

foundations

Analysis informing change

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Families and work in the twenty-first century

Family life appears to be under pressure from the twenty-four-hour society. Workplaces are also feeling pressure from global competition. Since 1998, the JRF has supported a programme of research considering how families and businesses are coping with and responding to these pressures. In this *Foundations*, Professor Shirley Dex - of the Institute of Education, London University - reviews the main findings from that research programme and the issues raised for policy and practice. As well as contributing important insights into where families feel most pressure, the research offers an opportunity to consider whether recent government policy aimed at helping working families - fast-moving as it has been - is going in the right direction. The projects found that parents' views run contrary to the thrust of government policy on a number of issues, including child care and working at weekends.

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- Stereotyped views of mothers having ‘family’ and fathers having ‘work’ as their central interest do not fit the facts. The main message from mothers and fathers in typical ‘1.5-earner’ households (where the father works full-time and the mother part-time) is that family comes first.
- Mothers want fathers to work shorter hours; parents of both sexes - and their children - dislike weekend working, especially Sundays.
- Couples putting their own needs second to those of their children by working long or atypical hours may help to explain links between mothers’ full-time work and divorce rates.
- The Government’s target of tackling family poverty through work can also send a signal that only paid work is important – reinforcing the low value placed on unpaid work and care. The overlapping implication - that paid child care is better than parental care - runs contrary to the instincts of many parents.
- Child care provision was a problem during school holidays and training days, for some parents working at atypical times of day and weekends, and when children were just starting school. In addition, co-ordinating different child care provision was problematic, especially in families with more than one young child.
- The decline in trade unions has paved the way for faster introduction of non-standard hours and contracts, but flexible working arrangements have not proved to be part of a movement to create ‘junk jobs’.
- Policies in the workplace need to give more attention to the needs of working carers of older adults and disabled children than is currently the case. Workplaces with mainly male workforces are also pockets of employment where flexible working is not on offer.
- The case for further regulation following the latest legislation is not strong and would be resisted by employers. However, long hours - breaching the EU Working Time Directive - and Sunday/weekend work are two areas where further action deserves consideration, given the views expressed by parents.
- Two groups of workers have been neglected in the Government’s consideration of work-life balance - the self-employed and employees who are affected by employers’ relocation policies.

The policy background

The 1997 Labour Government's many initiatives to address the pressures of work on family life have unfolded in stages, in part in response to European Union (EU) directives. After new thinking on *Supporting families* (Home Office, 1998), the *National Child Care Strategy* (DfEE, 1998) followed, gathering strength as it has gone along and merging its interests with an extended Sure Start policy. A *National Strategy for Carers* (DH, 1999) was also launched, but with fewer resources and provisions. Policy to help families with young children has increasingly coalesced around the Government's target to reduce child poverty, partly by ensuring that families have some paid work (HM Treasury/DTI, 2003). Measures to achieve this include extending:

- government subsidies for low-paying employers via a tax credit system to employees;
- subsidised, formal child care for working parents, alongside financial incentives for providers to launch new child care businesses; and
- more flexible working arrangements, in terms of longer leave entitlements and flexible hours, possibly in smaller shifts, to help the workless into work and existing employed parents to sustain a commitment to employment.

A mixture of tax changes, new regulations, incentives and encouragement to better practice is in place to help achieve the child poverty target. New legislation covers better maternity leave and pay (enacted in 1999 and 2003), new parental leave (1999), protection for part-time employees (2000), paid paternity leave (2003), and opportunities for some parents to have greater flexibility at work to suit their individual needs (2003). The Work-Life Balance Challenge Fund, launched in 2000, also offered employers encouragement and assistance to introduce more flexible working arrangements. Its initial aims were to allow employee parents greater opportunity to combine work and family life without such changes disadvantaging business. As policy has developed, greater flexibility at work has become linked more closely to addressing the child poverty targets (HM Treasury/DTI, 2003).

The JRF Work and Family Life Research Programme, launched before these changes occurred, has run alongside them. At times, the research has been able to feed into the policy consultations and discussions. Policy developments have moved at breathtaking speed and, in some cases, without sound evidence on which to build. However, the messages of the research programme are still highly relevant. In some cases they support the direction policy and regulation have taken, contributing much-needed evidence. In other cases, findings suggest that government targets will be difficult to meet.

This research programme did not set out to help the Government reduce child poverty. It was not specifically focused on the boundary between benefits and paid work, although several projects collected information from parents who had crossed this line. The research did set out to improve our understanding of how most British families - occupying the broad middle ground of circumstances - were managing work and family life at the turn of the twenty-first century.

This broader agenda is relevant to the Government's more focused interests but also to a much wider policy agenda including: labour market efficiency; fertility and the population size; the social care labour force; the individualisation of social life; social capital development; fathers' roles; the length of marriages; outcomes for children; and opportunities for private, public and voluntary sector partnerships.

The programme offered a timely opportunity to consider how well families, employers and communities, as well as the Government, are responding to the pressures that families and workplaces face. This *Foundations* outlines some of the themes of the programme and its main messages.



Trends in parents' employment

This programme of research was set against changes in families' involvement in the labour force, and particularly the large rise in working mothers. The dominant pattern for UK families at the beginning of the twenty-first century is to have 1.5 earners, most often a full-time employed father and a part-time employed mother. Drawing on different data sources, studies from the programme found:

- The largest change in labour market participation has come from mothers with a child under 5, their participation increasing from 43 per cent in 1991 to 54 per cent in 2001. Fathers' overall employment rates are unchanged (*Labour Market Trends*, 2002).
- Employed parents now work at 'atypical times' of day (outside 9 to 5) more than other workers; 53 per cent of mothers, 54 per cent of lone mothers and 79 per cent of fathers frequently work atypical hours (La Valle et al., 2002).
- 38 per cent of mothers and 54 per cent of fathers work at least one Saturday a month. One-quarter of mothers and just under one-third of fathers work once a month or more on Sundays (La Valle et al., 2002).
- Over half of fathers and 13 per cent of mothers regularly work over 40 hours per week. 30 per cent of fathers and 6 per cent of mothers regularly work over 48 hours per week, above the limit of the Working Hours Directive (La Valle et al., 2002).
- Some parents (29 per cent of partnered mothers) have adopted 'shift parenting' where each parent works at times of day that do not overlap with the other, in order to share child care (La Valle et al., 2002).

- Self-employment has grown among parents; 8 per cent of mothers and 16 per cent of fathers were self-employed in 2001 (Bell and La Valle, 2003).
- Self-employed parents were more likely than other parents to work long hours, at weekends and at atypical times of day; 14 per cent of self-employed mothers, and 49 per cent of self-employed fathers worked more than 48 hours per week (Bell and La Valle, 2003).
- Fewer lone than partnered mothers tend to be employed, although the number of lone mothers working is increasing (HM Treasury, 2003).

The pros and cons of two earners

Having two earners in the family reduces the risk of families facing financial hardship, more especially:

- in areas where men's employment is insecure;
- where one earner is self-employed;
- in starting up a family business; or
- in areas where unemployment is high.

For some, the dual or 1.5 earner strategy also provides extra income for holidays and for treats, so that children do not feel excluded from the consumer society.

Many mothers find there are additional benefits from working (Reynolds et al., 2003; La Valle et al., 2002; Mauthner et al., 2001; Backett-Milburn et al., 2001):

- paid employment now has higher status than staying at home to care for children;
- considerable satisfaction can result from carrying out paid caring work in the local community - the type of paid work many women do - rather than doing unpaid caring in the home;
- work provides more conversation topics with partners; and
- children can benefit.

The signs of stress in family life from having two earners are most evident in the high proportion of employed mothers (approximately half) who say they would prefer to stop work altogether and stay home looking after their children if they could afford to do so (Bell and La Valle, 2003).

Work-life balance and the workplace

In the early phases of this programme, the DTI was estimating the workplace costs from changing family circumstances. The economic costs of employee absence to cope with family crises, for example, were put at £11 billion in 1999, an average of £500 per employee. Stress and ill health were estimated to have lost between 4.4 and 8.5 million days and to have cost £360 million in the same year (DTI, 2000).

The business case

Surveys analysed in this programme suggest that employers, especially in larger workplaces, have been adapting to changes in family life and employee responsibilities by offering an array of work-life policies (Dex and Smith, 2002). Their reasons for change are varied but recognising the costs of ignoring problems has been one. Competition for talent has been another important element. Analyses of the Workplace Employee Relations Survey (a nationally representative survey of British workplaces) found that flexible working arrangements could be associated with improved business performance (Dex and Smith, 2002). This business case offers evidence to back the Government's campaign for greater workplace flexibility. In-depth case studies of a range of smaller organisations found that, contrary to survey findings, smaller businesses could be highly innovative in their response to employee requests for flexible working, possibly to a greater extent than is possible in larger organisations (Dex and Scheibl, 2002).

There were encouraging signs that career prospects were not penalised if employees made use of flexible working arrangements (Crompton et al., 2003 forthcoming).

Problem areas

A study of a range of business settings (Yeandle et al., 2002; Phillips et al., 2002; Bond et al., 2002; Reynolds et al., 2003) found that implementing work-life policies still has some way to go:

- Communication and awareness about the work-life policies need to be improved.
- Training of line managers needs increasing and improving.
- Flexibility needs to be part of workplace culture.
- More prominence and recognition should be given to the relatively neglected needs of those caring for older adults and disabled children.
- Measures are needed to address the ubiquitous long-hours culture, particularly prevalent among managers, that runs counter to work-life balance and sets working practice standards that many employees feel they cannot meet.
- The growth of weekend work raises issues for parents.
- The work-life balance issues for some groups of workers have not been considered: namely, the self-employed, employees who are relocated by their employer; and employees in predominantly male workplaces (see Bell and La Valle, 2003; Green and Canny, 2003; Basu and Altinay, 2003 forthcoming; Baines et al., 2003 forthcoming).

Box 1: Extending best-practice flexible working arrangements

Employers

- Involve employees in devising flexible solutions. Customised solutions work best for employees. This also provides opportunities for greater employee partnership, initiative and autonomy.
- Review the overall organisation of work, rather than bolting on flexible working policies. This brings far greater benefits and also addresses ineffective and low productivity working practices.
- Carry out rigorous cost-benefit analyses of employee relocation to test that it is necessary, as well as finding ways of alleviating some of the bad effects on families of this policy.
- Allow flexibility to both men and women in order to avoid discriminating in favour of one group. (This will also spread costs more evenly between employers.)
- Encourage the spread of multi-skilling, teamwork, rotating sabbaticals in other teams, and systems of explicit reciprocity between employers and employees.
- Encourage better communication between employers, managers and employees and transparent policies so that employees and line managers are aware of organisation policies. This may mean avoiding over-long lists of policies and confusing names.

Government and other bodies

- Extend the Work and Parents' Taskforce approach, with its duty on employers to give serious consideration to employees' request for flexibility, to cover all employees, not just parents with a child under six. This sort of customised approach is needed especially for carers of older adults.
- Encourage union involvement in devising new and more flexible ways to work.
- Raise employers' awareness that lean staffing policies can lead to higher turnover, loss of employee goodwill and loss of customer satisfaction.

New approaches

Smaller businesses often start out granting flexibility to individual employees who request it (Dex and Scheibl, 2002). Some employers had moved from this informal and discretionary response to a more explicitly reciprocal approach: *'You help the business and the business will help you'*. From here, some had moved to examine and then change the organisation of their work overall to facilitate greater flexibility for employees without disrupting business and even bringing some business benefits.

Larger organisations can retain the customised approach of smaller businesses by having fewer policies but an over-arching and explicit statement that employees can ask for the arrangements they want. This can also help avoid some of the problems of lack of awareness of 'family-friendly' policies. Encouraging employees to offer suggestions about how to improve working arrangements and productivity can also help to build employer-employee partnerships and trust and produce workable solutions to individuals' specific needs. Trust was found to underlie good working relationships across different types and sizes of organisations ranging from family businesses, other small businesses to large private or public sector organisations (Dex and Scheibl, 2002; Basu and Altinay, 2003 forthcoming; Yeandle et al., 2002; Phillips et al., 2002). Suggestions for helping to extend best-practice flexible working in workplaces are listed in Box 1. Trade unions are the obvious institutions to get involved in this sort of partnership building towards best practice.

Flexibility is very popular among employees and much appreciated in workplaces which offer it. However, working at weekends, especially Sundays, was the most unpopular working arrangement among parents. Given the popularity of flexible working, the lack of serious disadvantages, and even a good business case for some arrangements, the argument for having more such policies is strong. The Government's introduction, in 2003, of parents' right to ask for flexible working is a move in the right direction. It is also in tune with the way small businesses introduce and operate flexible working. However, by its restriction to parents, the new regulation runs the risk of generating resentment within workplaces where, according to these research projects, feelings of inequity and resentment currently are rare. This would be a pity.

The effects of work on family life

Work problems and stresses can sometimes carry over into day-to-day family life, although the extent to which this occurs varies according to how far parents separate these two aspects of their lives (Reynolds et al., 2003). The studies reached a number of conclusions about the overall effects of work on family life.

- The *quality* of work matters. Bad days and feeling a lack of autonomy can have a bad effect on family life (Reynolds et al., 2003).
- The *quantity* of work matters. Long hours can have a bad effect (La Valle et al., 2002; Baines et al., 2003 forthcoming; Reynolds et al., 2003).
- The *time of day* work is carried out matters. Working when children are at home, especially at weekends, was seen as a problem and created considerable dissatisfaction (Baines et al., 2003 forthcoming; La Valle et al., 2002).

Parents identified the following negative day-to-day effects from work:

- irritability and bad moods with the family, especially after a bad day;
- impatience with children and their slow pace after the fast pace of work;
- lower quality of relationships at home because of the stresses of work;
- time with spouse curtailed;
- insufficient energy to respond to children's requests;
- children not liking parents working at the weekend or when they are ill;
- parents' feelings of guilt;
- time with children squeezed due to long hours of work; and
- work encroaching into family life where parents worked at home.

Other bad effects were considerably more pronounced for couples and lone parents who worked at atypical times of day (La Valle et al., 2002; Bell and La Valle et al., 2003; Baines et al., 2003 forthcoming), reducing their frequencies of:

- family meals;
- family outings;
- family holidays;
- reading to children; and
- helping children with homework.

When facing competing demands, mothers put children and work first with time for self and their partner ranked second (Reynolds et al., 2003; La Valle et al., 2002).

Fathers' involvement in family life

Some interesting findings emerged about how having a family affects fathers (La Valle et al., 2002; Baines et al., 2003 forthcoming; Reynolds et al., 2003; Mauthner et al., 2003). These support other recent research findings about fathers.

It is often assumed that fathers give priority to work over family and mothers the reverse. But fathers and mothers were similar in many ways.

- Many fathers, like most mothers, think it is important to 'be there' for their children.
- Family life is central to fathers as to mothers.
- Family life affects fathers' as well as mothers' identities, their levels of fulfilment and satisfaction, their motivation for work and their sense of responsibility.
- Fathers' and mothers' choices about work and working hours are often made with children's needs in mind, although parents differ in the needs they prioritise. Even when fathers worked long hours, either as professionals or lower paid workers, they felt they were doing this for the family.
- Because of the different priority attached to the family's material well-being, some fathers think that time spent in relationship-building in families is more important than a higher standard of living, career progression at work and longer term prospects. These fathers are prepared to stick at jobs without prospects sometimes with lower pay, or to move area to achieve a better balance at the expense of their material standard of living. The percentage of fathers who feel they make such sacrifices remains to be determined.





- Some fathers, their extent is unclear, see themselves as having an emotional role in the family as well as their main breadwinner role. Fathers who work long hours tend to rely on mothers to provide what they see as the necessary time input into children's lives.
- Fathers enjoyed the additional income brought home from their partner's employment and the sharing of the breadwinner role. However, there was recognition and sadness that this often left little time for their relationship with their partner.

Child care

Although child care provision continues to expand under the National Child Care Strategy and the Sure Start programme, some problem areas remain and the thrust of government policy goes against the thinking of some groups of parents.

Problem areas

Child care provision was seen to be a problem for working parents of school aged children:

- during the school holidays;
- when schools announced additional days of holiday for training;
- for some of the parents working at atypical times of day and weekends;
- when children were just starting school and only attended part of the day.

In addition, co-ordinating different child care provision was problematic for employed parents, especially in families with more than one young child (Skinner, 2003).

Getting children from care in one place to care in another, either early in the morning, at midday or the end of school, led to considerable pressure on two-parent families and made some one-parent families feel it was so impossible that employment was not an option.

Co-ordinating child care, the geographical spread of provision and associated transport provision need more detailed consideration in the National Strategy if lone parents and even some couples are to be able to take up employment or have more than one child.

While it may be possible, even efficient, for schools to play a bigger role in organising care, moving into being providers or organisers of child care would involve a departure from their current roles as educators and may be resisted.

Existing child care providers face significant problems in trying to extend their services outside of the normal working day, even where they are willing to do so. There are staffing as well as other barriers. Childminders have done most to offer flexible services by extending their hours a little either side of the standard working day. But all child care providers thought further extension would encroach on their own family time and was therefore unacceptable. Similarly, other childcare providers thought that there would be problems finding staff to work at atypical times (Statham and Mooney, 2003).

Preference for informal child care

The Government's National Child Care Strategy is concerned with providing affordable, accessible, and high quality formal child care provision from childminders and various types of day care. Parents in these research projects wanted their children to be happy while they were out of the home, a preference that coincides with valuing good quality child care. But many parents also expressed strong preferences about the sort of child care they were happy with. (Backett-Milburn et al., 2001; Baines et al., 2003 forthcoming; La Valle et al., 2002;

Bell and LaValle, 2003; Mauthner et al., 2001; Reynolds et al., 2003 forthcoming; Skinner, 2003). Also, rather than being prepared to compromise on what was available, some parents' views were so strong that they were prepared to put themselves to enormous time and trouble to take their children to what they thought of as suitable carers (Skinner, 2003; Mooney et al., 2001). Some parents had strong preferences for care from relatives (La Valle et al., 2002; Baines et al., 2003 forthcoming; Bell and La Valle, 2003; Backett-Milburn et al., 2001; Mauthner et al., 2001). Child care subsidies do not cover these types of care.

What parents valued about child care was very evident in the choices they made. The Government's focus on subsidising formal child care may well be unlikely to persuade the parents it seeks to influence, many of whom prefer informal care, to take up employment. In this sense, National Child Care Strategy provision goes against the child care preferences of at least some parents.

Fathers in families from lower socio-economic groups were doing more child care than those from families with higher socio-economic status (La Valle et al., 2002). The paradox here is that these fathers often express more traditional views about families and the gendered division of labour. But in practice, they are more prepared to break the traditional division of labour by looking after their own children while the mother works. Some of the higher earning fathers expressed more egalitarian views but worked such long hours that this precluded them living up to their expressed values in terms of the time they could spend with their families.

Informal child care arrangements from relatives, friends and neighbours had other advantages. These relationships are the substance or glue of communities. Some commentators argue that social life has become more fragmented and isolated. Parents' time to engage in maintaining relationships with the wider family, friends and spouses, as well as engaging in voluntary activities, has undoubtedly been squeezed by engaging in paid work. However, one network that has become more central and vital, especially to employed mothers, is the child care network. Parents were found to be retaining links with their relatives, friends and neighbours because of child care – low income and less mobile families to a greater extent than higher income and more highly mobile ones (La Valle et al., 2002; Bell and La Valle, 2003; Skinner, 2003; Green and Canny, 2003; Yeandle et al., 2002; Backett-Milburn et al.,

2002, Reynolds et al., 2003). There was much use of informal child care as the main form of care while mothers were at work, as other regular surveys confirm.

Even when mothers used more formal types of care, most also needed either regular or occasional help from informal carers in order to be reliable workers and cope with family emergencies or sickness, unscheduled or ad hoc school holidays or flexibility at the start and end of work. These are important networks. Their importance becomes more visible when families had to relocate and were torn away from such relationships (Green and Canny, 2003; Yeandle et al., 2002). While paid services can replace reliance on family and friends to some extent, they cannot offer the same degree of flexibility, trust, reciprocity or social cohesion that social relationships offer.

Further opportunities for partnerships

In principle, there are at least four areas of support and potential partnership for families:

- Workplaces can provide support for families, over and above paying wages for work carried out.
- Workplace-based institutions, like trade unions can support families by protecting their employment conditions or negotiating more family-friendly working conditions and arrangements.
- Families can draw upon personal and household resources.
- Local infrastructure, for example, formal child care provision, supervision to get from school to after-school clubs, holiday clubs for school children, social services, voluntary organisations that help with care for older adults and disabled children and public transport can support families.

Opportunities for better and more effective partnerships were identified under each of these headings and a selection are listed below. The childcare infrastructure has already been considered.

Employers

- Family businesses - especially in areas of high unemployment - need more support. However, the trust placed in family members in family businesses (including those in minority ethnic communities), demonstrate levels of partnership within families rarely evident across family boundaries.
- Businesses to provide employers with local information about child care have been springing up. Despite this, relatively few employers have effective links with, or information about, local sources of infrastructure to help families, be that child care providers or services to help carers of older adults. This is an area where improvements could be made. It would be particularly valuable for families who are forced to relocate and move geographically.
- Employers seem to be more successful at introducing other employers to new practices and flexible working arrangements than government-led initiatives.

Trade unions

In the UK, unlike the USA, trade unions have been involved in the growth of flexible working, and particularly in its implementation. There is a clear role for unions in the future to address:

- the communication and awareness gap that exists between employees and employers, including pressing for clearer relationships and communication channels between human resources specialists, line managers and employees;
- plugging the awareness gap of line managers about their employer's policies and issues of work-life balance, including pressing employers to provide more training for line managers;
- helping policies to be implemented with equity;
- reducing the construction of policies that are either merely window-dressing or off-the-peg policies that do not address employees' needs, and thereby ensuring that policies are developed that do address real needs;
- having a central role in the implementation of parents' new right to request flexible working.

Are families coping?

At the outset of this programme there was concern that families were under pressure. Bearing in mind that these research projects have tended to focus on two earner couples or employed lone parents we need to return to answer the question of whether families are coping.

The strategy of having two earners, one full-time - usually the father - and one part-time - usually the mother, appears to be effective in reducing risk related to sustaining family finances and broadly provides the standard of living to which most low- and middle-income families aspire. Examining these families at a point in time, as these projects have tended to do, shows that they are managing to juggle work and family life and are not in state of total collapse. However, there are many tired parents, a large amount of dissatisfaction and even a desire to cut down working hours or give up paid work altogether.

Where two-earner or even 1.5 earner families are most under pressure and obviously on the edge of coping is where they have heavy responsibility for caring for older adults, have a disabled child, have the double caring loads for older adults and young children, or are in low-earning, vulnerable self employment. Given the trend towards an older age of first childbirth for mothers, this relatively new pattern of double care loads is likely to increase.

Parents expressed the strongest desire for change as follows (La Valle et al., 2002):

- Mothers would like fathers to cut down long hours of work.
- Many mothers would prefer shorter hours of work, even giving up paid work altogether, if they could afford it.
- Mothers and fathers (and even children) would prefer work for themselves and their partner that did not involve so much time on Sunday especially and weekends more generally.
- Both parents would like greater flexibility about work where they do not have it already.

There is, of course, a shrinking group of families which still relies on one, mainly male, earner. This group is larger if viewed over time rather than at one cross-sectional point in time since many couples still have a period when one (usually male) partner works and the other (usually female) partner stays at home when children are born and very young. We know relatively little about the group who persist with one earner for a longer period while their children are growing up and this is a gap that it would be useful to fill. Certainly, policy and benefit regimes have been largely ignoring this group.

One of the Government's main principles for addressing family issues has been that paid work is the route out of poverty for families. Clearly most of the Government's efforts have been directed at the no-earner households and lone parents on benefit, few of whom were researched in this programme. Dual-earner couples and lone parents who are working in low-paid jobs in these research projects, undertaken before the most recent 2003 Budget changes that are aimed at helping financially, were managing to keep out of poverty, but it was a difficult job for some. Many faced issues related to the cost and organisation of child care since their budgets were finely tuned with little slack. The 2003 Budget changes will help with household finances for some of these parents. However, survey work suggested that many mothers' preferences run counter to the direction Government policy is trying to encourage since they would prefer to work less rather than more while their children are young.

The other problem with the Government's seemingly worthy target for families to be financially independent is that it signals that only paid work is important. This is unfortunate since it reinforces the low value placed on unpaid work and care. Even childminders who are paid to care expressed that this low valuation affected them and their morale (Mooney et al., 2001; Statham and Mooney, 2003; Baines et al., 2003 forthcoming). There is also an overlapping implication: paid child care is better than parental care. However, many parents prefer unpaid child care. In addition, unpaid child care helps to create a sense of community and also is more flexible and cheaper for parents and the public purse. Policy should try to avoid destructive effects on parents' sense of community.

It should also be noted, however, that materialism and consumerism are strong drivers of parents' and children's values and aspirations at both middle- and low-income levels. Many parents believe that they are not giving their children the best start in life if they cannot buy them the latest toys or clothes. While this is a strong motivator for all parents, there is also a sense in which it is an unreachable goal. The demands keep on, fuelled by advertising and peer pressure and are never fulfilled. In this sense an escape from feelings of relative disadvantage will rarely be achieved.

Despite the plethora of new legislation and policy on families and work, and the need for some of these new employment laws to be bed down, there are several areas where the Government needs to consider further interventions, alongside its targets to eliminate child poverty. Long hours of work and Sunday and weekend work by parents need further consideration. The issue of advertising to children also needs consideration since this may be helping to nullify any feelings of improvement from additional income in low-income families.

About this *Foundations*

This *Foundations* was written by Shirley Dex, Professor of Longitudinal Social Research at the Institute of Education, London University. It draws on the findings from 19 projects in the JRF Programme, Work and Family Life, from 1997 to 2003.

This has been a programme about mainstream middle-ground family life in Britain at the turn of the twenty-first century. It has not incorporated the extremes where families have no employment, or too much employment in very long hours. The selection of the middle ground, covering the majority of heterosexual couple families and employed lone parents, was partly by design (avoiding the families reliant on benefits that JRF's other research programmes already covered), partly by chance (according to which good quality research projects responded to the 'Call for proposals'), and partly through the constraints of research (it is difficult for researchers to recruit parents working very long hours whose work dominates over home life).

The research projects included nationally representative surveys of parents, detailed qualitative interviews with mothers, fathers and some children, secondary analyses of existing sources and new data collection using survey, case study, focus group, and matched sample designs and methods.

How to get further information

A full report on this Programme, **Families and work in the twenty-first century** by Shirley Dex, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 1 85935 095 X, price £16.95).

This *Foundations* is based on the following studies. Titles marked with * are (or will be) available from York Publishing Services. Reference numbers are given for any *Findings* summary published by the Foundation: you can read *Findings* on our website, www.jrf.org.uk.

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