

Maternal Employment and Overweight Children in Korea: Seeking Explanations from Time-Use Data

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The literature suggests that maternal employment may be a contributing factor for the growing prevalence of childhood obesity. This study analyzes time diaries of 14,228 Korean mothers in the 1999, 2004, and 2009 Korean Time Use Survey (KTUS) to explore how mothers' employment is associated with their time use related to children's eating and physical activity. Closely replicating the study by Cawley and Liu (2007), this study estimates a regression of the amount of time spent by Korean mothers in feeding their children, providing physical care and supervising children's physical activity on maternal employment variables. Both the dichotomous indicator of mothers' employment as well as their paid work hours are considered. Local unemployment rates are included as an instrumental variable in the regression to identify the causal effect of maternal employment. The study finds that, while employed Korean mothers spend significantly less time in activities related to their children's diet and physical care than fulltime homemaker mothers, maternal employment does not 'cause' such reduction in mothers' time and rather significantly increases the probability for the mothers to be engaged in those activities. Not only does this finding contradict theoretical predictions, it is opposite to what previous studies from the U.S. have found. Several aspects of Korean society and its labor market may have made the relationship between maternal employment and children's weight issues unique. Potential sources for this puzzling contrast may include persistent gender norms, and the recent upward trend in human capital investment by Korean families with relatively high socioeconomic standing.

References

Cawley, J., & Liu, F. (2007). *Maternal employment and childhood obesity: A search for mechanisms in time use data*. (Working Paper No. 13600). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

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