

WSU researchers find mothers of children with autism pay price in workplace

EurekaAlert

VANCOUVER, Wash.—Mothers of children with autism see their careers disproportionately affected as they confront greater demands on their time, inflexible workplaces and increased medical costs, according to a new study by researchers at Washington State University Vancouver.

The study, based on a survey of 326 families in Washington and Oregon, found that slightly more than half the women worked fewer hours to accommodate the needs of their child and three out of five had not taken a job because of their child's autism. To care for the child, one-quarter had taken a leave of absence and nearly as many had not taken a promotion. Nearly 60 percent had suffered financial problems in the past year.

In two-parent households, two-thirds of the parents said the mother's work outside the home was most affected by their child's autism.

"We found that negative effects concentrate on the mother," said Dana Baker, lead author with Laurie Drapela of a paper published online this month in the peer-reviewed *Social Science Journal*.

Frequently, Baker says, mothers of autistic children must deal with extra doctor's appointments, conflicts at daycare, and meetings with teachers on Individual Education Plans—"things an employer could work around. Instead the mother gets reprimanded at work and that causes additional stress."

Autism spectrum disorder, or autism, is a neurological disorder affecting the development of social and communication skills. Its diagnosis has increased dramatically since the 1990s, and while estimates vary, one frequently cited estimate says it affects one in 150 children.

While U.S. public policy often focuses on training and entry-level workers, Baker and Drapela say policies are increasingly needed for parents whose established careers are affected when they have children with neurological disabilities.

"Understanding how to adapt programs and policies to better fit the more intractable challenges of these parents represents a vital responsibility of the twenty-first century," they said.

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