FEATURED SCHOLAR

Each month the Work and Family Researchers Network spotlights the contributions of a scholar who is making significant advances in understanding work-family concerns. We are delighted to present the following interview with **Lisa Stewart**

Lisa Stewart, PhD

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Experts Panel Link: https://wfrn.org/expert/lisa-stewart/

WFRN – *How did you first get introduced to work-family issues and become a researcher in this field?*

Lisa - My journey into work-family research began during my master's studies in Canada in 1998. While interning with a government department focused on workforce dynamics, I encountered data that revealed a striking pattern: men and women in Canada had relatively equal career trajectories and earnings until women reached childbearing age. At this point, many women reduced their paid work hours or left the workforce entirely to care for young children, creating a significant shift in their career paths.

This initial exposure to gender disparities in the workforce sparked my interest. Still, during my doctoral studies, I encountered a related, yet often overlooked, dimension of work-family challenges. Working at a research center specializing in family support for children's mental health, I heard firsthand accounts from parents, predominantly mothers, of children with mental health disabilities. These parents faced workplace stigma, shame, and even retaliation due to perceptions that they were less committed to their jobs because of their children's exceptional care needs. Many experienced career setbacks, social isolation at work, and, in some cases, loss of employment.

What struck me most was the lack of attention given to the intersection of work-family issues and disability. This gap in research and policy consideration compelled me to build my work off my mentors by teasing out how parenting a child with a mental health disability differs from raising children of typical development and engaging in eldercare when work and family are involved.

This experience highlighted how work-family issues extend beyond general gender disparities in the workforce, encompassing complex interactions between employment, caregiving responsibilities, and societal perceptions of caretaking and disability. It underscored the need for interdisciplinary approaches that consider not only labor economics and gender studies but also disability rights, mental health, and organizational psychology to fully address the multifaceted nature of work-family balance in diverse contexts.

WFRN - *How did you first get involved with the WFRN? What do you value most about the organization?*

Lisa – My introduction to the Work and Family Researchers Network (WFRN) came about in 2010 through a collaborative project at Portland State University. At the time, my mentors and I were tasked with developing a one-page brief on the supports and challenges faced by working parents of children with mental health or behavioral

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conditions for the Center on Work and Family at Boston College. This project highlighted the complex interplay between work environments, family dynamics, and healthcare systems - a perfect example of an issue requiring diverse expertise to understand and address fully.

The WFRN immediately stood out as a unique platform that brings together scholars from various disciplines. In today's academic landscape, where specialization is often the norm, WFRN offers a refreshing counterpoint. It's a space where economists can engage with psychologists, sociologists can collaborate with management experts, and public health researchers can find common ground with policy analysts.

What I value most about the organization is its commitment to fostering these interdisciplinary connections. WFRN recognizes that the intricate issues surrounding work and family life must fit neatly into a single academic box. Instead, they require a holistic approach that draws on multiple perspectives and methodologies.

I also value the organization's focus on helping early-career scholars. I was nominated as a WFRN Fellow (2012), and it helped me by providing guidance and a supportive community as I learned the ropes of my first tenure-line position.

WFRN – Tell us about your current research, what are you studying?

Lisa – My current work focuses on developing and piloting an intervention targeting workplace disclosure decision-making for parents of children with mental health needs. This intervention stems from over 20 years of research out of Portland State University focused on the challenges and supports parents of children with mental health needs encounter in the workplace. I have funding from the CDC/NIOSH to develop an online tool and resources. I am working with a national advisory group of parents who have helped me adapt a decision aid from medical science into the workplace. We are currently preparing to pilot-test the tool to see if it helps reduce decisional conflict around disclosure.

I am also writing a book with Claudia Sellmaier. Although it will not be released until 2026, we are deep into the work, which focuses on bringing together 20 years of research on work-family-community and disability research to highlight the key issues impacting families who care for a child with a mental health disability. The book offers insights from theoretical frameworks, analyzes cross-country social policies, and examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We include practical information and resources at the end of each chapter.

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Professor Lisa Stewart has been working in and researching mental health regionally and nationally. | Photo by Brent Dundore-Arias

WFRN – What are your big findings? Did you make any unexpected discoveries?

Lisa – The initial research phase has revealed several crucial insights:

First, we confirmed that parents face significant conflicts when considering whether to disclose their child's mental health status at work. This finding echoes similar patterns observed in other populations facing unclear decision outcomes. We term this concern “disclosure-related decisional conflict,” making clear that many parents who have children with disabilities feel tensions on the extent to which they should reveal or discuss these challenges with supervisors and coworkers.

Second, we discovered a correlation between disclosure-related decisional conflict and parental stress levels. This connection suggests a potential pathway linking workplace disclosure decisions to employee health outcomes, highlighting the far-reaching implications of these choices.

Third, our national needs assessment corroborated earlier qualitative studies on family decision-making patterns. This consistency enhances the generalizability and reliability of our findings, providing a solid foundation for further research and policy development.

And fourth, by applying the Ottawa Decision Support Framework (ODSF), we pinpointed the sources of decisional conflict for working parents of children with mental health needs. Typically used in medical settings, this framework has proved invaluable in identifying the types of support needed to reduce stress and maintain workforce

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engagement. Also embedded into this work is the CDC/NIOSH Total Worker Health framework, which views environmental stressors as a key variable that can be mitigated by targeting individual and structural mechanisms within the workplace.

WFRN – Your research indicates that parents who have children with disabilities face particular challenges in the workplace. What types of policies or practices could be of greatest help to this group of workers?

Lisa – You are correct; our needs assessment revealed high levels of decisional conflict among this group of parents. Because these parents struggle to predict the consequences of disclosure they need greater understandings of potential outcomes. These parents commonly feel uninformed about their choices. They would benefit from a clearer understanding of available options when facing a crisis due to changes in their child's mental health needs. They also need support from supervisors and coworkers regarding their children's mental health needs and how that maps on to work concerns (such as remote work and schedule flexibilities).

WFRN – How can your research guide the formulation of social policy?

Lisa – Results could inform the development of paid family leave policies that acknowledge the complex needs of employees with exceptional care responsibilities. A central theme from the study showcased parents' financial concerns when considering making a disclosure at work. Many cited the unpaid nature of FMLA as a driver of concern regarding disclosure. While many gains have been made to develop state-paid leave programs at the state level, they remain the exception and not the rule.

WFRN – Does your research inform workplace practice? How?

Lisa – My research has practical applications for improving workplace policies and practices. Working with parents of children with mental health disabilities I develop strategies to support workers who face difficult choices due to their child's mental illness. These approaches can be adapted to assist other employees dealing with similar challenges, whether due to their health conditions or other caregiving duties. My future efforts will work to expand these strategies to other vulnerable workers.

WFRN – Can you tell me how your research might help individuals or families develop effective personal strategies?

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Lisa – The myChoice Disclosure Decision Aid can help people make informed decisions about their work situation. It does this by:

1. Showing the pros and cons of different choices
2. Assisting users to understand how much personal information they want to share at work
3. Creating a personalized action plan based on:
    a. The user's current needs
    b. Their work environment
    c. Their personal preferences

The goal is to guide users through their options in a way that fits their unique circumstances.

You can visit the myChoice workplace disclosure decision aid and resources through the project website: www.mychoiceparents.com

We invite anyone who has a child with mental health needs or conditions to try the app and tell us what you think! If you are interested in being part of the alpha test of the app and resources, are a parent or caregiver of a child or young adult with mental health needs you can follow this link to sign up https://bit.ly/mychoiceparents. We are also recruiting supervisors and human resource managers to try the app and share their thoughts on managerial and organizational issues we might want to consider. If you or someone you know is interested in participating in this exciting project, you can sign up by clicking on https://bit.ly/mychoicesupervisors.

ABOUT THE WFRN

The Work and Family Researchers Network's mission is to facilitate virtual and face-to-face interaction among academic work and family researchers from a broad range of fields as well as engage the next generation of work and family scholars. The WFRN welcomes the participation of policy makers and workplace practitioners as it seeks to promote knowledge and understanding of work and family issues among the community of global stakeholders.

To learn more about the WFRN, please visit our website WFRN.ORG. To become a member, please click on this link https://wfrn.org/become-a-member/.

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