

Happy families?

Atypical work and its influence on family life

Ivana La Valle, Sue Arthur, Christine Millward, James Scott with Marion Clayden



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Ivana La Valle and **Sue Arthur** are Research Directors, both at the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), London, **Christine Millward** is Senior Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, **James Scott** is Research Assistant and **Marion Clayden** is Research Interviewer, both at NatCen.

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Introduction

The globalisation of the economy and a 24-7 society mean that a growing number of parents have to work at times which have traditionally been regarded as 'family times', such as evenings and weekends. Little is known about the effect that work at 'atypical' times might have on family life. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation funded the current study to explore this crucial issue, which was carried out by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen).

The context

In 1989 Moss Kanter noted that:

Traditional assumptions about the separation of work life and personal life are no longer viable, but we have not yet created a coherent set of new values and beliefs to take their place. (Moss Kanter, 1989)

More than a decade later the consequences of the absence of rules and values to regulate our relationship to work is nowhere more apparent than when looking at parents who try to reconcile a paid job with childcare responsibilities. The impact of parental employment on children's well-being, the possible link between increasing working hours and marriage break-ups, the lack of affordable and good quality childcare, and the disappearance of informal support networks parents have traditionally relied on, are just some examples of topics which have recently attracted much attention in the media, as well as in academic and policy circles (for example, Belsky, 1988; Brannen et al, 1994; Lewis and Lewis, 1996; Daycare Trust, 1997; Bryson et al, 1999; Dex, 1999; La Valle et al, 2000; Ermisch and Francesconi, 2001).

It has been argued that in Britain, up to the mid-1990s, a fast growth in maternal employment was not facilitated by appropriate economic and social policies, as has been the case in some other European countries (for example, Hewitt, 1993; Ferri and Smith, 1996; Lewis and Lewis, 1996; Brannen et al, 1997). During this period the primary emphasis was on social policy measures which incurred little cost to the state, and on employment policies that relied mainly on voluntary action rather than regulation (Bradshaw et al, 1996; Moss, 1996). The consequences of the state's reluctance to intervene in an area which was largely considered as 'private' are well documented. The careers of many women are profoundly affected by motherhood, as many mothers' employment options are closely linked to the availability of informal childcare, their ability to purchase formal childcare, their bargaining position in their job and more generally in the labour market, and their partner's willingness and ability to share childcare responsibilities (Brannen et al, 1994; Evetts, 1994; Dex and Joshi, 1996; Callender et al, 1997; La Valle et al, 2000).

Under the current Labour government the reconciliation of paid employment and home life has been given higher priority than in the past (for example, DfEE, 2000; DTI, 2000). The implementation of the EU Working Time Directive has introduced legislation to reduce excessively long hours and compliance with the EU Part-Time Work Directive aims to reduce the disincentive to working part time. The 1999 Employment Relations Act introduced rights to parental leave, while the 2001 Employment Bill has introduced enhanced maternity leave entitlement, paid paternity leave and leave for adoptive parents. In 2000 the government also launched the Work-Life Balance Campaign to encourage employers to

become more family friendly. More recently, following the recommendations of the Work and Parents Taskforce, proposals for flexible work arrangements have also been announced by the government (DTI, 2001; Work and Parents Taskforce, 2001). Changes have also been introduced to make formal childcare facilities accessible to more parents. The government's National Childcare Strategy (DfEE, 1998) aims to increase the level and quality of childcare to promote children's well-being and development, and to offer more parents the opportunity to work and enhance their employability. As part of this strategy financial support for pre-school and out-of-school childcare provision has increased and the Working Families' Tax Credit has been introduced, extending the financial support for childcare expenses brought in by Family Credit.

It is probably still too early to assess the impact of some of the policies and initiatives outlined above, but in judging their effectiveness one key issue needs to be considered: the globalisation of the economy and the 24-7 society mean that parents have to operate in an increasingly flexible and deregulated labour market, where work at atypical times is rapidly becoming the norm, rather than the exception (Dex, 1999; Hogarth et al, 2001). For example, the success of the National Childcare Strategy should be judged not simply in terms of how many new childcare places are created, but also whether these places are available when parents need them; for parents who work atypical hours this might mean, for example, childcare provision at the weekend. Similarly, policies and campaigns aimed at encouraging employers to become more family friendly cannot simply be judged in terms of if and how much parental leave is available, but the extent to which parents' needs become an important aspect of the 'new employment deal'.

Work at atypical times has long been a reality for some parents. For example, a study in the early 1990s found that mothers with children under the age of five with a part-time job were more likely than other workers to work evenings and nights, so their partners could look after the children while they were at work (Brannen et al, 1994). Similarly, another study based on data collected in the early 1990s found that a large proportion of fathers worked outside 'normal hours', that is, evenings, nights and weekends. However, the economic and organisational changes mentioned earlier mean that a growing number of people,

including parents, are affected by work at atypical times, as an EU review of working time policies found in the late 1990s (Bettio et al, 1998).

Understanding the impact that parental atypical work has on families is important not only to assess the effectiveness of existing policy initiatives, but also to inform future developments and to give an indication of how current policies might need to change to be more responsive to the needs of different groups of parents. A key question raised by the 24-7 society is if and to what extent work at typical times might have a negative impact on different aspects of family life, and limit the amount and quality of time families are able to spend together. Understanding the impact that work at atypical times might have on families requires a mapping of the range of the different atypical work arrangements, of what are the 'push' and 'pull' factors that might lead to these arrangements, and of how parents react to employers' demand for work at atypical times. It was to address these key questions that the current study was carried out.

Aims of the study

The overall aim of the study was to assess the effect that parental work at atypical times might have on family life. More specifically the research gathered data from parents to explore:

- how many parents work at atypical times, the frequency and nature of work at these times and the combination of (atypical and typical) work patterns in dual-parent households;
- if some socioeconomic factors are more or less likely to be associated with work at atypical times;
- the reasons why parents have atypical work patterns;
- the link between atypical work and childcare arrangements within and outside the family;
- parents' views on 'family time' and the factors which limit or facilitate the kind of family activities and times that are important to them;
- any differences in the quantity and quality of 'overlapping' family time between parents with atypical work patterns and those with more standard work arrangements;
- parents' views on how existing and future family policies might help the family life of parents who work atypical hours.

Work at atypical times

There is no agreed definition of what constitutes atypical working hours, particularly as work outside the standard Monday to Friday, 9 to 5 week has become increasingly common. In this study work at atypical times was defined as work at the weekend and work during the week before 8.30am and after 5.30pm. While, as noted above, work at these times is becoming increasingly common, these are nevertheless times when many families would expect to have the opportunity to be together.

How frequently parents work at atypical times was a central issue for the research, as the extent of the impact of atypical work on family life would be expected to be related to the amount of work at these times. It was also considered important to distinguish between different atypical times (that is, early mornings, evenings, weekends, and so on), as certain working patterns are likely to have more impact on family life and overlapping family time than others. For example, weekends and evenings may be expected to be more common overlapping family times than late afternoons and early mornings, when many parents (and particularly many fathers) are already at work or travelling to or from work. The regularity and predictability of work at atypical times was another dimension explored by the study, as again these would need to be considered in assessing the impact of atypical work on family life. For example, regular and 'traditional' shift patterns required in some occupations are very different from less formal arrangements for work at atypical times to meet deadlines or to cope with unforeseen emergencies. The number of working hours is another dimension that needs to be considered as long working hours will inevitably involve work at atypical times (although their regularity and predictability might vary considerably).

While in the research design atypical hours were defined as work outside the standard Monday to Friday week, in assessing its impact on family life, other important dimensions (for example, frequency, predictability, regularity, amount) are considered as far as possible, and within the limits imposed by the two research methodologies used (see below). For example, in the survey, definitions of atypical hours and frequency were very precise (for example,

whether one worked 8.30pm-6.30am several times a week, several times a month or less often). However, in the survey we could not explore other dimensions of atypical work, for example, how predictable these hours were and the number of atypical hours one worked, while it was usually possible to explore all these dimensions in the in-depth interviews.

Outline of methodology

The sample for the current study was selected from a survey of parents in England and Wales, which was carried out in 1999 by NatCen, on behalf of the then Department for Education and Employment (now known as the Department for Education and Skills) (La Valle et al, 2000). For that study, a random sample of parents with children aged 0-14 was selected from Child Benefit records, and face-to-face interviews were carried out with the parent who had main or shared responsibility for childcare decisions (in the overwhelming majority of cases this was the mother). The survey achieved an 80% response rate and provided comprehensive information on over 5,000 households' childcare arrangements and employment circumstances.

The sample for the current investigation was drawn from households where (both) parents were in paid employment in 1999 and were still in paid work when re-contacted for the current study¹. The sample used for this study is representative of working families with children aged 16 or under, but it excludes first-time parents with children under the age of two.

The data collection was conducted in two stages: a telephone survey of over 1,000 working parents and 40 follow-up in-depth interviews. The findings from the quantitative and the qualitative stages are reported together in a thematic way throughout this report, so that one set of findings is used to help explain the other. We have usually explained at the beginning of a section whether the material is drawn from the survey or the qualitative interviews. Where percentages are given, these relate to survey findings; where there are no percentages but data are presented in terms of groups, types of respondents, or broad associations, these are drawn from the qualitative interviews.

Telephone survey

Since one of the aims of the study was to compare the impact that work has on parents with atypical and more standard hours, the sample for the survey was selected in a way that would allow such comparison, and would also allow the exploration of combinations of (typical and atypical) work arrangements in dual-parent families. It was also important for the survey to include a sufficient number of lone parents to assess how atypical work might affect their family life. The sample was therefore designed to achieve an adequate number of cases in the following groups:

1. Couples where both parents work standard hours
2. Couples where one parent works standard hours and the other atypical hours
3. Couples where both parents work atypical hours
4. Lone parents who work standard hours
5. Lone parents who work atypical hours.

For sampling purposes respondents were classified as having atypical hours if at the time of the 1999 survey they:

- sometimes/usually worked shifts, or
- usually worked on Saturdays, or
- sometimes/usually worked on Sundays, or
- worked more than 40 hours a week.

Computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI) were conducted between January and March 2001 with 61% of the issued sample. The survey achieved a 72% response rate, once ineligibles (8%) and 'disconnected' (those whose telephones numbers were no longer in use) (7%) were excluded.

The analysis included in the report is based on the 1,165 mothers who responded to the survey, and the information that 966 of them who were living with a partner provided on their partner's employment circumstances².

The survey data have been weighted to correct for differential selection probability and non-response. The percentages presented in the tables have been calculated from the weighted

responding bases. Weighted bases and base descriptions are shown at the bottom of the tables.

Due to rounding, percentage figures may not add up to exactly 100% but may total between 98 and 102%. A note is included when percentages add up to more than 100 because respondents could choose more than one reply. The following symbols have been used in the tables:

[] To indicate a percentage based on fewer than 100 unweighted cases.

* To indicate a percentage value of less than 0.5%.

– To indicate a percentage value of zero.

Table 1.1 gives an indication of the confidence intervals to apply to different sizes of percentage results for different sample sizes within this report. These 95% confidence levels are the levels within which one can be 95% confident that the true answer will lie; in other words, there is only a one in 20 chance that the true answer will lie outside this range. To take an example from the table, for a percentage result of 50% on a sample of 1,000, there is a 95% chance that the true result will lie within $\pm 3\%$, that is, between 47% and 53%. These confidence limits assume a simple random sample and no adjustment has been made for the effects of clustering. Although such an adjustment would increase the confidence limits slightly, they would not differ notably from those shown in the table, and would in most cases still round to the same number of percentage points.

Table 1.1: Confidence intervals

Sample size	Approximate 95% confidence limits for a percentage result of:		
	10% or 90% +/-	30% or 70% +/-	50% +/-
50	8	13	14
100	6	9	10
250	4	6	6
500	3	4	4
1,000	2	3	3

In-depth interviews

Between June and August 2001 follow-up qualitative interviews were conducted with 40 parents from the survey sample. These explored in more depth some of the findings emerging from the survey data, and more complex issues which could not be covered in a structured telephone interview. In the in-depth interviews the views and experiences of fathers were also explored, something which was not possible to do in the telephone survey.

The sample for the in-depth interviews was selected to reflect the key characteristics of the research population, focusing mainly (but not exclusively) on parents who worked atypical hours. The following shows the profile of the achieved qualitative sample:

- 24 mothers and 16 fathers;
- 10 lone mothers and 30 couples;
- a variety of working arrangements, including different combinations of typical and atypical arrangements in dual-parent families;
- a spread across broad socioeconomic groups and occupations;
- parents' qualification levels: 10 respondents had qualifications at degree level, the remainder were below degree level or had no qualifications;
- households with children in different age groups: 12 respondents had children under the age of five, for 22 respondents their youngest child was aged between five and 11, and six respondents only had dependant children aged 12 or over;
- different childcare arrangements within and outside the family;
- different geographical areas in England, including metropolitan areas in the North East, Midlands and Yorkshire; towns and villages in the South East, North East and Yorkshire and Humberside.

Interviews lasted between one and one-and-a-half hours and a payment of £15 was given to respondents. The majority of interviews were conducted with one parent only, but in a few cases both partners contributed; while this had not been the initial intention of the research, it was done where both partners were keen to do so, and provided valuable data because of generating two sets of views.

Any names used in quotations have been changed to preserve confidentiality. Quotes have been attributed by giving the respondent's sex, their occupation and the extent of the work they do at atypical times. This latter classification has been done through an assessment of work at atypical times, where 'substantial' is work that adds up to around 10 hours a week or more regularly done at atypical times; 'limited' is less than this amount.

Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim to allow detailed analysis, which was conducted using Framework, a content analysis technique developed by NatCen.

Report outline

In the next chapter we present some of the survey results on the proportion of parents who work outside the standard Monday to Friday week. The nature, frequency and regularity of work at atypical times is then explored in more depth.

In Chapter 3 we focus on some key research questions, namely: why do parents work at atypical times? Do they have a choice in terms of which hours they work and what factors influence this choice?

In Chapter 4 we explore the relationship between atypical work and family circumstances, by looking at which family characteristics (for example, family structure, children's age) are more closely associated with atypical work. In this chapter we also investigate parenting roles in families with different working arrangements.

Chapter 5 looks at parents' attitudes towards use of time, how and why parents think about and prioritise different times of the day or week, and choose to balance their time between work and out-of-work.

Chapter 6 addresses the key research question: what influence does atypical work have on different aspects of family life? We look first at the extent to which atypical work might limit specific family activities; we then explore the impact of work on family life more generally and how satisfied parents are with the time they are able to spend with their children and with their partner. We then unpack the different dimensions

of atypical work and look at how these might impact differently on various aspects of family life.

In Chapter 7 we present parents' views on the kind of policies that would help parents to reconcile family and paid employment. This issue is explored in particular, but not exclusively, in relation to atypical work.

In the final chapter we highlight the main research results and their policy implications.

Notes

- ¹ On both occasions parents were classified as being in paid employment if they worked eight or more hours a week.
- ² Twenty-six fathers took part in the survey, but they were excluded from the analysis. In most cases their views and circumstances would have needed to be analysed separately from those of mothers, but the group was not large enough to do so.

Families' work patterns

In this chapter we first present the overall results on parental work patterns and, in particular, we look at if and how frequently mothers and fathers work outside the standard Monday to Friday week. The nature, frequency and regularity of work at atypical times is then explored in more depth in the final part of the chapter.

Overall results

In the telephone survey respondents were asked a series of questions about their and their partner's work patterns, including:

- the number of hours worked in a typical week (including paid or unpaid overtime);
- if and how often they worked early morning (6am to 8.30am), late afternoon (5.30pm to 8.30pm), evening/night (8.30pm to 6am), at the weekend and shifts;
- if they were ever required to be on call outside their normal working hours.

The survey questions asked about the hours parents were actually at work and did not cover travel time to and from work.

The results show that work outside the standard Monday to Friday week was widespread among parents in the sample. Predictably it was more common among fathers, not a surprising result given that half of them worked over 40 hours a week (Table 2.1).

- A substantial minority of employed mothers and the majority of fathers worked early mornings, with many parents doing these hours on a regular basis (21% of mothers and

41% of fathers worked these hours several times a week).

- Late afternoon work was slightly more common, with 25% of mothers and 45% of fathers working after 5.30pm several times a week.
- Predictably evening/night work was less common, but was still reported by a substantial minority of working parents and fathers in particular; 46% worked after 8.30pm and 17% did this several times a week. Twenty-seven per cent of mothers worked after 8.30pm, with 14% doing so several times a week.

As shown in Table 2.1, 30% of fathers worked over 48 hours a week. Very long hours were particularly common among fathers in professional and managerial positions, with 40% working over 48 hours a week, compared with 14% of other non-manual and 26% of manual workers.

Many parents also reported weekend and shift work (see Table 2.2); for example, 38% of mothers and 54% of fathers worked on Saturday at least once a month. While fathers were more likely than mothers to work on Sundays (with the respective figures being 31% and 26% who reported doing this once a month or more frequently), the gap was not as large as for other atypical times. A similar pattern was found in relation to shift work, reported by 26% of mothers and 31% of fathers. However, fathers were considerably more likely than mothers to be required to be on call outside normal working hours (36% and 18% respectively).

The combination of the frequency of Saturday and Sunday work was explored further, as regular work on both of these days might be expected to

Table 2.1: Employed parents' working hours (%)

	Employed mothers	Employed fathers
<i>Weekly working hours</i>		
1-29	51	2
30-40	37	48
41-48	7	20
49-59	3	18
60 and over	3	12
<i>Early morning work (6am-8.30am)</i>		
Several times a week	21	41
Several times a month	8	17
Less often	4	6
Never	67	36
<i>Late afternoon work (5.30pm-8.30pm)</i>		
Several times a week	25	45
Several times a month	14	20
Less often	11	8
Never	50	27
<i>Evening/night work (8.30pm-6am)</i>		
Several times a week	14	17
Several times a month	7	17
Less often	6	12
Never	74	55
<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>1,165</i>	<i>966</i>

Base: all mothers.

have a greater impact on family life than work on just one of these days. In considering these results, however, it should be noted that the survey did not ask about the amount of work done on Saturdays and Sundays, and this might vary considerably from a full day's work to a few hours, as the results of the in-depth interviews later will show. The results in Table 2.3 show that a very small group of parents (4% of mothers and 6% of fathers) worked every Saturday and Sunday. Around 1 in 10 worked on both these days every 2-3 weeks, and 10% of mothers and 15% of fathers worked less often on both of these days. While 45% of mothers never worked on both Saturdays and Sundays, the equivalent figure for fathers was 25%.

As discussed in Chapter 1, previous research of parents' work at atypical hours had found that part-time employed mothers were particularly likely to work at atypical times, so their partners could look after the children while they were at work (Brannen et al, 1994). As discussed later, while the current research found evidence of shift

Table 2.2: Weekend and shift working, and availability outside normal working hours (%)

	Employed mothers	Employed fathers
<i>Saturday working</i>		
Every week	13	19
Every 2-3 weeks	16	22
Once a month	9	13
Less often	15	18
Never	48	27
<i>Sunday working</i>		
Every week	7	8
Every 2-3 weeks	12	14
Once a month	7	9
Less often	10	17
Never	64	53
<i>Shift working</i>		
Usually/often	19	23
Sometimes	7	8
Never	75	69
<i>On call outside normal working hours</i>		
Usually/often	7	16
Sometimes	11	20
Never	82	66
<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>1,165</i>	<i>966</i>

Base: all mothers.

Table 2.3: Combination of frequency of Saturday and Sunday work (%)

	Employed mothers	Employed fathers
Every Sat and Sun	4	6
Every 2-3 Sat and Sun	10	11
Every 2-3 Sat and Sun once a month	4	5
Every 2-3 Sat and Sun less often	6	10
Never works both Sat and Sun	45	25
Other ^a	31	43
<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>1,165</i>	<i>966</i>

Base: all mothers.

Note: ^a This group includes parents with other combinations of Saturday and/or Sunday work, as well as those who did not work on these days.

parenting arrangements, atypical work was not found to be more common among mothers with part-time jobs. Forty-seven per cent of mothers with a part-time job (that is, less than 30 hours a week) frequently worked atypical hours, compared with 49% of mothers who worked 30-40 hours a week. Predictably the overwhelming majority of mothers who worked over 40 hours a week were classified as being atypical workers.

Parents' work patterns

Parents were divided into the three categories shown in Table 2.4, according to whether and how frequently they worked atypical hours. Respondents were classified as frequently working at atypical times if they worked either:

- early morning (6am-8.30am) or late afternoon (5.30pm-8.30pm) several times a week, or
- evening/night (8.30pm-6am) several times a month or more often, or
- on Saturday every three weeks or more often, or
- on Sunday every three weeks or more often.

The occasional atypical group included parents who did atypical hours less frequently, that is, worked:

- early morning or later afternoon less often than several times a week, or
- evening/night less often than several times a month, or
- less often than every three weekends.

The third group comprised parents who never worked atypical hours.

The results show that 53% of mothers and the majority of fathers (79%) frequently worked at

atypical times, with a minority being found in the occasional atypical work group. While 27% of mothers never worked atypical hours, a very small proportion of fathers were found in this category.

In most of the survey analysis presented in the rest of the report, parents who occasionally worked atypical hours and those who never worked at these times have been collapsed into a single category in order to have sufficient large bases for sub-group analysis, and for the analysis of different combinations of couples' work patterns. The box overleaf shows again the definition used in this analysis, and also the description of atypical hours used in the qualitative data analysis. Because of the different nature of qualitative data, it was not appropriate to classify parents as in the quantitative data analysis; in the former the terms used to describe atypical work are descriptive, rather than definitional (the only case when descriptions are used is in the quotes' attributions, as shown in the box overleaf).

As shown in Figure 2.1, using the combinations of couples' work patterns described earlier, the survey data show that among dual-parent families:

- the largest group (43%) included households where both parents frequently worked atypical hours;
- in 36% of families only the father frequently worked atypical hours;
- in 9% of households only the mother frequently worked atypical hours;
- in only 12% of households both parents did occasional or no atypical work.

Among lone parents, just over half (54%) frequently worked at atypical times.

Table 2.4: Parents' work patterns (%)

	Employed mothers	Employed fathers
Frequent atypical work	53	79
Occasional atypical work	20	14
No atypical work	27	7
<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>1,165</i>	<i>966</i>

Base: all mothers.

Different experiences of atypical work

Employment arrangements were explored in more depth in the qualitative interviews, which focused mainly on parents with atypical work patterns. The findings show that arrangements for work at atypical times varied a great deal in terms of their frequency, regularity and predictability.

In the analysis of the *telephone survey* data parents were divided into two groups according to their work patterns.

1. *Frequent atypical work*: this group included parents who worked *either*:
 - early morning (6am–8.30am) or late afternoon (5.30pm–8.30pm) several times a week, *or*
 - evening/night (8.30pm–6am) several times a month or more often, *or*
 - on Saturday every three weeks or more often, *or*
 - on Sunday every three weeks or more often.
2. *Occasional/no atypical work*: this group included parents who never worked atypical hours (that is, before 8.30am, after 5.30pm or weekends) or occasionally did these hours, that is, worked:
 - early morning or later afternoon less often than several times a week, *or*
 - evening/night less often than several times a month, *or*
 - less often than every three weekends.

Couples' work patterns were also combined into a single variable to show households where:

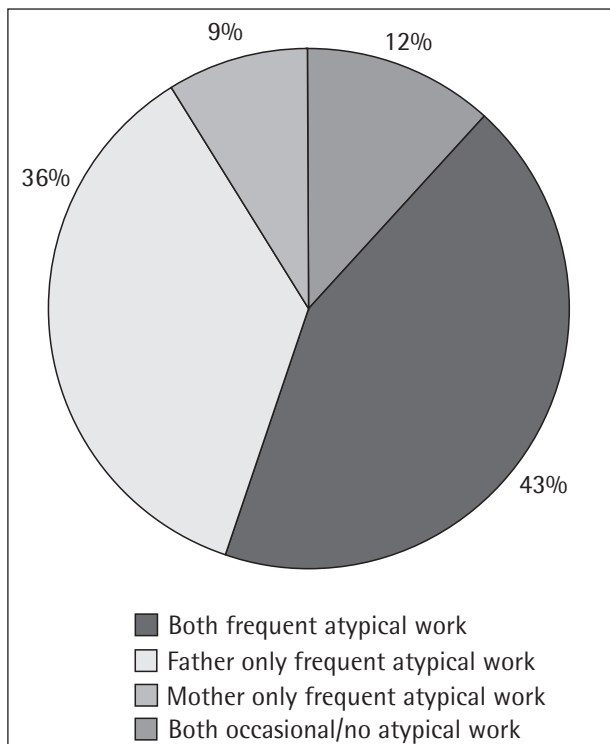
- the mother only frequently worked atypical hours (and the father did occasional or no atypical hours);
- the father only frequently worked atypical hours (and the mother did occasional or no atypical hours);
- both parents frequently worked atypical hours;
- both parents did occasional or no atypical hours.

In the quote attributions of the *in-depth interviews* two groups of parents are identified, those who did:

1. *substantial atypical work*: that is, around 10 hours a week or more regularly worked at the weekend or during the week before 8.30am or after 5.30pm;
2. *limited atypical work*: less than 10 hours a week worked at the weekend or during the week before 8.30am or after 5.30pm.

In all other cases, when presenting the qualitative data, the terms used to describe atypical work are *descriptive* rather than *definitional*.

Figure 2.1: Couples' combined work patterns



Base: all partnered mothers (weighted base: 966).

The in-depth interviews identified a group of parents who regularly worked atypical hours and who worked shifts (for example, early morning, night, twilight, and so on), usually alternated according to a predetermined rota. This group included parents in factory jobs, the service sector and in health, personal and emergency services. They tended to work full time, with the notable exception of those in the health sector, where in some cases part-time hours were negotiated usually by mothers after having their first child.

Shift allocation was generally arranged by managers, although, as discussed in Chapter 3, in some circumstances employees had some say in this process and could ask for specific shifts which suited their needs (for example, a midwife who asked to work only night shifts). The notice given by an employer about the shifts parents were required to work varied considerably. In some cases shifts were rotated according to a regular pattern, while, at the other extreme, the notice period could be very short (for example, a week or less). The former system was more

common in factories, while a short notice period was more likely to be a feature of jobs in health, personal and emergency services, and to a lesser extent, the service sector. Very short notice requests for emergency cover were also a feature of these occupations, but did not appear to happen very frequently.

Apart from shift workers, other parents who worked at atypical times were a very heterogeneous group; they ranged from those who occasionally worked atypical hours to those who did it on a daily basis. Furthermore, outside the standard Monday to Friday week, some parents' hours were more 'atypical' than others; for example, night and Sunday work could be said to be more atypical than early morning or late afternoon work.

The proportion and amount of work done at atypical times also varied considerably. For some parents atypical work meant working a limited amount of time at either side of the 8.30am-5.30pm (week) day, for example, starting work at 8am or finishing at 6pm; for these parents the overall proportion of work at atypical times was small. This was a feature of some white collar jobs, where parents had flexible arrangements (for example, start work early and finish early), or were in positions where some (albeit limited) extra, unpaid work was an expected, even if not formally required, part of the job. Childcare was an example of a sector where a limited amount of time outside the standard 9-5 day was required; again this was likely to be early morning or late afternoon. For example, the sample included a childminder who started work at 7.30am and a father who used to work in an after-school club till late afternoon. There were parents with very part-time jobs, who also worked a small number of atypical hours. For example, parents who worked in the sport and leisure industry (for example, a swimming instructor who regularly worked two hours on a Saturday morning) and in cleaning jobs, which tended to involve some early morning, late afternoon or evening (part-time) work.

At the other end of the spectrum, we find parents who worked a substantial amount of atypical hours, although when, and in some cases where, these hours were done varied considerably. Long working hours were a predominant, but by no means universal, feature of professional and managerial jobs, and long hours inevitably meant

work at atypical times. As discussed later, long and "crazy" hours (as they were described by a police officer) were generally accepted as part of a job, which required a high level of commitment and motivation, and were seen as necessary in order to progress in a career. This was a more predominant pattern among fathers than mothers, as mothers' working hours were often constrained by their childcare arrangements and responsibilities. While the nature of the work required some parents to work long (and therefore atypical) hours, as discussed later, professionals usually had considerable control over when, and in some cases where, the work was done, and this was particularly so for work which was over and above the contracted hours. So, for example, it was common among professional parents (for example, teachers, managers, chaplains) to take work home to do in the evening or at the weekend. Even those who did not take work home usually had a great deal of flexibility about when the 'extra' hours were done, and could arrange these around other commitments (for example, family). For example, a news media editor explained:

"It's an aggressive working hours culture ... and it depends on the work flow and what exactly I'm doing in my job, but I'll make up the time late at night ... so quite often I'll go back to the computer at 10 or 11 and work till 2 or 3 or 4 in the morning as necessary ... but I never work at the weekend ... weekend is a sacrosanct family time for me." (father, news media editor, substantial atypical hours)

Being required to travel (at atypical times) was another aspect of the work of some parents in this group, and there was generally not a great deal of flexibility around the timings and arrangements of work trips.

Finally, in considering issues around work-family balance, it must be noted that training and learning were an integral part of some parents' working life. Professional updating and training were required in some jobs and were not always undertaken during normal working hours. Some parents were also learning in order to change career or enhance their employability. In both cases the learning tended to be done in the parents' own time. This aspect of parents' working life was also impinging on family life, as much studying had to be done at times

traditionally reserved for the family (for example, in the evening, at the weekend and holidays).

Conclusion

The survey results have shown that work during hours and on days which have traditionally been considered as 'family times' was very common among parents, and among fathers in particular, with a majority frequently working at atypical times. Early mornings, late afternoons and Saturdays were the most common atypical working times. Among dual-parent families, the largest group included households where both parents frequently worked atypical times (just over half of lone mothers were also found in this category). In line with another recent large-scale survey, which looked at working hours after the introduction of the EU Working Time Directive (Hogarth et al, 2001), our survey also found that a substantial minority of fathers were working over the limit specified by the EU Directive, and long hours were particularly common among fathers in professional and managerial positions.

As well as being a large group, the qualitative data show that parents with atypical hours were also very heterogeneous and three sub-groups can be distinguished within this group. First, we find shift workers who regularly worked atypical hours and tended to be allocated shifts according to a predetermined rota, with notice periods varying considerably in different occupations. The second sub-group included parents for whom work at atypical times was infrequent or involved a small number of atypical hours. Some parents' atypical work was also confined to hours which were not generally regarded as very 'atypical'. The third sub-group included parents who, while not shift workers, did a substantial amount of atypical work, as the nature of their job required them to work over and above their contracted hours. However, unlike shift workers, work at atypical hours among this group did not generally follow a predetermined pattern, and parents had considerable flexibility over when (and sometimes where) this work was done, as we will see in the next chapter.

Reasons for atypical hours

In this chapter we focus on some key research questions: why do parents work at atypical times? Do they have a choice in terms of which hours they work and what factors influence this choice? We first compare the labour market position of parents who frequently work atypical hours with that of those who work at more standard times, and consider their bargaining position in the labour market and in their job. We then proceed to explore the complex interplay of factors which lead to work at atypical times.

Position in the labour market

The survey results do not show a clear link between atypical work and qualification and skill levels among mothers, while this link is more evident and consistent among fathers.

Mothers who frequently worked atypical hours were more likely than other mothers to have no qualifications (11% and 17% respectively). However, 17% of mothers from both groups were qualified at degree level or above. Variations in qualification levels were partly reflected in the

mothers' position in the labour market: mothers who frequently worked atypical hours were slightly more likely than others to be in manual occupations, and in professional or managerial positions, although differences are small (see Table 3.1). When looking at employment status we find that 12% of mothers with frequent atypical hours were self-employed, compared with 7% of other working mothers.

Differences in human capital and labour market position emerged more clearly among the respondents' partners. Fathers with frequent atypical hours were less likely than other fathers to be educated to degree level or above (26% compared with 39%). As shown in Table 3.1, they were also less likely than other fathers to be managers or professionals (41% and 48% respectively), and more likely to be in manual occupations (34% and 24% respectively). Twenty per cent of fathers who frequently worked atypical hours were self-employed, compared with 16% of other working fathers.

Qualification and occupational levels are only two of the complex interplay of factors which might lead to atypical work. Other important factors

Table 3.1: Parents' work patterns and socioeconomic group (%)

	Mothers		Fathers	
	Frequent atypical work	Occasional/ no atypical work	Frequent atypical work	Occasional no atypical work
Professional/managerial	20	18	41	48
Other non-manual	49	58	15	23
Manual	8	6	34	24
Other	23	19	10	6
<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>615</i>	<i>550</i>	<i>761</i>	<i>204</i>

Base: all mothers.

which might lead to atypical work are parents' bargaining position in their job and more generally in the labour market, specific requirements in a chosen career and the extent to which career choices need to be balanced with family and financial responsibilities. These are explored in the rest of the chapter.

Bargaining position: choice and control over hours

Choice in the labour market

The qualitative interviews reflected the considerable diversity among parents in terms of choice of job and control over working hours. For example, in some occupations, such as teaching and nursing, the high level of demand meant that often parents could have considerable choice about the type of jobs and sometimes the working arrangements available. In contrast, factors associated with lack of or limited job choice and working arrangements included low skill levels and very specialised work, particularly if demand for it was declining and was combined with lack of geographical mobility. Health problems and disability could also affect parents' level of choice and their overall bargaining position. Job insecurity was likely to be the main concern for parents with these characteristics, as getting and keeping a job might be their main priority.

Not surprisingly, a high level of choice in the labour market tended to be associated with high qualifications and skill levels, although there were examples of parents with low skill levels who did have some degree of choice over the types of job they were able to secure. For example, some parents, and mothers in particular, had chosen to move out of factory work and into other occupations, such as care jobs, which they saw as more rewarding and with working hours that better suited their needs. Fathers with lower skills tended to express more uncertainty and anxiety about their employment prospects than mothers in an equivalent position. This may reflect changes in the labour market, which have led to a decline in manual 'male' jobs and an increase in manual 'female' jobs, but also some men's anxiety about being the 'breadwinner', as has been found by another recent study on fathers (Warin et al, 1999).

Negotiation over hours within job

In addition to levels of choice or constraint within the labour market, people had varying degrees of choice and negotiating power over their working hours and arrangements in their workplace. There were three main factors that influenced the extent to which parents felt they had a say over their working hours and arrangements:

- the type of occupation they were in;
- their bargaining position in their job; and
- the attitude of the employer.

Links were found between the type of occupation and the degree of flexibility of working hours. Some jobs clearly require one to be away from home and 'at work' at fixed times, teaching being an obvious example. As discussed in the previous chapter, shift work was often fixed to fit in with operating hours or team rotas. Other jobs required long hours, which were discretionary in theory, but hard to avoid in practice. At the same time, the atypical aspects of different jobs could have a degree of flexibility within them. Some professionals could in part control the amount of extra hours they put in and when they did it. Similarly, certain workplaces offered flexibility in shift allocation or swapping within teams.

People's bargaining position appeared to be significantly influenced by how replaceable they felt they were in their workplace. Parents in low-skilled manual jobs believed they could be easily replaced. However, parents with high skill levels and experience talked about having a "reasonable bargaining position", particularly if they had been in the job for a length of time. Negotiating working arrangements was generally spoken about in relation to family reasons, for example, taking time off, refusing shifts or extra work. The downside to being in a stronger bargaining position was that it often went alongside a feeling of responsibility towards the job, and a commitment to do extra hours when required.

Sometimes atypical hours had been introduced as a new way of working, and had therefore been effectively forced on employees. There was the example of an employer who introduced shift work and employees who were "made to sign an agreement" stating that they "did not mind what hours they worked". Agreeing to work at atypical times was sometimes seen as the only way to keep a job:

“... it’s now a prerequisite of the job and of course you have to do it if you want to stay employed by our company.” (father, gas service technician, substantial atypical hours)

Fear of harming future progression within the company also meant that some parents had concerns about saying ‘no’ to their employer (for example, about extra hours), especially where they felt their bargaining position was not strong. This also seemed to be underpinned by a general confidence level, as well as a strength of belief about not imposing on family life. Women in particular seemed to place a strong priority on family life, perhaps because women in couples were less likely to be in the ‘breadwinner’ role and therefore could be more assertive with their employers, or because employers’ attitudes were different towards women and men.

As other studies have shown (for example, Bevan et al, 1997), the attitude of the employer towards negotiating working hours to fit around family life was a key feature of how easily people were able to take control over balancing work and family. When the employer was understanding and sympathetic to the respondent’s family commitments, this was often said to be linked to the employer (or manager) having children themselves. Unsympathetic and inflexible employers had made life difficult for some respondents, who then had to rely on a partner or other family members in emergency situations.

Finally, self-employed parents represented a distinct group who, in theory, had considerable control over their working hours, but in practice this was often not the case, as their hours were

often determined by the demands of the market or the season (for example, for parents in the building or leisure industry). There was also a tendency among self-employed parents to work long hours, which inevitably led to a considerable amount of work at atypical times. There were, however, examples of self-employed parents who had a great deal of flexibility over their working hours; for example, a financial adviser whose core hours were between 3pm and 7pm and all his other hours could be arranged around those more or less as he chose. The sample also included a mother who used to be a teacher and decided to become a freelance trainer to have more control over not only when, but particularly how much she worked, and her decision to become self-employed was strongly influenced by her desire to reduce the hours and pressure of work.

Reasons behind atypical hours

As seen above, there was a variety in the degree of choice over job and flexibility of hours within a job found in the in-depth interviews. Despite this, when parents in the survey were asked why they were working at atypical times, a large majority of mothers¹ (75%) said that the hours were a requirement of their job, rather than a choice. This is also reflected in the finding that the majority of mothers working at atypical times said that they would prefer to work different hours (see Chapter 7). Smaller, but nonetheless substantial, numbers of mothers said that they worked atypical hours because it was easier for childcare arrangements (24%), or so that their partner (29%) or non-resident parent (8%) could

Table 3.2: Mothers' reasons for working atypical hours, by family structure (%)

Multi-coded responses	Partnered mothers	Lone mothers	All mothers
No choice, job requirement	73	83	75
For ease of childcare	25	21	24
Partner can look after children ^a	29	n/a	n/a
Non-resident parent can look after children ^b	n/a	8	n/a
<i>Weighted base</i>	625	121	1,165

Base: mothers who worked early am, late pm, evening or night several times a month, or weekend at least once a month, or shifts or more than 40 hours a week.

Notes: ^a Only partnered mothers were asked this question.

^b Only lone mothers were asked this question.

Table 3.3: Mothers' reasons for working atypical hours, by socioeconomic group (%)

Multi-coded responses	Professional/ managerial	Other non-manual	Manual	Other ^a
No choice, job requirement	78	71	[76]	80
For ease of childcare	19	27	[20]	25
Partner can look after children ^b	21	30	[28]	35
Ex-partner can look after children ^c	5	7	[8]	14
<i>Weighted base</i>	166	363	54	163

Base: mothers who worked early am, late pm, evening or night several times a month, or weekend at least once a month, or shifts or more than 40 hours a week.

Notes: ^a This includes members of the armed forces and unclassified cases.

^b Only partnered mothers were asked this question.

^c Only lone mothers were asked this question.

look after the children while they worked (Table 3.2). Further evidence was gathered in the qualitative interviews which provides an opportunity to understand more about the predominance of 'job requirement' as a reason for parents' working hours (see below).

There were some variations among different groups of mothers, although differences were generally small. For example, lone mothers were more likely than mothers in a couple to say that their working hours were a requirement of their job (83% and 73% respectively). Mothers in couples were more likely to give childcare reasons for their atypical hours when: (a) these hours were done more rather than less often; and (b) the father was also working atypical hours. This latter group could coincide with the group of parents identified in the in-depth interviews as 'shift parents' (see Chapter 4).

Working at atypical times was more likely to be a requirement for mothers in professional/managerial and manual jobs, rather than those in middle-level occupations who were more likely to take childcare factors into account (Table 3.3).

Working shifts or Saturdays was slightly more likely to be said to be a job requirement (79% and 78% respectively) than other types of atypical work. Conversely, working late in the day or at night was slightly more likely than other hours to be done so that the partner could look after the children (23% of partnered mothers who worked these hours said it was because their partner looked after the children). Given what is known about availability of formal childcare, it is perhaps not surprising that weekend work was least likely

(compared to other times of work) to be done for ease of childcare arrangements; 13% of mothers who worked Saturdays and 17% who worked Sundays reported ease of childcare arrangements as a reason for working at the weekend.

Objectives underpinning decisions to work atypical hours

This section draws on the qualitative evidence to explore the factors underpinning parents' decisions about working hours and arrangements. Even where choices appeared very limited, parents were still making a decision about whether to take a particular job or not, and in some cases, whether to work or not. We can identify three main and distinct objectives that parents were trying to achieve in making decisions about work and working hours.

- *Balancing work with looking after or spending time with children:* this included people working at atypical times, when their partner was available to look after the children (which might include working evenings, nights or weekends). The atypical hours they worked tended to be fixed, and did not involve overtime or unpaid extra hours. Career ambitions were described as being 'on hold' while the children were young. This group included mainly women in couples, across a range of different occupations, although the category did include some men.
- *Work enjoyment or ambitions:* this approach to work was characterised by a high degree of commitment and loyalty, which sometimes

meant a willingness to work long and atypical hours as a result. On the whole, atypical work took the shape of either ‘voluntarily’ extra hours in the evening or at the weekend, or shift work which was accepted as part of the job (for example, nurse or police shifts), and did not result in extra money.

- *Financial gain or imperative*: parents in this group regarded atypical hours as being part of the job and tended to feel that this was the only job they could get or were qualified to do (rather than a job that gave them a strong sense of reward or enjoyment). These parents were mainly in skilled or unskilled manual jobs and in the retail sector. Financial factors also sometimes influenced the amount or type of atypical hours worked, where doing overtime or a particular shift meant earning more money.

Although one of the approaches reviewed above tended to have a predominant role in shaping decisions about work, some parents expressed their motivations as a balance between all three factors:

“It’s a mix of all those things ... if I was looking at a job I would be looking at the hours ... but it would have to be the remuneration you have, if you were forced to work awkward hours then how much is that worth to you, that’s it at the end of the day is what you’ve got to think about.”
(father, social club manager, substantial atypical hours)

It is worth bearing in mind that while people often had a predominant reason for their main working hours, they nonetheless made decisions about ‘extra’ or ‘ad hoc’ hours on the basis of other influences. For example, some parents might be working a shift pattern because the hours went with their job, but might make a decision whether to do overtime or a particular shift based on either financial or family circumstances. Men were more likely to give family reasons for deciding against doing ad hoc hours than they were for their main working pattern.

In the following sections, we explore the different dimensions of the role of childcare and parenting responsibilities, work and financial motivation.

Childcare responsibilities

In this section, we will look at the circumstances where people’s decisions about atypical hours were influenced by their wish to minimise the use of non-parental childcare. In doing so, we will also look at the effect of decisions about parental roles.

As mentioned earlier, it was predominantly mothers whose decisions about work and working hours were strongly influenced by their childcare responsibilities, whereas fathers on the whole continued with existing jobs and job patterns. However, there were also men who had reviewed their working hours on having children. The considerations for parents in combining work and looking after children included:

- changing working hours;
- deciding whether to take on overtime, certain shifts, or extra ‘voluntary’ hours;
- cutting back hours to part time or to term time;
- changing job;
- whether to work at all.

Prioritisation of childcare responsibilities had led one group of mothers to work hours which were mainly at standard times and during school hours. While mainly standard hours, their work might also involve a small amount of extra work at atypical times, at a time when their partner was not working and was therefore available to look after the children. These mothers tended to be strongly motivated in wanting to spend time with their children, not wanting to miss out on their children’s development, or believing that their children would be unhappy if they were left in the care of others. In these cases there was sometimes a sense that the father was relatively strongly work-oriented and would not be prepared or able to take on substantial childcare responsibilities.

For another set of mothers, wanting to minimise the amount of formal childcare used meant they had decided to work mainly at atypical hours. For these mothers, the priority was less about making sure that they spent time with their children themselves, and more about ensuring that the children were looked after by someone in the family (be it their father or grandparent). For these parents, the intention was that one parent would work when the other was at home and vice versa, and in this way children were

predominantly with one parent or another. Although lone mothers did not have the option of having a partner at home to share childcare with in this way, nonetheless some minimised the need for formal childcare by working at atypical times so that they could share the childcare with the child's father or grandparents.

With this second group of mothers the cost of formal childcare was also an important factor:

“If I was able to go, you know, on to days [instead of nights] then obviously I'll have to pay double that because I'd have to have the afternoon as well, so that's not really worth me working really, £700 or whatever.” (mother, senior care assistant, substantial atypical hours)

For some parents, working alternate shifts with their partner was the only way of earning an income, while at the same time not having to pay for childcare. This calculation obviously depended on the options available and preferences for childcare, as well as on the earning potential of the partner who would otherwise stay at home.

As well as cost, reasons for wanting to minimise 'outside' childcare were partly influenced by negative attitudes towards formal childcare compared to family care, as well as wanting to spend that time with their children themselves. Some parents had very strong feelings either against using formal childcare at all, or using 'too much' formal childcare, with a preference for parental care and then the next best thing being relatives or friends.

This view was underpinned by the following reasons against formal childcare, with concern about the quality of care provided by childminders in particular coming out strongly, as well as arguments in favour of parents or family:

- anxiety about someone unknown looking after children, expressed in the phrase, “You read so many stories in the papers”, and linked to concerns about people with different value systems or different parenting approaches;
- concern about too many different carers involved in looking after children, expressed through phrases such as “pillar to post” and “farming children out”;

- previous experiences with childminders where children were unhappy;
- importance to both the child and the parent of parental involvement for stability, relationship building and the child's development.

These concerns about formal childcare appeared to be particularly relevant for young (that is, pre-school) children, rather than older children, partly because it was said that older children could tell you if they were not happy. Also, once children were at school, childcare was seen as less influential because it was often used for less time, maybe for just an hour or two after school.

Other parents were far happier with the idea of formal childcare. Parents who were using childminders or nurseries said that they were happy with them because they knew they were very good, they had a good atmosphere and approach, their child enjoyed going, and most importantly, the parents felt they knew the carers well and could trust them. Some parents talked about the benefits of formal over informal childcare, for example, the opportunity to develop social skills or a routine. However, on the whole, it seemed that informal childcare would be preferred if there was that choice. Parents using formal childcare were generally those who felt financial pressure to work, or had few alternative childcare options – either they did not have family members (including a partner for lone parents) available or willing to help with childcare, or they felt strongly about not imposing on their family.

Parenting roles

Although women generally took responsibility for organising their hours around their partner's, some fathers were also flexible when work hours between the couple clashed or overlapped. This might involve the father working or refusing to work at atypical times: for example, changing or refusing to do a particular shift, taking a day's holiday, or making hours up another time, depending on how flexible his job was.

The qualitative sample included a small group of fathers who had adapted their hours, which resulted in some work at atypical times, to be at home when their partner was at work and thus minimise the amount of formal childcare required.

This had happened when the following circumstances arose:

- where a father was particularly committed to minimising non-parental childcare or spending time with children himself; and
- where his job was much more flexible or less well paid than the mother's.

Interestingly, in these situations, cost of childcare did not appear to play a major role in decision making. Formal childcare was used as well as the father looking after the children. A slightly different set of factors appeared to be influencing fathers' decisions, compared to either of the two groups of mothers described above. However, as this group is very small, it is difficult to draw any more general conclusions.

For lone parents, organising their hours to minimise formal childcare either meant coordinating with an ex-partner or grandparents, or (for those with school-age children) making sure that their work hours generally fell within school hours. Lone mothers commented on the impact of the relationship breakdown on their ability to share childcare with the other parent, although on the whole lone mothers said that they had always had primary responsibility for childcare, so the relationship breakdown had not greatly influenced their work pattern:

“I think some things were easier [before the divorce] because things like paying the mortgage, paying the bills, all that thing, I didn't have to think about it, but the practical sides of looking after the children, picking up the children, housework, that was always my responsibility I suppose.”
(lone mother, teacher, limited atypical hours)

The children's age had, of course, a clear influence on how people felt about organising their work hours around childcare. Minimising childcare for children at different stages (particularly pre-school compared to school-age children) required different patterns of work. When children were older (examples of age 11 or 12 were given), they were more capable of making their own journey to school, and looking after themselves in the evenings and weekends. However, parents may still feel strongly that they wanted to be available for older children at certain times (see Chapter 5).

Work and financial reasons

As discussed earlier, the survey found that the majority of mothers working at atypical times said that they did so because it was a requirement of the job, rather than through choice. Occupational choices were generally independent of and prior to decisions about family and childcare. As already mentioned, there was a greater tendency among women to have considered whether to work at all on having children, as well as what sort of hours they would be prepared to work. The qualitative interviews suggested that this group could be broken into two separate sub-groups:

- parents who chose their job because of career ambition, enjoyment and reward, and who accepted or actively pursued the hours that went with it; and
- parents who felt they had little choice of work and that their financially constrained circumstances meant that they could not dictate their working hours.

Work commitment or ambitions

Across a range of professions and occupations there was a fairly widespread enjoyment or satisfaction achieved from the jobs that parents were doing, influenced primarily either by enjoyment or reward from the process of the job itself, and/or by an enjoyment about having “a life outside the home”. This latter work motivation was given particularly by women, but also by men who had experienced long periods out of the labour market:

“I value teaching, I think it's an important job, it makes me feel good about myself.... However much I love being here and I love my children and being with my family, I love that minute when you walk into school or university....” (mother, university lecturer, limited atypical hours)

Enjoyment or satisfaction from a job could mean that people were more prepared to work the sort of hours that they might not otherwise wish to:

“I wouldn't do it if I didn't enjoy it because it is so time-consuming hours-wise that if you didn't enjoy it, you wouldn't do it ... I enjoy meeting the people ... that's just the highlight of the job ... everybody is so nice

and I'm a people person." (father, social club manager, substantial atypical hours)

Among some, but not all, couples, the man was said to be more ambitious than the woman about work, to take work more 'seriously', and to be more committed (a commitment which usually resulted in long working hours). Commitment arose from a sense of personal achievement and responsibility, and could be fuelled by a loyalty to the employer or, where people were self-employed, wanting the business to succeed. Commitment and loyalty were fostered by having worked somewhere for a long time, and a belief in a 'give and take' work environment.

Some people, again mainly women, felt that their decisions about their work and family had involved a compromise whereby their career was 'on hold' during the time their children were young, such that they worked fewer hours, or in a less rewarding job. In other couples, the woman's job appeared to be of equal importance to her as her partner's; sometimes it was even more important, either financially or in terms of her commitment or reward.

Financial factors

There was also a group of parents who did not enjoy their job, but did it for the money they could earn, the convenience of the hours, or because they felt it was the only job they could get. These tended to be people in low-paid manual jobs, such as factory work or waitressing:

"I suppose it is repetitive, but it's a job and it's good money and I've got responsibilities and no way was I going on the dole."
(father, factory worker, substantial atypical hours)

Financial factors could influence the fact that people worked at atypical times in two ways:

- *directly*: in providing an incentive to work particular shifts or overtime which paid more;
- *indirectly*: in providing a general motivation to work or stay in a particular job (which requires atypical hours), because the pay was considered to be good or a belief that extra 'voluntary' hours would lead to longer-term financial reward.

It was clear that people varied in the priority they gave to material aspects of their life relative to other aspects, in particular the time they had available to spend outside work and with their family. For some this involved a careful calculation of the degree to which working extra hours was 'worth it':

"If they're paying it [overtime] at a premium rate, then we have made a conscious effort that whilst I can I'll earn it ... and the family will fit round me to allow me to earn that ... but it's a bit like plate-spinning ... if I started working Saturday and Sunday I'd be doing too many hours." (father, police officer, substantial atypical hours)

Part of this calculation included, as discussed above, taking into account the costs of childcare during periods when both parents were working.

In talking about financial motivations, people made an assessment about what they felt was an appropriate level of income for them, and especially in the light of their partner's income, where relevant. In assessing this level, people seemed to fall into two main groups:

- People for whom financial motivation was described as being a necessity: in these cases the income went towards what can be called the basics – food, clothes, or to pay off debts. There was a strong sense that the income was essential to 'provide for the family'. For some women, this had meant working when their children were young when they would have preferred to have been at home:

"I would love to have been at home full time but I didn't, we needed extra money just to make ends meet.... I always said when I had children I'll stop work and go back when they went to school but I never had that option." (mother, retail store manager, substantial atypical hours)

- People whose financial motivation for work or their working hours was to provide 'extra' money, for example, to support particular 'lifestyle' decisions. These might include 'nice' holidays and outings, activities or coaching for the children, higher quality housing or a shorter mortgage life, or private schooling. This group was made up mainly of people

who had the lower income in a dual-parent household, and tended to be women.

Parents' attitude towards financial factors was, of course, also influenced by their financial situation (that is, the degree to which they could 'afford' not to worry about it), and past experiences, including childhood experiences of poverty and of divorce. These experiences sometimes encouraged a strong financial motivation in parents to ensure that their children did not suffer financially in the way respondents had done, or as a result of a relationship breakdown:

"I swore my kids wouldn't have to go to school and feel different like we did. We never had holidays, we never had anything like that ... and that's why it is important to me to maintain a decent standard of living for us as a family." (lone mother, two jobs in administration/sales, substantial atypical hours)

Some people said that their choices about work and working hours were not influenced at all by financial factors. These seemed to be people who were either strongly anti-materialistic in outlook, and/or who had relatively high levels of household income, and perhaps took this for granted:

"I'd rather come out with less money and enjoy what I do ... the money wasn't that important, as long as it covered my child-minding and gave me what I needed for the week.... With having the cancer and not knowing if I was going to make it ... the last thing I'm going to do is to be stuck in a job I don't like, it makes you realise that life's not about working, it's about living it." (lone mother, horse stable assistant, limited atypical hours)

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that parents do make choices about the type of jobs they do and sometimes about the working hours within that job, and there are a range of reasons why parents' choices may lead to work at atypical times. As numerous studies have shown, for many mothers family responsibilities play a key role in shaping

their decisions about their paid work and careers (for example, Brannen et al, 1994; Evetts, 1994; Hakim, 1996; Bryson et al, 1999; Backett-Milburn et al, 2001; Mauthner et al, 2001). A substantial minority of mothers in the study had chosen to work at atypical times in order to fit their work around arrangements for looking after children. In doing so, mothers were influenced by feelings about wanting to spend time with their children, or to avoid the use of formal or non-parental childcare. This was particularly true of partnered mothers and mothers in middle-level occupations. Dual-parent families usually organised their work hours in combination, whereby one parent (usually, but not always, the mother) tended to take on the main responsibility for looking after children and to adjust their own work hours accordingly.

Fathers' atypical work seemed to be more linked than for mothers with having a less strong position in the labour market, that is, low occupational status and qualification levels. Fathers appeared to be more likely than mothers to work atypical hours because of financial factors, but also as a result of career ambitions or challenges. As other studies have shown, while many mothers adjust their employment arrangements to fit with their family responsibilities, many fathers appear to be doing the opposite, and arrange their family commitments around their working lives (Spencer and Taylor, 1994; Ferri and Smith, 1996).

Although parents make choices, these are nonetheless made within the constraints of limited job opportunities, demanding work patterns, financial obligations and aspirations, and negative feelings about formal childcare or lack of adequate formal provision. The next chapter looks further at the interaction between atypical working hours and childcare arrangements.

Note

- ¹ For these questions, survey respondents were asked for their own reasons for working atypical hours, but not for their partner's reasons, so we cannot provide data for fathers. Mothers were asked these questions if they worked early am, late pm, evening or night several times a month, or weekend at least once a month, or shifts or more than 40 hours a week.

4

Atypical work and family circumstances

Having reviewed the frequency and different types of atypical work, and the interplay of factors which lead to work at atypical times, in this chapter we explore the relationship between atypical work and family circumstances. The first part of the chapter looks at which family characteristics (for example, family structure, children’s age) are more closely associated with atypical work. We then look at parents’ roles in families with different work arrangements, and consider the influence that atypical work might have on the division of childcare responsibilities in dual-parent families.

Atypical work and family circumstances

Family structure and children’s age

Looking at family structure and atypical work, the survey found that lone mothers were as likely as partnered mothers to frequently work at atypical times, with 53% of the former and 54% of the

latter being classified as frequent atypical workers. Lone mothers were less likely to work late afternoons, evenings and nights: 22% reported working late afternoons several times a week and 12% doing evening/night work several times a week; the corresponding figures for partnered mothers were 26% and 14% respectively. Lone mothers were also less likely than partnered mothers to be shift workers (22% and 26% respectively). However, 24% of lone mothers worked early mornings several times a week, compared with 21% of mothers with a partner. The former were also more likely to report weekend work, with 45% of lone mothers saying they worked at least one weekend a month, compared with 40% of partnered mothers.

Overall, mothers in the frequent atypical work category were more likely than other employed mothers to have a child under the age of five, with the respective figures being 25% and 20%.

When looking at work patterns in dual and lone-parent families (Table 4.1), the link between having a pre-school child and frequent maternal

Table 4.1: Parents’ work patterns and age of youngest child (%)

	Dual-parent families				Lone mothers	
	Mother only frequent atypical work	Father only frequent atypical work	Both frequent atypical work	Both occasional/no atypical work	Frequent atypical work	Occasional/no atypical work
Under 5s	[26]	22	27	18	16	13
5-11	[41]	51	43	47	48	58
12+	[32]	27	30	35	36	29
<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>91</i>	<i>344</i>	<i>417</i>	<i>113</i>	<i>107</i>	<i>92</i>

Base: all mothers.

atypical work is still evident in dual-parent households. Lone mothers with frequent atypical work patterns were only slightly more likely than other lone parents to have a child under the age of five, but were more likely to have an older child: 36% of lone mothers frequently working at atypical times had a child over the age of 11, compared with 29% of other employed lone parents.

Childcare arrangements

As discussed in the previous chapter, the survey results show that a substantial minority of mothers in dual-parent families said that they worked atypical hours so that their partner could look after the children while they worked. As we saw from the qualitative data, this could be because respondents believed it was important for the children to be with their parents, but also because of the lack or cost of childcare, or concern about formal provision compared to informal. The survey findings on the childcare arrangements mothers had while at work confirm a link between atypical work and the father's contribution to childcare. In dual-parent households where both parents frequently worked at atypical times, 30% of fathers looked after the children while the mother was at work. The equivalent figure was much lower in dual-parent families where only the mother or only the father frequently worked atypical hours (19% and 13% respectively), and was lowest in households

where both parents did occasional or no atypical hours (10%) (Figure 4.1).

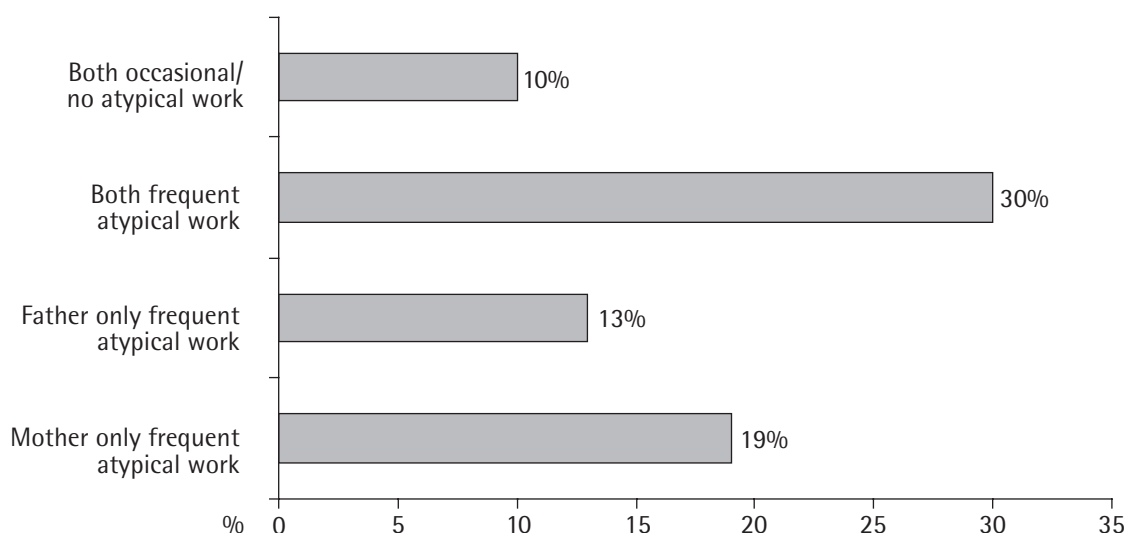
Interestingly the results show that fathers in higher level occupations were less likely to be involved in childcare: 12% of fathers in the professional/managerial group, compared with 26% of those in other non-manual occupations and 23% of those in manual jobs looked after the children while the mother was at work.

When looking at non-parental childcare, the survey results show that parents who frequently worked atypical hours were more likely than others to use informal childcare¹ when they worked:

- 55% of dual-parent families where only the mother frequently worked atypical hours and 49% where both parents worked these hours used only informal childcare, compared with 39% where only the father worked atypical hours and 27% where both parents did occasional or no atypical hours;
- use of informal childcare was even more widespread among lone parents, with 60% of those with atypical hours and 47% of other lone mothers using only this type of care.

The qualitative findings show that parents were more likely to use formal childcare when they were working relatively limited atypical hours, for example, starting work slightly early in the morning, or finishing at around 6pm.

Figure 4.1: Fathers who provide childcare while the mother is at work in dual-parent families with different work patterns (%)



Base: all partnered mothers (weighted base: 966).

Table 4.2: Couples' work patterns and division of childcare responsibilities in dual-parent families (%)

	Mother only frequent atypical work	Father only frequent atypical work	Both frequent atypical work	Both occasional/ no atypical work
Mother main carer	[54]	73	60	61
Father main carer	[3]	1	4	1
Childcare shared equally	[42]	27	36	38
<i>Weighted base</i>	91	344	417	113

Base: all partnered mothers.

Childminders, nurseries, and after-school clubs were available to some parents to provide childcare during these hours (although these parents generally acknowledged that they were lucky with their arrangements).

Outside of these more limited atypical hours, at weekends, nights or late evenings, parents were far more reliant on their partner or on non-parental informal care provided by relatives, particularly grandparents. As described in Chapter 3, for some people the wish to have informal rather than formal childcare had played a major role in the decision to work at atypical times. Preferences for informal childcare were underpinned by a combination of ideological preference for family involvement (especially the other parent), and concerns about the quality and cost of formal childcare. In addition, while some people felt comfortable about using formal childcare (although this tended to be with a condition that the balance did not tip too far away from parental care), they found that it was not available at the times that they wanted it. The reported lack of formal childcare when needed tended to be related to ad hoc rather than a regular requirement, for example, on an occasional Saturday morning or up to around 7pm in the evening (depending on the combination of each partner's work requirements that week). As a result, some couples felt a higher level of stress in having to juggle between the constraints of two jobs and limited childcare availability. Also, some parents felt more reliant than they would like on informal carers, particularly grandmothers:

“I feel guilty for asking ... for Paul's mum [mother-in-law] as well, yes, I do, I just feel that they're my responsibility and I should like be able to sort all the childcare out. I mean they don't mind that, you know, neither of them mind, they love having them

but I just don't like to sort of keep asking.”
(mother, midwife, substantial atypical hours)

As discussed above, the survey found that in dual-parent households where the mother frequently worked atypical hours, fathers were more likely than in other families to be involved with childcare; however, this was only partly reflected in the division of childcare responsibilities between parents. As we can see from Table 4.2, in families where only the mother frequently worked atypical hours, parents were more likely than others to share childcare, with 42% mentioning this. However, parents who both worked atypical hours were almost as likely as families with occasional or no atypical hours to share childcare (36% and 38% respectively). Interestingly fathers were most likely to be the main carer in families where mothers frequently worked at atypical times.

Again, fathers in professional or managerial occupations seem to play a smaller childcare role than others. As shown in Table 4.3, in 28% of families where the father belonged to this group childcare was equally shared, compared with 41% where the father was in the other non-manual category and 35% where fathers were manual workers.

The qualitative data show that fathers' involvement in looking after the children appeared to be shaped in part by the type of job and hours they were doing (and as mentioned in the previous chapter, some fathers had altered their working hours to look after children). Fathers tended to be more involved if their job was reasonably flexible, for example, they could control their working hours, work from home, finish work early or work shifts so that they could be at home when their partner was at work. However, for fathers to become actively involved in taking responsibility for looking after children,

Table 4.3: Fathers' socioeconomic group and division of childcare responsibilities in dual-parent families (%)

	Fathers' socioeconomic group			
	Professional/managerial	Other non-manual	Manual	Other ^a
Mother main carer	70	56	63	[58]
Father main carer	2	3	3	[2]
Childcare shared equally	28	41	35	[40]
<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>407</i>	<i>159</i>	<i>309</i>	<i>92</i>

Base: all partnered mothers.

Note: ^a This includes members of the armed forces and unclassified cases.

this also had to involve a willingness and interest in carrying this out, which (according to mothers) was not always the case, even if working hours allowed this type of involvement. One mother who worked a mix of shifts while her husband worked standard days said:

“I generally take it [helping with homework] on and try and fit it in, which is hard sometimes when you don't have a time span to do it ... that's a little bit difficult depending on what shifts I happen to be on. But, as I say, I've started delegating that out to [husband] a little bit now ... he's very much 'I've done my day's work, I'm coming home to sit down now' – I think he enjoys doing it ... but I think he did find it difficult at first to accept doing it.” (mother, nurse, substantial atypical hours)

Links between family orientation and atypical hours

In this section, the qualitative data will be used to draw out the associations between the factors influencing a couple's work decisions and the combination of their working hours. It is worth remembering that we only collected information from one partner in a couple, so conclusions drawn about the decision making of the other partner need to be somewhat tentative.

Analysis of the qualitative data enabled us to identify three broad types of work combinations between couples, which were associated with particular sorts of decisions about work and family between the couple².

Shift parenting

In this group the working hours of each partner are organised in a way that between them they can be available to look after the children. This is generally the result of a deliberate decision, although sometimes has come about by chance, because those are the hours that go with the job, but it is seen as a benefit as it minimises the need for non-parental childcare. On the whole, one partner's hours are more or less 'standard' most of the time; in other words they work during the day, from around 8am at the earliest until around 5.30pm at the latest. The other partner mainly works hours when their partner is not at work, or when the children are at school (these can be fixed hours or variable shifts). On the whole, women have shaped their hours around their partner's job (including choosing standard hours where a partner is working atypical hours), although there were examples of couples where the opposite was the case. While childcare is often shared between the couple, fathers sometimes appear to be reluctant to become very active or take on responsibility for looking after children (according to mothers).

Both partners' jobs are seen as important, either financially or in terms of job satisfaction; in other words neither partner would choose not to work at all, or to cut back their hours. Parents in this group tend to have relatively young children, aged 10 or under, and informal or formal childcare is used on a part-time basis to cover any periods when both parents are working, regularly or on an ad hoc basis.

In one sub-group of this category, *both* partners are doing substantial atypical hours. On the whole, each partner is working at atypical times because of the demands of their job and financial

pressures, rather than to fit around looking after children (although in one couple, the mother had arranged to do weekday night shifts to fit around her husband's shifts, which were very variable, but always during the day, except at weekends). Childcare tended to be less of an issue for this sub-group, as children were generally older.

Separate parenting roles

In the second category, couples take on clearly demarcated and more 'traditional' roles, whereby one partner prioritises the family and the other prioritises work. The partner with the career, or the 'breadwinner', generally (although not necessarily) works at atypical times, either doing long hours, 'extra' hours or shift work. The other partner has primary or sometimes sole responsibility for looking after children, and works part time, not seeing their job as a 'proper' job or career. This partner may work at atypical times, for example, a couple of hours one evening a week or on a Saturday morning, but not a substantial amount. These roles tended to be adopted according to traditional gender roles, although there was one example of a mother breadwinner where the father had a part-time, casual delivery job.

The use of any non-parental childcare is therefore minimal, except for ad hoc occasions, and this is the preference of either both partners or the one who has main responsibility for childcare.

Dual parenting

This group is made up of couples who both work in professional jobs and consider themselves as having a 'career'. Both partners' 'core hours' are standard, with a varying number of additional (voluntary) hours, likely to be done at atypical times. Fathers in particular seem to work extra hours due to commitment towards their job and career ambitions. Formal childcare tends to be used during the day when both parents are at work³, while after work both parents are actively involved in looking after and spending time with children. Parents feel comfortable about using formal childcare and are generally able to afford a type of childcare that they are happy with.

Lone mothers

Some similar groupings of respondents also appeared to emerge from the qualitative interviews with lone mothers who worked atypical hours (however, because the sample size of lone parents is small, conclusions should be more tentative).

- Lone mothers sometimes organised their work hours in a type of shift parenting arrangement with a non-resident parent, a grandparent or other relative. As with the shift parent group among couples, this tended to be when children were younger and where financial factors were important.
- Another group did a considerable amount of work at atypical times, including combining a number of different jobs, or working long and varied shifts. This tended to be when children were older and financial factors were often significant.
- Some lone parents were in professional jobs, such as teaching, where the amount of atypical hours they did was more or less under their own control and could be done, for example, after the children were in bed.
- Finally, some lone parents were in jobs which involved limited atypical hours, and were closer to a standard working day. This was often dominated by a wish to spend a maximum amount of time with the children.

Conclusion

It was somewhat surprising to find that lone mothers were as likely as partnered mothers to frequently work atypical hours, given what is known about the availability of formal childcare outside standard hours. The qualitative research suggests that lone parents may be more likely to be doing less substantial amounts of atypical work, or at less 'atypical' times. As the survey results showed, they were also more likely than couples to use non-parental informal childcare, which enabled or encouraged them to work at atypical times.

The survey has shown that mothers in the frequent atypical work group were more likely to have pre-school children and were also more likely to rely on informal childcare. More crucially in dual-parent families where the mother

frequently worked at atypical times, the father was considerably more likely than in other families to look after the children when the mother worked, and he was particularly likely to do so if he also frequently worked atypical hours. Fathers in professional and managerial positions were less likely than other fathers to be involved in childcare; this could be partly due to the long hours the former group worked, as we saw in the previous chapter.

These survey results provide some evidence of 'shift' parenting and were confirmed by the in-depth interviews, which found that some couples arranged their working hours in order to minimise the need for non-parental childcare. In some cases these arrangements were partly determined by the lack of affordable and adequate formal childcare, but they were also strongly influenced by parents' belief that children should be cared for within the family. Sharing of childcare responsibilities was also likely to be found among couples with more standard hours, where both parents had a strong career orientation. The study included a group of parents with a more traditional gender division of labour, and in these cases the father was likely to work atypical hours, while the mother was likely to work part time, with little or no work at atypical times.

The belief that it is important for children to spend time with the parents, combined with mothers' strong career orientation and/or work at atypical hours, resulted in many cases in a substantial paternal contribution to childcare. However, the survey results show that in the majority of dual-parent families, mothers still had the main responsibility for caring and arranging care for the children, and, as discussed earlier, this meant that they had often placed their career aspirations on hold.

Notes

- ¹ Informal childcare included grandparents, siblings, other relatives and friends.
- ² Two couples fell outside this categorisation. The first was a couple where both were doing more or less standard working days. In the second couple, the mother worked as a childminder (in order to easily combine work and looking after her children) and so the issue of fitting family around work and how this is done did not arise.
- ³ Children tended to be pre-school, but this is likely to have been a feature of the sampling process rather than a characteristic of this group.

5

Attitudes towards family time

Using the qualitative data, this chapter explores parents' attitudes towards use of time, how and why parents think about and prioritise different times of the day or week, and how they choose to balance their time between work and out of work. It provides an important context for understanding the ways parents make decisions about work, and how they feel about the impact of work on their family life (discussed in Chapter 6). As explained in Chapter 1, the in-depth interviews focused mainly on parents working atypical hours, so the findings in this chapter largely reflect the views of this group.

Different ways of thinking about time

In talking about family time during the in-depth interviews, respondents were asked to reflect on different uses of time: time for or with their children, time with the whole family, time spent as a couple and time for themselves. As other research has shown (for example, Gershuny, 2000), work was the aspect of people's lives that most dominated their time. The ways people used their time outside work varied enormously, of course, although there were some common patterns to be found.

One of the key differences between people in how they seemed to conceptualise time was in thinking about quantity of time compared to quality, which sometimes meant time being specific around times of the day or week, that is, relative to other routines or activities taking place. Some parents spoke in terms of this distinction; others implied it in the way they spoke about specific times rather than amount of time.

Another key way some people seemed to think about time was in terms of time 'trade-offs'. There were a number of trade-offs that people made:

- less time at one stage during a week (or a year) compensated for by more time at another stage of the week, for example, evenings versus weekends, or winter versus summer;
- lack of time for themselves or together with their partner, compensated for by time with children;
- lack of time for themselves or together with their partner at present, compensated for by the knowledge that as the children got older the balance would change.

Another trade-off that people made was between time and money. This could work in either direction, for example, some people talked about sacrificing extra money in order to be able to spend more time with the family. Others felt that the extra money earned through working long or atypical hours had contributed towards their children's (and family's) quality of life, and that this in some way balanced out the fact that there had been less time available:

"I don't think I've spent anywhere near enough time with them [that is, his children] because of work. But I suppose to sort of defend myself in that ... they've got a fairly good standard of living, they always have a foreign holiday a year, they've always gone on school trips, they're always reasonably well clothed ... that sort of thing which you can't get if you don't work." (father, social club manager, substantial atypical hours)

These, along with other concepts of time, are explored in the following sections of this chapter.

Time with children

People generally spoke about their children being their ‘first priority’ in life. This tended to be said in the context of work demands or commitments. For some people, this meant that children were their priority once they had completed their work commitments; for others it was reflected in their decisions about their working hours, and also in their responses to ad hoc situations at work or at home. As described in the previous chapters, it was usually (but not exclusively) mothers whose decisions about working hours were made around arrangements for the children. Putting time for children after work commitments did not necessarily mean that children were seen as second priority (although this sometimes appeared to be the case in families where parents had strongly demarcated roles); rather, that earning money was seen as a means of supporting the family.

There were a number of reasons why time with children was felt to be important:

- not missing out on child’s development (being there for the ‘first steps’) and being there to shape development, through education, discipline and instilling value systems;
- being there to support children, if they have difficulties or with things like homework or school activities;
- building a relationship between parent and child, sharing activities together, fun and enjoyment, interacting.

As the children grew older, these factors shifted in emphasis or what was required changed in practice.

People seemed to place different levels of emphasis on the importance of time with the whole family versus time for a parent to spend with children. Family time was seen as important for creating security for children, and for increased awareness of human interactions and exchanges, as well as for fun and enjoyment. Different types of activities were clearly more relevant for an individual parent spending time with children compared to whole families together. For example, helping with homework, reading, and talking or giving advice were all more appropriate for one-to-one contact. Activities such as outings, visits to family, play or

eating together at home, were more likely to be seen as important or pleasurable things to do with the whole family. Apart from eating a family meal together, these activities tended to be seen as things that could be done less regularly than, for example, helping with homework, and working hours were therefore not necessarily seen as interfering in the same way:

“Because we don’t see each other in the week so you don’t get fed up with each other, do you, so you can do it, you know, at weekend your time spent together is better than what you would if you spent all week together I suppose.” (father, depot supervisor, substantial atypical hours)

There were different ways that people felt they could achieve what they wanted to in terms of parenting time. For some, the *amount* of time spent with the child was the most important; for this reason, people had chosen to limit their overall working hours, as well as to work at times when the children were not around. For others, the priority was to have quality time with the children. This attitude tended to be more prevalent among parents whose working hours were either relatively long, and/or who frequently worked at times when the children were at home (after school or at the weekends). It also applied more to whole family time than to individual parent time with children. In these cases family time could not be taken for granted; parents had to make sure it happened and this was considered a very special time:

“I tend to work a lot of weekends, you work three out of four weekends, so with regard to family outings or weekends away, you don’t do a lot of those, but when you do do them they’re more special so I don’t think you lose out because they become more special when you do do them.” (mother, nurse, substantial atypical hours)

An important aspect of quality time was a belief about which times of day, relative to children’s routines, provided the best time to spend with children. This was key in understanding why people had made certain decisions about work, or felt the way they did about their work hours (described in Chapter 6). Key times of day or week were:

- time after school, for some parents this included fetching children from school;
- evenings, especially meal times;
- later evenings (for older children);
- breakfast time (seen as important if people were not eating together in the evening);
- weekends (sometimes Sundays were seen as more important).

Evening meals and weekends, particularly Sundays, seemed to be important for whole family time, although were not always possible. As discussed in the next chapter, the survey found that many parents who frequently worked atypical hours said that their job considerably limited the time they were able to spend with the family in the evenings and at weekends. People had sometimes set or tried to set boundaries around these times of day: a father who worked long hours nonetheless described his weekends as 'sacrosanct' family time; a mother talked about both she and her partner keeping free from work the 'domestic crunch' time of early evening. People in professional jobs who had more control over their 'extra' hours were more successful at doing this.

There was evidence that mothers in some families had been more responsible than fathers for managing family time. In a number of families, this had included placing restrictions on a father's weekend activities. One mother had attended parenting classes with her husband, and as a result had instituted some specific family activities, such as all having breakfast together. Some people, however, appeared to have just thought less than others about the importance to them of whole family time. (For example, one respondent said that she felt so guilty when she had to tell the survey interviewer at the first stage of the research that they never had a family meal together, that she then instituted having a meal with the whole family every Sunday.)

Where people worked shifts, they sometimes had no choice about working weekends, even if family time at weekends was important to them:

"I would like my weekends back on a permanent basis ... I mean I like to spend time with my family rather than in somebody else's house [as a service engineer], you know, and it's being able to do what you want to do, and when you

want to do it." (father, gas service technician, substantial atypical hours)

People varied in the way they allocated priorities to different times, depending largely on the age of their children. Time after school was especially important for parents with younger children, whereas later evenings were a more significant time when children were older and more independent. These times provided an opportunity for parents to talk to children, and to be there if children wanted any advice or support. It was also influenced by the way that time with older children was limited by the child's own activities and interests.

Being available for children after school was particularly important for the women in the study. If their current working hours did not allow this, they often spoke about how their 'ideal' working hours would be to finish in time to meet children from school, that is, around 3 or 3.30pm. This was partly because of a preference for not using formal childcare, or leaving children on their own in the house after school. However, it was also because of a belief that the time immediately after school is a special time, when children talk about their day and help can be given with homework.

Again, this was influenced by the age of the children. With younger children at school, parents who came home shortly before bedtime felt that this was the hardest time of the day. Mornings before school were also described as less easy, sometimes 'chaotic' times:

"I do like getting my [working] hours out of the way early because when he gets up it's all about eating breakfast and going to school, it's not a time to do anything, we might talk or chat but it's nothing huge or major so if I'm up and at work early 5, 6 o'clock, and I'm home [before school ends], that's the way I'd like it." (father, police officer, substantial atypical hours)

However, where children were slightly older, this could mean that the best part of the day was early evening once the children had rested after school, and were ready to sit and talk, perhaps over a family meal:

"We do always eat together and I like that ... it's very important. Because I think the children come in and they're quite tired and

they don't want to talk very much so they [... go upstairs, watch television] and then by the time they come down and we sit down at 6.30, 7 o'clock to eat, then they, you know, they chat, chat, chat, and I like that. And then they do a bit more homework and we tend to sit down and watch television together at 8.30 for half an hour or, yes, we do that or we just sit and chat, or walk the dog." (mother, university lecturer, limited atypical hours)

As children moved into their teens, parenting requirements changed. Parents were no longer required to 'look after' children as they were able to look after themselves and to go to and from school. However, parenting in terms of 'being there' was still seen as important, and sometimes more so, particularly as the parent was more dependent on their child to determine the right time to discuss problems.

There was a fairly widespread view that it was important for children to be able to spend time with *each* parent. This was also the case where parents were separated, although it had not always been possible. Although people felt strongly about this, their reasons did not appear to be very specific. Time with each parent was felt to be important because it provided a stable environment, input from 'either side' that helped to create a balanced child. As discussed in previous chapters, because parents had adopted different patterns of parenting between them, some respondents appeared to see the two parents as interchangeable, whereas others seemed to feel that provided the main 'carer' spent time with the children, it was less important for the other parent to do so.

In the same way, people had different perspectives on the idea of 'balanced' time within the family. In families where parents had adopted different but complementary roles, a balanced situation was for one partner to spend time with the children while the other focused on work. In other families, balance was about both parents having an individual balance of time between family and work.

In some families, parents spending time individually with children was valued equally or above having whole family time. This seemed to happen where people felt that time together as a whole family was difficult, because of arguments

or difficulties in finding activities the whole family could do together (sometimes because of a big age gap between children, or older children wanting to do their own thing). In these situations, parents preferred to spend individual time with children, doing what that child wanted to do. Another advantage of parents spending individual time with children was that it shared out the work between parents, or sometimes gave the other parent time off. It was also, perhaps, more true when children were older:

"I think so long as we're around either together or one or the other to provide advice and, you know, contact and all the rest of it, and provided we are seen to sort of behave as one, you know, we agree on everything that affects them, I don't think there's a problem." (father, maintenance engineer, substantial atypical hours)

Time away from children

On the whole, time with a partner or for yourself came lowest down the list of priorities, after work and spending time with children. Generally people felt that time with their partner (where relevant) was important, but had concerns about how difficult this was to achieve in practice.

Time for yourself

When it came to prioritising time for themselves, people's views varied considerably. Some found it very important; others were happy to have it lower down their list of priorities:

"Time to myself, whatever I do with that, is important to me.... I like time to myself, I always have done for as long as I can remember. I don't know whether it comes down to the fact that because I'm at work, I'm with other people all day therefore I value time on my own or whether it's just a personality trait, I don't know." (lone mother, computer systems analyst, limited atypical hours)

"I personally haven't, I'm too exhausted to be thinking about gyms at 9 o'clock at night ... when my children are grown up enough

I will then think about that time for myself, but that's not an issue where – I enjoy watching my children play football, I don't have to go and watch them play football but I enjoy watching them, so I could quite easily go off and do my own thing but I don't enjoy it, so that's my time, my time is watching them.” (mother, registered childminder, limited atypical hours)

A few people felt that they had more time on their own than they needed:

“I do get more time to myself than I would choose because I might be kicking around waiting to go to work while [son] is at school and [wife] is at work, so yes, I get more time than I would choose, to be honest.” (father, police officer, substantial atypical hours)

Women seemed to talk more than men about the importance of time for themselves. This seemed to be underpinned by the fact that women spent time balancing a number of different demands on their time. While men appeared to be mainly balancing work with being at home, women spoke about being the main organiser of childcare, and the main person doing the cooking and housework. Not surprisingly, the time spent doing housework or other domestic responsibilities was not seen as time for themselves. This was also acknowledged by some male partners (as well as being reported by women):

“To be fair, [my wife] does the majority of the household chores. I mean apart from maybe pots and cooking on my part, [she] probably does the rest, you know, ironing and washing, so I think it's important even for her to have some sort of relaxation or relaxed time where she hasn't got to do anything which is the same for me.” (father, factory technician, limited atypical hours)

Some people had a more conscious approach towards active management and balancing of demands on their personal time. This was linked to the deliberate creation of special family times (mentioned above), either through instituting 'rules' for themselves or the whole family, or through managing their time so that housework or other things did not impinge on these times. Others prioritised the different demands on their

time, and saw the use of their time in terms of conscious choices:

“I've kind of redefined what I want to do with that time... So although I have the opportunity to have time to myself I tend to find I just think, oh, I'll just put that washing load in or I'll just do this or I'll just do that, but that's choice, I could put my feet up and have a glass of wine if I wanted to, it's up to me. I like to be on top of things particularly for weekends so I can do things with the children.” (lone mother, computer systems analyst, limited atypical hours)

Lone parents' circumstances were very different from those of parents in couples when it came to spending time by themselves. In many ways, balancing their time was harder because they were doing everything on their own and had no partner at home to share childcare with. However, in some ways spending time on their own was easier than for partnered parents, for example, when children were seeing their (non-resident) father. Some lone parents said that they found they had more time to themselves than they had ever had when they were living with the children's father.

Time with a partner

As already mentioned, spending time with a partner was seen as important, but was generally not a high priority compared to family time, and in particular when children were young, people spoke about putting their time together as a couple on hold until children were older.

Where people did manage to spend time together as a couple, this was usually in the evening when children were asleep, or at other times when children were out but neither parent was working.

However, some people were very concerned about a lack of time together as a couple. Not surprisingly, this was particularly true among couples who were doing some sort of shift parenting. As with family time, people spoke about trying to instigate special 'couple time', and some had taken particular steps to do so. This issue is discussed further, in Chapter 6, when we will report on how people felt work had impacted on their family time and time spent as a couple.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to explore how parents think about family time in different manifestations; the findings largely reflect the views of parents with atypical working hours, given that the in-depth interviews focused mainly on this group. It is not surprising that parents place a different emphasis on different ways of using their time. This is partly influenced by the age of the children (in particular where older children have lives which are more independent from their parents), but also in relation to children's routines and different times of the day or week when parents feel they should be available. Time with children was a top priority, above time for oneself or with a partner. Although time when the whole family was together was not seen as especially important to everyone, 'traditional' family times, such as evening meals and weekends, nonetheless emerged as significant times for parents.

There was some evidence that parents' attitudes towards use of time had some impact on their decisions about working hours (if they felt able to have a say over their hours). In particular, where people felt strongly about the amount of time they themselves spent with children, this had sometimes resulted in cutting down their working hours, or in the decision to keep a particular time of day or week 'sacrosanct' and free from work. At the same time, people's attitudes sometimes appeared to be shaped by their work patterns. For example, parents who worked hours that affected the time available for the children or the family focused instead on the alternative times, when they were free from work (for example, weekends or weekday evenings), and worked on the basis of quality time rather than quantity.

6

Atypical work and its influence on family life

This chapter addresses the key research question: what influence does atypical work have on different aspects of family life? We first look at the extent to which atypical work might limit specific family activities; we then explore the impact of work on family life more generally and how satisfied parents are with the time they are able to spend with their children. We unpack the different dimensions of atypical work and how these might impact differently on various aspects of family life. This is followed by a discussion of how work might interfere with a couple's time. To conclude we present some case studies, which illustrate some of the key findings on the relationship between atypical work and family life.

Impact of work on family activities

In the in-depth interviews we found that it was often difficult for parents to establish what might be the negative effects of working hours on their family life. Parents instead tended to talk about the effects of their hours in terms of things that *they* missed out on in relation to their children, or in relation to things that they were unable to do for themselves or with their partner. Their feelings about how they should be spending time with the children or as a family tended to be guided by fairly broad ideas about parenting, rather than by any particular idea of cause and effect, that is, how much time was the right amount to spend with the children and for what reasons. Women in particular spoke about feeling 'guilty', or not feeling like a 'proper mother' if they felt they were not spending 'enough' time with their children.

There was a range of different things that parents believed they were missing out on because of their working hours, including:

- not being available generally for children after school, and especially to help with homework;
- not seeing children every day, or being away from home for periods of time;
- missing children's development, for example, 'their first steps';
- not being able to be involved in children's after-school activities and to organise children's visits to their friends;
- not being able to attend school functions, sports days and so on;
- not being able to spend the weekend together;
- not being able to eat together as a family.

As is clear from the activities mentioned, some of these were restricted by work done outside standard hours (for example, weekends, evening meals), but some were equally an effect of being at work at all outside school hours, for example, working a 'typical' 9-5 day still restricts involvement in after-school activities.

The extent to which work at different times interfered with family activities was also explored in the survey, and in the next sections we compare the survey results for families where parents frequently worked atypical hours with those who did not do any atypical hours or did them only occasionally.

Evening family meals

As discussed, evening meals were seen by parents as an important time for the family, an opportunity for parents and children to spend

some 'quality' time together, a 'ritual' which ensured regular contact and communication between different family members. Survey respondents were therefore asked if and how frequently they had an evening meal together as a family. As shown in Table 6.1, while most working families regularly had a meal together, parents who frequently worked atypical hours were less likely than others to do so:

- 50% of households where both parents frequently worked atypical hours all shared a family meal everyday or most (that is, 4-6) days of the weeks; the equivalent figures for the other dual-parent groups were: 60% where only the father was an atypical worker, 67% if the mother only frequently worked atypical hours and 75% of families where both parents did occasional or no atypical hours;
- 7% of families where the father only was an atypical worker and 8% of dual frequent atypical worker households did not usually have an evening meal together;
- 73% of lone mothers in the frequent atypical work category had a family meal every day or most days (that is, 4-6) of the week, compared with 80% of other lone mothers.

Predictably a family evening meal was more likely to be disrupted if parents worked late afternoons, evenings or nights; around 1 in 10 dual-parent households where (one or both) parents frequently worked these hours did not regularly eat together.

Not surprising, given the above results, 59% of mothers who frequently worked atypical times said that their job prevented them from sharing an evening meal with the rest of the family, compared with a quarter (25%) of other employed mothers. Fathers' work was seen by mothers as being even more disruptive: 83% of mothers with a partner who frequently worked atypical hours and 59% of those with a partner with occasional or no atypical hours said that their partner's job prevented the family from having an evening meal together.

Family holidays

A holiday can also be another 'special' time for families and again, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, atypical work seems to interfere with this special family time. While most families had had a family holiday in the past year, as found with meal times, those most likely to miss out on family holidays were households where both parents frequently worked atypical hours (14%) and where only the father did so (8%). Lone parents were less likely than other parents to say that they had had a family holiday, with lone mothers who frequently worked atypical hours being the least likely to have had a holiday (16% had not had a holiday in the past year) (Table 6.2).

Table 6.1: Couples' work patterns and frequency of family evening meals^a (%)

	Dual-parent families				Lone mothers	
	Mother only frequent atypical work	Father only frequent atypical work	Both frequent atypical work	Both occasional/no atypical work	Frequent atypical work	Occasional/no atypical work
Every day	[31]	27	28	45	43	52
4-6 days a week	[36]	33	22	30	30	28
1-3 days a week	[29]	31	37	25	24	14
Don't usually eat together	[3]	7	8	-	2	5
Varies greatly	[1]	2	5	1	1	-
<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>91</i>	<i>344</i>	<i>417</i>	<i>113</i>	<i>107</i>	<i>92</i>

Base: all mothers.

Note: ^a A family evening meal was defined as one which included the respondent, her partner (if applicable) and at least one of their children (if there was more than one child in the household).

Table 6.2: Parents' work patterns and family holidays^a in the past year (%)

	Dual-parent families				Lone mothers	
	Mother only frequent atypical work	Father only frequent atypical work	Both frequent atypical work	Both occasional/no atypical work	Frequent atypical work	Occasional/no atypical work
A week or longer	91	86	80	96	79	83
Less than a week	3	7	7	4	5	3
None	6	8	14	1	16	14
<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>90</i>	<i>341</i>	<i>412</i>	<i>114</i>	<i>111</i>	<i>97</i>

Base: all mothers.

Note: ^aA family holiday was described as a time when both parents (if applicable) were not at work and the children were also at home, regardless of whether they went away or not.

Other family activities

The survey also explored the impact of parental work on some of the other activities discussed above, such as reading and playing with the children, and taking them to sports classes, which might involve one or both parents, and also asked about activities which involved the whole family, such as family visits and outings. As well as the extent to which mothers' thought their work disrupted these activities, mothers were also asked about the impact of their partner's work on these activities. The results are presented separately for couples and for lone parents.

Couples

Children's activities which might involve one or both parents were most likely to be disrupted by work and particularly by work at atypical times. This is probably due to the fact that these activities are likely to be frequent and some (for example, sport/recreational activities) tend to take place at fixed times. However, it is interesting to note that, regardless of work patterns, the majority of mothers said that their work never limited these activities, while the perceived disruption of the father's work was considerably higher, particularly if they were atypical workers.

As shown in Table 6.3, among mothers and fathers who *frequently worked atypical hours*:

- 32% of these mothers said that their working hours and/or days limited the time they could

spend reading, playing and helping their children with their homework every week; the equivalent figure for fathers is 46%;

- 26% of these mothers felt that their work limited their involvement with children's recreational activities every week; at 41% the corresponding figure for fathers was considerably higher;
- 24% of mothers in this group said that their work regularly prevented outdoor activities with the children; the equivalent figure for fathers was again higher, at 36%.

Compared with children's activities, activities which involved the whole family, such as family visits, shopping and outings, were less likely to be limited by atypical work, with 20% or less of mothers with frequent atypical hours saying that their work regularly disrupted these. The corresponding figure for fathers with frequent atypical hours was between 20% and 28%. However, the gap between atypical parents with frequent atypical hours and other parents remains large, even for these activities.

These results suggest that while atypical work does limit family activities, maternal atypical work is considerably less likely to be disruptive than paternal atypical work, probably because, as discussed earlier, mothers work shorter (atypical) hours, and often these are arranged around the needs of the family.

In order to explore the impact of work in dual-parent households with different work patterns, we first look at whether the mother's work often (that is, every week) limited the activities

Table 6.3: Mothers' views on whether their and their partner's days and/or hours of work limit family activities: dual-parent households (%)

How often work limits time spent on:	Mothers		Fathers	
	Frequent atypical work	Occasional/no atypical work	Frequent atypical work	Occasional/no atypical work
<i>Reading, playing, helping the children with homework</i>				
Every week	32	12	46	18
Less often	10	11	18	22
Never	59	77	37	60
<i>Involvement in children's recreational/sport activities</i>				
Every week	26	15	41	28
Less often	22	22	32	31
Never	52	64	26	41
<i>Outdoor activities with the children^a</i>				
Every week	24	14	36	18
Less often	16	10	24	17
Never	60	76	40	65
<i>Family visits to friends/relatives</i>				
Every week	20	9	25	10
Less often	25	12	28	15
Never	55	79	47	74
<i>Going shopping with the family</i>				
Every week	18	7	28	8
Less often	11	9	18	14
Never	71	84	54	78
<i>Family outings</i>				
Every week	17	5	20	7
Less often	21	10	29	18
Never	62	85	52	75
<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>508</i>	<i>458</i>	<i>761</i>	<i>204</i>

Base: all partnered mothers.

Note: ^a This question was asked only if the youngest child in the household was aged 14 or under.

discussed above; and second, whether mothers thought that their partner's work often disrupted these activities.

- For some activities (that is, reading and playing with the children and family visits) the disruption caused by maternal work was similar regardless of whether the mother only or both parents frequently worked atypical hours. Mothers' work was more likely to limit outdoor activities with the children, family shopping and outings, if the father was also a frequent atypical worker. Involvement in children's recreational activities, on the other

hand, was more likely to be affected by maternal work if only the mother was a frequent atypical worker (Table 6.4).

- Among fathers all activities were more likely to be limited by paternal work if only the father frequently worked atypical hours, although in some cases differences were small (Table 6.5).

The different effects of maternal and paternal work in households with different (atypical and typical) work combinations seem to confirm the earlier results. These showed that families where both parents were frequent atypical workers were

Table 6.4: Couples' work patterns and family activities limited by the mother's work (%)

	% of partnered mothers who said their work limited each of the activities listed every week			
	Mother only frequent atypical work	Father only frequent atypical work	Both frequent atypical work	Both occasional/no atypical work
Reading, playing, helping children with homework	33	13	31	12
Involvement in children's recreational/sport activities	31	14	25	16
Outdoor activities with the children ^a	14	13	26	16
Family visits to friends/relatives	19	9	21	9
Going shopping with the family	13	7	19	5
Family outings	11	6	19	4
<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>91</i>	<i>344</i>	<i>417</i>	<i>113</i>

Base: all partnered mothers.

Note: ^a This question was asked only if the youngest child in the household was aged 14 or under.

Table 6.5: Couples' work patterns and family activities limited by the father's work (%)

	% of partnered mothers who said their work limited each of the activities listed every week			
	Mother only frequent atypical work	Father only frequent atypical work	Both frequent atypical work	Both occasional/no atypical work
Reading, playing, helping children with homework	10	50	42	24
Involvement in children's recreational/sport activities	19	43	41	36
Outdoor activities with the children ^a	14	39	34	21
Family visits to friends/relatives	6	28	22	14
Going shopping with the family	4	29	28	12
Family outings	2	21	19	11
<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>91</i>	<i>344</i>	<i>417</i>	<i>113</i>

Base: all partnered mothers.

Note: ^a This question was asked only if the youngest child in the household was aged 14 or under.

more likely to have some kind of shift parenting arrangement, and fathers were more likely to play a bigger role in terms of childcare, compared with families where only the father was a frequent atypical worker. Households where only the father frequently worked at atypical times seemed to have a more traditional gender division of labour, with the mother having main or even sole responsibility for the children and the father often working long and substantial atypical hours.

The extent to which work limits children's and family activities might be expected to be greater at certain times of the day (for example,

evenings) and week (for example, Sundays), and also if work at these times is frequent. However, parents were asked a general question about the impact of work on these activities, rather than a more specific question about the impact of work at specific times. Given that most parents worked a combination of atypical hours, the link between the frequency of different atypical times and disruption to family and children's activities is not easy to assess. Although some trends seem to emerge from this analysis, the results should be treated with caution.

Among partnered mothers:

- those who worked late afternoons, evenings and nights were more likely to say that work often disrupted children’s and family activities than those who worked early mornings;
- an association between late afternoon, evening and night work and its frequency was particularly evident for some activities; for example, mothers who worked these hours several times a week were more likely than those who did these hours several times a month to say that reading, playing and helping the children with homework, family visits and outings were often limited by work.

Similar trends were found among fathers, although in this case the frequency of late afternoon, evening and night work (that is, several times a week versus several times a month) was more clearly linked to disruption to both children’s and family activities.

Finally we looked at the impact of Sunday work and the number of working hours on family activities, as the latter are regulated by legislation, while there is pressure from the business community to relax current Sunday trading legislation, which imposes a six-hour limit on Sunday opening (Irwin, 2002).

An association was found between Sunday work and disruption to family activities, with both mothers and fathers who worked on Sundays more likely than other parents to say that work disrupted these activities. However, the link between frequency of Sunday work and disruption to family activities is less clear (Tables 6.6 and 6.7)¹:

- 40% of mothers who worked every Sunday said that their work often limited the time they could spend reading and playing with their children, compared with 15% of those who did not work on Sundays; the corresponding figures for fathers were 53% for those who worked every Sunday, and 33% for those who never worked on this day;
- 32% of mothers who worked every Sunday said that their work often limited family visits, compared with 11% of those who did not work on Sunday; the corresponding figures for fathers were 36% for those who worked every Sunday, and 20% for those who never worked on this day;
- similarly, 32% of mothers who worked every Sunday said that their work often limited family outings, compared with 6% of those who did not work on Sundays; the corresponding figures for fathers were 40% for

Table 6.6: Mothers' Sunday work and disruption to family activities (%)

	% of partnered mothers who said their work limited each of the activities listed every week				
	Sunday work every week	Sunday work every 2-3 weeks	Sunday work once a month	Sunday work less often	Never Sunday work
Reading, playing, helping children with homework	[40]	47	[21]	31	15
Involvement in children's recreational /sport activities	[32]	21	[18]	31	18
Outdoor activities with the children ^a	[23]	27	[21]	26	16
Family visits to friends/relatives	[32]	19	[20]	23	11
Going shopping with the family	[24]	22	[21]	15	9
Family outings	[32]	19	[23]	16	6
<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>118</i>	<i>66</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>622</i>

Base: all partnered mothers.

Note: ^a This question was asked only if the youngest child in the household was aged 14 or under.

Table 6.7: Fathers' Sunday work and disruption to family activities (%)

	% of partnered mothers who said their work limited each of the activities listed every week				
	Sunday work every week	Sunday work every 2-3 weeks	Sunday work once a month	Sunday work less often	Never Sunday work
Reading, playing, helping children with homework	[53]	49	[54]	38	33
Involvement in children's recreational sport activities	[57]	36	[33]	43	37
Outdoor activities with the children ^a	[51]	32	[38]	37	28
Family visits to friends/relatives	[36]	24	[25]	18	20
Going shopping with the family	[43]	28	[27]	14	23
Family outings	[40]	16	[18]	15	15
<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>77</i>	<i>135</i>	<i>83</i>	<i>159</i>	<i>511</i>

Base: all partnered mothers.

Note: ^a This question was asked only if the youngest child in the household was aged 14 or under.

those who worked every Sunday, and 15% for those who never worked on this day.

As shown in Tables 6.8 and 6.9, among both mothers and fathers a very clear link was found between the number of working hours and disruption to family activities, although again the results for the former should be treated with some caution as the number of mothers working more than 40 hours a week was small. Some of the largest differences were again found for:

- reading and playing with the children, with 20% of mothers who worked part time (that is, under 30 hours a week) saying this was often limited by work compared with 42% of those who worked over 48 hours; the corresponding figures for fathers were 28% for those in the 30-40 hours group and 68% of those who worked 60 hours or more;
- outdoor activities, with 13% of mothers who worked part time saying this was often limited by work, compared with 46% of those who worked over 48 hours; the corresponding figures for fathers were 23% for those in the 30-40 hours group and 53% of those who worked 60 hours or more;
- similarly large differences were also found in relation to parents' involvement with children's recreational activities, family visits and outings.

Lone parents

As shown in Table 6.10, as with respondents in couples (Table 6.3), lone mothers who frequently worked atypical hours were more likely than other lone parents to say that work often interfered with the family activities explored in the survey.

Some, although on the whole not very large, differences were found between lone and partnered mothers in the extent to which they felt their work interfered with family activities. Compared with frequent atypical workers in dual-parent families, lone mothers with frequent atypical hours were more likely to say that work often (that is, every week) interfered with some children's activities, including:

- reading, playing and helping children with their homework (37% of lone mothers, compared with 32% of partnered mothers with frequent atypical hours);
- involvement with children's recreational activities (30% of lone mothers, compared with 26% of partnered mothers with frequent atypical hours).

For some family activities the reverse was true, with lone mothers with frequent atypical hours

Table 6.8: Mothers' working hours and disruption to family activities (%)

	% of partnered mothers who said their work limited each of the activities listed every week			
	1-29	30-40	41-48	49+
Reading, playing, helping children with homework	20	22	[29]	[42]
Involvement in children's recreational/sport activities	17	23	[24]	[40]
Outdoor activities with the children ^a	13	21	[39]	[46]
Family visits to friends/relatives	11	18	[20]	[32]
Going shopping with the family	10	14	[18]	[24]
Family outings	10	12	[18]	[18]
<i>Weighted base</i>	498	346	66	55

Base: all partnered mothers.

Note: ^a This question was asked only if the youngest child in the household was aged 14 or under.

Table 6.9: Fathers' working hours and disruption to family activities (%)

	% of partnered mothers who said their partner's work limited each of the activities listed every week				
	1-29	30-40	41-48	49-59	60+
Reading, playing, helping children with homework	[13]	28	45	51	68
Involvement in children's recreational/sport activities	[8]	32	43	47	55
Outdoor activities with the children ^a	[10]	23	36	40	53
Family visits to friends/relatives	[13]	17	25	23	36
Going shopping with the family	[4]	18	26	32	38
Family outings	[9]	12	17	22	32
<i>Weighted base</i>	24	459	193	173	113

Base: all partnered mothers.

Note: ^a This question was asked only if the youngest child in the household was aged 14 or under.

less likely than their counterparts in couples to say that work often limited these activities, including:

- going out with the children for a walk, bike ride or other outdoor activities (the respective figures being 21% and 24% for lone and partnered mothers with frequent atypical hours);
- family visits (the respective figures being 15% and 20% for lone and partnered mothers with frequent atypical hours).

When looking at weekly disruption to reading, playing and helping the children with homework, the difference between lone mothers with frequent atypical hours and other lone mothers is very similar to that of partnered mothers (21 and

20 percentage points respectively). In the case of involvement in children's recreational/sports activities the difference between lone mothers with frequent atypical hours and other lone mothers (16 percentage points) is larger than that of their partnered counterparts (11 percentage points). For all other activities, among lone mothers there were not large differences (3-6 percentage points) between the proportion of frequent atypical and other workers who said these activities were often disrupted by work, while the equivalent figure was more than double (10-12 percentage points) among partnered mothers. This is because lone mothers with occasional or no atypical hours were more likely than their partnered counterparts to say that work often disrupted these activities.

Table 6.10: Whether lone parents' days and/or hours of work interfere with family activities (%)

How often work limits time spent on:	Lone mothers	
	Frequent atypical work	Occasional/no atypical work
<i>Reading, playing, helping the children with homework</i>		
Every week	37	16
Less often	7	9
Never	56	75
<i>Involvement in children's recreational/sport activities</i>		
Every week	30	14
Less often	20	36
Never	50	50
<i>Outdoor activities with the children^a</i>		
Every week	21	17
Less often	19	11
Never	60	72
<i>Family visits to friends/relatives</i>		
Every week	15	12
Less often	26	11
Never	59	77
<i>Going shopping with the family</i>		
Every week	12	8
Less often	9	8
Never	78	85
<i>Family outings</i>		
Every week	16	10
Less often	18	9
Never	66	82
<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>107</i>	<i>92</i>

Base: all lone mothers.

Note: ^a This question was asked only if the youngest child in the household was aged 14 or under.

Views about influence of work on family life

The survey explored satisfaction with the time parents were able to spend with their children. While overall levels of satisfaction were high, atypical work and particularly paternal atypical work was associated with lower than average satisfaction levels. In dual-parent families (Table 6.11):

- mothers with frequent atypical hours were more likely to be dissatisfied with the time they were able to spend with their children than other mothers, 24% of the former were fairly or extremely dissatisfied, compared with 14% of the latter;
- respondents were even less satisfied with the time their partners spent with the children;

again the level of dissatisfaction was higher if the partner frequently worked atypical hours (33% saying they were fairly or extremely dissatisfied), compared with those with partners with occasional or no atypical hours (14% were fairly or extremely dissatisfied).

A combined variable was created to show the proportion of respondents in dual-parent families who were (extremely or fairly) dissatisfied with the time they and/or their partners were able to spend with the children (Figure 6.1). The results are in line with previous findings and show that work was more likely to disrupt family life where the father only and where both parents frequently worked atypical hours: 40–41% of respondents in these two groups were dissatisfied with the time they and/or their partners spent with the children. The corresponding figures were 25% where only the mother frequently worked atypical hours, and

Table 6.11: Satisfaction with time employed mothers and fathers spend with their children in dual-parent households (%)

	Mothers		Fathers	
	Frequent atypical work	Occasional/no atypical work	Frequent atypical work	Occasional/no atypical work
Extremely satisfied	21	30	14	23
Fairly satisfied	55	56	54	64
Fairly dissatisfied	19	12	26	11
Extremely dissatisfied	5	2	7	3
<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>508</i>	<i>458</i>	<i>761</i>	<i>209</i>

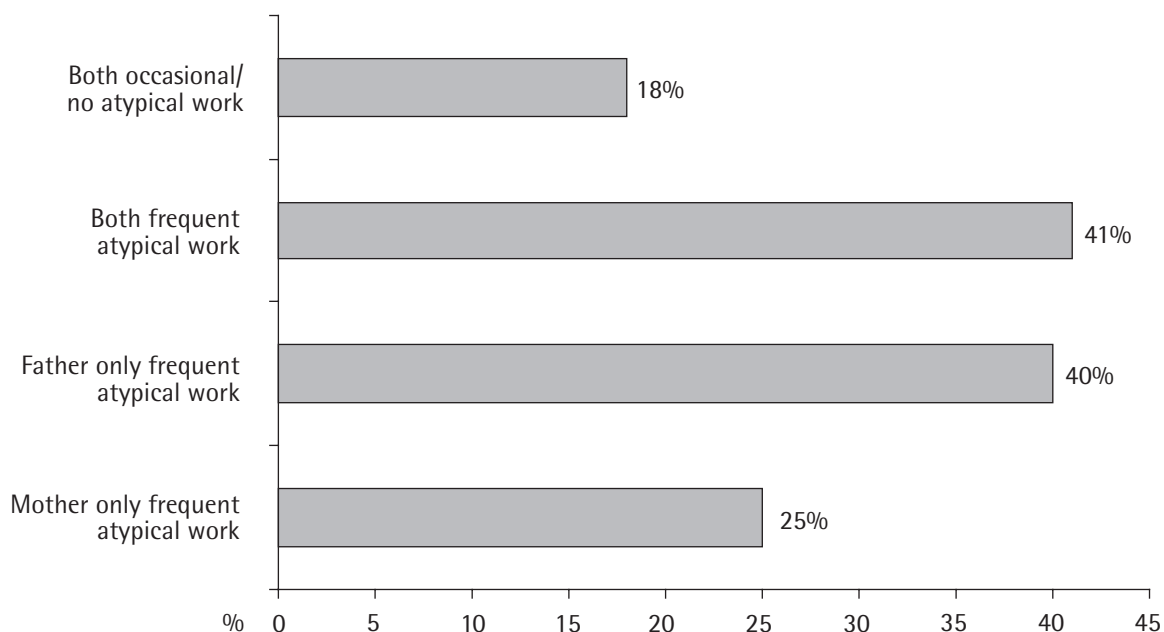
Base: all partnered mothers.

18% where both parents did occasional or no atypical hours.

Views about the influence of work on family life were also explored in the in-depth interviews. As mentioned earlier, parents seemed reluctant to think of their work as having any negative impact on their children's lives, and often underlined this with the general principle that family would always come before work, and that at some level they had a choice about the hours they worked:

“If we thought our hours were affecting him adversely then the hours would go, we'd cut back on the hours. We do the hours out of choice, we enjoy our jobs and we think we can sustain a reasonable family life. If the family life was going wrong then the hours would stop.” (father, police officer, substantial atypical hours)

However, particular groups of people were more likely to believe that work patterns were having a detrimental effect on family life. First, among

Figure 6.1: Respondents who were dissatisfied with the time they and/or their partner^a spend with the children in dual-parent households with different work patterns (%)

Base: all partnered mothers (weighted base: 966).

Note: ^a The figure shows the percentage of respondents who said they were fairly or extremely dissatisfied with the time they and/or their partner spent with the children.

couples where both partners were working substantial atypical hours there was a feeling that both parents and children were or might be missing out from not having enough time all together as a family:

“One Sunday in a month he has the full day off so in that Sunday we might go sailing [otherwise] I usually have to take them but no, we don’t really do, the only time we do things together is when we’re off.... It’s horrible. Can’t go anywhere, can’t plan anything because we don’t really know, can’t go away for a week or anything like we want to, so it’s just the odd, catching the odd days when we can go.” (mother, factory worker, substantial atypical hours)

Another group of people who expressed concern about work interfering with family life were mothers whose partners worked long hours and who also travelled away from home. These women tended to work shorter hours themselves, and were happy with the time they spent with their children, but not with their partner’s involvement, including time spent as a whole family.

Some lone parents appeared to have more concerns than parents in couples about the effect of work on their family time. This was the case even where they were not working for a substantial amount of atypical hours. This appeared to be linked to feelings of guilt about working, and the effect of having to be responsible for children and the home all the time, which caused extra stress.

This was confirmed by the survey results, which show that lone mothers (Table 6.12) were less satisfied than other mothers (Table 6.11) with the

amount of time they were able to spend with their children. Dissatisfaction varied again according to whether lone mothers frequently worked atypical hours (31% were fairly or extremely dissatisfied) and other lone parents (19% were fairly or extremely dissatisfied).

The in-depth interviews show that concern about insufficient overlapping family time or time spent with the children was not by any means restricted to the effects of atypical hours. Two aspects are worth considering here. First, that the definition of atypical hours adopted for this study (that is, work outside the standard Monday to Friday week) was not the most significant cut-off point for some parents, especially mothers with school-age children. They said that their ideal working hours would be closely aligned with school hours (approximately 9am-3pm), and any hours worked past 3 or 3.30pm were seen as negative. Second, the total number of hours worked appeared to be a more relevant consideration for some people than the times of day the hours were worked. This was because their view about the way work interfered with family time was linked to the amount of time available for children, and working fewer hours meant that their time overall (including the other aspects of their life they sought to balance) was less rushed and more conducive to positive relationships with their children:

“I think less hours, two nights or three days a week would do me fine. That would actually be the nice medium that we need because I do get, I don’t get stressed out about work, I get stressed out about having to come home and start housework or coming home and cooking a meal and things like that.” (mother, nurse, substantial atypical hours)

Table 6.12: Satisfaction with time spent with their children (%)

	Lone mothers	
	Frequent atypical work	Occasional/no atypical work
Extremely satisfied	22	36
Fairly satisfied	47	45
Fairly dissatisfied	23	16
Extremely dissatisfied	8	3
<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>107</i>	<i>92</i>

Base: all lone mothers.

Another key aspect of people's concerns which was not directly related to working at atypical times was working during school holidays. This was the time when people said that they became most aware of the impact of their work, and was as true of standard hours as it was of working at atypical times, sometimes more so. This issue will be discussed further in the next chapter.

What factors shape the effects of different working hours

The in-depth interviews explored the different aspects of people's work and home arrangements that had an impact on the extent to which people's work interfered with their family life. In other words, given similar work patterns, working at similar atypical times, the following were key factors that were likely to heighten or lessen the perceived impact:

- the specific nature of their working hours, that is, the frequency, regularity and predictability;
- the nature of the job, for example, how flexible the hours are, whether the work can be based at home or not;
- the way in which the work hours of each partner are combined and fit with their preferred childcare arrangements;
- other aspects of home life which make demands on time;
- financial situation.

These factors are explored in the rest of this section.

Nature of working hours

It was not surprising to find from the quantitative and qualitative data that overall, where people were working less frequently at atypical times, the less likely this was said to interfere with different aspects of family life. For example, a married nurse who worked one out of four Saturdays did not feel this had a significant effect, and similarly, someone who took work home every evening felt this impacted on evening activities far more than someone who only did so occasionally.

However, at the same time, regularity and predictability of hours led to a less disruptive

work arrangement than for someone who was, for example, often on call or being given very little notice about their shift rota:

"I'm quite happy to do shift work but what we're doing at the moment I'm finding extremely hard work as you can imagine because it is unpredictable, particularly on the on-call weekends. It's very hard to plan anything such as visiting children, friends, going somewhere for a day out, whatever."
(father, separated from own children, maintenance engineer, substantial atypical hours)

The least disruptive arrangement for working at atypical times appeared to be work that was infrequent but predictable, allowing a degree of planning to be built around it.

The link between frequency of atypical hours (and in particular paternal atypical hours) and interference with family life was confirmed by the survey results, which asked mothers if and to what extent their own and their partner's work limited family time in the evenings and at weekends.

- Among mothers who worked late afternoon, a third (34%) of those who did it several times a week and 16% of those who did several times a month believed their work very much limited their evening family time. The corresponding figures for fathers who worked late afternoon several times a week and those who did these hours several times a month were 41% and 21% respectively.
- Thirty-eight per cent of mothers who worked evenings/nights several times a week and 35% who worked these hours several times a month believed that their work very much limited the evening family time. The equivalent figures for fathers who worked evenings/nights several times a week and those who did these hours several times a month were 47% and 43% respectively.
- Among respondents who worked every Saturday, 40% believed their work very much reduced Saturday family time, this figure drops to 23% among mothers who worked every 2-3 Saturdays. The corresponding figures for fathers were 51% (among those who worked every Saturday) and 27% (among those who worked every 2-3 Saturdays).

- Work was reported to limit Sunday family time by 35% of mothers who worked every Sunday and 24% of those who worked every 2-3 Sundays. The corresponding proportions for fathers were 43% (among those who worked every Sunday) and 28% respectively (among those who worked every 2-3 Sundays).

Nature of the job

The in-depth interviews found that the effect of atypical work was also linked to the degree of flexibility inherent in the job, and whether that flexibility was within the choice and control of the employee, or demanded by the employer. This mainly had an impact in terms of managing ad hoc childcare needs. Where people were able to work formal flexi-time, or have an informal system of give-and-take of hours, parents found that atypical hours were not particularly disruptive or were even seen as benefiting family life. For example, some people had a formal or informal arrangement to start work later in order to accommodate childcare arrangements; others had shift systems which allowed a degree of flexibility in their allocation or for swapping shifts with colleagues. Other people talked about feeling able to say 'no' to doing extra hours if they were not able to organise childcare.

The ability to work from home also provided some people with a flexibility to combine atypical hours with looking after children, for example, working in the evening once children were asleep.

Less positive aspects of flexibility arose where employees were required to work extra and atypical hours with very little notice, or felt obliged through a commitment to the job to work over and above their contractual hours. This was true, for example, for one nurse who, as a ward sister, felt she should cover for hours where there were otherwise nurse shortages on her ward.

Combination of work patterns and childcare arrangements

In dual-parent families, the combination of the parents' working hours could have a considerable influence on how they viewed the effect of atypical work on the family. However, a key difference here between couples is the extent to which frequent time with the whole family (that

is, overlapping family time) is important to them (see Chapter 5). Where maximum time with one or other parent is viewed as most important for the children, then lack of overlapping family time takes lower priority. Some family time was felt to be important, but this did not need to happen every day, or even every week:

"At least this way they get me through the week and they get daddy at weekends and then when it comes to my weekend off [once a month] we've got like a big trailer tent in the yard and we just go off with that, go and camp somewhere and go away for the weekend.... It's nice when there's just the five [of us], when there's like nobody else around, we just sit and play games or we go and sit by the river or whatever.... And it's nice to see the different things that they do with him at the weekend." (mother, senior care assistant, substantial atypical hours)

The two main groups who appeared to view their hours in this way were parents in the shift parenting category (particularly where this was a deliberate choice, rather than a necessary aspect of their respective jobs), and fathers where the mother was the main carer, and who felt that their contribution to family life was at a different level:

"The important moments are the things about behaviour, about, you know, how they've been in a certain circumstance and, even that, if I'm away on a trip, I mean you can hardly deal with that stuff.... They're the things that I think are important to be around for and they're the conversations that are really important to them." (father, sales director, substantial atypical hours)

As described earlier, there was a tendency for lone parents to see their atypical hours in a more negative way than parents in couples, unless they had a type of shift parenting arrangement with their ex-partner, or with their mother. This is likely to be linked to the fact that they did not have a substitute parent who could ensure that family life was being carried on while they were working.

Parents' perceptions about the impact of work on family life were also shaped by their views about their non-parental childcare arrangements. As discussed in previous chapters, it was unusual for

respondents to say they were not happy with their childcare arrangements. Sometimes there was concern about imposing on a grandparent, or about having to book and pay for a nursery place when it was not later needed, but generally the quality of care was felt to be good. When atypical hours led to a (non-parental) childcare arrangement which was believed to be positive for the child (for example, a grandparent, an after-school club), this was not seen as having a negative effect on family life.

Other demands on time

The influence of working hours on family life was seen very much in the wider context of other life spheres and commitments. These tended to be compounding factors that could cause extra time pressure and/or add to parents' stress. These factors became significant when people were talking about the amount of time they had available for children, but also the quality of that time and the impact on their relationship. The following are examples of commitments which negatively impinged on the time and energy parents were able to dedicate to family life:

- a long journey into work;
- a stressful or very tiring job;
- work-related study or training;
- housework, cooking.

"I'm sure I'm more short-tempered, I'm not a short-tempered person but because of my juggling, spinning these plates, it makes me more short-tempered which must have an impact on them, mustn't it, growing up with this neurotic mother." (lone mother, teacher, limited atypical hours)

In an open question, survey respondents were also asked if and what other factors, apart from work, limited their family time:

- domestic chores were mentioned by 13%;
- the same proportion (13%) said their hobbies and interests (for example, sport, voluntary work, learning) limited their family time;
- children's commitments (for example, sport or recreational activities, and time spent with their friends or a non-resident parent) were reported again by 13% of parents;

- parental stress and the need to care for an older or disabled relative were mentioned by very few respondents (2% in each case).

Whether a partner was supportive in sharing caring and domestic responsibilities could also make a difference as to how easy it was to manage family life at home.

The way different work patterns interfere with family life is clearly also shaped by the children's age and life cycle stage. For example, parents who worked atypical hours when children were not yet at school talked about how much more they would see of their children as a result of being at home during the day. Whereas, as children got older and started doing their own activities, family life might be far more influenced by the children's own preferences for not spending time together as a family, than by a parent not being at home during that time:

"In terms of the kids, you know, they've a fierce independence, it didn't take very long before you were boring and you weren't funny anymore.... They've got their lives and, you know, there are priorities that they're making for their lives and they're making decisions about whether they want you in it or not in it." (father, sales director, substantial atypical hours)

This finding seems to partly explain the earlier survey results (Chapter 4), which showed that atypical work was more common among mothers with children under the age of five and over the age of 11.

Financial situation

As discussed in Chapter 5, some parents talked about making a compromise between time and money when they spoke about family life. For them, the effects of their atypical hours were more about being able to provide their children with the opportunity to have a certain standard of living, than about being able to spend time with them. These people tended to have been relatively poor during their own childhood, and saw themselves as the family 'provider'; they were often men or lone parents.

Table 6.13: Couples' work patterns and satisfaction with time as a couple (%)

	Mother only frequent atypical work	Father only frequent atypical work	Both frequent atypical work	Both occasional/ no atypical work
Extremely satisfied	9	11	8	22
Fairly satisfied	64	55	51	61
Fairly dissatisfied	23	27	27	14
Extremely dissatisfied	4	7	14	3
<i>Weighted base</i>	91	344	417	113

Base: all partnered mothers.

Impact of work on couple time

In the survey partnered mothers were asked how satisfied they were with the time they were able to spend together as a couple; again the results show that satisfaction levels were lower among frequent atypical workers (Table 6.13):

- 41% of respondents who frequently worked atypical hours and whose partner also did so were (extremely or fairly) dissatisfied with time spent as a couple;
- the equivalent figure was between 27% and 34% where only one parent frequently worked atypical hours, and 17% where both parents did occasional or no atypical hours.

As reported in Chapter 5, time with a partner was generally seen as important. Being able to share things together, talk about problems, and spend time together was valued, as one person said, “that’s why we got married”. However, time as a couple invariably came lower down the list of priorities than time with children. A father who worked very long hours felt that when he came home his main priority was to spend time with the whole family:

“I would rather just be with the family, be with the kids and be with Claire [his wife] and of course I mean Claire would see that as being entirely selfish because she wants to go out and socialise and she wants to go and socialise with her partner [that is, the respondent] and he doesn’t want to.”
(father, sales director, substantial atypical hours)

Some respondents seemed particularly aware that their relationship was suffering as a result of a

combination of prioritising family time and their work. They had instituted specific times to spend together once they realised this was not happening naturally, for example, an evening out a week, or one weekend away a year. Other people were aware of the toll their work was taking on their relationship, but felt they could cope because of a belief that this would improve once the children were older or because it was a necessary sacrifice:

“I think our marriage has taken a toll (on having children and working) rather than Sarah [daughter] ... but in some respects the basics are still there so it’s better for it to be like that maybe than her to lose that time and things.” (mother, nurse, working substantial atypical hours)

The amount of time couples spent together was shaped largely by working hours and the ages and routines of children; for example, whether children went to bed early leaving the main part of the evening free for the parents to spend time together. Parents who both worked substantial atypical hours or in a shift parenting pattern seldom had time when they were both at home and the children were not around. However, the same was true for couples where only one partner worked substantial atypical hours and the other was working very standard, even part-time hours. Where one partner was working (late) evenings or at weekends, this was perceived as having a particularly negative effect on time for couples.

As the quotation above demonstrates, limited time as a couple not only affected time available to spend together, but could also have a negative effect on a couple’s social life. For some people, the combination of their working hours meant

that even if they were unable to spend time together at traditional times, such as weekday evenings, they nonetheless could spend time together at other times, for example, in the afternoons. However, this might mean little time available to see friends.

As with time available for children, factors other than work influenced the amount and quality of time that couples could spend together. Where parents felt very tired as a result of demanding work, or other demands on their time such as studying, they were less able to enjoy time with their partner.

Conclusion

We conclude the chapter by presenting some case studies which illustrate the range of combination of (atypical) work arrangements parents have and how much flexibility and control they have over their working hours. The case studies also show how different work patterns might lead to different childcare arrangements within and outside the home, and how parents feel about the quality and quantity of time they are able to spend with their children and as a family. The names of the families described in the case studies have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

Mother and father both atypical workers

Jenny and Paul both work a substantial number of hours at atypical times. They live in Devon with their three children, aged 10, eight and six. Jenny has a full-time managerial position in a department store. She enjoys her job and finds it rewarding, but is clear that her reason for working in that job is because they need the money. She has a rota every few weeks, usually involving half a week of early shifts (7am–4pm) and half a week of later shifts (9.30am–6.30pm). She works most Saturdays. Her work schedule has to be flexible to meet business needs. Her husband Paul works for a small business. He works full time on alternate shifts, 4am–5pm, and midnight to midday. He works near home, and can come home from work to help with the children. At the times when both parents are working and the children are not at school, they are looked after by a childminder, but Jenny is keen to make sure the children spend enough time with their parents. Jenny earns more than her husband and feels she needs to work to keep the family finances afloat.

Jenny feels frustrated that she sees little of her husband, and not enough of the children in the evening after school for homework and bathtime, although she is pleased that her husband gets to spend time with the children when she is at work. She feels the children miss out on doing activities after school, because neither parent can commit to a regular time. They have little family time together, and make a special effort to do things together in the evenings when both parents are home from work. She is particularly frustrated about Paul's long hours because he is always tired as a result of work.

Mother typical and father atypical worker

David is in a senior management position. He is very committed to his job, and as a result works an average 10-hour day; his job also involves a lot of travel and social events in the evenings and weekends. His wife works part time, five mornings a week, doing administrative work. David describes them as having split responsibilities, in that his wife has stayed at home to look after the children. They live in York with their two children, aged 13 and nine. The children go to various after-school activities, but do not have any formal childcare.

David does not feel that he misses out or that the children miss out as a result of his work. The family is important to him and, when he is not travelling, they have breakfast together and sometimes eat together in the evening. His main concern is that his wife is shouldering a lot of the burden of raising the children, and that his work causes a lot of tensions in their relationship; he also feels he misses out on time for himself. He feels he can give the family what they need and is there to discuss and deal with difficult issues that arise in relation to the children. His job is rewarding and challenging, and he would not want to work fewer hours. He thinks he is a good role model for his children in terms of his work.

Mother atypical and father typical worker

Elaine and Tony have two children, aged three and six, and live in Plymouth. They have arranged their work to do a type of shift parenting. Elaine works full time in the health sector. She works three shifts a week, clustered around the weekend: 8am until 10pm on Saturdays and Sundays, and from lunchtime on Fridays until the following morning. She has one weekend off a month. Her husband, Tony, works in a factory, from 8am until 5 or 5.30pm each weekday, with one afternoon off a week. When both parents are at work, the children are looked after by relatives or close friends. Elaine feels strongly about not using formal childcare.

Elaine wanted to work in order to have an interest outside the home, but deliberately chose her hours so that the children could be with one parent or the other most of the time. She wanted to work at the weekend so that she could be with the children during the week, as they started to get older and needed help with reading and homework. She likes the fact that they can spend the weekend with their father, although she is sometimes jealous of this time, and would like to have more family time. They usually have time all together, as a family, on weekday evenings, and every fourth weekend, when they plan to do things. She does not have much time for herself, or to spend with Tony, and they try to make time to go out one evening a week as a couple.

Lone mother, atypical worker

Sheila is divorced and has three children, aged 15, 13 and 10. They live in Bristol. She works full time as a teacher. She is out of the house at work from 8.15 am until about 4.30, although regularly stays for an hour longer at school for meetings. Some days she stays until mid-evening, when the children are with their father. She works at home doing preparation and marking in the evening from about 9pm, and on Sundays for about five hours. The children do activities after school, and need lifts, but are old enough to walk to school and to look after themselves.

Sheila is very committed to her job and works long hours as a result, but feels that it has a negative impact on the children because she is not always able to be a 'proper mum'; the children have to be more independent. She makes a conscious effort to have family time, especially for evening meals, although this happens less often as the children get older and want to do their own thing. She finds the combination of the tension of doing teaching work and juggling everything at home very stressful, and feels that this has an effect on how she behaves with the children and what she feels able to help with, for example, homework. She would feel more relaxed if she did not have to work in the evenings.

Note

- ¹ Caution should also be taken in considering some of the results as the number of cases in some of the categories is rather small.

Combining family and atypical work

Parents' views about family and work balance were also explored in relation to government intervention. Based on their experiences, in the in-depth interviews respondents were asked to reflect on what kind of policies would help parents to reconcile family and paid employment. This issue was explored in particular, but not exclusively, in relation to atypical work.

Parents' views about government intervention

The qualitative data show that underpinning the concept of family–work balance was the belief that this is ultimately a personal choice. Respondents believed that parents need to have options and to be able to take decisions according to their and their children's needs. As discussed earlier, these are likely to vary considerably depending on factors such as parents' career stage and aspirations; attitudes to parenting; beliefs about the importance of family time, time for themselves and as a couple; the availability of informal support networks, children's age and life cycle stage. Many respondents felt reasonably happy with the balance they had achieved between family and work, although there were considerable variations depending on parents' position in the labour market, financial and family circumstances. Many mothers were also far less happy about the extent to which their partner's work interfered with family life.

When the family–work balance issue was discussed in more general terms, rather than specifically in relation to respondents' personal circumstances, the overwhelming view was that many parents are not able to make family and work choices that are best for them and their

children. Indeed many are forced into situations which are extremely stressful for them and have a negative impact on the children. Respondents referred to the past, when their own circumstances were far from ideal, and also gave examples of other parents whose work circumstances were having a negative impact on their family life. As a childminder explained:

“I have a family at the moment, both parents work very long hours ... mum drops off and dad always picks up ... and dad works Saturday and mum always works Sunday. I personally think it's too much ... because I actually see their children are missing out on certain things ... like sports day at school and swimming gala at school and, you know, parents' evenings, going to friends' houses after school ... their children don't do any of that because they go to the childminder's in the morning and after school every single day, and then, dad works Saturday, mum works Sunday and they're trying to get the house cleaned and the garden done and ... food shopping for the rest of the week, so there's no family time whatsoever.” (mother, childminder, limited atypical hours)

As we will see in the rest of the chapter, there was a widespread belief that much needs to be done to support working families. Key areas of intervention identified by parents included: employment legislation, changing organisational cultures, support for low-income families and adequate childcare support.

Legislation and incentives were seen by some parents as essential to make workplaces more family friendly: “Legislation needs to be there, otherwise it [flexible work] won't happen”. But

this was not a universal view, as some thought that ultimately if employers are opposed to or are not persuaded by the benefits of family-friendly legislation, they will always find ways of avoiding it. In some cases legislation, for example to regulate working hours, could have a negative effect, as in recruiting staff, employers might discriminate against parents who might not be prepared to work the hours required by the business. There were also parents (particularly those in managerial positions and those who were self-employed) who could see the problems some employers might face if working arrangements were more (tightly) regulated.

It was also felt that current legislation should be strengthened and there should be more emphasis on enforcement. The Working Time Directive was mentioned as an example of legislation which was not achieving its aim, as some respondents explained: “Working Time Regulations make no difference to anything or anybody”; “We need a national strategy like the Working Time Directive, but one that is enforced”. The survey results in Chapter 2, which show that a nearly a third of fathers work over the limit specified by the Directive, seem to support the views expressed by these parents. This result is further supported by a recent study on work–life balance which also found that a substantial minority of men work above the 48 hours limit specified in the Directive (Hogarth et al, 2001)

Changing organisational cultures was also seen as essential by some parents. In parents’ pleas for more ‘reasonable’ working hours (discussed below), there was an evident desire to change workplace cultures so that family-unfriendly practices, such as long hours, become perceived as ‘unreasonable’. In arguing that government and employers need to work together to change the culture and the public’s perceptions of long hours, a mother gave the example of the drink driving campaign, which has radically changed the way drink driving is perceived by most people. Some parents also believed that cultural barriers in the workplace were particularly likely to be faced by fathers, as there is still little recognition and acceptance of their role as carer, an issue which has been highlighted by other studies (Burghes et al, 1997; Hogarth et al, 2001).

The ability to negotiate arrangements which met one’s family needs was for some parents more closely associated with financial issues, rather

than (or in addition to) family-friendly legislation or organisational cultures. Parents with low earning potential felt they had little or no choice of when and how much they worked, as this was largely determined by their financial needs. For these parents a ‘decent wage’ was a necessary precondition to achieving a better balance between work and family.

There was also a general agreement among parents that the childcare support available is often not adequate to meet the needs of working parents. Further government intervention was seen as necessary to improve access to different types of formal provision and to ensure that this was sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of parents with different employment patterns.

Having reviewed the ways in which parents felt changes could be brought about, in the rest of the chapter we will explore the specific changes parents identified as crucial to help them reconcile paid employment with family commitments.

More ‘reasonable’ working hours

In the in-depth interviews, long hours, which inevitably result in work at atypical times, were identified by respondents as a key pressure point for families and something which affected fathers in particular. While, as discussed in previous chapters, in some cases flexibility about when the ‘extra’ hours are done made them easier to combine with family commitments, they still considerably reduce family time. As one respondent explained, in reflecting about lessons learnt from her experience so far of combining family and work:

“I wouldn’t work so many hours, because you get tired and you do compromise family life ... I would kick my husband on the backside and get him to do more, ... get more involved with the family and for him to get a less stressful job so he was more amenable when he came in.” (mother, substantial atypical hours)

As discussed earlier, fathers’ long hours were perceived as particularly disruptive to family life, as a respondent, whose husband was a self-

employed builder and worked an average of 70 hours a week, explained:

“I don’t think the fathers get a true picture of what bringing a baby up is like because a lot of fathers are only there ... first thing in a morning and the rest it’s bedtime and that’s it, they’ve missed all the daily routine out. I mean obviously that’s not their fault, it’s just the way of the world ... they might be there for the last cuddle of the day sort of thing ... [but] there’s more to a baby than the last cuddle of the day, particularly as they get older and they demand more of your time.” (mother, nurse, limited atypical hours)

Also, as a father explained when asked what advice he would give to other parents:

“I would encourage [parents] ... not to invest so much time with work and more time with family because I think that, apart from anything else, anecdotal evidence suggests that people regret it later on, having spent so much time at work ... and I think that men in particular have an issue around work and identity and somehow ways have got to be found so that people can actually talk about where they feel their real priorities are and what they really want.” (father, vicar, limited atypical hours)

As discussed earlier, parents’ views about work at atypical times and how it influenced their family life varied considerably, with many being reasonably happy with the balance achieved. However, when discussing the issue of atypical hours more generally and parents’ preferences, work at atypical times and particularly at some of these times was seen as problematic for families:

“My advice [to other parents would be] find a job with set hours and don’t be a midwife.... It’s just my shift patterns really that are the bugbear, you know, if I could work set days then it would be, it would be wonderful, but it’s OK.” (mother, midwife, substantial atypical hours)

As the manager of a department store also explained:

“I think it’s wrong that we’re now open on a Sunday.... Because the people who do their

shopping are going to be office people or whatever who work 8 till 5, Monday to Friday, what about the people who have to work in the stores and if they’re contracted to work that day they have to work whether they want to or not, ... and I don’t think it’s all, oh yes, it’s brilliant, they’re open on Sunday, oh, they’re open on Boxing Day, but nobody actually gives a thought to the people and the families who actually are the ones that are going to.” (mother, retail store manager, substantial atypical hours)

Also, some felt that there was something wrong and unfair with a system where, on the one hand employees could be forced to work at atypical times, like weekends, while on the other, there is virtually no formal state-funded childcare at these times. This was particularly an issue for lone mothers who felt under strong pressure to be in paid work. As a lone parent, who used to work in a travel agency where she had to work Saturdays, explained:

“Childminders aren’t open on Saturdays. Nurseries don’t open on Saturdays so how the hell [can parents work on Saturdays], you can’t rely on your family anymore because a lot of people work so I think that, you know, I think the company definitely needs to be more flexible.” (lone mother, personnel officer, limited atypical hours)

The ‘unpopularity’ of work at atypical times, when considered in an ‘ideal world scenario’ was also confirmed by the survey results. Mothers who worked long hours (that is, over 40 hours a week) or at atypical times were asked if they would like to change their working arrangements. Respondents whose partners worked these hours were also asked if they would like their partner’s arrangements to change. The questions did not deal with the financial implications of changes in working hours, and therefore we cannot assess whether respondents would favour these changes, regardless of any financial consequences. Nevertheless the results provide a useful indication of the less ‘popular’ working arrangements.

As shown in Figures 7.1 and 7.2, weekend work and long hours were the arrangements parents would most like to change, with Sunday work proving particularly unpopular, as it had already

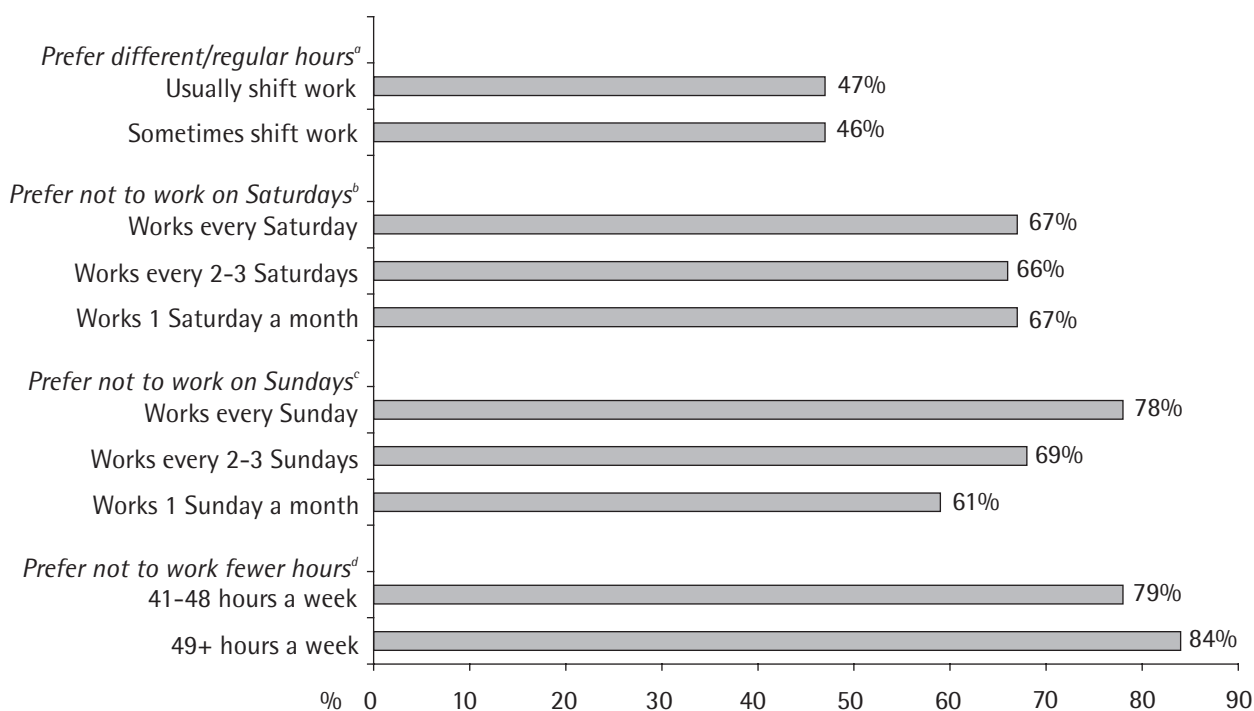
been shown by research on the impact of deregulating Sunday trading (Hill and Dex, 1999).

- Just under half (46-47%) of mothers who worked shifts would prefer to work different/regular hours; the equivalent figure was similar for fathers (44-48%); the results were very similar regardless of whether parents worked shifts often or occasionally.
- Regardless of how frequently mothers worked on Saturdays, the majority (66-67%) would prefer not to work on this day. The same applied to fathers, with 61-69% of respondents in a couple saying they would like their partners not to work on Saturdays.
- Sunday work was even more 'unpopular', although here there appears to be a link between frequency and preferences: 78% of mothers who worked every Sunday would prefer not to, compared with 61% of those who only worked one Sunday a month. The corresponding figures for fathers were 77% and 81%.
- Long hours were equally unpopular: 79-84% of mothers who worked over 40 hours a week would prefer to work shorter hours.

- Most respondents would also prefer their partners to work shorter hours, although a 41-48 hour week was perhaps seen as more acceptable for fathers (63% of mothers said they wanted them to work shorter hours) than for mothers (79% would prefer shorter hours).

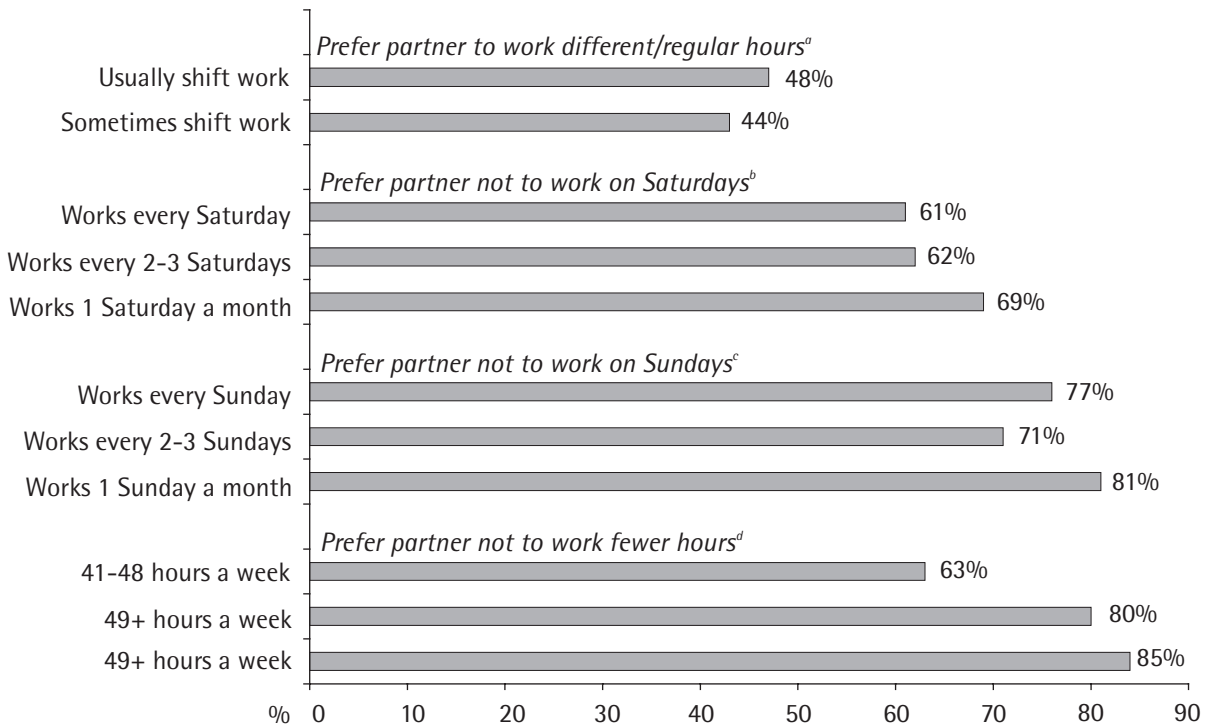
In an open question respondents who said they would like different working times were asked why they wanted to change them. As shown in Figure 7.3, the largest group of mothers (41-43%) wanted to change their working arrangements in order to have more family time, with the figures being similar, regardless of whether mothers frequently worked atypical hours or not. Other reasons for wanting to change job arrangements, such as reducing the use of non-parental childcare, work at times when childcare is easier to arrange and to have a better quality of life, were mentioned by a small proportion of respondents (6-9%), with again small differences found between mothers who frequently worked atypical hours and other working mothers.

Figure 7.1: Mothers' preferred work times (%)



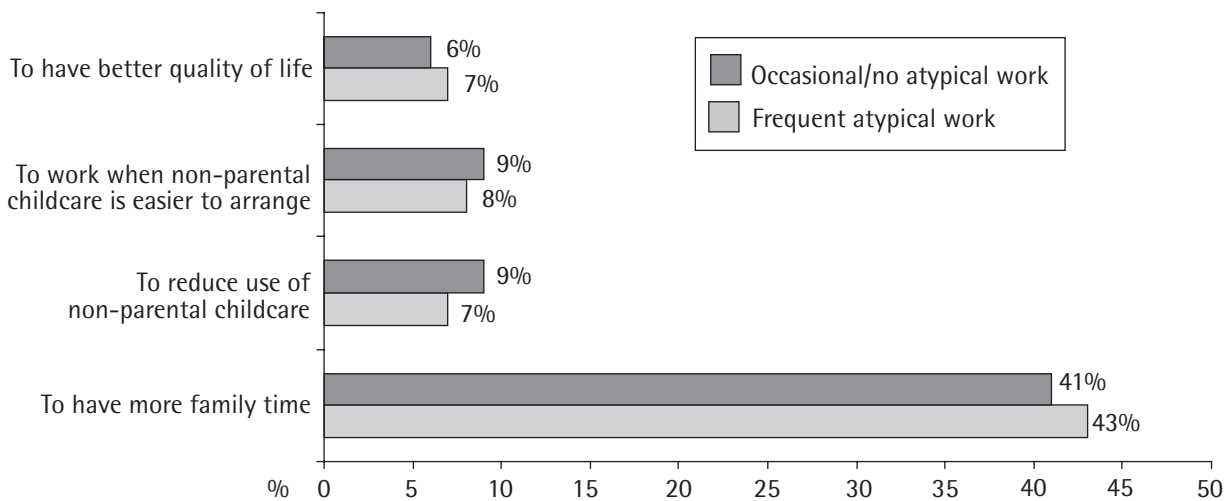
Base: ^a All mothers who worked shifts; ^b all mothers who worked Saturdays once a month or more often; ^c all mothers who worked Sundays once a month or more often; ^d all mothers who worked more than 40 hours a week.

Figure 7.2: Mothers' preferences for their partners' work times (%)



Base: ^a All mothers whose partner worked shifts; ^b all mothers whose partner worked Saturdays once a month or more often; ^c all mothers whose partner worked Sundays once a month or more often; ^d all mothers who whose partner worked more than 40 hours a week.

Figure 7.3: Mothers' reasons for preferring different working times (%)



Base: All mothers who preferred different working times (weighted base: 501).

Flexible work

Parents' views on the need for flexible arrangements for working families largely reflect the recent recommendations from the Work and Parents Taskforce (2001). A key issue raised by respondents in relation to work conditions was that *all* parents should have the power to negotiate arrangements that suit their family needs. Respondents believed that it should be 'legitimate' and 'acceptable' for parents to draw boundaries around work demands, when they feel that these would negatively affect their families. However, it was generally recognised that the control parents had over working arrangements varied considerably and some actually had very little. As a teacher explained:

"I would say [to other parents] ... you need to let your employer know what you need and try and negotiate, take advantage in any way you can.... And I suppose for me because being a so-called professional and being valued at work ..., it makes it much easier, but I know the lady who cleans our house, for example, is a teaching assistant ... and when she went on maternity leave they made her job redundant ... she didn't have anything to go on, she couldn't have made any demands of her employer."
(mother, teacher, limited atypical hours)

For many parents, and mothers in particular, flexible work meant being able to work part time, during school hours and term time, with the latter being particularly popular (and valued by those who could do it), given the difficulties in arranging holiday childcare (discussed later). However, for some parents flexible work also meant not being forced to work at atypical times, as a mother explained:

"His [husband's] workplace could do with coming into the 90s. He got reprimanded, quite seriously because he couldn't work overtime because of the kids." (mother, senior care assistant, substantial atypical hours)

Flexible work also meant being able to take sufficient time off, particularly at crucial stages (for example, when a child was born), but also for family emergencies (for example, when children are sick) and at key pressure points (for

example, school holidays). Two key recurrent themes emerged in discussions about parental leave: it should be paid, otherwise many parents would not be able to afford it; it should be there for both mothers and fathers; and the latter in particular should be strongly encouraged to take time off.

"I think it [parental leave] should be paid ... there's nothing more important to the children, in the first few years of their life and so there should be ... an incentive for people to take that time off and it shouldn't be seen as a penalty and it shows that it's the sort of priority for the whole of society and a community which is where it should be because I think the whole welfare of all our children is important for us all." (father, vicar, limited atypical work)

As another father also explained:

"It's slightly alienating for the father anyway during the pregnancy because the women can feel the growing in the stomach and the kicking and so on but the father is kind of outside ... and [therefore] it's very important for the father ... to have enough time after the birth ... what I found with the other dads is that they've got into this cycle whereby they went back to work too early, I mean often the day after as it were, and didn't get involved in the nappy changing and the feeding ... and as a result when they would occasionally try later on to do something like changing a nappy they'd do it a bit wrong and then the mother would be protective and go, oh, you don't do it like that, and they got into this cycle where they take increasingly less responsibility and some of them didn't seem to be able to get out of it." (father, news media editor, substantial atypical hours)

Flexibility was also related to the location of work. Some found that working from home made it easier for them to reconcile work and family. As we saw earlier, home working arrangements varied considerably. At one extreme, there were those who were totally home-based and who might be doing a job such as childminding so that they could look after their children, as well as earn an income. At the other end of the spectrum were parents who would do at home mainly the 'extra' work, typically in the

evening and the weekend. In both scenarios working from home meant that work at atypical times could be more flexible and cause less disruption to family life, and this was the aspect of home working which made it particularly appealing to parents.

Work near home was also something high on some parents' 'priority list', as this can contribute to reducing the amount of time one is away from the family. This was an issue that was more closely linked to how much parents worked, rather than when they worked. It was particularly important for parents who worked full time or long hours and were in danger of work spilling into what they saw as the minimum amount of family time they should have.

Childcare support

As mentioned earlier, there was general agreement among the parents interviewed that the childcare support available is often not adequate to meet working parents' needs. Many parents believed that in most areas subsidised group provision is not sufficient, particularly for under-threes and for school children. The aspects of provision parents felt should be improved are discussed in the rest of this section.

Flexible childcare

Flexibility of provision in terms of opening times was an issue raised by some parents and particularly by parents working atypical hours, for example, those who had to be at work early in the morning or late afternoon.

As with work, flexibility of childcare also had a spatial dimension, with some parents saying they would like work-based provision, especially for younger children, but also holiday care for school children. This did not appear to be an issue related specifically to atypical work, but it was more likely to be related to convenience (for example, eliminate the need for extra travel), or influenced by parents' wish to be near their children (for example, being able to pop in to see them or be around in case of an emergency).

Out-of-school care

Out-of-school care, both during holidays and term time, was identified by some parents as being problematic.

Holiday childcare seemed to be a key pressure point for working families, unless parents had a term-time contract or used all-year-round childcare provision, such as a nanny, a childminder or a private nursery:

"It's the holidays people get really stuck on ... you can work 9 till 3 and then pick up the kids, but no employer is going to let you have six weeks off." (mother, care assistant, substantial atypical hours)

"I get stuck in the school holidays and no childminder is going to have them just during school holidays. Something during school holidays would make life easier." (lone mother, waitress, limited atypical hours)

Another suggestion for dealing with school holidays was that they should be broken up in three-week sessions or even that parents should be given the choice of when their children could take their holidays. This is an option that might suit some parents, but could be problematic for others. Also a 'deregulated' school holidays system might raise serious questions for the viability of the holiday childcare industry.

An issue which affected some parents who worked atypical times, but also most parents who worked at all outside school hours, was the lack of group-based provision before and after school. Even if using a childminder was an option, some parents argued that school children do not want to go to a childminder, and they need provision with an emphasis on sport and recreational activities.

"I mean if there was an after-school club that did decent stuff and did a bit of sport and that they would enjoy going to, that would be brilliant, I think it would be good for them and it would mean I could sort of have a lot more leeway about what I do. So I think that's the biggest thing." (mother, further education tutor, no atypical hours)

“And a lot of children when they get to school age don’t really want to be going to childminders, they’d rather be playing football or netball with their friends.”
(mother, childminder, limited atypical hours)

Some parents also felt that there is an assumption that once children start secondary school they can ‘ fend for themselves’. While they might not require the same level of close supervision that younger children need, they still need a lot of support, as this is the stage when they are more likely to ‘get into trouble’; they could still benefit from some structured recreational and sport activities.

Childcare costs

It was generally thought that childcare costs are high; this is partly supported by the fact that, as shown earlier, shift parenting was linked in some cases to the need to reduce or even eliminate childcare costs:

“They [government] are encouraging us back to work, but they need to understand that someone has got to pay for childcare. Why make out-of-school clubs so expensive?”
(mother, senior care assistant, substantial atypical hours)

As well as the cost of provision itself, some parents face ‘additional’ costs because sessions need to be booked in advance (and therefore paid for). Parents with variable working arrangements, who get short notice about their hours, need to book and pay for childcare they may then not use. Parents with variable working hours were very likely to be people with substantial atypical hours.

Informal childcare

As was evident from the discussions in earlier chapters, and as it has been shown by other research (La Valle et al, 2000), family networks played a vital role in supporting working parents, as a mother explained:

“Parents who are thinking of moving away from their extended family should think again.” (mother, lawyer, no atypical hours)

Echoing the recommendations of recent research on grandparents (Richards, 2001), parents in the study thought there should be recognition for the support provided by grandparents, who play a vital role in terms of childcare provision. Some parents gave payments in kind to grandparents, and others wished they could afford to pay them, particularly as in some cases grandparents made a substantial contribution to childcare, and had to (re)arrange their work and other aspects of their life in order to help with the childcare. This was an issue that applied in particular to parents with atypical work, as they were more likely than others to rely on informal care. As we saw, use of informal care was influenced by many factors, but the lack of (subsidised) formal provision at some of the atypical times these parents worked was one of them.

Conclusion

Respondents in the in-depth interviews clearly thought that government needs to play an important role in supporting working families, by ensuring workplaces are more responsive to the needs of parents and by providing adequate and affordable childcare.

Changes suggested by parents, such as parental leave and more flexible working arrangements, are in line with legislation which has recently been introduced (for example, the 1999 Employment Relations Act), and with changes currently being considered by the government (for example, the recent recommendations of the Work and Parents Taskforce on flexible working). However, despite new legislation, it seems that parents’ ability to obtain jobs and working arrangements that fit with their family responsibilities still depend partly on the strength of their bargaining position and/or their willingness to ‘sacrifice’ their career. Parents, and particularly fathers, in less skilled occupations seemed to have less control over their working arrangements. As the survey results in Chapter 3 showed, fathers in manual occupations and with lower qualification levels were more likely than others to frequently work atypical hours. The survey results also show that the majority of mothers who worked at atypical times said these hours were a requirement of the job rather than a choice, with lone mothers particularly likely to mention this. We also saw, in Chapter 6, that in

an 'ideal world scenario', most parents would prefer not to work atypical hours, so they could have more family time, with long working hours and Sunday work being particularly unpopular. Long hours were seen as having a considerable negative impact on family life and as seriously limiting fathers' ability to be involved with their children's lives. The substantial minority of fathers in the survey who worked over the 48 hours limit specified in the Working Time Directive raises questions about the effectiveness of this legislation in tackling this issue.

Despite the widespread use of and preference for informal childcare, parents in the in-depth interviews felt that more could be done to improve formal provision. In particular, it was felt there should be more childcare for children under the age of three and for school-age children, and provision should be more flexible, affordable and responsive to the needs of families in different circumstances. While the relatively high level of involvement in childcare among fathers in lower level occupations could partly reflect their attitudes towards parenting roles, it could also be the result of lack of affordable provision. As the in-depth interviews have shown, the need to minimise or even eliminate childcare costs had contributed to some parents' decision to have some kind of shift parenting arrangement.

Conclusion

When we started the study we set out to answer what, on the surface, appeared to be a relatively simple research question: how is the increase in atypical working hours affecting family life? However, this question proved to be far more complex than it first appeared, and, as often happens in social research, it proved far from easy to find definitions, categories and typologies which could adequately capture and explain a very complex reality. The first challenge was to define 'atypical' working hours. In an increasingly deregulated labour market, the notion of 'typical' work ceased to be meaningful some time ago. Furthermore, the notion of a standard, Monday to Friday, 9-5 working week emerged in a social and economic context characterised by a gender division of paid and unpaid work, and where parents' relationship with the labour market and their caring responsibilities were seen as 'private matters'. As many working parents know, there is nothing 'typical' about the standard Monday to Friday, 9-5 week, as this does not correspond to the times when most childcare and education services have traditionally been available.

Having drawn somewhat artificial boundaries around the notion of atypical working hours, we then identified three key research questions:

- How widespread are different types of atypical work among working families?
- What are the push and pull factors that lead to work at atypical times?
- How does work at atypical times affect families in different circumstances?

In the rest of the chapter we first summarise the main results from the study, and then consider the policy implications of these findings.

Atypical work and family life

The study has shown that work at atypical times is widespread among parents and among fathers in particular. Parents' reasons for working at atypical times varied considerably and were shaped by the interaction of the attitudes, aspirations and behaviour of different family members, as well as labour market opportunities and access to childcare provision.

As with work arrangements in general, atypical work among mothers often reflected their preference about the way to reconcile work and family. Fathers' atypical work was more closely linked to financial necessity or job insecurity, or career ambition and long working hours. Parents' control over working arrangements depended largely on their bargaining position. Parents in professional jobs were more likely to report (typical or atypical) working arrangements which suited both their career aspirations and their family needs. On the other hand, some parents (and particularly fathers) in lower socioeconomic groups were likely to feel that they had no options but to work at atypical times, as there was no or little scope for negotiating more flexible arrangements in their workplace or to find a job with more suitable hours. The need to reduce or even eliminate childcare costs also influenced the working hours of some parents in this group, who had some kind of shift parenting arrangement.

Work at atypical times, and especially some of these times, such as Sundays, was unpopular with many parents as it negatively impinged on many aspects of family life, from parents' involvement in children's activities, to activities that involve the whole family. Also, as we saw, time for

couples seems to be the main ‘casualty’ of atypical work, as time for children and the whole family is prioritised. However, the in-depth interviews suggest that the overall survey results on the negative impact of atypical work might mask considerable variations between families in different circumstances. For some families work at atypical times had resulted in some benefits; for example, it had enabled parents (including some fathers) to spend more time with their children and have more time for themselves. It had reduced or even eliminated the need for non-parental childcare, and the ‘logistic’ difficulties and cost implications that can result from using this. In other families, however, atypical work meant that parents (and fathers in particular) were not able to be involved as much as they (and their partner) would have liked in their children’s lives. The amount of overlapping family time and family activities were also considerably limited by atypical work, with the biggest limitations arising where both parents were frequently working atypical hours.

Flexible work

It clearly emerged from the study that for families to benefit from, or not to be negatively affected by, work at atypical times, parents must be able to exercise a certain degree of choice over the nature of work required at these times (for example, how much and when to do it), and employers must be prepared to be flexible and negotiate arrangements which meet families’ needs, as well as business requirements. As discussed earlier, while choice and flexibility had shaped the arrangements of some parents, others seemed to have had little control and choice, and it was in these cases that atypical work was particularly likely to be seen as negatively impinging on family life.

It is not entirely clear from the research results what the impact will be of the government’s response to the recommendations of the Work and Parents Taskforce (DTI, 2001). An employer’s duty to give serious consideration to requests for flexible working might lead to better partnership, understanding and communication between employers and employees. However, given that the extent of control over working arrangements depends partly on one’s bargaining position, this change might not be sufficient to

ensure that some parents in a ‘weak’ labour market position are able to obtain arrangements that better suit their family needs.

Moreover, as discussed earlier, the ability to negotiate arrangements which meet one’s family needs was for some parents more closely associated with financial issues, rather than (or in addition to) family-friendly policies. Low-income families might not be able to afford options such as part-time work, reduced working hours or unpaid parental leave. For low-paid parents the need to enhance their take-home pay (for example, by working overtime and at atypical hours paid at a higher than average rate) might also limit their ability to achieve a better balance between work and family life.

Long working hours

As we saw earlier, a substantial minority of fathers worked over the 48 hours limit specified by the Working Time Directive, with long hours being widespread among fathers in professional and managerial positions. The negative impact that long hours have on families emerged very clearly from the study. The group of fathers most likely to work long hours (that is, those in professional and managerial jobs) were least likely to be involved in the care of their children. Long hours (for both mothers and fathers) were also associated with a lower level involvement in children’s activities and frequent disruption to family life.

The results of this and other studies (for example, Hogarth et al, 2001), raise questions about the effectiveness of the Working Time Directive in dealing with the long working hours culture, and the damaging effect it can have on families. The UK is the only EU country to allow opt-outs by ‘choice’ and for some employers. A recent survey found that 47% of UK companies had employees working outside the Working Time Directive rules on maximum working hours (Temperton and Jolivet, 2001). It seems that if the Directive is to have a more incisive impact on the long working hours culture and the associated beneficial effects on family life, the opt-out option will have to be abolished.

Concerns raised by employers about the potential negative business consequences of more tightly

regulated working hours might prove unfounded, given the recent experience in France where five million employees have had their working hours considerably reduced, with some early evidence that this reduction in working hours has contributed to the creation of three million jobs. Furthermore, as well as reducing working hours, the new French legislation has also introduced more flexible working arrangements; these enable employees to better combine work and family responsibilities, but also give employers the flexibility they need to respond to changing business needs, following the abolition of many restrictive practices (Temperton and Jolivet, 2001). Clearly the French experience would need to be evaluated more fully, when data on the longer-term impact are available, yet the initial results do seem to suggest that reducing working hours could result in benefits for the economy, as well as for families.

Sunday work

Another aspect of atypical work which is regulated by law (at least in the retail sector) is Sunday work. The study has shown that many parents work on Sundays and a substantial minority do this relatively frequently. Sunday work was in the majority of cases a job requirement, and of all the atypical work times, this was the most unpopular one. Parents who worked on Sundays were considerably more likely than other parents to report that their work frequently disrupted activities with children, as well as family activities.

As mentioned earlier, there is pressure from the business community to relax current Sunday trading legislation, which imposes a six-hour limit on Sunday opening. Any potential business benefits of extending Sunday opening hours would need to take into account the costs to families; as this study has shown, the latter might be high.

Childcare provision

The study has also identified some possible gaps in the provision of formal childcare. Some parents in the study had some kind of shift parenting arrangement because of lack of formal (affordable) childcare. Shift parenting arrangements were more common in families with fathers from lower socioeconomic groups, which seems to provide further evidence of the link between shift parenting and financial circumstances. The reliance on non-parental informal care among parents who worked at atypical times (and particularly lone mothers) could also partly reflect the childcare industry's failure to adapt to changing employment patterns, including the increase in work at atypical times.

While parents appeared generally happy with their choice of informal and/or parental childcare, it was nevertheless a choice that might have been made in a context where formal and affordable childcare options were not available. However, this complex scenario makes it difficult to predict the type, nature and amount of additional formal provision that would be necessary to fill the gaps identified by the study.

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