

Modern Families Index 2020



Foreword

Denise Priest, Bright Horizons

Bright Horizons is proud to be partnering with Working Families to produce and share the 2020 *Modern Families Index* once again, the eighth year that we have done this. Reading this year's findings, and reflecting back to what we originally heard from families in 2012, I believe we can feel cautiously optimistic that the tide is turning in favour of family-friendly workplaces and less gender division around caring responsibilities.

We hear that over half of parents surveyed this year feel that their line manager cares about their work-life balance and (possibly as a consequence of this) that they feel confident discussing family-related issues with their employer. It has sometimes been the case in the past that although an organisation might aspire to be a family-friendly workplace, the effectiveness of their policies had been hampered by inconsistent follow through by line managers, resulting in a loss of take-up of support measures and lack of engagement. Recognising this risk, employers are increasingly complementing their work-life policies with training and coaching – for the individual and the line manager – in order to ensure confidence and empowerment and a workplace culture where requests for flexible working or support with dependant care are welcomed rather than tolerated. As the cliché goes, there's no "one size fits all" fix for all the challenges and nuances around the work and family balance. Organisations which do this best undertake an approach which is both multi-faceted and holistic; a variety of practical support measures for employees throughout their key life changes, underpinned by access to information and resources, in an environment where people feel safe in asking for the help they need and where leadership at all levels "walks the talk". At Bright Horizons we continue to be proud of the innovative and supportive people practices of the employer clients we partner with, and inspired by their successes.

However heartening the more positive aspects of this year's findings might be, there's still considerable room for improvement, and some dangers to avoid along the way. Access to flexible working is increasing, with more than half of the survey's respondents working flexibly; this is good news – but how many of the remaining parents wish for flexibility but are denied it? Flexible working can make the key difference in helping parents manage work and family – but it must be realistically possible to do the job in the time

available or stress and burn-out will result. Technology can be a wonderful enabler, but when it starts to blur boundaries and means employees don't feel they can switch off in the evenings and weekends, inevitably family life suffers.

With today's emphasis on addressing the gender pay gap and other gender inequalities, there's a clear and pressing need for employers to continuously examine their people policies to ensure they are retaining key female talent and doing all they can to avoid attrition. Perhaps as a reflection of this, the 2020 *Index* research indicates that there are fewer differences between mothers and fathers in their responses; it is the generational differences that are now standing out. Millennials have a much lower tolerance for anything that restricts their ability to live their lives the way they want to. In our survey the millennial parents were almost twice as likely to say that they are contemplating downshifting or reducing their hours in order to protect their work and family balance. The clock is ticking for any organisation that chooses not to listen to the voices we hear in this research – the calls for family-friendly working have gathered momentum, which can only be a good thing.



Foreword

Jane van Zyl, Working Families

The 2020 edition of the *Modern Families Index* paints a complex picture of the changing ways that families balance work and home life. *The Index* shows that parents' attitudes towards family and work are shifting. Increasingly, caring responsibilities are shared more equally between mothers and fathers. Very few families have a full-time stay-at-home parent; in most couple households, both parents are working. This could be due to an economic imperative rather than choice: couple households are more likely to feel financial pressure when the partner works less than full-time (or not at all) – parents' way round this is for both parents to work full time. Similarly, most single parents work full-time; and are more likely to feel financial pressure when they work less than this.

Most parents in the *Index* want enough time to spend with their families and the freedom to tailor their work patterns to achieve a balance between their responsibilities at home and at work. Encouragingly, many parents seem to be pushing at an open door; their employers are sympathetic to their desire for family time and try to facilitate this through offering flexible and family-friendly policies and practices. And, in turn, employees are becoming more confident and assertive: work-life balance is becoming an expectation, not a favour.

However, parents still face challenges in the workplace. Some parents who have access to flexibility feel trapped in their roles, unwilling to take on new opportunities if there is no guarantee the same flexibility will be available to them. Others find their need for work-life balance hampered by workplaces and managers who limit flexible working, and by workloads and workplace cultures that demand and value long hours. This two-speed working environment means there are 'haves' and 'have-nots': those who have the ability to take control of their time, and those who don't.

Working Families continues to call for measures to enable parental choice and promote more agility in the labour market. If employers take a flexible-by-default approach to recruitment, and publish their flexible and family-friendly policies, parents will be able to make informed choices about future roles. This will have a mutual benefit: employers will gain a more engaged, motivated and productive workforce, and employees will be able to find the balance that works best for themselves and their loved ones.



About families in the UK today

There are 6.2 million couple households with dependent children and 1.7 million single-parent families in the UK.¹ Of the 14 million dependent children living in families, the majority (64%) live in a married-couple family. The percentage of dependent children living in cohabiting families increased from 7% in 1996 to 15% in 2016, while the percentage of dependent children living in single-parent families changed little - 21% in 2017 compared with 20% in 1996.² Married couples with dependent children have more children, on average, than other family types. In 2016, 55% of single parents with dependent children had one child, in comparison to 40% of married couples.³

The employment rate for mothers was 74% in 2018 – an increase of 5.1% over the last five years.⁴ Dual-earner households are now the norm in the UK. Among couple families, the percentage of both parents working full-time increased from 26% in 2001 to 31% in 2013.⁵ In 76% of couple families with one child, both parents are in employment. Very similarly, in 75% of couple families with two children, both parents are in employment. Families with one child are most likely to have both parents in full-time employment (40%). Families with two children are more likely to split employment so that the father works full-time and the mother works part-time (41%). In couple families with three or more dependent children, 41% have just one parent in employment. Couple families with three or more children are most likely to split their employment so that the father works full-time and the mother is not in employment.⁶


Overall, 13 million working parents (employed and self-employed) live in the UK.⁷ Parents in the UK use

a variety of flexible working arrangements. According to the Labour Force Survey, 853,000 have flexible working hours and 494,000 work term time only (the majority of whom are women).⁸ Nearly a quarter of employees work part-time and, in 2017, 27% of employees reported having one set of flexible working arrangements. Employees in small workplaces are more likely to work part-time, but those working in larger workplaces are more likely to have access to a wider range of flexible working arrangements.⁹

There has been a change in fathers' working hours in the UK. Although they still work some of the longest hours in Europe, their hours have fallen from 47 per week in 2001 to 45 per week in 2011, driven by a decline in weekend and evening working. There has also been a significant change in the proportion of fathers in the UK working 40 hours or more: in 2001, 40% of fathers worked 48 hours or more, but this proportion had declined to 31% by 2013.¹⁰

The time parents spend on housework declined significantly between 2000 and 2015. There has also been a reduction in the time spent on paid work – to be expected, given the relative decline in working hours experienced by UK workers since the turn of the millennium.¹¹ The gender gap in housework has been shrinking as well, but mostly because mothers are doing less housework than they used to. Compared to 2001, in 2015, mothers spent 25 fewer minutes per day on core housework and four fewer minutes per day on non-routine housework (such as DIY and gardening). However, this was not necessarily because fathers were doing more; fathers actually did less non-routine housework in 2015 than in 2001.¹²

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1. ONS (2017) Families and Households 2017. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2017>
 2. ONS (2017) Families and Households 2017. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2017>
 3. ONS (2017) Families and Households 2017. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2017>
 4. ONS (2018) Families and the Labour Market 2018. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/familiesandthelabourmarketengland/2018>
 5. Connolly, S., Aldrich, M., O'Brien, M., Speight, S. and Poole, E. (2016) 'Britain's slow movement to a gender egalitarian equilibrium: parents and employment in the UK 2001–2013.' *Work, Employment and Society*, 30(5), pp. 838–57.
 6. ONS (2017) Families and the Labour Market 2017. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/familiesandthelabourmarketengland2017>
 7. ONS (2018) 'Parents and non-parents by sex and age of youngest dependent child and different working arrangements, UK and regions.' <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/adhocs/009340parentsandnonparentsbysexandageofyoungestdependentchildanddifferentworkingarrangementsukandregions2018>
 8. ONS (2018) 'Parents and non-parents by sex and age of youngest dependent child and different working arrangements, UK and regions.' <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/>



While mothers tend to perform more routine family activities and be more involved with children than fathers,¹³ fathers' involvement with children has grown, and continues to grow – from 45 minutes per day in 2001 to 57 minutes per day in 2015.¹⁴ On average, men spend 16 hours a week doing unpaid care work – including childcare, laundry and cleaning – while women spend 26 hours a week on these activities. Analysis of time-use data shows that women carry out an average of 60% more unpaid work than men.¹⁵ Overall, both mothers and fathers now spend more time taking care of their children than they used to, but the gender gap in childcare time is not closing because of the shift towards more time-intensive, child-centred parenting – particularly among parents in managerial and professional occupations.¹⁶

This gendered division of labour within households is a barrier to women's participation in the labour market. Women are more likely to work part-time – 41% of women in employment work part-time, compared to 13% of men.¹⁷ When couples have children, women are more likely to move to part-time work to accommodate the new demands of home and family – data collected in 2015 showed 65% of mothers with a child under 11 worked part-time, compared to fewer than half (47%) of other women. And fathers with a child under 11 are slightly more likely to work longer hours than other men – 33% compared to 31%.¹⁸ UK work and family policy, with its shorter paternity leave, can perpetuate the idea of mothers as carers and fathers as workers – although Shared Parental Leave (SPL) provides an opportunity for some parents to establish more equitably shared patterns around work and childcare, early on.

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- adhocs/009340parentsandnonparentsbysexandageofyoungestdependentchildanddifferentworkingarrangementsukandregions2018
9. CIPD (2019) Megatrends: Flexible Working. January. https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/megatrends-report-flexible-working-1_tcm18-52769.pdf
 10. Modern Fatherhood (2016) 'Parental working in Europe.' https://www.modernfatherhood.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Parental-Working-in-Europe-Working-Hours-final_formatv3.pdf
 11. NatCen (2019, forthcoming) Changing Patterns of Parental Time Use in the UK.
 12. Speight, S. (2019) 'Gender gaps in how parents spend their time: do we see a trend to more equality?' NatCen, 5 April. <https://bit.ly/2jUTcHU>
 13. Modern Fatherhood (2013) Father Involvement with Children and Couple Relationships. Briefing Paper, 17 October. <http://www.modernfatherhood.org/publications/father-involvement-with-children-in-couple-relationships/>
 14. NatCen (2019, forthcoming) Changing Patterns of Parental Time Use in the UK.
 15. ONS (2016) 'Women shoulder the responsibility of "unpaid work".' 10 November. <http://visual.ons.gov.uk/the-value-of-your-unpaid-work/>
 16. Speight, S. (2019) 'Gender gaps in how parents spend their time: do we see a trend to more equality?' NatCen, 5 April. <https://bit.ly/2jUTcHU>
 17. House of Commons Library (2019) 'Women and the Economy.' <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06838/SN06838.pdf>
 18. Norman, H. and Watt, L. (2017) 'Why aren't men doing the housework?' Working Families, 29 August. <https://www.workingfamilies.org.uk/workflex-blog/why-arent-men-doing-the-housework/>

Who took part in the 2019 Index?

There were 3,090 respondents, almost equally distributed between the regions and nations of the UK – apart from Scotland, where the sample size was deliberately boosted to 507 parents. Slightly more mothers than fathers responded overall: 53% and 47% respectively. The majority – 76% – of parents were aged 26–45; 46% of parents were Millennials.¹⁹ The majority – 83% – were white British. Sixty-two per cent were either married or in a civil partnership, while 14%

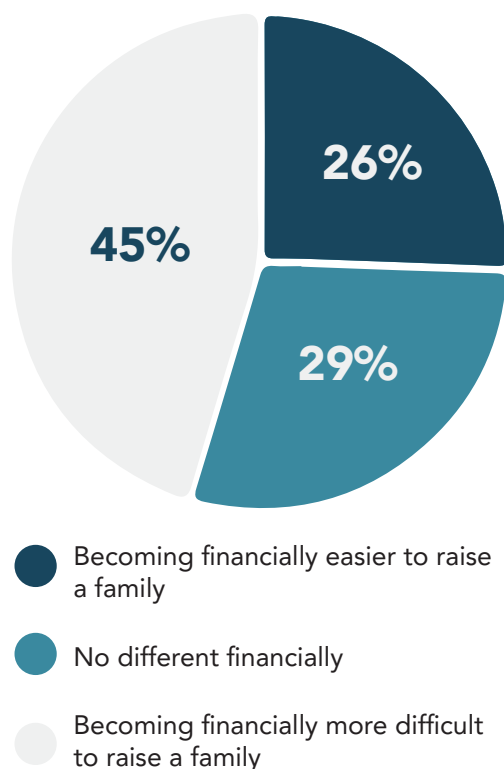
were cohabiting. This means the proportion of single-parent households that took part was slightly higher than the national average: 24% compared to 20% respectively. To be eligible to take part in the *Index*, parents had to be in work and have a dependent child under 18 years of age. This is a change from the 2019 *Index*, where the cut-off age for dependent children was 13.

Raising a family and finance

Against a background of a decade of slow wage growth and rising costs, many parents reported financial pressure, saying it was getting more difficult financially to raise a family (Figure 1). This is consistent across previous editions of the *Index*. Parents in London felt the financial pressure least, with only 18% believing it had become more difficult financially, while parents in Wales and Scotland found their finances most stretched (59% and 51% respectively). Parents in the private sector fared better than those in the public and voluntary sectors, who were more likely to report it was becoming financially more difficult.

According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, to reach the minimum income standard in 2018, a single parent with two children aged four and seven needed to earn £35,216 a year; and a couple with two children aged four and seven needed to collectively earn £39,992 a year.²⁰ Median household incomes in the *Index* were significantly higher in London (£70,000) than any other region. Excluding London, the median household income was £35,500, meaning that many families in the 2020 *Index*, surveyed in 2019, were around or slightly below the minimum income standard.

Figure 1. Family finances, last 3 years (n=3,092)



19. For this report, Millennials are those born between 1983 and 2002.

20. JRF (2018) A Minimum Income Standard for the UK 2008-2018: continuity and change - <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/minimum-income-standard-uk-2018>

Work and working time

The majority of respondents worked full-time (70%). Most fathers worked full-time (90%) and more than half of mothers (52%). Ten times as many mothers as fathers worked part-time. There was a low proportion of self-employed parents (6%) and a very low proportion of agency and zero-hours workers (less than 2%) in this year's *Index*.

Respondents with a partner were asked about their working pattern. The majority (96%) were dual-earner households (both parents were in work), and in 74% of these households both parents worked full-time. Ten per cent of respondents said their partner was a stay-at-home parent and not working, although of these a third said their partner was looking to get back into work. As noted in the foreword, more and more mothers have been entering the workplace in the last decade; the proportions in the *Index* are higher than the national average but point towards the same trend of higher and increasing numbers of mothers in work.

Parents worked in a range of sectors, with more fathers working in sectors like manufacturing and

construction, and more mothers in sectors like administration and health and social work. Most jobs (63%) were in the private sector. In terms of job level, 56% of respondents identified themselves as middle managers or above (including professionals). Mothers dominated the lower job levels, including support/non-managerial and junior.

60% of parents had been in their job for five years or more. Fathers were slightly more likely to have been in post longer: more mothers had been in their current role for fewer than five years, and almost twice as many mothers (27%) as fathers (15%) had been in their job for two years or fewer.

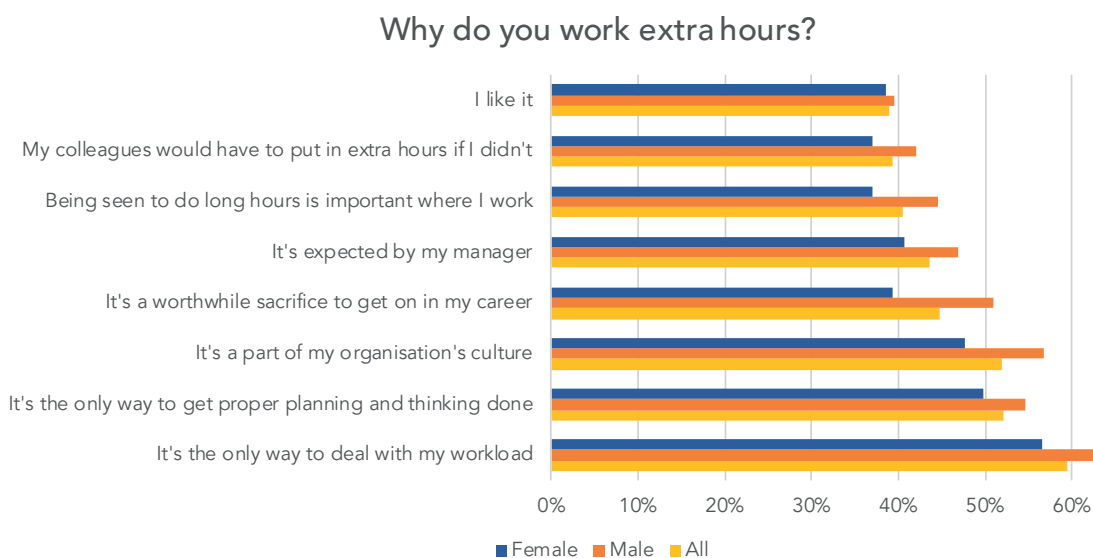
As in previous editions of the *Index*, the tendency was for respondents to work more than their contracted hours, rather than fewer. From 15 hours per week upwards, if parents varied from their contracted hours it tended to be to put in extra time. For full-time workers, the most common contracted week was 40 hours. Of these, a third put in extra hours – an average of 7 hours per week. Similarly, part-time workers were also putting in more time. Twenty-eight per cent of those contracted to work 20 hours per week were also working, on average, 7 extra hours per week – almost an extra third of their working week.



Extra hours

The reasons people work extra hours are shown in Figure 2. The primary causes of extra hours are familiar, and relate to issues around work volume and intensity. Jobs are too big to fit into the hours allocated to them, and organisational culture demands people put in extra hours. For many, progression is linked to the ability to demonstrate commitment through long hours, erecting barriers for those who can't do this. Solutions lie in realistically calibrating jobs to the hours available through job design, and by embedding flexibility in all roles and at all levels through the use of tools like flexible recruitment.

Figure 2. 'Why do you work extra hours?' (n=1,655)



Technology, work and blurred boundaries

Extra hours are not simply confined to staying at work. Many people reported that they dipped into work after they left the office and returned home. Forty-four per cent of respondents said they checked emails or did other work in the evening, and just over half (51%) said this happened often or all the time. Those who did this tended to be in more senior roles, and cited workload pressure (40%) and manager expectation (35%) as the main reasons. Only 25% were doing this through choice. A consistent picture emerges of many jobs being simply too big to fit into a working day, requiring extra time just to stay on top of things. Over the long term, this is likely to be unsustainable as parents look to downshift or find an employer offering a better work life balance.

The question of work overspill is important for both employees and employers. Parents reported that work regularly and negatively spilled over into home life, disrupting everyday activities as well as health and wellbeing. Technology was a mixed blessing for parents in the *Index*. Fifty-six per cent, and more fathers than mothers, said it had helped them obtain a better work-life balance. However, 28% remained equivocal about the benefits, and 16% felt it had harmed their work-life balance. For many, technology increased their work hours – 48% agreed with this statement, and fathers were more at risk at 55%. Work expanding into family time is unlikely to have positive outcomes, especially if this is persistent and long term.

More parents were 'separators' rather than 'blenders', in that more (47%) felt the boundaries between work and home had become too blurred by technology, while only 25% disagreed. While a technology-enabled blending of work and life may suit some workers, parents would prefer a less blurred division. This is particularly true of higher-income workers. Those who felt boundaries were too blurred also reported having poorer wellbeing.

Flexible working

Over half (55%) of respondents reported they worked flexibly. Men were as likely to work flexibly as women – although, as noted previously, fewer men worked part-time and men were more likely to use remote working. Millennials (16–35) were the most likely age group to work flexibly, and flexibility was also linked to seniority – the higher level a job was, the more likely that some kind of flexibility was in use. The most popular types of flexible working were flexitime (57%), flexible working place (43%) and part-time work (16%).

Arranging flexible working

Parents were asked how they had arranged their flexible working pattern with their employer. Fifty-five per cent said their pattern was formal (i.e. had involved a contractual change), while 40% have an informal arrangement and 5% were not sure. Seventy-six per cent of those who worked flexibly, and made a formal request to do so, had used the Right to Request Flexible Working; more men (81%) than women (70%) reported using this. This may be because employers commonly expect mothers to work flexibly, and have developed higher levels of policy provision for them than for fathers, requiring fathers to fall back on statutory provisions.

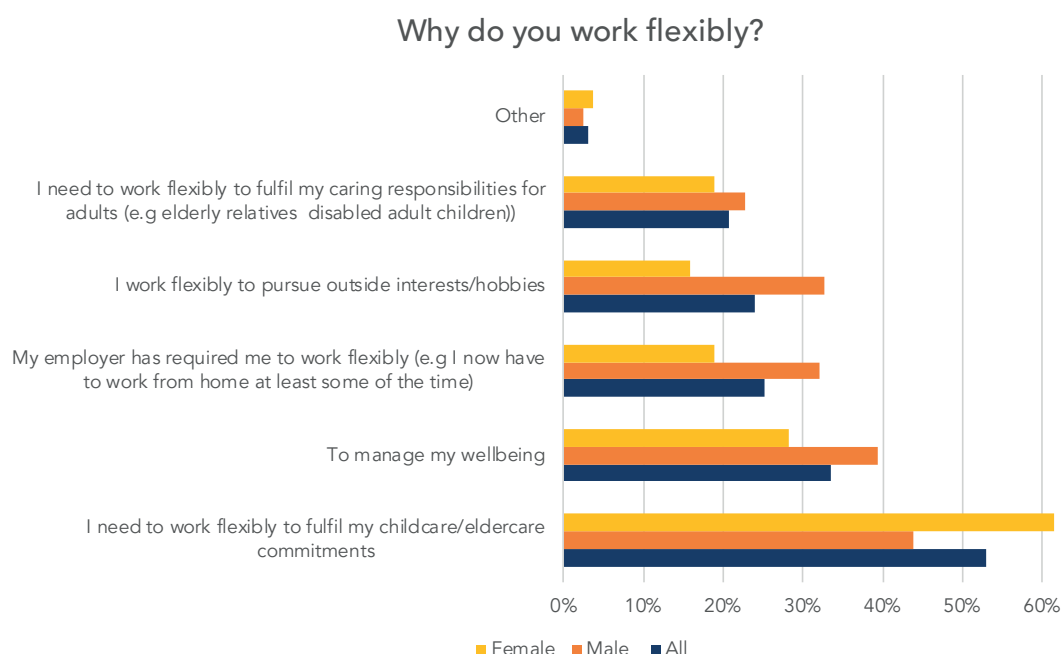
The primary reason for using flexible working is support with childcare. However, there was a spread of reasons for using flexibility (see Figure 3), which suggests it is gaining wider acceptance away from its traditional origins of being for mothers of young children. Simply put, flexibility has become more mainstream, and employees are adopting it for reasons other than care. The number of people who work flexibly for wellbeing reasons is notable, and suggests that flexible working is being used to manage workloads and wellbeing, as well as reconciling family and work commitments. There is also evidence of organisations proactively deploying flexibility and imposing change (see box below). Although this may be beneficial for some employees, flexibility that employees haven't necessarily chosen is flexibility primarily for the organisation's benefit, potentially undermining the benefits for individuals.²¹

Imposed flexibility

Twenty-five per cent of parents who worked flexibly said their employer required it. For some employees, having a new working pattern imposed (for example, being required to work part-time or from home) can be disruptive and even make their job untenable. Employers must provide a good business reason for the change, and demonstrate they have fully explored other ways of organising work, before imposing it.

21. Lewis, S., Anderson, D., Lyonette, C., Paine, N. and Wood, S. (eds) (2016) *Work-life Balance in Times of Recession, Austerity and Beyond*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315683263>

Figure 3. 'Why do you work flexibly?' (n=1,714)



Flexible workers were able to accrue more flexibility over time, although their initial 'core' flexible arrangement had often been made using the Right to Request Flexible Working. Fifty-four per cent said they had been able to increase their flexibility, while only 10% had seen a decrease.

Fathers were more likely to have accrued more flexibility, perhaps because they have grown more confident in asking for it and employers have responded to changing expectations by offering more flexible options than fathers can use. Women are more likely to have remained static, possibly as a result of being more likely to work part-time, and therefore have less scope to incorporate more flexibility.

Millennials seem able to accrue more flexibility, which again may reflect their expectations of being able to access flexibility and a better work-life balance. Again, employers are responding to these demands. In short, asking for more flexibility is, for many employees, pushing at an open door.

However, there are more negative possible interpretations. That flexibility must be accrued shows it is still an earned privilege rather than an everyday, business-as-usual practice. It also suggests that flexibility is still individualised rather than embedded in employment culture; accruing flexibility is a matter of proving, over time, that it is deserved. This is unhelpful to parents, who need flexibility on an ongoing basis.

Flexible working and progression

When it came to progression and promotion, a quarter of respondents said they had received a promotion within the last two years, while 31% said they had never received one, with mothers much more likely than fathers to report the latter (39% and 21% respectively). Part-time workers were also less likely to have received a promotion in the last two years, as well as within the last five years. Part of this is likely to be driven by the 57% of parents who say they will have to remain in their current job because they are not certain they could find similar flexibility elsewhere.

Parents had different levels of control over their working lives in terms of working place, working time and working amount. On all measures, fathers had higher levels of control than mothers – probably because most men worked full-time and have had the opportunity to accrue more control. Senior workers had more control than junior ones, reinforcing the finding that flexibility is earned over time. Control is important; the *Index* shows that, when flexibility allows parents to have more control over their time, it plays a significant role in their decisions about their careers. Many would prefer to stay in a job with flexibility than move to a new one where it might not be available.

There were a range of reasons for people not working flexibly. Of the 45% who didn't work flexibly, the most common reasons cited were that their role did not allow any flexibility (45%) and that flexibility wasn't available where they work (32%). Flexibility was least available in the administrative and support, health and social care, and education sectors – all of which employ more mothers than fathers. Although family-friendly and flexible working might be more complex in some sectors, as previous editions of the *Index* have pointed out, there are many examples

and case studies of family-friendly working practices in all sectors. This suggests that building employer awareness of the possibilities and opportunities for family-friendly working practices is an ongoing task that needs to be supported by practical examples. Otherwise, there will continue to be 'haves' and 'have-nots', where fewer opportunities for work and family balance will have wider negative impacts for individuals and their employers.

Probing more deeply, parents who said flexible working was not available where they worked were asked to describe exactly what this meant. Seventy-nine per cent said managers told them flexible working wasn't possible, while 21% said all requests for flexibility were routinely rejected. Both of these amount to a blanket ban on flexible working that, in reality, may be hard for employers to justify given employees' rights to having their flexible working requests fairly considered. Line managers themselves may not be responsible for the decision to block flexibility – they may be implementing the decisions of more senior leaders in the context of their wider workplace culture.

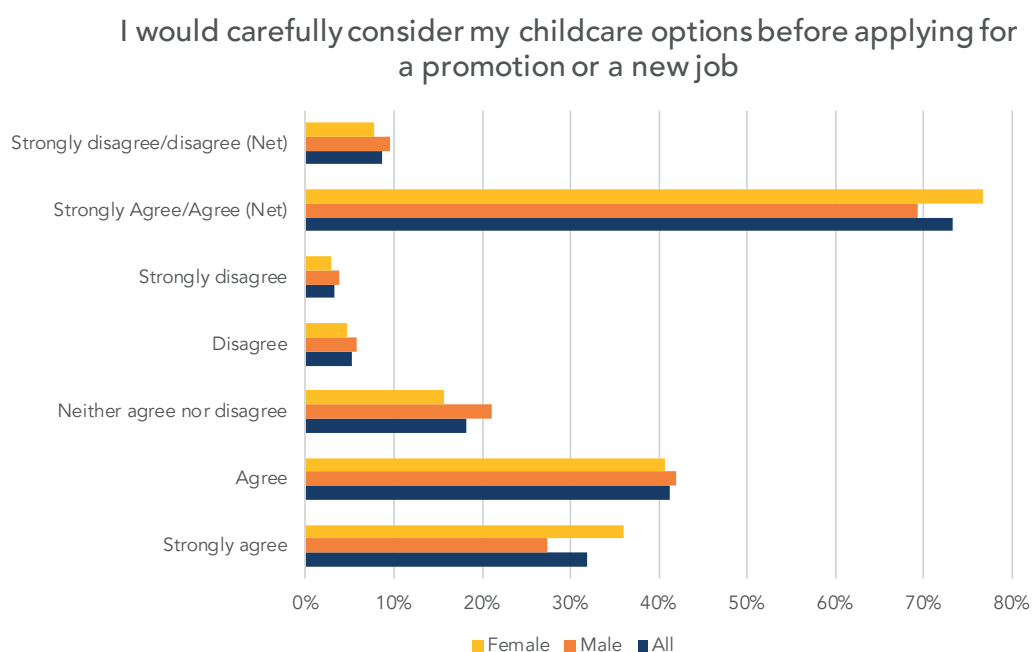


Childcare and caring

Forty-one per cent of parents used some form of childcare, with 54% using registered formal care, 29% using informal care and 17% using a mixture. For formal childcare, nursery, breakfast clubs and holiday clubs were the most popular options. Ten per cent were able to make use of an employer-funded or workplace nursery. For informal care, grandparents were by far the most common childcare providers. Affordability and availability of formal childcare were barriers for some, particularly single parents and part-time workers.

Childcare considerations are fundamental for parents when they think about work. Career progression and development are considered through the lens of childcare arrangements for both mothers and fathers (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. 'I would carefully consider my childcare options before applying for a promotion or a new job' (n=3,092)



Over 80% of eligible parents said the 15 and 30 hours' free childcare and tax-free childcare schemes had helped them to work. This demonstrates the crucial role of childcare in helping parents to work.

Sharing childcare

Almost a third of parents surveyed (31%) said they shared childcare equally between them. Of these, 38% were Millennials and 40% were aged between 36 and 45. Not all these parents were high earners - 42% had a combined household income of between £25,000 and £49,999; nearly a quarter (23%) earned between £50,000 and £74,999 between them.

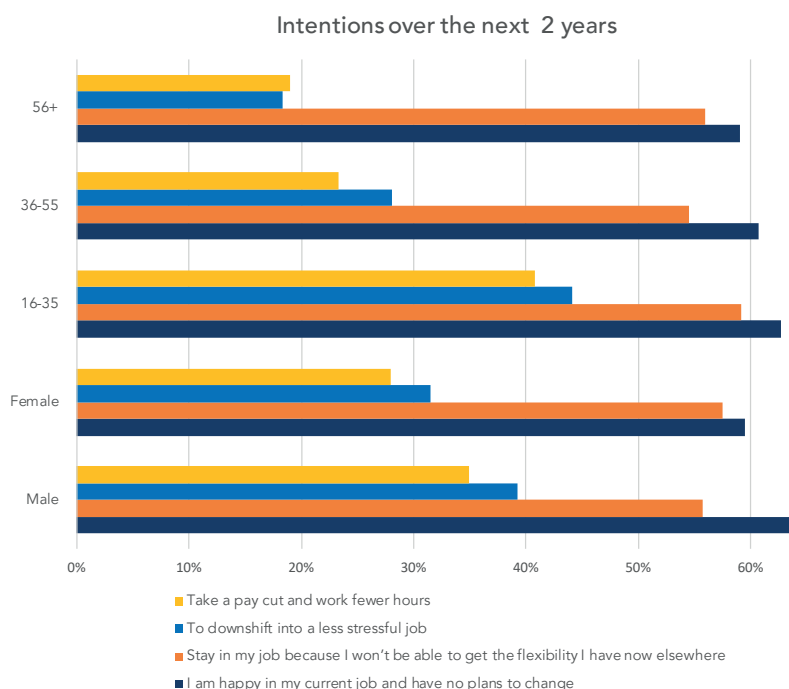
Parents who shared childcare equally largely did so as a matter of choice rather than circumstance. They also found it easy to arrange with their employer and found that their employer was supportive, as were their colleagues. More than three quarters said it was easy to maintain in practice, although a third said friends and family viewed it as unusual.

Parents who said they shared childcare equally did more similar things when they returned from work - there was less of a gender divide around chores. Parents who shared childcare equally also tended to share household chores after work.

Work-life balance and wellbeing

Respondents identified family as their highest priority. This influenced both how they viewed their job and the choices they made around work. Parents were asked to think about how they intended to balance work and family over the next two years. The results are shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Intentions over the next two years (n=3,092)



The number of parents who feel moving jobs would risk their access to flexible working is notable. Although flexibility may be a positive retention tool, a lack of flexibility across the workforce may lead to stagnation, as parents stay in their current job longer than they otherwise would if they could be sure of flexibility in a new role.

There is relatively little difference between mothers and fathers in terms of their intentions over the next two years, suggesting work-life balance is de-gendering. Getting the right balance between work and home is not only the preserve of mothers – fathers, too, want a better balance, reflecting wider social changes regarding involved fatherhood and the benefits of fathers' involvement with their children.²² More notable were the differences between Millennial parents and older groups. Millennial parents were almost twice as likely to say they were contemplating downshifting or reducing their hours. This points to

younger workers having higher expectation that they should have a work and family balance, and being more willing than older cohorts to make changes to get what they want. Employers may wish to recognise this demand and provide opportunities for balanced lives, through offering not only flexible working but also 'human-sized' jobs and good quality alternatives to full-time work, if they want to become and remain an employer of choice.

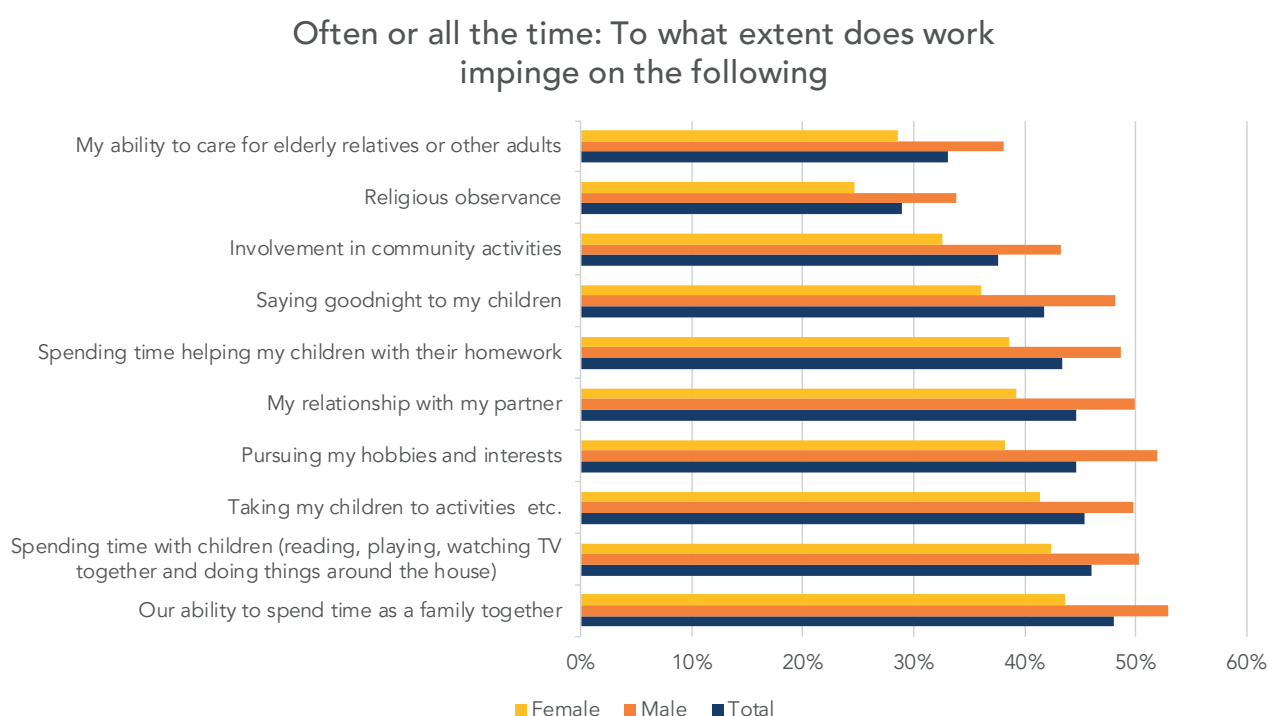
The *Index* finds that many parents' employers already support work-life balance. Organisations that don't support this risk losing employees, and are missing opportunities to maximise effectiveness and individual performance. Notably, the parents who say they have no intention of moving because they are happy are the parents who are more likely to work flexibly (58% versus 41%) - a positive finding for employers ahead of the curve on flexible working.

22. Rushing, C. and Powell, L. (2015) 'Family dynamics of the stay-at-home father and working mother relationship.' *American Journal of Men's Health*, 9(5), pp. 410-42.

Work, wellbeing and family life

Many parents reported that work negatively impacted on their family life. Forty-eight per cent said work affected their ability to spend time together as a whole family, while 46% said work prevented them from seeing their children often or all the time. Forty-five per cent of parents in couple households said their relationship with their partner was negatively affected, too. This pattern of work encroaching into family life is shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6. 'To what extent does work impinge on the following?' (n=3,092)



Parents also reported that work affected their ability to manage their wellbeing, and, where work overlapped into their home life, they reported negative consequences often or all the time. This included failing to get enough sleep (47%), being unable to find time to exercise (45%), not having enough time to prepare a healthy diet (36%) and relationship problems with their partner (32%).

Parents were asked to assess the balance between work and family, thinking about the twin currencies of time and money. Fewer than a quarter thought

they had the right balance between work and money. Thirty-four per cent thought they had neither enough time or money, and 37% said they had enough time with family but not enough money to fully enjoy family life – an unsurprising figure, given the proportion of parents who reported it was getting more difficult financially to raise a family. Mothers were more likely to report a money shortfall – a result of lower incomes due to part-time work, and almost certainly lower pay, related to the gender pay gap.

Taking action: how parents are finding a better work–life balance

Parents were also asked to report on changes they had already made to their working lives to find a better family and work fit. Cumulatively, most parents (76%) had done something to try to get the balance they wanted. These could broadly be divided into proactive and non-proactive activities.

On the proactive side, parents had reduced their hours (17%), found a job with a better employer (12%), were actively job searching (13%) or had applied to work flexibly (13%). On the non-proactive side, parents reported putting off looking for a new job (19%), refusing a new job (12%) and refusing a promotion (10%). Sixteen per cent said they had increased their hours because they needed more income, driven by the increasing financial costs of raising a family.

Mothers were more likely to have reduced their hours, but across the other measures it was almost equal between mothers and fathers, reinforcing the fact that work–life balance is no longer a ‘mothers and babies’ issue.

Parents were asked about home life, and couple households were asked how they divided up chores and childcare. Men were more likely to say they took time for themselves to relax and unwind after work or to play with their children, but not to do household chores, while women were more likely to start doing chores after work, or to take over the childcare. There is evidence, both in the *Index* and elsewhere,²³ that this gap is closing – albeit slowly. This closure may be accelerating in households where both parents say they share the childcare equally (see page 12) – and, as more mothers enter the workforce and increase their hours, this gap may close more quickly.

Fathers also said they were more likely to remain in ‘work mode’ – that is, thinking about work issues even when they were spending time with their family – than mothers. These fathers were also more likely to ‘dip into’ work when they were at home, suggesting the boundaries between work and family life might

be increasingly hard to maintain for workers who feel required to extend their working day into the evenings.

49% of parents reported that their wellbeing was good or very good. While not a direct comparison, national wellbeing statistics²⁴ indicate that the parents in the *Index* have similar levels of wellbeing to the general population. Among *Index* respondents, significantly more fathers than mothers reported better wellbeing, and parents in London reported high levels of wellbeing in comparison with other regions. In terms of wellbeing and work, parents were realistic about the changes they needed to make, and did not ascribe negative wellbeing entirely to the pressures of work: 43% said they would need to make changes to their work–life to improve their wellbeing, while fewer (35%) identified work as the primary driver of negative wellbeing.

23. Speight, S. (2019) ‘Gender gaps in how parents spend their time: do we see a trend to more equality?’ NatCen, 5 April. <https://bit.ly/2jUTcHU>.

24. ONS (2018) ‘Personal well-being in the UK: July 2017 to June 2018.’ 28 November. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/measuringnationalwellbeing/july2017tojune2018>

Lifecycles

Parents were asked whether their need for flexible working was greatest when their children were at preschool, at primary school, transitioning to secondary school (11–13) or at secondary school (14–18).

Mothers reported their need for flexibility was greatest when their children were in the pre-school and primary school years. After this period, the need for flexibility dropped for both mothers and fathers, but remained higher for fathers. In other words, fathers reported having a greater need for flexible working when their children were older. This indicates the need for flexibility evolves over time, and that it may shift between parents as their roles and responsibilities change.

It is possible fathers may need flexibility when their children are older for a number of reasons, including mothers returning to work full-time and fathers filling the gap; fathers taking advantage of the greater availability and acceptability of flexibility over the last decade; changing parenting roles, with fathers becoming more confident in their parenting ability as their children get older; and fathers wishing to be more involved as social expectations and behaviours change.

Attitudes to and experiences in the workplace

Fifty-six per cent of parents reported they were satisfied with their work–life fit. This almost exactly mirrored satisfaction with the extent to which the individual's job enabled them to obtain a balance – a clear link between employer attitude and policy on the one hand and employee contentment on the other.

Parents assessed the attitudes in their workplace to flexible working and work–life balance, saying whether they felt men and women were treated equally and fairly, whether their manager and organisation cared about their family life and whether they thought there was a genuine and open culture of flexibility. An overall picture emerged of most parents having a positive experience at work, but with troubling gaps for some parents. These findings are set out in Table 1. The figures in brackets show the values in 2018.

Most parents believed flexible working was a genuine option (although it was still gendered, especially around part-time work). Parents believed their employer would give them a fair hearing, cared about their work and home balance, and would take account of their family and treat them accordingly.

Across the majority of measures, fathers had more positive attitudes than mothers, as did Millennials compared with other age groups. This may be because fathers, relative to mothers, are more recent beneficiaries of flexible and family-friendly working practices,²⁵ and policy provision in many organisations has been catching up fathers with mothers. Organisations have also actively promoted opportunities for work–life balance as inclusive, and

communications reinforce the idea that flexibility is for all. Millennials' assumptions that work–life balance is a normal part of working life are reflected in their positive attitudes, and to some extent their expectations are being met. Simply put, they – and many other parents – are finding that their employers are increasingly willing to work with the grain of their lives. Parents also said they would feel confident asking their employer to take time off for a family event (70%) and to discuss limiting work in favour of family (60%).

There remained some reluctance among parents, however. Thirty-seven per cent said they had faked being sick so they could meet a family obligation, and 38% had lied or bent the truth about family responsibilities that got in the way of work. Half of parents didn't believe their organisation cared about their work and home balance, and more than half didn't believe flexible working was a genuine option for men. These parents fall into a category of flexible 'have-nots'. Their employers' attitudes to flexibility are negative; flexibility is off the table for discussion, and they are less likely to work flexibly. Elsewhere in the *Index* is evidence that parents will leave, or are thinking of leaving, their current job so they can join the group of flexible 'haves': those who have a good employer that facilitates, rather than prohibits, their attempts to obtain a better balance. Good employers can capitalise on this by making their flexible working offer more transparent. Others may wish to carefully consider risks to their workforce performance, staff turnover and workplace reputation.

Figure 6. 'How does work impinge on family life?' (n=3,092)

	Total	Male	Female	16 - 35	36 - 55	56+
I feel confident discussing work-related issues with my employer	61% (56%)	65%	57%	62%	60%	61%
I feel confident my employer will take account of my family responsibilities and treat me fairly	57% (49%)	61%	53%	60%	54%	55%
I feel confident discussing family-related issues with my employer	55% (47%)	59%	52%	58%	53%	52%
My manager cares about my work and home balance	53% (46%)	56%	50%	57%	49%	46%
At my workplace, flexible working is a genuine option for women	51%	57%	46%	55%	49%	46%
My organisation cares about my work and home balance	50% (43%)	55%	46%	54%	47%	47%
Where I work it is more acceptable for women to work part-time than men	46%	52%	41%	52%	41%	40%
At my workplace, flexible working is a genuine option for men	46%	53%	39%	52%	41%	40%

Reinforcing the idea that flexibility is a positive force, parents identified the benefits of having a flexible and family-friendly employer. These benefits included a happier workforce (59%), better retention (52%), a more motivated and productive workforce (51%), higher levels of discretionary effort (48%) and an enhanced reputation as an employer of choice (45%). Only 5% of parents thought having a flexible and family-friendly employer would make no difference. To become a more family-friendly employer, parents thought employers should put more policies in place to help people balance work and life (32%), make efforts to change the company culture so work-life balance is more acceptable (30%), encourage people to use existing company policies to help their work-life balance (25%), provide childcare (19%) and let senior managers work flexibly to set a good example (14%).

Parents saw a role for government, too – to improve rights to work flexibly (45%) and make it easier to find affordable childcare (44%), for example.

Parents were asked whether they would like to see employers publicise their parental leave offer (Figure 7). This was particularly popular among Millennials, and almost equally popular between mothers and fathers. Parents would like to make informed choices about employers, and putting this information into the public domain would help. It is unlikely that many people would feel confident enough to enquire about maternity or paternity benefits at a job interview, for example.

Similarly, parents responded positively to the idea of employers stating in job adverts that flexible working is available. This is something *Working Families* has promoted through the *Happy To Talk Flexible Working* recruitment strapline.²⁶ Parents' responses can be seen in Figure 8.

More employers taking this approach could have significant effects on parents' labour market mobility, bearing in mind the numbers who said they would like to move but felt unable to do so without confidence about flexibility in a new job (page 13).



25. ONS (2018) 'Personal well-being in the UK: July 2017 to June 2018.' 28 November. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/measuringnationalwellbeing/july2017tojune2018>

26. Working Families (2018) 'Happy To Talk Flexible Working.' <https://www.workingfamilies.org.uk/campaigns/happy-to-talk-flexible-working/>

Figure 7. 'Would it make a difference to you if employers publicised their offer to parents around shared parental, paternity and maternity leave?' (n=3,092)

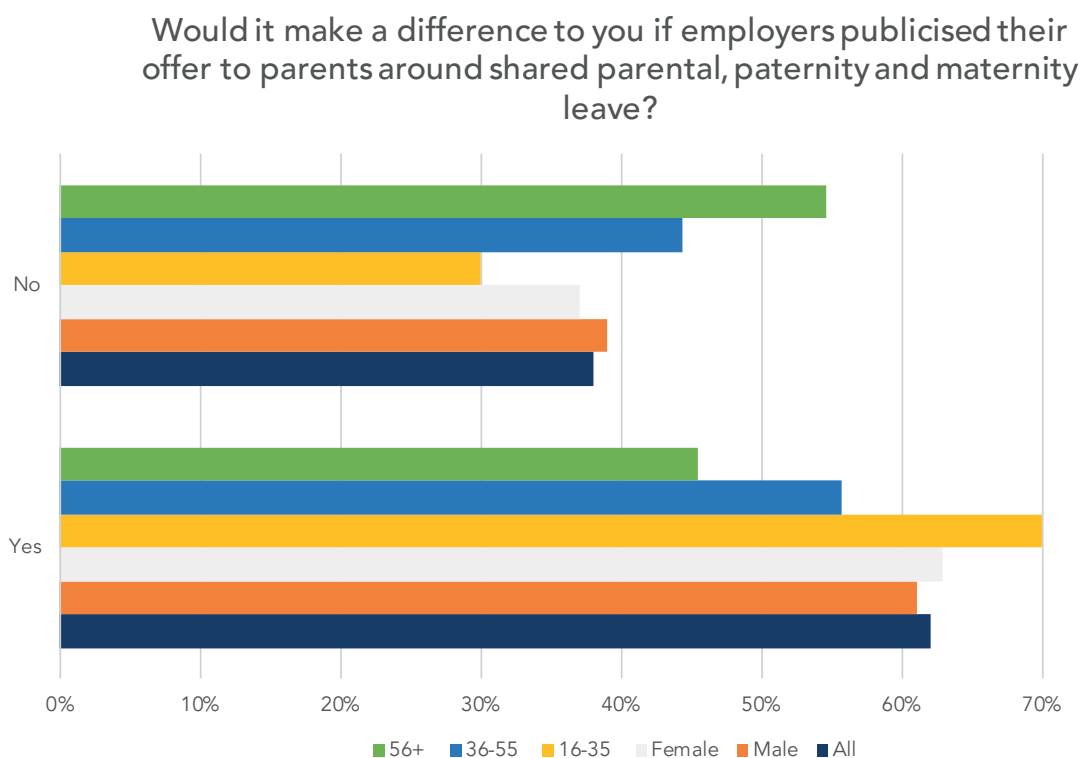
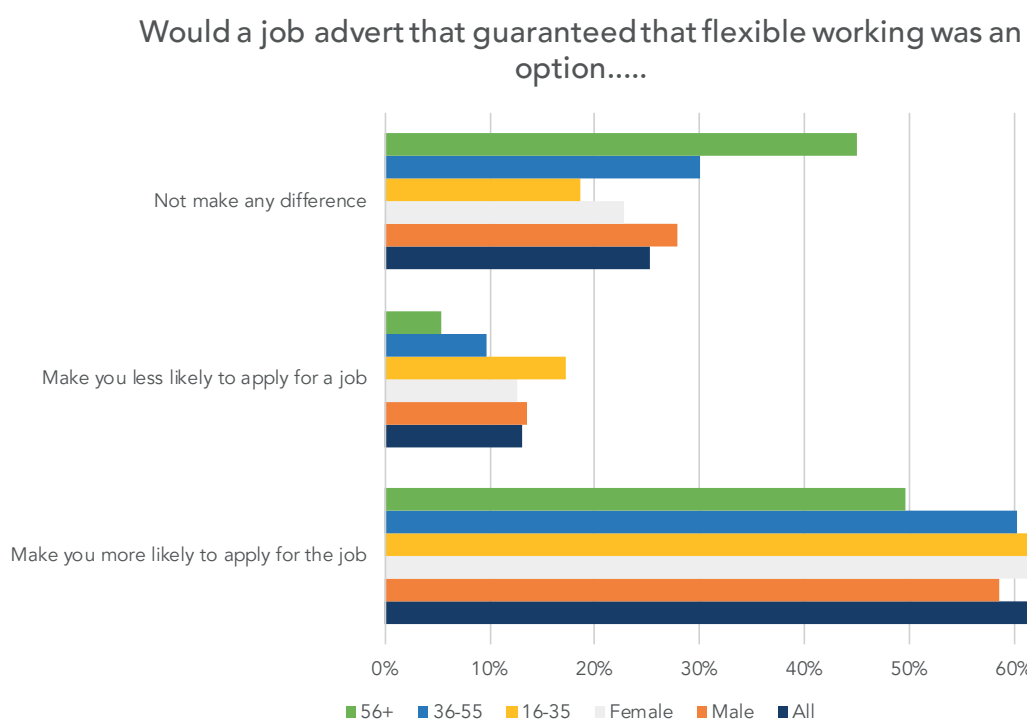


Figure 8. 'Would a job advert that guaranteed flexible working was an option...' (n=3,092)



Conclusion

The *Index* paints a mixed picture for many families in the UK. There is clear evidence that some parents have secured a relatively good work–life balance that works for them and their family.

While they are not free from some work encroachment into their family life, families able to use flexible working are broadly content. Furthermore, they seem to enjoy a supportive work environment that recognises and meets their demand for work–life balance and family-friendly working. The workplace has evolved into a more family-friendly place over the last decade for these parents, with a growing understanding from employers that work and life are not separate spheres.

But while there remains a perception that full-time is the optimum work pattern for progression, and while employment practice remains uneven between workplaces, with some employers offering flexibility and others not, even those parents who are currently able to access better opportunities for work–life balance can find their career prospects constrained. More transparency from employers about what their work–life balance offer is – and, in particular, a flexible-by-default approach to recruitment – would allow more labour market mobility.

A significant group of parents might be classed as flexible ‘have-nots’, who aren’t able to access positive flexible working in the same way and whose employers are yet to offer opportunities and support. This includes those who do have some flexibility, but where this has been imposed upon them by their employer rather than freely chosen. If parents are still going into employment ‘blind’ – that is, not knowing their new employer’s attitude to flexibility and family-friendliness until they have started – they are at risk of losing in this lottery. Good employers should make the most of their advantage by publicising how family-friendly they are.

Some persistent issues affect many parents. On the one hand, some have a good level of control and autonomy over their working lives. But this is by no means universal, and many parents – even where they do have access to flexible working methods that should deliver a better work–life fit – are struggling.

Work is still ‘too big’ to fit into the hours allotted to it, and many parents are having to put in extra time – at work or from home – just to get the job done. Too many jobs remain unscrutinised in terms of their design, and employees are simply expected to get on with it as best they can, but the hours they put in reveal that many roles need scrutinising and redesigning to make them more ‘human-sized’.

While many parents acknowledge that technology has helped them reconcile work and family life, they are also clear that it has facilitated expanded workloads, blurring the boundary between work and home too much. For employers, simply putting the tools for family-friendly working before employees is not enough – they need proactive management, too.

The *Index* captures changing attitudes among parents. Fathers still dominate full-time work, and mothers are still shouldering the double burden of paid work and childcare/domestic work. But the third of parents who share childcare is a positive sign, showing that some parents are putting new attitudes and beliefs about the roles of mothers and fathers into practice. Especially encouraging is that this has been supported by their employers, and that they report it has been an easy arrangement to maintain in practice. Workplaces need to recognise that fathers might want to take a larger role in their children’s upbringing, and to facilitate this through policy, practice and culture. Not all parents will want to choose an equal caring arrangement, but those who do should be free from gendered work practices that assume a mother is, by default, the carer.

Throughout the *Index*, fathers’ enthusiasm and desire for work–life balance and flexible working is apparent. This is a trend that is only going to grow as Millennial mothers and fathers move upwards through the workplace and become the managers and leaders of the future. There is now an expectation among Millennials – and fathers in particular – that flexibility, family-friendliness and work–life fit should be part of working life. If it isn’t there, the risk is that they’ll move on to an employer who can offer it. But it is also important to note that flexibility isn’t just demanded by young parents with young children. The *Index* clearly shows that, as children get older, needs within families change, with fathers requiring more. Employers should take a lifecycles approach to their people practices, recognising that needs evolve rather than abate.

Recommendations

1. The *Index* shows many parents would like to change jobs, but feel unable to move, for fear they won't be able to achieve the flexibility they have now elsewhere. Making the Right to Request Flexible Working a day-one in employment right will support them to be more agile in the labour market.
2. However, as the *Index* also shows, too many UK workplaces are sending the message that working flexibly isn't 'allowed'. Working parents in the *Index* clearly support the UK Government requiring employers to advertise jobs as open to flexible working by default.
3. Recruiting on a flexible basis should be a catalyst for an organisation-wide, strategic approach to better job design amongst UK employers, which, as the *Index* identifies, is crucial to 'human-sized' jobs and delivering genuine work-life balance for parents (as opposed to the ability to 'just get by'). Job design is the starting point for using the *Happy To Talk Flexible Working* strapline and logo.
4. Proactively managing tools (like technology) for family-friendly working is crucial. This could include introducing robust policies around the use of technology to work flexibly, so that parents know they can and should disconnect without penalty, and senior managers role-modelling 'switching-off'.
5. There is support from working parents in the *Index* for the UK Government to build on the momentum of gender pay gap reporting and require employers to publish their parental leave and pay policies externally, helping parents to better understand a potential employer's family-friendly offering during the recruitment process.
6. The *Index* highlights that childcare continues to be a fundamental consideration for parents when making decisions about work; and many working parents also care for adults. Employers should consider how to better support working parents with childcare, such as offering workplace nursery schemes and back-up emergency care programmes; and consider publishing their policies for carers and any support they offer around childcare and eldercare, as part of a wider family-friendly working offer.
7. The key to shifting the dial on gender equality at work is shifting the perception, as well as the reality, that mothers are the primary carers. Employers that can afford to do so should enhance paternity and shared parental pay and extend fathers' individual entitlement to leave and pay beyond two weeks. Going further, the Government should introduce 12 weeks of properly paid, standalone leave for fathers and secondary carers alongside existing schemes.
8. The *Index* shows that parents have a clear, ongoing need for flexibility as their children get older. Employers are encouraged to take a lifecycles approach to flexible and family-friendly working, reinforcing the message that flexible working is for everyone. To help parents with children of all ages to balance work and care, the UK Government should introduce two months of paid parental leave (as part of parents' existing 18-week entitlement), in line with the EU's Work-Life Balance Directive.



About Working Families

Working Families is the UK's work-life balance charity. We help working parents and carers—and their employers—find a better balance between responsibilities at home and in the workplace.

We provide free legal advice to parents and carers on their rights at work. We give employers the tools they need to support their employees while creating a flexible, high-performing workforce. And we advocate on behalf of the UK's 13 million working parents, influencing policy through campaigns informed by ground-breaking research.

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