

Young Adult Parents' Work-Family Stress: The Role of a Difficult Child and Parental Conflict

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## ABSTRACT

Approximately 70 percent of mothers and 93 percent of fathers with children who are under 18 years are in the paid labor force, and studies have documented that employed parents with young children often experience high levels of stress as they attempt to manage their work and family roles. The current study focuses on factors associated with observed variability in reports about work-family stress, and considers the role of child characteristics as well as couple-level dynamics. Prior research has shown that parenting a more 'difficult' child is a source of parenting stress, but such studies have not focused specifically on work-family stress, and have tended to be limited to older parents. Analyses also investigate the role of partner disagreements about assistance with parenting responsibilities as a further complication to family life that may influence perceived work-family stresses. Drawing on data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS) (n=263), results indicate that having a child perceived as more difficult in particular was associated with greater work-family stress among employed young parents, highlighting the importance of providing institutional and informal support to such parents.

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Today most mothers and fathers in the U.S. are employed. Specifically, 70 percent of mothers and 93 percent of fathers with children under the age of 18 are in the paid labor force (U.S. Department of Labor 2016). There appears to be higher levels of stress associated with both work and family roles compared to previous decades, and this seems to be especially true for those with young children (Coontz 2005). Parents typically report feeling pressed for time as they manage work and family responsibilities (Bianchi 2011; Coontz 2005; Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2011; Craig and Mullan 2010). Although scholars have examined the prevalence of that stress, relatively little attention has been paid to how children's behavior and parenting conflict are associated with work-family stress. In the current study, our aim was to fill this gap in the literature by examining the association between a difficult child, parenting conflict, and work-family stress, controlling for other known correlates of work-family stress.

Children's behavior is an important factor predicting parenting stress yet is not often examined as a critical correlate of work-family stress. Previous research that has examined child behavior associated with parenting stress has tended to focus on child hyperactivity (Mash and Johnston 1983), behavioral disorders, or cognitive and developmental delays (Neece, Green, and Baker 2012). Early on, Frone, Russell, and Cooper (1992) found positive associations between a scale that included parental stressors (e.g., parents' workload, child's behavior), marital stressors (lack of spousal support, and relationship conflict), and family involvement on family-work conflict. We move beyond Frone et al. (1992) by distinguishing child behavior and parenting conflict. To date little to no recent research has examined the association between these domains (child behavior and parenting conflict) and work-family stress. Shreffler, Meadows, and Davis

(2011: 173) state: “there are no articles known to the authors linking work-family conflict and satisfaction with parenting or children’s behavior.”

Drawing on a population-based sample (Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study) we investigate the correlates of work-family stress with a focus on the family context. Further, given gender differences in parenting responsibilities we will determine whether there are gender differences in the role of a difficult child and parenting conflict on work-family stress. Prior work-family literature often has focused on mothers and has ignored fathers. This research will provide new insights into an important feature of the emotional health and well-being of parents.

### *Current Investigation*

This paper draws on a stress framework to consider how key family factors (perception of having a difficult child and parenting conflict) are associated with work-family stress, and accounting for other known correlates of stress. The Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study (TARS), is a longitudinal study of adolescents as they move into young adulthood and that represent the experiences of a large heterogeneous sample of respondents. TARS is unique because it is focusing on young adult parents. Previous research on work-family stress has tended to examine older parents. For example, Grzywacz, Almeida, and McDonald (2002) examined work-family stress among a sample for whom the mean age was 42 years. Further, prior studies often are limited to married parents or combine individuals who are cohabiting with those who are married (Ford, Heinen, and Langkamer 2007). However, as cohabitation is an increasingly more common context in which to have and raise children (Manning 2015), it is important to expand beyond work-family stress among marital couples to include cohabiting couples. Finally, the TARS permit an examination of work-family stress for young adults after

the Great Recession of 2007-2009, which disproportionately has affected this cohort. Our study offers a contemporary portrait of millennials in the current economic climate.

Drawing on a stress framework, we tested four key hypotheses. First, we hypothesized that increased perception of having a difficult child would be associated with higher levels of work-family stress. Further, we expected this association to persist after accounting for known correlates of work-family stress including number of children (Kinnunen and Mauno 1998), age of children (Grzywacz et al. 2002), union status (Nomaguchi 2012), race (Grzywacz et al. 2002), education (Mennino, Rubin, and Brayfield 2005), and employment status (part-time versus full-time) (Kinnunen and Mauno 1998). Alternatively, the child characteristics (age and number of children) may explain the association between child behavior and work-family stress. Second, we hypothesized that greater frequency of parenting conflict would be associated with increased work-family stress. We anticipated that this would persist in models that included traditional correlates. Third, we hypothesized that both the perception of having a difficult child and parenting conflict would be associated with work-family stress. Alternatively, the perception of having a difficult child may be associated with high levels of conflict and explain the association between perception of having a difficult child and work-family stress. Finally, we hypothesized that the association between perception of having a difficult child and work-family stress would be greater for women than men.

#### *Data and Sample*

We employed the fifth interview (2012) of TARS, a longitudinal study based on a stratified random sample of adolescents registered for the 7<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> grades in Lucas, County, Ohio during the fall of 2000. Made available through Ohio's Freedom of Information Act, the initial TARS sampling frame, which was developed by the National Opinion Research

Center (NORC), drew from student rosters from 62 schools across seven different school districts and included over-samples of Black and Hispanic adolescents. Although the sampling frame of the TARS data was school-based, school attendance was not required for inclusion in the sample. The first interview of TARS occurred in 2001 and the fifth interview in 2012.

Compared with descriptive data from the 2011 American Community Survey (ACS), the TARS sample is demographically similar to young adults living in the U.S. in terms of gender, race, educational attainment, employment status, and union status. The TARS are well suited for this study because of it provides information on contemporary young adults with respect to work-family stress, parenting conflict, and perception of having a difficult child.

The fifth wave of the TARS consisted of 1,321 respondents. Initially, due to small cell size, we excluded respondents who were classified as ‘other’ for race/ethnicity resulting in 1,317 cases. We limited the analytic sample to respondents who were parents (n=416). We further limited the sample to respondents who were employed at least 10 hours a week at the time of the fifth interview (n=263). We limited the analyses of co-residential couples to 171 respondents who were married or cohabiting at the time of the interview. We used modal imputation to account for missing data for the control variables (n=263).

### *Measures*

#### *Dependent Variable*

*Work-family stress*, measured with one item, asked respondents: “How much stress do you face in balancing your paid work and family life. Responses are coded as: (1) not at all (2) a little, (3) some, (4) a great deal, and (5) a lot.

### *Independent Variables*

*Difficult child*, an index with four items, asked respondents to indicate during the past month the frequency of the following experiences: (1) felt your child is [children are] much harder to care for than most; (2) felt your child does [children do] things that really bother you; (3) felt you are giving up more of your life to meet your child's [children's] needs than you expected; and (4) felt angry with your child [children]? Responses range from 1 (none of the time) to 4 (all the time) ( $\alpha = .81$ ). Higher scores indicate having a misbehaved child and lower scores indicated having a well-behaved child.

*Parenting conflict*, measured with one item, asked respondents: "During your relationship, how often have you and [name of partner] fought about doing more to help with the kids?" Responses included: (1) never, (2) hardly ever, (3) sometimes, (4) often, and (5) very often. We limited this item to respondents who were co-residing at the time of interview.

### *Control Variables*

The multivariate analysis included child characteristics, union status and demographic variables. *Child characteristics* included number of children, and age of youngest child. Given the young age of the sample the *number of children* is coded as (0) one child and (1) two or more children. *Age of child* is coded as (0) 0-5 years and (1) 6 years-12 years. Union status included married, cohabiting, dating, and single. A series of categorical variables are included.

*Race/Ethnicity* is recoded into three categories: (1) non-Hispanic white, (2) non-Hispanic black, and (3) Hispanic. *Age* is a continuous indicator ranging from 22 to 29. Respondent's *education* is categorized as (1) less than high school, (2) high school, (3) technical or some college, and (4) college or more. *Employment status* is divided into two categories: part-time and full-time.

### *Analytic Strategy*

Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations are used to describe the distribution of the variables by gender (Table 1). Next, we used OLS regression to estimate correlates of work-family stress (Table 2). The first set of analyses included all young adult working parents. Model 1 is a bivariate model and Model 2 included child characteristics, union status, and demographic variables. Model 3 tested whether the association between the perception of having a difficult child and work-family stress persisted net of the traditional correlates. We limited the second set of analyses to co-residential couples (Table 3). We presented the bivariate associations in Models 1 and 2. Model 3 tested whether the association between the perception of having a difficult child and work-family stress remained significant net of the traditional correlates. Model 4 tested whether the association between parenting conflict and work-family stress remained net of the traditional correlates. The full model, Model 5, tested whether the association between the perception of having a difficult child, parenting conflict and work-family stress persisted net of the traditional correlates.

### *Preliminary Results*

In Table 1, approximately half of the sample (48.56 percent) reported some work-family stress. The mean score for work-family stress for men is 2.73 ( $SD=1.10$ ), indicating that men tended to report little to some work-family stress. On other hand, the mean score for work-family stress for women is 3.08 ( $SD=0.99$ ), indicating that women tended to report some work-family stress. For men, the mean score is 5.09 ( $SD =1.49$ ) for perception of having a difficult child, while for women, the mean score is 5.44 ( $SD=2.12$ ), indicating that men and women, on average reported that their children are not difficult. The mean score for parenting conflict for the total sample is 2.19 ( $SD=1.12$ ), indicating that individuals in this sample hardly ever experienced



parenting conflict. Interestingly women have slightly higher means score than men for parenting conflict ( $M=2.34$ ,  $SD=1.29$ ;  $M=1.99$ ,  $SD=1.12$ ), indicating that women experience parenting conflict slightly more often than men.

Additionally, for co-residential parents, the mean score for perception of having a difficult child for the total sample ( $n=171$ ) is 5.14 ( $SD=1.90$ ) suggesting that individuals on average reported that their child is not difficult. For men, the mean score for perception of having a difficult child is 5.05 ( $SD=1.46$ ), and for women the mean score is 5.22 ( $SD=2.24$ ), suggesting that men and women, on average reported that their child is not difficult with women reporting having a difficult child slightly more than men. For parenting conflict, the mean score for co-residential samples is 2.40 ( $SD=1.16$ ), suggesting that individuals in this sample hardly ever experienced parenting conflict, but experience parenting conflict slightly more than individuals in the larger sample of co-residing and non-residing parents ( $n=263$ ). Similarly, to the full sample, for co-residential parents, women have slightly higher means score than men for parenting conflict ( $M=2.63$ ,  $SD=1.16$ ;  $M=2.15$ ,  $SD=1.11$ ), indicating that women experience parenting conflict slightly more often than men.

Table 2 showed the results from the OLS regression of work-family stress of employed parents on perception of having a difficult child, and the control variables. Model 1 demonstrated the relationship between work-family stress and perception of having a difficult child. It appears from Model 1 that perception of having a difficult child is associated with greater work-family stress. The coefficient between perception of having a difficult child and work-family stress is statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). Model 1 showed that as perception of having a difficult child increased, work-family stress increased. Model 1 explained nearly 6 percent of the variation in work-family stress. Model 2 demonstrated the associations between the control variables and

work-family stress. Surprisingly, none of the variables in this model are significant. Model 3, the full model examined the OLS regression of work-family stress of employed parents on perception of having a difficult child and the control variables. Net of the control variables, the coefficient for perception of having a difficult child ( $p < .001$ ) remained statistically significant. Model 3 explained 13 percent of the variance in work-family stress and is a better predictor of work-family stress than the previous models.

In Table 3 we provided the results from the OLS regression of work-family stress of employed co-residential parents on perception of having a difficult child, parenting conflict, and the control variables. This table focused on married and cohabiting individuals. Model 1 demonstrated the relationship between work-family stress and perception of having a difficult child. This model indicated that perception of having a difficult child is associated with greater work-family stress among co-residential parents. The coefficient between perception of having a difficult child ( $p < .01$ ) and work-family stress is statistically significant. Model 1 showed that as perception of having a difficult child increases, work-family stress increases for co-residential parents. Model 1 explained about 4 percent of the variation in work-family stress among co-residential parents. Model 2 demonstrated that as parenting conflict increases, work-family stress increases. The coefficient between parenting conflict ( $p < .05$ ) and work-family stress is statistically significant. Model 2 explained 3 percent of the variation in work-family stress among co-residential parents.

Model 3 demonstrated the relationship between perception of having a difficult child, the control variables and work-family stress. The relationship between perception of having a difficult child ( $p < .01$ ) and work-family stress is statistically significant. This model showed that women ( $p < .01$ ) in co-residential relationships experience higher amounts of work-family stress

than men. Model 4 demonstrated that although in the right direction, the association between parenting conflict and work-family stress is not statistically significant. Compared to Model 3, the gender coefficient decreased from 0.392 to 0.373 and was significant at .05 level. Model 4 explained 10.7 percent of the variation in work-family stress among co-residential employed parents.

Model 5, the full model, examined the OLS regression of work-family stress of co-residential employed parents on perception of having a difficult child, parenting conflict, and the control variables. The coefficients for perception of having a difficult child ( $p < .05$ ) and gender (women) ( $p < .05$ ) remained statistically significant. Parenting conflict was not statistically significant. Model 5 explained 13.7 percent of the variation in work-family stress.

Interactions of parents' gender and perception of having a difficult child as well as parenting conflict were conducted. We found no significant gender difference, indicating the association between perception of having a difficult child and work-family stress, as well as parenting conflict and work-family stress was not statistically different for mothers and fathers. The final paper will further explore gender differences in work-family stress among employed parents and co-residential employed parents.

### *Discussion*

About half of young adult working parents report work-family stress. Our preliminary results indicated that mothers and fathers seem to share similar levels of work-family stress. Preliminary results from this study provided insights into how children influence work-family stress. Our results indicated that parents' perceptions of their children's behavior influence feelings of work-family stress. This association persisted after controlling for the age and number of children. Although women reported greater levels of work-family stress, having a

difficult child plays a similar role for both men and women. While parenting conflict is associated with work-family stress, it does not explain the role of perception of having a difficult child on work-family stress.

This study found that as perception of having a difficult child increases, parents' reports higher levels of work-family stress, supporting our first hypothesis that increased perception of having a difficult child would be associated with higher levels of work-family stress. Greater frequency of parenting conflict was found to be associated with increased work-family stress among co-residential parents, therefore supporting our second hypothesis that greater frequency of parenting conflict would be associated with increased work-family stress. Our third hypothesis stating that both perception of having a difficult child and parenting conflict would be associated with work-family stress was partially supported, as perception of having a difficult child was associated with work-family stress, but parenting conflict was not, when both variables were included in the regression model. When separated by gender, it was found that the association between perception of having a difficult child and work-family stress is slightly higher for women than men, supporting our fourth hypothesis that states the association between perception of having a difficult child and work-family stress would be greater for women than men.

The present study contributed to the field of work-family stress by focusing on young adult parents who are just starting out. As such, our focus is on relatively young biological parents. Prior studies often focused on parents who middle-aged or older. In addition, prior studies are often limited to married couples and this study distinguished cohabiting and married biological parents.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Work-Family Stress for the Total Sample, Mothers and Fathers

	Total Sample (n=263)	Men (n=114)	Women (n=149)
<b>Dependent Variable</b>			
Work-family stress (1-5)	2.93 (1.05)	2.73 (1.10)	3.08 (0.99)
<b>Independent Variables</b>			
Difficult child (4-16) <sup>a</sup>	5.29 (1.88)	5.09 (1.49)	5.44 (2.12)
Parenting conflict (1-5) <sup>b</sup>	2.40 <sup>b</sup> (1.16)	2.15 <sup>b</sup> (1.11)	2.63 <sup>b</sup> (1.16)
<b>Control Variables</b>			
<i>Children characteristics</i>			
Number of children			
1	57.79%	59.65%	56.38%
2 or more	42.21%	40.35%	43.62%
Age of child			
0-5	75.29%	71.93%	77.85%
6-12	24.71%	28.07%	22.15%
<i>Union Status</i>			
Married	33.46%	32.49%	34.23%
Cohabiting	31.56%	38.60%	26.17%
Dating	19.39%	13.16%	24.19%
Single	34.98%	28.95%	39.60%
<i>Sociodemographic characteristics</i>			
Race/ethnicity			
Non-Hispanic White	57.79	55.26	59.73
Non-Hispanic Black	25.86	24.56	26.85
Hispanic	16.35	20.18	13.42
Age (22-29)			
	25.82 (1.79)	25.86 (1.71)	25.79 (1.86)
Education (1-4)			
	2.71 (0.90)	2.57 (0.86)	2.81 (0.93)
Employment status			
Part-time	28.90%	14.91%	39.60%
Full-time	71.10%	85.09%	60.40%

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study

Note: Standard deviations are indicated under mean values and ranges are listed beside Variable.

<sup>a</sup>The mean score for difficult child among co-residential parents (n=171) is 5.14 for the total sample, 5.05 for men, and 5.22 for women.

<sup>b</sup>This is the mean score for parenting conflict when the sample is limited to co-residential parents (n=171).

Table 2. OLS Regression of Work-Family Stress of Employed Parents on Perception of Having a Difficult Child and Control Variables (n=263)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Difficult child	0.133***	---	0.140***
<i>Children Variables</i>			
Number of children	---	0.135	0.014
Age of child	---	-0.190	-0.217
<i>Union Status</i>			
(Cohabiting)			
Married	---	0.225	0.278
Dating	---	-0.096	-0.058
Single	---	0.274	0.254
<i>Demographic Variables</i>			
(Men)			
Women	---	0.240	0.204
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>			
(Non-Hispanic white)			
Non-Hispanic black	---	-0.186	-0.208
Hispanic	---	0.047	0.121
Age	---	-0.032	-0.038
<i>Education</i>			
(High school)			
Less than high school	---	-0.249	-0.328
Some college	---	0.101	0.065
College or More	---	0.181	0.189
<i>Employment</i>			
(Full-time)			
Part-time	---	0.215	0.159
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.056	0.074	0.130
<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.053	0.026	0.081

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study

NOTE: p<.05\*, p<.01\*\*, p<.001\*\*\*

Reference categories in parentheses

Table 3. OLS Regression of Work-Family Stress of Co-residential Employed Parents on Perception of Having a Difficult Child and Control Variables (n=171)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Difficult child	0.103**	---	0.108**	---	0.099*
Parenting Conflict	---	0.148*	---	0.100	0.060
<i>Children Variables</i>					
Number of children	---	---	-0.055	-0.006	-0.070
Age of child	---	---	-0.144	-0.102	-0.127
<i>Demographic Variables</i>					
(Men)					
Women	---	---	0.392**	0.373*	0.374*
<i>Union Status</i>					
(Cohabiting)	---	---	---	---	0.284
Married	---	---	0.300	0.244	
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>					
(Non-Hispanic white)					
Non-Hispanic black	---	---	-0.061	-0.024	-0.059
Hispanic	---	---	0.356	0.342	0.368
Age	---	---	-0.010	-0.002	-0.006
<i>Education</i>					
(High school)					
Less than high school	---	---	-0.201	-0.154	-0.200
Some college	---	---	0.207	0.236	0.203
College or More	---	---	0.100	0.081	0.085
<i>Employment</i>					
(Full-time)					
Part-time	---	---	0.040	0.068	0.033
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.038	0.029	0.133	0.107	0.137
<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.032	0.023	0.067	0.039	0.066

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study

NOTE: p&lt;.05\*, p&lt;.01\*\*, p&lt;.001\*\*\*

Reference categories in parentheses

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