



“Balancing Work, Care, and Childhood Development: A Comprehensive Review of Behavioural Problems in Preschool Children of Employed and Unemployed Mothers”

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Abstract: Preschool years represent a critical developmental period during which children acquire foundational emotional, social, and behavioral skills. Maternal employment status has long been debated as a significant determinant of early childhood behavioral outcomes. With increasing participation of women in the workforce globally, concerns have emerged regarding the impact of maternal employment on preschool children's behavioral development, particularly in comparison to children of unemployed mothers. Behavioural problems in preschool children, such as aggression, hyperactivity, anxiety, withdrawal, and attention difficulties, can have lasting effects on academic performance, peer relationships, and mental health later in life. This review aims to critically analyze existing literature on behavioural problems among preschool children of employed and unemployed mothers, exploring contributing factors, theoretical perspectives, cultural influences, and the role of maternal well-being and caregiving practices. Evidence suggests that maternal employment alone does not determine behavioral outcomes; rather, factors such as quality of childcare, parenting style, maternal stress, socio-economic status, and work–family balance play crucial mediating roles. The review highlights the importance of supportive policies, early identification, and nursing and community-based interventions to promote positive behavioral development among preschool children regardless of maternal employment status.

Keywords: Preschool children; behavioural problems; maternal employment; child development; working mothers; unemployed mothers; early childhood behaviour; nursing interventions

Introduction

Early childhood, particularly the preschool period between three and six years of age, is a formative stage characterized by rapid cognitive, emotional, and social development. During this phase, children learn to regulate emotions, interact with peers, and adapt to structured environments such as preschool settings. Behavioural problems emerging during this stage, if left unaddressed, may persist into adolescence and adulthood, leading to academic difficulties, impaired social functioning, and increased risk of mental health disorders.

In recent decades, changing socio-economic conditions, urbanization, and educational aspirations have led to a steady rise in maternal employment worldwide. While maternal employment contributes positively to family income, women's empowerment, and societal

development, it has also raised concerns regarding its influence on child-rearing practices and early childhood behavioural outcomes. Traditionally, unemployed mothers were perceived as being more available for caregiving, whereas employed mothers were often viewed as constrained by time and work-related stress. These perceptions have prompted extensive research comparing behavioural problems in preschool children of employed and unemployed mothers.

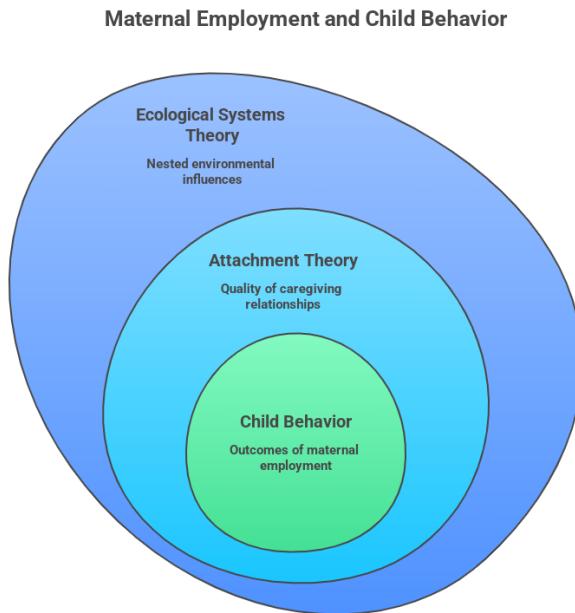
However, findings across studies remain inconsistent and often influenced by contextual, cultural, and methodological variations. This review seeks to synthesize existing evidence to provide a balanced and comprehensive understanding of behavioural problems in preschool children in relation to maternal employment status, while emphasizing the implications for nursing



practice, early childhood education, and family-centered care.

Conceptual Framework

The relationship between maternal employment status and child behavior can be understood through ecological and developmental theories. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory emphasizes that child development occurs within nested systems, including family, workplace, community, and broader sociocultural contexts. Maternal employment influences not only the microsystem of parent-child interaction but also the exosystem through workplace policies and childcare availability.



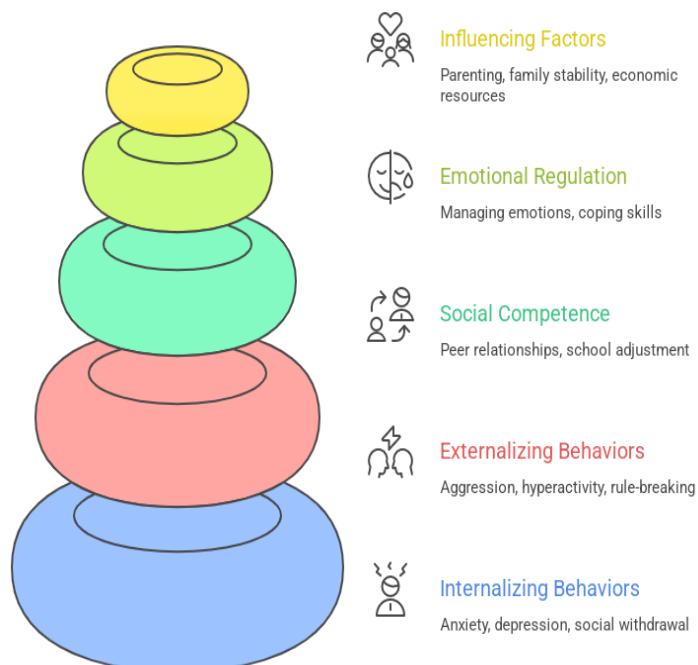
Attachment theory further explains how the quality of early caregiving relationships, rather than the quantity of time spent together, shapes children's emotional security and behavior. Secure attachment can be established by both employed and unemployed mothers if caregiving is sensitive, responsive, and consistent. In contrast, maternal stress, depression, or inconsistent parenting—regardless of employment status—can contribute to behavioral problems in children.

Types of Behavioral Problems in Children

Behavioral problems in children are broadly categorized into internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Internalizing problems include anxiety, depression, somatic complaints,

social withdrawal, and fearfulness. These behaviors are often less visible but can significantly impair emotional well-being and academic performance. Externalizing problems are characterized by aggression, oppositional behavior, hyperactivity, impulsivity, and rule-breaking behaviors, which are more disruptive and frequently attract adult attention.

Behavioral Problem Hierarchy



In addition to these categories, children may exhibit difficulties in social competence, emotional regulation, peer relationships, and school adjustment. These behavioral domains are influenced by parenting practices, family stability, economic resources, and parental mental health, all of which may vary between employed and unemployed mothers.

Conceptual Understanding of Behavioural Problems in Preschool Children

Behavioural problems in preschool children refer to patterns of behavior that are developmentally inappropriate, persistent, and disruptive to the child's functioning or social environment. Common behavioural problems observed during the preschool years include



externalizing behaviors such as aggression, temper tantrums, hyperactivity, impulsivity, and non-compliance, as well as internalizing behaviors such as anxiety, fearfulness, withdrawal, excessive dependency, and low self-esteem.

These behaviours are influenced by a complex interaction of biological maturation, temperament, parenting practices, family environment, and socio-cultural factors. While occasional behavioural challenges are considered normal during early childhood, persistent or severe problems may indicate underlying emotional or environmental difficulties. Maternal factors, including emotional availability, mental health, parenting style, and employment-related stress, play a crucial role in shaping children's behavioral patterns during this stage.

Maternal Employment: Changing Dynamics and Social Context

Maternal employment is no longer an exception but a norm in many societies, driven by economic necessity, career aspirations, and changing gender roles. Employed mothers may work full-time, part-time, or in informal sectors, each presenting unique challenges and opportunities for child caregiving. Employment may enhance maternal self-esteem, financial stability, and access to better educational and healthcare resources for children. Conversely, it may also contribute to role strain, fatigue, reduced supervision time, and emotional exhaustion.

Unemployed mothers, on the other hand, may have greater physical availability for childcare but may also experience financial stress, social isolation, or reduced self-worth, which can indirectly affect parenting behaviors. Thus, maternal employment status alone cannot be viewed as a simplistic determinant of child behavioral outcomes; rather, it must be understood within a broader ecological and psychosocial framework.

Theoretical Perspectives Linking Maternal Employment and Child Behaviour

Several theoretical frameworks have been applied to explain the relationship between maternal employment and preschool children's behaviour. Attachment theory emphasizes the importance of early mother-child bonding

and emotional responsiveness. According to this theory, consistent and sensitive caregiving fosters secure attachment, which is associated with better emotional regulation and fewer behavioural problems. Critics of maternal employment argue that prolonged separation may disrupt attachment, although empirical evidence suggests that quality of interaction is more important than quantity of time.

Ecological systems theory views child development as influenced by multiple interacting systems, including family, workplace, community, and societal policies. From this perspective, maternal employment affects children indirectly through factors such as parental stress, childcare arrangements, and family routines. Social learning theory highlights the role of modeling and reinforcement, suggesting that children's behaviour is shaped by observed parental coping strategies and emotional responses to stress.

Behavioural Problems in Preschool Children of Employed Mothers

Research examining behavioural problems among preschool children of employed mothers has produced mixed findings. Some studies report higher levels of externalizing behaviors such as aggression, hyperactivity, and defiance among children of employed mothers, particularly when maternal work hours are long or work conditions are stressful. These behaviours are often attributed to reduced parental supervision, inconsistent discipline, and fatigue-related irritability in parents.

However, other studies indicate no significant difference or even better behavioral outcomes among children of employed mothers, especially when employment is stable and childcare quality is high. Exposure to structured daycare environments may enhance social skills, independence, and adaptability in preschool children. Moreover, employed mothers may demonstrate more authoritative parenting styles, balancing warmth with consistent discipline, which has been linked to positive behavioural outcomes.

Importantly, maternal job satisfaction and work-life balance appear to be stronger predictors of child behavior



than employment status itself. Mothers who perceive their work as fulfilling and manageable tend to exhibit better emotional regulation, which positively influences child behavior.

Behavioral Problems Among Children of Employed Mothers

Research on children of employed mothers has yielded diverse findings. Several studies suggest that children of employed mothers do not exhibit higher levels of behavioral problems compared to those of unemployed mothers. In fact, some evidence indicates better social competence, independence, and self-regulation among these children, particularly when maternal employment is stable and satisfying.

Employed mothers often contribute to improved family income, which can enhance access to educational resources, healthcare, nutrition, and enriching extracurricular activities. Economic stability reduces parental stress and fosters a more supportive home environment. Moreover, employed mothers may model positive attributes such as autonomy, responsibility, and achievement, which children may internalize.

However, challenges may arise when maternal employment is associated with long working hours, inflexible schedules, or high job stress. In such cases, children may experience reduced parental supervision, inconsistent routines, and emotional unavailability, potentially leading to externalizing behaviors such as aggression or attention problems. The quality of substitute childcare plays a crucial role; high-quality childcare settings have been shown to buffer potential negative effects and promote positive behavioral outcomes.

Behavioural Problems in Preschool Children of Unemployed Mothers

Preschool children of unemployed mothers are often assumed to exhibit fewer behavioural problems due to increased maternal availability. Some studies support this assumption, reporting lower levels of aggression and attention problems in children whose mothers are not employed outside the home. Increased supervision,

involvement in daily routines, and emotional presence may contribute to these outcomes.

Nevertheless, unemployment may also be associated with financial hardship, maternal depression, and stress, particularly in low-income settings. Children exposed to chronic economic strain and parental emotional distress may exhibit internalizing behaviors such as anxiety, fearfulness, and social withdrawal. In such contexts, maternal unemployment may not serve as a protective factor but rather a risk factor for behavioural problems. Thus, the psychological well-being of the mother and the quality of the home environment remain critical determinants of child behavior, regardless of employment status.

Behavioral Problems Among Children of Unemployed Mothers

Children of unemployed mothers are often assumed to benefit from increased maternal availability. While greater time spent together can strengthen emotional bonds, unemployment may also be accompanied by adverse conditions that affect child behavior. Financial insecurity, social isolation, and reduced self-esteem among unemployed mothers can contribute to parenting stress and depressive symptoms.

Maternal depression and anxiety are consistently associated with higher levels of internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems in children. Unemployed mothers experiencing psychological distress may display less responsive, more irritable, or inconsistent parenting behaviors. These patterns can undermine children's sense of security and emotional regulation, increasing the risk of behavioral difficulties.

Additionally, prolonged unemployment may expose children to chronic stress related to economic hardship, housing instability, and limited access to educational and recreational resources. Such stressors can negatively affect children's emotional well-being, academic motivation, and peer relationships, leading to both internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems.

Comparative Analysis of Behavioural Outcomes

Comparative studies between preschool children of employed and unemployed mothers reveal that



behavioural outcomes are influenced more by mediating variables than by employment status alone. Factors such as parenting style, family support systems, quality of childcare, socio-economic status, and cultural norms significantly shape behavioural patterns.

Children of employed mothers in supportive work environments with access to quality childcare often demonstrate comparable or superior behavioral adjustment compared to children of unemployed mothers facing socio-economic stress. Conversely, children of unemployed mothers experiencing financial insecurity and limited social support may exhibit increased emotional and behavioural difficulties.

These findings underscore the need to move beyond binary comparisons and adopt a holistic approach when examining behavioural problems in preschool children.

Influence of Childcare Quality and Early Education

Childcare quality plays a pivotal role in moderating the relationship between maternal employment and child behaviour. High-quality childcare settings characterized by trained caregivers, low child-to-caregiver ratios, structured routines, and emotionally supportive environments promote positive social interactions and behavioural regulation.

Preschool children attending such settings often develop better peer relationships, communication skills, and adaptive behaviors. In contrast, inadequate or unstable childcare arrangements may contribute to behavioral problems, irrespective of maternal employment status. Therefore, access to quality early childhood education is essential for mitigating potential behavioral risks.

Role of Maternal Mental Health and Parenting Practices

Maternal mental health is a critical factor influencing preschool children's behavioural outcomes. Depression, anxiety, and chronic stress in mothers are strongly associated with both internalizing and externalizing behaviors in children. Employed mothers experiencing work-related stress and unemployed mothers facing

economic insecurity may both be vulnerable to psychological distress.

Parenting practices such as warmth, consistency, positive reinforcement, and effective discipline significantly shape children's behavior. Authoritative parenting has consistently been associated with fewer behavioural problems, whereas harsh or inconsistent parenting increases the risk of maladaptive behaviors. Supporting maternal mental health and parenting competence is therefore essential in addressing preschool behavioural problems.

Cultural and Societal Influences

Cultural beliefs regarding motherhood, employment, and child-rearing influence both maternal experiences and child behavior. In some societies, working mothers may face social stigma, leading to guilt and stress that affect parenting interactions. In others, maternal employment is normalized and supported through extended family systems and institutional childcare.

Societal policies such as maternity leave, flexible work arrangements, and affordable childcare significantly impact maternal well-being and child outcomes. Countries with family-friendly policies tend to report fewer negative associations between maternal employment and child behaviour.

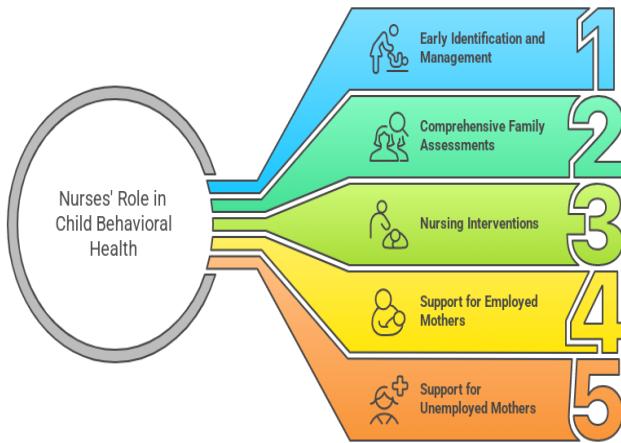
Implications for Nursing Practice and Public Health

Nurses play a crucial role in early identification and prevention of behavioural problems in preschool children. Community health nurses, pediatric nurses, and school health nurses are well-positioned to assess developmental milestones, educate parents, and provide counseling on positive parenting practices.

Nursing interventions should focus on parental education, stress management, promotion of work-life balance, and referral to early intervention services when needed. Supporting both employed and unemployed mothers through counseling, parenting programs, and social support initiatives can significantly improve behavioural outcomes in preschool children.



Unveiling the Multifaceted Role of Nurses in Child Behavioral Health



Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to examine the long-term behavioural trajectories of preschool children in relation to maternal employment. Greater emphasis should be placed on contextual factors such as job quality, paternal involvement, and childcare environments. Culturally sensitive research is also needed to understand variations across different socio-economic and cultural settings.

Conclusion

Behavioural problems in preschool children are shaped by a complex interplay of maternal, familial, and societal factors. Maternal employment status alone does not determine behavioural outcomes; rather, the quality of caregiving, maternal mental health, socio-economic conditions, and supportive environments play decisive roles. Recognizing these multifaceted influences is essential for developing effective interventions and policies that support families and promote healthy behavioural development in early childhood.

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