



THE GLOBE AND MAIL

CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER ■ FOUNDED 1844 ■ GLOBEANDMAIL.COM ■ TUESDAY, JULY 29, 2003

Mom's career suffers when child is disabled: report

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Globe and Mail Update

The working lives of mothers suffer the most when a child is disabled, Statistics Canada said Tuesday.

More than half (54 per cent) of Canadian families who have a disabled child said the career of at least one family member has suffered as a result, data from a survey conducted by Statscan between September 2001 and January 2002 found.

Mothers were the most affected, the agency said – either by having to reduce their work hours or change their shifts to accommodate caring for the disabled child.

Of the 84,000 children whose family employment situation changed because of the child's impairment, seven in 10 mothers said they had directly experienced difficulties because of their child's situation.

In 14 per cent of cases, both the mother and father were affected, while in 11 per cent of cases the fathers alone felt the impact.

“Not surprisingly, the more severe the child's disability, the greater the impact on the family situation,” the agency said.

The family lives of 155,000 Canadian disabled children, between the ages of five to 14, were examined for the survey. About 57 per cent of the children surveyed were considered to have mild or moderate disabilities, while the remaining 43 per cent were characterized as having severe to very severe limitations.

The study found that among families whose children had mild disabilities, 40 per cent experienced an impact on their employment situation. That number jumped to 73 per cent for families whose children were more severely disabled.

The survey showed that of the children with mild disabilities, 24 per cent of parents worked fewer hours, but in those with severe disabilities, 47 per cent were forced to reduce the time they spent at work.

Parents also made other sacrifices, including turning down a job or promotion to take care of their child, or even quitting their jobs entirely.

The study also looked at the needs of parents and their disabled children.

Many parents reported that they felt they weren't getting the help they needed to cope with their child's condition.

“In total, about one-half those children with disabilities requiring specialized aids did not have all the aids that they needed,” the agency said.

Of the 155,000 children with disabilities, about 52,000 had parents who said because of their child's condition they needed help with housework, family responsibilities, and time off for personal activities.

Cost was the predominant reason why parents did not receive all the help they needed with housework, family responsibilities and personal time off.

The study was funded by Human Resources Development Canada.

With a report from Canadian Press