is born, you're controlling for one of the advantages of parental employment. One of the reasons why parental employment may benefit children is because it brings more financial resources to the family, can decrease stress because of increased income, and can allow the child to have opportunities she/he might not otherwise have. To really distinguish between selection factors, the researcher needs to sort variables that precede employment from those that are a consequence of employment. These are a few things that other studies had done consistently that I thought should be done differently.

SWFRN: Many of the previous studies didn't include the effects of fathers' employment, they looked just at the effects of mothers' employment on children.

Harvey: To be perfectly honest when I did my first analyses, I just looked at mothers. I thought, "What am I doing?" I've been doing this research on father involvement, "How could I leave them out?" It's so easy to do, because all of the literature is focused on mothers' employment, and because there's not tons of variability in father employment. I went back and added effects of fathers' employment.

SWFRN: And your study was longitudinal, unlike many of the other studies.

Harvey: Right. Or it was a longer term longitudinal. Most of the other studies had been done with the .86 data, looking at 3-4 year old kids, so it was looking at the effects of employment during the first 3 years on 3 and 4 year olds' development. It was very short-term longitudinal. One of the studies, Vandell & Ramanan (1992) did follow the kids until they were 6 or 7 years old. That was quite a small sample and the mothers were very young in that sample, so it wasn't a very representative sample. In fact that was one of the things that Clarke-Stuart said in her article -- that if we're going to understand the effects of early employment we need to do longitudinal research.

SWFRN: Please compare and contrast some of your findings with the other research.

Harvey: First I looked at comparing the children of mothers who were employed, to mothers who weren't employed on their language development, their academic achievement, their behavioral problems, and their self-esteem and their compliance to, which is similar to behavioral problems, and I found no differences in just employment status per se. Then I looked among mothers who were employed; the number of hours they worked; at what point they returned to work; and discontinuity of employment. I found some slight negative effects with variables when working more hours was associated with slightly lower language development and cognitive academic achievement that lasted through elementary school. But the effects were incredibly small, we're talking about correlations, I think it was .07, or .08, because it was such a small sample, even very tiny correlations came out very significant when using a .01 criteria. They were very tiny and tended to fade over time. The few negative effects I found were small and had to do with the extent of maternal employment. As far as fathers go, I didn't find much for fathers, there were occasional small effects but nothing linear. So generally fathers' employment doesn't seem to be related to kids' development. I also looked at the moderating effects of various variables, and found some. Although what was striking was how few I found. I did find a couple but they weren't all that consistent. I was surprised at how few moderating effects I found. In part, because of the moderating variables I had available to me. For example, a variable that measured parent satisfaction with their employment was not available. Other research has suggested that's an important moderator.

SWFRN: What do you think the implications of the findings are?

Harvey: Well, I think that the study suggests that we need to look at individual differences. We need to understand individual differences. When, for example, childcare works out well for employed parents and when it doesn't work out well. Most psychologists response to this study was that they weren't particularly surprised. Most researchers within psychology said "Why is there such a big furor over this? We're beyond this, we're looking at individual differences."

SWFRN: I promised we'd touch on the press reaction, because it was surprising.

Harvey: Yes, I was shocked. When Ellen Goodman interviewed me, she expressed the viewpoint that I think a lot of researchers felt as well, which was: "What's the big deal? Why?" It was interesting to see this kind of split reaction between people saying "What's the big deal?" and people saying "This is a huge shock." When reporters

would interview me and they'd say, "Were you surprised? I'd say "No. I wouldn't really be that surprised either way, because the research has been kind of mixed." Often the reporters expressed disbelief.

I think outside of the research world there's a very strong belief that early maternal employment is harmful to kids, so a study showing that's not the case is surprising. It challenged a lot of peoples' values. I got some negative reaction from media, namely Dr. Laura and Rush Limbaugh. I also received a lot of e-mails and mail from individuals, mostly parents, many of whom were pretty angry.

I think the study was interpreted as being threatening to families who choose to have either parent stay home. I think they felt that if the study is saying there's no difference between people working outside of the home, and stay at home parents, then "Why are we doing it?" They feel like "I'm making a sacrifice for my child," and this study is saying that it's not really doing any good; it really makes them feel like the study is questioning their worth.

And I try to emphasize that's not the case, that the study is really looking at huge groups, not at individual differences, and that staying at home is a valuable thing as well. I think it really threatened a lot of people. But I was surprised, I would have never guessed that it would have been front page news. It was strange to be talking about this complicated study and complicated issue with non-professionals.

SWFRN: It does seem that work-family issues trigger a response from the media/ public that many other research topics don't.

Harvey: Yes, childcare does bring research back to the real world. In some ways that's satisfying, and in some ways it's hard. As psychologists, we're used to talking with other psychologists, not with people outside the field.

SWFRN: Are there any other points you'd like to make, or anything you think is important to add?

Harvey: I don't know if you saw Jim Levine's editorial in the *New York Times*. I thought he made a really good point that all of the media attention focused on the mothers' employment piece, and very few of them mentioned that the research did look at fathers' employment as well.

Reactions from Press/Public: A Sampling

Feder, Don (March 8, 1999).

"Day-care study defies common sense," *Boston Herald*; Boston, MA.

Feder charges that Harvey's "cause-driven" study is reflective of her feminist agenda. He posits that the results of the study "contradict common sense" by suggesting that mother-child bonding can "be established in an hour or two of quality time." Feder suggests the study will be "used as an endorsement of institutional day care," and criticizes the study for not distinguishing between various child-care arrangements. Feder describes child-care centers as "less than ideal," creating in children a "sense of loss and abandonment."

Goodman, Ellen (March 4, 1999).

"A mother's choice" *Boston Globe*; Boston, MA.

Goodman suggests that Harvey's study is support for the idea that "our children's whole future doesn't rest on this one choice." Citing the emotional nature of the "mommy wars," Goodman notes that "even the author found that 'the most shocking result of the study was the overwhelming response'." Goodman points out that even though the study also looked at the effects of fathers' employment, the public reaction was focused overwhelmingly on maternal employment, showing that "it's mothers that still matter in the public mind."

Levine, James A. (March 4, 1999).

"The other working parent," *New York Times*; New York, NY.

Levine asserts that Harvey's study is "not a study of working mothers but of working parents," noting that the study "is one of the first national studies to examine the effect of men's employment on their children's development." Levine criticizes the media coverage and public response because "focusing on only the maternal role reinforces a way of thinking that perpetuates women's sense of burden [and] constrains their careers." Levine urges women and men to "stop assuming that the workplace is incapable of responding to men's family needs...[in order to] help mothers feel less guilty about going to work."

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