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# Time, Health and the Family

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What working  
families want

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Working Families 2012

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# Time, Health and the Family

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## Introduction

Working families have never been higher on the agenda. Seen by policy makers as a crucial foundation stone in the cohesion of society and the economy, 'hard-working families' are never far from the headlines and government initiatives. But does the picture so broadly painted in national debates match the reality of work and family life for families in the UK today? This survey and report looks at some of the issues that families face around working time and family time, and what it really is like trying to combine both.

## About working families today

Combining work and family life can often be complex, and, as individual needs change as caring responsibilities evolve within families, so getting a good work-life fit shifts also. The arrangements families might make to combine work and care when they have their first child will alter significantly as children grow up, siblings arrive and eldercare becomes a responsibility. Parents and carers might use interlocking arrangements which include flexing their working arrangements and building networks of care to help them with their care of dependant children or adults. The detail of how this actually happens, and what the effects are on family life, are what *Time, Health and the Family* considers. Getting the 'right' balance for families is, of course, subjective but it is possible to detect an optimum state for families is where no-one is short-changed: parents are able to give of their best at home and at work in a way which is sustainable and does not diminish wellbeing. Tensions and conflict between employed life and family life where one is not fitting well with the other have negative repercussions for both.

The current backdrop against which families try to reconcile work and family life is complex. The Government have expanded (and will, from next year, expand further) the Right to Request flexible working to all employees; many organisations have flexible working policies; new flexibility is being introduced for mothers and fathers to divide up leave to care for new babies. On the other hand, there is ongoing economic uncertainty. Wages are falling, in real terms, for many families and work for many is insecure. In addition, there is the issue of the 'sandwich generation', where an ageing population means that many people are providing care both for the own children and elderly parents or relatives, layering on another level of complex arrangements which need to be reconciled with existing family and work commitments. Families have to also contend with some of the most expensive childcare in Europe, and, for families with children with a disability, a serious shortage of appropriate and affordable childcare.

## Combining work and family life – quick facts

- Around 30per cent of both working men and women in the UK reported that they do not have enough time to give to partners and family due to the amount of time they spend on their jobs.<sup>1</sup>
- The typical working pattern for dual income couples after childbirth in the UK is for mothers to reduce and for fathers to increase their working hours.<sup>2</sup>
- Only 17per cent of men (an historical low) now believe that it is the man’s role to earn the money while the woman stays at home.<sup>3</sup>
- 69per cent of men and 58per cent of women said that the demands of their job interfere with family life.<sup>4</sup>
- Mothers and fathers who operate ‘traditional’ family roles experience more stress than those who share earning and caring more equitably<sup>5</sup>
- Many British fathers are working long hours, struggling to balance work and family and fear that requesting flexible working will damage their careers.<sup>6</sup>
- Work spillover impacts children. Seventy eight per cent of parents in this survey said that work impinged on their ability to spend time with their children, with 42per cent saying this happened often or all the time. Additionally, 75per cent of parents found that work curtailed their ability to help their children with their homework, with 39per cent saying this was often or all the time.

## The sample

The survey was sent to 959 parents<sup>7</sup>, who were working and who had at least one dependant child under 16. Of these 517 were women and 442 men.

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<sup>1</sup> European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2003)

<sup>2</sup> Flexible Working Policies: a comparative review, Equality and Human Rights Commission (2009)

<sup>3</sup> British Social Attitudes Survey (2010)

<sup>4</sup> British Social Attitudes, the 23rd Report: perspectives on a changing society, Park, A., Curtice, R., Thomson, K., Phillips, M., & Johnson, M. (2007)

<sup>5</sup> When Partners Become Parents, Cowan and Cowan (2000)

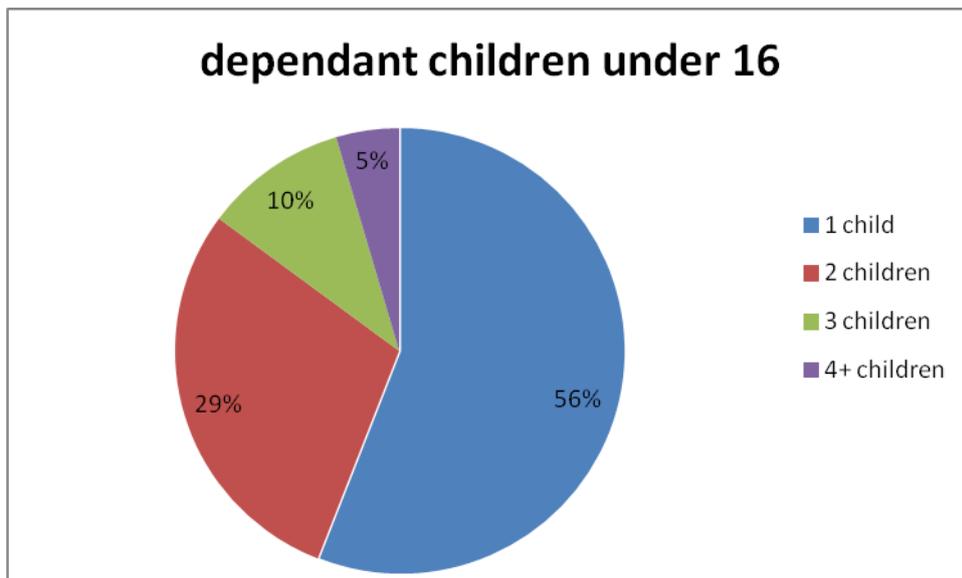
<sup>6</sup> Fathers, Family and Work, Equality and Human Rights Commission (2010)

<sup>7</sup> All tables and charts use all parents as a base. Where the number is different this is shown.

The sample was drawn from across the UK, and across a range of occupations and sectors. The survey was conducted in August 2012.

The mean age of the sample was 38 years old. Eighty six per cent of respondents were living as a couple, married or in a civil partnership. Forty six per cent of the respondents were male, 54 per cent female.

The number of dependant children families have is shown in Figure 1:



**Figure 1**

Twenty nine percent had a caring responsibility for an older adult. This is a higher than expected number (Carer's UK estimate that 1 in 8 adults are carers).

Parents worked in a wide range of jobs. The five most commonly reported were IT and retail, at 10 per cent each, followed by healthcare, education and manufacturing all at eight per cent each.

The level of job parents had is shown below:

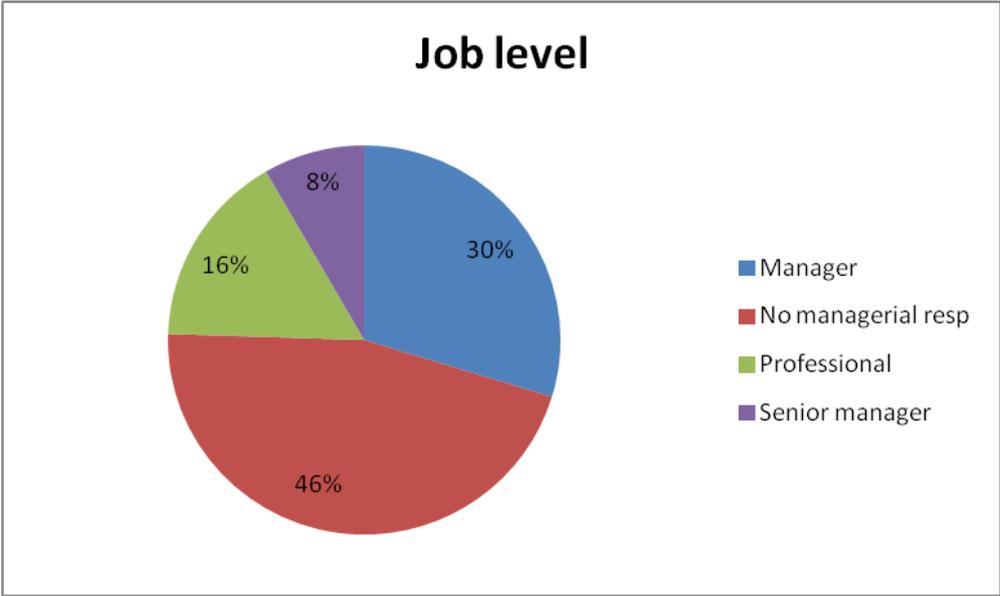


Figure 2

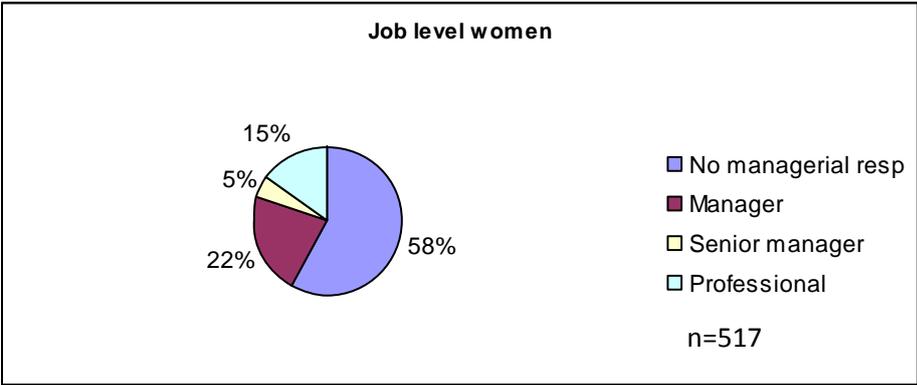


Figure 3

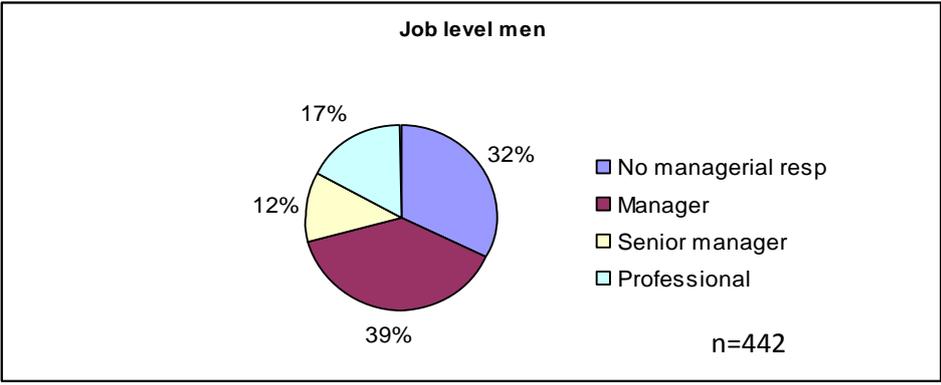


Figure 4

The income range was:

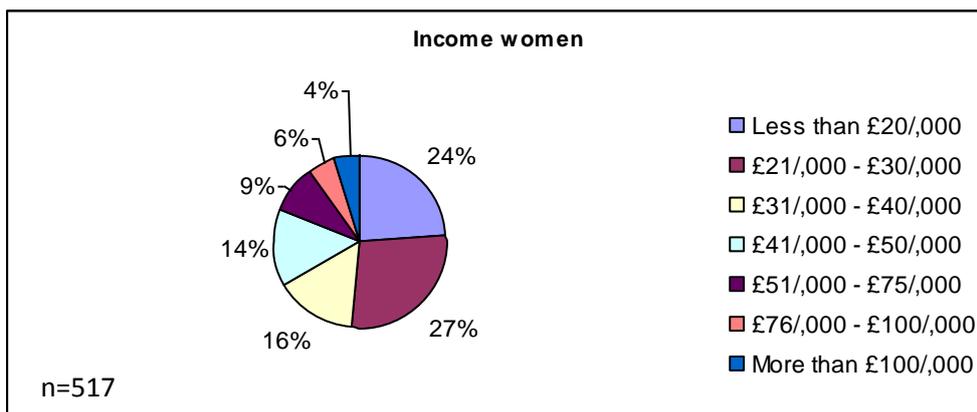
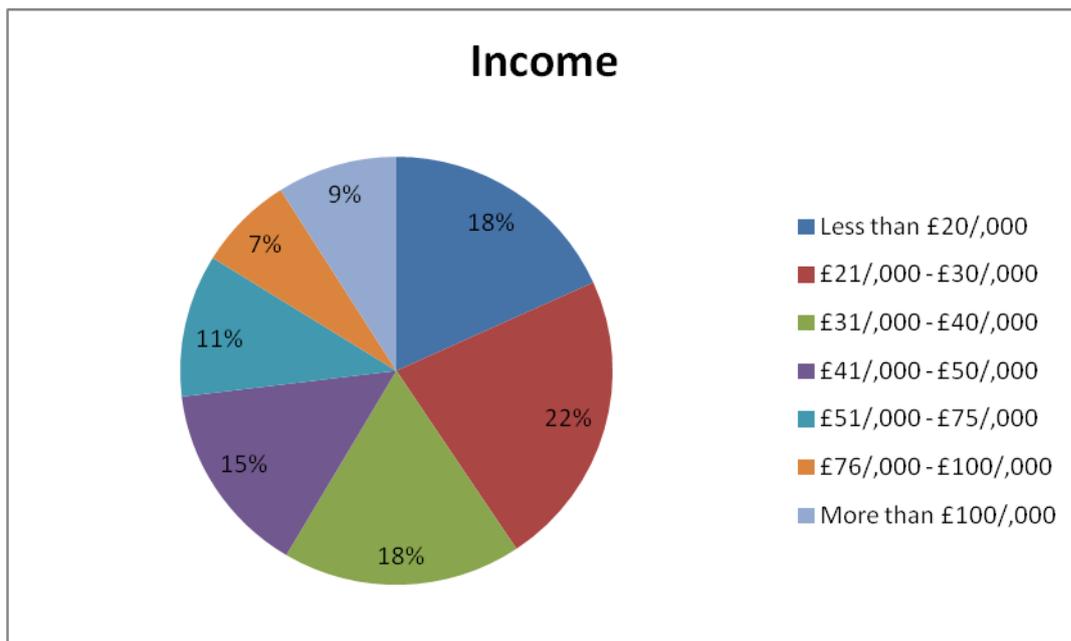


Figure 5

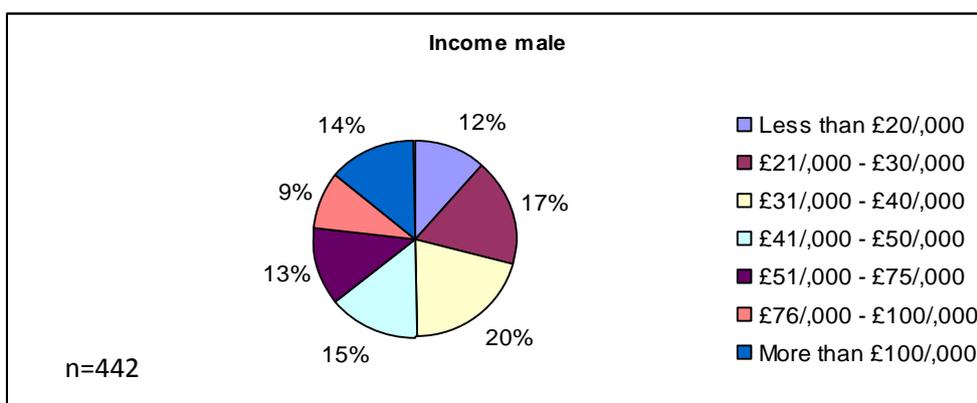
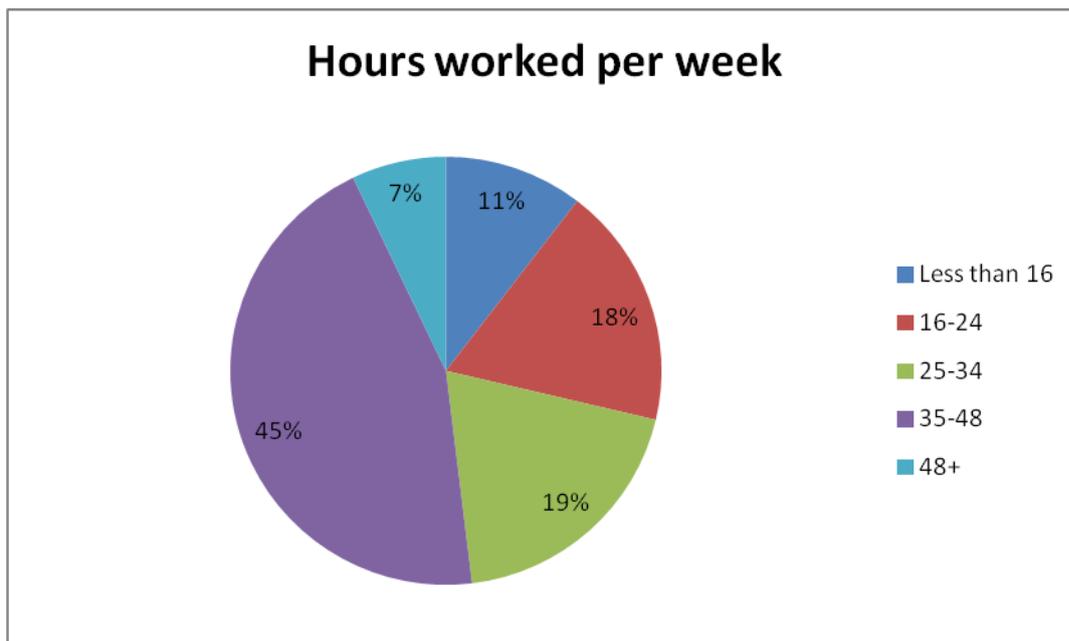


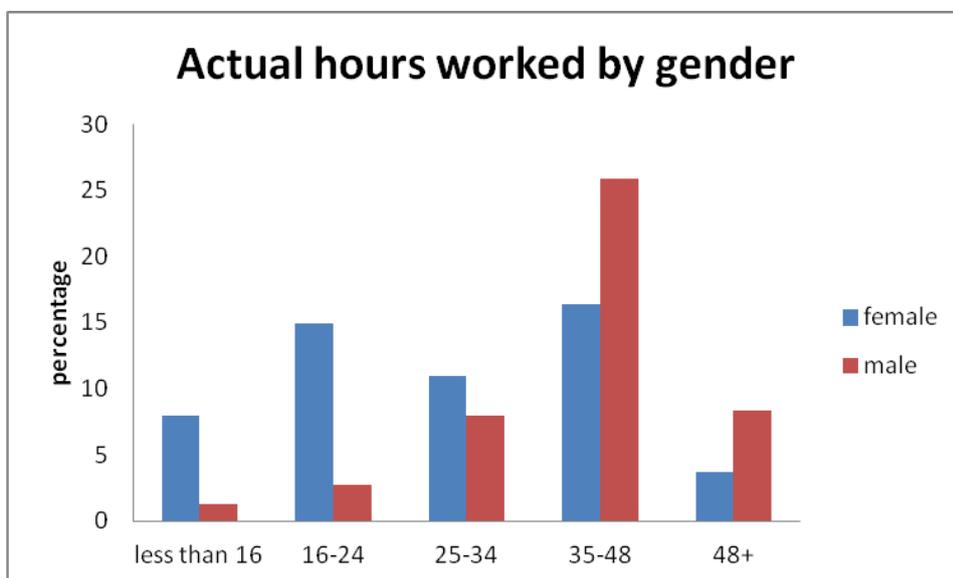
Figure 6

Respondents worked for a variety of hours, as shown below.



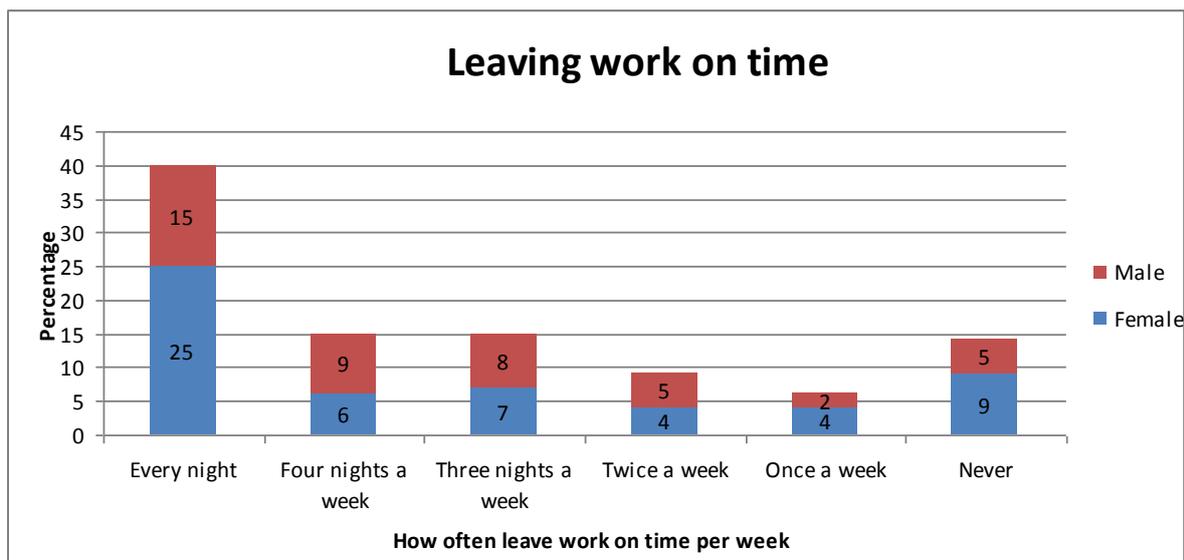
**Figure 7**

Slightly more parents worked a 'full time' week (35-48 hrs) than worked reduced hours (less than full time). Fewer parents worked long hours (48+ hours). By gender, a clear trend where men are more likely to work longer hours than women can be seen. Significantly more women worked reduced hours, especially below 24 per week, than men.



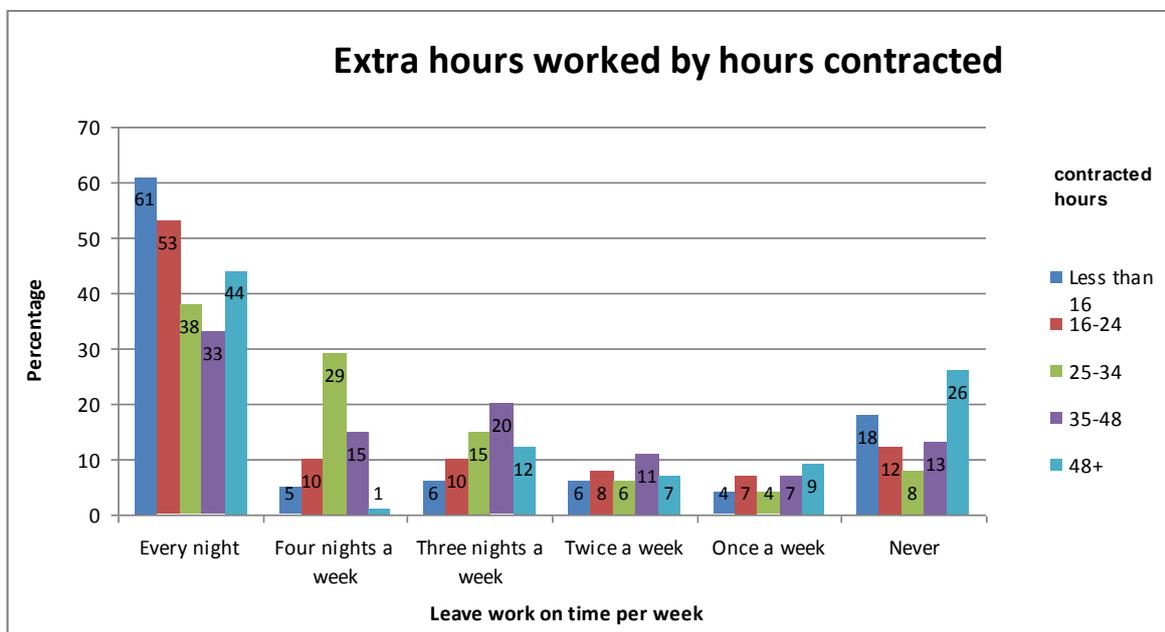
**Figure 8**

There is a mixed picture of late working or extra hours put in. Below is a table which shows how often parents left work on time each week:



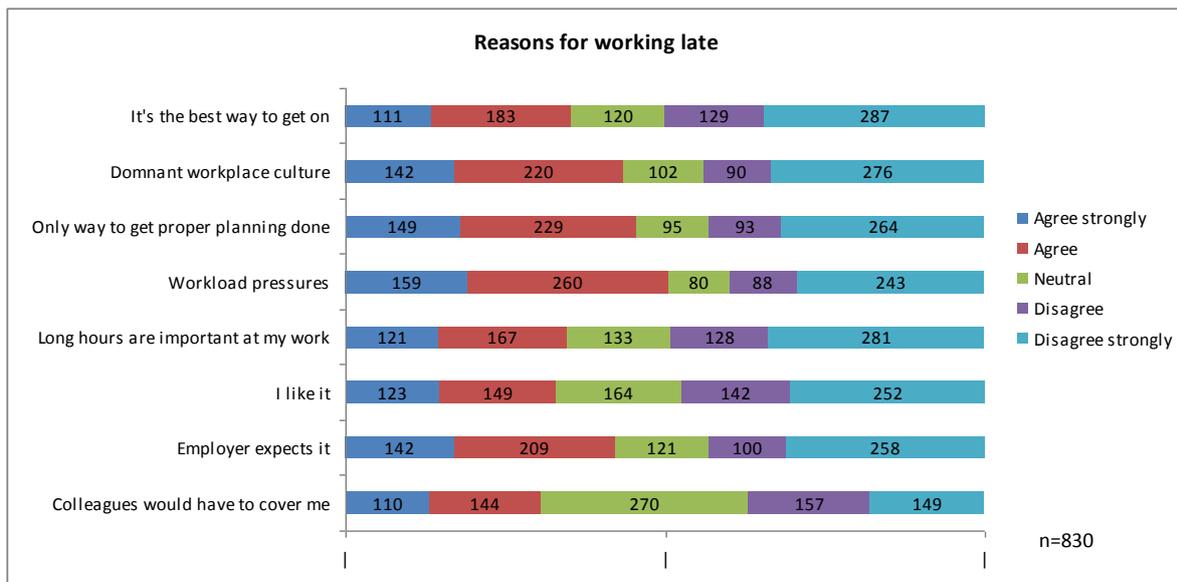
**Figure 9**

As can be seen, 40 per cent of parents left work on time every night ( of these, 63 per cent women, 37 per cent men). However, more women than men report that they *never* get away from work on time (fourteen per cent of all parents said they never left on time). When examined by working time it can be seen that across the ranges of contracted hours parents are putting in extra. In all groups of workers working more than 24 hours per week, more than 50per cent regularly stay late at least once a week.



**Figure 10**

The reasons for staying late at work were varied. If they said that they worked late, parents were asked to choose from a range of reasons. Their responses are shown below.



**Figure 11**

Parents identified work organisation issues as the most important factors in accounting for their extra hours: workload pressures, and the only way to get proper planning done were those they most agreed with. Workplace culture and employer expectation were in balance – in each category parents agreed and disagreed in almost equal measure about whether this was why they worked extra. Fewer parents agreed that doing extra hours helped them get on at work, securing advancement and promotion. This is a finding which is of concern, and in line with recent research on presenteeism, where parents appear to be doing extra hours merely to tread water or attempt to be more visible to demonstrate commitment and not in the expectation of positive outcomes or ‘getting on’.

### Flexible working

Parents of children under the age 17 have the right to ask to work flexibly (the Right to Request flexible working). Less than half of the parents in our sample said that they *could* work flexibly (46 per cent). Government figures estimated (in 2009, before the age limit was increased to 17) that a quarter of eligible parents had used the legislation to secure flexible working<sup>8</sup>. The most recent Work-Life balance survey from the Department of Business Innovation and Skills<sup>9</sup> found that awareness of the right to work flexibly was high: 75 per cent of all employees, 73 per cent of employees with non-childcare, caring responsibilities and 79 per cent of parents were aware of the right, rising to 82 per cent for parents of young children. It is unlikely that parents surveyed in *Time Health and the Family* are unaware of their right to work flexibly, but 54 per cent, when asked ‘can

<sup>8</sup> Extending the Right to Request Flexible Working to parents of older children. BERR, 2009

<sup>9</sup> The Fourth Work-Life Balance Employee Survey, BIS, 2012

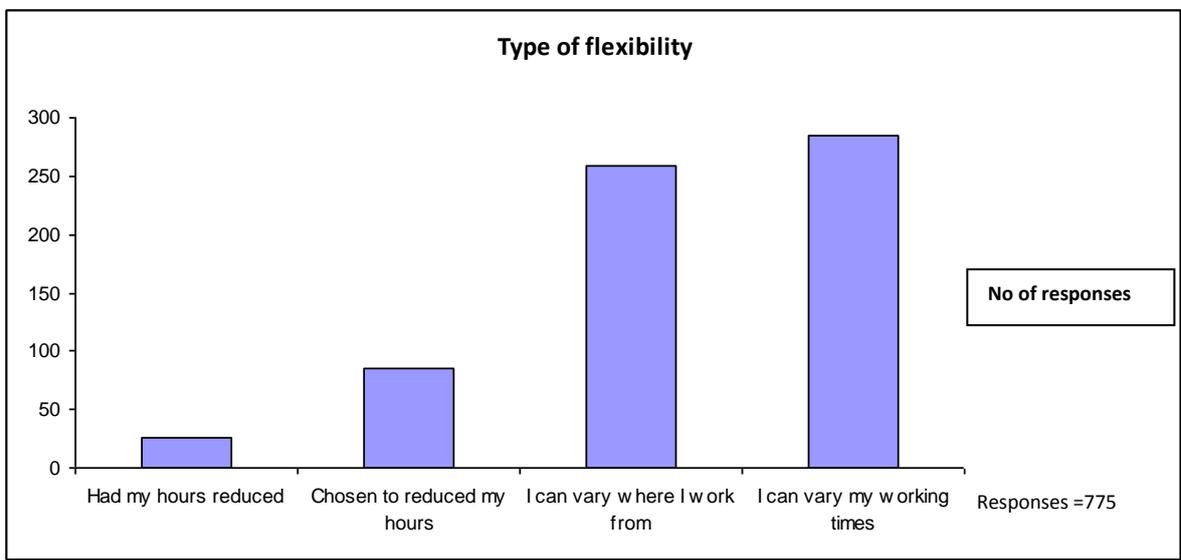


Figure 12

you work flexibly?' said 'No'. A majority of those who worked in London reported they could work flexibly, by a factor of 2:1. In all other regions flexible working was a minority.

There was a variation between the types of flexibility worked, and the level of job which parents had. Parents were allowed to choose more than one type of flexible working pattern. The table below shows that those with no managerial responsibility were not afforded the same opportunity to vary their place of work as those who had managerial responsibility. However, they were able to exercise control over their working hours. Those with no managerial responsibility were more likely than any other group to work less than 24 hours per week. It may be that reduced hours jobs are more open to flexible working times as the working pattern is already non traditor responses=655

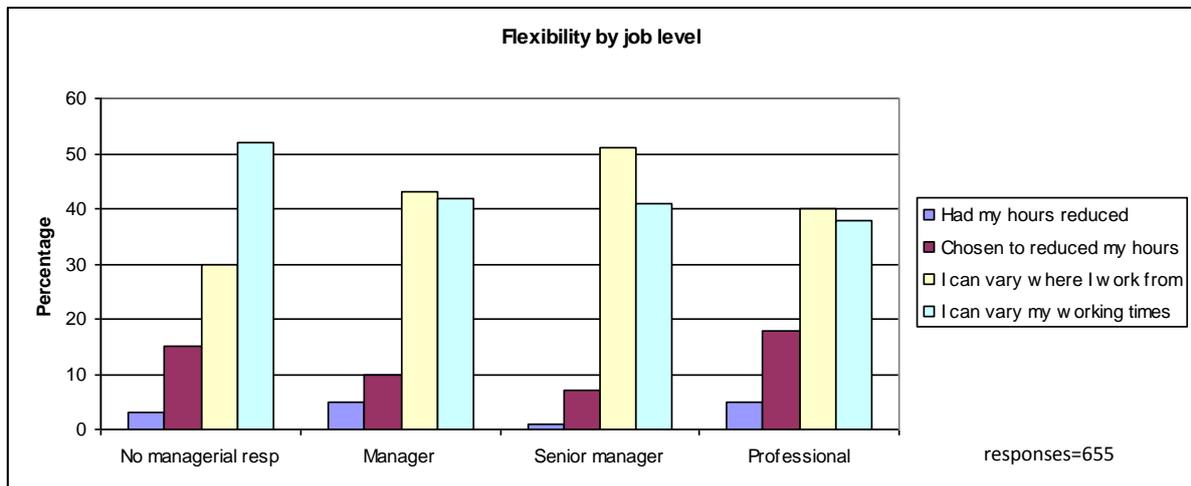
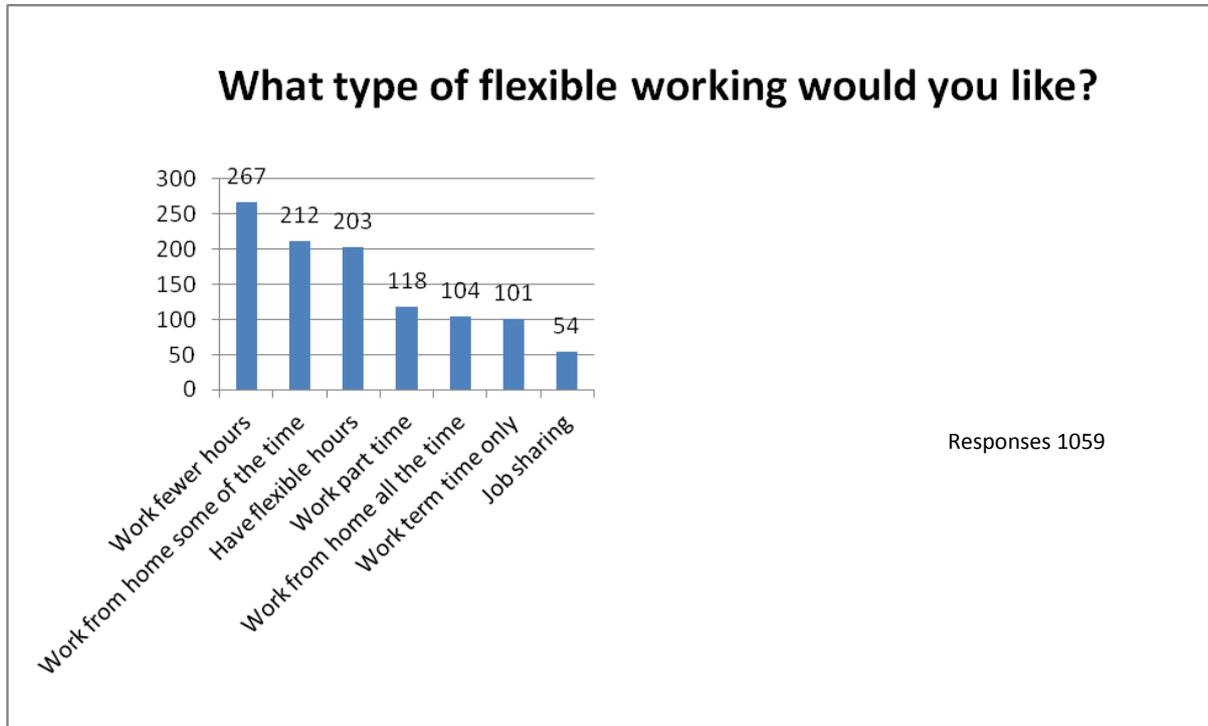


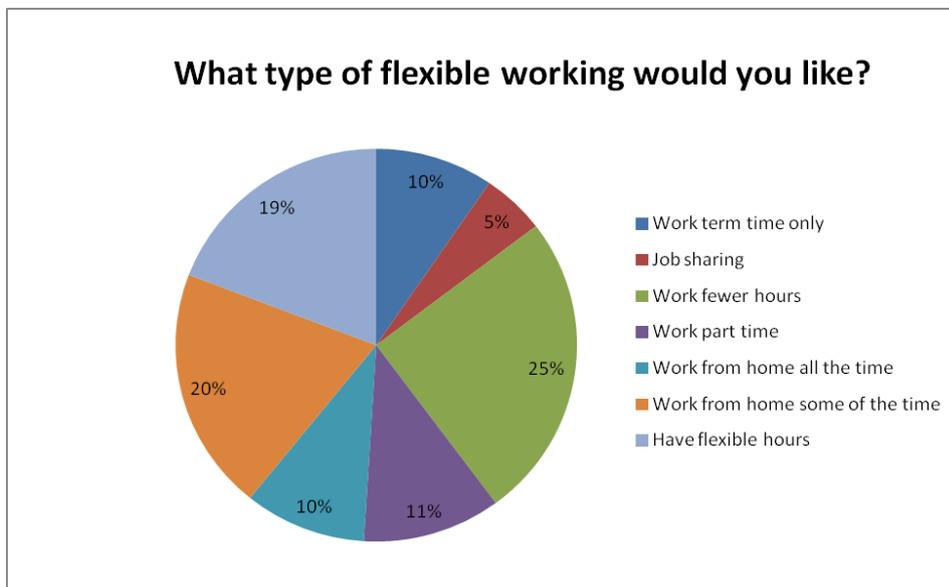
Figure 13

In terms of their working time, parents were asked to say how they would like to work, if they could. They were asked to choose from a range of options, and could choose more than one option. Fifty

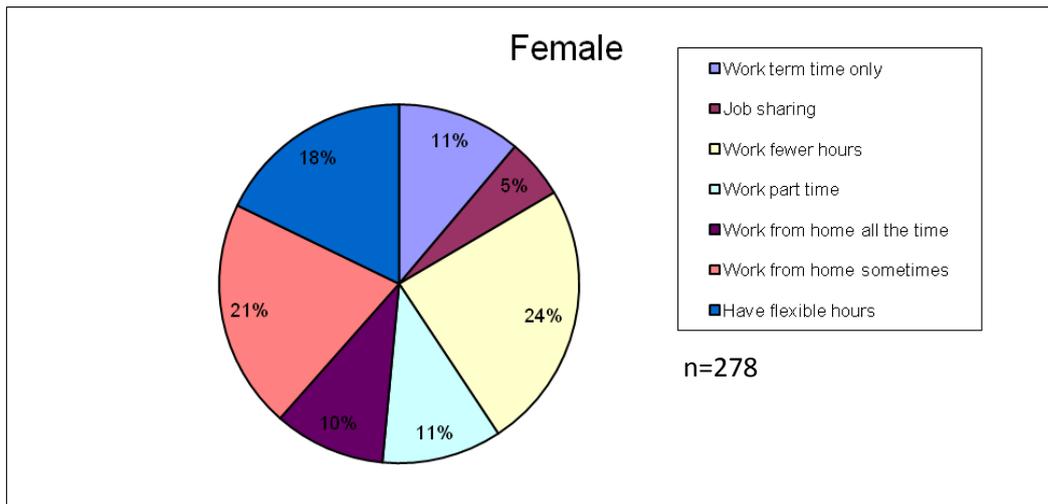
seven percent of parents (54 per cent women, 60 per cent men) chose at least one type of flexible working. They identified working fewer hours (25 per cent) and having flexible hours (19 per cent) as the two most popular options they would choose. By gender, men and women were almost identical in the choices that they would make.



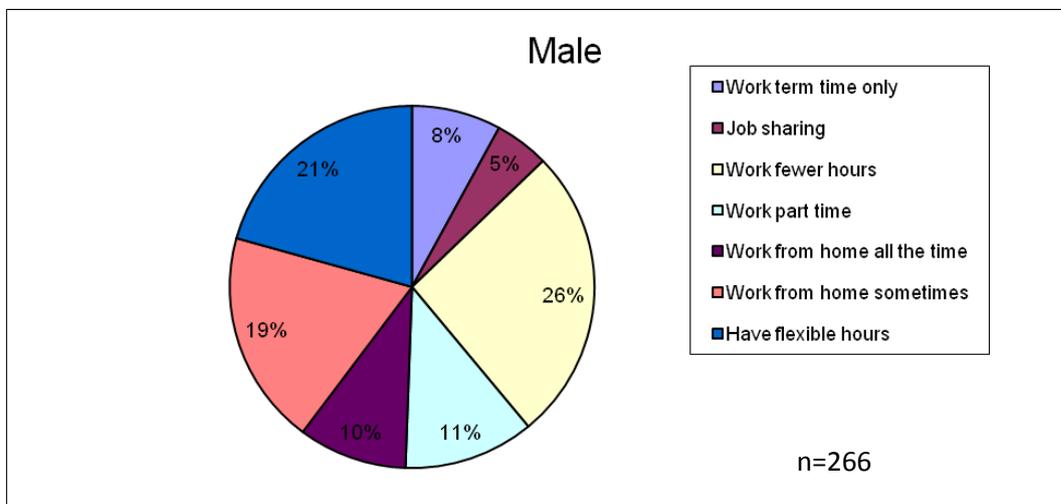
**Figure 14**



**Figure 15**



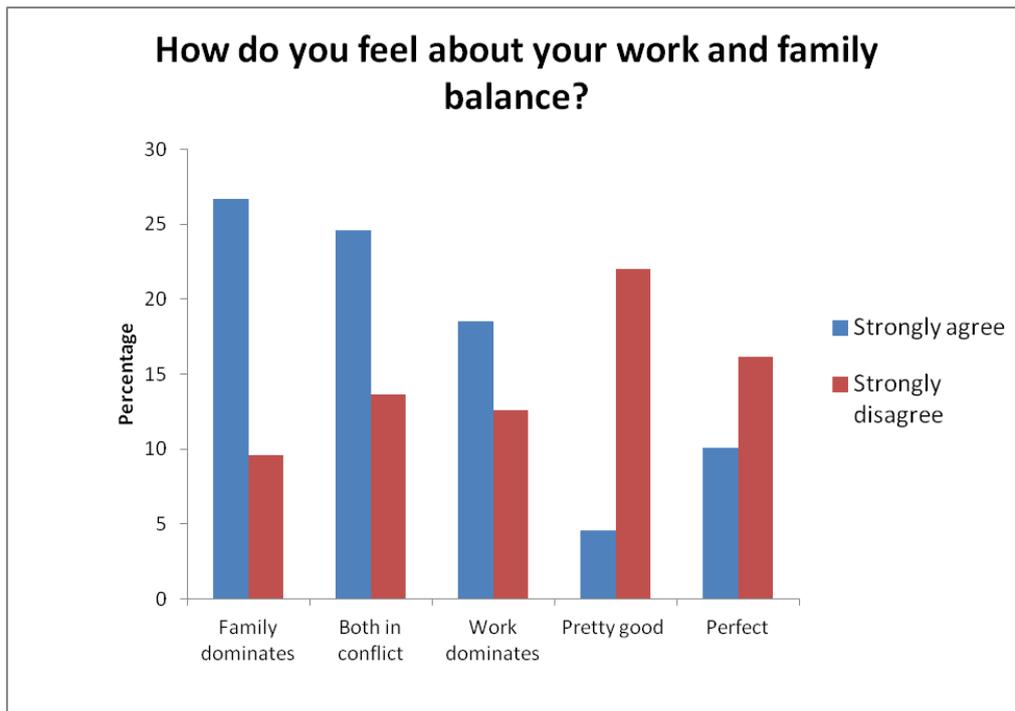
**Figure 16**



**Figure 17**

## Work and family life

Parents felt conflicted about their work and family life, reporting that the length of their working hours curtailed family activities. The chart below shows how parents responded to statements about their own work life balance.



**Figure 18**

The chart shows the proportion of parents who either agreed strongly or disagreed strongly with the statements. It can be seen that fewer parents believed that they had a pretty good or perfect work life balance than those who agreed that their balance was awry either because family dominated work, work dominated family, or both (work and family) were in conflict.

### **Family-Work and Work-Family conflict**

The idea of imbalance being caused by family dominating work is one which has been identified as Family-Work conflict, where home life spills over into work life and can have negative effects.<sup>10</sup> Family-work conflict might arise from the fact that family life is often experienced as less pliable than work; commitments and responsibilities at home may rank more highly in a parent's hierarchy of concern than work issues, or be harder to reschedule. A sick child, for example, may require a parent to curtail their working time to look after them. Family life might therefore impinge on work life to a greater extent than vice versa. There is also the possibility that parents are in a situation where issues like childcare availability and affordability are making it more problematic for them to fulfil their roles as employees as effectively as they would like. With the average family spending 33 per cent of its net income<sup>11</sup> (the highest of any OECD country) on childcare, a continuing economic downturn which is squeezing families may be exacerbating this problem. Further work in this area is needed.

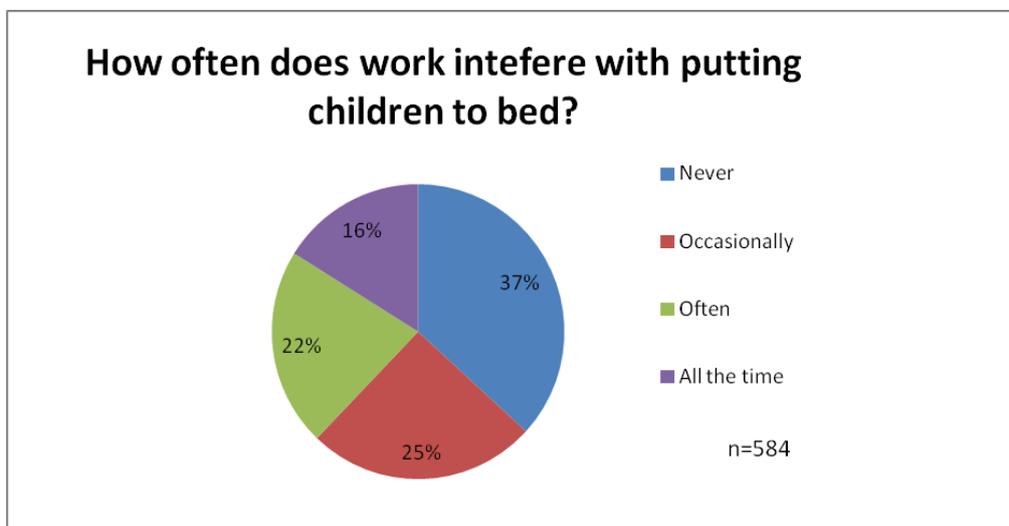
<sup>10</sup> *Happy Homes, Productive Workplaces. Working Families and One plus One 2012*

<sup>11</sup> *OECD Family Data base, Panel B: Childcare cost in % of family net income:*  
<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/52/11/42004407.pdf>

Nineteen per cent of parents strongly agreed that work dominated family life resulting in Work-Family conflict. This is related to but distinct from Family-Work conflict but the direction of the conflict is reversed (although the two are unlikely to exist in isolation of each other). This was evident amongst the parents in this sample in a number of ways; in the activities parents identified as being compromised by work overspill into family life.

In addition to identifying whether they experienced work-family conflict or family-work conflict, a quarter of parents said that they felt that they were experience conflict a combined conflict, with both elements in conflict with each other. This is apparent in the health and stress effects that parents reported which resulted from this conflict, and their own feelings of resentment towards their employer, and their desire to work in a different way or to access more flexible work options as a way of resolving this conflict.

The charts below show how parents identified the frequency with which work impacted on everyday family activities. Parents responded to these questions as appropriate to their own family situations.



**Figure 19**

### How often does work impinge on spending time together with your children at home?

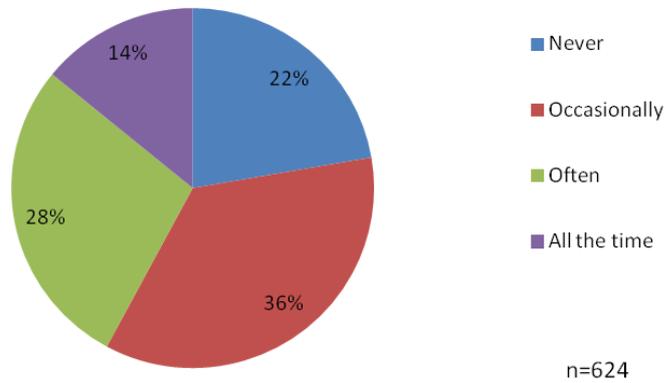


Figure 20

### How often does work impinge on your ability to help your children with their homework?

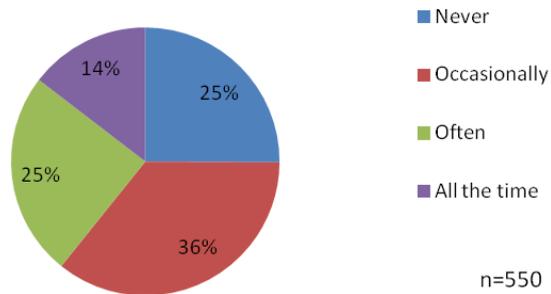
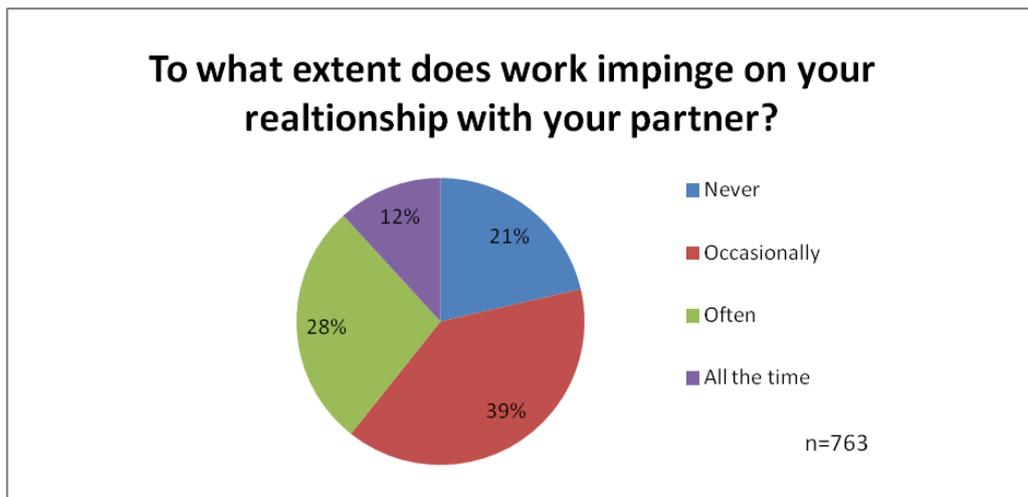


Figure 21



**Figure 22**

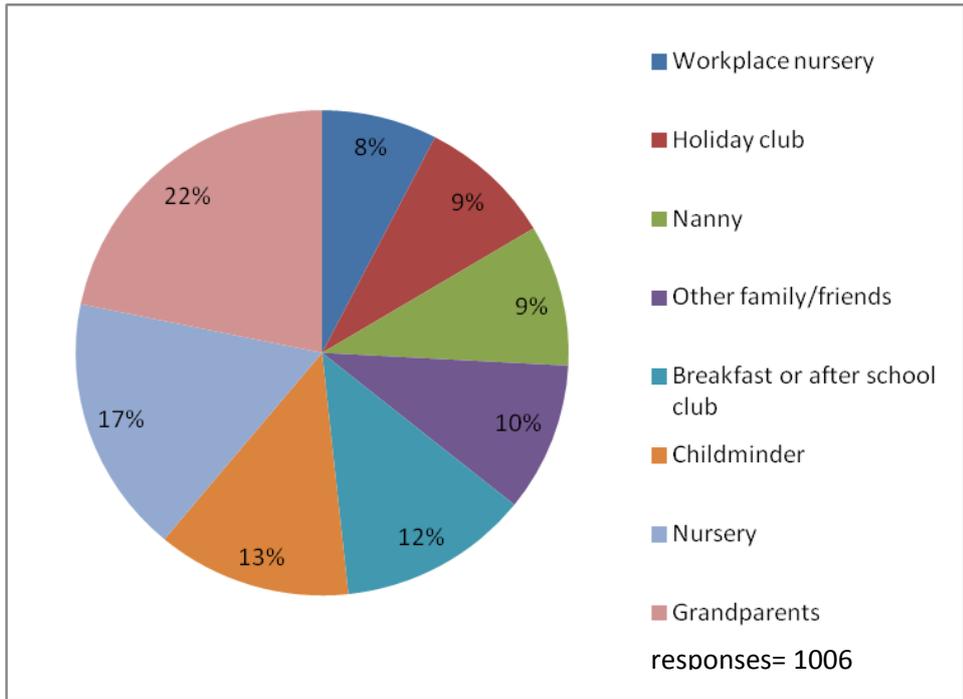
In the three activities concerning parents' involvement with their children, the majority of parents in each case had experienced work impacting on family life. However, between 38-42 per cent of these parents had experienced this impact 'often' or 'all the time'. Whilst it might be unavoidable that work might make demands which occasionally have a knock-on effect on family time, that it should happen on a regular basis implies that either work is organised poorly, work is not accurately configured to the hours allotted to it, or that the employee is performing badly. For each of these possibilities managerial intervention would appear to be necessary to understand and seek solutions for the problem; the risk of ignoring it lays employers open to resulting poor performance, demotivation and resentment, and stress and burnout. Where parents report on their relationship with their partner, 61 per cent have felt that work demands have had a negative impact, with 40 per cent saying this happens often or all the time. Recent research from Working Families and One Plus One<sup>12</sup> has found that couples with better relationship quality have better engagement at work. Where work is negatively impacting relationships, there is a very real danger that this will rebound back into the workplace in the form of lowered engagement.

## Childcare

Parents were asked about what kind of childcare they used. If they used more than one kind then they could specify more than one choice. The results are below:

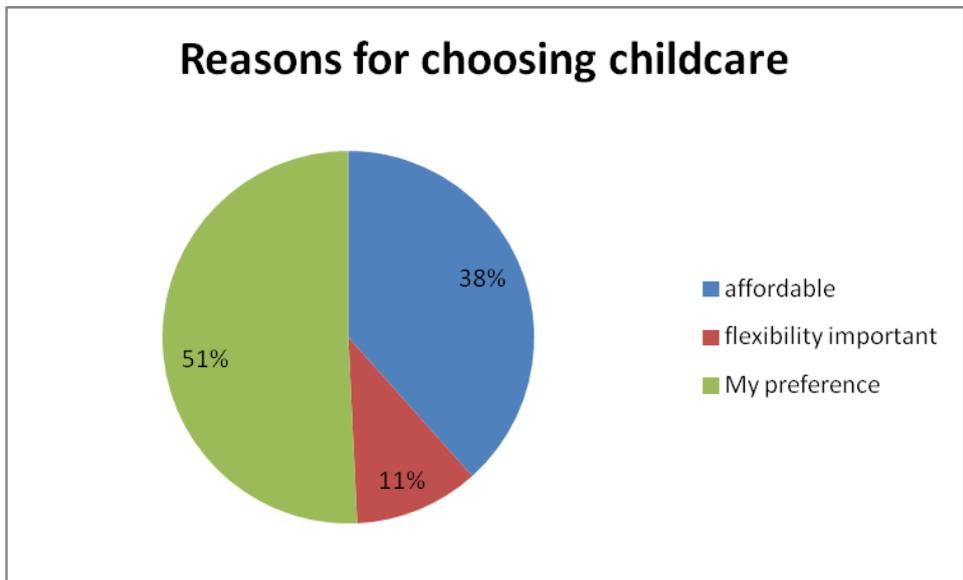
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<sup>12</sup> *Happy Homes, Productive Workplaces*, Working Families 2012



**Figure 23**

Almost a quarter of the respondents used grandparents as their childcare solutions, with a further 9 per cent using friends and family. The reasons for the choices for childcare are shown below:



**Figure 24**

A clear majority stated that they had chosen the type of childcare they had as it was their preference, although a significant percentage had chosen childcare on the basis of affordability.

## Health

Parents were asked about their health in relation to their work-family balance, in particular about work-related health issues and health behaviours. Parents were asked about whether they experienced work related stress, and whether or not this was better, the same or worse than three years ago.

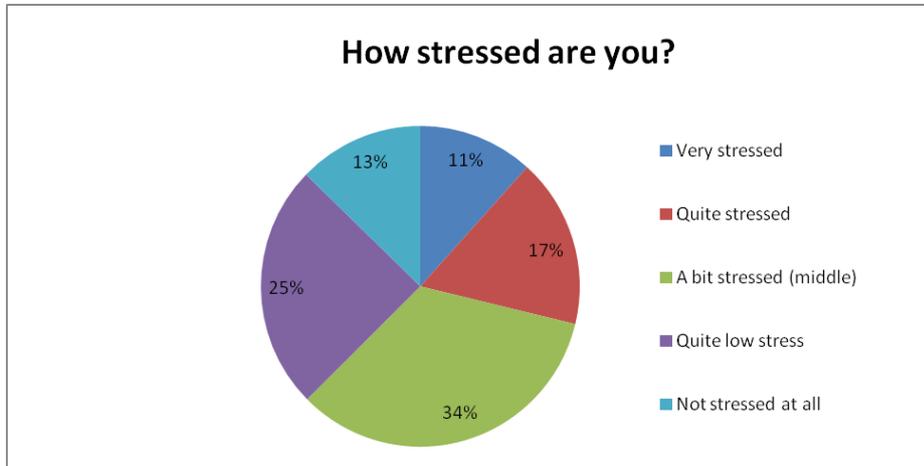


Figure 25

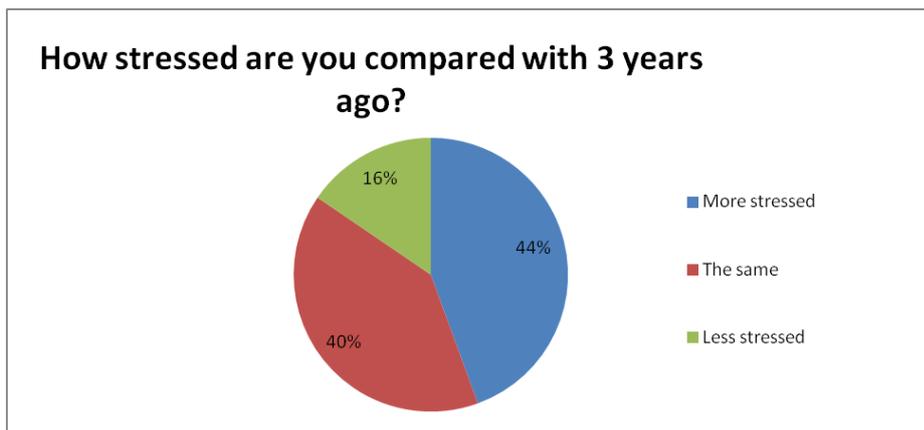
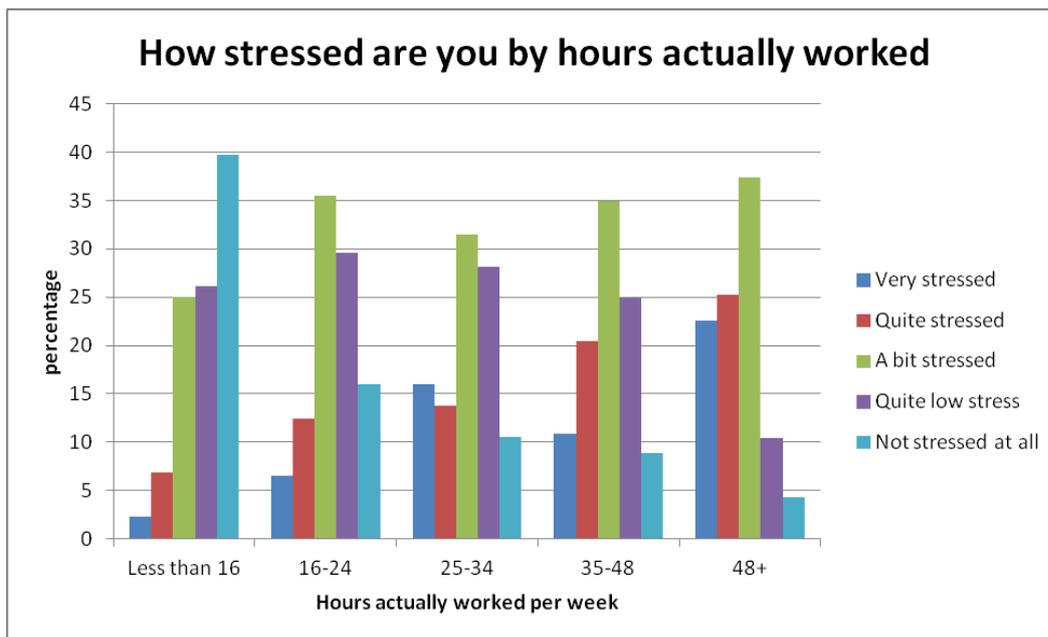


Figure 26

Twenty eight per cent of parents reported being very or quite stressed, whilst 34 per cent said they were a bit stressed (the midway point between very stressed and not stressed at all). Whilst some work related stress is unavoidable, the well documented negative effects of work-related stress suggest that a shift from higher stress to lower stress levels would benefit parents.

However, only 15 per cent of parents have seen a decrease in stress, with 45 per cent reporting an increase in their stress levels. That there has been a stress increase for almost half of the parents is of concern. It may be a result of the continuing economic downturn, where job security and work intensification due to restrictions in staffing levels and redundancies have had a negative effect. The table below shows how parents report their feelings of work-related stress in relation to the hours that they do.

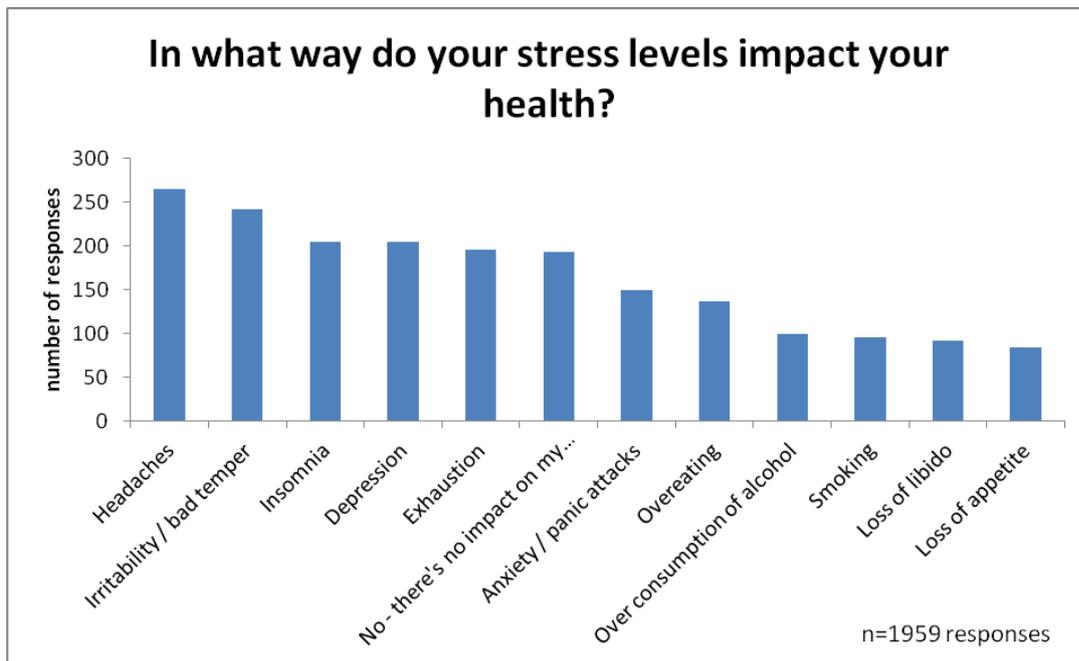


**Figure 27**

As would be expected, work related stress levels increase with time spent at work. The parents who were working less than 24 hours per week were less likely to report feeling very or quite stressed, with those working 48 or more hours were more likely, with almost half falling into the very or quite stressed categories. Almost a third (30 per cent) of parents who worked 25-34 hours reported being very or quite stressed; for them, reduced hours are not a guarantee of less stress. In fact, there are more parents reporting they feel very stressed (16 per cent) than in the group who work full time hours (11 per cent). It may be that although they have reduced their hours, their workloads have not been calibrated accordingly. When observed alongside the stress levels of parents working less than 24 hours, it suggests that working between 25 and 35 hours a week increases the risk of high stress. This is possibly because these workers are regarded as ‘almost full time’ and allocated work as if they were full time employees; those working below 24 hours may be less visible and subsequently not allocated work in the same way. Stress may also result if parents are unable to flex their working life, or regularly have to put in extra hours. The attendant loss of autonomy and control is likely to exacerbate stress. Both long working hours and lack of control and autonomy have been found to increase work-related stress.<sup>13</sup> Although the majority of parents did not work long hours (above 48 per week, from the European Working Time Directive definition), a key consideration is whether or not parents are working longer hours than they expected to. If they are, then this will contribute to a feeling of lack of control as well as impacting on other arrangements in their lives, that may depend upon them working close to their contracted hours.

<sup>13</sup> *Work related stress*, European Foundation for Living and Working Conditions, 2010

Work related stress was reported by parents to affect them in a number of ways (below). Parents could choose as many types of stress effects as appropriate to them. The most commonly reported symptom of stress was headaches, and the least was loss of appetite.



**Figure 28**

It is likely that individuals dealing with stress are not performing optimally at work. Nor are they likely to be participating in family life in a way which they would like. High stress was not limited to parents who worked in highly paid jobs – across the income range parents reported work related stress. Work related stress is not an executive phenomenon, although in this sample the highest proportions of stress are found amongst those working long hours and earning over £100,000.

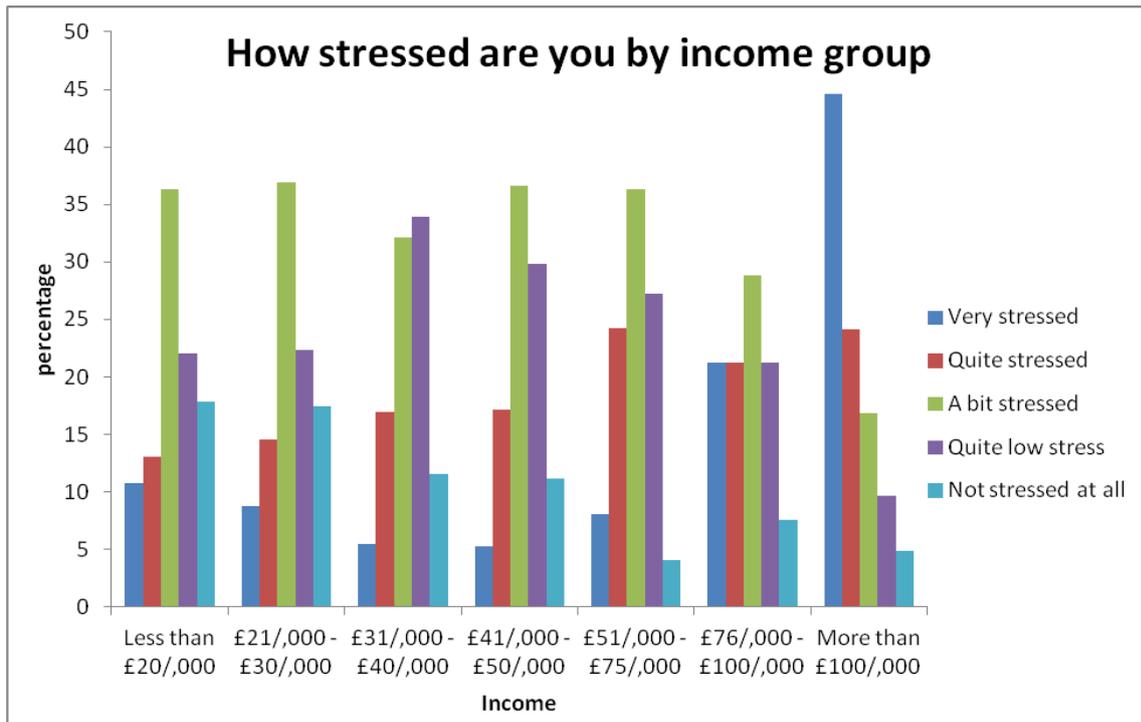


Figure 29

### Parents' views on work and work-life balance

Parents were asked how strongly they agreed with a number of statements about their work-life balance. The chart below shows how parents felt about their employer in relation to their work-life balance.

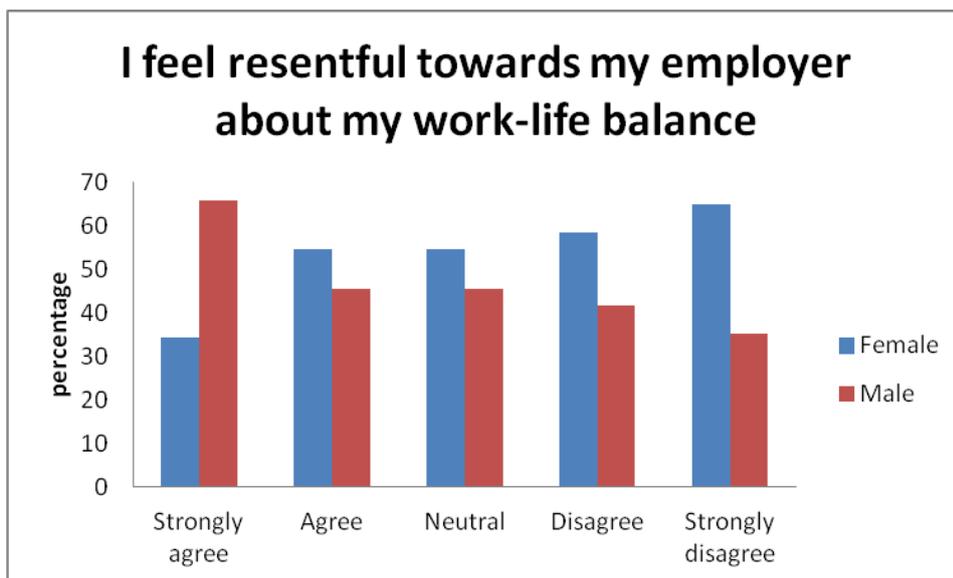
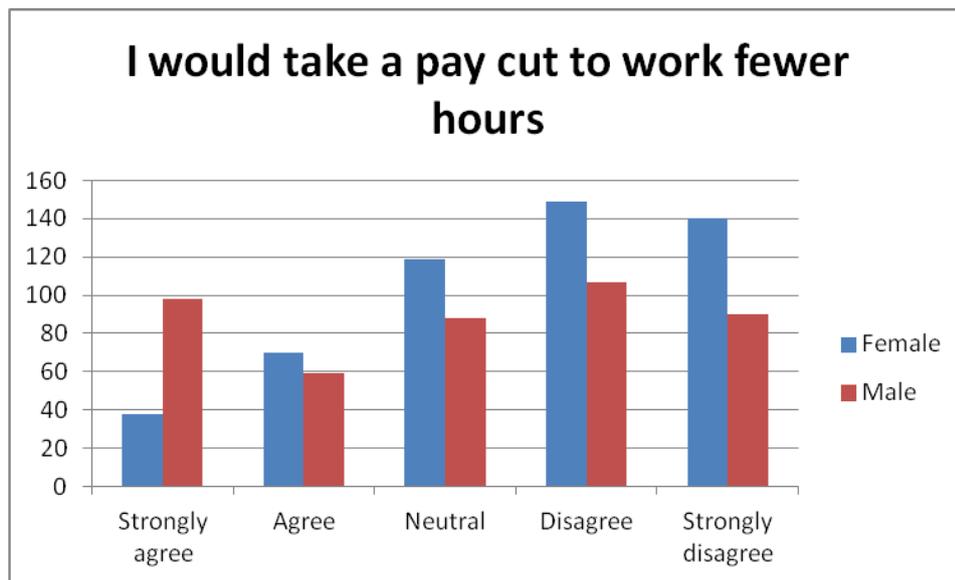


Figure 30

Men who are parents are more resentful than women towards their employers. The chart above shows the proportion of parents who responded for each category. This shows that amongst those who strongly agreed that they felt resentful towards their employer, men were almost twice as likely to do so than women. Overall, this was 23 per cent of all the fathers who responded to the survey as opposed to 10 per cent of women. This may not be surprising in view of the fact that men are generally less likely than women to work in flexible ways, and the historical perception of organisational efforts around flexible working being that they are aimed primarily at mothers.<sup>14</sup> However, it has serious implications when considering not only the way in which flexible working is playing out for families, but in terms of employee engagement and wellbeing.

The table below shows how parents view reducing their hours to achieve a better work-life balance



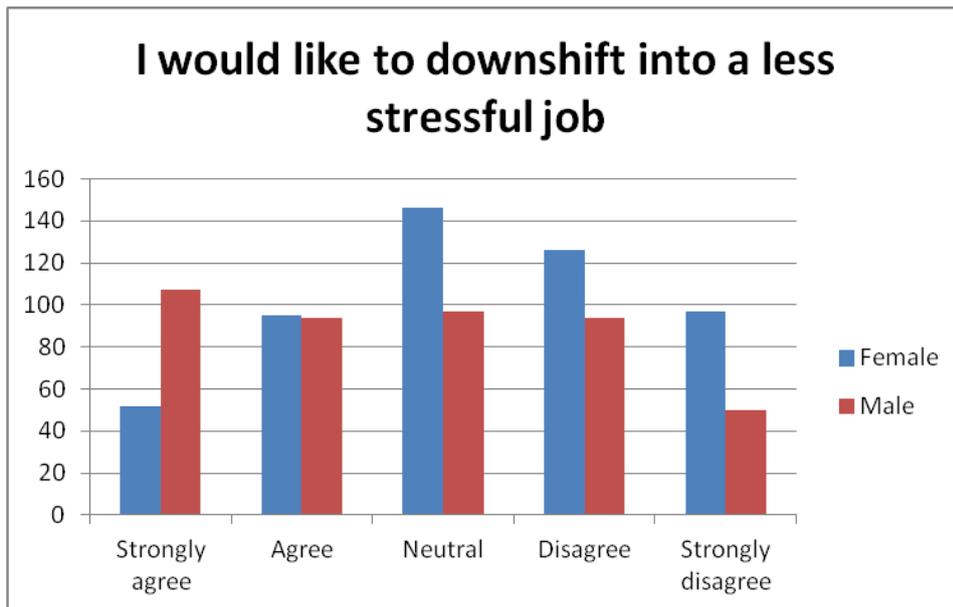
**Figure 31**

It is evident that the majority of parents would not want (or would not be able) to countenance a reduction in income. This is unsurprising, as pressure on family income is growing each year.<sup>15</sup> However, it is noteworthy that men rather than women show an appetite for reducing hours and income in the strongly agree category by more than 2:1. They are also less likely than women to disagree. This may be indicative of two things: that men want more flexibility; and that women do not want to necessarily be the parent who reduces their hours (or further reduces them if already working less than full-time). As figure XX has shown, men are less likely to work reduced hours arrangements than women and so may feel they have the capacity to do so where women do not.

Parent’s aspirations to work in a less stressful job are shown in Figure 32:

<sup>14</sup> Lewis, S. & Cooper, C.L. (1999), ‘The work-family agenda in changing contexts’ in *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 4(4): pp.382-393.

<sup>15</sup> Resolution Foundation, Commission on Living Standards



**Figure 32**

Men appear more keen to move into less stressful roles than women. This may again reflect men's desire to access employment which offers more opportunities for work-life balance, less demanding/or less stressful roles being associated with opportunities for work-life balance.<sup>16</sup> It may also reflect a reluctance on the part of women to compromise their career in return for low-level, but flexible, employment or reflect that women in reduced hours jobs do not feel that they are working to their full capacity. We anticipate being able to probe more deeply into this area in subsequent years.

## Discussion

There are a number of issues for parents trying to balance work and family life today. These are not solely confined to the home though; the way parents are able to balance work and life, and their success in doing so, links both to their lives as employees, and to the role they play in society.

### *Family*

It is evident that parents are feeling the encroachment of work into aspects of family life such as helping children with homework. For many parents surveyed, this is not the odd isolated experience, but something which happens on a regular basis. Staying late at work seems to be a common experience for many parents, and for women as much as for men. Although few of the parents were working extremely long hours, the proportion who regularly found that family life and work life were in conflict or that one dominated the other is indicative of a work-life equation which is out of balance. Forty nine per cent of parents agreed or strongly agreed that family life disrupted work, indicating that the time demands of each were not dovetailing. That family life was felt by parents (almost equally split between men (50 per cent) and women (49 per cent)) to dominate work

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<sup>16</sup> Britain's Hidden Brain Drain, Equal Opportunities Commission

demonstrates that many family commitments are not negotiable and flexible. These may be because the surrounding infrastructure (of family life) does not allow any flexibility – for example most formal childcare provision in nurseries operates on a fixed hours 8-6 basis, hospital and GP appointments are mostly scheduled during the working day etc – or it may be that demands on parents time for family life are not ones which can easily be predicted and planned for. Where work dominates family, fixed work demands may not be not easily compatible with unpredictable family time demands. However, other research<sup>17</sup> has shown that Family-work conflict is less damaging to employees work performance than Work-family conflict.

An almost equal number of parents felt that work and family were in conflict with each other. Clearly, these parents (as well as those experiencing Family-work conflict and Work-family conflict) would welcome the opportunity to work in a way which would allow them to achieve a better work-life fit. However, many of the parents surveyed here said that they could not work flexibly. This lack of flexibility, coupled with employment which often requires extra hours to be put in combines to create conditions where stress can build up. This stress had negative influences not only on the individual parent themselves, but also on their family, their wider circle of social and community relationships and also on their employer. Stress from work caused by imbalance is not confined to high paid managerial roles, but was apparent across all income bands. Nor is it confined to long hours workers, with stress being reported for those working ‘normal’ full time roles below 48 hours per week.

### **Flexible working**

More than half of parents (57 per cent) showed an appetite to be able to flex their hours, vary the place they worked from, and reduce their hours in order to get the balance that they want. Their opportunities to do so, however, were limited with 54 per cent of all the parents in the survey saying that they could not work flexibly. Managers were the most likely to be able to flex their working times and place, with professionals slightly more likely to have reduced their hours. Shorter contracted working hours were more common amongst non-managerial parents, with a lower proportion able to flex their working time and place. It may be that their choice to work fewer hours limited their willingness or capability to employ any extra flexible working options.

The number of parents reporting work related stress, late working and the regular disruption of family life through work seems consistent with restricted use of flexible working. Parental awareness of flexible working, where parents identified the type of flexibility they would like demonstrated awareness of flexibility not matched by take up. It is useful to look at some of the reasons which parents cited for working extra hours as a possible explanation: factors like a dominant workplace culture and employer expectation of extra hours are unlikely to encourage the take up of flexible working.

The take up of more flexible working would go some way to helping parents achieve the balance which they identify as missing. Only a minority feel that they have the balance right. Although the Right to Request flexible working is a right all parents enjoy, many would appear not to be able to

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<sup>17</sup> Happy Homes ibid

use it within their organisation. In some cases this might also be for financial reasons, where reductions in hours equate to a salary reduction too. Whatever the reason, many parents appear to be working in a family unfriendly way. Evidence from the Working Families employer benchmark<sup>18</sup> shows that whilst organisations have comprehensive work-life balance policies, there is a reality gap between the policies and their take up; policies do not always translate into practice. Reasons for not taking up available flexible working options are often linked to organisational culture and attitudes, where employees fear that choosing flexible working options will damage their career.

## Work

Working tasks for many parents does not seem accurately calibrated to their working hours. For many parents extra hours are a fact of life. The main issue is one around workload pressure. This would suggest that employers are allocating work beyond the hours that they have allotted to it, and are relying on parents (and, no doubt, other employees) to put in extra hours. This is a well documented phenomenon: the TUC estimates that employees put in two billion hours of unpaid overtime in 2011<sup>19</sup>.

Organisations which themselves are under pressure may place additional burdens on their employees in the form of expanded workloads to increase productivity. However, the risks to employee health and wellbeing caused by work-related stress are also likely to increase, especially if managers are given little training or support. This sample of working parents shows clearly that work related stress is prevalent and often worse than three years ago. Working in a way which is sustainable for employees makes good business sense, even if an organisation is under pressure.

Working patterns and expectations about who works and when are changing. Imminent changes to legislation mean that it will be easier for parents to share the care of children during the first year of life, effectively making it easier for women to return to work and men to provide childcare. This may begin to challenge some of the rigid assumptions that are made in many workplaces about the traditional roles of fathers and mothers. This is welcome, and overdue. As can be seen from this sample of working parents, men are more willing to countenance a work downshift to less pay and lower stress than women are. Other research<sup>20</sup> has observed that men are less engaged than women are at work. This is likely to be associated with decreased levels of motivation and effort. In *Time Health and the Family* men are more resentful towards their employers than women about their work-life balance (or lack of it). In the employment market women are, in increasing numbers, earning more than their male partners, disrupting the traditional 'breadwinner' model. In this survey, women are not keen to downshift or reduce their hours to the same extent as men. A shift may be underway in how families themselves view the roles of mother and father, earner and carer, and that their own expectations and desire for more equality here does not match the way that they find work is organised.

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<sup>18</sup> Top Employers for Working families 2012, Working Families

<sup>19</sup> *Work Your Proper Hours Day 2012*, TUC 2012

<sup>20</sup> *Flexible Working and Fathers*, Working Families, Lancaster University Management School



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