

The influence of atypical working hours on family life

A growing number of parents 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. This study, of a nationally representative sample of working parents, looked at the extent of such working, why parents undertake it and how it affects family life. The study shows that:

-  In the majority of two-parent families one or both parents frequently worked atypical hours, while just over half of employed lone mothers worked at atypical times.
-  Mothers were less likely than fathers to work frequently at atypical times, and their (typical and atypical) arrangements often reflected their preferences about reconciling work and family.
-  Fathers' frequent atypical work was more closely linked to financial necessity and job insecurity, or career ambition and long working hours.
-  For both mothers and fathers, control over working arrangements depended largely on their labour market position, with parents in lower socio-economic groups more likely than those in professional jobs to feel they had no option but to work at atypical times.
-  Where parents took turns to look after children, this was partly determined by a desire to maximise the time either parent spent with their children, but also (in a minority of cases) by lack of affordable and adequate childcare.
-  In households where (one or both) parents frequently worked atypical hours, family activities were more likely to be limited by work. The time parents had as a couple appears to be the main 'casualty' of atypical work, as parents prioritised time for children and the whole family.
-  Long working hours and Sunday work seem to cause the greatest disruption to family life: parents with these working patterns were more likely than others to say that work limited their engagement in family activities.

Background

While we know that work at atypical times is increasing, we know very little about its nature, how such arrangements come about and their effect on families. This study explored the impact of atypical work on family life. 'Atypical hours' were defined as work at the weekend, and on week days before 8.30am and after 5.30pm. Other important factors, such as the frequency, predictability, regularity and amount of such work, were also considered.

How widespread are atypical working hours among parents?

The survey showed that work at atypical times is widespread among parents, and among fathers in particular:

- 21 per cent of mothers worked early mornings (between 6-8.30 am) several times a week; the corresponding figure for fathers was nearly double (41 per cent);
- late afternoon work (between 5.30-8.30pm) was slightly more common, with 25 per cent of mothers and 45 per cent of fathers working these hours several times a week;
- 14 per cent of mothers and 17 per cent fathers worked evenings/nights (after 8.30pm) several times a week;
- 38 per cent of mothers and 54 per cent of fathers worked at least one Saturday a month; Sunday working (once a month or more) was reported by a quarter of mothers and just under a third of fathers;

- 18 per cent of mothers and 22 per cent of fathers worked every Saturday *and* Sunday at least once a month.

Nearly a third of fathers worked over the 48 hours limit specified by the Working Time Directive; very long hours were particularly widespread among fathers in professional and managerial jobs.

In most two-parent families one or both parents frequently worked atypical hours, while 54 per cent of employed lone mothers were in this category (see Figure 1).

Why do parents work at atypical times?

Qualitative interviews showed that parents' control over their working arrangements depended largely on their labour market and bargaining position:

- Parents in professional jobs were more likely to report (typical or atypical) working arrangements which suited their career aspirations and family needs.
- Parents (and particularly fathers) in lower socio-economic groups were more likely to feel that they had no option but to work at atypical times, as there was little or no scope for negotiating more flexible working arrangements in their workplace or finding a job with more suitable hours.

Access to different types of childcare and views about parenting also played a key role in shaping parents'

Figure 1: **Couples' combined work patterns**

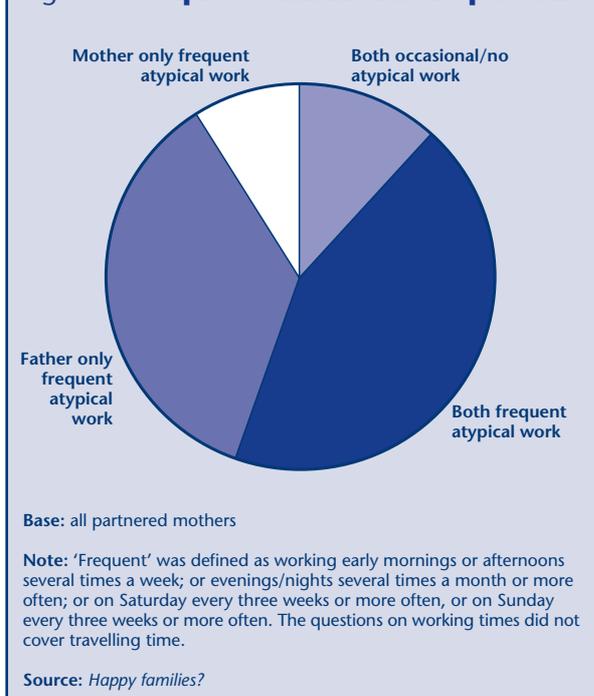
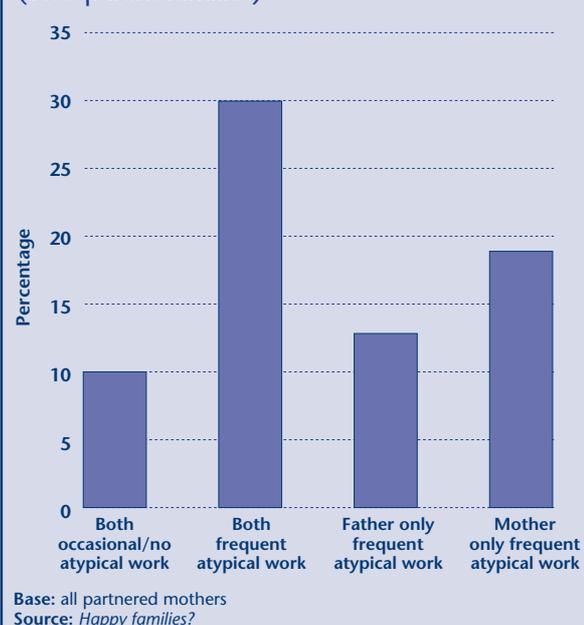


Figure 2: **Percentage of fathers providing childcare while the mother is at work (Two-parent families)**



employment circumstances in general, but also work at atypical times:

- Families where one or both parents frequently worked at atypical times were more likely than others to rely on informal childcare.
- In two-parent households 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 at atypical times (Figure 2).

How does work at atypical times affect family life?

Where parents frequently worked atypical hours family activities were more likely to be limited by work. For example, in dual parent families:

- 32 per cent of mothers with frequent atypical hours said that every week their work limited the time they could spend reading, playing and helping their children with their homework, compared with 12 per cent of other employed mothers; the equivalent figures for fathers with frequent atypical hours and other employed fathers were 46 and 18 per cent respectively.
- 17 per cent of mothers with frequent atypical hours and five per cent of other employed mothers said family outings were limited by their work every week; the figures for fathers were very similar.
- Half of households where both parents frequently worked atypical hours all shared a family meal everyday or most days; the equivalent figure for families where both parents did occasional or no atypical hours was 75 per cent.

A similar picture was found among lone mothers, with those with frequent atypical hours being more likely than other employed lone mothers to say that work disrupted family activities.

A very clear link was found between the number of working hours and disruption to family activities, with longer hours being associated with more frequent disruption. Similarly, parents who worked on Sundays were more likely than others to say that their work limited their engagement in family activities.

The survey explored parents' satisfaction with the time they were able to spend with their children and as a couple:

- 24 per cent of partnered mothers with frequent atypical hours were dissatisfied with the time they were able to spend with their children, compared with 14 per cent of other partnered mothers; the

corresponding figures for lone mothers were slightly higher at 31 per cent (for frequent atypical workers) and 19 per cent (for other lone mothers).

- 33 per cent of respondents with a partner who frequently worked atypical hours said they were dissatisfied with the time their partner spent with the children, compared with 14 per cent whose partner did occasional or no atypical hours.
- 41 per cent of respondents who frequently worked atypical hours and whose partner also did so were dissatisfied with time spent as a couple; the equivalent figure was 17 per cent where both parents did occasional or no atypical hours.

The in-depth interviews suggest that the overall survey results might mask considerable variations between different families. For some, work at atypical times had some benefits; for example, it had enabled parents (including some fathers) to spend more time with their children and to have more time for themselves. It had reduced or even eliminated the need for non-parental childcare, and the practical difficulties and cost implications that can result from using this. Families for whom the benefits of atypical work outweighed the possible disadvantages included:

- parents who had considerable choice of and control over their (atypical) working arrangements;
- parents who did a limited number of atypical hours, which might be confined to times that were not seen as very atypical;
- when parents worked at weekends, this might be seen as beneficial if they could find alternative 'family days', this was usually possible if the children were not yet at school and both parents were able to take days off during the week;
- overall two-parent families seemed to be in a better position than lone parents to take advantage of the opportunities offered by work at atypical times.

In some 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 and in family activities. Groups more likely to express dissatisfaction with atypical work included:

- those with long working hours and a substantial amount of atypical work;
- parents who had very limited or no control and choice over their working arrangements;
- families where financial constraints and/or limited access to free/affordable childcare meant that 'shift parenting' arrangements tended to be seen as the only viable option;
- parents who worked frequently at the weekend.

The combination of substantial atypical work, lack of control over working arrangements and limited access to childcare was particularly problematic for lone parents.

Policy considerations

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 (e.g. how much and when to do it). While the legislative changes planned following the recommendations of the Work and Parents Taskforce will help many families, they might not be sufficient for some parents who are in a 'weak' labour market position.

Furthermore, for some parents the ability to negotiate suitable working arrangements is 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 (e.g. 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

The negative impact that long working hours have on families emerged very clearly. The group of fathers most likely to work long hours (i.e. 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 less involvement in children's activities and frequent disruption to family activities. These findings raise important questions about the effectiveness of the Working Time Directive, as it is currently applied in the UK, in dealing with the long hours culture.

Sunday work

In most cases Sunday work was a job requirement and of all the atypical work times, this was the most unpopular. Parents who worked on Sundays were considerably more likely than others to report that their work frequently disrupted family activities.

Any potential business benefits of extending Sunday opening hours (currently limited to six hours) would need to take into account the costs to families.

Childcare provision

Some parents in the study had some kind of 'shift parenting' arrangement because of lack of formal and affordable childcare. Such arrangements were more common in families with fathers from lower socio-economic groups.

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

About the project

The study was carried out in 2001 by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen). The sample was selected from a large-scale, nationally representative survey of parents of 0- to 14-year-olds, carried out in 1999 by NatCen, on behalf of the then Department for Education and Employment. The sample for the current survey, undertaken two years after the original one, is therefore representative of working families with children under 17, 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 mothers (72 per cent response rate); and 40 follow-up depth interviews with both mothers and fathers.

How to get further information

The full report, **Happy families? Atypical work and its influence on family life** by Ivana La Valle, Sue Arthur, Christine Millward, James Scott with Marion Clayden, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press as part of the Family and Work series (ISBN 1 86134 481 3, price £14.95).