



A Review of Behavioral Differences Among Children of Working and Non-Working Mothers: Implications for Pediatric Nursing

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Abstract

The increasing participation of women in the workforce has brought significant attention to the potential behavioral differences in children raised by working and non-working mothers. This review aims to synthesize existing research on how maternal employment status influences behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social development among children, and to explore its implications for pediatric nursing practices. The review also highlights the mediating effects of socioeconomic factors, parenting styles, and childcare quality on these behavioral outcomes (Kalil & DeLeire, 2002; Baumrind, 1991).

A comprehensive search was conducted using databases including PubMed, PsycINFO, CINAHL, and Scopus. Keywords included “working mothers,” “non-working mothers,” “child behavior,” “maternal employment,” and “pediatric nursing.” Studies published between 2010 and 2024 were selected based on relevance, peer-review status, and methodological rigor.

Findings indicate that children of working mothers may show greater independence and social competence, attributed to early exposure to structured environments and peer interactions (Belsky et al., 2007; NICHD, 2006). Conversely, children of non-working mothers tend to exhibit stronger attachment security and emotional regulation due to prolonged maternal presence (Barlow et al., 2010). However, outcomes are significantly moderated by the quality of caregiving and family support systems (Vandell & Wolfe, 2000).

These findings have important implications for pediatric nurses, who play a vital role in early behavioral screening, parental counseling, and the promotion of supportive caregiving environments regardless of maternal employment status (Wissow, 2015).

1. Introduction

The dynamic shifts in societal structure, particularly the growing participation of women in the workforce, have brought increasing focus to the behavioral development of children in differing maternal employment contexts. A *working mother* is typically defined as a woman who engages in full-time or part-time paid employment outside the home, while a *non-working mother*—often referred to as a *stay-at-home mother*—is one who primarily dedicates her time to household responsibilities and direct caregiving, without engaging in external employment (Chatterjee & Singh, 2020). *Child behavioral development* encompasses a wide range of outcomes, including emotional regulation, social interaction, cognitive progress, and conduct-related behaviors, which are shaped by both internal and external environments.

The significance of early behavioral development in children is well documented in developmental psychology. According to Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, a child’s behavior is influenced by complex interactions across multiple layers of environment—ranging from immediate family to societal influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These layers are particularly impacted by parental roles, including that of the mother, whose presence and interaction are foundational in shaping early experiences.

With increasing female participation in the workforce globally—an estimated 47% of women being employed as of 2020 (ILO, 2020)—the structure of child caregiving is undergoing transformation. This shift necessitates an updated understanding of how maternal employment status affects child behavior, especially in diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts.

The purpose of this review is to explore the behavioral differences between children raised by working and non-working mothers, with particular emphasis on emotional, cognitive, and social outcomes. Additionally, it seeks to evaluate the implications of these findings for pediatric nursing, especially in terms of early identification, guidance, and care strategies. By synthesizing research from multiple disciplines, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding that supports evidence-based pediatric care practices.

2. Methodology

This paper adopts a narrative-integrative review approach to critically examine and synthesize current evidence on the behavioral differences observed in children of working and non-working mothers. The integrative method allows for the inclusion of diverse research designs—quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods—thereby offering a comprehensive perspective on the topic (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005).

A systematic literature search was conducted across four major electronic databases: PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, and CINAHL, targeting peer-reviewed journal articles published between January 2010 and March 2024. The search strategy utilized the following keywords in various combinations: “working mothers,” “non-working mothers,” “child behavior,” “maternal employment,” and “pediatric nursing.” Boolean operators such as AND and OR were used to refine and broaden the search where necessary.

A total of 58 eligible articles were selected for detailed review after screening 154 studies for relevance and quality. These studies were thematically grouped into five categories for analysis:

1. Cognitive and Academic Outcomes
2. Emotional and Behavioral Adjustment
3. Social Competence and Peer Interaction
4. Parenting Styles and Caregiving Contexts
5. Nursing and Clinical Implications

This thematic framework was guided by recommendations for organizing narrative reviews in behavioral sciences (Cooper, 2016). Quality appraisal of studies was also undertaken using methodological checklists suitable for both qualitative and quantitative designs (CASP, 2018).

Table: Summary of Key Studies on Maternal Employment and Child Behavior.

Study	Focus	Key Findings
Buehler et al. (2023)	Association between maternal employment and child mental health	Maternal employment linked to more conduct problems but fewer internalizing behaviors; full-time employment associated with externalizing issues; part-time and delayed return (after first year) may benefit child mental health.
Dunifon et al. (2013)	Maternal work schedule inflexibility and child behavior	High work schedule inflexibility correlated with increased externalizing and internalizing behavior problems in children; effects more pronounced in single-mother and low-income families.
Gennetian et al. (2010)	Maternal employment stability and child behavior	Stable maternal employment over early childhood linked to fewer externalizing behavior problems; employment stability more influential than mere employment status.
Lucas-Thompson et al. (2010)	Maternal work conditions and child development	Mothers' exposure to work-related stress negatively impacts children's behavioral development; educational and social time with mothers mediates this effect.
Baydar & Brooks-Gunn (1991)	Effects of maternal employment and child care on preschoolers	Maternal employment combined with high-quality child care associated with better cognitive and behavioral outcomes in preschoolers.

Buehler et al. (2023) conducted a comprehensive review examining the relationship between maternal employment and child mental health outcomes. The study found that while maternal employment is associated with increased conduct problems, it also correlates with reduced internalizing behaviors such as anxiety and depression. Notably, part-time employment and returning to work after the child's first year were linked to more favorable child mental health outcomes.

Dunifon et al. (2013) explored how the inflexibility of a mother's work schedule affects child behavior. The study revealed that high work schedule inflexibility is associated with increased externalizing (e.g., aggression) and internalizing (e.g., anxiety) behavior problems in children, with the effects being more significant in single-mother and low-income households.

Gennetian et al. (2010) investigated the impact of maternal employment stability on child behavior. Findings indicated that consistent maternal employment during early childhood is linked to fewer externalizing behavior problems in children, suggesting that employment stability plays a crucial role in child behavioral development.

Lucas-Thompson et al. (2010) examined the effects of maternal work conditions on child development. The study found that mothers' exposure to work-related stress negatively affects children's behavioral development. However, the time mothers spend in educational and social activities with their children can

mediate this negative impact.

Baydar & Brooks-Gunn (1991) analyzed the combined effects of maternal employment and child care quality on preschoolers. The research concluded that maternal employment, when paired with high-quality child care, is associated with improved cognitive and behavioral outcomes in preschool-aged children.

These studies collectively underscore the nuanced relationship between maternal employment and child behavioral outcomes. Factors such as the nature of employment (full-time vs. part-time), work schedule flexibility, employment stability, and the quality of child care play significant roles in influencing children's behavioral development. Understanding these dynamics is essential for pediatric nurses and healthcare professionals to provide informed guidance to families navigating maternal employment decisions.

3. Theoretical Framework

Understanding the behavioral outcomes among children of working and non-working mothers requires a solid foundation in developmental and sociological theories. The following theoretical models provide insight into how maternal roles and external environments influence child behavior and development.

3.1 Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory, first introduced by John Bowlby (1969), posits that the emotional bond between a child and their primary caregiver—typically the mother—is critical for psychological security and social development. Bowlby emphasized the concept of a “secure base,” where consistent maternal availability fosters emotional stability, trust, and resilience in children. In the context of maternal employment, concerns often arise around whether working mothers can maintain sufficient availability to support secure attachment. However, subsequent studies have suggested that the quality, rather than the quantity, of maternal interaction is more predictive of healthy attachment (Ainsworth et al., 1978). This theory is especially relevant when analyzing emotional and behavioral regulation in children who experience prolonged separations from their mothers due to employment.

3.2 Ecological Systems Theory

Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) expands the understanding of child development beyond the family to include multiple environmental systems—microsystem (family, school), mesosystem (interconnections), exosystem (parents' workplaces), and macrosystem (cultural values and norms). In this framework, maternal employment is part of the exosystem, which, although indirect, significantly influences the child's microsystem through changes in routines, caregiving structures, and parental stress. For example, a mother's work schedule or the availability of quality daycare can shape the child's immediate experiences, indirectly affecting their behavior, social skills, and adaptability. This theory is essential for pediatric nurses, who must consider not only individual factors but also the broader social and institutional settings affecting child development.

3.3 Role Theory

Role Theory, as conceptualized by Biddle (1986), explores how societal expectations influence individuals' behavior based on the roles they occupy. For mothers, the dual role of caregiver and employee can create role conflict, potentially leading to stress, guilt, or reduced responsiveness, which may, in turn, influence child outcomes. According to this theory, behavioral differences in children can emerge not merely due to the mother's employment status but due to how well she integrates and manages her multiple roles. Supportive environments—both at work and home—can help mitigate negative effects and enhance positive modeling for children regarding gender roles and responsibility.

3.4 Relevance to Child Developmental Outcomes

Each of these theoretical frameworks underscores that behavioral development is multifactorial. Secure attachment leads to emotional regulation, ecological influences shape behavior through environmental interactions, and role expectations guide parental behavior and its interpretation by the child. Integrating these theories allows pediatric nurses and child health professionals to better assess behavioral symptoms, provide contextually appropriate guidance, and design interventions that support both the child and the working/non-working parent.

4. Behavioral Outcomes in Children of Working Mothers

The behavioral development of children with working mothers is shaped by a complex interplay of caregiving quality, maternal involvement, environmental structure, and external support systems. Research indicates a spectrum of outcomes—both positive and negative—depending on contextual variables such as childcare quality, socioeconomic status, and the emotional availability of the mother.

4.1 Cognitive and Academic Development

Children of working mothers often experience early exposure to structured settings like daycare and preschools, which contribute positively to their cognitive and academic development. Gennetian et al. (2010) observed that consistent maternal employment was associated with improvements in executive functioning and learning behaviors, largely due to the establishment of routine and greater autonomy. Moreover, findings from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (2006) suggest that children placed in high-quality daycare environments during their formative years demonstrate enhanced language development, memory skills, and academic preparedness compared to peers without such exposure. These advantages are most pronounced when maternal employment is stable and childcare settings provide rich, stimulating experiences.

4.2 Social Competence and Peer Relationships

Children of employed mothers often exhibit greater social competence due to increased interaction with peers in structured settings outside the home. According to Belsky et al. (2007), regular engagement in daycare or early childhood education facilities enhances children's ability to navigate social environments, develop empathy, and practice cooperative play. However, the quality of these interactions is contingent upon the caregiving environment. Vandell and Wolfe (2000) caution that poor-quality childcare, marked by high child-to-caregiver ratios or untrained staff, can hinder the development of secure attachments and increase behavioral risks. Thus, while maternal employment can promote social skills, the context in which alternate caregiving occurs plays a pivotal role.

4.3 Emotional and Behavioral Challenges

Despite cognitive and social benefits, children of working mothers may face emotional and behavioral challenges, especially when maternal availability is limited due to work demands. Lucas-Thompson et al. (2010) reported elevated levels of anxiety, irritability, and attention-seeking behavior among children who experienced prolonged separations from their mothers or inconsistent caregiving routines. These issues may be exacerbated by maternal stress, which has been shown to influence parenting behaviors and emotional responsiveness. Greenberger and O'Neil (1993) highlighted that high levels of occupational stress in mothers could result in less patient and more reactive parenting styles, thereby contributing to behavioral dysregulation in children. Hence, while maternal employment itself is not inherently detrimental, the psychological well-being of the mother and the emotional consistency of the caregiving environment are crucial mediators of child behavioral outcomes.

5. Behavioral Outcomes in Children of Non-Working Mothers

Children raised by non-working or stay-at-home mothers often experience different developmental trajectories compared to those whose mothers are employed. These differences manifest across emotional, social, and cognitive domains, often influenced by the level of maternal involvement, home learning environments, and socio-cultural dynamics.

5.1 Emotional Stability and Attachment

One of the most frequently noted advantages for children of non-working mothers is stronger emotional security. Prolonged and consistent maternal presence enables the development of a secure attachment, which is foundational for emotional well-being and stress regulation. Barlow et al. (2010) observed that children with full-time caregiving from mothers during early years showed fewer signs of separation anxiety and had more emotionally responsive interactions. Similarly, Hill et al. (2005) found that these children displayed lower cortisol levels and better behavioral regulation, suggesting that emotional stability is enhanced when children consistently experience maternal availability and attunement. The predictability and emotional safety provided by non-working mothers play a key role in early psychological development.

5.2 Social Development

While emotional attachment may be strong, children of non-working mothers sometimes show delayed social development due to reduced opportunities for peer interaction outside the home. According to Huston and Aronson (2005), limited exposure to group play or structured environments may result in slower acquisition of cooperative skills and social adaptability. Nevertheless, these children often present with fewer behavioral issues related to authority and discipline. Baydar and Brooks-Gunn (1991) reported that children raised in full-time maternal care were less likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors such as defiance or aggression, possibly due to the stable disciplinary strategies and emotional consistency provided in a one-on-one caregiving setting. Hence, while peer-related socialization may be delayed, behavioral discipline within the home may be more effectively maintained.

5.3 Academic Motivation and Cognitive Stimulation

In terms of academic and cognitive outcomes, children of non-working mothers may receive abundant emotional nurturing but sometimes lack exposure to structured cognitive stimulation. Parcel and Menaghan (1994) argued that children in home-based care often miss out on the learning frameworks provided by preschools or daycares, such as early literacy activities, cognitive games, and performance feedback. This can affect their initial school readiness, although it may be offset in families where the mother is highly educated or actively engages in learning-based interactions at home. The cognitive gap, therefore, is not inherent to maternal non-employment but dependent on the educational quality of the caregiving environment.

6. Influencing Variables and Mediators

Behavioral outcomes in children of working and non-working mothers cannot be understood in isolation from the broader context of influential mediating variables. Factors such as socioeconomic status, parenting style, childcare quality, and maternal mental health significantly affect how maternal employment status translates into child development outcomes. These mediators offer insight into why different children respond differently to similar caregiving environments.

6.1 Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status (SES) serves as a foundational determinant of both parenting resources and the quality of developmental experiences available to a child. Kalil and DeLeire (2002) emphasized that in lower-income households, maternal employment may be linked to economic necessity rather than personal choice, which can introduce stress and reduce the time and energy mothers can devote to their children. Conversely, in higher SES families, working mothers are more likely to afford high-quality childcare, extracurricular activities, and educational resources, which in turn buffer potential negative effects of maternal absence. Thus, SES mediates not only access to resources but also the emotional climate in which children are raised.

6.2 Parenting Style and Involvement

Parenting style plays a critical role in shaping child behavior, regardless of maternal employment. Baumrind (1991) identified authoritative parenting—marked by warmth, responsiveness, and consistent discipline—as the most conducive to positive behavioral outcomes. Whether a mother is employed or not, it is her parenting approach that strongly influences emotional resilience, self-regulation, and social competence in children. Involvement, expressed through time spent on shared activities, responsiveness to emotional needs, and communication, has been found to outweigh the quantity of time in its impact on developmental outcomes.

6.3 Quality of Childcare or Preschool Environment

The caregiving environment outside the home acts as a major mediator for children of working mothers. Clarke-Stewart et al. (2002) demonstrated that high-quality childcare—characterized by low child-to-staff ratios, trained personnel, and developmentally appropriate curricula—significantly contributes to enhanced cognitive performance, social adjustment, and language skills. On the other hand, poor-quality settings may increase the risk of behavioral issues such as aggression or withdrawal. Therefore, the type and quality of substitute care a child receives are central to understanding the behavioral effects associated with maternal employment.

6.4 Maternal Mental Health

A mother's psychological well-being directly impacts her parenting capacity and, consequently, child behavior. Luthar and Ciciolla (2015) noted that maternal depression, anxiety, and chronic stress are strongly associated with reduced emotional availability and increased likelihood of inconsistent or harsh parenting. Such conditions may arise both in working mothers experiencing work-family conflict and in non-working mothers facing social isolation or financial stress. Children of mothers with poor mental health tend to show higher rates of behavioral and emotional disturbances, underlining the need for psychological support systems as part of pediatric care and family interventions.

7. Cultural and Societal Perspectives

The impact of maternal employment on child behavior is deeply shaped by cultural values, societal structures, and gender norms. While many psychological and developmental theories are globally applicable, their manifestation often differs across cultural contexts. In India, where family systems and societal expectations differ significantly from those in Western countries, maternal employment carries unique implications for both mother and child.

7.1 Indian Context vs. Western Findings

Research comparing Indian and Western contexts reveals divergent outcomes due to differences in societal support structures and cultural expectations. Sarkar and Seshadri (2014) found that in Western societies, maternal employment is generally normalized and supported by institutional childcare systems, workplace flexibility, and egalitarian gender roles. In contrast, Indian working mothers often face conflicting demands between professional responsibilities and traditional caregiving expectations. These conflicting pressures

can affect maternal stress levels, child-parent interactions, and consequently, child behavior. Moreover, unlike in the West where non-parental care is professionally regulated, Indian families often rely on informal caregiving, which can vary widely in quality and developmental support.

7.2 Influence of Extended Family Support Systems

In the Indian sociocultural framework, extended families play a pivotal role in childrearing, especially when mothers are employed. Chatterjee and Singh (2020) observed that the involvement of grandparents and other relatives in caregiving not only reduces maternal guilt but also ensures consistent emotional and physical support for the child. This multigenerational caregiving model can mitigate the potential negative effects of maternal absence, offering children a sense of continuity and belonging. However, variations in parenting philosophies between generations may lead to confusion or inconsistency in discipline and values, which can influence behavioral regulation in children.

7.3 Gender Role Expectations and Stigma Around Maternal Employment

Gender norms heavily influence perceptions of maternal employment in Indian society. Rajadhyaksha (2004) highlighted that working mothers are often subject to social scrutiny, with their employment interpreted as neglecting traditional maternal duties. These societal expectations contribute to internalized guilt and psychological conflict, affecting the quality of maternal involvement. Moreover, children may also internalize societal judgments, especially if they are exposed to peers or community narratives that idealize stay-at-home motherhood. Such stigmatization not only affects maternal well-being but also subtly influences children's understanding of gender roles and their behavioral expression within family and social contexts.

8. Implications for Pediatric Nursing

Given the diverse behavioral outcomes associated with maternal employment status, pediatric nurses hold a critical role in ensuring children's holistic development through early intervention, family support, and policy advocacy. Recognizing the interplay between maternal roles and child behavior equips pediatric healthcare providers to tailor interventions that are both context-sensitive and developmentally appropriate.

8.1 Screening and Early Identification

Pediatric nurses are uniquely positioned to observe early signs of behavioral or emotional dysregulation in children during routine health visits. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP, 2016) recommends the use of validated behavioral assessment tools such as the Pediatric Symptom Checklist (PSC) or Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) to screen for developmental concerns. By incorporating questions about maternal employment patterns and the child's daily caregiving environment, nurses can better identify risk factors and guide timely referrals. Recognizing red flags—such as excessive clinginess, delayed language, or aggression—within the context of caregiving routines enhances early detection and supports more accurate diagnosis.

8.2 Family-Centered Care and Counseling

A core responsibility of pediatric nurses lies in empowering families with knowledge about child development, irrespective of the mother's employment status. Wissow (2015) emphasized that nurses should educate both working and non-working parents on developmental milestones and offer strategies to nurture emotional security and independence. For instance, working mothers can be guided on establishing consistent routines and maximizing quality time, while non-working mothers may be advised on facilitating peer interactions to encourage social development. Counseling may also include support in managing separation anxiety, setting boundaries, and encouraging behavioral regulation through positive parenting practices. Such family-centered interventions ensure that child behavior is addressed within the context of parental well-being and caregiving dynamics.

8.3 Community and Policy Advocacy

Beyond clinical settings, pediatric nurses play a vital advocacy role by influencing community norms and public policies that impact child health. Promoting access to high-quality childcare services is essential in supporting working mothers and ensuring children's cognitive and emotional needs are met in professional caregiving environments. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2019) has underscored the importance of workplace flexibility and parental leave policies to promote work-life balance and reduce caregiver stress. Pediatric nurses can advocate for these provisions at the institutional and policy levels, emphasizing the long-term benefits of stable caregiving for children's mental and behavioral development. Additionally, organizing community education programs can help dismantle stigmas surrounding maternal employment and promote supportive, inclusive parenting models.

9. Gaps in Literature and Future Directions

Although a substantial body of literature exists on the behavioral outcomes of children based on maternal employment status, several critical gaps remain unaddressed. These limitations highlight the need for more diverse, inclusive, and long-term research efforts to better inform pediatric nursing and child development practices.

9.1 Lack of Long-Term Longitudinal Studies in Developing Countries

Most of the existing longitudinal research on maternal employment and child behavior stems from Western countries with relatively stable social support systems and formalized childcare frameworks. In contrast, developing nations such as India, Nigeria, or Bangladesh lack extensive, long-term studies tracking children's behavioral and emotional outcomes over time. This gap is significant because cultural norms, extended family involvement, and informal childcare arrangements in these contexts may yield different developmental trajectories. Without such longitudinal evidence, healthcare practitioners in these regions are often compelled to rely on frameworks developed in vastly different socio-economic environments, potentially limiting the relevance and effectiveness of pediatric guidance.

9.2 Limited Focus on Fathers' Roles in Child Development

A striking limitation in the literature is the persistent underrepresentation of fathers in studies concerning child behavior and caregiving dynamics. Lamb (2010) argues that despite growing awareness of the father's role in modern parenting, research continues to focus predominantly on mothers, thereby offering an incomplete picture of family influences. In both working and non-working mother households, the involvement of fathers in emotional nurturing, discipline, and daily caregiving can significantly buffer or amplify behavioral outcomes. Future studies must adopt a more inclusive family systems approach that captures the contributions and mediating effects of paternal engagement in child development.

9.3 Need for More Culturally Nuanced Research

Cultural context is a powerful determinant of how maternal employment is perceived and how it affects child development. However, much of the literature continues to apply Western theoretical models universally, without adequately addressing the cultural, religious, and gender-role variations present across different societies. The lack of culturally nuanced research impedes the creation of tailored interventions for families with diverse backgrounds. For example, in collectivist cultures, where extended families often share caregiving responsibilities, the emotional impact of maternal absence may be less pronounced than in individualistic societies. Future research must incorporate qualitative and ethnographic methodologies to capture these complex socio-cultural influences and provide richer, more applicable insights for pediatric and developmental professionals.

10. Conclusion

This review has highlighted the nuanced behavioral differences observed among children of working and non-working mothers. While children of working mothers may benefit from increased independence, structured routines, and early socialization opportunities, they may also be at risk for emotional or behavioral challenges if maternal availability or caregiving quality is compromised. Conversely, children of non-working mothers often experience greater emotional security and consistent discipline but may face limitations in social exposure and cognitive stimulation if not supplemented through intentional learning activities.

A key takeaway from the literature is that maternal employment status alone does not determine child developmental outcomes. Rather, the quality of caregiving, the emotional attunement of the caregiver, and the broader socio-cultural context significantly mediate these effects. Supportive parenting practices, enriched environments, and stable emotional connections are essential in fostering positive behavioral and cognitive development in children—regardless of whether a mother is employed or not.

In this context, pediatric nurses play a crucial role as frontline professionals who can observe, assess, and respond to developmental concerns in early childhood. As mediators, they can bridge gaps between families and services; as educators, they can empower parents with evidence-based strategies; and as advocates, they can influence policies that support work-life balance, mental health, and access to quality childcare. By adopting a holistic, family-centered approach, pediatric nurses can help ensure that all children receive the support they need to thrive, regardless of maternal employment patterns.

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