

 a **working families** publication

Time, Health and the Family: What Working Families Want

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Foreword

This report is the first in the Time, Health and the Family research programme, which will explore the integration of work and life for families and carers today. We know that we work long hours in the UK, and that long hours at work mean that time at home is squeezed. But what does this mean for families today; what gets caught in the time deficit, what do parents think of it, and vitally, what do they think can be done?

This research conducted amongst working parents points to one overriding message. Together parents, employers and government need to look at work in a different way – to work leaner, shorter, more productive hours to free up time for our families and communities. The report highlights some important tensions. Parents feel that the only way out of stressful, long hours work is to find another job – and yet, we know many of them never get round to it – because of financial pressures, or simply because they don't have the time to do it. In the meantime, the government is warning of the dangers of becoming an unfit, obese generation. Our children may be the first generation in modern times to have a worse life expectancy than their parents. And yet the research demonstrates that binge working is stopping us from eating properly or taking exercise.

How can we change this? The research shows surprising levels of acceptance amongst parents – they don't blame anybody in particular. Instead they feel trapped in an embedded culture of long working hours and short-changed families. It is clear that for many of today's families, the way we organise and use our time for work isn't in harmony with their own idea of happy family life. The challenge is to find a way to engage employers, government and parents themselves in re-examining the methods and goals of work today, and develop a model of work which will benefit us all. The potential rewards, socially and economically, for families and employers, are too great to ignore.



Sarah Jackson
Chief Executive
Working Families

Summary

- Many parents in the UK are working longer hours than they should be and feel they have to because of:
 - Heavy workloads which do not match the hours allocated to them
 - A long hours culture which pervades their organisation
- Working long hours is resulting in increased stress levels which are having negative health effects:
 - Physical effects: headaches, exhaustion, depression
 - Unhealthy lifestyles: lack of exercise, overeating, increased alcohol consumption etc.
- Half of parents are unhappy with their work and family balance, and the majority feel that work dominates and thus their family life suffers – especially spending time with children. Morale and productivity are also affected.
- For those with no flexibility in their working arrangements (45% of sample) there is a more significant resentment towards employers for their lack of work-life balance and this group are more likely to feel that employers should take on most of the onus for improving things.
- However the majority of parents see the responsibility of improving work-life balance lies primarily with themselves. They believe the only real solution for them is to look for another job with an employer who offers better work-life balance options.
- In terms of expected improvements from employers, the most important is seen as cultural – changing the perception that it is good or important to work long hours (this is especially the case for those working long hours).
- Few expect to see high levels of government intervention on this issue, however, there is widespread support for giving parents the right to work flexibly.

Introduction

Over the last twenty years, there have been significant changes in the way that work and family life integrate. Against a backdrop of rapid change in the workplace, family life has also altered. In part this has been driven by social changes, but in many cases these changes have been driven by developments in employment culture. How have families faced these changes, and, more importantly, what do they think about them? This report aims to look at some of the issues today's families encounter when trying to integrate work and family life, and to examine the effects of work on their relationships, their health, their sense of well-being and the way they function at work.

About this report

This report uses data drawn from a survey commissioned by Working Families. Using a web-based interface, working parents submitted their responses by clicking through the survey online. Respondents were either; from families where one parent worked full-time and the other at least part-time; or single parents working full or part-time. 646 interviews were completed – 392 men and 254 women. Data has been weighted to give a 50:50 split. This report attempts to put the findings from the research into a wider context, and where information has been used to build a wider picture, it is sourced in the endnotes.

Families and work today

73% of families in the UK today comprise a married or cohabiting couple, down from 92% in 1971. In the same period the number of lone parents has increased from 8% to 27%.⁽ⁱ⁾ The most common model for a working family today is the 1.5 worker family (sometimes referred to as the dual earner family), where both parents work, often one full-time, and the other part-time. Around two thirds of families today fall into this pattern. This represents a significant change from the old model of the worker family, where only one parent (usually the father) worked, and has been driven by legislation on equality of opportunity and pay, increasing educational attainments for women generating an interest in working outside the home, and a decline in the amount and security of men's earnings.

More and more women are entering paid employment, often, in the case of families with children, taking on the part-time worker role. 68% of women with dependent children are now working with 40% working part-time.⁽ⁱⁱ⁾ This net increase in working time for families means that there is necessarily less time available for home life. In the case of lone parents who are working (53%), this time balance is exaggerated as the impact of working time is less likely to be mitigated by having a partner who has time to spend at home.

There are significant differences in the labour market experiences of men and women, which are important to consider when looking at the way families combine work and life. Although the participation of women in paid employment has increased, various issues have exerted influence on their employment. The bulk of childcare falls to women, and the age of the child has an impact on work: 55% of working age women with children under five were in the labour force. This compares with 73% whose youngest child was aged five to ten and 80% whose youngest child was aged 11 to 15.⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾

The gap in pay between men and women also has an effect on the way families divide up work. Men, in the UK, earn approximately 20% more than women doing the same job.^(iv) Obviously this will impact on families in their assessment of how best to maximise income, often leading to the withdrawal from the workplace of the lower paid partner. In reality this means women give up work or reduce their hours to look after children as it makes more economic sense. At the same time it reinforces the necessity for the father to take on the main breadwinner role, bringing with it the attendant pressures of keeping and improving his job (often through long hours and other family unfriendly working practices).^(v)

Work

Working life has changed to such an extent in the last 25 years that it is difficult now to define 'typical' work. The growth of the 24/7 society has long put paid to the traditional 9 to 5 job. Similarly, increasing employment insecurity has seen off the job for life, which characterised the experience of previous generations of workers. Employees are much more likely to move between jobs, and accept the necessity to do so as part of the conditions of modern working life. Employment protection and health and safety legislation, increasingly driven by the European Union, has changed and, in many cases, enhanced work conditions for employees. Measures such as maternity and paternity leave, entitlement to paid holidays and parental leave have sought to make working life better.

However, working culture has not kept pace with social and legislative reform. Along with job insecurity, working hours have been steadily increasing to such an extent that the UK government did not feel earlier this year that it could adopt European laws to limit the working week, preferring instead to allow employers to ask their employees to continue to 'opt-out' of limits to working time. This indicates that longer working hours have become so ingrained that many organisations could not function without their employees putting in extra hours at work. It is estimated that in the UK employees are putting in the equivalent of an extra seven days per year.^(vi)

Against this background of work insecurity and intensification, however, are developments specifically aimed at addressing the impacts of work on family life. Chief of these has been the development and availability of flexible (sometimes known as 'family friendly') working practices. These flexible working practices are designed to let employees balance, either by rearranging their working time, or by reducing it, their work and home lives. In the UK these are often aimed at parents, confirmed by recent legislation giving all parents of young children the right to request flexible working. However, some companies have taken this further and extended the right to ask for flexible work arrangements to all employees, regardless of whether they have children or not. These policies, though, must be set in the context of the UK where fathers still work the longest hours in Europe, at 45+ hours per week.^(vii)

How does work 'work' for families?

Because of the variety of types of employment, it is difficult to paint a picture of a typical working family, especially when factoring in matters such as ages and numbers of children, childcare and other caring arrangements and other issues like location, income and support networks. However, the integration of work and family life presents all working families with one key issue: time. How much time a family has for activities outside work is one of the major concerns for families today.

How much work do we do today?

The average working week in the UK stands at about 44 hours for a full-time worker, against an EU average of 40 hours. For people who work up to 45 hours per week, there has been a steady increase in the number of hours they are working over the last few years. For people already working long hours (over 45) there has been a slight decline in their numbers.^(viii) The parents in our sample were asked about the variance in what hours people are contracted to work and what hours they actually work. The tables below show the difference in contracted vs actual hours.

Figure (a)

Women: hours contracted vs hours actually worked

Base: Working Mothers (254)

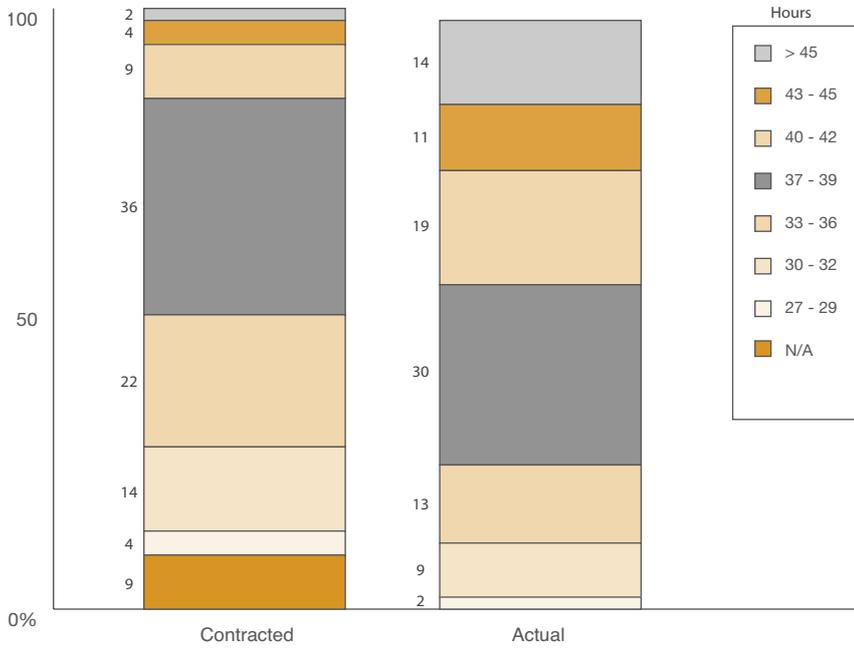
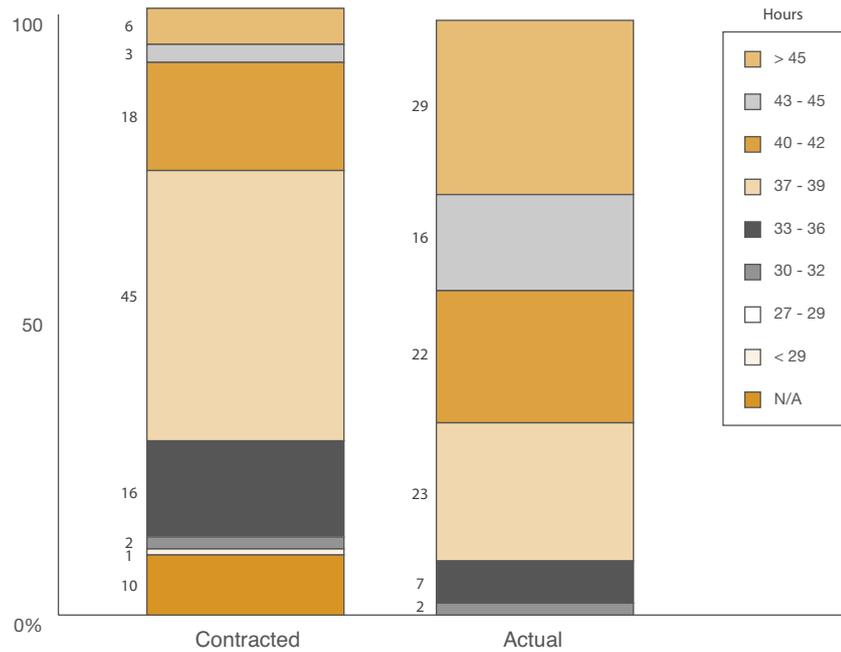


Figure (b)

Men: hours contracted vs hours actually worked

Base: Working Fathers (254)



It is clear from the above tables that many people are working extra hours. 21% are contracted to work 40+ hours, but 56% regularly work more than 40+ hours, rising to 67% for men. Only 4% of parents are contracted to work 45+ hours, yet 21% are regularly doing so. This rises to 29% for men. There is a correlation between hours and income, with higher incomes associated with longer hours. The discrepancy between the time allocated for a certain job (the contract), and the actual time it takes to do it is weighted in favour of the organisation rather than the individual. The reasons for people working extra hours are shown in the table below.

Figure (c)

Reasons for working long hours

Base: Total working parents (646); Parents working > 45hrs (148)



Over half of all the parents we surveyed felt that long hours were necessary simply to get their job done, rising to 73% of those who already identified themselves as working more than 45 hrs per week. Furthermore, significant numbers of parents felt that their employer expected them to put in extra hours again rising for those who worked the longest hours. This indicates a workplace attitude which could limit parents ability to spend more time with their families.

The role of flexible working

Flexible working has benefited both employees and employers. It has allowed workers to find ways to balance their work and home lives, through rearrangement of hours, moving to task-based working, reducing their hours and changing their place of work. It has facilitated participation in the labour market for women, and those with caring responsibilities, and increased employment opportunities for many who may have previously been excluded. For employers it has given them access to a wider pool of labour, allowed them to retain talent and reap the rewards of improved employee motivation and commitment. There are clear benefits for both.

However, it has been noted that even where flexible working policies exist, they are often not taken up by employees. Awareness has been found to be determined by a mixture of an employee's personal characteristics and circumstances, the type of job they do and their value to their employer.^(ix) It also might be because of lack of information about the policies, or because of a discrepancy between flexible working options being available and the prevailing company culture which rewards the worker unencumbered by family responsibilities.^(x)

Family unfriendliness, like the intensification of work, the increase in working time, job insecurity and the growth of unsociable hours has a more significant effect on families and work and family integration than the availability of flexible working policies.^(x4) Researchers at the OECD have noted that countries, like the UK, which have the best statistical information about ‘family friendly’ provision often have poor provision of statutory benefits and public childcare, and are also sites of growing family unfriendly phenomena like long hours.

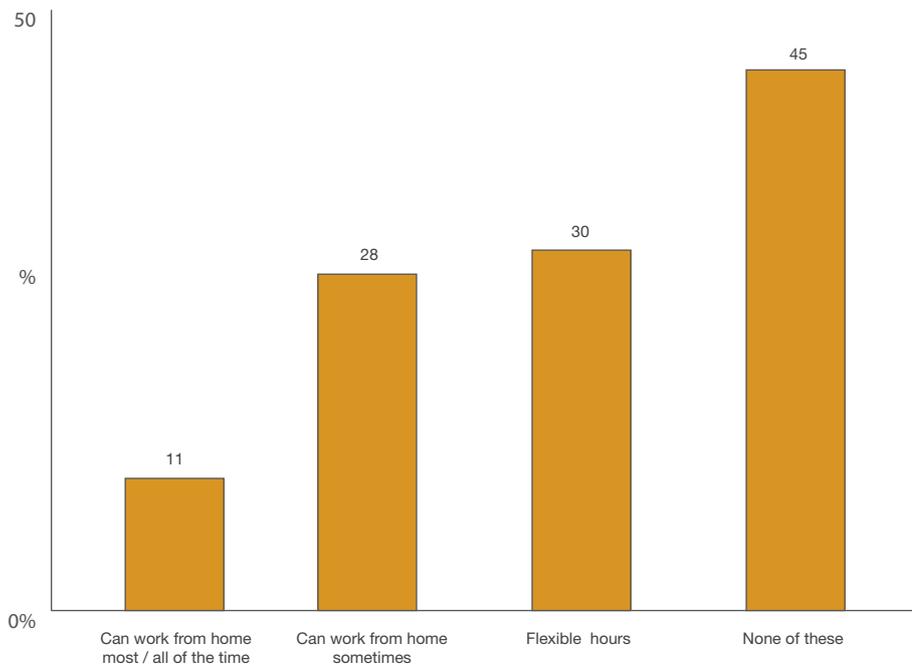
Barriers to adopting flexible working practices for employees may be direct opposition from their employer, who do not wish to allow such practices, or fear that by adopting a flexible working role they will damage their career and employment prospects. Employers may shy away from adopting flexible working practices for a number of reasons: it may disrupt their business, or increase managerial workloads. Access to policies is also dictated by line managers’ attitudes.^(x5) More difficult to quantify is the fear from employers of somehow ‘opening the floodgates’ if they allow flexible working to exist in their organisations, preferring instead to try to maintain traditional working practices, even if these run counter to better work-life integration for their employees and ignore accruing business benefits.

As a measure to help work-life integration, flexible working practices are a key requirement for parents. The survey of working parents found that 60% would opt for flexible working practices if they could change anything in their working lives. Other surveys have found similar interest in flexible working practices from working parents. However, only about half of all the parents we asked had any access to flexible working arrangements, as illustrated by the table below.

Figure (d)

Availability of flexible working

Base: Working parents (646)



This fits with the wider UK picture of demand for flexible working outstripping supply. According to the Government's Work-Life Balance Study, 81% of employees had access to flexible working arrangements. However, when part-time work was removed from the equation, less than one in four employers offered any other types of flexible working. Of these, less than half (44%) gave their employees more than one choice of flexible working options. Employees, on the other hand, wanted to see a variety of flexible working arrangements: 47% wanted flexitime, 35% a compressed working week, 26% part-time work, 25% term-time working and 16% job-sharing.^(xiii) Clearly many parents want more flexibility than is currently on offer to them.

Atypical hours and family life

As employers have faced the competition of a global marketplace and 24/7 society, pressure has increased to keep costs low and seek efficiency gains, whilst at the same time striving to cope with customer demand for services to be available outside 'traditional' hours. There have been two approaches to resolving this issue: designing new jobs which can be filled with low cost new labour; or expecting employees to work longer hours to make up the gap. What this has led to is an increase in early morning, evening or weekend work. It is estimated that 2.41million families are affected by weekend working alone, and that the people who do weekend work are likely to be poorly paid, and with fewer qualifications.^(xiv)

The effects on family life of atypical working (sometimes known as unsocial hours) are complex. Just over half of employed lone mothers worked atypical hours. In the majority of two-parent families, one or both parents frequently work atypical hours. Where parents had chosen to work atypical hours and the hours were short, they were seen as beneficial for family life and deliberately selected to allow more time for childcare. However, where there was little control or choice, parents felt that atypical hours had a negative effect on family life. The time parents had for each other was the main casualty of atypical work, as they tend to prioritise any non-work time for spending with their children. Atypical work was most common amongst fathers, with 41% (double the number than that of women) working early mornings and 54% working at least one Saturday per month. Of all the types of atypical work, weekend work (especially Sundays) and long hours were considered most disruptive to family life.^(xv)

Health

How is the health of families affected by working life? There is a substantial base of evidence, both from Health and Safety bodies and other researchers, which makes a link between negative health impacts on employees and factors like long hours work, work intensification and atypical hours.

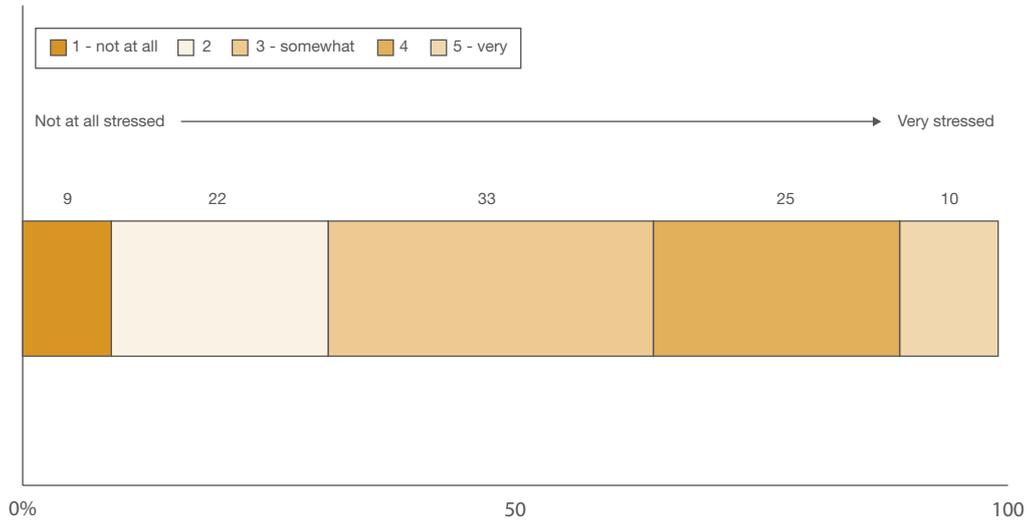
One area of concern is work-related stress. This is defined by the Health and Safety Executive as: "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them". They estimate that about half a million people in the UK experience work-related stress at a level they believe is making them ill; up to five million people in the UK feel "very" or "extremely" stressed by their work; and work-related stress costs society about £3.7 billion every year (at 1995/6 prices).^(xvi)

Parents in our sample were asked to assess their own stress levels (Below (e)).

Figure (e)

How stressed are you by work?

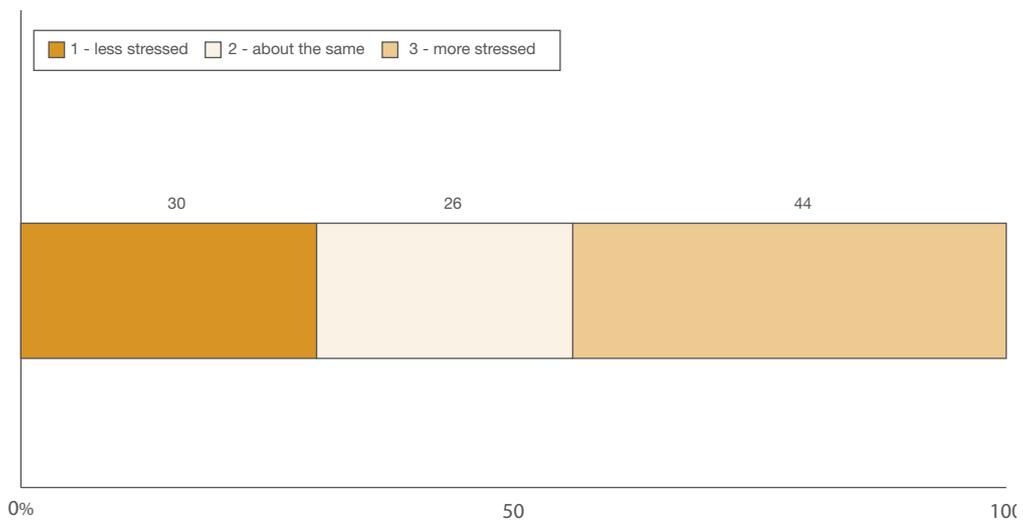
Base: Working parents (646)



Over a third (35%) of working parents feel stressed by work, rising to almost half (45%) of those working over 45 hours. It also appears that work stress is increasing, compared with five years ago (below), with almost half the parents reporting that they are more stressed now. Only one in five parents said they were unaffected by stress.

Figure (f)

How stressed are you by work compared with five years ago?

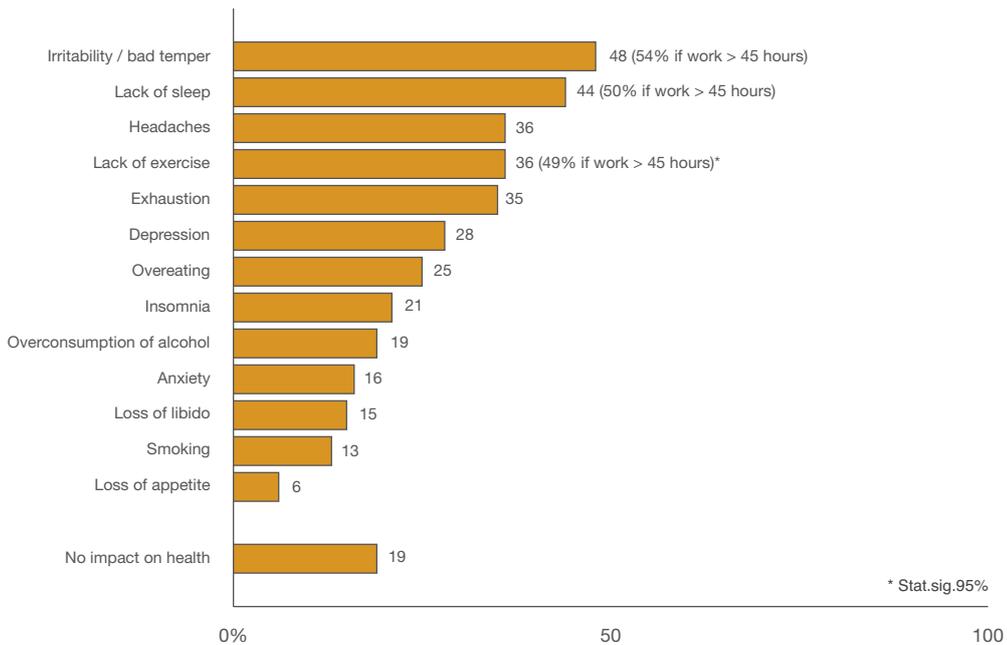


We asked our parents directly what the effects of work were on their health, specifically how they were impacted by work stress. The results are below

Figure (g)

Impact of work stress on health

Base: Working parents (646); Parents working > 45 hours (148)



For the majority of parents, there were negative health impacts in terms of irritability (48%), sleeplessness (44%), headaches (36%), lack of exercise (36%) and exhaustion (35%).

It appears that work stress, particularly long hours work, is causing problems for many parents in terms of the 'healthiness' of their lives. This inevitably will have a knock-on effect into their family life, both in the time they have left to spend with their families, and also the quality of that time.^(xvii)

It is worth noting anecdotal evidence from France, after the introduction of legislation limiting the working week to 35 hours for many workers. Although introduced primarily as a measure to tackle unemployment, the effects on families were beneficial, "Two-thirds of people on a shorter week say that it has improved their lives. Working women, especially, say that a four day week, or shorter working day, has made their lives tolerable for the first time."^(xviii)

Diet and exercise

There is increasing anxiety about rising obesity levels amongst children and adults in the UK. A reliance on unhealthy food, coupled with a reduction in the amount of exercise people are doing, has led some commentators to predict a future health crisis. Time pressures mean people are more likely to rely on vpre-packaged foods. When asked how often they used convenience food or ate poorly because of work and time pressures, nearly all the parents in our survey had done this at some point (see (h) below).

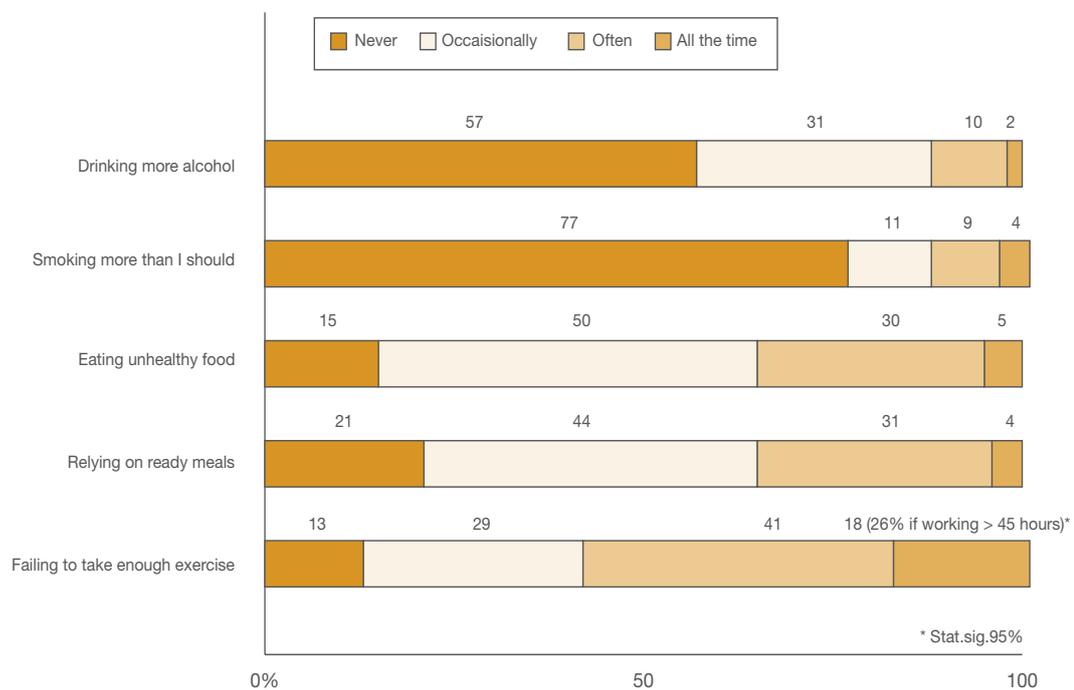
Similarly, parents in our survey also said that work pressures had an effect on their health in terms of increased alcohol intake, reduced exercise and, in some cases, smoking (see (h) below).

Particularly noticeable is the lack of exercise that parents are able to take because of work. 60% say that work frequently or always prevents them exercising. When coupled with the evidence on eating habits, with around 35% stating they often or always eat unhealthily, it is clear that parents feel that work pressure has an effect on how healthily they are able to live. This has implications for employers in terms of an unhealthy workforce, for the parents themselves, for their children and for society in general. The table below shows the comparative incidence of unhealthy behaviours.

Figure (h)

Extent to which time at work results in unhealthy behaviours

Base: Working parents (646); Parents working > 45 hours (148)



It is evident that where hours increase, taking exercise diminishes. This is particularly noticeable in the sub-group of parents who work more than 45+ hours per week.

The picture which emerges of work-related stress and unhealthy habits brought about by work intensification and a time squeeze for parents, caused by working longer hours, is of conditions which are hostile to family life. The International Labour Organisation has noted that one of the main factors of stress is trying to combine work and family life. Amongst the work issues they recognise as raising stress are time pressures and atypical hours. They specifically recommend the reduction of hours of work, the reduction of overtime and the introduction of more flexible arrangements in relation to working schedules, rest periods and holidays.^(xix)

Family life

There is no set definition of what 'good' family life is. Perhaps the best measure is to ask families what they want, how good they think their family life is, and what they would do to improve it. In the case of families where one or both parents work, this will be informed by the role that work plays in their lives. Factors like income and standard of living have to be offset against the time sacrifices necessary to get them.

Children's attitudes to their parents work and family life has been examined by previous research, and concluded that children want to spend time with their parents, and vice versa. In perhaps the most comprehensive study, children who spent more time with their parents on work and non-workdays felt that their parents put family before work, and graded their parents higher to the researchers. It is also important to children (and to parents) that they be there at important times of their lives (such as school and sports events) and when they are sick. 50% of parents were revealed to believe that they didn't spend enough time with their children.^(x)

Figure (i)

Time spent with children and partners on weekdays

Base: Working parents (646)

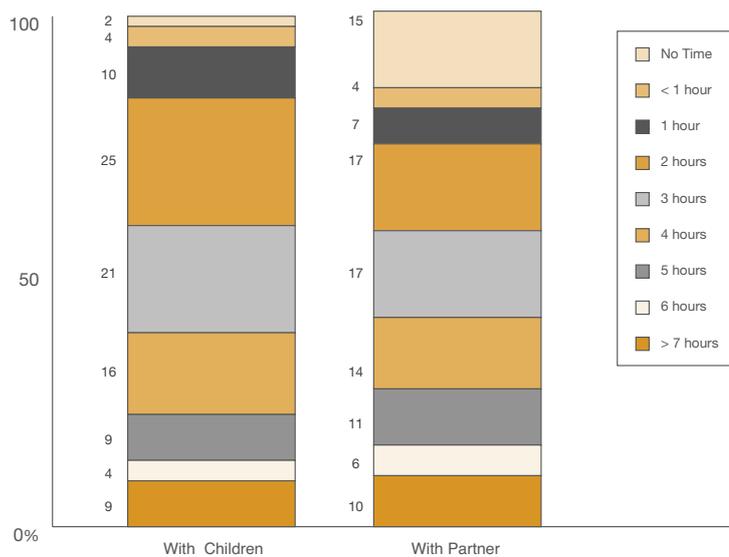


Figure (j)

Number of times a family sits down to an evening meal per week

Base: Working parents (646)

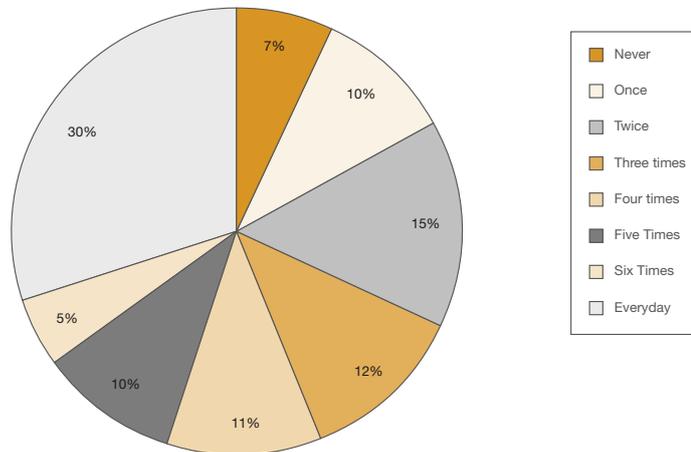


Figure (k)

Extent to which work impinges on family activities

Base: Working parents (646); Parents working > 45 hours (148)

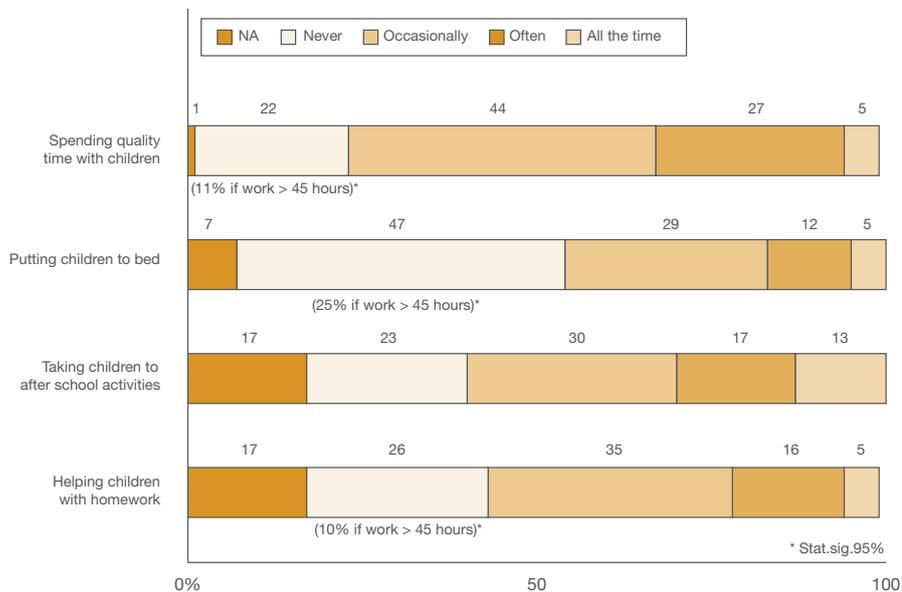
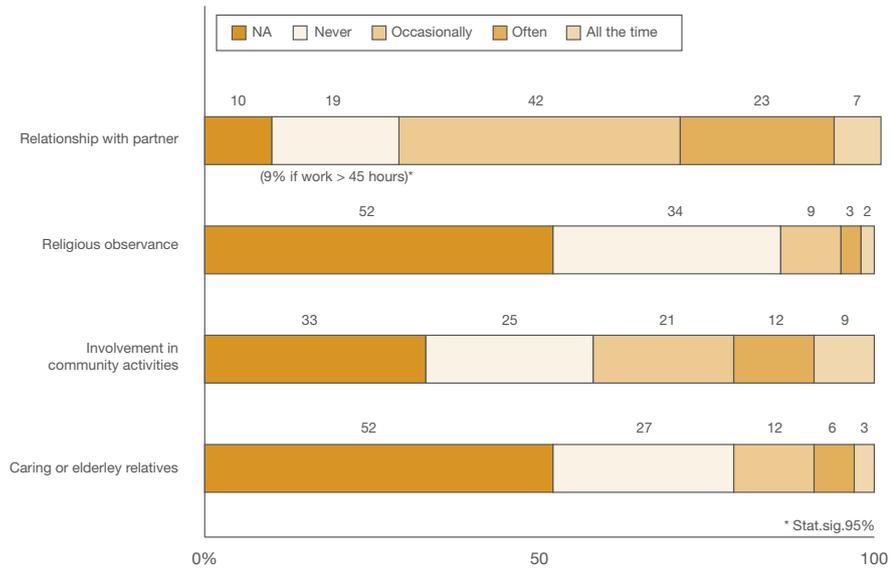


Figure (I)

Extent to which work impinges on family activities

Base: Working parents (646); Parents working > 45 hours (148)



Around 41% of parents are spending two hours or less with their children every day, a percentage which increases to 59% if they work 45+ hours per week. Around one third of families manage to eat together every day, with a similar number eating together two times or less each week. This is not affected by hours worked. One explanation may be that more affluent (with longer working hours) families consciously make an effort to eat one meal together.

When asked to estimate the impact work had on specific family activities, parents were emphatic that it negatively affected the amount of 'quality' (sometimes referred to as 'focussed') time which they could spend with their children, with three quarters of parents identifying this issue. Again, research has identified quality time as very important to children. Time pressured parents are less likely to be able to have good 'focused' attention for their children, and are more likely to be stressed and tired, factors which affect the quality of life for children.^(xxi)

Nearly half (46%) of parents said work had stopped them being there to put their children to bed, and over half (56%) said that it affected their ability to help their children with their homework. Three fifths of parents also acknowledged that work had impacted their ability to take their children to after-school activities. This is worth noting, not least for the wider effect that work has on community life and social activities. According to one survey around 40% of people said that working hours stopped them doing hobbies, social and community activities.^(xxii) The TUC link the increase in working time to a 30% decrease in voluntary work since 1995.

Certainly parents feeling the time squeeze will have less time to take their children to after school activities and sports clubs, as well as pursue any exercise themselves (table h). This has further implications for the overall health of children, and is worth highlighting again in the light of current debates on obesity. Other researchers have noted the detrimental effect on community and society in general of long working hours, going so far as to say that they threaten civil society. Participation in community clubs and activities is undermined by long working hours, and it is a matter of public interest, not simply a matter of choice between employer and employee, to promote a better balance between work and life.^(xxiii)

The effect of working time on parents' relationships with their partners is marked. 72% (rising to 82% for those working 45+ hours) say their relationship has been affected. This is corroborated by other research, which has found that lengthening working hours take their toll on relationships. 72% of managers admitted that their relationship with their partner suffered because of their workload, according to one survey,^(xxiv) and this is a view backed up by HR body the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.^(xxv) This problem is not confined to the UK. A detailed survey in New Zealand amongst families found strong evidence linking increases in working time to a deterioration in family relationships.^(xxvi)

It is interesting to note that fewer parents felt that they were affected when it came to caring for elderly relatives. This figure is almost certainly likely to rise in the future, as the workforce and population ages. Organisations like Carers UK estimate that an increasing proportion of UK employees are having to take on caring responsibilities for elderly relatives. Some employers have recognised this trend and have already taken steps to introduce policies entitling carers to take leave and/or flexible working arrangements to help employees cope. However, such employers remain in the minority.

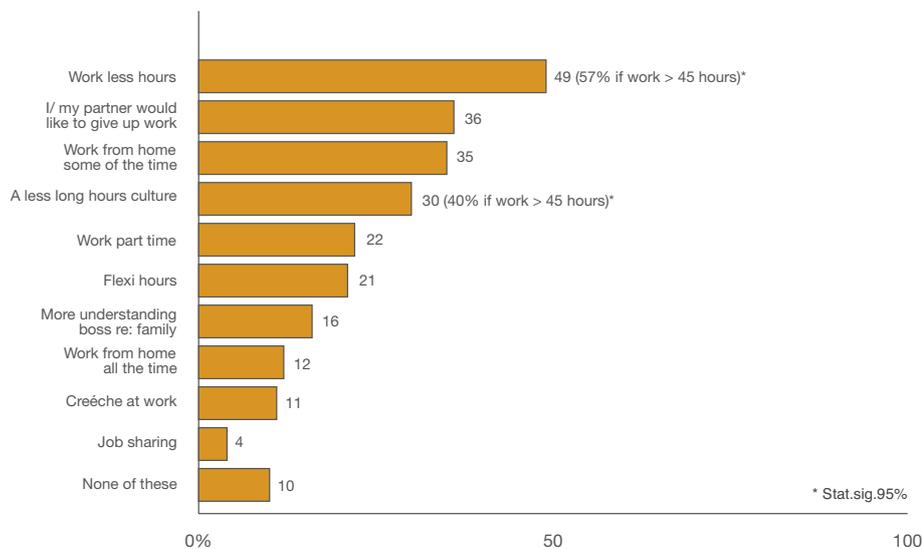
What would working families change?

When working parents were given the choice of a range of options of changes they could make to their lives, the results pointed strongly towards a reduction in working time. About half of all the parents identified working less hours as the key improvement they would make. Their choices are shown in the table below.

Figure (m)

Changes people would make in their working life

Base: Working parents (646); Parents working > 45 hours (148)



Time pressures are felt more keenly by those working longer hours, reflected in the higher number (57%) who would like to scale back their working time. There are implications for employers contained in the finding that for 30% of working parents, a change in company culture away from long hours working would improve the quality of their lives. This figure leaps by a third to 40% for workers who put in longer hours. Parents distinguish between reducing their hours to more manageable levels and part-time work.

Just over a third of parents would either give up work themselves, or see their partner stop work. The male:female split was 42%:31%. This may reflect a preference amongst men for traditional family and gender roles with the mother taking on the role of fulltime childcare at the expense of paid employment. Certainly there seems to be some childcare related factors here; 45% of parents with children aged five to six years old were in favour of one or the other parent giving up work, as opposed to only 30% with children aged 11 to 15. Other research has noted that many self employed mothers (approximately half) would like to give up paid work altogether if they could afford it.^(xxvii)

Parents would like more flexible working options. Over a third of parents would like to be able to work from home some of the time, with around a fifth each choosing flexible hours and part-time working as practices they would like to have access to. It is possible that the long hours culture identified in many parents' responses affects their ability to adopt flexible working practices, even if they are available. They may feel that the unspoken cultural code of long hours would inhibit any meaningful development

of organisational work-life balance policies.

16% of parents identified their boss as a barrier to improving their working lives when it came to balancing work and home. There is evidence that line managers' attitudes towards work-life integration can be crucial. Their management practices and attitudes have been identified as key elements when it comes to allowing employees access to work-life balance policies and practices.^(xxviii)

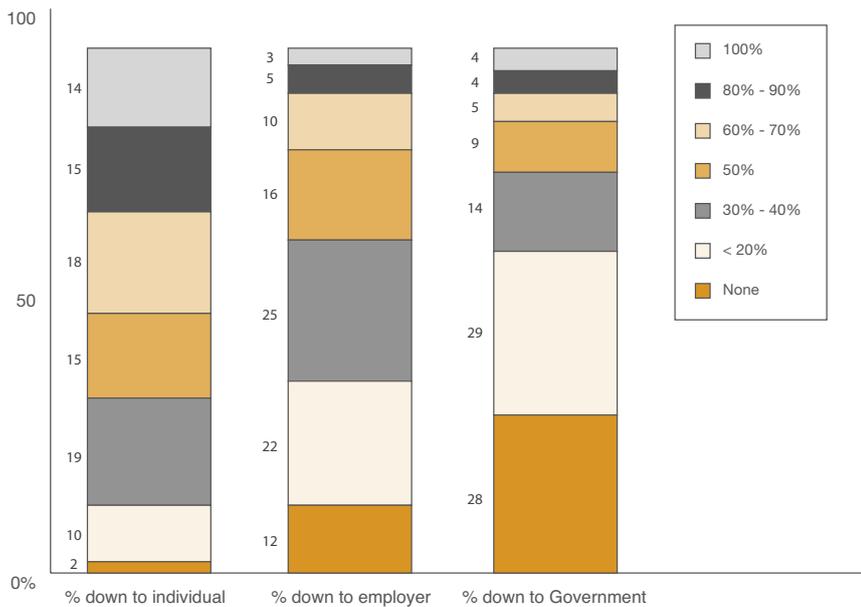
Who should make the changes?

We asked parents who they felt was responsible for improving their work-life balance: themselves, their employer or the Government. Parents were asked to allocate 100% across the three choices. The results are below.

Figure (n)

Proportional responsibility for work-life integration

Base: Working parents (646)



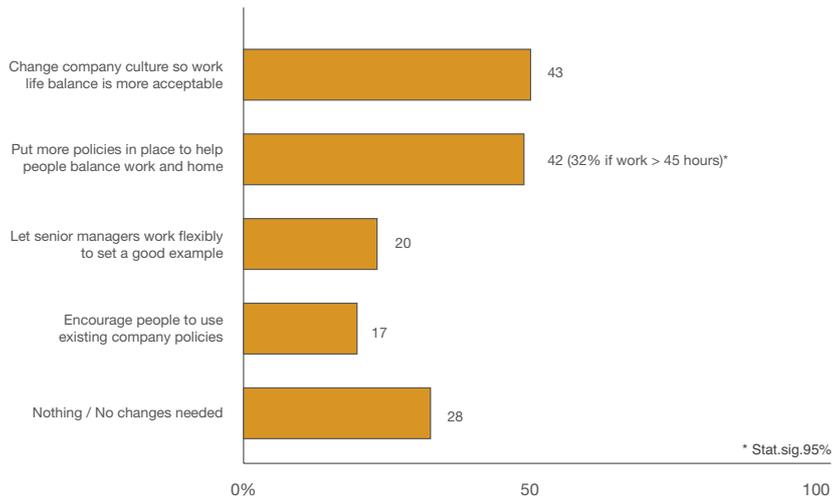
Employees identify themselves as being most responsible for their own work-life balance. 47% of parents place more than 50% of the responsibility with themselves, whereas only 18% place more than 50% responsibility with their employers and 13% place more than 50% responsibility with the Government. However just over 70% of parents believe that Government does have role to play in this area, and even more (88%) think that their employer has some responsibility here. It would appear that parents believe that a combination of the three (themselves, government, and employers) all should take a part in parents' work and family balance. However, it is worth noting that many parents see the solution to their work-life balance problems as leaving their current employer for a more family friendly one. In fact, 41% felt this way. There is an issue for employers here.

But what exactly do parents want employers and government to do? The table below shows that company culture is the factor which most parents (43%) would like to see change.

Figure (o)

Steps that should be taken by employers

Base: Working parents (646); Parents working > 45 hours (148)



Such a culture may inhibit the take up of existing policies designed to enhance work-life balance. Working longer hours may be the 'way to get on' in their organisation. This supports other findings where employees feel that taking advantage of flexible working options (such as reduced hours) will see them sidelined, and their careers stalled in comparison with colleagues who have not decided to work flexibly.^(xxix)

Parents would like to see more policies in place to help them get their work and family balance right. This percentage drops for people who are working longer hours, which may appear counter-intuitive. However, one reason may be that the parents doing the bulk of longer hours are higher paid male professionals who tend to place the responsibility for work-life balance on themselves, and would like to see cultural change rather than formal policies. Role models also have an important role to play, with 20% saying they would like to see their senior managers work flexibly. The role of good management examples has been identified in work-life balance studies. Senior managers can send the signal that it is OK to adopt different work patterns by doing so themselves. Where there are no such examples, employees can become discouraged from changing their own work patterns.^(xxx)

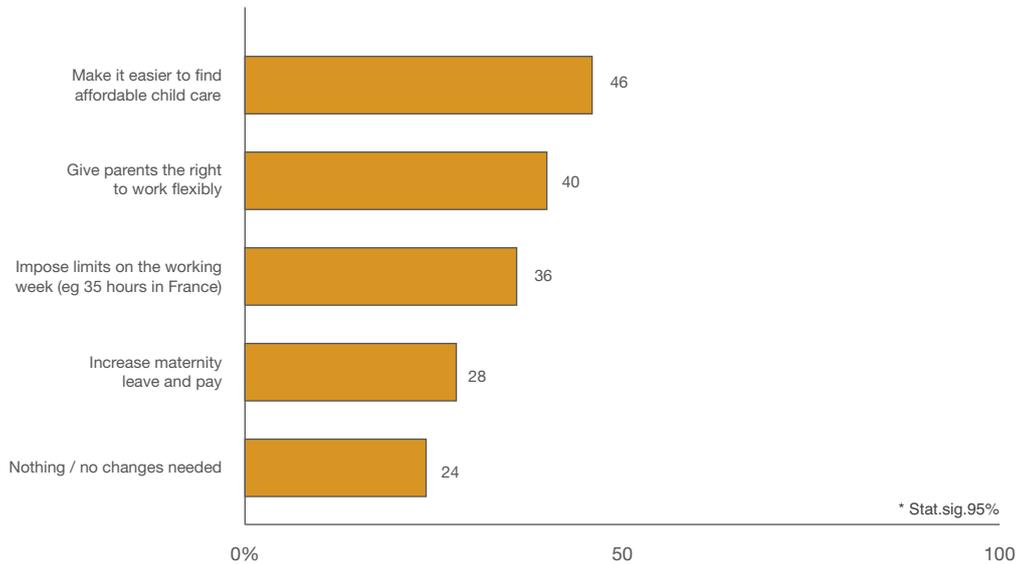
Almost one third of parents felt that no changes were needed from their employer. These parents were most likely to be over 50 and work from home most of the time. Their independence from the workplace may mean that they are less affected by the company culture than colleagues who are office-based.

In the view of the parents surveyed, there was a role for government to play in work and family integration. The steps parents believe government should take are set out below.

Figure (p)

Steps that should be taken by the Government

Base: Working parents (646)



Parents felt that the Government should be involved in childcare. Almost half of them (46%) wanted to see action here, the majority unsurprisingly with younger children. The high cost of childcare is well known. Campaigning organisation the Daycare Trust calculate that the average cost of a nursery place for one child now stands at £7,300 per year in England, and the costs for childminders and nannies are also higher than in the rest of Europe. Few workplaces offer any childcare provision, and where they do, places are limited. There is also a question of the availability and flexibility of childcare. Research has documented the juggling that working parents have to do in order to meet the often rigid patterns of paid-for childcare providers.^(xxxx)

Parents would also like to see a right to work flexibly. Indeed, across the board, flexible working was the most popular option. This would be a strengthening of their position at the moment, where parents with children under six years old (18 in the case of children with a disability) only have a right to request a change to their working patterns, not a right to actually change them. Furthermore, just over a third would like to see a limit on the working week introduced. In the light of the UK Government's position on maintaining the UK opt-out from the EU's Working Time Directive 48 hour working week limit, this seems a highly unlikely development. In any case, recent evidence from France suggests that although families affected by the 35 hour week appreciate the extra time available to them, the economic effects of a limited working week are unwelcome. Whether a reduced working week would reduce parents need for childcare or flexible work options is not clear, but it would seem logical to assume that working less hours would involve lower demand for non-parental care.

Increases in maternity leave and pay are options favoured by 28% of parents, with 44% of 18-29 year-olds choosing this option. In the case of men who become fathers, there is strong existing evidence that if paternity pay was paid at higher levels they would be more inclined to take time off at the birth of a child. Only 47% of fathers said they would be able to afford to take paternity leave paid at the current level of £102.60 per week. But this rose to four fifths who said they would take it if they were paid at 90% of their salary.^(xxxii) There have been recent enhancements in maternity pay and leave, and the introduction of statutory paternity leave, and there are further improvements mooted by government in terms of pay and splitting leave between mothers and fathers. It should be noted, however, that maternity and paternity leave and pay are not the sole responsibility of government. Employers are able to set what levels of pay and leave they like, within statutory minimums.

Finally, around a quarter of parents felt that there was no need for any government intervention. The figures were fairly consistent across parents of different ages, incomes and locations at ranging between 20-30%. The only noticeable difference was parents who worked at home most of the time, with just over 50% saying the Government didn't need to get involved. Again, this may be due to being less influenced by the pressures of workplace culture, and the time constraints of travelling to and from a place of work.

The work and family interface

What are the effects of working life on the actual work that parents do? If parents are unhappy with work encroachment into family life, how does this reflect back into their work? And do parents think that their employers are helping or hindering their work and family balance?

The effects of long hours work on family life are well established in existing research, not just in the UK but across the world. In Australia researchers concluded that “Unless there is some protection and relief from pressures for employees to work extended hours,...the equilibrium of many families affected by long hours is at risk”.^(xxxiii) US researchers have reached similar conclusions, associating long hours with increased work and home conflict, involvement in family work and childcare and marital conflict.^(xxxiv) 90% of parents surveyed felt that working long hours was damaging to their family life,^(xxxv) and the EU lists the reconciliation of work and family life as a key objective.

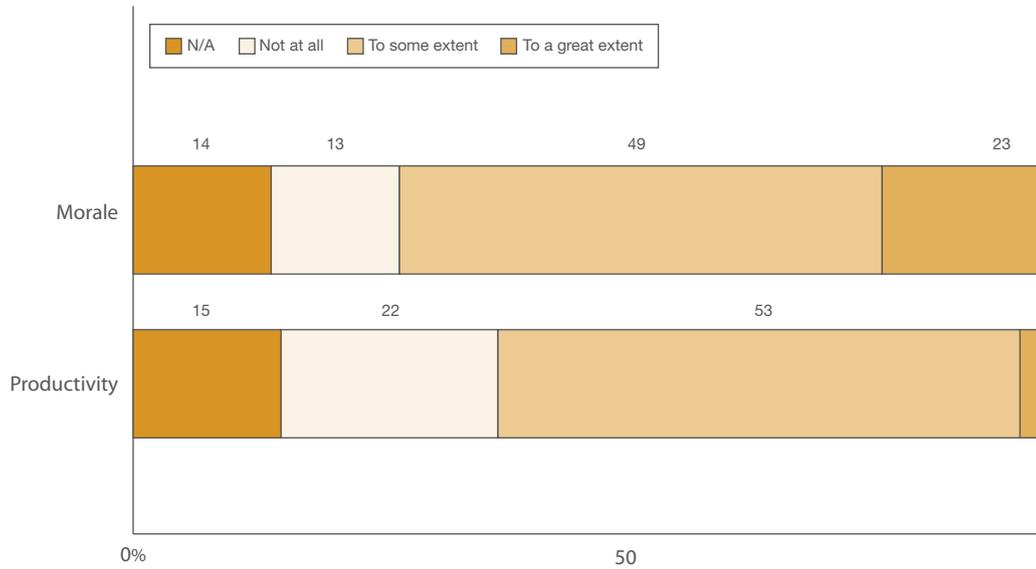
But if working long hours isn't good for family life, then why do it? As shown earlier (table c) the reasons are split between culture and expectations, and work organisation. Men, in particular, are likely to work longer hours, not least because the 'breadwinner' role is one identified by fathers as being integral to being a good father.^(xxxvi) Other drivers for longer hours include ambition and personal achievement, extra earnings (via overtime), enhanced career prospects and the hope of reward for demonstrating commitment.^(xxxvii)

What are the effects of working longer hours on parents' performance at work? We have seen the impact of working time on aspects of family life. Parents were asked to comment on how their morale and productivity were influenced by working time. The results are shown in the table below.

Figure (q)

Extent to which increased working hours affect productivity and morale

Base: Working parents (646)



Well over half of parents find that both their morale (72%), and productivity (63%) are affected by longer working hours. This is consistent with other research which also found that morale and productivity were negatively impacted as hours increased.^(xxxviii) Evidence from Working Families' Employer of the Year Awards suggests that long hours are less useful in increasing productivity than introducing policies which curb longer hours working. Farrelly Engineering, a manufacturing firm working in a highly competitive sector, put in place a variety of measures to help employees better integrate work and family life. These included prohibiting long working hours, and banning work from being taken home by employees. Since launching these policies sales have doubled, staff churn reduced and customer satisfaction levels have increased.^(xxxix) It is unlikely that parents are able to perform to the best of their abilities at work with lowered morale and increased dissatisfaction with their work and family balance caused by working longer hours.

Do organisations recognise a role for themselves in helping their employees balance work and home, and does this communicate itself to the parents in their workforce? Parents were asked to judge how much they felt their employer did to help them get the balance right. The results are shown in the tables below.

Figure (r)

My organisation helps me balance my home and work commitments

Base: Working parents (646)

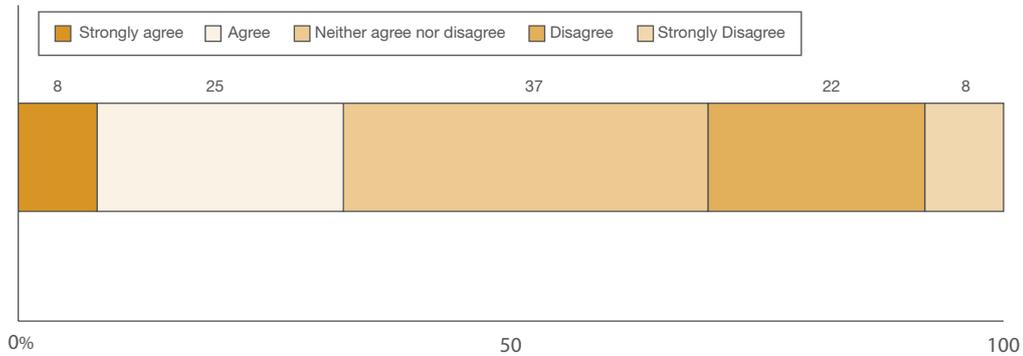
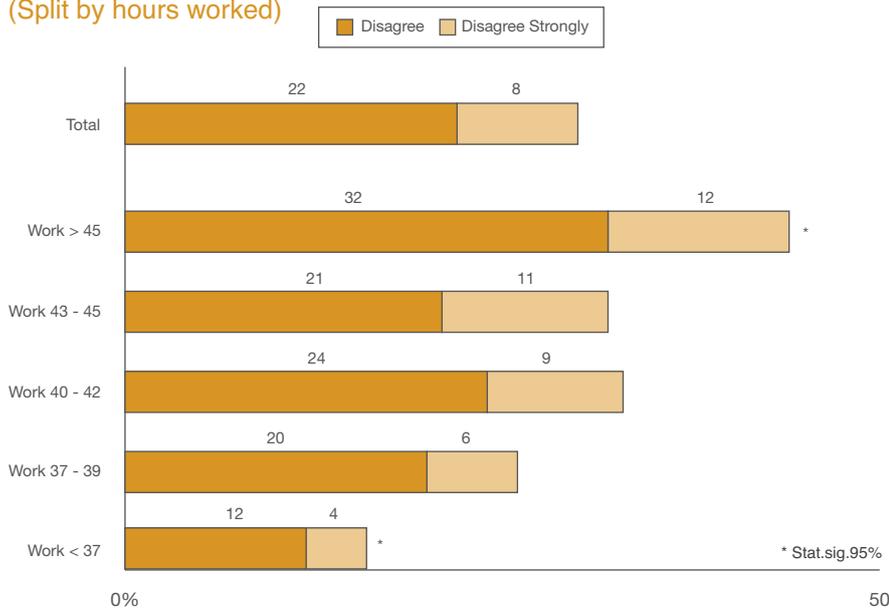


Figure (s)

(Split by hours worked)



Around one third of parents think that their organisations do help them balance work and home life, whilst slightly fewer (30%) think that they do not receive organisational help. More women than men thought that their organisation did more to help them, with 10% more men stating that they felt little employer support in this area. This is likely to be influenced by the greater number of men working longer hours, and the higher proportion of women who use flexible working methods (including part-time work) to balance work and home.

The split along hours worked is revealing. It clearly shows that longer hours are associated by parents with less organisational encouragement to balance work and family life. As hours per week decrease, so does dissatisfaction with employers attitudes to work and family integration. For those working the longest hours there is a significant increase to 44%. These parents may feel trapped by the long hours culture of their organisation, detecting little encouragement to address their working time. It may be that employers in some instances are not willing to encourage work and family balance at the expense of the input of long hours employees, despite implications this may have for productivity and morale. As has been pointed out elsewhere, employers seldom remark on the 'free hours' routinely being supplied by workers.

Conclusion

Working families today face pressures which are different from those of previous generations. Workplace demands have increased as the 24/7 globally competitive economy has taken hold. Work intensification is a phenomenon many of the working parents in our survey have first hand experience of, with many working extra hours simply to get their jobs done. At the same time, in response to competition and demand, organisations are also extending their hours, placing further demands on employees to work atypical hours in the form of morning, evening and weekend work. Working parents must try and balance these demands with having the kind of family life they want, but this is often difficult to achieve. About half the parents in this survey felt that they didn't have a good balance between work and home.

Why is this? One factor which emerged from this survey was that working parents felt that the working culture they were in prevented them taking action to get a better balance. They felt that employers expected them to put in long hours, and that it was the 'done thing' at work. For parents working longer hours the feeling of cultural expectation was even stronger. For many parents what is needed at work is a change in company culture which is more supportive of employees. Flexible working policies or options are not sufficient if the dominant culture does not support their meaningful use.

There is an issue for employers here which goes beyond making work and family integration measures available - they must work towards making them acceptable for employees to use. It is also worth noting that there seems to be something fundamentally wrong with the time allocated to work. A significant number of parents worked beyond their contracted hours, and stated that extra hours were the only way to get their job done. Whilst it is not suggested that everyone should work strictly to their contracted hours, the status quo is, at best, not conducive to a balance between work and home.

Parents are concerned about the impact of work on their family life, with 47% saying that they were unhappy with their work and home balance most of the time. Of these, two thirds said that they felt work dominated and their family life suffered, whilst the other third said they felt so torn that they could please neither their employer or their family. Family activities like eating together, time spent together, helping children with homework and taking them to after school activities were all eaten into by work. There are implications here, both for families themselves, and for the development of social capital. If parents have less time to devote to community, sport or religious activities then the networks which are sustained by them will be damaged. If family life is to be sustained, then work, especially long hours work and atypical hours, need to be prevented from infringing too greatly on family life.

To help with the balance of work and home, parents would like to see greater availability of flexible working, and the right to work flexibly. Only half of the parents surveyed had access to flexible working arrangements. This is an issue which both employers and government should address. Although working parents looked first to themselves to take action on their work and family integration, the solution which they proposed to get a better balance was to leave their current employer and find a more family friendly one. This should concern employers, who may wish to examine the possible effects of a parental workforce who have one eye on opportunities in other organisations where they feel they would be happier with their working arrangements. With parents acknowledging that family unfriendly conditions like long hours negatively effect their morale and productivity, organisations may wish to examine the business case for work-life balance measures.

Although the government has been active in encouraging, through legislation, parents of young children to make applications to rearrange their working lives, it is interesting to note that parents would like to see this strengthened to a right to work flexibly, along with enhancements to maternity and paternity pay and leave. This suggests that current legislation is not tough enough to help many parents in the workplace, and factors like company culture still hold the upper hand.

The effects of work on the health of working parents, and by extension, their families, is worrying. The majority of parents reported being stressed by work, and many more reported being more stressed by work than they were five years ago. This translates itself into unhealthy behaviours and outcomes for parents including depression, exhaustion, sleeplessness, a failure to take exercise, over and unhealthy eating and over consumption of alcohol. Unhealthy parents are unlikely to be able to give of their best either at home or at work. Current policy drives to increase the health and fitness of children and adults are unlikely to be assisted by a workforce which is too time-starved to actively participate in such measures.

At the root of what working families want is time. Families need time to be together, to pursue social and community activities, and also time to be effective at work. For many working families today the balance seems to have swung away from the family and in favour of work. Measures to rectify this, such as flexible working, seem only to be partially successful. For many parents a more radical change in work culture is needed for them to really address their work and family balance. Economic, health and social outcomes are all affected by the current imbalance, and improvements would be felt not only by the parents themselves, but more widely in society.

- i Office of National Statistics, Labour Force Survey (ONS)
- ii as above
- iii as above
- iv Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) Facts about Men and Women today 2004
- v Dex Families and Work in the 21st Century 2003 Joseph Rowntree Foundation(JRF)
- vi TUC
- vii EOC Facts about Fathers today
- viii ONS
- ix WERS98
- x Pocock 2001
- xi Galinsky Bond Freeman 1996
- xii Yeandle 2002
- xiii DTI (The Second Work-Life Balance Study 2003)
- xiv Relationships Foundation 2004
- xv La Valle et al The Effects of Atypical Hours on Family Life (JRF)2002
- xvi HSE
- xvii TUC
- xviii The Independent, June 2001
- xix International Labour Organisation Workers with Family Responsibilities Recommendations (no.165)
- xx Galinsky 1999 Ask the children
- xxi Galinsky 1999 Ask the children; Pocock 2001
- xxii Mental Health Foundation 'Whose life is it anyway?' 2003
- xxiii Jacobs and Gerson 1998 Review of Social Economy
- xxiv CMI Quality of Working Life survey 2000 (Profs C Cooper/ L Worrall)
- xxv CIPD Married to the job 2001
- xxvi The Impact of Work Hours on New Zealand Families.NZCTU 2002
- xxvii Bell and LaValle 2003, Combining self-employment and family life
- xxviii Roffey Park Institute 2002 Work-Life Balance: The Role of the Manager
- xxix Flexexecutive/CIPD 2002 Work-Life balance or career death
- xxx Parents at Work 2001 Quality of Life in the City
- xxxi Skinner 2003 JRF Running around in circles: co-ordinating childcare, education and work
- xxxii CIPD/Hammonds 2004 Flexible working and paternity leave
- xxxiii Pocock
- xxxiv Hill et al 2001 Family relations 50
- xxxv Working Families/TUC 2004 More time for families
- xxxvi Warin et al 2000 JRF Fathers work and family life
- xxxvii La Valle 2002
- xxxviii CMI Quality of Working Life
- xxxix Working Families, Employer of the Year Awards 2003

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