



# Parental employment, family routines and childhood obesity<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Using the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey-Kindergarten Class of 1998–1999 (ECLS-K) data from kindergarten through eighth grade, this paper investigate the relationships among maternal employment, family routines and obesity. More hours worked by the mother tend to be negatively related to positive routines like eating meals as a family or at regular times, or having family rules about hours of television watched. Many of these same routines are significantly related to the probability of being obese, implying that family routines may be a mechanism by which maternal employment intensity affects children's obesity. However, inclusion of family routines in the obesity regression does not appreciably change the estimated effect of maternal employment hours. Thus, the commonly estimated deleterious effect of maternal employment on children's obesity cannot be explained by family routines, leaving the exact mechanisms an open question for further exploration.

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## 1. Introduction

A growing body of research has focused on the relationship between parental employment patterns and childhood obesity. There are many reasons why an increase in parental employment intensity might increase child obesity. For example, dual career families typically have to make more use of child care. Even for school-aged children, it is typical for families to use before or after-school care (or both). This use of non-parental care may impact family routines in multiple ways, depending on the stability of the care arrangements. When these arrangements are not stable, it may be especially difficult to maintain family routines around meal times and bedtimes, and to ensure regular periods of active play. Even with stable care arrangements, the time constraints inherent in dual-career families may make it difficult to maintain

routines, and may also result in more reliance on conveniences such as fast food.

In this paper I use data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey-Kindergarten Class of 1998–1999 (ECLS-K) to investigate the relationship between parental employment patterns, family routines, and childhood obesity. While I show that mother's hours worked and type of child care both seem to be significantly related to some family routines, and (as has been seen in the literature) more hours worked per week by the mother is significantly positively related to a child's risk of obesity, the relationship between employment and weight is robust to controlling for family routines and the type of child care. Interestingly, there are also some significant relationships between family routines and child weight that are robust to controlling for maternal employment hours. Neither maternal employment nor family routines appear to have a causal relationship with the diet and activity behaviors available in the data, though. In the next section I review some of the past literature on parental employment, family routines and obesity, followed by a description of the data and empirical approach used, before discussing my main results. I conclude with some thoughts on future research directions.

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## 2. Background

There is a large and growing literature on the effect of parental employment on children's obesity. [Anderson et al. \(2003\)](#) focus on the intensity of a mother's work over the lifetime of the child, finding an arguably causal relationship on the probability that a child is overweight.<sup>1</sup> While they hypothesize that the mechanism for this effect may be related to the time constraints imposed by working more hours per week, the focus is purely on estimating the size of the reduced form effect of hours on the probability of being overweight. A range of follow-up studies using different samples of U.S. children have generally found similar results, with no evidence of a role for paternal employment (e.g., [Araneo, 2008](#); [Courtemanche, 2009](#); [Fertig et al., 2009](#); [Liu et al., 2005](#); [Ruhm, 2008](#)). While not focusing on employment, [Morrissey et al. \(2011\)](#) and [Miller and Han \(2008\)](#) both find weight increases with nonstandard work schedules. Note that such schedules may be related to a lack of family routines or to instability in child care.

In a study focusing on single mothers of kindergarteners, [Herbst and Tekin \(2011\)](#) find that the positive effect of an indicator variable for maternal employment is no longer significant when they include type of child care used in the year before starting school.<sup>2</sup> Instead, higher weights are limited to kindergartners who were previously in center-based care (especially) and those cared for by relatives. It is possible that being in these types of care are better proxies for a higher intensity of work than the simple employment indicator variable. However, using the same data, but not limiting themselves to single mothers, [Maher et al. \(2007\)](#) find that it is family, friend and neighbor care that is significantly positively related to overweight (although for Latino children nonparental care seemed protective of obesity).

While the literature finding an effect of maternal employment on children's obesity has become fairly large, somewhat less progress has been made on determining the mechanism behind this effect. [Fertig et al. \(2009\)](#) and [Cawley and Liu \(2007\)](#) are some of the only papers to directly address the question. The former use children's time diaries from the Child Development Supplement of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), while the latter use mother's time diaries from the 2003–2006 American Time Use Survey (ATUS). Overall, there is some evidence for the role of different eating patterns for the children of employed mothers, but differences in activity levels do not look as promising. For example, [Cawley and Liu \(2007\)](#) find that employed women spend less time cooking, less time eating with their children, and have a higher likelihood of purchasing prepared foods.<sup>3</sup> [Fertig et al. \(2009\)](#) find that the impact of maternal employment is reduced when accounting for the number of meals eaten.

However, they find only marginal effects of TV watching. Similarly, [Morrissey et al. \(2011\)](#) find no impact of TV watching or physical activity, when measuring activity by step counts. [Parker \(2007\)](#) finds no difference across children by the labor force status of their mothers.<sup>4</sup>

Closely related to the idea of a relationship between maternal employment and obesity is the relationship between child care and obesity. In fact, one potential pathway for the effect of maternal employment is via what happens in child care versus parental care. Recall that [Herbst and Tekin \(2011\)](#) conclude that compared to parental care, children in center-based care or other non-relative care prior to kindergarten are more likely to be overweight, while an indicator for maternal employment is not significant. [Lumeng et al. \(2005\)](#), however, find no association between extensive center-based pre-school care and overweight in later years. Additionally, they find a decreased probability of overweight (relative to parental care) for limited center-based care. Finally, [Pearce et al. \(2010\)](#) find that it is being in informal child care (mainly grandparents as caregivers) that is associated with a significantly higher probability of being overweight, with no relationship between overweight and formal care. Interestingly, the deleterious effect of informal care was only found for children whose mothers were in a managerial or professional job.

While there is a literature related to family routines and obesity, most papers simply focus on one family routine in particular, rather than more broadly on the role of routines overall. A common focus is on family mealtime.<sup>5</sup> For example, [Taveras et al. \(2005\)](#) find that children with a higher frequency of family dinner are less likely to be observed to be overweight in a baseline period, but find no association with the likelihood of becoming overweight over time. [Sen \(2006\)](#), however, finds not only a similar cross-sectional relationship, but also a lower probability of becoming overweight and higher likelihood of not staying overweight, although these relationships only hold for white children. [Gable et al. \(2007\)](#) focus on a broader definition of family meal frequency, adding breakfast and dinner together, and find that eating more family meals in kindergarten and first grade is associated with a lower probability of becoming overweight by 3rd grade.<sup>6</sup> Finally, while the focus of [Utter et al. \(2008\)](#) was on children in New Zealand, they conclude that any beneficial effect of family dinner frequency may be driven by such families being more supportive generally of healthful behaviors, since in their study the beneficial effect was only observed in simple regressions, disappearing when controlling for a range of

<sup>1</sup> They focus only on pre-adolescent children age 3–11.

<sup>2</sup> These kindergarteners are from the same survey used by this paper, the ECLS-K.

<sup>3</sup> Earlier articles not explicitly focused on childhood obesity have also noted that maternal employment is correlated with less meal planning, shopping, and food preparation (e.g., [Crepinsek and Burstein, 2004](#); [Ziol-Guest et al., 2006](#)).

<sup>4</sup> Note that in addition to looking at employed mother's food shopping/preparation behaviors, [Crepinsek and Burstein \(2004\)](#) also look at children's level of vigorous activity and find no relationship with maternal employment.

<sup>5</sup> See [Rhee \(2008\)](#) for a more detailed review of the family meals literature, in the context of a broader discussion of the role of parenting styles.

<sup>6</sup> They also find a positive association between more hours of TV and becoming overweight, but no relationship for aerobic activities. Note they also use the ECLS-K data that I use here, although with some sample restrictions.

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