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Maternal Reflections on Working from Home with Children during the Pandemic

Due to widespread work and school closures during the early waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, many mothers were forced to work from home while supervising their children's remote schooling. The current study examines maternal reflections on this period, focusing on the perceived impact of working in close proximity for both mothers and their children in the United States. Mothers reported that their children learned more about their job responsibilities since the onset of the pandemic compared to before it, which was likely due to children spending more time closer to their mothers while they worked. We used thematic analysis to examine mothers' open-ended responses. Two overarching themes emerged. The first theme was that greater time together increases children's understanding of working mothers' role in the family, workplace, and community. The second theme was that observing one's mother work from home can inform children's future career paths. Mothers shared that this experience of learning about their mothers' career enabled their children to better understand their perspective, which has the potential to be an empathy-building experience. Looking towards the future, this increased respect and empathy have the potential to improve relationship quality and help children view their mothers' careers more favourably.

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected the daily lives of mothers and their children (O'Reilly and Green). With pandemic-related closures, both children as well as their mothers transitioned to a largely work-from-home format (Bhumika; Kniffin et al.). As schools closed to stop the spread of COVID-19, children of all ages remained at home and engaged in remote schooling. Parents had to grapple with the demands of their children's schooling while balancing their own job demands under stressful conditions. Many parents were working from home for the first time, and others had to continue to go into work as they were designated as essential employees.

Mothers took on a disproportionate amount of the increased caregiving and household demands, reflecting longstanding gender inequalities (O'Reilly and Green; Sevilla and Simon). These changes brought on by the pandemic had negative consequences for both mothers and their children. However, the current study sought to examine the potential positive effects of the increased time mothers and their children in the United States (US) spent together during the pandemic.

Data collection took place mid-pandemic in the early fall of 2021. Although a diverse sample of American working mothers were recruited, it is important to note that more than half of the mothers in our study were college educated. Below, we first review the literature and highlight the potential negative as well as positive impacts of the pandemic on working mothers before describing how our study assessed maternal reflections of working in close proximity to children during pandemic-related school and work closures.

Literature Review

The pandemic blurred the lines between work and home. During lockdown, many mothers worked in close proximity to their children. The existing research has focussed on the drawbacks for families during the pandemic lockdown, which we outline here, whereas our study seeks to examine potential benefits of being in close proximity during this time.

During the pandemic lockdown, mothers reported increased family-work conflict, as responsibilities at home affected their ability to complete the demands of their jobs (Bhumika; Powell). Many mothers attempted to carry out their typical job responsibilities and participate in remote meetings while caring for their children. Correspondingly, work-family conflict also increased, as many mothers experienced work stress that spilled over and affected family dynamics, as they tried to simultaneously attend to work and home responsibilities (Charalampous et al.; Craig and Churchill).

As such, it is not surprising that many mothers reported feeling exhausted as they tried to balance the demands of work and family during the pandemic (Barroso and Horowitz; Igielnik; O'Reilly and Green). With increasing demands at home, some mothers were forced to reduce their hours at work (Cummins and Brannon). Mothers often reported that they were less productive at work during the pandemic, and many similarly indicated feeling less satisfied with their jobs (Feng and Savani). The effects of the pandemic extended beyond mothers' work lives with notable effects on their overall wellbeing (Davenport; O'Reilly and Green). Some mothers reported higher levels of stress and greater symptoms of anxiety and depression since the onset of the pandemic (Cameron et al.; Davenport).

Like their mothers, children experienced increased stress and adjustment

difficulties because of the pandemic (Ramchandani; Skinner et al.; Vogel et al.). As noted above, stress from mothers might have indirectly affected children. Direct effects of the pandemic were also evident, as children often feared catching COVID-19 or having a loved one fall ill (Araújo et al.). Changes to routine were especially challenging, and the transition to remote schooling negatively affected learning as well as reduced access to children's social infrastructure (Agostinelli et al.). During lockdown, children were separated from their friends at a time when they might have needed them most, as social support can provide a protective function during stressful times (Dalton; Vogel et al.).

Despite the negative consequences of the pandemic, many adults were also able to describe some positive effects (Schmiedeberg and Thönnissen). Adults commonly reported that a positive repercussion of the pandemic was greater flexibility at work (Cornell et al.). Some also believed the pandemic allowed them to lead more calm lives and gain new perspectives (Cornell et al.).

The pandemic created more time for families to spend together. As work and school closed, mothers and children spent more time at home with greater opportunity to engage in discussions and activities (O'Reilly and Green). For some mothers and children, the pandemic might have fostered stronger relationships and greater family cohesion (Weeland et al.). The current study sought to explore the potential positive implications of the unprecedented opportunity for children to observe their mothers working from home, especially in the early days of the pandemic. In particular, we examined the positive effects of working from home for both mothers and children in the US.

Current Study

Many children were able to see firsthand how their mothers approached their job demands and interacted with colleagues after they transitioned to remote work (Barhate et al.). Research has long documented the strength of observational learning, including the potential influence of mothers on their children (Armstrong). Successful women have often noted their own significant maternal influences on their careers and leadership aspirations (Armstrong). The pandemic provided an opportunity for children to observe their mother and work and learn from this experience.

The experience of working in close proximity to mothers may be similar to previous programs designed before the pandemic to promote understanding of mothers' work. For instance, Take Your Daughters and Sons to Work Day is an annual event in the US, which began in 1993. This event was originally only promoted as Take Your Daughter to Work Day but transitioned to include sons in 2007 and was designed as an opportunity for children to learn about career options (Yuko). Traditionally, the event is held each April; millions of

children participate in opportunities to observe the world of work (Moses). Pioneered by the Ms. Foundation, the event was intended to demonstrate that gender is not a limitation to career pursuits as well as teach children about career paths (Waxman). During lockdown, for many families, every day became a Take Your Daughters and Sons to Work Day. We sought to examine how mothers perceived the effects of working in close proximity for both themselves and their children. In particular, we were interested in how mothers viewed the impact of their work during the pandemic on their children’s career trajectories and leadership aspirations.

Methods

Participants

Participants included 133 mothers recruited from Prolific, an online participant recruitment platform. An additional six mothers began but did not complete the study. Mothers were eligible for the study if they resided in the US, were over 18 years of age, and were currently working (See Table 1 for reported demographic information). Mothers reported working in a wide range of industries including education, business management and administration, finance, healthcare, government, and hospitality.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Age Range	18-24 years (3.8%) 25-34 years (33.0%) 35-44 years (41.4%) 45-54 years (19.5%) 55-64 years (2.3%)
Race/Ethnicity	White (82.0%) Black (8.2%) Latina (6.8%) Asian (1.5%) Other (1.5%)
Marital Status	Married (55.6%) Not Married (44.4%)
Highest Education Level	Some High School (1.5%) High School Diploma/GED (14.3%) Some College or 2-year Degree (31.6%) Four-Year College Degree (21.0%) Some School Beyond College (3.8%) Graduate/Professional Degree (27.8%)

Total Household Income	\$10,000-\$24,999 (8.3%) \$25,000-\$49,999 (22.6%) \$50,000-\$74,999 (16.5%) \$75,000-\$99,999 (18.0%) \$100,000-\$149,999 (18.8%) Over \$150,000 (15%) Preferred Not to Answer (.8%)
Number of Children	1 (48.8%) 2 (37.0%) 3 (8.7%) 4 (1.6%) 5 or more (3.9%)

Procedure

Participants signed up to complete the study via Prolific, which directed them to an external link to complete the study online. Participants completed several measures and answered open-ended questions to assess their experiences during the pandemic via PsychData, an online survey platform. Data collection took place between mid-September and mid-October 2021.

Measures

Participants completed a brief Demographic Survey, including the following measures: the researcher-designed measure of Working and Mothering during the Pandemic; the Parenting Role Overload Measure (Luthar and Ciciolla), and portions of the Environmental Influences on Child Health Outcomes Measures—Adult Primary Version (ECHO).

Demographic Survey

Mothers indicated their age, race/ethnicity, marital status, education level, household income, number of children, and type of employment.

Working and Mothering during the Pandemic

The researchers developed a brief measure to assess mothers' experiences of working during the pandemic. Participants indicated their modality of work (i.e., workplace, hybrid, or home). Participants also indicated the extent to which their children were near them when working from home before the pandemic as well as since its onset on a one (never) to five (extremely often) scale. Similarly, participants indicated how much their children knew about their job responsibilities before the pandemic as well as since its onset on a one (none) to five (a great amount) scale. We included the following open-ended

questions: “During lockdown (March to June 2020), please describe your work situation. Did you work from home, or did you have to go into work? How did this arrangement affect your children?”; “What do you think your children learned about your job/career during the pandemic that they did not know prepandemic? What do you think facilitated this learning (e.g., did your children have greater opportunity to observe you working, did you have discussions about your work)?”; and “How do you think your work during the pandemic influenced your children’s career trajectory and leadership aspirations?”

Parenting Role Overload Measure (Luthar and Ciciolla)

Mothers reported on parenting role overload by responding to seven items (e.g., “Doing all I have to do as a mother often leaves me exhausted”) on a one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree) scale.

Environmental Influences on Child Health Outcomes Measure—Adult Primary Version (ECHO)

A portion of the ECHO measure was used to assess negative adjustment outcomes (e.g., “had difficulty sleeping” and “had angry outbursts”) and COVID-19-related distress (e.g., “tried to avoid thoughts and feelings about COVID-19” and “have been distressed when I see something that reminds me of COVID-19”) on a one (not at all) to five (very often) scale.

Results

The current study used a mixed-methods approach to examine working mothers’ experiences more fully during the pandemic. We first provide findings from an analysis of survey responses and then discuss the themes that emerged when open-ended responses were examined using thematic analysis following Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke’s thematic analysis model.

Quantitative Findings

Mothers’ experience of COVID-19-related distress was positively correlated with parenting role overload and negative adjustment outcomes ($r = .30, p < .001$ and $r = .65, p < .001$, respectively). Despite experiencing COVID-19-related distress, mothers indicated that their children learned more about their job responsibilities since the onset of the pandemic compared to before it ($t(132) = 8.60, p < .001$). This finding may be the result of children spending more time closer to their mothers when they worked, since the onset of the pandemic than before it ($t(130) = 6.06, p < .001$).

Qualitative Findings

Following thematic analysis of the open-ended responses, two overarching themes emerged. The first theme was that greater time together increases children's understanding of the working mothers' role in the family, workplace, and community. The second theme was that observing one's mother work from home can inform children's future career paths.

Theme 1: Greater time together increases children's understanding of their working mothers' role in the family, workplace, and community

The initial lockdown period of the pandemic (qualified as March to May 2020) placed many mothers and their children in close proximity, as work and school moved to online platforms. Even mothers who worked from home before the pandemic had an increase in proximity, since their children attended school from home. Workspaces, depending on job responsibilities and household space, were often close enough that families got glimpses into one another's daily lives that they had not had before. We attempted to understand these glimpses, specifically those related to the mother's work role and duties, by looking for themes in mothers' responses to the questions: "What do you think your children learned about your job/career during the pandemic that they did not know pre-pandemic? What do you think facilitated this learning (e.g., did your children have greater opportunity to observe you working, did you have discussions about your work)?" We found that mothers, often by sheer proximity and sometimes through intentional conversation, were teaching their children about their career and being a member of the workforce.

Many mothers reported that their child learned about their career. Children observed their mothers and saw firsthand the duties they complete as well as how they interact with coworkers. The children overheard meetings and saw how mothers divided their time while working. One mother shared:

My son learned a tremendous deal about what I do, how much I work, and the people I work with. He actually developed relationships with many of my colleagues, and if he heard their voice, he would come in and say hi to them. He would watch what I do, how I say things, and be interested in helping me solve work problems. He got to see how important it was to have social skills, computer skills, and how I was able to apply them.

In this shared experience, like many others, the mother reported that her child was learning what it means to be in a workplace, even during an irregular time like the COVID-19 lockdown. Her son also observed the implementation of important workplace skills, which will be useful to have regardless of his future career. As children observed their mothers' jobs, much of the knowledge

they reportedly took away was related to what the job required of them more than how they did it.

Flexibility, numerous meetings, stress levels, and other workplace conditions were often the focus of children's comments. Several mothers indicated that their child was learning even when they could not observe the specific content of their mother's job. As one mother shared: "I think they [my children] learned that jobs can have flexibility... I cannot talk about my work with my kids due to the nature of work I am in, so they do not know much about what I do; however, they know that I do have more flexibility." Thus, many mothers indicated that their children learned about characteristics of careers in general.

Although many mothers reported general learning that occurred as their children observed them working from home, others reported very career-specific knowledge that their children took away from the time together. For example, one mother who works as a special education teacher said that her children "were able to meet my students, [and] they didn't realize that my students were 'typical' and high functioning like regular people not severely impaired." This mother's children had, of course, heard about their mother's work and, from the mother's statement, had an idea about the students with which she worked. Even so, the COVID-19 lockdown brought to light misunderstandings the children had about what their mother does by directly seeing her work. In this example, the learning about the mother's specific career happened by mere observation, as was the case in many accounts shared by participants.

Some mothers also reported taking the time together as an opportunity to intentionally share with their children and teach them about their career. For example, one mother "[tried to] teach her [daughter] one new thing per day, whether it's about technology or general information." In these cases, being together provided the impetus for teaching children workplace skills, many of which children may have not learned until they entered the workforce. Interestingly, sometimes children began discussions about their mothers' work, as one mother noted that her children "questioned me more about my work and the people I work with, so they became more aware of my day to day." Whether intentional on behalf of the mother or an unavoidable effect of pandemic restrictions, these children gained knowledge about what a career looks like and how their own mothers navigate the work world.

Many mothers expressed that their children gained a sense of respect for what their mother does for their family and their role in the broader community by observing her at work. Some mothers reported that observing them work led their children to have respect for their specific career. There were mothers who took time to explain the role they play in the community. For example, one mother described what her child learned: "My daughter learned just how important my job was and how I keep the lights on for the state of Kentucky

and at times the entire USA. She learned about my work by observing and asking questions. We often had discussions about my profession and the work that I was currently doing. She is interested in pursuing a career in engineering.” Outside of the mother’s specific career, there was a continued theme of feeling that their children had developed a sense of admiration for their hard work. One mother believed that her daughter took note of the importance of her work: “I answer any questions she has and try to explain why I have to work, whether that’s in general—we need a roof over our heads—or more specific (i.e., ‘I have to be at the computer for a few more minutes to deal with XYZ’)” These kinds of statements suggest that children gained respect for their working mother, which is something positive that children and mothers may take away from the pandemic.

Theme 2: Observing one’s mother work from home can inform children’s future career paths

Observational learning that occurred during the pandemic is made even more significant in discussions of how children might apply the knowledge gained to their own career paths. After reflecting on whether they thought their children learned by observing their work, mothers were asked how that knowledge might influence their children’s future careers. We analyzed responses to the question “How do you think your work during the pandemic influenced your children’s career trajectory and leadership aspirations?” to look for themes. The impact, of course, depends on the type of knowledge obtained. A child who learned how to code may not use those skills if they grow up to be a chef. However, those children who learned generally about what it means to be part of a workplace in terms of teamwork, collaboration, and even power hierarchies have gained knowledge that will generalize across many career paths.

Throughout the narratives provided, mothers commonly shared that by learning about careers during the pandemic, their children reported desires to either imitate or intentionally stay away from their mother’s career. This theme applied to wanting or not wanting to enter the mother’s specific field, desire to emulate their mother’s overall work habits, as well as deciding for themselves which aspects of their mother’s career are appealing for their own path. One mother shared that from working from home together her son “saw what the outcome was of studying in school and why spelling is important, even if it’s annoying.” She continued: “He saw that there was a goal that can be achieved with working hard.” Another mother shared that she was able to encourage her daughter through the experience of working from home during the pandemic: “She also has seen how I deal with issues that may arise and realizes there is always a solution.” Although many mothers in the study experienced working from home during the pandemic as stressful, they commonly reflected

on the positive implications in terms of their children's future careers.

Interestingly, many mothers indicated that their children have expressed a new interest in pursuing their same career. For example, one mother shared the following: "My daughter has stated that she wants to do something that helps children with mental disabilities. She has seen how I have helped people, and she says she wants to do something for those people when they are young." These sentiments were often centred around the children observing their mother in a helping profession. Responses like these were common in mothers who were in medical or educational professionals. These types of careers—those that have a direct interaction with people, especially vulnerable populations—seemed to invoke children's empathy and a desire to do the same.

Even when the child did not express interest in pursuing the same career as their mother, they took note of aspects of their mother's career that they would like to emulate in their future career. Work-life balance, flexibility, and leadership roles were what mothers commonly reported that their children aspired to have in their future career paths. This idea is exemplified by one mother who remembered her daughter "appreciate[ing] the fact that both [she and her husband] were able to stay home and work from home, so this may affect how she chooses to work down the road." Similarly, another mother shared that "Balancing work and raising family is never easy but it must be balanced, with my behaviour I believe I am influencing the future of my children in a positive manner." In this way, children are learning the lessons of what they would like in a future career.

However, some mothers perceived that working in close proximity to their children during the pandemic was actually teaching children about what careers they would not like to pursue. Often, these observations had to do with specific aspects of their mother's career. Long hours, disrespect, and stress were frequent reasons discussed for why a child might be disinterested in a particular career path. For example, although some mothers perceived that their children admire their position as the leaders at work, one mother reported: "I don't believe she wants to be a manager. She knows that comes with a lot of stress and a lot of 'filling in the gaps' for coworkers who are out." Importantly, in contrast to some mothers who reported their children desired to pursue similar career paths because they were able to help people, others reported that their children viewed their careers in the health or education fields as starkly undesirable because they observed their mothers being disrespected. This issue was illustrated by one mother who shared the following: "I think she [my daughter] learned more about how poorly teachers are treated by administration and school districts. She had more opportunity to observe me working and to see/hear the meetings I was in and calls I was on." These experiences could encourage discussions about what children

desired and what they wanted to avoid as they thought ahead to their own future career paths. The discussions that emerged between mothers and their children were evident in the comments of one mother who shared as follows: “I believe that she [my daughter] also witnessed that I was stressed when trying to get my work tasks done, which may have made a negative impression on her. We did have conversations about this, both in making sure that you like what you do as well as sometimes needing to do tasks that you don’t particularly enjoy.” Mothers such as this one shared that they could discuss the negative aspects of their careers so that their children understood their mothers better but could also better understand what they hoped for in their own futures.

Overarching the experience with working from home, regardless of whether it was positive or negative, was the idea of admiration or respect for the mother’s work. As one mother shared: “They saw me as a teacher and I think gained new respect for me.” Mothers who reported that their children wanted to be exactly like them as well as mothers who reported that their children wanted to pursue a completely different career indicated that their children gained a sense of respect from observing their mother at work.

Discussion

In the current study, our quantitative analyses indicated that mothers reported COVID-19-related distress, role overload, and negative adjustment outcomes consistent with past research and accounts in the popular press (Dickinson; O’Reilly and Green; Perelman). However, our quantitative analyses also revealed that children were spending more time with parents and learning more about their careers. It seems that the mothers working from home provided a firsthand experience, which could be viewed as equivalent to a mini-internship or job shadowing opportunity (Buzzeo and Cifci).

Prior to the pandemic, mothers might have had more limited involvement in their children’s career exploration due to demands on their time as they worked outside of the home (Godbey and Gordon). Our qualitative analysis highlights important ways children learned as their mothers worked from home, suggesting new ways that mothers can play a critical role in their children’s career development (Oomen). As work from home became widespread, many mothers in our study reported intentionally teaching their children about their career, fostering discussions about work, and encouraging their children to ask questions about their work just as is done in many industry-based mentorship programs (Ilumoka et al.). Although some mothers directly taught their children about their jobs, other mothers reported that their children were gaining knowledge indirectly via observational learning, as was found in interviews of mothers and daughters before the pandemic (Armstrong).

Children may have learned a great deal by watching how their mothers worked and noting both career successes and obstacles faced, as documented in research prior to the onset of COVID-19 (Bloemen-Bekx et al.). Regardless of whether direct instruction or observational learning was experienced, many mothers reported that their children took away general knowledge about their work as well as information specific to certain careers, such as teaching or healthcare.

The COVID-19 pandemic is believed to have massive long-term implications for the workplace, and these changes likely spurred youth to consider their future career paths (Jemini-Gashi and Kadriu). Mothers played an especially important role in their children's career development during uncertain periods before the pandemic (DiPalma and Reid), and the mothers in our study recognized that they were serving as significant career models for their children, as they exposed their children to their work environment and fostered discussions about careers (Bloemen-Bekx). In our study, many mothers reported that their daughters wanted to follow in their footsteps and pursue similar career interests. This finding is consistent with the work of Jill Armstrong, who interviewed mother-daughter dyads prepandemic and found that many daughters wanted to have a career similar to their mothers. However, just like in Armstrong's study, some of our study participants reported that they wanted to pursue a career path quite different from that of their mothers, as they recognized the aspects of their job they did not wish to emulate. Regardless of whether they wished to follow or avoid their mothers' career paths, the daughters in Armstrong's study recognized their mothers as the most influential people guiding their career decisions, even when considering fathers, peers, teachers, and career counsellors. Likewise, in our study, the children of participants are learning a great deal from their mothers, both directly and indirectly, and this is affecting children's career aspirations.

Equally important were the positive implications of these experiences for mothers who had been under immense stress during the pandemic. Mothers often felt a profound sense of guilt trying to balance work and family during the pandemic (O'Reilly and Green); however, by reflecting on how their children had been watching them work at home, many mothers realized that their children had gained respect for their job and the impact of their work on their family as well as the greater community. This recognition can likely serve a protective function, as mothers still must combat long-lasting effects of the pandemic, as many continue to work from home and experience childcare shortages (Goldstein; Nyberg). Similar to feeling greater respect from their children, mothers reported that this experience enabled their children to better understand their perspective, which has the potential to be an empathy-building experience. Perhaps, this increased respect and empathy can improve relationship quality and help children view their mothers' careers more

favourably. Pre-COVID-19 research suggested that daughters were more likely to view their mothers' careers negatively and wish they had more time and lower levels of stress (Wierda-Boer and Ronka). Future research should focus on children, in addition to mothers, to determine the long-term implications of mothers working from home.

The narratives shared by mothers in the current study suggested that although incredibly stressful at times, work-from-home experiences can be used to foster resilience among mothers and their children. Undoubtedly, mothers faced tremendous obstacles working from home during the pandemic. However, as children observed the challenges the pandemic presented, mothers often took this as an opportunity to discuss how to handle obstacles that may be encountered. These discussions likely fostered resilience in children. By helping children gain new perspectives on the challenges their mothers faced, mothers felt greater support from their families, which has long been found to be a key ingredient of resilience (Luthar and Ciciolla). As we look ahead, the themes that emerged from the current study can have implications for fostering discussion between mothers and children about work so that children feel supported in their career development and mothers feel supported by their families as they try to juggle the demands of home and work.

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