



PARENTS' JUST-IN-TIME WORK SCHEDULES ARE NOT WORKING FOR BABIES

JANUARY 2021



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

INTRODUCTION


Infants and toddlers thrive in environments of stability with trusted caregivers, but irregular and unpredictable work schedules mean many families lack the ability to ensure such an environment for their young children. Such schedules, referred to as “just-in-time scheduling practices,” create an environment of uncertainty and stress for both the caregiver(s) and children in a family. Often accompanied by material hardship, unpredictable work schedules can affect and possibly undermine key ingredients of healthy development: economic security, interactions with trusted caregivers, parental or caregiver well-being, and routines young children can count on. Research points to consequences for emotional and behavioral health as well as cognitive and language development in young children. Centering equitable work practices in public policy will allow families to better meet basic needs as well as cultivate and strengthen the relationships with their children—the foundation of their healthy developments.

The first three years of a child’s life are the foundation for all later development, as young children discover the world through experiences with their parents and other caregivers. A young child’s early relationships, especially with parents, shape the architecture of the developing brain.ⁱ These relationships require time, care, and consistency—conditions that unpredictable work schedules often thwart.

Unstable and unpredictable work schedules often give rise to household economic insecurity, dramatic increases in hunger, and other hardships.ⁱⁱ The constant juggling of work schedules and family needs can lead to depression and stress in parents and caregivers and a home environment of increased instability and chaos. When parents and caregivers are subject to just-in-time

work schedules, their children likely will be affected as well. The instability and unpredictability that parents or other caregivers experience may spill over at home and negatively affect children by upsetting family routines, disrupting developmental child care time, and introducing strain and stress into everyday interactions that would, in an ideal setting, be warm and supportive.

Further, there are stark racial and gender disparities when looking at who is most likely to be impacted by unpredictable work schedules.ⁱⁱⁱ Research confirms that many of the low-wage, hourly jobs in which unpredictable schedules are found, are jobs that women are more likely to hold and that women of color are at especially high risk of being subjected to unpredictable work schedules.



Given the negative developmental outcomes linked to unpredictable schedules as well as impacts on a family’s economic security and family and caregiver well-being, these unfair and unpredictable scheduling practices sustain the known intergenerational consequences of poverty — and ultimately racism — in our society.

LIFE UPENDED HAS DEVELOPMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Across the United States, life upended by unpredictable work schedules is the reality for many families. A recent study found that nearly three in four workers with low wages experience last minute shift changes^v inevitably impacting their families as well. Beyond that, two in three workers with low wages have less than two-weeks' notice of their schedules^v and one in three workers receive their schedules with less than one-week notice^{vi}, impeding their ability to plan for things like child care, paying rent, and other necessary household expenses.

Many of these families have young children: Two in five infants and toddlers live in a household with low income.^{vii} Moreover, children of color are more likely to grow up in a household with low income — nearly 60 percent of Black and American Indian children, and more than 55 percent of Hispanic children live in families with low income as compared to less than 30 percent of White children.^{viii} As previously noted, families living with low income are also likely to have unpredictable work schedules. Over a third of young children in households with low income have a parent who receives less than a week's notice of their schedule^x — less than a week to make sure child care is in place, plan travel logistics, and rearrange everyday routines.

Exposure to such unstable work schedules has intergenerational consequences. Research has confirmed the potential negative effects of working nonstandard schedules on adults' psychological, physical, and sociological well-being.^x Due in great part to the unpredictable nature of just-in-time scheduling, parents or other caregivers may have elevated stress levels and depression, starting a chain reaction with their children's development. Young children are affected by their caregiver's well-being as well as the disruption to routines, exposure to unstable child care arrangements, and potentially lack of opportunities for the everyday interactions that help form strong neural connections.

Research indicates developmental concerns in young children whose lives are consistently upended by inconsistent parental work schedules, including:

Heightened anxiety and external behaviors.^{xi}

Routinely unpredictable and unstable schedules have consequences for children's lives including destabilizing their routines and care arrangements. These conditions increase children's anxiety and tendency to act out. Young children in households where caregivers are working unpredictable schedules are also more likely to experience sadness, worry, and anger, which can be exhibited through arguing, tantrums, and disobedience.^{xii} These children are also more likely to have multiple caregivers, which can add stress.

Negative impacts on cognitive and language development,

especially during the first year of a child's life. One study found that mothers working nonstandard schedules beginning in the first year of their baby's life may affect later child cognitive outcomes and the trajectory of development thereafter.^{xiii} Research suggests that this might also be due, in part, to lower quality and inconsistent nature of child care arrangements available to families working nonstandard schedules.

Increased levels of stress and depression for caregivers.

Workers with unstable schedules experience higher rates of turnover in their job, which can negatively impact a family's ability to meet their basic needs, psychological well-being, and overall health.^{xiv} The challenge of finding and keeping reliable, quality child care can intensify levels of stress at home as well as children's and caregivers' well-being are inextricably linked.



WHO ARE THE WORKERS WITH UNPREDICTABLE SCHEDULES?

- Nationally, 20 percent of the workforce is subject to nonstandard schedules.
- The rate is even higher among workers with low income and workers in low-wage hourly jobs—between 28 and 50 percent.
- Women are more likely than men to work nonstandard hours with unpredictable schedules, especially women living with low income.
- Workers of color, especially women of color, are 10 to 20 percent more likely to experience unpredictable scheduling.
- Nearly 30 percent of mothers with low income with a child under six work nonstandard hours, with half of those mothers working an irregular nonstandard schedule.
- Nearly half of Hispanic children, and more than one-third of all young children living in households with low income have a parent who receives their work schedule less than one week in advance.

THE INTERSECTION OF INSTABILITY AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

While the instability created by just-in-time work schedules affects all family members, very young children and especially infants and toddlers are acutely impacted by their environments in a way that makes them particularly sensitive to stressors in their day-to-day life that can impede their development. Children thrive when predictable, responsive care and routines provide the trust and safety that frees them to play, explore, and learn. When we consider what infants and toddlers need to flourish, the risks posed by irregular, unpredictable parental work schedules become clear.

Relationships: Young children experience their world as an environment of relationships, and these relationships affect virtually all aspects of their development.^{xv} The quality and stability of a child's human relationships in the early years lay the foundation for a wide range of later developmental outcomes – self-confidence and sound mental health, motivation to learn, achievement in school and later in life, the ability to control aggressive impulses and resolve conflicts in

nonviolent ways, knowing the difference between right and wrong, having the capacity to develop and sustain casual friendships and intimate relationships, and ultimately to be a successful parent oneself.^{xvi} For parents, creating trusting relationships takes unhurried time for everyday interactions, establishing routines and rituals, and responsive caregiving attuned to baby's needs. Unpredictable schedules and the accompanying stressors disrupt the ability to devote time to these essential tasks.

Routines and Rituals: Routines, or activities that happen at almost the same time every day in almost the same way, help babies' development by fostering self-control, confidence, and social skills. They also support learning and language development, which happen through everyday moments. Rituals are special actions that help young children navigate stressful parts of routines or other aspects of everyday life.^{xvii} When parents have irregular work schedules, it may be more difficult to establish the routines that contribute to positive development, and abrupt changes in schedules or caregivers may make transitions even more stressful.

Parent or Caregiver Well-being: Very young children are closely attuned to the well-being of their parents or other caregivers. Studies have found that children's cognitive and emotional outcomes are significantly affected by a caregiver's depressive symptoms.^{xviii} In particular, evidence suggests that maternal depression may compromise the relationship between the caregiver and the child – a foundational aspect of a child's healthy development. The importance of caregiver mental health to early development explains the impact that higher levels of stress and depression have on young children in families with unpredictable work schedules.





UNPREDICTABLE WORK SCHEDULES AND CHILD CARE

Working parents face insufficient options for quality, affordable child care and are further constrained when working jobs with unpredictable schedules. These parents are often forced to cobble together multiple child care options which can strain the parents and deprive the child of a consistent caregiver, a key feature of quality child care. Ironically, parents with young children—the same parents struggling to find quality, affordable child care—are also the parents more likely to work nonstandard work schedules.

Working parents with unpredictable schedules may have great difficulties in juggling work and family demands, especially when they struggle to find child care. Coupling fair work schedule policies with greater investments in child care supports such as the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) will allow for greater family stability and overall healthier child development.

UNPREDICTABLE SCHEDULES AFFECT FAMILIES' ECONOMIC WELL-BEING

Unpredictable work schedules also affect another key ingredient for positive early development: economic security. When scheduling practices are volatile, so is income. When hours are uncertain and are not guaranteed, neither is steady income. Income matters in early child development. Economic deprivation at an early age can have a profound impact on the developmental foundations that affect later learning capacity.

Economic volatility leads both to material hardships, which can deprive young children of nutrition and shelter essential to their well-being, and to the increased stress that, as discussed previously, affects emotional health. Material hardship is common among hourly workers at the nation's largest retail and food-service firms—industries that rely on their employees' just-in-time schedules. According to a recent study, one in six of these workers experienced housing hardship.^{xxix} Another 42 percent of the workers who had shifts cancelled reported hunger hardship as compared with 29 percent of workers who did not have cancelled shifts.^{xx} For those workers with children, this is particularly alarming. Research has confirmed that material hardship has a negative association with the cognitive and social-emotional development of children.^{xxi}

Families have been particularly susceptible to unpredictable schedules, and therefore unpredictable income, during COVID-19. Throughout the pandemic, workers in jobs with low wages have been the most likely to be laid off. Those workers that were able to retain hours or return

to their jobs also experienced higher instances of their hours being cut, resulting in more instability during the pandemic.^{xxii} These changes to caregivers' income and employment status have had implications for their children. One recent study found that parents who lost both their job and their income during the COVID-19 pandemic had more negative interactions with their children.^{xxiii}

The same study found that interventions providing income for families without employment due to COVID-19 were effective in improving interactions between parents and children. Further, it was found that parental job and income losses are strongly associated with parents' depressive symptoms, stress, and diminished sense of hope.

When caregivers struggle to meet their family's basic needs, especially while juggling last-minute logistics and chaotic family life, it causes additional stress. Such chronic stress has lasting, long-term effects, with decades of research showing that exposure to chronic stress during early childhood—particularly infancy—can negatively affect brain and biological development as well as social-emotional development.^{xxiv}

The relationship between quality of care in the early years and child development is well established: just-in-time scheduling practices are likely to have consequences for children's development and safety and to contribute to the intergenerational transmission of poverty and hardship.



POLICY SOLUTIONS

The majority of young children growing up today are raised in households in which all of the adults are able to work, do work.^{xxv} Although working parents are the norm, family-friendly workforce policies have struggled to keep up with the needs of today's families. Millions of people in America are working in sectors vital to the economy but are paid low wages and are subject to just-in-time scheduling practices. These scheduling practices make it next to impossible for working people to meet their own responsibilities and equally critical roles outside of their jobs, including that of caregiving to our future workers, innovators, and leaders.

While businesses reap the benefits of dynamic scheduling practices as families struggle, predictable work schedules could benefit families and businesses alike. A growing body of research has found that increasing predictability, stability, and flexibility of worker schedules can lead to higher productivity and increased sales for retail stores—a solution benefiting the worker and the economy.^{xxvi}

To ensure a strong economy, national policies should recognize the needs of workers who also are raising families. Legislation such as The Schedules that Work Act, first introduced in 2014, would address many of the problems caused by just-in-time scheduling practices while fostering the equity and stability that families need. Policies aimed at building strong family-first work supports for workers with unpredictable schedules must:

- **Protect workers requesting a schedule change for various reasons including child care:**

All employees of companies with more than 15 workers would have the right to request changes in their schedules without fear of retaliation. Employers would be required to consider and respond to all schedule requests. Further, when a worker's request is made due to a health condition, child or elder care, a second job, continued education, or job training, the employer would be required to grant the request unless a legitimate business reason precludes it.

- **Incentivize predictable and stable schedules:**

Employees in food service, cleaning, hospitality, warehouse, and retail occupations—as well as other occupations designated by the Secretary of Labor—would have advance notice of their work schedules and receive additional pay when they are put “on-call” without any guarantee that work will be available, are sent home early on snow days, are scheduled for a “split shift”, or receive schedule changes to shifts are cancelled with less than two weeks' notice.

- **Guarantee workers the right to rest between shifts:**

Work schedules that require workers to work the closing shift one day and the opening day the next are especially disruptive, often leaving workers without enough time to travel home and rest between shifts. Employers would be prohibited from requiring employees to work with less than 11 hours of rest between shifts and would be required to pay employees time and a half if they voluntarily agree to work with less than 11 hours to rest.

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ABOUT ZERO TO THREE

ZERO TO THREE works to ensure all infants and toddlers benefit from the family and community connections critical to their well-being and development. Since 1977, the organization has advanced the proven power of nurturing relationships by transforming the science of early childhood into helpful resources, practical tools and responsive policies for millions of parents, professionals, and policymakers.

ENDNOTES

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