Early Maternal Employment and Children’s Later Depression: A Reverse Goldilocks Phenomenon

Catherine Chambliss*, Indira Joell, Taylor Wilson, Julia Mills, Ryan Walker, Stephanie Guzman, Stephanie Gardner, Salone Singh, Ciara Blazak, and Kimberly-Joy Walters

Authors’ affiliations:
Ursinus College

* Corresponding author: E-mail: echambliss@ursinus.edu

Abstract

Concerns about how maternal employment affects the development of children continue to attract research attention. Most of the literature focuses on how maternal employment affects children’s behavioral development. However, some studies have examined the longer term impact of maternal employment on adolescent and young adult affective functioning, including risk of depression. The current study explored the relationship between maternal employment during four developmental stages and subsequent risk of depressive symptoms in young adulthood. The BDI-II, DIRI Personal Distress Scale, and measures assessing maternal employment history were administered to 452 undergraduates. Four 2 x 3 MANOVA (sex x maternal employment status [full-time, part-time, nonemployment] during the participants’ infancy, preschool years, elementary school years, and adolescence) were conducted to investigate the effect of maternal employment during each of the four stages of development on subsequent development of depressive symptoms and personal distress. A significant interaction effect showed that sons whose mothers were employed part-time during their infancy reported higher rates of subsequent depression on the BDI-II than those whose mothers were nonemployed or employed full-time. For both men and women, a history of part-time maternal employment during the child’s infancy was associated with reports of greater personal distress in young adulthood. Maternal employment during the other three developmental stages was not associated with significant differences in subsequent depression or personal distress.

Keywords: depression, maternal employment, infancy, day care, part-time employment

Introduction

A dramatic increase in maternal employment, especially during children’s infancy, has spurred an expansion of scientific scrutiny of the association between maternal employment and child well-being. The literature offers conflicting suggestions about the influence of maternal employment on child development, including its effects on long term personal and social functioning. Early critics of
maternal employment voiced various reservations. Bowlby (1988), for example, asserted that when mothers are employed during their child’s infancy, their ability to form a secure attachment with their child is compromised, creating long-term deficits. Parcel and Menaghan (1994) proposed that the problems associated with maternal employment stem from the depletion of mothers’ psychological resources, thereby lowering the energy the mothers have to devote to nurturing, which in turn has a negative effect on the child.

A study by Belsky (1988) showed that early maternal employment was negatively associated with children’s secure attachment behavior. Belsky’s (1988) findings suggested that children of full-time employed mothers were more likely to be insecurely attached than children of part-time or non-employed mothers. Consistent with this, research by Jaeger and Weinraub (1990) suggested that leaving infants in daycare tends to interrupt the mother-child interactions needed for children to develop secure attachments.

Contrary to these findings, neither Domingo and Chambliss (1998) nor Domingo, Keppley, and Chambliss (1997) found maternal employment to be significantly associated with attachment problems later on in life. Instead, both studies showed positive attachment features to be associated with maternal employment. In a similar vein, a 1997 National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) longitudinal study found that children who spent significant time in child care before the age of one showed no difference in mother attachment and bonding compared to children with stay at home mothers (NICHD, 1997).

Han, Waldfogel, and Brooks-Gunn (2001) focused on the long-term impact of early maternal employment on children’s cognitive and behavioral outcomes. Their participants were non-Hispanic white and African American children between the ages of 3 and 4 in the 1986 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. They were followed longitudinally until the children were about 8 years old to see whether or not their mothers’ employment status affected them as they developed. The results of the study suggested that mothers who worked during the 1st year of their child’s life adversely affected their children’s subsequent risk of having behavioral problems. At ages 7 and 8, children of such mothers tended to show more externalizing behaviors. They also found that early maternal employment had a negative effect on white children’s cognitive outcomes at ages 3 and 4, and that these effects persist to ages 7 and 8 in some instances but not in others. Interestingly, no significant effects of early maternal employment on cognitive outcomes were found among African American children, suggesting that the effects of early maternal employment vary by racial and ethnic group.

Belsky and Eggebeen (1991) examined the effects of early and intensive maternal employment on young children’s socio-emotional development. They expected children of employed mothers to be at a higher risk of being more disobedient and prone to behavioral problems, such as aggressive towards peers between the ages of 3-8. Their study, using data drawn from the National Longitudinal Survey of Labor Market Experience of Youth (NLSY), found that children who were in daycare for 30 hours or more per week in their first year showed poorer performance in school and social functioning than children whose full-time care began later. There was mixed support for Belsky’s earlier conclusion that more than 20 hours per week of nonparental care in the first year of life is a risk factor for development of aggression and noncompliance. Although this work suggests that early and extensive maternal
employment may predict poorer childhood outcomes, the final regression model showed that employment main and interaction effects accounted for little (e.g., 1.56%) of the variance in their composite measure. Furthermore, the NLSY sampled children born to poorer, younger, less-educated, and minority mothers.

Other studies suggest that there is little association between postnatal maternal employment and a child’s cognitive functioning (Baydar & Brooks-Gunn, 1991; Goldberg, Prause, Lucas-Thompson & Himsel, 2008). The beneficial cognitive impact of maternal employment was noted in a study done by Youngblut, Loveland-Cherry, and Horan (1994), which focused on a sample of particularly vulnerable children who were born prematurely and lived in a single-parent family. They found that length of maternal work hours was positively related to cognitive achievement and mental processing scores in children.

An ambitious meta-analysis of 69 studies by Lucas-Thompson, Goldberg, and Prause (2010) explored the impact of maternal employment during infancy and early childhood. They specifically looked at achievement and behavioral problems, measuring both internalized and externalized behavioral problems, and academic achievement. The included studies spanned over five decades.

Their results indicated that early maternal employment was not significantly associated with children’s achievement or their internalized or externalized behaviors. In fact, maternal employment was associated with higher achievement, as well as fewer internalizing behaviors. Despite their reassuring findings, Lucas-Thompson, Goldberg, and Prause (2010) caution that there may be some subgroups for which early maternal employment may be associated with negative outcomes.

Some researchers have attempted to clarify the contradictory array of research findings by looking distinctly at maternal employment during different developmental periods. For example, since mothers who return to work during their child’s infancy face an array of special challenges, the impact of maternal employment during this period may be distinctive. Berger, Hill, and Waldfogel (2005) examined whether early return to work had any effect on a child’s health or developmental outcomes. They assessed mothers who returned to work within 12 weeks of giving birth, and examined seven outcome variables related to child health and development via a linear regression. They concluded that new mothers who go back to work early may adversely affect their child’s health and development. Children with mothers who returned to work sooner were less likely to receive optimal health-related experiences, including immunizations and breastfeeding. This impact of early return was greater when mothers went back to work fulltime.

Other researchers have sought clarification by exploring the role of various mediating factors. For example, MacEwen and Barling (1991) explored how mothers’ mood and behavior during employment affects children’ cognitive and behavioral difficulties. They assessed inter-role conflict and satisfaction with the role among 147 employed mothers. They found that the mothers’ negativity about their roles was associated with greater rejection and incorporation of punishing behavior. Mothers’ negativity was also linked to their child’s anxiety, withdrawal, conduct disorder, inattention, and immaturity. These findings suggest that maternal ambivalence about employment may contribute to the toxic effects some researchers have observed. Such ambivalence might be especially pronounced among mothers returning to employment when their child is an infant, particularly when the
employment is compelled by financial necessity.

Maternal employment may also influence children indirectly through its effects on mothers’ access to social support. Individuals who feel more socially connected have lower rates of depression, have higher self-esteem, and are more empathic to others, as well as more trusting and cooperative. As a consequence, others are more open to trust and cooperate with them. This generates a positive feedback loop promoting social, emotional, and physical wellbeing (Seppala, 2013). Workplace involvement may be psychologically protective for mothers, and by extension their children, if it is linked to experience of a broader and more robust social support system.

The potential role of socioeconomic factors in observed associations between maternal employment and various outcomes in children is also important to consider. Much research on the impact of maternal employment is marred by the fact that maternal employment status is often correlated with various socioeconomic risk factors. For example, divorced mothers are often compelled to work, sometimes against their will, especially when children are very young. Given the MacEwen and Barling (1991) findings about the impact of maternal negativity, this can create confounds that may complicate interpretation of findings of difference between children reared by employed and nonemployed mothers.

Confirming the ties between parental divorce and maternal employment, Clark-Stewart, Vandell, McCarthy, Owen and Booth (2000) found that separated or divorced mothers reported working significantly more hours (30.1) than either single (21.6) or married (23.1) mothers, who did not significantly differ from each other in terms of the number of maternal hours employed. Similarly, Pett, Vaughan-Cole, and Wampold (1994) found that divorced mothers were significantly more likely to be employed full-time (62.6%) as compared to married mothers (28.3%). They assessed how maternal employment, marital status, and perceived maternal stress affected preschool children’s behavioral outcomes. There were 104 married and 99 divorced families included in this study. These researchers measured various demographic and psychological characteristics, mothers’ well-being and perceived daily stress, child’s behavior using a checklist, and utilized videotapes which measured mother-child interactions including controlling and supportive behaviors. Their results suggested that maternal stress from divorce and daily stressors increased child behavior issues and controlling mother-child interactions.

Given the association between maternal employment and divorce, it is important also to consider research demonstrating how divorce may affect depression risk, thereby possibly affecting the apparent relationship between maternal employment and depression. Ross and Mirowsky (1999) investigated the life-course disruption hypothesis, according to which socioeconomic and interpersonal problems associated with parental divorce in childhood increase the risk of depression in adulthood. The study used data from a 1995 telephone survey of Aging, Status, and the Sense of Control (ASOC) of 2,592 respondents aged 18 to 95 years. Their measures included a modified seven-item version of the Center for Epidemiological Studies’ Scale of Depression (CES-Dm) (Ross & Mirowsky, 1984), and assessments of parental divorce (i.e., “Thinking back, did your parents get divorced when you were a child?”), education level, three measures of economic resources (household income, economic hardship, and history of economic hardship), and problems in
interpersonal relationships (close relationships and in general). Results suggested adults whose parents divorced when they were children have increased levels of depression than adults from intact families. However, no intrapsychic effects of parental divorce on depression were found. Rather, the effects of the divorce, such as lower socioeconomic status and current interpersonal problems, increased the likelihood of depression in adults, especially those with lower educational attainment. While no intrapsychic effects were found, the life-course disruption caused by the parental divorce in childhood apparently has negative effects on the future mental health of the child.

Gilman, Kawachi, Fitzmaurice, and Buka (2003) explored the association between family disruption (i.e., divorce) and low socioeconomic status during the first seven years of life with onset of adult depression. They analyzed data from 1,104 offspring (born in either 1984 or 1996) of participants of the Providence, Rhode Island site of the National Collaborative Perinatal Project who had completed the adult follow-up. Their measures included indicators of early childhood disruption, childhood socioeconomic status (including parental occupation at birth and age 7), history of paternal conflict, and depression (using the National Institute of Mental Health Diagnostic Interview Schedule [DIS]). The overall sample showed a lifetime prevalence of major depression of 24.7%, which is slightly higher than the 17.1% found in many nationally representative surveys. Parental divorce by the age of seven predicted a higher risk of adult depression. The risk of depression was elevated when parental conflict as high. In addition, the risk of depression was higher among children with a lower socioeconomic status during early childhood, independent of family disruption. While the study was not broadly representative, its results were consistent with previous findings. Importantly, it focused on early childhood family disruption and investigated the role of parental conflict during this time, which proved to exacerbate the risk of children’s later depression.

Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, and McRae (1998) examined the effects of parental divorce on depression and whether these would change in the transition from childhood to adulthood, after controlling for pre-disruption characteristics (such as already poor mental health, low SES, etc.). They studied a cohort of children born in England, Scotland, and Wales in the first week of March 1958 using the National Child Development Study (NCDS) longitudinal study. Using both Growth-Curve Models and Fixed-Effects Models, they found that participants whose parents later divorced already had emotional problems at age 7 when compared to participants whose parents did not divorce; this could be due to parental conflict but this was not measured. The models also showed an increase in emotional problems from age 7 to 33 in participants whose parents divorced compared to participants whose parents did not. This suggests that mental health problems of participants whose parents divorced when they were young will persist and even increase as the individual ages into their twenties and thirties, even after controlling for pre-disruption effects. As a result, studies showing deleterious consequences of maternal employment may actually be describing negative correlates of parental divorce or being reared in a single parent household.

Additional confounding factors further complicate causal extrapolations from maternal employment studies. For example, mothers who choose to work tend to have greater educational attainment and have
higher incomes (Hill, Waldfogel, Brooks, & Han, 2005). Because these characteristics are also positively related to child outcomes, it is hard to discern whether differences in outcomes between these groups are related to these confounding factors or to the differences in maternal employment status.

These financial differences are often associated with important variations in child-rearing practices, including some which may relate to subsequent development of depression. Doepke and Zilibotti (2019), using data available at the international and national level, demonstrated a link between socioeconomic factors and the values that parents think are important for child rearing. They reviewed responses to the World Values Survey, which assesses the five most important values parents strive to instill in their children, as well as data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. Their results suggest that parents base their childrearing strategies on the socioeconomic conditions in which their children are raised. Highly competitive conditions increase parental authoritativeness and reduce permissiveness. Constraints on parental resources also affect their decisions. For example, participation in various extracurricular activities is affected by financial and time resources.

When Doepke and Zilibotti (2019) considered the amount of time parents spend with their children, they found that across all countries, and especially where income inequality has accelerated, the number of hours parents spend with their children has increased. These researchers conclude that when parents can afford to engage in more authoritative parenting, their children may benefit in various ways.

Consistent with this, Chan and Koo (2011) found strong associations between parenting style and youth outcomes, including subjective well-being, self-esteem, health, and risky behavior. Children raised by authoritative parents reported higher self-esteem and were less likely to use substances. Since self-esteem and avoidance of substance use are both protective psychologically, the Chan and Koo research findings support the notion that parents whose socioeconomic circumstances provide the time and financial resources for more intensive, authoritative parenting, may reduce their children’s subsequent risk of depression.

The current study chose to focus on maternal employment’s impact on depression because this problem seems to be a growing menace. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that an estimated roughly 12% of those in the U.S. will experience depression at some time. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that by 2030 the deaths and disability associated with depression will exceed those due to heart disease, accidents, cancer, stroke, and war. Disturbingly, an American College Health Association survey of students in 2012 reported that 27% of the men and 33% of the women reported having had a period of depression in the preceding year that was serious enough to impair their functioning.

Afrin (2016) assessed the impact that steady maternal employment has on depression, self-efficacy, and loneliness among adolescents. Their participants included 200 children from the ages of 15-18. Here, maternal employment was associated with more negative outcomes on all three variables, including depression.

Research done by Han and Miller (2009) also focused on the impact of maternal employment and the development of depression in adolescents. They used data from the US National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), which included 12,686
men and women ranging from the ages of 14-21. This survey was given every year starting in 1979 and up until 1994; after 1994 it was given every other year. A different survey, the NLSY-CS, was given to the children. The data collected from 4,200 children consisted of information about the children from birth to ages 13 or 14. In order to determine the varying degree of depression in the adolescents at ages 13 or 14, a variety of questions were asked that included how the individual felt (sad, angry, happy, lonely, tired, busy, or too pressured by parents). They found that almost all of the mothers worked nonstandard shifts by the time their child was 11 or 12. Maternal night shift work and length of maternal employment were linked to a higher level of depression in adolescents. These outcomes seemed to be tied to decreased time spent eating meals together and reduced support in the home environment (Han and Miller, 2009).

Chambliss, Termine, Norton, Barry, Bahm, Papas, and Papas (2010) investigated the relationship maternal employment has on depression in young adults. The participants were 199 undergraduates who were administered the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II). A higher level of depression was found in young adults whose mothers had worked consistently during all four developmental stages compared to peers whose mothers had been nonemployed throughout those four periods (Chambliss et al., 2010). However, this relationship between children’s depressive symptoms and mothers’ employment history was not evident among young adults whose mothers’ employment was perceived to be financially unnecessary, supporting the notion that the motivation for maternal employment and socioeconomic correlates of maternal employment may moderate the relationship between maternal employment and outcomes in children.

In contrast, Aghdam, Ahmadzadeh, Hassanalizadeh, Ebrahimi, Sabzmannan and Javadivala (2015) described results challenging this link between maternal employment and children’s depression. They explored the way in which maternal employment affects children’s mental health (anxiety, depression, and social functioning) by evaluating 583 fifth, sixth, and seventh graders. Here, children of employed mothers showed lower levels of mental health problems than did children of mothers who were not employed and stayed home. Non-working mothers also reported having greater problems with their child.

These equivocal findings compel additional work articulating the long-term correlates of early maternal employment on adult psychological functioning. The current study will assess the relationship between different levels of maternal employment during four developmental periods on young adults’ experience of depression symptoms and personal distress. To accommodate the need to consider some possible confounding factors, the current investigation included assessment of parental marital status, enabling an evaluation of the potential role of divorce in any observed group differences.

Method

The participants in this study consisted of 452 undergraduates, including 297 females and 155 males, aged 17 through 27 with the mean age of 18.69 years old. Participants completed self-report measures during an Introductory Psychology class. They disclosed information about their mother's work status at various stages of development. The stages of development were infancy (birth to 1 1/2 years old), preschool (2 to 5 years old), elementary school years (6 to 12 years old), and adolescence (13 to 18 years old). The subjects reported if their mother was non-
employed, employed part-time, or employed full-time outside of the home during each stage of development. Confidence ratings were obtained for each of the four self-report assessments of maternal work status ($M = 95.22\%, SD = 6.47$). Information from participants with confidence ratings below one standard deviation from the mean were omitted in order to increase measurement validity.

Participants also completed the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II) (Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996). The BDI-II is a self-report measure that is commonly used to screen for depressive symptoms and clinical depression. Its 21-items assess depressive symptoms on a 4-point Likert scale. Lower scores indicate a lack of depressive symptoms while higher scores indicate a high probability of an individual having depression. Finally, participants completed the Davis Interpersonal Reactivity Index (DIRI; Davis, 1980). The DIRI is a 28 item self-report questionnaire. The DIRI contains four subscales measuring fantasy, perspective taking, empathic concern, and personal distress. Scores on the personal distress scale were included in order to corroborate findings about depression yielded by the BDI-II.

Results

A 2 (sex) by 3 (maternal employment during infancy: nonemployment, part-time employment, and full-time employment) MANOVA was performed on the BDI-II and DIRI Personal Distress scores to evaluate the relationship between maternal employment status during infancy and subsequent depressive symptoms. The sex by maternal employment Wilks’ Lambda=.96, $F(4/776) = 4.42, p = .002$; the effect size based on Wilks’ Lambda was small. A significant sex x maternal employment interaction effect was noted, showing that for men only, a history of having a mother who worked part-time during infancy was associated with higher BDI-II scores than having had a nonemployed mother. Sons whose mothers had worked full-time scored in between the other groups (Maternal nonemployment: $M=6.64, SD=5.10$, n=64, part-time employment: $M=10.21, SD=8.87$, n=40, and full time employment $M=9.39, SD=7.09$, n=33; $F(2/294)=3.03, p=.05$; see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maternal Employment Status (Infancy)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>MALES</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-Time</td>
<td>9.39</td>
<td>7.09</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-Time</td>
<td>10.21</td>
<td>8.87</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonemployed</td>
<td>6.64</td>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FEMALES</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-Time</td>
<td>8.40</td>
<td>7.18</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-Time</td>
<td>8.53</td>
<td>6.55</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonemployed</td>
<td>8.88</td>
<td>7.17</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Means and standard deviations on the BDI-II for sons and daughters with different maternal employment status during infancy. $F(2/294)=3.03, p=.05$
Follow-up tests of between-subjects effects revealed a maternal employment main effect on the Personal Distress scale. These results were generally consistent with those observed on the BDI-II, but were not limited to sons. Participants whose mothers had been employed part-time reported greater personal distress as young adults than those whose mothers had worked full-time when they were infants. Here, those whose mothers had been nonemployed scored in between the other groups (Maternal nonemployment: \( M=17.65, SD=5.35, n=181 \), part-time employment: \( M=18.41, SD=4.87, n=108 \), and full time employment \( M=16.07, SD=4.40, n=106; F(2/333)=6.78, p=.001 \)).

Similar MANOVA were conducted investigating the relationship between sex and maternal employment at three later developmental periods on subsequent depression. No significant differences were found in levels of depression among the sons and daughters of mothers who were employed differently during their child’s preschool years, elementary school years, or adolescence.

A follow-up 2 (sex) by 3 (maternal employment during infancy: part-time, full-time, and nonemployment) MANOVA was performed on two items from the BDI-II deemed especially important. No significant main effects emerged. The sex by maternal employment Wilks’ Lambda=.97, \( F(4/890) = 3.50, p = .008 \); the effect size based on Wilks’ Lambda was modest (.15). Follow-up analyses revealed a significant sex by maternal employment history interaction effect on the suicidal ideation item \( (F= 5.52, df = 2/446, p = .004) \), indicating higher suicidal ideation among men whose mothers had worked part-time during their sons’ infancy (Maternal nonemployment: \( M=.04, SD=.20, n=76 \), part-time employment: \( M=.26, SD=.62, n=43 \), and full time employment \( M=.11, SD=.32, n=36 \)). A significant sex by maternal employment history interaction effect was also found on the loss of interest in other people and things item \( (F= 3.30, df = 2/446, p = .04) \), indicating that men whose mothers worked part-time reported higher loss of interest than the other groups (Maternal nonemployment: \( M=.20, SD=46, n=76 \), part-time employment: \( M=.56, SD=.77, n=43 \), and full time employment \( M=.31, SD=.52, n=36 \)). Women’s responses did not vary significantly across the maternal employment conditions.

In order to evaluate whether the potential confound of history of parental divorce may have contributed to the results of this study, an independent samples \( t \)-test was performed to compare individuals’ levels of depression in single parent households and non-single parent households. No significant difference in BDI-II scores was found between these groups. Similarly, a \( t \)-test comparison of Personal Distress scale scores also showed no difference between participants reared in single versus two-parent households. Oneway ANOVA were conducted to evaluate possible differences in history of parental divorce across the three maternal employment during infancy groups. No significant differences across the three maternal employment groups emerged.

**Discussion**

The goal of this study was to ascertain whether or not a history of maternal employment during four developmental stages was associated with higher levels of later depression in early adulthood. While no significant differences emerged when maternal employment during the preschool years, elementary school years, or adolescence was considered, the current findings suggest there may be reason for some concern about the impact of part-time
maternal employment during infancy, particularly for sons.

The sex x maternal employment interaction effect observed here, indicating that sons with a history of part-time maternal employment during infancy scored higher on the BDI-II than sons with nonemployed mothers, is of interest. It is important to note that this relationship was only found for maternal employment during infancy, and not at later developmental periods. This suggests that sons may have a particular sensitivity to maternal absence during their earliest months, or greater difficulty adapting to nonmaternal care. It may be that sons adjust to day care settings somewhat less well than daughters. However, since sons whose mothers had worked full-time scored in between the other groups, it is interesting to consider why greater maternal employment actually seemed to attenuate the negative effects observed. Perhaps because full-time maternal employment is more often associated with formal day care placement, and stable workday transitions, it may offer a more structured and beneficial routine for infants than part-time nonmaternal care. As a result, when compared to less consistent part-time nonmaternal care, full-time day care may be less compromising for infant boys. In addition, part-time employed mothers may be less able to afford high quality day care.

The finding of greater personal distress among both sons and daughters with a history of part-time maternal employment during infancy is also of interest. The DIRI personal distress scale findings corroborated the BDI-II indictment of part-time maternal employment during infancy. However, on this measure those with a history of full-time maternal employment actually performed better than those whose mothers had been nonemployed.

This curvilinear relationship may be attributable to a “reverse Goldilocks” phenomena, suggesting that infants generally adapt better to either extreme of the maternal employment continuum. Whereas in the tale of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* her optimal choice was in the middle (porridge that was neither too hot nor too cold), mothers’ opting for the middle road of part-time maternal employment may not always be best for children. The stable routines associated with having either a nonemployed mother or a full-time employed mother may be more conducive to optimal development, possibly through their impact on sleep. Part-time maternal employment, in contrast, may be more disruptive for either the mother, the child, or both. This somewhat counterintuitive possibility suggests the need for additional investigation and clarification.

The negative correlates of part-time maternal employment observed here also may be due in part to its potentially adverse impact on maternal social connections (Seppala, 2013). Having an intermediate work schedule may compromise mothers’ ability to fully connect with a support group. Part-time employed mothers may lack both the strong bonds with neighbors fostered by staying at home full-time with infants, and the strong workplace alliances forged through full-time employment. As a result, they themselves may be more isolated and at greater risk of depression, which research has shown can elevate children’s risk of depression. It is also feasible that some mothers work part-time because their own depression compromises their energy. Since vulnerability to depression is partially inherited, this offers an alternative rationale for elevated depression among children of part-time employed mothers.

Alternatively, the detrimental impact of part-time maternal employment observed here is also consistent with the possibility
that, as is true of so much research in this area, other confounding factors may have been operating. It is possible that socioeconomic adversity and parental problems may have varied across the maternal employment conditions in this study. The fact that efforts to discern the operation of such confounds failed here does not guarantee that such factors do not play an important role in accounting for these depression differences. Differences in such things as maternal ambivalence about working and type of job may have fostered the negative outcomes linked with part-time employment during infancy in this study. Future research should include more refined assessment of these possibly influential factors in order to determine the role they may have played in shaping the current findings. Replication of these findings using a more representative, non-collegiate sample would also be valuable.

References


