Your Work Stress Could Be Affecting Your Kids' Health

Lack of control at work and the stress that creates could be affecting your children.

By Virginia Pelley Jan 23 2019, 7:34 PM

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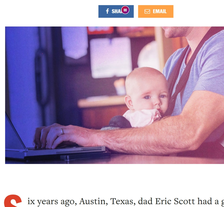

Six years ago, Austin, Texas, dad Eric Scott had a good job in fundraising and arts event production. He loved the work, but it was a stressful, demanding job that regularly required him to put in 15- to 18-hour days. One day, Scott came home to his then six-year-old daughter. She looked at him very matter-of-factly and said, "Some days it's like you're not my Daddy."

"She didn't mean to be cruel," says Scott. "She was just sharing her observation, as children sometimes so brutally do." But Scott was devastated; the next day, he started looking for a new job.

Working long, demanding hours can affect a parent's ability to, well, parent. But getting an accurate picture of how a parent's work life affects kids' health might be more complex — and the effects could be physical in addition to emotional, new research suggests.

According to a new study published in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, parents in high-stress jobs in which they had "low autonomy" – meaning they didn't have freedom to make decisions about how they do their jobs – tended to have children who felt less healthy.

The researchers solicited self-reported data from Nigerian kids, mostly 13 to 15 years old, and their parents. It didn't matter whether the parents made a lot of money or very little, the authors wrote. The strongest correlation was between parents who had demanding jobs with little freedom and kids who most identified with statements such as "My health is worse now than it was last year" and "Sometimes I feel like my health keeps me from doing something I want to do."

It takes more resources to regulate behavior in demanding, low-autonomy jobs, says co-lead author Christiane Spitzmueller, Ph.D., professor of industrial organizational psychology at the University of Houston. If someone's job depletes those resources, Spitzmueller says, they're less able to engage in behavior that requires "sustained effort," such as parenting.

"Generally, there's a relationship where the more work stress there is, the more likely there is to be work-family conflict, where you feel like work is negatively impacting your family," Spitzmueller says. "Parents who feel depleted tend to want to plop on the couch after work and not do anything active or try to steward kids to engage in positive behaviors."

Positive behaviors include cooking a meal together, going for a walk, or working on a game or puzzle, she says. Problems can arise, on the other hand, with "passive parenting": Bringing home take-out or staring at a phone while the kid is entertained by the TV or an iPad doesn't allow for the kind of engagement that tends to enrich kids.

Psychologists have been studying the effects of parental stress on kids' mental health for several decades. Studies have linked fathers' behavior with emotional problems in their children; another study published in 2007 found that marital stress affected teens' emotional development; and a study of low-income families published the *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* in 2008 concluded that boys with depressed mothers were more prone to antisocial behavior such as aggression.

But researchers are just starting to explore how parental stress might affect kids' physical health, too. In another new study, German researchers concluded that stressed mothers were more likely to have infants that were obese. Work demands more of people than it ever did before. The majority of modern workers pull longer hours than ever before and the boundaries between the office and home become more blurry by the day, making it harder to disconnect from the demands of a job. As stress from work bleeds into home life, it's no wonder a correlation is forming.

At this point, however, it's probably too soon for parents to begin worrying that their stressful job might make kids sick.

"Could I imagine that, depending on how a child's treated by a parent on a regular basis, it could have an impact on the child's health? Sure," says Matt Traube, MFT, a psychotherapist in San Luis Obispo, California. "But it's a tricky thing to measure because there are so many factors mitigating how people deal with stress. At this point I would just say, 'It's a neat idea — how do we further study it?'"

Although there's been a trove of published research about stress, the effects of autonomy are less understood, Traube says. "When people feel they don't have control, that has historically been tied to dissatisfaction at work."

Feeling as though someone doesn't have a sense of agency at work can be draining and emotionally exhausting, he continues. "It can affect your self-esteem and start to shape how you view yourself as a parent."

Another, perhaps simpler, way to look at it is in terms of value rather than autonomy, says Tom Kearns, LMSW, a counselor in New York City and the mental health advisor for the Milwaukee Bucks.

"If he's in a workplace where he feels valued, that has a positive impact on his ability to connect and relate to and have patience with his child," Kearns says. "But if he's overlooked at meetings, or not included in a meeting or lunch with co-workers, it can make him feel not a part of something, and that can make him feel isolated."

A father might compensate for the frustration he feels at his job by ruling his kids with a heavier hand at home, putting strict and less healthy demands on them to create a sort of "value" for himself, Kearns adds. Feeling isolated also can make dads withdraw at home.

"Even if he's present, he might not engage with the child if he's not feeling valued himself," Kearns says. "The child picks up on this, and it has the effect of the kid longing for something that's not there. Or the kid might think he or she is to blame for the father not being more attentive."

So, it might sound, at this point, like an impossibility to hold down a challenging, stimulating job without screwing up your child for life. It's not. It does, however, require that people take stock of how their career might be affecting their kids and that they make sure to take care of themselves, too.

"Knowing when to focus on your job or your family, and how to deal with the rejected party gracefully, may be the essence of being a working parent," says Scott, who still works in the nonprofit sector but now as a marketing director with less intense hours. "And it's easy to place the blame for this on your job or your employer, but I think parents have to take ownership of our part in this."

Scott points out that sometimes it's just easier to deal with work than to deal with your kids, although parents might tell themselves that they "have to" answer that email, for example, or put in another hour of work after dinner.

"Your work is straightforward: You have defined responsibilities and expectations, and, usually, you can evaluate your success easily," says Scott. "You have a level of control that you simply do not have with parenting. Parenting can be a total mind scramble, where success can look like failure and vice-versa, and I think some people retreat into their work as an escape."

If a parent's job is unfulfilling for whatever reason, they might want to move on like Scott did. But if they're stuck for the moment and feeling undervalued at their job, they do have to check that before they walk through the door to make sure that when they're home, they're in a good space for their child, Kearns says.

Self-awareness, per Kearns, is key. "Also ask yourself, *How does this connect historically into my family?* and *Am I doing the kinds of things I saw my father do when he came home from work?*" he suggests. Without some reflection and awareness, people tend to repeat negative patterns of behavior even when they don't want to.

Of course, most parents want to be engaged as much as they're able. But it's impossible to be the perfect "on" parent all the time.

Although he overhauled his career to make sure he was more present for his daughter, Scott says his still carves out some me-time. "I cut myself some slack. I'd rather my kids have a father who is overall happy than one who is terrified to let them watch TV for an hour while daddy drinks a beer on the porch to decompress."

Traube, who is a father of one with another on the way, agrees that creating a support system and figuring out what a parents can do to take care of themselves — whether it's calling a friend and talking during their commute, meditating, negotiating an earlier work start time so they can leave earlier or letting their family know that taking a breather to walk the dog is the first thing they do when they get home — is essential for parents.

"It's like putting on your oxygen mask first on an airplane before putting one on your child," Traube says. "You do need to do self-care to be a good parent."