

**EMPLOYMENT DURING ADOLESCENCE IS ASSOCIATED
WITH DEPRESSION, INFERIOR RELATIONSHIPS,
LOWER GRADES, AND SMOKING**

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ABSTRACT

A self-report questionnaire was administered to high school seniors to collect data on the psychological, behavioral, and social aspects of their lives. It was found that employment was associated with (1) greater depression; (2) inferior relationships with parents and best friend, including less time and physical contact with parents; (3) lower grade point average; and (4) smoking.

Adolescents are often employed part-time during the school year (Bachman & Schulenberg, 1993; Mortimer, Finch, Ryu, & Shanahan, 1996), and frequently by their senior year, they are working more than 20 hours a week (Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991). A review of the literature reveals that adolescent employment has both positive and negative effects (Mael, Morath, & McLellan, 1997; Mihalic & Elliot, 1997). Positive effects of adolescent employment include a stronger sense of personal efficacy and orientation to occupational achievement (Mael et al., 1997; Mihalic & Elliot, 1997). However, working has also been associated with negative aspects of adolescents' psychological, behavioral, and social well-being. For example, working adolescents, especially girls, have been found to be notably more depressed (Shanahan, Finch, Mortimer, & Ryu, 1991; Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991). Working adolescents have also been noted to experience inferior relationships with their parents, which may be related to spending less

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time with their families (Sayfer, Hawkins-Leahy, & Colan, 1995; Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991). In addition to less family time, they have less time to spend on homework, which may result in a lower grade point average (Mihalic & Elliot, 1997). Further, it has been reported that working adolescents engage in substance abuse more frequently than adolescents who do not work during high school (Mihalic & Elliot, 1997; Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991).

In the present study, all of these effects were explored in the same sample. Nonworking adolescents were compared with adolescents who worked at least two hours per week. Working was expected to affect mood, parent and peer relationships, and academic achievement.

METHOD

Participants

Eighty-nine high school seniors (52 females, 37 males; mean age = 17.2 years) were recruited from a suburban South Florida high school. Eighty questionnaires were subsequently completed. Participants' ethnic distribution was 75% Caucasian, 11% Hispanic, 5% Asian, and 4% African-American, with the remaining 5% classifying themselves as other. Their socioeconomic status was middle to upper middle class. Fifty-two percent reported that they did not work, 20% worked 2-6 hours per week, and 28% worked more than 7 hours per week. Chi-square analyses revealed that the nonworking and working (2 hours or more per week) groups were not differentially distributed by gender or ethnicity (see Table 1).

Procedure

Participants were administered a Likert-type questionnaire that gathered information on psychological, behavioral, and social aspects of adolescent life (Field & Yando, 1991). The questionnaire was completed anonymously.

Depression. The Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977) contains twenty depressive symptoms experienced over the past week (e.g., "I felt lonely"), which are rated on a four-point Likert scale (0 = rarely or none of the time, 1 = some or a little of the time, 2 = a lot of the time, and 3 = most of the time). This scale has been standardized for high school populations, with a score of 19 or higher indicating depressed mood (Radloff, 1991). Acceptable test-retest reliability (.80-.90) and concurrent validity have been reported across a variety of demographic characteristics, including age, education, and ethnic groups (Wells, Klerman, & Deykin, 1987).

Table 1. Demographic Data

	Groups		χ^2	<i>p</i>
	Nonworking	Working		
Gender			.17	.69
Male	55%	45%		
Female	50%	50%		
Ethnicity			5.74	.22
Caucasian	54%	46%		
Hispanic	33%	67%		
Asian	56%	44%		
African-American	0%	100%		
Other	75%	25%		
Socioeconomic Status			8.54	.07
High	68%	32%		
Upper Middle	50%	50%		
Middle	36%	64%		
Lower Middle	0%	100%		
Low	33%	67%		

Note. Working = 2 hours or more per week.

Relationships. The 24-item Intimacy Scale (Blyth & Foster-Clark, 1987) assesses mother, father, and best friend relationships. Respondents rate their relationships on a scale from 1 = not at all to 5 = very much. Questions include the following: "How much does your mother understand what you are really like?" "How much do you go to your father for advice/support?" "How much do you share your inner feelings

or secrets with your best friend?" Higher scores indicate more optimal relationships. This scale has been reported to have good internal consistency and test-retest reliability (Blyth & Foster-Clark, 1987).

Additional relationship items included (a) *conversations* with each parent: "How often do you have conversations with your mother (or father)?" (1 = never to 5 = daily) and "How good do you think your conversations are with your mother (or father)?" (1 = nonexistent to 5 = very good); (b) *touch* with each parent: "How often does your mother (or father) hug or show you physical affection?" and "How often do you hug or show physical affection toward your mother (or father)?" (1 = never to 5 = daily); and (c) *time spent with family or friends* (1 = one hour or less, 2 = two to six hours, and 3 = seven or more hours per week).

Free-time activities. These questions included (a) time doing chores (1 = one hour or less, 2 = two to six hours, and 3 = seven or more hours per week); and (b) time on the Internet (1 = less than one hour, 2 = one to two hours, and 3 = more than two hours per day).

Academic achievement. Adolescents reported their grade point average (GPA), which was coded as 4 = A, 3 = B, 2 = C and 1 = D, and whether they attended honors classes.

Cigarette use. Adolescents rated their use of cigarettes on a scale from 1 = never to 5 = regularly.

RESULTS

As shown in Table 2, correlation analyses (Spearman's rho) revealed that working was related to the following: (1) higher depression scores; (2) poorer relationships with parents (fewer conversations and of poorer quality) and best friend; (3) less touch (or physical affection) with parents; (4) less time spent with family (but not friends); (5) more hours spent doing chores; (6) lower grade point average; and (7) more frequent smoking. Adolescents who worked were also significantly less likely ($p < .01$) to be enrolled in honors classes than were those who did not work (32% versus 68%, respectively).

DISCUSSION

These findings are similar to those previously reported for adolescents who work in excess of 20 hours per week—greater depression, inferior relationships, and lower grades (Sayfer, Leahy, & Colan, 1995;

Table 2. Correlations Between Working and Other Variables

	Work
Depression	.23*
Relationship with Parents and Friends	
Intimacy with Parents and Friends	-.42***
Parent Conversation	-.34**
Parent Touch	-.32**
Time with Family	-.26*
Time with Friends	-.20
Free-Time Activities	
Time Doing Chores	.40***
Time on the Internet	-.05
GPA	-.20*
Smoking	.27**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Shanahan, Mortimer, Finch, Ryu, & Shanahan, 1991). In particular, results of the present study revealed that working more hours was related to fewer conversations with parents, spending less time with them, and showing and receiving less physical affection (e.g., hugs). Future studies might examine whether less touching during adolescence is related to greater depression, and whether increasing physical contact (such as through hugs and back rubs by friends and family members) would decrease depression, as has been noted for massage therapy (Field, Morrow, Valdeon, Larson, Kuhn, & Schanberg, 1992).

While working was also related to poorer relationships with best friends, it was not associated with time spent with friends or on the

Internet. Surprisingly, work was related to spending more time doing chores, although working and chores were also associated in another study (Entwise, Alexander, Olson, & Ross, 1999). Perhaps working leads to a greater sense of responsibility, or vice versa.

The relationship between working and poorer academic performance is consistent with a study reporting lower grade point averages for adolescents who work more than 20 hours per week (Mihalic & Elliot, 1997). In the present study, working even as few as 2 hours per week was associated with lower GPA and not being enrolled in honors classes. Moreover, adolescent smoking was also positively related to working.

In sum, working may be detrimental for adolescents in their senior year of high school. Working was associated with depressed mood, diminished intimacy with family and friends, lower GPA, and more frequent cigarette use. Future studies should explore adolescents' motives for working. As this was a homogeneously middle socioeconomic sample, there was no apparent need to work for financial reasons. Discouraging adolescents from working will require knowing their motivations. Further, the direction of effects could not be determined here. Adolescents who do less well academically, for example, may elect to work for self-esteem reasons, rather than their employment contributing to inferior academic performance. Additional research is needed to help parents and adolescents make more informed choices.

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