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# Factors that Affect Attachment between the Employed Mother and the Child, Infancy to Two Years

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## Abstract

To explore a mother's feeling of attachment and the affects her working status on the attachment relationship with her child, upon ethical clearance from the institutional ethics committee, in-depth interviews of nine participants were conducted. Mothers enrolled were those who resumed the employment within the first year of post-delivery and were having a child up to two years of age. Results revealed that maternal employment itself does not enhance or deteriorate attachment with the child. It is combinations of factors that revolve around it impact on their bond. Overall, maternal integration or the balance of the dual roles of employment and motherhood is critical in the development of a sound and secure attachment between the employed mother and the child.

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*Keywords:* Human development, working mother, secure attachment , infant;

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## 1. Introduction

Motherhood is a 24 hour job and a responsibility requiring energy. However, many women also choose to undertake another job (a salaried one). Employment requires time and energy and even at times it leads to mental stress. The dual-earner concept emerged in the west in the 1970s, and by the 21st century the concept of the working mother has become a norm (Christensen, Johnson and Turner, 2011). However, as compared to the west, in Pakistan the working mother is a more recent phenomena. Hence, this study provided an opportunity to explore attachment factors indigenous to Pakistani culture. The concept of the working mother definitely has its root, whether it is for

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career enhancement or is need based. Women in modern society have joined the workforce for a variety of reasons such as they are more educated and they work for their personal fulfillment, life expectancy has increased and youthfulness has been extended, the numbers of single-parent homes have increased (Hock, 1980) the traditional gender-role responsibilities have been modified or they are working to have good life (Rattani, 2012). Regardless of the reasons, it is a common phenomenon to see mothers working in all sectors of the work force. Thus it's not really a matter of "whether mothers should work mothers do work" in this modern day life (Schwartz, 1983). During the earlier months of infancy known as the "symbiotic phase, the need for the mother is absolute" (Honig, 2002). A limited access to the mother could cause a breach in secure attachment as this bond is dependent upon the physical presence of the mother attaining to the fulfillment of infant's needs including feeding, bathing, changing, and playing. Through these daily practices a bond is developed between the mother and the infant. The physical presence of the mother paves the way for emotional attachment between the child and mother. This bond could be secure, insecure or even ranging in-between. A working woman may not have proper time to spend with her infant in order to fulfil these needs. This way physical detachment from the mother could affect mother child relationships and their attachment may be impacted. Hence, daily separations and the stresses that an infant experiences in conjunction with mother's employment may cause detrimental effects to the attachment bond (Shuster, 1993). That is, if the mother is not constantly available, then this could disrupt the attachment formed between the mother and infant. According to the World Health Organization, a child wants to be attached to a mother figure, especially when under stress (Vaughn, Gove & Egeland, 1980). This relationship derives comfort from the attachment figure and protests when the attachment figure is not available. This study aimed to explore mothers' perspectives of attachment between mother and the child, factors that lead to secure attachment, and the factors related to employment affecting the attachment relationship between the mother and the child. The research question was what are the factors that affect the attachment between the employed mother and the child, infancy-two years?

## **2. Methodology**

Employing a qualitative research approach; exploratory research design, was used in this study. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethical Review Committee, Aga Khan University. A mother with a child up to the age of two years, and she must have resumed work within the first year post-delivery, was the criteria for inclusion in the study. Through non-probability, purposive sampling technique eleven mothers were invited to participate in the study, all of whom agreed. However, two participants backed out right before the interview time; one was shifting abroad and the other informed that her schedule did not allow room for an interview. Through a consent form participants were briefed about the study i.e. right to refuse to answer any interview question, withdraw from the study. They were also communicated that no monetary compensation would be given of their time, and they were given assurance that their individual identity would be kept confidential and secured. Prior to actual data collection the interview guide was pilot tested to make any modification in case it was required. Altogether, nine participants shared their experiences through their in-depth interviews; participants were not restricted to answering in English since they might have been more comfortable in expressing themselves in the native language of Pakistan, Urdu. These interviews were conducted in privacy so that the participants were not influenced by individuals in the same premises and their confidentiality was also maintained. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and translated by the primary researcher. The audio tapes of the interviews were not accessible to anyone other than the researchers. Simultaneous to audio taping the researcher was documenting the field notes and reflective journal to enrich the data. Each participant was assigned a code which was used for recording and analysis of the data. The interview transcripts, field notes and reflective journal were analyzed and based on the analysis, under research objectives categories were extracted from the data set. Analysis of narratives was a cyclical process in which data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously. Participant transcriptions were emailed to each participant for a final check in order to maintain the validity of the study.

## **3. Findings**

A demographic profile of the participants is presented in Table I. All the participants were young adult professionals having undergraduate as a minimum qualification.

### 3.1 Participants' Perspectives of Attachment between the Mother and Child

Initially, the working mother's perspective of attachment was explored. This was done in conjunction with the mother-child relationship. A full-time working mother expressed that mother child relationship is natural and could not be separated provided that mother accepts and is allowed to perform this role. She said:

*"This is a connection created by Allah paak [nature]. Even when I have a problem, my mother calls and asks whether everything is okay..this is a natural connection..[between] the mother and child specially."*  
Code # M5

Another respondent said:

*"No matter how much apart you are, nothing will happen. The relationship will remain strong... my sister-in-law tells me that all day long I take care of him [the child], but whenever he sees his ama [mother], he becomes hers. So yes, there is a bond, a natural bond."*  
Code # M2

However, one participant mentioned that the mother figure does not necessarily embody the mother only, and attachment can be built by anyone who steps into the shoes of the mother figure. She stated her view on attachment with the mother figure in the following way:

*"...when the child is born, they don't know mummy, daddy, they respond to love and care they get..and let's say I wasn't there from day one and whoever stepped into my shoes.. it could have been my husband, my mom or whoever...the bond would have developed with that person. So it's not necessarily that I am the mom, it's my prerogative she needs to have the bond with me.The bond will come if I am the mother figure..if I am giving the kind of love and attention and care to her. If I am around her and am responsive to what she needs. If she can trust me with herself..then I think that bond develops."*  
Code # M9

The idea stated above is similar to the contents in John Bowlby's attachment theory, in which the mother does not automatically become the central attachment figure but it could be anyone who provides care giving over a period of time (Bowlby, 2004). Generally the participants were in a view that the bond does not grow spontaneously, but the mother has to put in an effort to nourish the bond with her child. Without a conscious attempt to nurture it, this bond could become weaker and create an insecure relationship between the mother and the child.

### 3.2 Factors that Lead to a Secure Attachment

Participants' perspectives of factors that lead to secure attachment between the mother and child, infancy-two years are presented with their narrations.

#### 3.2.1 Spending quality time together

Majority of the working mothers (eighty-nine percent) agreed that spending quality time together enhances the mother-child attachment. The following participant's excerpt gives an idea of what quality time means and how this time is utilized.

*"..to enhance the experience in the available time. You could be sitting with your child 24 hours a day and you might not have that bond versus having it in the short amount of time that you spend. Have an engagement..through play or an activity..make that time matter and count so she knows whatever time she spent, was meaningful..you did something that mattered to her."*

Code # M9

The working mother should put in an effort to spend quality time with her child. At times, this could mean sacrificing personal hobbies or compromising on other responsibilities; however, enhancing the time spent with your child only creates a more fruitful bond. Mothers emphasized that the happiness of the child in activities meaningful to him should be the key in quality time. Also, children up to the age of two years require physical presence of the mother and spending this time together valuably creates a stronger bond. According to the working mothers, this is something that could be difficult but utterly important in securing an attachment bond.

### 3.2.2 Mother being problem solver

Seventy-eight percent of the working mothers felt that playing the role of the problem solver paved way for a strong attachment bond with the child. These mothers felt that this role was instinctively incorporated into the role of the mother; that is, the part of the problem solving was automatically an ingredient of motherhood. The following excerpts shed light on this notion:

*“If she has a problem, she says mama..if she wakes up [at night] and sees that I am not on the bed, the first thing she will say is mama and she would say baba [father], mama, trying to ask the father where the mother is..her eyes are opened when I go and as soon as she sees me, she closes her eyes because she is trying to sleep. She just wants that comfort.”*

Code # M1

Solving the basic physical needs of hunger, diaper change and bathing also aid in the attachment relationship. Babies and even infants display a sense of discomfort when they are experiencing a desire for fulfillment of the physical needs. Nearly all the participants felt that sensing this discomfort and responding to it immediately leads to a satisfied child who can trust the mother to resolve such issues.

### 3.2.3 Breastfeeding

More than half of the mothers (sixty-seven percent) felt that breastfeeding was a source of securing attachment with the child from birth. One of the respondents said:

*“I think it’s their right. And there is a strong bonding that takes place.. by the nature of God. When you feed a child through the bottle, those feelings are not there. Anyone can bottle feed. There is a reason why Allah Paak [God]has this breastfeeding in the process. And whatever Allah Paak has given naturally, you should adhere to that. And definitely there is a bond. Why the bonding is there I cannot explain that but it’s there.”*

Code # M5

Another participant reported that:

*“..I am very pro-breastfeeding..my pediatrician was very pro-breastfeeding and whatever I had read about it made me think that the child deserves—it’s his/her right to be breastfed. Religiously as well as clinically..And for me it’s a very big source of attachment with my child..She depends on me. And it gives me a conscious effort to be close with her as much as I can. I think it’s important and it’s a natural way and a fantastic way to be close to your child apart from the fact that you’re giving a lot of nutrition to your child.”*

Code # M6

According to participants’ view breastfeeding in addition to be a source of attachment is also a natural right of the child and should be respected. It also serves as comfort for the child, a haven in which he may feel relaxed as he is embraced and nourished by the mother. However, twenty-three percent of the participant mothers felt that the act of breastfeeding alone cannot aid in attachment. A mother must take care of herself in order to provide nutritious milk (Through a healthy diet, regular exercise and maintaining her own personality and feelings) to create a bond with the

child. These aspects are transferred through the breast milk and into the child. Therefore, a powerful connection between the mother and child is created when there is minimal disturbance in the transference process through the act of breastfeeding.

### 3.2.4 Developing a routine

About half of the participants (forty-five percent) felt that putting a child on a regular routine enhances attachment security. A routine lets the child get into the habit of organizing daily events--this way he is not flustered by things that come his way but welcomes them with ease and understanding. It makes it easier for the mother to allot time slots for the fulfillment of basic needs such as hunger, sleep, bathing, etc. as well as play time/social activities with the child. A respondents reported that:

*“Time management is very important..how to balance your own life and your child’s and you should give your child priority and time. Having a child does not mean that your life stops. Both should go hand in hand. Sometimes I do take out time for television..at that time my child is playing independently with her blocks..but that only comes when the child knows that my mother was playing with me earlier and now it’s her time..of course you have other housework to do..you can’t neglect everything at one time when you have a child..she’s in a routine [the child]..she knows this will happen.”*

Code # M1

A routine helps to organize, to balance one’s life so that the working mother is able to fulfill her own daily responsibilities of work and home management in the midst of raising a child. It is important for the mother to take out time for herself other than her employment. Independent slots for herself serve as fuel, a refresher that relaxes her in order for her to actively play her role as a working mother.

### 3.2.5 Mother as protector from physical and emotional abuse

Thirty-four percent of the participants felt that from the child’s perspective, the mother figure served as the ultimate protector, a shield to protect from any kind of harm, physical or emotional. This attack on the child could range from teasing by external family members to scolding and hitting from non-maternal caregivers. The following participant excerpts portray this notion:

*“Nothing will happen. He feels relaxed with me, secured with me. He knows nobody can do anything. Nobody can tease him..around others at home, it is common for him ..to even receive scolding. But around me, he knows he will get one thing - love. He knows I will hold him in my lap and love him; he knows I will not tease him or anything..with mama he knows it will be different.”*

Code # M2

One of the participants describing her experience said:

*“My child knows I will not hit her. Sometimes my husband gets upset with her, but she comes running to me..My husband said that I am spoiling her. If anybody hits her at home or even scolds her in a loving manner, then she comes crying to me. She knows mama will not hit me.”*

Code # M4

### 3.2.6 Giving awareness to the child

Thirty-four percent of participants felt that it was important to let the child know that the mother goes to work; that is, the child should be aware of this instead of leaving him in the clouds as to the whereabouts of the mother. Keeping the child in the loop and providing him with an understanding gives him respect as well as it satisfies his curiosity and helps him accept the mother’s routine. This in turn leads to a secure attachment between the mother and child. Participants also felt that giving awareness of morals and values also paves way for a solid attachment

pattern. By doing this, the mother is sharing long-lasting concept of humanity and ethics. This teaching can be done through examples of self, verbal coaching and storytelling. The participants felt that it was crucial that the mother delivers these concepts because there is a strong attachment in doing so.

One of the participants said:

*“[Attachment] is when you’re actually giving something - not literally, but like values and systems. And when you are not there, the kids can replicate these things from you.”*

*Code # M10*

### 3.2.7 Non-maternal caretaker stability

A couple of mothers stressed the importance of non-maternal caretaker stability - that is, consistency in the person(s) assigned to take care of the child while the mother is at work. Up to the age of two years, children are quite vulnerable and take time to develop a relationship with the non-maternal caregiver especially a person they are exposed to for the first time. It would be comforting for the child as well as the mother if the caretaker remained static. An uncomfortable child might hesitate to voluntarily stay with the often changing caretakers and could create a commotion and rebel from being babysat. This could even interfere with the trust bond the child has with the mother, hence disturbing the attachment relationship.

### 3.2.8 Bringing together secure attachment

The key to enhancing the attachment relationship with the child is sensitive and responsive parenting. Sensitivity involves the mother’s ability to understand the infants “acts and vocalizations as communicative signals to indicate needs and wants” and responsiveness encompasses the degree to which the mother responds “contingently and appropriately to the infant’s signals” (Vaughn, Gove, & Egeland, 1980). This involves understanding a child through his behavior and cues and consequently making proper judgments in relation to these needs. For instance, if a child is feeling ill, then a sensitive mother would be able to tell through his facial expressions or change in body temperature and be able to respond immediately by taking him to the doctor/giving over-the-counter medication. Responsive caregivers are able to curb their own schedule to provide maximum benefit in favor of the child.

Sensitive and responsive parenting creates a trust bond in the child with the mother. The child is able to confidently turn to the mother for help and expect a satisfactory response in return.

## 3.3 Factors related to employment affecting attachment relationship between the mother and child

### 3.3.1 Flexible employer

Fifty-six percent of the participants feel that a flexible employer aids in the attachment relationship with the child. If this flexibility of work was not given then resumption of job would not have been possible. One of the participants said:

*“I am full-time but it’s flexible. When the baby was 4 months I did not have to follow a very strict schedule unless there is a meeting..I can go late in the morning or I can work from home.. My line manager, who is also female, has two young children..she understands, she empathizes what I go through. So she’s very supportive in how I can manage my work as long as I am doing my work..it makes them happy..it could get very difficult [if I didn’t have this kind of personality as my manager]..it is about how much you empathize with your workers..so it helps when you have somebody who understands because your issues are just so basic sometimes.”*

*Code # M6*



Another participant who works as a teacher, requested her employer to grant her flexible hours initially as she had resumed work one month post-delivery. She felt that this was too soon to begin, but since she was dropping her older daughter in the same school each day, she thought that she might as well give it a try. In the beginning, she commented that she didn't even officially sign in/out because there were even times in which she would have to rush back home to tend to her newborn's needs. In this way, the flexible work hours provided this mother with the opportunity to adjust back to the school routine in a comfortable manner, at her own pace Code # M5. A flexible employer provides opportunity in the mother-child relationship to build a sense of security--the mother does not drastically cut physical ties with the child as soon as employment is resumed, but gradually mixes in employment with motherhood.

### 3.3.2 *Quality of non-maternal care*

In terms of the quality of non-maternal care during the hours of employment, the working mother is happy with the non-maternal care if her child is comfortable. When both mother-child are at ease, this tends to build a strong attachment between them because both have an understanding, an agreement that a particular form of childcare is working. However, if one or the other is not satisfied then this tends to create a breach in attachment security due to stressful feelings on either end. The stressed mother may constantly be worried whether her child is comfortable and the stressed child may develop trust issues with the mother for placing him in a non-comfort zone. Family support - joint-family, biological parents, or even one's husband, seems to be the most common form of child care in this study. According to the participants of the study, in non-maternal care provided by close family, there is a sense of ownership, feeling of responsibility and an urge to voluntarily care for one's own blood. Many participants felt that this was the ideal form of non-maternal care and one in which the child and mother both felt comfortable. In Pakistani culture, the paternal/maternal sides feel it is also their responsibility to support the mother in child rearing. In this way, the working mother may be at ease knowing that the child is in high quality non-maternal care. Returning to work could be easier for the mother as she knows she has stable social support. Participants felt that children learn much on ethics, moral, values and culture from one's own family rather than non-family member(s).

On-site daycare facilities was also observed to be an advantage for those who may not have family support or those who feel that the mother-child relationship would become stronger if the child is close to the mother. This way the mother is able to take part in the child's daily needs as much as she is able to. For some mothers, taking care of the child personally in the initial period after resuming work is crucial since the bond is still forming in this period. This gives the child a sense of security that the mother has not abandoned him, but is around to fulfill his needs.

### 3.3.3 *Part-time versus full-time employment*

Participants' responses varied about the working status; full time vs part-time. One of the respondents said:

*"I think working full-time with home responsibilities and a child..I would not be able to do it much..would not be able to balance. So in my set-up [working part-time] it is doable. It is actually enjoyable because I work limited hours. If I were working full-time then I would have the stress on the back of my mind—I have to go home I have to do this I have to play with [my child]. Right now I have the entire day so my child has her pace and I have my own pace..I can focus on her diet, her growth, her learning..[learning] cannot be formal [at this age]..so eyes and ears and leaves are an on-going thing..while eating, playing..the reason I don't want to work full-time is so that I can get this pace of working with her according to her flexibility as well."*

*Code # M1*

As a full-time working mother, one mother felt that she has to stretch herself between work and motherhood, but she does adjust herself to spend time with her infant. However, at times this mother feels stressed. ,



She shared:

*“-- stretch yourself a bit to be with them [children] and manage your own ambitions..that physically you're doing yourself a lot of harm..especially when you're working you need to take care of yourself..give yourself relaxation time..because if you're feeling good then the emotions get transferred..biologically too—if you're healthy then you'll be nursing your child much better.”*

Code # M6

Participants had a view that it is important to have supportive family; in-laws and husband as they all impact on her physical and emotional status which is required for her to fulfil her various responsibilities; at work and at home. Both sets of mothers mentioned that employed motherhood embodies compromises and even sacrifices. The part-time moms felt that this had to be done in connection with the number of hours dedicated to work. The full-time moms associated this more with their social life, sleep, and time spent with the child. There are studies that lean towards part-time employment as more favorable (Barglow, Vaughn, & Molitor 1987, Belsky, & Braungart, 1991, Sagi, Koren, Gini, Ziv, & Joels, 2002), yet it has been contradicted (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 2000). However, in the current study, whether the mother is full-time or part-time, both the groups agreed that giving the child quality time is important. Quality time plays a critical role in maintaining the mother-child bond after resuming employment. According to John Bowlby's attachment theory, the quality of interaction between the mother and child is more important than the amount of time spent together (Bowlby, 2004). There is not a black or white answer whether the attachment is affected by the number of working hours. In both cases, it is all a matter of acceptance of the life a mother selects for herself as a working mother. Once the woman has accepted the decision of working then she decides to tackle it and it becomes easier to lead the life of either the part-time or full-time working mother.

### 3.3.4 Work -related stress

Forty-five percent of the participants felt that work-related stress, at times, did affect the attachment relationship with their child. The following describes their thoughts:

One mother who works from home prefers to tend to her employment at night for 3-4 hours when her daughter is asleep. Initially this was not a problem, but when her daughter started waking up frequently at night once the mother herself retired to bed, then the lack of sleep (of the mother) started to become a bit problematic.

*“..I have to be up with her and that becomes stressful for me. Although the child is not to be blamed for because this is by choice that I am working, it is not forced. So yes, I do sometimes lose my temper a bit in the morning..why can't I sleep..but I have to correct myself that it's not her fault and she's a baby she will wake up. It's normal..the times that I have sleepless nights..when she sleeps in the afternoon I sleep then..that's how I manage it.”*

Code # M1

Another participant also felt that employment may interfere with the attachment relationship if the mother is tired, but also depends on the attitude that the mother brings home from work. The following describe her feelings:

*“Even if you're not tired it depends on the frame of mind you have when you come home. So when you're happy, it reflects. If you're tired or unhappy it reflects. So if your work is very stressful, then it impacts your children.. I have peaks and lows. When my work is at a peak it is tough... And that's when the guilt seeps in because I am so tired and I know I am stretching it mentally and physically I displace my anger on my child I know it is not right...”*

Code # M6

Acknowledging the support from the family one of the respondents said:

*“Sometimes I feel overburdened with work and I get tired when I go home in the evenings. Then I tell my husband to take care of the baby while I tend to other things..my baby is also constantly crying at the time..then I am not able to give the kind of time that the baby seeks..and I do feel that I am not giving my*

*baby time. Then sometimes I leave my chores in the middle and attend my baby..it's life. There are up's and down's. Then it just depends on how you manage things as a mother. My husband also cooperates with me. Working together eliminates problems."*

Code # M4

For some participants, it was about balancing the home, the child and work which made things a bit stressful. The period in which work was resumed deemed to be a bit stressful for certain mothers because they may not have known how to balance skillfully, and in this initial act of balancing, the child would suffer because of the lack of attention. As responded by a participant:

*"..it was difficult to manage things initially—home, child, office. How should I do it was a question that was constantly there. But now, thank goodness everything's good."*

Code # M4

#### 4. Discussion and conclusion

Working mothers felt that both her roles, work and motherhood are important. Her work defines her as an individual, provides her the opportunity to rise professionally and gives a boost in her self-esteem. Motherhood involves emerging oneself in fulfilling the needs of the offspring. Fulfillment of these roles derives from providing comfort and physical as well as emotional security to the child. The challenge arises when there is an imbalance in maternal integration; the mother's attitude towards her dual roles of motherhood and employment the degree to which she is satisfied and balancing these roles. A positive partnership of the two roles has been associated with a secure attachment between the mother and the child (Etaugh, Williams and Carlson, 1996). A secure mother-child relationship possesses feelings of joy and cheerfulness. Once the relationship is in such a position, it would be easier for the child as well as the mother to depart in the hours of employment. Such satisfactory feelings enable the child to face life independent of the mother because he understands and accepts that the mother has to attend to other things not as a substitute to motherhood, but alongside it. He understands that the mother will be there for him if need be and spend time with him once she is home. In such a relationship, the child understands that he is the priority of his mother and nothing can alter that.

##### 4.1 Tables

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Participants

Serial No.	Participant Code	Profession/Designation	Education Background	Age Of Mother	Monthly Family Income **(Pakistani Rupees)
1	M1	Public Health Assistant Consultant	Mph	27	> 100,000
2	M2	Senior Staff Cardio Technologist	Mba	30	*
3	M4	Senior Clinic Receptionist	Ba	30	40,000-45,000
4	M5	School Teacher	Ma	35	90,000-100,000
5	M6	Learning Advisor Retail, Multinational Company	Mba	28	>100,000
6	M7	Ceo Of Steel Trading Company; Freelance Writer	Ma, Msc	39	>100,000
7	M8	Executive Assistant To A Foreign Consular General	Mba	32	>100,000
8	M9	Barrister, Civil Litigator, Corporate Advisor; Partner In Law Firm	Bba, Mba, Llb, Bar-At-Law	32	>100,000
9	M10	Trainer, Consultant, Manager Of Self- Owned Business	Mba	29	>100,000

**Table 1:** A demographic profile of participant code, profession, education background, age and monthly family income

\* As the participant was not comfortable sharing this information her autonomy was respected

\*\*1 US Dollar = 96.60 Pakistani Rupee (at the time of interview).

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