Parents’ evening and night work schedules and children’s social and emotional well-being in Germany: The importance of fathers

Till Kaiser¹, Matthias Pollmann-Schult², Jianghong Li³

¹Department of Psychology, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Bochum, Germany
²Otto-von-Guericke-Universität Magdeburg, Germany
³WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Germany

An emerging body of evidence shows that parents’ nonstandard work schedules have a detrimental effect on children’s well-being. However, only limited research has investigated mediating factors that underpin this association. Likewise, only limited studies have examined fathers’ nonstandard work schedules. A further limitation is that far few studies have looked at joint work schedules of both parents. Based on data from the Families in Germany Study (FiD), this study aimed to address these research gaps. The sample consists of parents and their children at ages 7-8 and 9-10 (n=838 child observations in dual-earner families). The data was collected between 2010 and 2013. We focused on parents’ evening and or night work hours (every day, several times a week, or changing as shifts) as the main type of nonstandard schedules. Children’s social and emotional well-being was measured with the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) based on both mothers’ and fathers’ reports. The study reveals three key findings. First, children have more behavior problems across all domains when both mothers and fathers work evening and or night schedules. However, there are differences across domains. For example, mothers and fathers report more problems if both parents work evening and night schedules, and this effect seems to be stronger in the domain of conduct problems than in other domains. Second, the link between both parents’ evening/night work schedules and child emotional and behavioural problems is in part attributed to harsh and strict parenting styles of both parents, but with a stronger mediating effect of fathers’ parenting. Third, for the first time our findings reveal spill-over effects or “cross-parent” effects of nonstandard work schedules in all domains of SDQ: If only mother works evening/night schedules she also reports an increase in hyperactivity and emotional symptoms that is transmitted through fathers’ strict and harsh parenting. If only fathers work non-standard work schedules, they also report more emotional symptoms in their children, which is mediated through maternal strict control. In summary our finding underscores the importance of joint parental work schedules and of the notion that fathers play an important and a unique role in children’s development.

Keywords: children, nonstandard work, social and emotional well-being, SDQ, dual-earner couples