

Working Better: Fathers, family and work – contemporary perspectives



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Introduction

In summer 2008, the Equality and Human Rights Commission launched ‘Working Better’, a new policy initiative to explore how we can match the aspirations of employees with the needs of employers. The Working Better project is aimed at setting a new agenda to meet the changing needs of families, workers and employers in the 21st century. Its purpose is to find solutions that will increase choice, fairness and equality for parents, carers, disabled people, young people and older workers. This short report focuses on fathers and their experiences of and attitudes towards work and care.

The role of fathers as care-givers within the family has received increasing attention from policy and research in the last decade. While there have been huge changes in women’s participation in employment over the last 30 years, men’s contribution to childcare has not increased at the same rate. In most cases, women continue to shoulder the responsibility for childcare, even in households where both parents work full-time.

The desire of many fathers to spend more time with their children can be frustrated by long working hours and inflexible workplaces, leading to tensions between work and family. There is ongoing debate as to how policy might better enable fathers to spend more time with their families, and become more involved in the day-to-day care of their children. However, as studies on work-life balance have usually focused on women, we know relatively little about men’s employment and how it relates to their family lives.

This paper offers new insights into how fathers experience and think about work and care in Great Britain today. The majority of modern fathers are non-traditional in their views. On some issues, fathers hold less traditional views than mothers. But although fathers express egalitarian views, in practice, most still work full-time and their partners provide the bulk of childcare within the family. However, there are encouraging signs of change. Flexible working is highly valued by fathers for the benefits it brings to family life and they are optimistic about proposals for more leave for fathers.

The paper draws on a large quantitative dataset from an online survey of 2,261 fathers and is supported by qualitative data from several online forums involving a wide range of groups of fathers. YouGov conducted the research as part of the overarching Working Better programme of work in December 2008 (see Ellison et al, 2009), and all figures and quotes used in this paper are from this study. **(1)**

Fathers' attitudes to work and care

The vast majority of fathers work full time and six in 10 of the survey work over 40 hours a week. This is not a new finding. But while on the surface fathers still appeared to conform to the traditional male-as-breadwinner role, their attitudes towards parenting roles were much less traditional.

Although nearly half (47 per cent) of fathers thought that the father's role is to provide, only 23 per cent of fathers (compared to 34 per cent of mothers) thought that childcare is the primary responsibility of the mother. Over half (55

per cent) of the fathers surveyed believed that the parent who is paid more should stay at work, regardless of whether they are male or female. Sixty-two per cent thought that fathers (in general) should spend more time caring for their children (see Table 1).

Table 1: Attitudes towards work and care

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?	% of fathers who agree	% of mothers who agree	n (unweighted)
Fathers are responsible for providing for their family	47	31	2234
Childcare is the primary responsibility of the mother	23	34	2232
The parent who is paid more should stay at work regardless of whether they are male or female	55	41	2217
Fathers should spend more time caring for their children	62	59	2230

Fathers want to spend more time with and prioritise their children

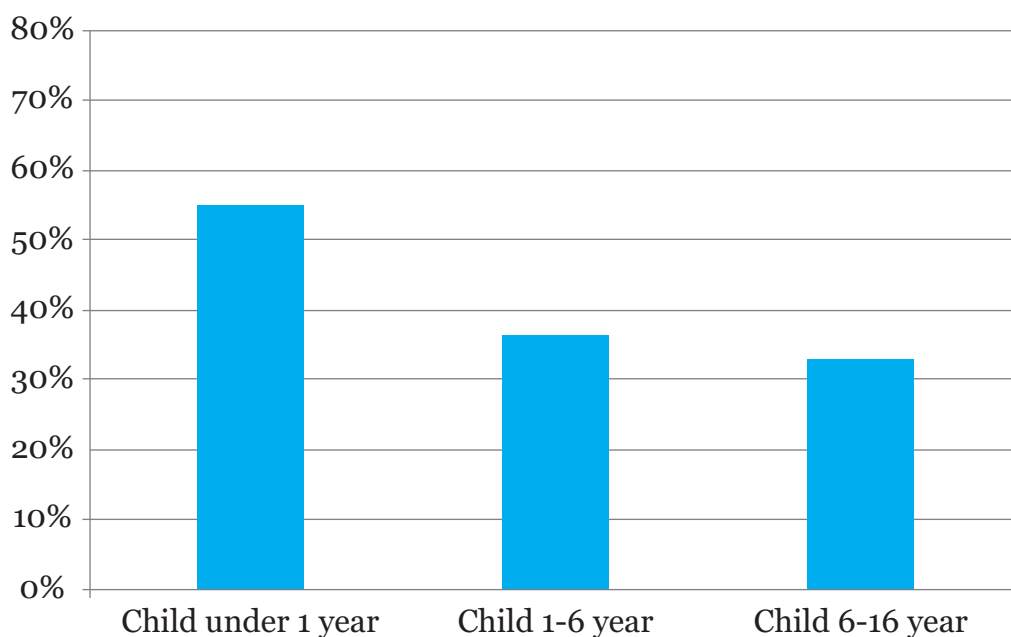
Many fathers were also dissatisfied with the amount of time they spent at work and the amount of time they spent with their children.

Half of fathers, and particularly those who work long hours, believed they spent too much time at work, while 42 per cent of fathers thought they spent too little time with their children. This figure rises to over half (54 per cent) for fathers with children under one year (see Figure 1).

There is evidence that a significant minority of fathers provide care for their children during the traditional working week. Nearly one in five fathers (21 per cent) of pre-school children said that, as part of their child's childcare

arrangements from Monday to Friday, their child was at home with them. Two in five fathers (43 per cent) of school-aged children said they provided care before and after school.

Figure 1: Fathers who feel they spend too little time with their children



Base: All fathers (n=2026)

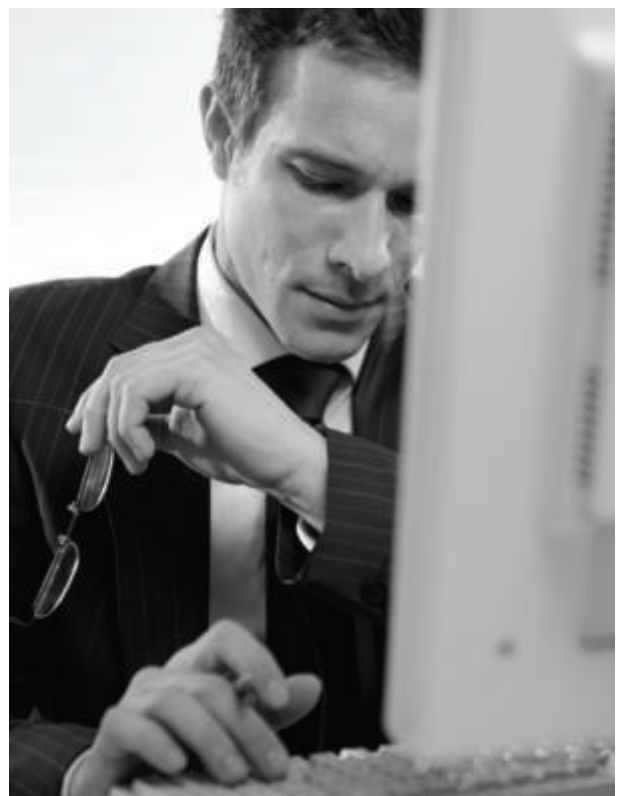
Where fathers differ from mothers

Fathers and mothers held broadly similar views about work and care. However, they differed on who *has* primary responsibility for childcare; who *should* be responsible for providing financially, and; satisfaction with working hours.

Thirty one per cent of fathers who live with their partners said they shared primary responsibility with their partners. In contrast, only 14 per cent of women living with their partners said that responsibility was shared. This may indicate that fathers who share responsibility with their partners are more likely to take part in a survey on parenting, and are therefore over represented in the sample. However, similar discrepancies between men's and women's perceptions of who is responsible for childcare have been found in other studies. This suggests that fathers tend to overestimate their own contribution to childcare, or that women tend to underestimate their partner's contributions (or a combination of both).**(2)**

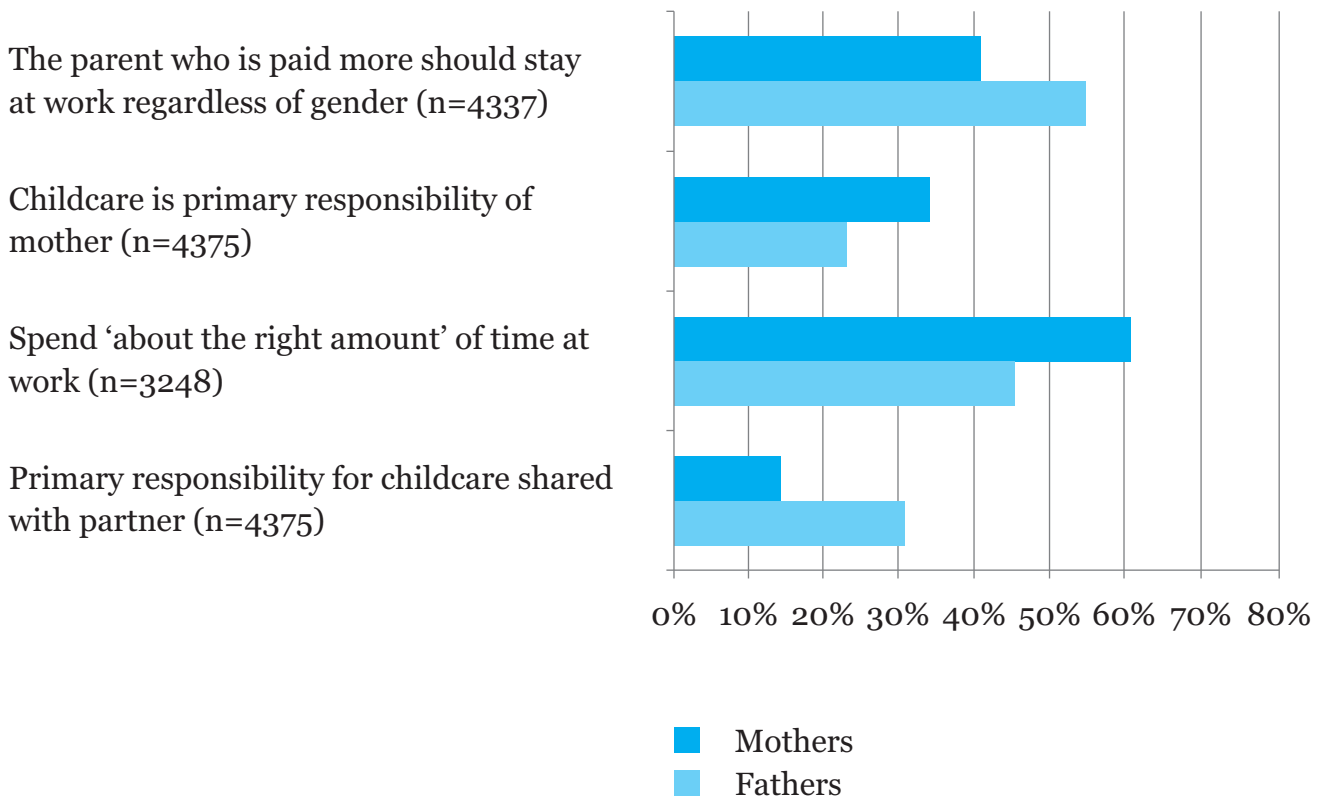
Fathers appear to have less traditional views than mothers on some aspects of parenting. For example, they were less likely (23 per cent) than mothers (34 per cent) to think that childcare is the primary responsibility of the mother, and more likely (55 per cent) than mothers (41 per cent) to believe that the parent who is paid more should stay at work regardless of whether they are male or female.

Fathers were less satisfied with their working hours than mothers were with theirs: 46 per cent thought they spent 'about the right amount of time' at work, compared to 61 per cent of mothers. However, fathers were nearly three times as likely as mothers to agree that work comes first (17 per cent compared to six per cent), and were more likely than mothers to think that they could meet the needs of both work and care (50 per cent compared to 42 per cent of mothers).



Where fathers differ from mothers *Continued*

Figure 2: Differences in fathers' and mothers' attitudes towards work and care, and experiences of work and care %





Meeting aspirations

Nearly six in 10 fathers (58 per cent) believe that it is possible for partners to share responsibilities around work and childcare equally. However, fathers who want to spend more time with their families face challenges in doing so.

Only nine per cent of fathers said they have primary responsibility for childcare (two per cent of whom were lone parents), while a third of those living with their partners said they shared this responsibility with their partner (although as seen in section 3, men's and women's views diverge on shared responsibility).

'In society, women are generally more expected to take the lead on childcare and family life... We try to share things more equally in our family – so maternity leave, while much appreciated, also shifted the balance of our family relationships in an odd way.'

(Married with three children aged 13, and twins 10)

'I would like to spend more time with my children. But as a couple we decided that as I can support the family it would be best if my wife was to leave her work. Although she has more interaction with the children than I do we have all parts of family life covered between us.'

(Married with three children aged five, and twins seven)

There is some evidence to suggest that some sub-groups of fathers are more likely to share responsibility. In particular, fathers with a disabled child were less likely to be working full time and were twice as likely to say they had primary responsibility for childcare as fathers without a disabled child (17 per cent compared to eight per cent). Gay and bisexual fathers were also more than twice as likely as heterosexual fathers to report having primary responsibility (20 per cent, compared to eight per cent). While there is no other quantitative research on lesbian, gay or bisexual parents, qualitative studies have shown that

gay fathers tend to have egalitarian households and be actively involved in caring for their children.(3)

The most commonly cited reason fathers gave for working was financial necessity (63 per cent), while far fewer gave career-related reasons for staying in work. While over half of fathers said they had a good compromise between work and care, nearly a quarter (23 per cent) said that their arrangements caused ‘tension and stress’ at home. Disabled fathers and fathers with disabled children, ethnic minority fathers

and those with a household income of less than £15,000 per year, were more likely to report that their arrangements caused ‘tension and stress’. A study by Clarke and McKay (2008) showed that families with a disabled parent or child are at a higher risk of family breakdown than other families, but that this was closely related to financial pressures.(4) The increased levels of tension and stress reported among the fathers in our survey may be attributed to low income levels rather than the fathers being disabled, or of a ethnic minority group, per se.

Table 3: To what extent do you agree or disagree that your current arrangements cause tension or stress in your family?

	% who agree / strongly agree	n (unweighted)
All fathers	23	2165
Fathers with disabled children	33	206
Ethnic minority fathers	31	167
Fathers who earn <£15,000 per year	31	268

Workplace flexibility

There is evidence that a significant minority of fathers take advantage of greater flexibility within the workplace, and that this brings benefits to their family lives.

Almost half of fathers (49 per cent) said that some form of flexible working was available to them. The four most common forms available to fathers were flexitime, staggered start and finishing times and working from home. While over half of mothers (51 per cent) said that part-time work was available to them, only 20 per cent of fathers thought they had this option.

The availability of flexible working varies widely by sector. Sixty per cent of fathers in the finance and business sector said that flexible working was available to them, compared to only 30 per cent of those employed in manufacturing industries (see Figure 3).



Although flexible working was available to half of fathers, only 30 per cent were actually using it. Those who were working flexibly were more likely to be doing so due to flexible working being a feature of the job when they started (41 per cent) than through a formal (or informal) negotiation (26 per cent) (see Figure 4).

While nearly one in three fathers (32 per cent) said that nothing would stop them asking for flexible working, around two in five said that being marked out as not committed to their jobs (36%), or the thought that it would negatively affect their chances of promotion (44%), would stop them from making a request.

The overwhelming majority (96 per cent) of fathers who were working flexibly valued their working arrangements, while two thirds (66 per cent) of all fathers considered the availability of flexible working to be important when looking for a new job.

This research showed a low awareness of the current right to request flexible working policy: a quarter of fathers knew about the April 2009 extension of this legislation to parents of children up to the age of 16.

Figure 3: Availability and usage of flexible working by sector:

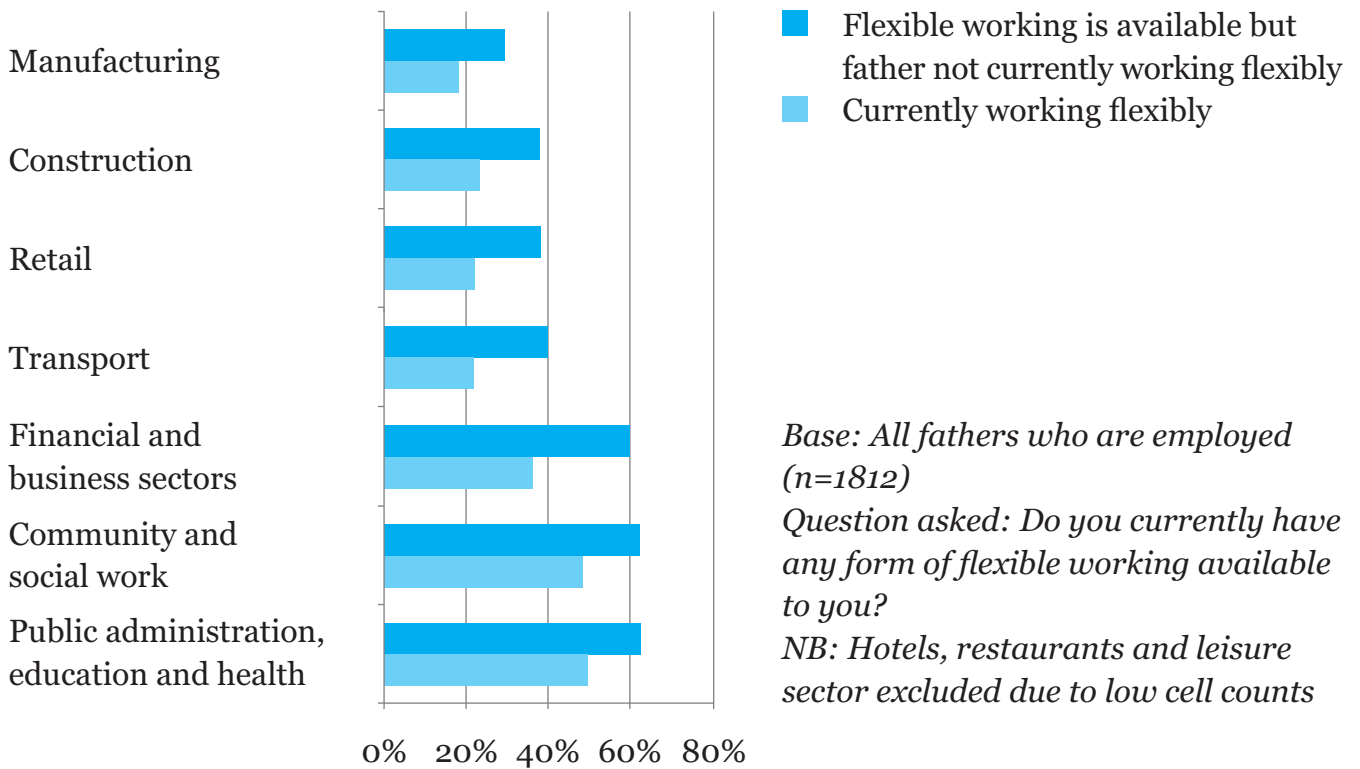
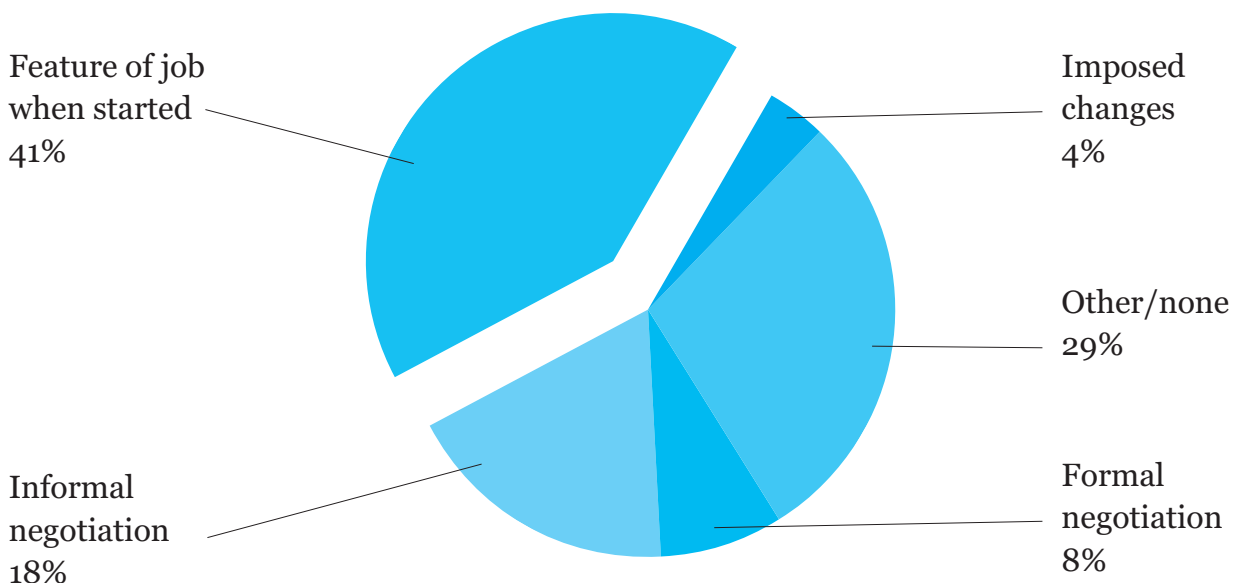


Figure 4: Routes to flexible working



Base: All fathers who are working flexibly (n=600)

Question: Did your flexible working come about due to any of the following?

Fathers' views on current and proposed paternity leave policies

Over half (55 per cent) of fathers with a child under six years took statutory paternity leave when their last child was born.⁽⁵⁾ The majority (56 per cent) of these fathers said that taking time off around the birth of their child led to them taking a greater role in caring for their children, while 69 per cent said it led to improvements in family life.

Of those who did not take paternity leave, two thirds (66 per cent) said they would have liked to 'a lot'. The most common reason these fathers gave for not doing so was being unable to afford to take the time off.

At present, employed fathers are entitled to take two weeks' paid paternity leave (paid at £123.06 per week) and 13 weeks' unpaid parental leave. They also have the right to request flexible working on the same basis as mothers. In addition, the Government recently published draft Additional Paternity Leave Regulations which it is currently consulting on. This

will introduce the new right to transfer up to six months maternity leave to the father only if the mother returns to work. The new right will come into force in April 2011.

There was strong support among fathers for longer paternity leave (see Figure 5). Over half (54 per cent) supported an option to transfer up to six months of the mother's maternity leave to the father. Sixty-one per cent supported an additional four weeks paid leave that would be reserved solely for the father and importantly, 55 per cent of employed fathers said they would take this kind of leave if it were available.

'I was made redundant two weeks before the birth of our child so had a couple of months off before starting my next job. This time out of work was a real blessing in disguise as I could help take some of the pressure off my wife... I would advise any guy to take the maximum paternity leave available.'

(Married, with son under one)

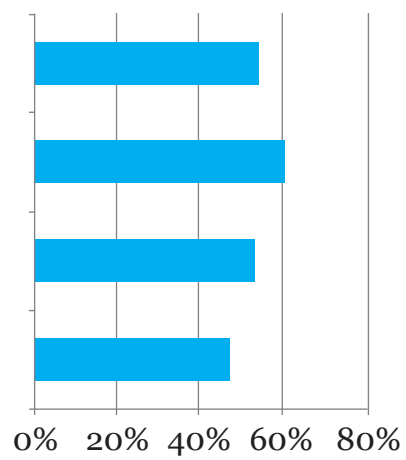
Figure 5: Fathers' views on paternity leave:

Would definitely take extra 4 weeks paid leave if available (n=1668)

Would support extra 4 weeks paid leave reserved for fathers (n=2271)

Would support option to transfer portion of maternity leave to father (n=2271)

Think current paternity leave should be longer (n=2271)



Conclusions

The findings from this survey show that fathers' attitudes towards parenting do not appear to match the reality of their work and care arrangements.

Their rejection of traditional views, dissatisfaction with the time they spend with their children and their strong support for extended paternity leave shows a willingness to be involved in the day-to-day care of their children. In practice, however, most fathers still work full time, and many work long hours.

Comparing sub-groups of fathers has also shown that combining work and care is by no means a universal experience. The ways in which fathers organise their work and caring responsibilities can differ by whether or not they have a disabled child, how much money they earn, or by ethnicity. The availability and use of flexible working varies widely by occupational sector.

A significant minority of fathers are working flexibly and enjoying the benefits that this brings to their family lives. From these fathers and from those who are not as fortunate, there are clear messages about what they would like to see in terms of improving their work-family balance: greater flexibility in the workplace, longer and better paid paternity leave, and greater flexibility for fathers and their partners to decide what works best for them.



Working Better: policy recommendations

The findings presented in this paper are part of *Working Better*, a wider programme of work undertaken by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which looks at the impact of public policy and workplace culture on how work is organised in the UK.

The Commission has set out detailed recommendations that seek to enable genuine choices for men to take up caring responsibilities.

The Commission recommends:

- A series of incremental changes over the next decade to increase men's take up of family leave and make it longer, better paid and more flexible, culminating in the introduction of gender neutral parental leave by 2020.
- Greater flexibility in paternity and parental leave including paternity, maternity and parental leave that can be taken as days, weeks or longer blocks of time, with temporary part-time work as a standard option.
- A publicity drive to raise awareness of the right to request flexible working, particularly targeted at fathers.
- Targeting reluctant employers by using a quality part-time jobs fund to subsidise employers who offer new fathers a reserved month of reduced hours / flexitime compressed hours.

The full recommendations can be found in the report *Working Better: Meeting the changing needs of families, workers and employers in the 21st century* (EHRC, 2009).

Endnotes

- 1 The members of YouGov's research panel are drawn from all sections of society, but are not recruited using a random probability sampling approach. The data is weighted on factors such as age, education, gender and socio-economic classification to ensure as close a match as possible to the GB population, but the findings cannot be generalised to the GB population. For further information about the methods used, see the main report. Ellison, G., Barker, A., and Kulasuriya, T. (2009). 'Work and care: a study of modern parents', EHRC.
- 2 See, for example, Lee and Waite (2005) *Husbands' and wives' time spent on housework: A comparison of measures*, who showed spouses' estimates of their own and each others' contributions to housework to vary substantially.
- 3 Dunne, G. A. (2005). *The different dimensions of gay fatherhood*. Swindon: ESRC.
- 4 Clarke, H. and McKay, S. (2008) *Exploring disability, family formation and break-up: Reviewing the evidence*. London: DWP.
- 5 As statutory paternity leave was introduced in April 2003, only fathers with a child under the age of six were asked this question.



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