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Abstract

Despite growing evidence that parental work–family conflict (WFC) affects children's emotional well-being, little is known about the multiple pathways underlying such effects. This study examines the association between parental WFC and children's emotional well-being and the potential mediating role of parenting behaviors in this process. Using the German Family Panel data from wave 6 (2013/2014), wave 8 (2015/2016), wave 10 (2017/2018), and wave 12 (2019/20), we use random-effects and multiple mediation models to analyze how parental WFC influences parenting behaviors and children's emotional well-being, and whether parenting behaviors mediate their association. Parental WFC is linked to more negative communication and conflict and less parental warmth, especially among mothers. Parental WFC is linked to children's emotional well-being, with a more pronounced association for mothers' WFC. Mediation analyses showed that parenting behaviors partially

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mediate this association. Our results underscore the importance of reducing WFC among working parents to promote children's emotional well-being.

Keywords

work–family conflict, emotional well-being, parenting behaviors, mediation analysis, pairfam

Introduction

Work–family conflict (WFC) refers to a situation where the demands of work and family domains are “mutually incompatible” (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Recent studies show that WFC has become increasingly prevalent globally, with many workers reporting disruptions in work and private domains (Allen et al., 2020; Ollier-Malaterre & Foucreault, 2017). WFC can have a major impact on employees' health and well-being (Guo & Wang, 2024). Several studies have documented that WFC harms workers' mental health (Cooklin, Dinh, et al., 2016; Song et al., 2024), simultaneously lowering work productivity (Goullet et al., 2022), life satisfaction (Qu & Zhao, 2012), and marital satisfaction (Chen & Lim, 2012; Molina, 2021). However, research on the relationship between parental WFC and children's mental health outcomes is still in its early stages. Evidence suggests that parents' WFC is negatively associated with children's overall mental health (Dinh et al., 2017; Leach et al., 2021), elevated emotional problems (Yucel & Latshaw, 2021), and increased behavioral problems (Lim, 2024).

Despite an emerging body of literature on the link between parental WFC and children's mental health outcomes, such as internalizing behaviors, externalizing behaviors, overall mental health, and problematic internet usage (Bilodeau et al., 2023), important research gaps remain. First, previous studies exploring the pathways linking parental WFC to child mental health problems considered only a single mediator in their analyses or examined various mediators separately (Hess & Pollmann-Schult, 2020; Strazdins et al., 2013). However, Von Soest and Hagtvet (2011) argued that, compared with multiple mediation models, single mediation models can lead to inconsistent results, as the former consider the simultaneous interplay of several mediators. Thus, previous studies have provided only limited insight into underlying pathways that interact with one another (for a review, see Bilodeau et al., 2023).

A second research gap is that we know little about whether parental WFC is associated with child-reported parenting behaviors and emotional problems. While earlier studies relied on only parent-reported measures of children's

mental health outcomes and parenting behaviors (e.g., Cooklin et al., 2016; Dinh et al., 2017; Van den Eynde et al., 2020), more recent work suggests discrepancies between parent-reported and child-reported emotional difficulties (Hess & Pollmann-Schult, 2024). Studies examining reporter bias in children's mental health have shown that parents' mental state may affect their assessment of their children's emotional and conduct problems (Gartstein et al., 2009; Seiffge-Krenke & Kollmar, 1998). In the context of parents' WFC, reporter bias may occur when a higher level of WFC leads parents to rate their children's emotional well-being more negatively.

A final research gap involves differences in children's responses to mothers' and fathers' WFC. With a few exceptions (e.g., Dinh et al., 2017; Van den Eynde et al., 2020; Yucel & Latshaw, 2021), most of our knowledge about the association between parental WFC and children's emotional and behavioral problems is based on mothers only. As women tend to perform a larger share of childcare (Craig & Mullan, 2011), most studies observe that mothers' WFC is negatively associated with children's mental health outcomes (Cooklin et al., 2015; Hess & Pollmann-Schult, 2020; Pilarz, 2021). However, the changing role of fatherhood and increased fathers' time with their children (Hook & Wolfe, 2012), coupled with mothers' growing labor-market participation, raises new questions about how fathers' WFC may lead to changes in parenting behaviors, which in turn may influence children's mental health outcomes.

Building upon and addressing these gaps in current scholarship, our study seeks to provide new insights into the pathways underlying the link between both mothers' and fathers' WFC and children's self-reported emotional well-being. We draw on data from the German Family Panel (pairfam) to examine the association between parental WFC, child-reported parenting behaviors, and child-reported emotional well-being, and the potential mediating roles of child-reported parenting behaviors in this process. Our study extends previous research in three ways.

First, it explores whether parental WFC is linked to children's emotional problems through multiple pathways and whether certain parenting behaviors are more important than others. By testing positive and negative parenting behaviors as mediators, our analysis shows that mothers' WFC influences children's emotional problems by increasing detrimental parenting behaviors (e.g., negative communication and conflict) but not by reducing positive parenting behaviors (e.g., parental warmth). Second, we examine children's views on their mental well-being and how parents interact with them. Having children's perspectives on their emotional well-being and parents' behaviors toward them helps minimize parental reporting bias and endogeneity in the analysis. Finally, we consider parental gender differences in the effects of

parental WFC on children's emotional well-being. Together, our study provides a new assessment of how mothers' and fathers' WFC affect the emotional well-being of children and the mediating role of parenting behaviors. Our findings have implications for policy interventions that aim to reduce WFC and support parents experiencing high WFC, ultimately promoting children's emotional well-being.

Background

Parents' WFC and Children's Emotional Well-Being

The key theories for understanding the impact of parental WFC on children's emotional well-being are crossover theory and family systems theory. Crossover theory explains how positive or negative experiences and emotions can transfer between individuals within the same social environment, particularly in a dyadic relationship (Bakker et al., 2009; Westman, 2001). It focuses on crossover effects between couples, for instance, when WFC influences relationship satisfaction between partners (Bakker et al., 2009; Yang & Dahm, 2021). However, the crossover effects of WFC can also manifest in relationships between parents and children. In the context of this study, it is plausible that elevated WFC among parents negatively affects children's emotional well-being by altering parenting behaviors.

Similarly, family systems theory proposes that a person's attitudes and behaviors are largely influenced by the attitudes and behaviors of other family members (Cox & Paley, 2003). According to this theory, a family is a social system in which each member exerts both direct and indirect influence on the others (Broderick, 1997). Notably, family systems theory points out the importance of looking "beyond the mother-child relationship and considering fathers and their relationships in the family in order to better understand children's development" (Cox & Paley, 2003, p. 193). In this sense, family systems theory emphasizes the importance of focusing on the entire family.

Like several prior studies (Matias & Recharte, 2021; Nelson et al., 2009; Yucel & Latshaw, 2021), we adopt crossover theory and family systems theory as an overarching theoretical framework to examine the pathways between parental WFC and children's emotional well-being. We extend this emerging but underdeveloped area of research by exploring the *mediating roles of child-reported parenting behaviors* in the association between parental WFC and children's emotional well-being. In the following, we discuss these pathways in greater detail.

Mediating Roles of Parenting Behaviors

The study of parenting has gained significant attention across academic disciplines, reflecting its importance in child development. Parenting is categorized through two distinct concepts: parenting style and parenting behavior. Parenting style¹ is defined as “a constellation of attitudes toward the child that are communicated to the child and create an emotional climate in which the parents’ behaviors are expressed” (Darling & Steinberg, 1993, p. 488). In contrast, parenting behaviors are the concrete and observable interactions between parent and child, such as how parents respond to specific situations or implement discipline (Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Kuppens & Ceulemans, 2019). Both parenting style and behavior influence children’s development and psychological well-being (Pinquart, 2017). When parents demonstrate consistent warmth and positive engagement, children show fewer emotional and behavioral problems (Bayer et al., 2006; Kingsbury et al., 2020). Conversely, negative parenting behaviors—particularly those characterized by verbal harshness or conflict—are often associated with increased emotional and behavioral problems in children (Hess & Pollmann-Schult, 2020; Kaiser et al., 2019; Yap & Jorm, 2015). Among these parenting behaviors, harsh parenting is a strong predictor of emotional and behavioral problems among children (Chen & Raine, 2018; Kaiser et al., 2019; Pinquart, 2017).

Emerging evidence suggests that parental WFC can impact children’s emotional well-being through its influence on parenting behaviors (Cooklin, Westrupp, et al., 2016; Hess & Pollmann-Schult, 2020; Wang et al., 2024). The negative effects of parental WFC are likely to cross over to children, as parents experiencing high levels of WFC are more likely to exhibit negative parenting behaviors. This evidence is drawn from research showing that a high level of WFC may cause parenting stress (Cooklin et al., 2015; Vieira et al., 2018), and those who experience high levels of stress may find it challenging to communicate positively with their children (Chung et al., 2022). Parents who experience elevated levels of WFC are also more likely to engage in aversive parenting behaviors, such as verbal harshness (Hess & Pollmann-Schult, 2020; Wang et al., 2024), inconsistent punishment, or discipline (Cooklin et al., 2016), irritable interactions (Cooklin et al., 2015; Dinh et al., 2017), and more coercive disciplinary practices, including shouting, expressing anger, showing annoyance, and arguing with children (Verweij et al., 2021).

WFC may affect children’s emotional well-being not only by increasing negative parenting behaviors but also by reducing positive ones. Parents experiencing high levels of WFC are less likely to engage in positive parenting

behaviors than parents with lower levels of WFC (Cooklin et al., 2015, 2016b; Lim, 2024). Positive parenting, often measured as parenting warmth or parent–child relationship satisfaction (Chen et al., 2019), refers to a dimension of “positively valued” behaviors that includes parents’ affection for and acceptance of their children (Deater-Deckard et al., 2011). The demands of WFC can drain parents’ energy and focus, making it more difficult for them to praise their children or spend quality time with them. Specifically, parents facing greater work–family conflict tend to display less warmth in their interactions with their children (Cooklin et al., 2015, 2016b; Lim, 2024).

Both positive and negative parenting behaviors have a significant impact on children’s emotional problems. Negative parenting behaviors, such as harsh parenting, are associated with increased emotional and behavioral problems in children (Yap & Jorm, 2015). Verbal harshness—such as negative criticism and disproportionately intense verbal discipline—is linked to emotional and conduct problems (Chen & Raine, 2018; Hess & Pollmann-Schult, 2020; Kaiser et al., 2019; Piquart, 2017) as well as increased feelings of depression (Wang & Kenny, 2014).

Conversely, positive parenting is associated with reduced emotional problems among children (Hess, 2022; McKee et al., 2007) and a lower risk of mental illness (Chen et al., 2019). Among various positive parenting behaviors, parental warmth is an important factor for decreasing children’s emotional problems (Bayer et al., 2006; Kingsbury et al., 2020). For example, positive parenting behaviors, including praising or expressing affection, are linked to fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety among children aged 6 and 7 (Kingsbury et al., 2020). Similarly, Bayer et al. (2006) reported that higher levels of warm and engaged parenting behaviors are associated with lower levels of anxiety and depression among children.

Differences by Parent Gender

Prior research shows that gender differences exist in how work–family stress affects parenting behaviors (Cooklin et al., 2015, 2016b; Nelson et al., 2009). Gendered expectations and inequality in paid work, housework, and childcare are linked to differences between mothers and fathers in their ability to manage WFC (Bass et al., 2009), and hence gender differences exist in the impact of WFC on parenting behaviors (Cooklin et al., 2015, 2016b; Yucel & Latshaw, 2021). Previous studies indicate that mothers who experience high levels of WFC display more negative parenting behaviors than fathers. For instance, mothers with high levels of WFC show more harshness toward their children (Hess & Pollmann-Schult, 2020), whereas fathers facing higher WFC do not display more harshness than fathers with lower WFC (Cooklin et al., 2015).

These findings suggest that parental WFC influences specific parenting behaviors according to parent gender, though in different ways.

Children's responses to parenting behaviors might also differ by parent gender. It is well known that mothers tend to spend more time on childcare and supervision, even when they work longer hours than fathers (Bianchi et al., 2007; Craig & Mullan, 2011). Because working mothers spend more time with children, maternal work-related stress affects children more directly and more intensely than that of fathers (Matias & Recharte, 2021).

The Present Study

We advance work–family scholarship and the study of children's emotional well-being by investigating multiple pathways from parental WFC to child emotional problems. By utilizing multiple mediation models, we examine different parenting behaviors as mediators for the association between parental WFC and child emotional problems. Specifically, the present study aims to answer the following research questions:

- (1) Is parental WFC associated with child-reported parenting behaviors (negative communication, conflict, and parental warmth) and child-reported emotional problems?
- (2) Is the association between parental WFC and child emotional problems mediated by negative communication, conflict, and parental warmth?
- (3) Do (1) the association between parental WFC and children's emotional problems and (2) the mediating effects of parenting behaviors vary by parent gender?

Our study makes a further methodological contribution by employing children's self-reports of parenting behaviors and their emotional problems. By asking children to assess their emotional problems and their parents' attributes and behaviors toward them, we gain insight into how children perceive their interactions with their parents and their emotional well-being. In contrast, prior studies have typically used parenting behaviors and children's emotional symptoms as reported by parents. Such approaches may introduce bias in understanding children's emotional problems and how children feel about interactions with their parents. For example, parents experiencing high levels of WFC and stress may be more likely to perceive their children's emotions and behaviors negatively (Sawyer et al., 1998), and they may not be aware of their negative parenting behaviors toward their children. By using measures of children's evaluation of their emotional problems and child-

reported parenting behaviors, we can capture children's perspectives and minimize bias.

Methods

Data

We use the German Family Panel, also known as pairfam, which is a longitudinal study on partnership and family dynamics in Germany. The study began in 2008 with 12,402 respondents and was conducted annually until 2022. Notably, pairfam has a unique multi-actor design that includes the main respondents, their partners, and all children aged 8 to 16 years living in the same household with the main respondents. Pairfam was collected using computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPIs) and pen-and-paper personal interviews (PAPIs). Children took a 15-minute CAPI with their parents' permission. Pairfam provides information on the respondents' employment status, work schedules, parental work–family conflict, children's mental health, and parenting behaviors. Since it offers detailed information on parenting behaviors, it is well-suited for our research questions. We used four waves of pairfam data, as information on work–family conflict and parenting behaviors was only available in wave 6 (2013/14), wave 8 (2015/16), wave 10 (2017/18), and wave 12 (2019/2020). We linked 2,034 children with their mothers (3,622 observations) and 1,732 children with their fathers (3,080 observations), resulting in 6,702 observations.

Measures

Dependent Variable. Our study focuses on children's emotional problems as the dependent variable. We used the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to assess children's emotional problems (Goodman, 1997). The SDQ measures children's emotional symptoms with the following five items: Please tell me to what extent these sentences are correct for you. For your answer, think about how things were during the past 6 months. (1) I am nervous in new situations, (2) I easily lose confidence, (3) I am often unhappy, depressed, or fearful, (4) I have many fears, I am easily scared, and (5) I get a lot of headaches, stomachaches, or sickness. Children's emotional symptoms were rated on a scale from 0 "Not true" to 2 "Certainly true." We aggregated the responses to these five questions to create a measure for children's emotional problems, with a total scale from 0 to 10.

Independent Variable. Our primary independent variable is parental WFC. Survey participants were asked eight questions related to WFC: (1) Because of my workload in my job, vocational training, or university education, my personal life suffers; (2) even when I am doing something with my friends, partner, or family, I must often think about work; (3) after the stress of work, I find it difficult to relax at home and/or to enjoy my free time with others; (4) my work prevents me from doing things with my friends, partner, and family more than I'd like; (5) because I am often under stress in my private life, I have problems concentrating on my work; (6) because of my personal schedule, I often lack time to do my work; (7) the time I need for my partner, family, and friends keeps me from being more involved in my job, vocational training, or university education; and (8) conflicts in my personal life reduce my work performance. We combined responses from these questions to create a measure of the level of conflicts that parents experience between work and family in both directions and computed an overall score for WFC by calculating the row mean of all eight items. As shown in [Table 1](#), the WFC scale is used in full (1.00–5.00) with a mean of 1.91 among mothers and a mean of 2.09 among fathers.

Mediators. We examine whether positive and negative parenting behaviors—negative communication, parent–child conflict, and parental warmth—mediate the association between WFC and child emotional problems. In the pairfam study, children were asked how often their mother or father did certain things in order to gauge their parent–child relationships.

The scale *Negative Communication* (Cronbach's alpha (α) for mothers = 0.63, α for fathers = 0.68) uses three items based on the instrument of [Schwarz et al. \(1997\)](#), indicating the degree of negative behavior from parents toward their child ([Thönissen et al., 2023](#)): How often does [name parent] do the following things? (1) [Name parent] criticizes you, (2) [Name parent] screams at you when you do something wrong, and (3) [Name parent] scolds you when he or she is angry at you.

The scale *Conflict* (α for mothers = 0.73, α for fathers = 0.77) was adapted from the Network of Relationships Inventory (NRI), which measures 10 relationship qualities ([Furman & Buhrmester, 1985](#)). The conflict scale was measured by two items: (1) How often are you and [Name parent] annoyed/angry with each other? and (2) How often do you and [Name parent] disagree and quarrel?

The scale *Parental Warmth* (α for mothers = 0.74, α for fathers = 0.83) uses three questions to measure how much positive attention and nurturing care parents show in their child-rearing practices ([Thönissen et al., 2023](#)). These questions evaluate the actual parenting behaviors demonstrated by both

Table 1. Sample characteristics for parents and children

Variable	Mothers				Fathers			
	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Work-family conflict	1.91	0.66	1.00	4.88	2.09	0.63	1.00	4.43
Parenting behaviors								
Negative communication	5.74	2.09	3.00	15.00	5.56	2.11	3.00	15.00
Conflict	4.33	1.41	2.00	10.00	4.14	1.45	2.00	10.00
Parental warmth	13.35	1.69	3.00	15.00	12.62	2.19	3.00	15.00
Weekly work hours	28	12	0	80	43.69	9.14	2.00	90.00
Education level								
Lower secondary	0.06	0.20	0	1	0.04	0.19	0	1
Higher secondary	0.56	0.50	0	1	0.50	0.50	0	1
Tertiary	0.38	0.49	0	1	0.46	0.50	0	1
Log of household income	7.42	0.42	4.42	10.41	7.43	0.40	5.18	10.41
Having partner	0.89	0.32	0	1	0.98	0.13	0	1
Child characteristics								
Emotional problems	2.43	1.97	0	10	2.43	1.92	0	10
Child gender								
Boy	0.51				0.53			
Girl	0.49				0.47			
Migration status	0.18	0.38	0	1	0.17	0.37	0	1
Age	11.32	2.18	7	16	11.22	2.19	7	16
Number of observations	3,622				3,080			

mothers and fathers, drawing from a similar scale developed by [Jaursch \(2003\)](#): How often do the following things happen between you and your parent [name parent]? (1) [Name parent] shows you that he or she likes you, (2) [Name parent] tries to cheer you up when you are sad, and (3) [Name parent] praises you. Children rated each item on a five-point scale ranging from 1 “Never” to 5 “Very often,” where higher values indicate a higher prevalence of each parenting behavior. For the analyses, the parenting behavior measures comprise the row mean of all items answered by the children.

Control Variables. In the multivariate regression models, we controlled for mother, father, and child characteristics. Parents’ characteristics include their weekly work hours (less than 15 hours, 15–34.9 hours, 35–44.9 hours, and 45 hours or more), education levels (lower secondary, higher secondary, and tertiary), log of household income, mothers’ and fathers’ partnership status

(married or unmarried cohabitating vs. no partner), and migration background (having migration background vs. no migration background). Children’s characteristics include child age and gender. We also include dummy variables indicating survey years.

Analytical Strategy

We used random-effects (RE) regression models with cluster-robust standard errors (Brüderl & Ludwig, 2014) and multiple (parallel) mediation modeling to investigate the association between parents’ WFC and their children’s emotional problems through different parenting behaviors (see Figure 1 for the conceptual mediation model). In the first part of the analysis, we estimated whether (1) parental WFC is associated with changes in their parenting behaviors and (2) parental WFC and parenting behaviors are associated with children’s emotional problems.

In the second part of the analysis, we examined the mediating roles of parental behaviors by estimating the indirect effects of parenting behaviors that link parental WFC to children’s emotional problems (Goldsmith et al., 2018). We estimated the total effect, direct effect, indirect effect (for each mediator), and total indirect effects. Additionally, we conducted separate analyses for mothers and fathers to address potential gender differences in the effect of WFC on parenting behaviors and their mediating role in linking WFC to child emotional well-being.

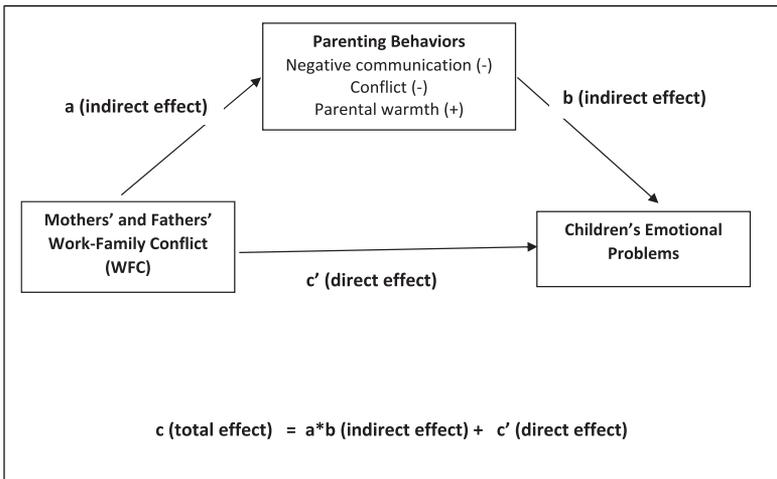


Figure 1. The Conceptual Mediation Model

Results

Descriptive Results

Table 1 shows the sample characteristics. The mean score for mothers' WFC is 1.91, and for fathers' WFC is 2.09. Regarding child-reported parenting behaviors, the mean score for negative communication by mothers is 5.74, for conflict is 4.33, and for parental warmth is 13.35. The mean score for negative communication by fathers is 5.56, conflict is 4.14, and parental warmth is 12.62. Fathers work on average 43.69 hours per week, and thus have longer weekly work hours than mothers do (mean weekly work hours of 28). Approximately 38% of mothers and 46% of fathers are college-educated; 89% of mothers and 98% of fathers are partnered. In terms of child characteristics, the mean score for child-reported emotional problems is 2.43 for both samples of mothers and fathers. Around 17%–18% of children have a migration background. The mean age of children is 11.32 in the mothers' sample and 11.22 in the fathers' sample.

Multivariate Results

Table 2 shows the association between WFC and child-reported parenting behaviors separately for mothers and fathers. The first three columns of **Table 2** show that higher levels of WFC among mothers are significantly associated with more negative communication between a mother and a child, more conflict, and less parental warmth toward a child. While the estimates of the relationships between mothers' WFC and all parenting behaviors remain significant, fathers' higher WFC is significantly associated only with more negative communication, showing marginal significance with conflict and parental warmth.

In the next step, we tested the effects of mothers' and fathers' WFC on children's emotional problems. **Table 3** presents the results of the random-effects models by parent gender. In Model 1, we adjusted for parents' education, work hours, income, partnership status, demographics, and child characteristics. Looking at the results for mothers (Model 1), we see that WFC experienced by mothers is significantly related to their children's emotional problems. In other words, children aged between 7 and 16 whose mothers experienced WFC are more likely to experience emotional problems over time. Fathers' WFC is associated with high levels of emotional problems in children with marginal significance (Model 1). In Model 2, we added three parenting behaviors—negative communication, conflict, and parental warmth—to the model. Upon adding these indicators, the relationship

Table 2. Predictors of mothers' and fathers' different parenting behaviors (random-effects regressions)

	Mothers			Fathers		
	Negative Comm.	Conflict	Parental warmth	Negative Comm.	Conflict	Parental warmth
WFC	0.288*** (0.059)	0.190*** (0.039)	-0.102* (0.043)	0.152* (0.063)	0.082+ (0.046)	-0.105+ (0.063)
Education (ref: lower secondary)						
Higher secondary	-0.008 (0.197)	0.043 (0.126)	0.083 (0.169)	0.603** (0.200)	0.561*** (0.143)	-0.566* (0.240)
Tertiary	-0.148 (0.207)	0.133 (0.130)	0.163 (0.173)	0.602** (0.206)	0.583*** (0.146)	-0.243 (0.244)
Weekly work hours	-0.005 (0.003)	-0.007** (0.002)	0.000 (0.003)	-0.002 (0.004)	0.001 (0.003)	-0.014** (0.005)
Log of household income	-0.226* (0.107)	0.0701 (0.062)	0.284*** (0.085)	-0.111 (0.114)	0.009 (0.080)	0.381*** (0.105)
Partnered	-0.266* (0.131)	-0.307*** (0.081)	0.034 (0.102)	-0.053 (0.312)	-0.149 (0.176)	-0.822*** (0.208)
Children's characteristics						
Boy	0.223** (0.082)	-0.198*** (0.054)	-0.325*** (0.065)	0.350*** (0.091)	-0.105 (0.062)	-0.291** (0.091)
Age of child	-0.498*** (0.151)	-0.230* (0.101)	0.446*** (0.123)	-0.322 (0.170)	-0.045 (0.113)	0.451** (0.158)
Age of child ²	0.0199** (0.007)	0.0142** (0.004)	-0.027*** (0.005)	0.0125 (0.007)	0.005 (0.005)	-0.032*** (0.007)

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

	Mothers			Fathers		
	Negative Comm.	Conflict	Parental warmth	Negative Comm.	Conflict	Parental warmth
Migration status	0.177 (0.110)	-0.180* (0.072)	0.029 (0.084)	-0.141 (0.121)	-0.223*** (0.079)	0.108 (0.118)
Constant	10.27*** (1.123)	4.689*** (0.707)	9.906*** (0.869)	7.526*** (1.257)	3.431*** (0.856)	10.89*** (1.137)
Number of observations	3,622			3,080		

Note. + $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Standard errors in parentheses. German Family Panel data, waves 8, 10, and 12. All models include survey years.

Table 3. Predictors of children’s emotional problems (random-effects regressions)

	Mothers		Fathers	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
WFC	0.303*** (0.054)	0.230*** (0.052)	0.116+ (0.061)	0.079 (0.059)
Parenting behaviors				
Negative communication		0.152*** (0.019)		0.134*** (0.022)
Conflict		0.163*** (0.027)		0.116*** (0.029)
Parental warmth		-0.0111 (0.021)		-0.044* (0.020)
Education (ref: Lower secondary)				
Higher secondary	-0.275 (0.168)	-0.277 (0.155)	0.211 (0.189)	0.0373 (0.176)
Tertiary	-0.536** (0.178)	-0.531** (0.165)	0.123 (0.194)	-0.038 (0.182)
Weekly work hours	0.000 (0.003)	0.002 (0.003)	-0.00747 (0.004)	-0.0078 (0.004)
Log of household income	-0.331** (0.108)	-0.308** (0.104)	-0.412*** (0.109)	-0.379*** (0.107)
Partnered	-0.029 (0.123)	0.063 (0.117)	-0.603 (0.380)	-0.620 (0.368)
Children’s characteristics				
Boy	-0.430*** (0.077)	-0.435*** (0.075)	-0.428*** (0.082)	-0.475*** (0.080)
Age of child	-0.655*** (0.140)	-0.532*** (0.137)	-0.427** (0.150)	-0.354* (0.147)
Age of child ²	0.0255*** (0.006)	0.0196** (0.006)	0.0150* (0.007)	0.0111 (0.006)
Child’s migration status	-0.104 (0.095)	-0.100 (0.090)	-0.252* (0.099)	-0.200* (0.094)
Constant	8.921*** (1.046)	6.690*** (1.048)	9.210*** (1.168)	8.230*** (1.182)
Number of observations	3,622	3,622	3,080	3,080

Note. + $p < 0.10$ +; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Standard errors in parentheses. German Family Panel data, waves 8, 10, and 12. All models include survey years.

between mothers' WFC and children's emotional problems is attenuated but remains statistically significant. The coefficient of association between fathers' WFC and children's emotional problems decreases from $b = 0.116$ to $b = 0.079$ and the coefficient for fathers' WFC becomes insignificant. These results also show that the association between mothers' WFC and children's emotional problems, independent of sociodemographic characteristics, is stronger than the association between fathers' WFC and children's emotional problems.

To explore the hypothesized mediating effects of the three parenting behaviors on children's emotional problems, we decomposed the total effects into the direct effects of mothers' and fathers' WFC on children's emotional problems and the indirect effects of WFC via negative communication, conflict, and parental warmth (Table 4). The total effect of mothers' WFC on children's emotional problems ($b = 0.301$, $p < 0.001$) is the sum of the direct effect ($b = 0.240$, $p < 0.001$) and the indirect effect ($b = 0.061$, $p < 0.001$). The specific indirect effects indicated that the effects of mothers' WFC are mediated by negative communication ($b = 0.034$, $p < 0.001$) and conflict ($b = 0.027$, $p < 0.05$). Although mothers' WFC is associated with higher levels of negative communication and conflict and less parental warmth (see Table 2), parental warmth shows no statistically significant mediating effect on children's emotional problems. The proportion of the total effect mediated by negative communication, conflict, and parental warmth amounts to 20%.

Table 4. Mediation analysis

	Total effect	Direct effect	Total indirect effect	Specific indirect effect
Mothers' WFC \Rightarrow Children's emotional problems	0.301***	0.240***	0.061***	
Via negative communication				0.034***
Via Conflict				0.027**
Via parental warmth				-0.001
Fathers' WFC \Rightarrow Children's emotional problems	0.106+	0.082	0.024*	
Via negative communication				0.010
Via conflict				0.010
Via parental warmth				0.004

Note. + $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. German Family Panel data, waves 6, 8, 10, and 12. All models include control variables for child sex, child age, child's migration background, parents' education, household income, partnership status, and survey year.

The lower panel of [Table 4](#) shows whether parenting behaviors mediate the association between fathers' WFC and children's emotional problems. As previously shown in [Table 3](#) (Model 2), the total effect of fathers' WFC is marginally significant ($b = 0.106, p < 0.10$). Although there is a significant total indirect effect ($b = 0.024, p < 0.05$), the indirect effect of each parenting behavior is statistically insignificant. In total, the three parenting behaviors explain about 22% of the impact of fathers' WFC on children's emotional problems.

Discussion

A Summary of the Main Findings

Our findings show that children report significantly more emotional problems when their mothers experience higher levels of WFC. In contrast, the association for fathers is considerably smaller and only marginally statistically significant. Mothers with elevated levels of WFC are more likely to use negative communication, more likely to have conflicts with their children, and less likely to show parental warmth toward children. These negative parenting behaviors, in turn, are associated with more emotional problems in children. These mediating effects, however, were weaker for fathers. While fathers' parenting behaviors were strongly associated with more emotional problems in children, their level of WFC only marginally influences their parenting behaviors.

Significance and Contributions

Our findings make three important contributions to the literature on WFC and children's emotional well-being. First, we examine the potential pathways (multiple parenting behaviors) that link parents' WFC to children's emotional well-being. While most existing studies use a single mediator to explain the association between parental WFC and children's psychological well-being ([Hess & Pollmann-Schult, 2020](#); [Mustillo et al., 2021](#); [Vieira et al., 2018](#)), we extend the existing literature by identifying multiple pathways underlying the association between mothers' and fathers' WFC and children's emotional well-being. Our findings indicate that mothers' WFC is negatively associated with children's emotional well-being, partly because of increased harmful parenting behaviors (negative communication and conflict). Although parental warmth is considered a major mediator between mothers' WFC and children's negative outcomes ([Lim, 2024](#)), our study has shown that

reductions in parental warmth do not translate into negative impacts on children's emotional well-being.

Second, we extend the prior literature by including fathers in the analysis and examining whether mothers' or fathers' WFC has a greater impact on children's emotional well-being. Prior studies mostly focused on the association between mothers' WFC and children's mental health outcomes, and only a limited number of studies considered both mothers and fathers (Dinh et al., 2017; Van den Eynde et al., 2020; Yucel & Latshaw, 2021). Although a prior study suggested that the association between fathers' WFC and children's mental health (mother-reported) was similar for mothers (Dinh et al., 2017), we find a stronger association between mothers' WFC, child-reported parenting behaviors, and child-reported emotional well-being. In addition, the mediation analyses show that fathers' negative communication, conflict, and parental warmth do not have a significant indirect effect, unlike mothers' negative parenting behaviors. These findings underscore the need to understand and support mothers who experience high levels of WFC to improve children's emotional well-being.

Lastly, in previous research, children's emotional problems and parenting behaviors are mostly measured using only parents' reports (Cooklin, Westrupp, et al., 2016; Dinh et al., 2017; Van den Eynde et al., 2020), thus omitting children's perspectives on their emotional problems and how their parents behave toward them. In this study, we take a child-centered approach to understanding how parental WFC influences children's emotional problems by analyzing children's reports about their emotional well-being and how parents interact with them. Thus, we bring children's perspectives into the emerging literature on the impact of parental WFC. This approach has wide methodological significance in that it potentially minimizes reporter bias and endogeneity.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations. Our study has certain limitations. For instance, it focuses on a single country context, Germany, where German mothers in our sample were predominantly part-time employees (about 66% of mothers in our sample work less than 35 hours per week). As part-time employment is common for mothers in Germany, results may not be generalizable to countries where full-time employment among mothers is more common. In addition, the data in the pairfam survey are limited to four waves that provide information on WFC, child-reported emotional problems, and child-reported parenting behaviors. Thus, we were unable to investigate the stability of WFC effects on children's emotional well-being over longer periods of their development.

Another limitation is our inability to identify the causal effects of parental WFC on children's emotional well-being. Parental WFC may increase due to increasing work-related stress, but it can also increase due to increasing parenting stress resulting from children's emotional problems. Thus, there is a possible bi-directional association between parental WFC and emotional well-being. However, previous studies using longitudinal data suggested a causal link between WFC and children's mental health outcomes (Dinh et al., 2017; Leach et al., 2021). Hence, our results align closely with the findings of previous studies in terms of the plausible causal direction (Bilodeau et al., 2023).

In our analyses, parenting behavior mediators account for between 20% and 22% of the association between parental WFC and children's emotional problems. This finding suggests that there are mediators that play a role in linking parental WFC to child emotional problems. Parental mental health problems (Dinh et al., 2017; Leach et al., 2021), marital dissatisfaction between parents (Dinh et al., 2017), or constraints on time available for children due to WFC (Li & Guo, 2023) are potential pathways that were not addressed in this study.

Future Research. Future research could explore the effects of parental WFC on children's emotional well-being and the mediating roles of parenting behaviors in terms of how they vary in different country contexts. As we have noted, cultural expectations of intensive mothering might influence individuals' capacity to balance between work and family and children's expectations of parenting behaviors. Longitudinal studies with extended follow-up periods assessing parental WFC, child-reported emotional problems, and child-reported parenting behaviors may provide further evidence on the long-term impact of persistent WFC on parenting behaviors and child emotional problems. Additional research in these areas will allow for a more rigorous assessment of the causal effects of WFC on children's emotional problems. Other potential mechanisms, for example, parental mental health problems, parents' time spent with children, marital conflict, divorce, and mistreatment of children, should be investigated.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study contributes to our understanding of the relationship between parental WFC and child emotional problems by examining the mediating roles of parenting behaviors. Our findings provide further evidence that high levels of parental WFC are associated with negative parenting behaviors, which in turn potentially contribute to children's emotional

problems. As workplaces evolve to prioritize workers' well-being, our findings point to the need for proactive policy measures to reduce workers' WFC and to support parents under high stress due to WFC, thereby mitigating adverse effects on children's emotional well-being.

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Ethical Considerations

The German Family Panel (pairfam) is de-identified. Respondents' names are never kept with their survey answers, so it is impossible for researchers to identify individuals. Therefore, no personal data was processed.

Author contributions

Misun Lim conceptualized the study, prepared the data, conducted formal analysis, developed the methodology, interpreted results, and played a leading role in manuscript composition. Matthias Pollmann-Schult contributed to study conceptualization, data preparation, formal analysis, methodology development, results interpretation, and manuscript writing. Jianghong Li contributed to study conceptualization, results interpretation, and manuscript writing. All authors participated in drafting and revising the manuscript, have reviewed and approved this version for publication, and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Data Availability Statement

The data underlying this article are available in the German Family Panel (pairfam) at <https://doi.org/10.4232/pairfam.5678.11.0.0> (Brüderl et al., 2024).

Note

1. Baumrind (1971, 1991) suggests a typology with four parenting styles: (1) authoritative, (2) authoritarian, (3) permissive/indulgent, and (4) neglectful.

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