

# Balancing Work and Family: The Impact of Work-Family Conflict on Children's Behavior in Australia

Alexandra Lipasova

Universitat Pompeu Fabra, España

aleksandra.lipasova@upf.edu

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3470-2361>

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## Abstract

This study examines the impact of work-family conflict (WFC) and parental irritability on children's externalizing problems in various family structures in Australia. The findings reveal that for mothers from intact families, WFC is a predictor of children's externalizing problems throughout their childhood and adolescence. However, for fathers from intact families and sole mothers, WFC is not associated with children's externalizing problems. Moreover, while the association between paternal irritability and children's externalizing problems exists for all groups of parents, it is stronger for mothers than for fathers. These results highlight the potential negative outcomes for children resulting from parental distress in an adverse context of weak family policies in a liberal welfare state and the persistence of traditional gender values in couples.

**Keywords:** WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT, PARENTS' IRRITABILITY, EXTERNALIZING PROBLEMS OF CHILDREN, PARENTING, FAMILY STRUCTURE.

## Resumen

Este estudio examina el impacto del conflicto trabajo-familia (CTF) y la irritabilidad de los padres en los problemas de externalización de los niños en diversas estructuras familiares en Australia. Los hallazgos revelan que para las madres de familias intactas, la CTF es un predictor de los problemas de externalización de los niños a lo largo de su niñez y adolescencia. Sin embargo, para los padres de familias intactas y madres solteras, la CTF no está asociada con los problemas de externalización de los niños. Además, si bien la asociación entre la irritabilidad paterna y los problemas de externalización de los niños existe para todos los grupos de familias, es más fuerte para las madres que para los padres. Estos resultados resaltan los posibles resultados negativos para los niños derivados de la angustia de los padres en un contexto adverso de políticas familiares débiles en un estado de bienestar liberal y la persistencia de valores de género tradicionales en las parejas.

**Palabras clave:** CONFLICTO TRABAJO-FAMILIA, IRRITABILIDAD DE LOS PADRES, PROBLEMAS DE EXTERNALIZACIÓN DE LOS HIJOS, CRIANZA DE LOS HIJOS, ESTRUCTURA FAMILIAR.

## Introduction

The way how adults integrate work and family and how they feel about it has shifted due to women's labour force participation, changing nature of employment, and the changing ideas towards gender and parenting (Byron, 2005). Work-family conflict (WFC) is a notion based on the scarcity hypothesis where, because of lack of time, attention, and energy, combining work and care responsibilities creates competing demands and overload for parents (Strazdins et al., 2013). In Australia, work-family conflict is widespread. Over 30% of all employed mothers and fathers of young children say they never have enough time to do their job, and 66% of fathers cannot attend family activities because of their jobs, along with about 40% of mothers (Baxter et al., 2007). Work conditions are key drivers of conflict, especially long and inflexible hours, insecurity, low overall satisfaction, and low autonomy (Byron, 2005).

Parents' work-family conflict can influence children's mental health through parenting. Irritable or hostile parenting is a strong determinant of child's mental health (Repetti et al., 2002). Work stress and inflexible schedules clash with family time together, limiting opportunities for family activities and increasing pressure on family relationships, which despite parents' best efforts, can lead to more angry and irritable reactions (Bauer et al., 2012).

Research shows the connection between parents' work and family responsibilities and children's internalizing and externalizing symptoms (Dinh et al. 2017, Strazdins et al., 2013). Internalizing problems signify a disturbance in emotions and moods and generally refer to anxiety and depressive symptoms. Externalizing problems are behaviors that are destructive and harmful to others and generally refer to irritability due to anger, hostility, aggression, lack of attention, impulsivity, and lack of concentration (Zahn-Waxler et al., 2000). Peer victimization was found as one of the causes of externalizing problems. For instance, children who are often the target of peer victimization are at risk to develop hostile social-cognitive biases, which may drive aggressive behaviors (Reijntjes et. al, 2011).

The current study addresses two research questions. First, I look into whether parents' experience of WFC and irritability increase their children's externalizing problems. Second, I investigate whether these associations are dependent on family structure (intact or sole-mother families). The results are based on a longitudinal analysis of panel data that explores the effect of parents' WFC and irritability on externalizing problems of children in working parents' families. Panel data allows to control for variables that cannot be observed or measured, like cultural factors or differences in parenting practices across families; or variables that change over time but not across entities (i.e. national family policy regulations). Thus, it accounts for individual heterogeneity (Torres-Reyna, 2007). Also, repeated observations allow for a study of causation.

The current paper contributes to the existing field of research in several ways. Firstly, most of research on how the work-family interface influences child outcomes has been cross-sectional (e.g., Cooklin et al., 2014). I address these associations using panel data covering over 7 years of children's life, which allows to trace the changes in parents' and children's characteristics in 2-year intervals. Secondly, the current paper provides a more holistic view on association between externalizing problems of children and family structure. Some recent longitudinal research from Australia is devoted to parenting irritability and inter-parental conflict as two likely mechanisms explaining the associations between work-family conflict and child mental health problems (Vahedi et al., 2018, 2019). However, this research is focused on dual-earner families. The associations between work-family conflict and child outcomes in lone parent families need to be further investigated. In Australia single-parent families comprise 15% of total 7.3 mln families (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Previous studies have found that unpartnered mothers are exposed to higher levels of parenting stress due to a lack of coping resources that would alleviate tensions involving mental health and stress (Cooper et al., 2009). In a similar vein, studies have found that unpartnered mothers are likely to perceive greater work-family conflict due to their poorer working conditions (e.g., high job demands, lack of

job controls, and job instability), which weaken their ability to fulfill family demands (Berryhill & Durtschi, 2017). Thirdly, I investigate how parents' irritability influences children's externalizing problems. On a practical level this study may help to inform future policy development strategies.

This article is structured as follows. First, I describe ecological systems approach to child development. Second, I look into Australian context in terms of family structure, family policy and gender equality. Then I introduce the data and methods used. Finally, the results of the analysis and discussion section are presented.

## Literature review

### Ecological systems theory

The impact of parents' work and employment on family functioning, parenting style and child development has been of interest to scholars for decades. Research has shown that work-family conflict can have negative effects on both parents and children, including increased stress and irritability, low job satisfaction, and mental health issues (e.g., Vahedi et al., 2018, 2019). Moreover, recent studies have found a link between parents' work-family conflict and children's externalizing problems, such as aggressive demeanour and disobedience (e.g., Dinh et al. 2017).

Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this paper will explore the relationship between parental WFC, irritability, and children's externalizing behaviors. Bronfenbrenner (1979) is one of the first scholars who addressed parental work and employment as important environmental predictors of relationships in the family and child development. Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) states that children develop within a complex system of connections at various levels of their environment.

This theory addresses differences in parental styles through several systems: the ontogenic system, which includes psychological and emotional traits as well as socio-demographic characteristics of persons; the microsystem, which describes the immediate surroundings of the individual; the exosystem, which includes wider social settings on which the child does not have any influence, but still they affect the child's experiences; and the macrosystem, which reflects the impact of society norms and values on the everyday life of the family.

The critical element in the ecological systems model is experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). According to Bronfenbrenner, experience indicates that the environment of human development includes objective and subjective features, which are experienced by the persons living in that environment. Both subjective and objective elements in the model drive the course of human development and neither of them alone is assumed sufficient. Over the life course, human development includes processes of complex reciprocal interaction between a human being and the persons and objects in their environment. To be efficient, this interaction must take place on a regular basis over significant periods of time. Bronfenbrenner calls these forms of interaction proximal processes. These processes include feeding and comforting a baby, playing with a young child, child-child activities, group or solitary play, reading, learning new skills, etc. (ibid). For children, participation in such interactive processes gradually generates motivation, knowledge, the ability to do certain things, and the skill to engage in such activities both with other persons and on their own.

For example, through an increasingly more complex interaction with their parents, children increasingly become agents of their own development. Thus, in the current research, I hypothesize that the emotional state of parents caused by work-family conflict can strongly affect the quality of proximal processes, children's behavior, and outcomes (Hypothesis 1). More recent family-oriented research has also shown a link between parents' experience of work-family conflict, detrimental family processes, and child mental health outcomes (e.g., Cooklin et al., 2014, 2016; Dinh et al., 2017). I also expect the effect of work-family conflict on externalizing problems to be stronger for mothers than for fathers (Hypothesis 1.1, gender effect hypothesis), as existing research states that mothers' work-family conflict poses a more persistent influence on internalizing

and externalizing problems across childhood and adolescence compared to that of fathers' (Vahedi et al., 2019).

Other powerful forces at work bear a more objective nature and refer to the context in which the family is functioning. These factors may include welfare state support for families with children or the predominant gender ideology of society. They also refer to the family structure. As Bronfenbrenner points out, even in families with favourable socioeconomic circumstances, children of sole mothers or fathers for whom no other person is acting reliably in a "third-party" role are at greater risk of experiencing externalizing problems and a so called "teenage syndrome" – dropping out of school, substance abuse and anti-social behaviour. Most of these effects are more typical for boys than for girls (Bronfenbrenner et al., 1996). Thus, one of the hypotheses of the current research states that the effect of work-family conflict on externalizing problems of children is more significant for sole-mother families than for intact families (Hypothesis 1.2, family structure hypothesis), as single mothers report higher levels of work-family conflict than other parents (Minnotte, 2012).

### Parents' irritability and children's externalizing problems

Parents are a key influence on children's and adolescents' abilities to regulate their emotions (Sheeber et al., 2000). Theoretical perspectives on observational learning/modelling suggest that parents' personal emotional tendencies implicitly teach children which emotions and self-management strategies are appropriate. By observing their parents' reactions to provocative emotional situations, children learn what is expected of them in analogous situations in their own lives. In addition, parents who are prone to experience negative emotions may have difficulties regulating those emotions that, in turn, might be transmitted to their children via observational learning (e.g., Morris et al., 2007). Several groups of researchers have found support for a positive association between parents' (especially maternal) irritability and parents' difficulties in managing their own negative emotions and harsh parenting (e.g., Saritas et al., 2013). Other studies suggest that parents' irritability is related to aggressive behaviors and harsh parenting towards their children (Shay & Knutson, 2008), which, in turn, could influence the development of their children's externalizing and internalizing problems (Di Giunta et al., 2021). Taken together, these results support the view that parent irritability leads to greater parental harsh parenting and adolescent irritability (although the latter could also affect the quality of parenting), both of which increase the likelihood of externalizing and internalizing problems (Di Giunta et al., 2021).

Thus, I expect parents' irritability to have an effect on children's negative outcomes (Hypothesis 2, irritability hypothesis). Research shows that previous levels of parenting quality interact with adolescents' problem behavior in predicting parenting quality later: higher levels of problem behavior have negative effects on parenting, especially when parenting is already less adequate (Reitz et al. 2006).

### Australian context

Historically Australia has been progressive in terms of its development of both employment rights and women's citizenship rights (Newsome, 2017). However, until 2010 Australia lagged behind every other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development nation, except for the US, in introducing a national paid parental leave scheme. Brennan (2009) argues that the lack of a social insurance scheme, and the continued influence of the male breadwinner policy model impeded the introduction of the paid parental leave.

Australian social policy has been premised on the male breadwinner/female caregiver dichotomy (O'Connor et al., 1999). The ideal of the male breadwinner was built into foundational institutions of the Australian welfare state such as the "family wage". A ban on married women's employment in the Commonwealth public service was lifted only in 1966 and eligibility for most income support payments

continues to be assessed on family rather than individual income (Mahon et. al, 2016). Debates about childcare and parental leave policy reflect continuing tensions between supporters of the dual-earner family and institutions and practices that pull back towards more traditional patterns.

Overall, over the past 40 years, there have been significant changes in the composition of Australia's active workforce. There have been large increases in the employment participation of women, who comprised 48% of the total employed in 2022, compared to 36% in 1979 (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2023). Additionally, the proportion of women who were employed full-time increased from 26% to 34% over the same period (ibid). This trend can be attributed to changing societal attitudes towards women's roles in the workforce, increased access to education and training, and changes in government policies and workplace practices aimed at promoting gender equality. However, it is important to note that there are still significant gender disparities in employment outcomes in Australia. Although the employment rate of mothers with children under the age of 5 increased from 30 to 66% between 1981 and 2021, those with younger children are more likely to work part-time than full-time (LSAC, 2018).

At the beginning of the 21st century the male breadwinner model was still relatively strong, and women's citizenship was defined by their role as mothers (Pocock, 2005). Nowadays dual-earner families are predominant. In intact families studied in LSAC the employment rate of fathers was quite high and stable during the waves 5-8, at the level of 94-95%. The level of mothers' employment was relatively high as well, but the significant part of them worked part-time, and their share did not decrease with child's age. One of the explanations for this could be that women are more likely to go part-time than men because in the absence of state support it enables them to combine work and family and caring responsibilities. The growing share of men who work part-time (from 11.5% in 2012 to 13.8% in 2018) could be the consequence of changes in the labour market (Australian Government, 2020). Due to increased competitive pressures and changes in technology, employment forms have become more flexible, which resulted in the emergence of many new part-time jobs. It may also be due to the fact that men began to take on more housework or caring responsibilities than they did decades ago.

The share of male breadwinner families with children in 2021 did not exceed 15% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Still, male breadwinner model is proving to be quite resilient in Australia (Baxter and Hewitt, 2013). The disproportionate female share of part-time employment has helped entrench male breadwinners. Even though women have greatly increased their involvement in paid work over several decades, mothers still tend to be secondary earners.

In that category, the rate is about 52%. This may imply that Australia still has a strong male-breadwinner institutional framework that continues to hinder gender equality in paid and unpaid work (Baxter & Hewitt, 2013).

Literature on gender division of unpaid domestic duties shows that employed mothers in Australia typically deal with a disproportionate share of household and childcare responsibilities in comparison to employed fathers, they are more likely to bear the majority of the caregiving tasks, and their experience of work-family conflict may be particularly important for family functioning and children's outcomes (Westrupp et al., 2016). In this respect, it is interesting to compare the effect of mothers' and fathers' WFC on their children's externalizing problems in different types of families.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

I use four waves (i.e., time points) of data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC; <http://www.growingupinaustralia.gov.au/>). The terms of use of the data prevent me from publicly sharing the



data file. However, it can be obtained at the website of LSAC upon registration. This study is based on a secondary data analysis and is exempt from ethical review.

I take the following time points according to the age of children: 8-9, 10-11, 12-13, 14-15 years old. The sample comprises dual-earner and lone mother families who were employed part-time or full-time during all time points (the number of children is 2397, the number of mothers from intact families is 1982, the number of fathers from intact families is 1846, the number of sole mothers is 415). Excluding intact families where one partner doesn't work is justified by the fact that the focus of the analysis is on work-family conflict, which is likely to be different for families where both parents work compared to families where only one parent works. Including families where one partner is inactive would introduce a confounding variable that could obscure the relationship between the other partner's WFC and children's externalizing problems. Additionally, excluding these families may also improve the generalizability of the findings to families where both parents work.

## Measures

The dependent variable in the models is child's externalizing problems. Those are mother-reported and calculated as an average of the answers to the statements: "My child is constantly fidgeting", "My child often fights/bullies other youth", "My child is easily distracted". The answers range from 1 (not true) to 3 (certainly true). The reason behind using only mothers' estimation of children's externalizing problems is that fathers' answers had a lot of missing values. I compared the mean estimation of children's externalizing problems among mothers and fathers, and the difference was very small.

The independent variables are work-family conflict and parents' irritability, and their interaction. In LSAC parents rated the degree to which employment-related constraints impacted their family life and parenting (e.g., "Because of my work responsibilities my family time is less enjoyable and more pressured"). Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), and a work-family conflict score is calculated by averaging all the items, which was recoded into a score from 1 (low WFC) to 3 (high WFC) for the regression analysis.

Parents' irritability was reported on the frequency of their hostile, angry or rejecting behaviors toward the child using the question "How often are you angry when you punish this child?" with a five-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (all the time) and was recoded to the score 1 (low irritability) to 2 (high irritability) for the regression analysis.

I control for: children's characteristics (gender, victimization experience); parents' personal characteristics (education); work characteristics (full-time/part-time status); family characteristics (household income, presence of siblings).

## Data analyses

The method used is a modification of random effects that allows for diff

The method used is a modification of random effects that allows for differentiation of within and between effects (REWB) (Allison, 2009; Bell et. al, 2019). The reason for choosing this method is the following. In longitudinal data, such as LSAC, individuals or social units are measured on a number of occasions, which means occasions (at level 1) are nested within the individual or entity (at level 2). Thus, we can have "within" effects that occur at level 1, and "between" effects that occur at level 2 (Howard, 2015; Bell et. al, 2019), and these two different effects should not be assumed to be the same. Specifically, the impact of constant, between-person sources of variation must be differentiated from the impact of time-specific, within-person sources of variation. As Hoffman and Stawski (2009) put it, "persons should be modelled as contexts".

Common random effects (RE), though they can model the influence of time-constant covariates, like child's gender or parents' level of education, on the variable of interest, assume that between and within effects are equal, which may not be the case. Fixed effects model (FE) provides an estimate of the within effect but can say nothing about relationships with independent variables that do not change over time—only about deviations from the mean over time. FE specification reveals almost nothing about the level-2 entities in the model (Bell et. al, 2019). REWB model gives exactly the same results for the within effect (coefficient and standard error) as the FE model but retains the between effect which can be informative and cannot be obtained from a FE model (ibid). Thus, REWB is of more encompassing nature than either RE or FE, with heterogeneity modelled at both the individual (level 2) and occasion (level 1) level.

The dependent variable (i.e., child's externalizing problems) is regressed onto WFC and parents' irritability.

## Results

### Descriptive statistics

The descriptive statistics of the variables of the whole sample (intact families and sole mother families) are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for analytic variables

	Mean/%	SD	Min	Max
<i>Outcome variable</i> Externalizing problems of children	1.37	0.41	1	3
<i>Independent variables</i> WFC mother	2.86	0.95	1	5
WFC father	3.05	0.85	1	5
Irritability mother	2.26	1.03	1	5
Irritability father	2.13	1.01	1	5
Two parents in the household	86%		0	1
<i>Controls</i>				
Victimization experience	27%		0	1
Child is female	49%		0	1
Child's mother has graduate degree	50%		0	1
Child's father has a graduate degree	25%		0	1
Child's mother works full-time	52%		0	1
Child's father works full-time	95%		0	1
Family weekly income, in AUS\$1,000	2.63	1.94	0.01	16.74
At least one other child in household	91%		0	1

Source: Author's elaboration on LSAC data, B cohort, waves 5-8. Observations are pooled across waves. Number of children -2397, the number of mothers from intact families - 1982, the number of fathers from intact families - 1846, the number of sole mothers - 415.

Note: The range of the variable estimations: externalizing problems – from 1 to 3, WFC, irritability – from 1 to 5, victimization experience – from 0 to 1.



Descriptive statistics of the whole sample show a moderate level of children's externalizing problems. Fathers experience stronger work-family conflict than mothers, but mothers report higher levels of irritability towards their children. The majority of children in the sample (86%) have two parents in the household. 49% of surveyed children are girls and 27% of all children have had a victimization experience. The mothers in the sample tend to be more educated than fathers (50% vs 25% in having a graduate degree). Only 52% of mothers work full-time compared to 95% of fathers. The mean household income of the families can be described as average for Australia (Statista, 2018). 91% of the surveyed children have at least one sibling.

Descriptive statistics of intact families shows that, in line with the whole sample descriptives, fathers experience stronger work-family conflict than mothers, but mothers show more irritability towards their children (Table 2).

Table 2. Intact families' descriptive statistics (means)

Age	Externalizing problems	WFC mother	Irritability mother	WFC father	Irritability father	Victimization experience
8-9 y.o.	1.41	2.83	2.34	3.11	2.27	28%
10-11 y.o.	1.36	2.84	2.29	3.06	2.14	28%
12-13 y.o.	1.34	2.88	2.22	3.00	2.07	23%
14-15 y.o.	1.30	2.81	2.10	3.00	2.00	21%

Source: Author's elaboration on LSAC data, B cohort, waves 5-8. Number of mothers from intact families - 1982, the number of fathers from intact families - 1846.

Note: The range of the variable estimations: externalizing problems - from 1 to 3, WFC, irritability - from 1 to 5, victimization experience - from 0 to 1.

A higher level of WFC among working fathers compared to working mothers may seem surprising, but it goes in line with the previous findings. There is evidence that among parents of 8-15-year-old children fathers experience higher levels of WFC than mothers because they work longer hours (Yucel & Latshaw, 2021). Among the parents of younger children (0-5 year-olds) the negative effect of work on family life is also perceived to be greater by fathers (Baxter et al., 2007). However, another research shows that globally fathers and mothers report similar amounts of WFC (Hill et al., 2003).

In the whole sample for boys and girls we can see that externalizing problems decrease with age, as well as parents' irritability and the occurrence of victimization (reported by mothers). While fathers' work-family conflict tends to decrease with child's age, WFC of mothers has a more fluctuating character.

For sole mothers families the pattern is similar but with much higher level of externalizing problems, WFC, irritability, and children's victimization experience (Table 3). However, the occurrence of these factors tends to diminish with time.

Table 3. Sole mother families' descriptive statistics (means)

Age	Externalizing problems	WFC mother	Irritability mother	Victimization experience
8-9 y.o.	1.51	3.00	2.49	42%
10-11 y.o.	1.47	3.10	2.36	45%
12-13 y.o.	1.43	2.97	2.30	30%
14-15 y.o.	1.40	2.89	2.18	28%

Source: Author's elaboration on LSAC data, B cohort, waves 5-8. Number of sole mothers - 415.

Note: The range of the variable estimations: externalizing problems - from 1 to 3, WFC, irritability - from 1 to 5, victimization experience - from 0 to 1.

Figure 1 shows the difference in the occurrence of externalizing problems among boys and girls.

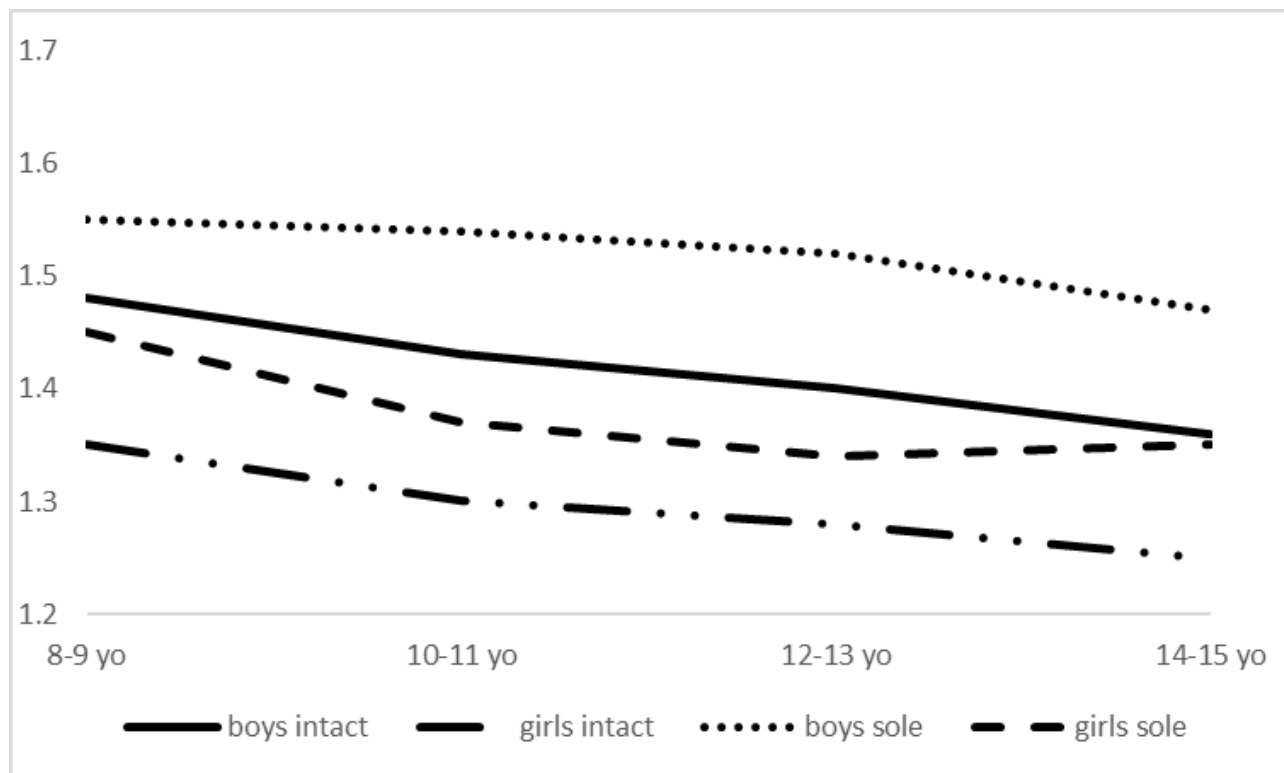


Figure 1.

Occurrence of externalizing problems among boys and girls by family type, Australia, 2012-2018

Source: Author's elaboration on LSAC data, B cohort, waves 5-8. Number of children -2397

Note: The range of the variable estimations: externalizing problems – from 1 to 3

As we can see from LSAC data, externalizing problems become less frequent with age and are more typical for boys than for girls, especially for boys from sole parent families. This finding goes in line with the previous research on gender differences in externalizing problems (Peter & Roberts, 2010). The possible explanation of the diminishing occurrence of externalizing problems among adolescents could be the fact that in the current research this type of problems is described rather as lack of concentration and attention than aggressive or deviant behavior and substance use, as in many studies on adolescent behavior (e.g., Schlack & Petermann, 2013).

Dynamics of work-family conflict among different group of parents is shown in Figure 2. Sole mothers and fathers from intact families report higher levels of WFC, which tends to decrease with the child's age. The number of sole fathers was too small to include them in the analysis. Decreasing WFC suggests that younger children (in the late middle childhood stage) are still more reliant upon and attached to their parents, requiring more supervision and time devoted to family demands, while adolescents place more importance on developing close peer relationships and independence, thereby distancing themselves from their parents (e.g., Yucel & Latshaw, 2021). WFC is greater for single parents compared to other parents: having only one individual, rather than two, available to attend to family needs creates high level of stress, as reflected in the literature (e.g. Forma, 2009).

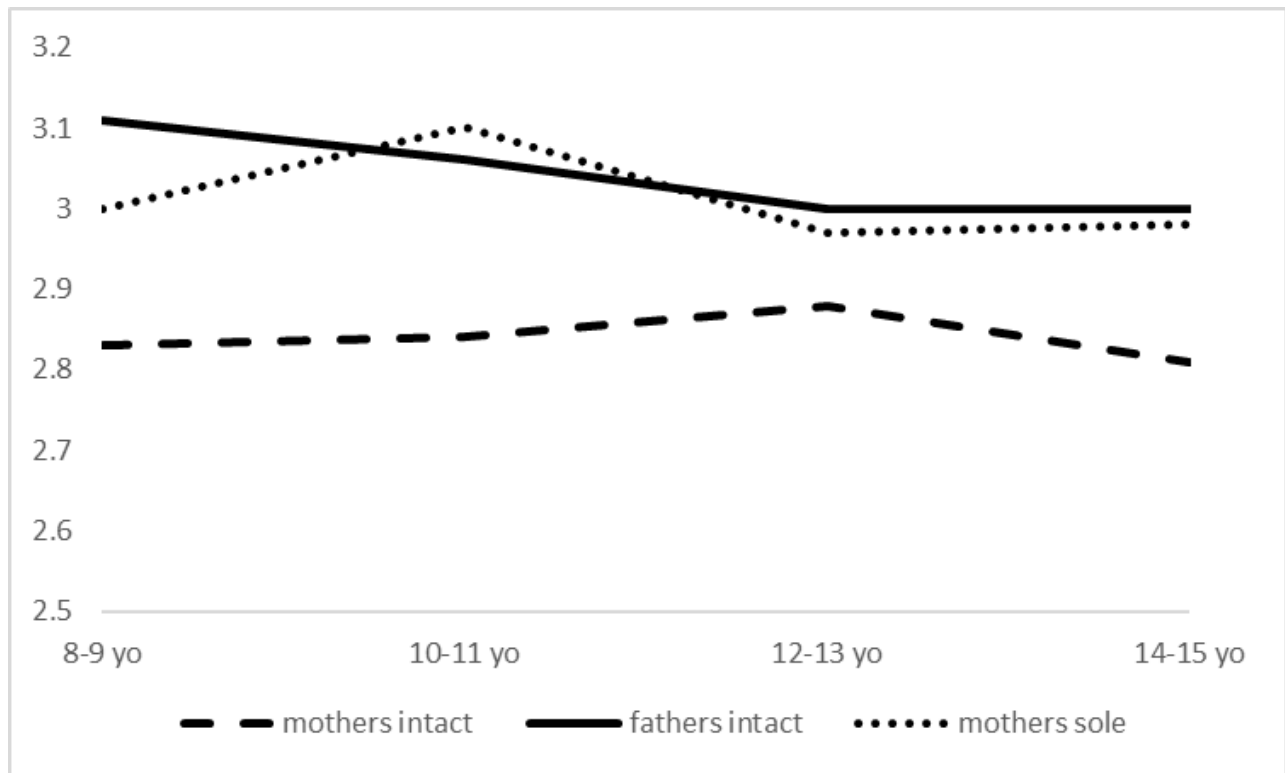


Figure 2.  
WFC dynamics by family structure, Australia, 2012-2018

Source: Author’s elaboration on LSAC data. B cohort, waves 5-8. Number of children -2397, the number of mothers from two-parent families - 1982, the number of fathers from two-parent families – 1846, the number of sole mothers - 415.

The level of parents’ irritability by family type is shown in Figure 3. It also tends to diminish with child’s age. Sole mothers report the highest level of irritability with their children, followed by mothers from intact families. Previous research has shown that mothers generally show higher levels of irritability compared to fathers, and the country context is irrelevant (Di Giunta et al., 2020). Moreover, Di Giunta et al. (2020) found that mothers, in comparison to fathers, might be more likely to experience stressful situations in which their competence to handle angry/irritable feelings is tested in the presence of their children.

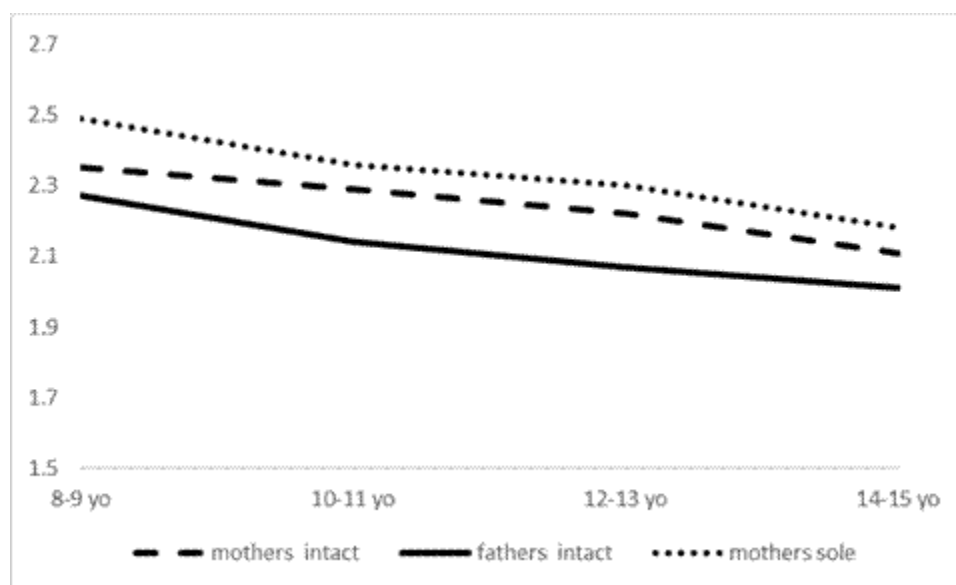


Figure 3.  
Parents' irritability by family type, Australia, 2012-2018

Source: Author's elaboration on LSAC data. B cohort, waves 5-8. Number of children - 2397, the number of mothers from two-parent families - 1982, the number of fathers from two-parent families - 1846, the number of sole mothers - 415.

Note: The range of the variable estimations: irritability - from 1 to 5.

### Results of REWB regression analysis

Three separate models were built: for mothers and fathers from intact families and for sole mothers. The effect of work-family conflict on children's externalizing problems is only significant for mothers from intact families (Model 1). The model estimates the between-mother effect of high WFC as 0.051, so the average level of children's externalizing problems in the families where the mother experiences high WFC, compared to families where the mother's WFC is low, is higher by 0.051. The within-mother effect is estimated to be 0.021. Thus for a given mother, high WFC increases the externalizing problems of her children by 0.021 on average. For fathers from intact families and sole mothers, this effect is not significant (Models 2-3). Parent's irritability is associated with children's externalizing problems for all groups of parents, and it is especially strong for sole mothers (Models 1-3). For sole mothers, high irritability increases externalizing problems by 0.187, compared to mothers with low irritability (Model 3).

As control variables, I included the household income, full-time/part-time status, parents' education, and the number of siblings but these variables were excluded from the table due to lack of impact. Household income and parents' education were used as predictors of socio-economic status, which has been linked in the previous research to various outcomes across the lifespan, including academic achievement and externalizing problems (e.g. Highlander & Jones, 2021). Full-time/part-time status and the number of siblings were used as proxies of parents' availability for the child. All these control variables did not have a significant impact on the children's externalizing problems when included in the models. However, the victimization experience, used as a control, is associated with externalizing problems in all models, with the highest effect in sole mothers' families (Model 3). Girls are less likely to experience externalizing problems, and the occurrence of these problems decreases with age for all type of families (Models 1-3).

Table 4.

	Model 1 Mothers intact	Model 2 Fathers intact	Model 3 Mothers sole
High WFC (within)	.021** (.010)	-.013 (.008)	.014 (.019)
High WFC (between)	.052*** (.014)	-.007 (.015)	.055 (.034)
Victimization experience	.120*** (.010)	.110*** (.013)	.148*** (.028)
Child's gender (girls)	-.131*** (.015)	-.110*** (.016)	-.121*** (.037)
High Irritability (within)	.019 (.010)	.018 (.011)	.006 (.026)
High Irritability (between)	.155*** (.021)	.093*** (.023)	.187*** (.051)
Age of child (8-9 yo – base)			
10-11 yo	-.059*** (.009)	-.058*** (.009)	-.042 (.029)
12-13 yo	-.071*** (.009)	-.071*** (.010)	-.054* (.026)
14-15 yo	-.096*** (.010)	-.104*** (.010)	-.063* (.029)
_cons	1.179*** (.063)	1.344*** (.053)	1.474*** (.137)
Observations	5813	5031	915
R <sup>2</sup> (overall)	.13	.09	.13

Models 1-3: Externalizing problems of children, work-family conflict, and irritability of mothers from intact families, fathers from intact families, and mothers from sole-parent families, Australia, 2012-2018

Source: Author's elaboration on LSAC data. B cohort, waves 5-8. Number of children -2397, the number of mothers from intact families - 1982, the number of fathers from intact families - 1846, the number of sole mothers - 415.

## Discussion

According to the received results, the gender effect hypothesis is only partially proved: while for mothers from intact families, there is an association between WFC and externalizing problems of children, it is not significant for fathers. This hypothesis stemmed from the extensive evidence showing that ongoing WFC can have a detrimental effect on the mental health and overall well-being of parents, subsequently impacting the well-being of their children (Cooklin et. al, 2016). The results may imply that, apart from parents' work-family conflict, other factors, like inter-parental conflict, contribute to the probability of children's externalizing problems. The family structure hypothesis was not proved: WFC does not affect children's externalizing problems in sole mothers' families. With this hypothesis, I argued that single mothers report experiencing more work-family conflict than other parents (Minnotte, 2012). WFC has a negative effect on

parenting performance, which influences the family environment, home experience, and the behavior of the child (Dinh et al., 2017). Considering the larger occurrence of externalizing problems among children in sole parent families, the results suggest that other factors rather than the mothers' WFC contribute to the occurrence of children's behavioral problems. The irritability hypothesis was proved: parents' irritability, especially mothers', does affect children's externalizing problems, and its effect is stronger than the effect of WFC. Parents' irritability affects home environment and the interactions with their children, shaping the functioning and the behaviour of the child (Reitz et al., 2006). This finding once more implies that policy and workplace family-friendly practices may help mothers and fathers of school-aged children experience less stress and function better in managing both their work and family responsibilities.

## Conclusion

Even though gender equality in Australia has significantly advanced over the last decades, there is still inequality in employment opportunities, pay, and division of household labour. While women comprise roughly 48% of all employees in Australia, their full-time salary is on average \$253.50 lower than that of men each week (Australian Government, 2023). The national gender pay gap was 13.3% in 2022 and it has remained between 13% and 19% for the past two decades (ibid). The share of fathers who take parental leave in Australia is very low by global standards: mothers take 95% of all primary carers' leave (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018). This indicates that policy changes faster than everyday attitudes and practices, resulting in mothers' work-family conflict, irritability, and negative children outcomes.

The findings of the current research suggest that work-family conflict experienced by mothers from intact families influences children's behavior to a greater extent than the WFC of other groups of parents. Since this effect is not observed in sole mothers' families, it may imply that other factors, like unequal division of household labour and inter-parental conflict, can have a detrimental effect on mothers' levels of stress and, consequently, on children's behaviour. Time-use data research shows that married and cohabiting mothers do more housework than sole mothers at the expense of their own leisure and sleep, while all mothers report about the same amount of child-care time (Repin et.al, 2018).

Another interpretation of the study results can be that working fathers take substantially less responsibility for childcare than working mothers do while reporting higher levels of WFC. This paradox can be explained by the fact that working mothers are overloaded and often have to balance multiple responsibilities, including work and family, which can lead to a lower level of perceived conflict due to their ability to manage and prioritize their responsibilities effectively. On the other hand, when mothers experience WFC, it may have a stronger impact on their children's externalizing problems because they are typically the primary caregivers and have a greater influence on their children's behavior and well-being. Additionally, societal expectations and gender roles may also be a part of this paradox, as mothers are often expected to prioritize their family responsibilities over their career, leading to greater guilt and stress when these responsibilities conflict with work demands. Scandinavian countries' experience shows that public policy, such as national policy initiatives on father involvement, may influence fathers' behavior. There are surprising similarities between working fathers and working sole mothers as well as significant differences in their self-reports about work-family issues. This indicates that future research should take the study of WFC issues beyond "working mothers". Moreover, as the previous research reveals, the fact that work-family issues are evident for fathers across the globe reinforces the possibility that these problems are fundamental, perhaps even universal, for families and work organizations (e.g. Hill et. al, 2003).

The current study certainly has limitations. First, it uses data from only one country, Australia, which is characterized by lower levels of income inequality and spatial inequality than other developed countries (Biddle & Montaigne, 2017). Hence, the differences in socio-economic status of families in the sample are quite modest. Thus, future cross-national research can further explore the relationships between parents'



WFC and children's conduct problems. Second, I did not include the availability of external help with the domestic chores in the analysis to avoid overloading it with controls. However, it is obvious that higher levels of external help, family support, and accommodating and understanding family members may decrease the level of mothers' WFC and its impact on externalizing problems of children. More research is needed on the factors that influence children's externalizing problems in sole mothers' families, since their occurrence is higher than in intact families, especially among boys.

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**Balancing Work and Family: The Impact of Work-Family  
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Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina

[hugosimkin@sociales.uba.ar](mailto:hugosimkin@sociales.uba.ar)

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