

**2025**

# **Working Families Index**

A snapshot of work  
and family life in the  
UK today.



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## Foreword

A comprehensive survey of 3,000 working parents in the UK, the *Working Families Index* is a snapshot of work and family life in 2024. What it reveals is differential experiences of work and parenthood in relation to income, job security, gender and ethnicity.

Encouragingly, there are trends toward flexibility, fathers wanting to take a more active role in looking after their newborn children, and more openness about family-related issues at work. There are also positives to be taken about the impact of flexible working both for parents and for employers.

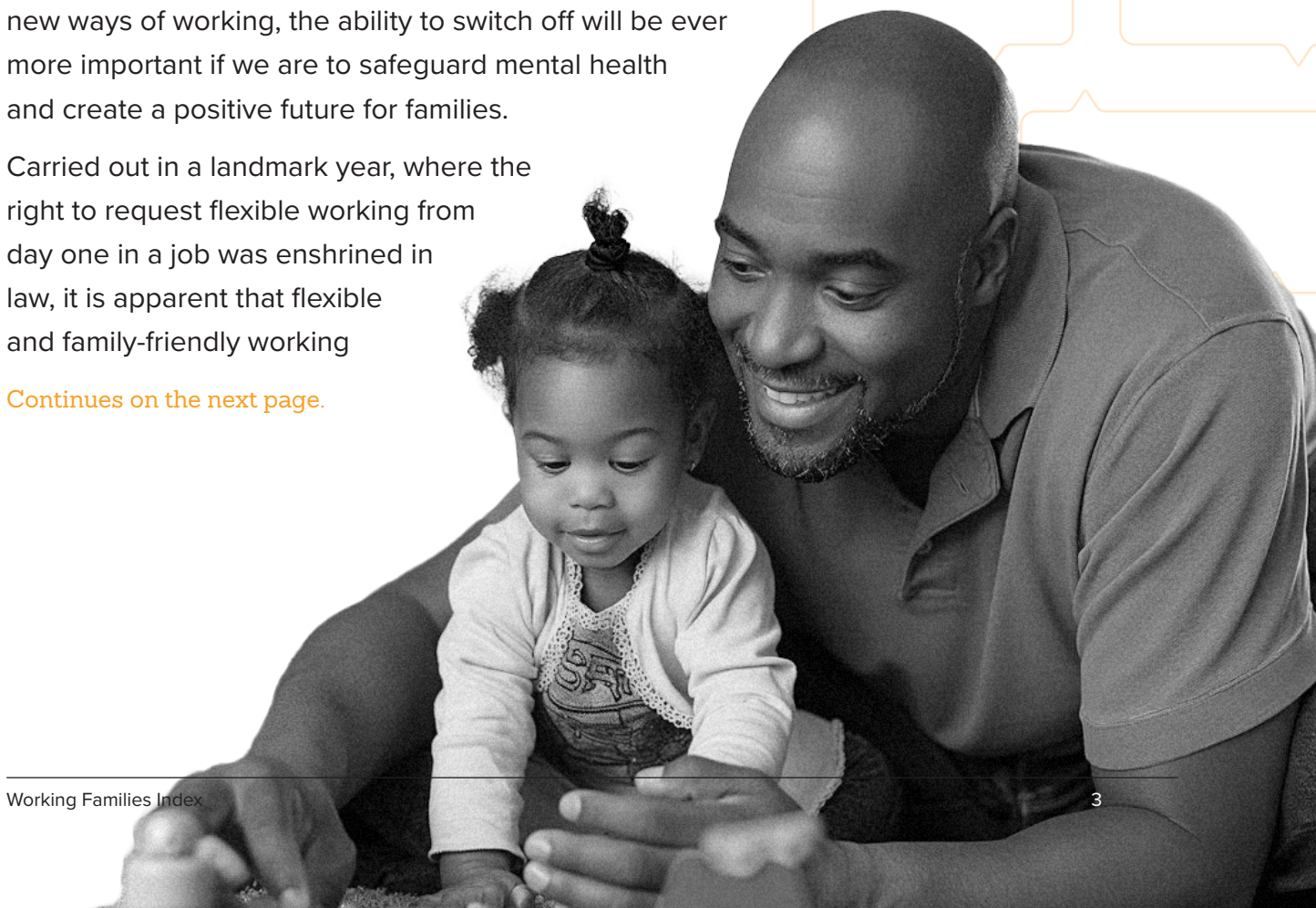
But the Index also clearly points to families who are grappling with the everyday battles of finding affordable childcare, working shifts with very little notice, and not having the parental leave or flexibility to give their families what they need. The findings also underscore the blurring of boundaries between home and work life that became a side effect of the pandemic, as well as working additional hours for the 'favour' of working flexibly. As we adjust to new ways of working, the ability to switch off will be ever more important if we are to safeguard mental health and create a positive future for families.

Carried out in a landmark year, where the right to request flexible working from day one in a job was enshrined in law, it is apparent that flexible and family-friendly working

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by Jane van Zyl,  
**CEO of Working Families**





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is not reaching everyone – access is still concentrated in certain roles and industries, as the bias towards remote or hybrid working persists. As families endure struggles with the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, affordable childcare, and access to flexible working are the linchpins of a system where parents can secure a meaningful income and lift themselves out of financial hardship.

There is hope on the horizon, as new policies, including the Employment Rights Bill and further proposals outlined in the Government's Plan to Make Work Pay, are set to shift attitudes toward a flex-first mindset. The Government should be reassured to hear that 65% of parents said they were likely to stay in their job to keep their workplace rights such as parental leave, meaning the proposed introduction of day one rights to paternity and unpaid parental leave, along with reforms to the right to request flexible working framework will indeed lead to a more dynamic, fluid labour market as promised. In a landscape where jobs are designed to be flexible, and the full breadth of flexible working options are utilised, opportunities open up across the labour market, meaning no role is taken off the table for parents and carers and enabling employers to tap into the wealth of skilled talent.



# Key Findings

## New Parent Leave:

Mothers and fathers are not taking the time they need and want with their new baby, and more often than not this is driven by financial reasons.

- For almost 8 in 10 mothers who didn't take the time off they needed, financial concerns were cited as the reason.
- Mothers concerned about money returned to work eight weeks sooner than those who weren't.
- 7 in 10 fathers who took less than two weeks paternity leave said it was because they were worried about money.

Some parents have no legal right to take any time off with their new baby.

- 21% of fathers were not entitled to paternity leave.


Those who have the privilege of eligibility and finances to take the leave they need are those with secure, well-paid jobs.




- The availability of enhanced parental leave increased the average length of leave taken, enabling mothers to take an average of an additional six weeks of maternity leave.


Legislation is playing catch-up in that fathers want to take more time off with their child.





- Men who were able to take six weeks leave were twice as likely to feel they had enough time with their baby than those who took under two weeks.


## Childcare:


 **Gaping holes in the childcare system mean parents use less childcare than they need, and rely on grandparents to get by.**

-  Less than half of parents (45%) report they can easily access the formal childcare they need.
-  4 in 10 parents report that cost prevents them from using as much formal childcare they'd like.
-  Half of parents reported using grandparents for childcare.

 **Challenges in accessing childcare needed is causing undue stress, putting parents into financial turmoil and is affecting their workplace opportunities.**

-  4 in 10 parents and over half of solo- and co-parents say finding childcare has negatively influenced their mental health.
-  Almost 2 in 10 families have gone into debt and over 3 in 10 have used their savings to cover childcare costs.
-  A third of parents have reduced their hours to manage childcare.
-  Almost 9 in 10 (87%) of parents agreed they would carefully consider childcare options before applying for a promotion or a new job.

 **The message about support for childcare isn't reaching all the parents that need it.**

-  4 in 10 of those who said they were unaware of the government funded free childcare scheme were using less childcare due to cost.

## Working Arrangements:

**Flexible working is widespread but options are still gendered and inequality of access remains a challenge, with a two-tier system in play tied to income and job type.**

- 8 in 10 parents work flexibly in some way.
- 9 out of 10 parents working reduced hours were women.
- Hybrid working is the most common form of flex: 32% of mothers are hybrid workers, and 39% of fathers.
- 8 in 10 parents in households with a total income over £100k felt they had control over their working arrangements, compared to less than 5 in 10 households with an income under £25k.

**Despite more widespread flexible working there remains unmet demand from those who do not work flexibly and a lack of transparency around flexible working options in job advertisements discourages parents from changing jobs.**

- Almost three-quarters (73%) of those not currently working flexibly would like to.
- Over half of parents who weren't working flexibly were not aware of the new right to request flexible working, and 60% of these parents said they would be likely to use it in the future.
- Over half of parents surveyed had not applied for a job they'd seen advertised as it didn't offer flexibility in the advert. This rose to 6 in 10 parents who receive Universal Credit and 6 in 10 parents in receipt of Carers Allowance.

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68% of parents said they're likely to stay in their job because they won't be able to get the flexibility elsewhere.

**Boundaries between home and work life are eroding and shift workers are faced with additional stress of short-notice shifts.**

Almost half (46%) of parents reported finding it hard to maintain boundaries between work and home life.

More than a quarter (27%) of parents working shifts are given less than a week's notice.

**With 7 in 10 mothers and 8 in 10 fathers reporting working additional hours, they appear to be an essential way of coping with workload or the cost of living.**

Almost a third (29%) of all parents saying they do so to increase their earnings.

1 in 5 mothers and 1 in 4 fathers say working additional hours beyond their contract is the only way to manage their workloads.

1 in 5 fathers report that working additional hours is valued at their organisations and important for career progression.

**Flexible working can increase loyalty and while many parents are able to discuss family with their employers this is not the case for everyone.**

73% of parents said working flexibly has increased their loyalty to their current employer.

Almost 6 in 10 (59%) parents said they feel confident discussing family-related issues with their employer, while less than half of Black parents felt this.



## New Parent Leave

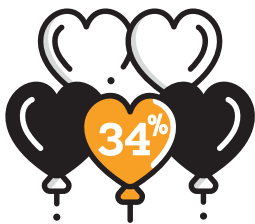
Many parents aren't able to, or can't afford to, take the time they need or want with their new baby. Some are feeling this more acutely than others. All too often the ability to spend the necessary time correlates with income and financial pressures, but the figures also tell a story of racial inequality. For parents in the survey, enhanced pay was a game changer, indicating that legislation in future must take account of the financial ability to take time off if it is to have an impact.



Mothers take an average of  
**30 weeks**

### Limited Time

Many women's experiences of maternity leave appear to be shaped by the legislation and the duration of financial support provided by the Government. Four in ten women returned to work within six months, within the period of 'Ordinary Maternity Leave' when an employee has a right to return to the same job. Seven in ten women had returned to work within nine months at the end of their Statutory Maternity Pay. Job security and financial considerations appear to be a key factor in determining when women return to work.



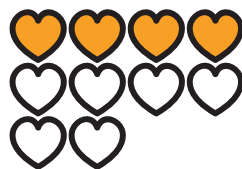
**Only a third (34%)** of mothers continued their leave beyond Statutory Maternity Pay of 39 weeks.



“I had issues with paternity leave because the leave was not enough and my boss wouldn’t pay me my usual salary.”

Despite the changing culture of many fathers now taking a much more active role in caring for their child, the overwhelming majority of eligible fathers took under six weeks of parental leave, and most fathers only took two weeks paternity leave.

The sense that there wasn’t enough time spent with a new baby was unfortunately a common experience amongst parents. A number of barriers, from financial worries to fear of losing jobs, were cited as curtailing parents from taking an adequate amount of leave.



**4 in 10 mothers** didn’t feel they took the time they needed with their new baby.



“My partner was only entitled to two weeks paternity leave which is nowhere near enough, especially as I had a c-section.”

Fathers who felt they had enough parental leave took three and a half weeks more on average, than those who felt they didn’t, while men who took six weeks leave were twice as likely to feel they had enough time off than those who took under two. The message men and their families are sending is clear; that fathers and partners need more than the current statutory offering of two weeks paternity leave.



Mothers who took enough time off had **six more weeks off work** on average.



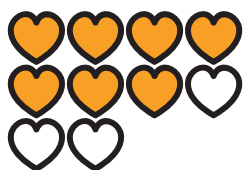
Mothers concerned about money returned to work **eight weeks sooner** than those who weren't.

### Economic pressures and barriers to taking leave

Money worries were a key driver in taking less parental leave. Almost half of parents (47%) reported they were not able to take as much time as they would have liked due to financial concerns.

For almost 8 in 10 mothers who didn't take the time off they needed, financial concerns were cited as the reason, and for three quarters, pay was not adequate to allow them the time they needed. This was echoed for fathers, half of whom didn't have enough pay to take the time they required, and 65% had concerns about finances which prevented them from taking the time they needed.

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7 in 10 fathers who took **less than two weeks leave** said it was because they were worried about money.



"My maternity pay didn't even cover bills. I had to go part-time as I could not afford nursery."

"Statutory paternity pay would have left us massively short so I had to use holidays"

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Other barriers and negative experiences reported included workplace attitudes, shift patterns and business needs in small employers:

“Inflexible parental leave including being told rota couldn’t be altered if the baby wasn’t born on its due date.”

“Partner worked for a small business. No room for part time flexibility or more than 2 weeks paternity leave without business turning to a loss.”

“I had a bit of difficulty with requesting my parental leave as my employer was being difficult over it.”

In the case of fathers there were concerns over career development and a reluctance to grant leave to men:

“I was apprehensive about asking for parental leave as I thought it would affect my career prospects.”

“It’s difficult to access parental leave especially when you are the father of the child.”

## Enhanced Leave

Unsurprisingly, enhancing parental leave had a positive impact on parents' ability to take parental leave. There were equal proportions of those who had enhanced leave and those who didn't. When mothers had access to enhanced leave, they took on average six weeks more than those that didn't. For fathers, enhancing leave meant they took an additional 1.26 weeks on average, which is a 75% improvement for those who are taking paternity leave of just two weeks. Fathers who took more than six weeks leave were twice as likely to have enhanced leave than those who took less than two weeks paternity leave.



“Enhanced parental leave was not available at the two jobs I worked at when my child was born. I would've liked to have taken more time off but took 2 weeks annual leave each time instead.”



**6 in 10** fathers taking more than six weeks leave had enhanced leave.

Having enhanced leave did not mean that all parents were able to take the time they needed, but it did make a marked difference. When they didn't have enhanced leave, six in ten mothers couldn't afford the time off they needed, compared to four in ten mothers who did have enhanced leave. The difference enhanced leave made to affordability was even more pronounced for fathers, with six in ten dads not being able to afford to take time off when they didn't have any enhanced leave, double that of the three in ten dads who couldn't take time off when they had enhanced leave.



”

“No financial support except maternity allowance.”

## Unequal access

Parents’ experiences of parental leave depend upon income and job security, with those on higher incomes and more secure employment enjoying better access through eligibility to leave and a financial ability to take leave offered. Those on lower incomes suffer the double blow of having less access to enhanced leave and being less likely to have a financial buffer to manage.

There are some parents who have no right to parental leave and pay, possibly due to being self-employed or not reaching the current 26-week eligibility threshold for Statutory Maternity Pay or Paternity Leave and Pay. Having to take lower-paid Maternity Allowance and fathers having no right to take leave often forces parents to return to work within a very short window.

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“The company that I worked for didn’t want to pay me while on parental leave.”



**21% of fathers and 14% of mothers** were not entitled to parental leave.

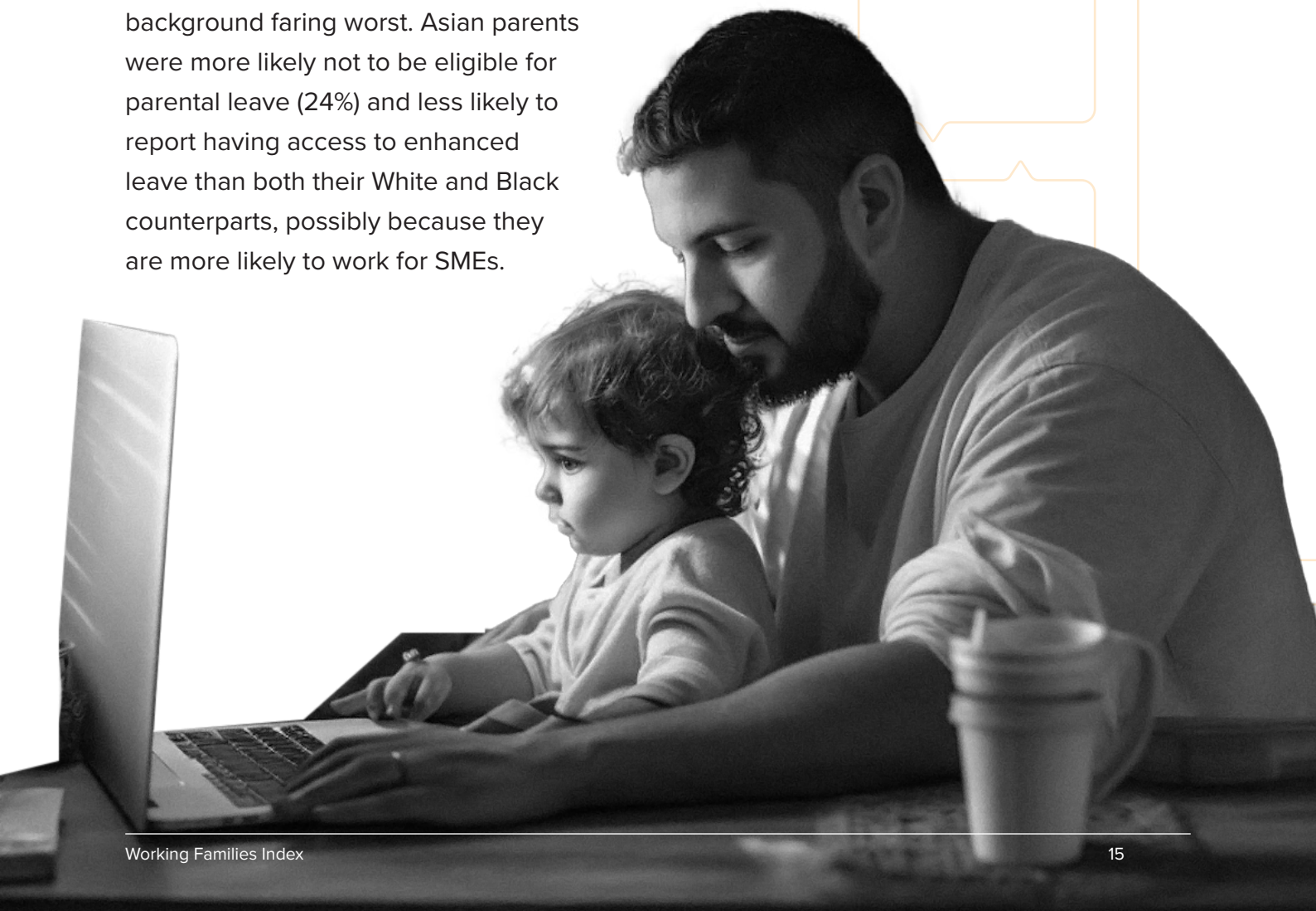
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“It was hell, I had to go on unpaid maternity leave.”

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“When my twins were born my husband had been working on ‘temporary contract’ for a big banking business, even though he had worked there for several years. They only allowed him to take 2 weeks off work but he was not entitled to paternity leave and any time off was unpaid. Our daughters were premature and had to spend over two weeks in hospital and I was recovering from a caesarean section. When our twins were in hospital our only worry should have been getting them home in the best health but instead we had the extra burden and worry about how we were going to pay our rent and bills.”

Those currently living in lower-income households and engaged in more precarious forms of employment are over-represented amongst the parents who aren’t eligible for parental leave. There also appears to be a marked difference in access to parental leave for parents of different ethnic groups, with parents from an Asian background faring worst. Asian parents were more likely not to be eligible for parental leave (24%) and less likely to report having access to enhanced leave than both their White and Black counterparts, possibly because they are more likely to work for SMEs.





## Recommendations to improve access to new parent leave

### Recommendations for government

The Government's proposed review into parental leave presents a real opportunity to set out plans to reform the UK's parental leave offer, however it is currently unclear if the review will cover eligibility, pay or related leave entitlements. We would like to see the review take the form of a public consultation that includes within its scope eligibility, statutory pay, as well as leave entitlements for adoptive and kinship parents.

In the medium to long-term the Government should legislate for the phased introduction of extended and better paid leave provision which encompasses more parents. As a minimum, this might begin with Statutory Paternity Pay being raised to living wage levels.

### Recommendations for employers

Employers should ensure that fathers-to-be are aware of, and encouraged to use their entitlements to leave.

Where possible, employers should offer enhanced leave, available as a day one right, which can be used at any time in the child's first year, ideally on a flexible basis – for example, by allowing the number of weeks available to be split rather than taken as one block.

## Childcare

As a non-negotiable for many working parents, families are dependent on a childcare system which often falls short. Finding, accessing and affording the childcare they need can be an uphill struggle. The ripple effect is that women, as the default caregivers, are responsible for picking up the pieces, which disrupts their careers, and sometimes their ability to work at all, reinforcing the gender pay gap.



**36% of parents of 5-11yr olds** are using breakfast or after-school clubs.

## Out of reach

Less than half of parents (45%) report they can easily access the childcare they need. Those with less financial resources encounter greater challenges, whereas higher-income households report greater access to wrap-around care and formal early years education and childcare.



**55% of households** with an income **over £60k** use wrap-around care compared to **40% under £60k**.

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“It’s just that there [are] not enough services or they are not what you are looking for, for example in the case of the free childcare, they fill up really quickly in the area I live and there are not enough for the demand.”

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“I sometimes struggle getting my child into clubs, which impacts my attendance at work.”

**Families with a child who has special educational needs** report they are often faced with scarce to nil childcare options to meet their child's needs.

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“I struggle to find childcare in the holidays as my youngest daughter is severely autistic.”

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“I have a non-verbal autistic son and have no childcare options at all.”

Affordability is the major stumbling block for families, especially when it comes to the early years. Four in ten parents report that cost prevents them from using as much formal childcare they'd like. Many have had to use their savings or find themselves in debt, meaning parents are paying to go to work and leaving families with a financial hangover that could have long-lasting effects.



**Almost 2 in 10 families** have gone into debt and over **3 in 10** have used their savings to cover childcare costs.





“I had to use all my savings (to buy a home) to pay for the nursery to continue being able to attend work.”



“I once had to pay for childcare but my bank was empty so had to take out a loan and it was a difficult time for us.”

Worryingly, not all parents are tapping into the financial support on offer. The survey found a small but significant portion of parents were not aware of the government’s funded childcare (17%) or Tax-Free Childcare schemes (23%), meaning some families have been struggling unnecessarily. Extrapolating these survey results to the wider population of parents with a child under the age of five years old in Great Britain (and accounting for single parent families and those with multiple pre-school aged children), this would mean some 62,000 parents are unaware about the offer of free funded hours from the government. Another reason for low uptake of financial support is suggested by parents in the survey who found the Tax-Free Childcare and free hours system confusing and hard to navigate.



“Even with Tax-Free Childcare and free childcare hours, I cannot afford to pay childcare costs and so am in debt to pay for it, but I need to work to stay in my occupation and want my child to be socialised with other children so I keep them in childcare.”



**6 in 10**  
**families** say  
accessing the  
childcare they  
need puts a  
strain on their  
finances.



“I couldn’t afford all costs as a single parent so got into debt with credit cards.”



**4 in 10** of those who said they were unaware of the government funded free childcare hours scheme were using less childcare due to cost.

”

“A lot of the problem is I don’t know what I am entitled to.”

”

“We have been confused with the free hours the Government have given as our child does not receive the full 30 hours a week but 22 hours which I assume is due to term time contracts or full time contracts but this is not very clear. It would also have been really helpful to allow our younger child who is now one to have full access to the 30 hours rather than drip feeding the hours in over a few years. This would have reduced the burden financially massively. Currently we have no holidays and are getting in debt each month covering the costs.”



**Almost 6 in 10** who were unaware of the Tax-Free Childcare scheme were likely to use it in future.

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“Applying for Tax-Free Childcare and free hours has been complicated.”

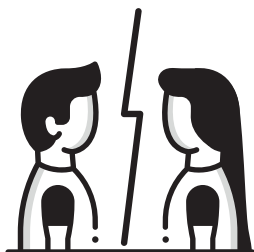
## Knock-on effects

Stress caused by the challenges in accessing appropriate, financially manageable childcare is having a detrimental effect on families. The impact is such that parents' mental health and relationships are feeling the strain, shaking the foundations of family life.



**4 in 10 parents** say finding childcare has negatively influenced their mental health.

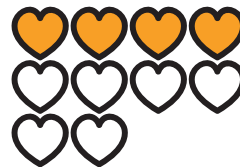
Some groups are experiencing this pressure more acutely than others.



**Half of co-parents, 45% of fathers and 58% of those working multiple jobs and 60% of those with insecure contracts** have relationships that have suffered due to the cost of childcare.



“Cost is very expensive, my partner does not work Mondays and Tuesdays so he can have our son, it means we can’t spend the weekend together.”



**4 in 10 parents** report that the cost of childcare has been a source of tension in their relationship with their partner.



**Women were twice as likely** to have reduced their working hours than men to manage childcare.

### Missed opportunities

Gaps in childcare provision are causing parents, predominantly women, to fall through the cracks at work, as they forego the opportunity to earn more or work toward more senior roles. Women's careers continue to be interrupted far more commonly than men. Childcare is a key driver of part-time working, and although for some this will be a conscious choice, for many it is because of a lack of feasible options.



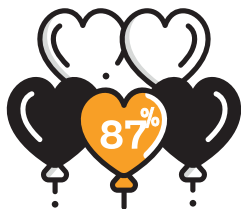
**4 in 10 mothers** report reducing their hours to manage childcare.



**3 in 10 mothers** work part-time compared to **1 in 20 fathers**.

The link between hours and opportunity is laid bare, with the half of those parents in the survey having reduced their hours reporting the least career progression. Women's careers disproportionately take the hit as they are twice as likely to reduce their hours than men, whilst those in insecure and low-paid jobs are also experiencing the brunt of limited childcare choices.

When childcare is unavailable, or unaffordable, parents can become stuck in a rut. Four in ten parents acknowledge they are likely to take a pay cut or work less hours in future to manage their caring commitments. The need to manage childcare caused some parents to miss out on applying for new jobs, and unsurprisingly it is these parents who reported less career progression.

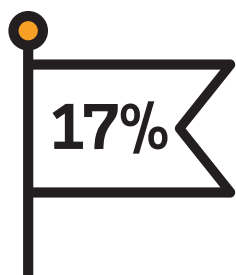


**Almost 9 in 10 (87%) of parents** agreed they would carefully consider childcare options before applying for a promotion or a new job, with mothers more likely to feel this way.

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“The cost has forced me and my ex-partner to take unpaid leave from work just to look after our child.”





**17% of mothers** had to forego a promotion or training opportunity to manage childcare.

The gender divide is clear, with women a third more likely to have to consider childcare options before going for a new job or promotion, putting them on the back foot when it comes to moving forward.

For a quarter of parents (23% of mothers and 25% of fathers), it's a partner or family member who has reduced their hours or quit their job to take care of children, highlighting that when formal solutions aren't accessible, there is always someone who pays the price.

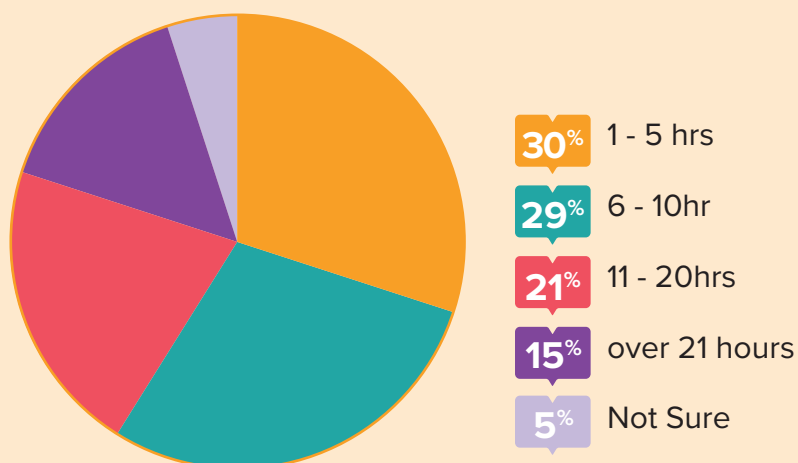
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“There’s not enough options for childcare in my area, places and childminders book out really fast leaving a lot of people to rely on friends/family or cut back working hours.”



## Grandparents to the rescue

One group who are evidently plugging the gaps in the childcare system are grandparents. Half of parents reported using grandparents for childcare, although in London this was reduced to a third. Of the parents who have this option, a third are receiving a full day's childcare a week. Grandparents are currently acting as a safety net for an unaffordable system, as half of parents say the cost of formal childcare is unmanageable. The Resolution Foundation estimates that grandparents provided 766 million hours of childcare in 2022-23, equating to approximately £3.5 billion<sup>1</sup> of nursery care. This is not, however, a cost-free solution. As the Equality and Human Rights Commission has previously warned, some grandparents risk economic hardship to take on a consistent caring role.



Grandparent care:  
hours per week by household



"It's been cheaper for three years not to work. I can only work now as my in-laws do free childcare."



"I have to work less hours because accessing after school care is expensive I don't think I qualify for help so grandparents help massively."



“I had trouble requesting my parental leave as my employer was being difficult over it.”

## Unpaid Parental Leave

When no support from family is available, taking Unpaid Parental Leave – if parents can afford the lost income – is sometimes the only option. However, 42% of parents were not aware of this right, and for those that were, challenges remained around a lack of affordability or employers being unwilling to grant permission for the leave, despite it being an employment right for employees who have been with their employer for a year. 48% of working parents who were not aware said they would be likely or very likely to use it in future, and the Employment Rights Bill is set to make access to Unpaid Parental Leave a day-one employment right.

## Recommendations to improve access to childcare

### Recommendations for government

Alongside the Early Education and Childcare Coalition, we are calling on the Government to guarantee that all children can access inclusive, high-quality provision that is affordable for their parents.

In the short term, the Government must ensure rising delivery costs (including recent changes to the National Living Wage and Employers NI contributions) are accompanied by increases in funding rates to ensure costs are not passed on to parents, or else settings may close.

As the Government deliver their plan to open 3,000 school-based early years settings, places outside of school hours must be made accessible.

### **Recommendations for employers**

Employers should support working parents with childcare challenges through offering a range of flexible working arrangements such as flexi-hours or term-time working, and by allowing for short-term flexible arrangements or paid time off for dependants, should their usual childcare arrangements be disrupted.





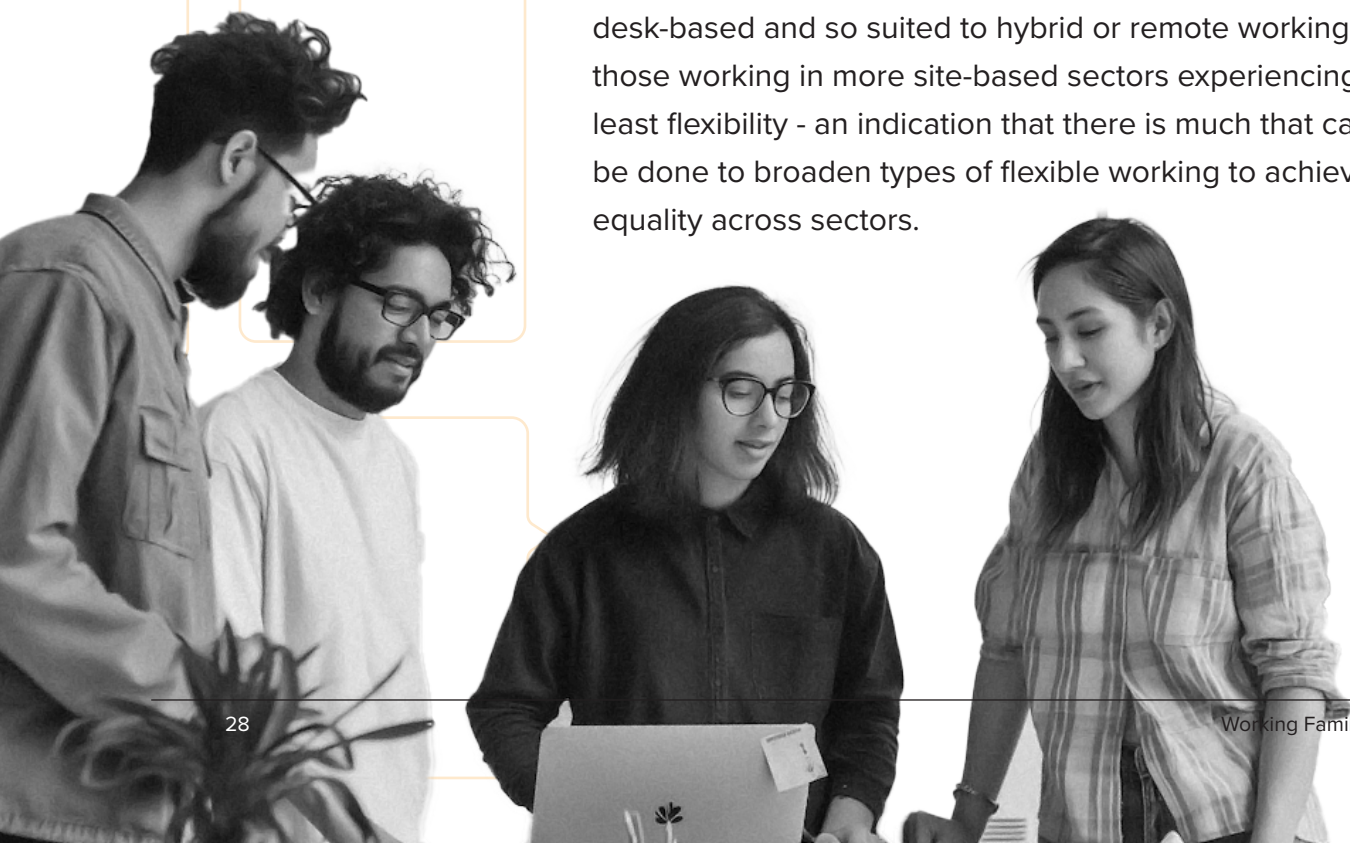
## Working arrangements

Parents are under pressure from all quarters as they try to manage a workload, finances and a family. Since the pandemic many more working parents have been able to experience the flexibility so valued by people with caring responsibilities, and yet, there is a chasm between those who have agency and access, and those restricted by circumstance. Even for those who can access flexibility, there are challenges, and there are plenty of opportunities for legislation and working practices to level the playing field.

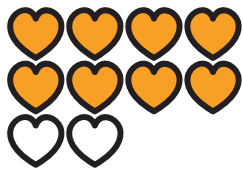
## An ever-more flexible workforce

Flexible working and working patterns that deviate from full time 9-to-5 hours are widespread amongst parents. This represents an upward trend, which jumped significantly from pre-pandemic rates - a little over half of parents worked flexibly in 2018 - but the figures have also continued to climb from 76% in 2022. For many parents and carers, flexible working is formalised in their contract, which is more common for higher earners and carers.

However, it's not a win for everyone. Flexible working continues to be concentrated in sectors more likely to be desk-based and so suited to hybrid or remote working, with those working in more site-based sectors experiencing the least flexibility - an indication that there is much that can be done to broaden types of flexible working to achieve equality across sectors.







**8 in 10** parents work flexibly in some way.

**Sectors with the highest proportion of parents working flexibly:**

- Business, consulting and management
- Information technology
- Accountancy, banking and finance

**Sectors with the lowest proportion of parents working flexibly:**

- Transport and logistics
- Retail
- Hospitality and events management
- Healthcare and social care
- Property and construction
- Leisure, sport and tourism

While the rise in flexible working is broadly positive, it is important to note that a degree of fluidity or a range of flexible working options are needed to fully meet the needs of working parents and carers. Generic hybrid policies may still result in a level of rigidity that doesn't accommodate individuals' caring responsibilities, and part-time working, reduced or variable hours that may be enforced or are seen as the only option can have significant financial implications.

**62%**

**62% have flexible working** formalised in their contract.



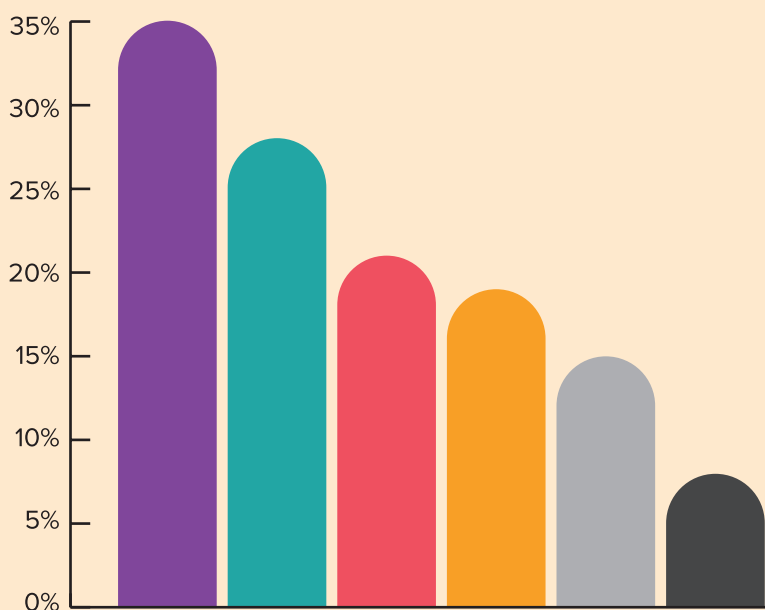
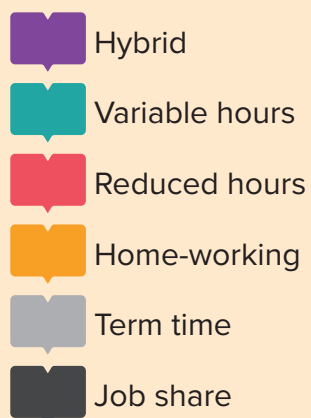
**9 out of 10 parents** working reduced hours were women

### Access to flex

Not everyone enjoys the benefits of flexible working, or the same access to types of flexible working, and the links between flex, income, and gender appear to be as strong as ever.

For those who do work flexibly, the most common types of flex were fairly evenly spread, but gendered. Women were less likely to work in a hybrid way compared to men (32% vs 39%) and were overwhelmingly more likely to be working part-time (31% vs 4%).

#### Types of flexible working

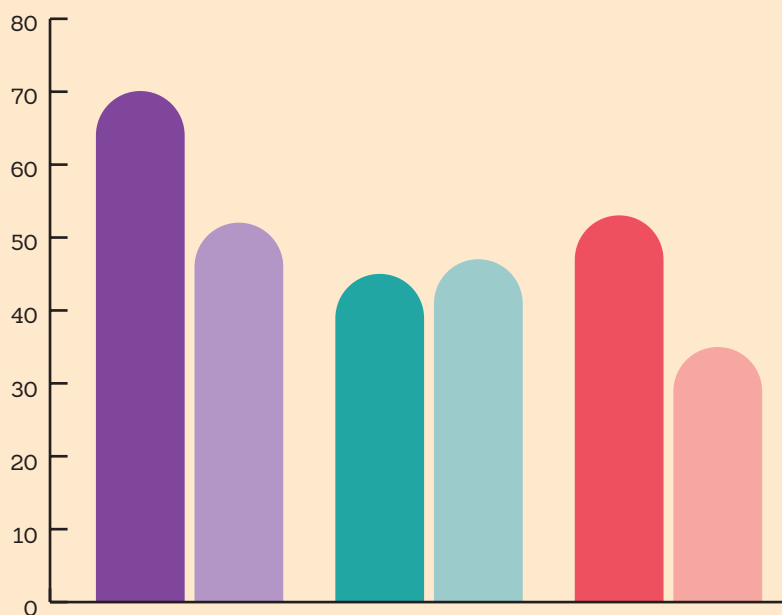


Those who didn't have access to flexible working options more often came from lower income households. Parents whose annual household income was over £60k, were almost three times more likely to be hybrid workers than those from households with an income under £25k, and more than twice as likely to be home-based workers, and almost twice as likely to be job sharers.

### Locked out of flexible working

This year's Index highlights the unmet need for flexible working, with almost three-quarters (73%) of those not working flexibly expressing a wish to. Flex is seen as a practical solution to everyday struggles of family life, chiefly childcare and coping financially. Mothers are more likely to be driven by the need to manage the juggle and keep costs down, underscoring that it is women who shoulder the burden of organising and managing the day-to-day practicalities of caring.

Reasons to work flexibly, by gender



Manage caring responsibilities:  
**63% overall**

Mothers Fathers

To spend quality time with my family:  
**46% overall**

Mothers Fathers

Reduce costs of childcare:  
**45% overall**

Mothers Fathers






”

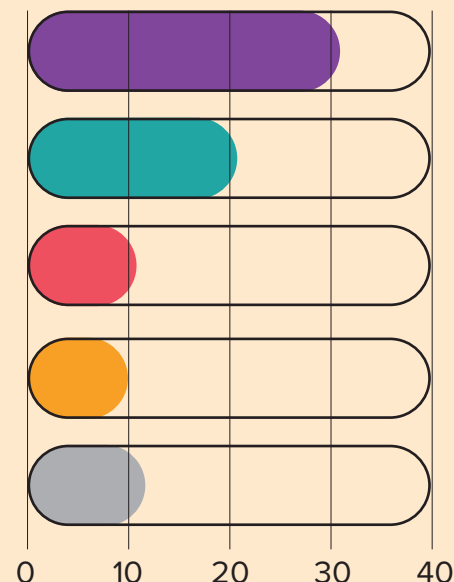
“I worked flexibly and had childcare arrangements around it. My employer then attempted to change my working days and I was forced to leave the job.”

Without flexibility, some parents in the labour market won't have the same opportunities to participate. Those who didn't feel the need to work flexibly more often had the support of a partner or children who no longer needed full-time care, meaning for single parents or parents of young children, flexibility is the gateway for full participation in the labour market.

The reasons given for parents not working flexibly point to a need for better understanding at an organisational and managerial level of the broad scope and benefits of flexible working to shift attitudes and improve workplace culture. Proposed legislation will hopefully encourage employers to consider job design and work with employees to find workable solutions.

## Reasons parents are not working flexibly, even though they would like to

-  **31%** said the nature of their role meant it wasn't possible
-  **21%** said it wasn't available at their organisation
-  **11%** said their line manager does not encourage flexible working
-  **10%** of those not working flexibly had a request denied
-  **12%** worried about the impact a flexible working arrangement would have on progression



## Unlocking opportunities

When it comes to finding flexible jobs, incorporating flexible options into job adverts has the potential to open up opportunities for parents and employers. For some parents, the fear of having to forego the flexibility they have can keep them locked into jobs, which isn't good for career progression or the labour market.



**68% of parents** said they're likely to stay in their job because they won't be able to get the flexibility elsewhere.

Over half of parents surveyed had not applied for a job they'd seen advertised as it didn't offer flexibility in the advert. This rose to six in ten parents who receive Universal Credit and six in ten parents in receipt of Carers Allowance. For these parents in particular, flex is a necessity to accommodate additional caring or keeping family finances within a tight budget by avoiding prohibitive childcare costs. Younger parents and parents from minoritised ethnic communities were also more likely to not apply for jobs if flexible options weren't clearly available, meaning employers are missing out on a wealth of skills and experience.

”

“I don't want to raise many objections due to fear of losing my job.”

”

“The only reason I can work from home 4/5 days a week and take and pick up my children from school during the work day is because I was offered a more flexible job elsewhere and my current employer needed to match that to retain me, otherwise this option would not have been offered.”



**67% of employers who take part in the Working Families Benchmark** already include flexible options on jobs advertised externally. They recognise that throwing the net wide will attract a diversity of talent and recruit an engaged workforce.





**Almost half (48%) of parents** who were not aware of the right to request flexible working had a household income of under £50k.

### Awareness of rights

Landmark legislation came into effect in the months before parents were surveyed, making requesting flexible working a day one right, and making the process more accessible for employees. And yet, half of parents were unaware of the new right to make a flexible working request, many of whom were in a position where it could make a significant difference to their ability to manage caring responsibilities.



“As a single dad I’ve never known what any of my rights are. When I applied for flexible working I was informed I could be moved store due to this and it upset me so I withdrew my application. A better working schedule would benefit me having better times.”

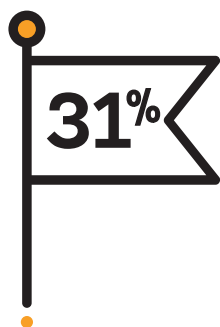


**24% of those likely to use** the right to request flexible working in the future do not currently work flexibly, but 73% would like to.

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**31% of those who were not aware** of the right to request flexible working said they had not applied for a job because flex wasn't specified in the advert.



Of those who weren't aware of this right, **60% would be likely** to use it in the future.

## Positive outcomes

For those working flexibly, the benefits are apparent, both for parents and employers. For parents, working flexibly had been positive for self-development, with six in ten reporting that flex had enabled them to build new skills. For employers, flexible working had created a more committed workforce where valuable talent was less likely to look elsewhere.



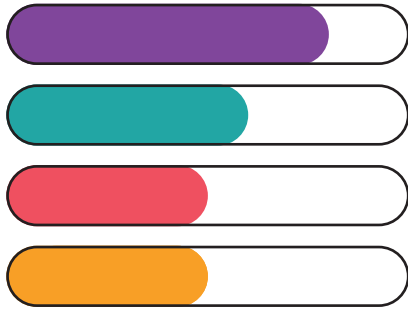
**64% of parents** said that working flexibly has discouraged them from looking for a new role elsewhere.







**73% of parents** said working flexibly has increased their loyalty to their current employer.



**77% of parents** said working flexibly has allowed them to stay with their employer.

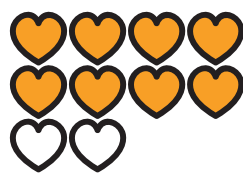


## Those who feel they had high control over working arrangements

-  **8 in 10** working full-time self-employed
-  **6 in 10** parents working full-time
-  **5 in 10** parents working part-time
-  **5 in 10** parents in insecure contracts

## A lack of control

A sense of autonomy can be a driver in motivation, productivity and fulfilment. Parents reported markedly different levels of agency when it comes to working arrangements, depending on job security, income and gender. Working more hours appeared to be a route to having more control, as did having more secure employment. Women were less likely to feel they had control over their working hours than men. And, as with access to flex, it's those with a higher income who enjoy more freedom over their working arrangements.

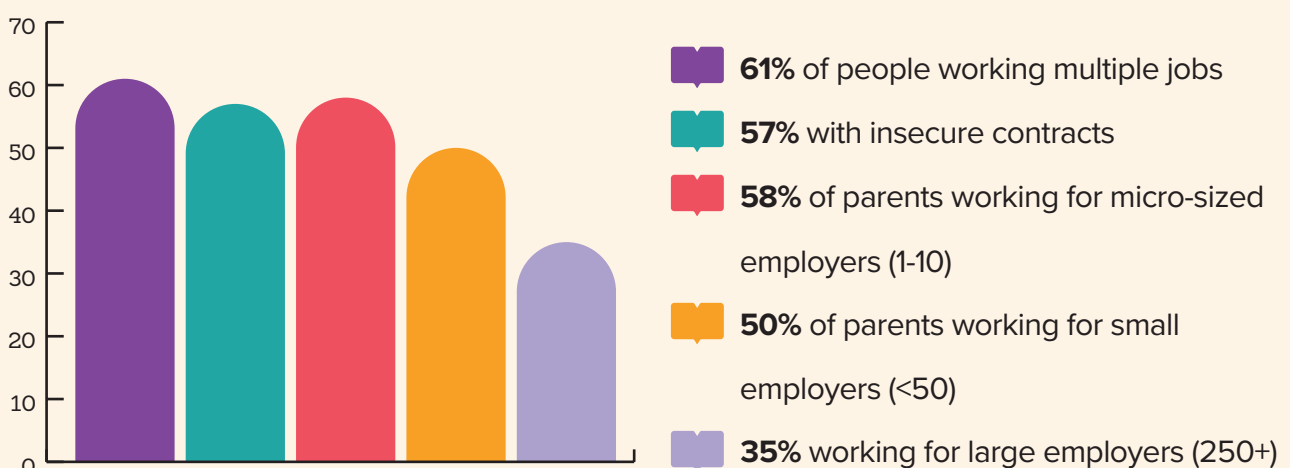


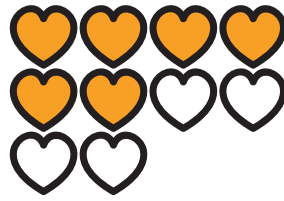
**8 in 10 parents** in households earning over £100k felt they had control compared to less than **5 in 10 parents** in households earning under £25k.

## Blurred boundaries

Accelerated by the pandemic, the line between work and home life has eroded, and the pressure to always be 'on' has become the norm for many. Almost half (46%) of parents reported finding it hard to maintain boundaries, with some groups experiencing this more acutely than others. In particular, those working in smaller organisations, young parents, parents with less job security and Asian parents were more likely to struggle. Reasons for this could be employer expectations, fear of losing jobs, or even Professor Heejung Chung's idea of a 'flexibility paradox', whereby flexible workers feel the need to reciprocate the 'favour' of working flexibly by making themselves always available or work beyond their contracted hours. The need to safeguard mental health as we adjust to new ways of working has been recognised in the proposed introduction of a 'right to switch off', which would go some way to address the 24/7 culture.

### Those who find it hard to maintain boundaries



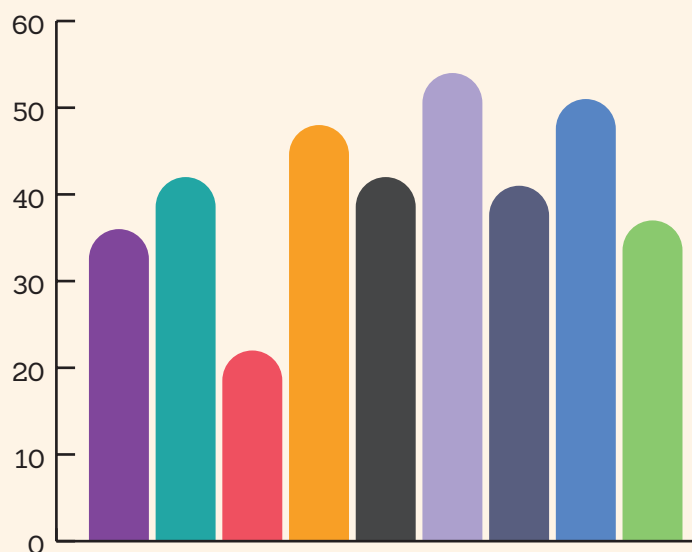


**6 in 10 parents**  
reported working  
shifts.

### Putting in a shift

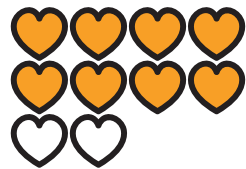
Many parents undertake shift work, characterised by working alternate mornings and nights, rotas or as and when there is a demand. For more than a quarter (27%) of these parents, they are given less than a week's notice, which is likely to make managing childcare a logistical struggle. The groups who fared worse fit with the pattern of those having less agency, less access to flexible working, and less income. Only one in ten parents reported having more than a month's notice, meaning that for the majority of shift working parents they are working with constant uncertainty.

### Parents who have a week's notice or less of shift



- 36% of 18 - 34yr olds
- 42% in London
- 22% White
- 48% Black or Black British
- 42% Asian or Asian British
- 54% for agency workers
- 41% for those on UC
- 51% for those on Carers Allowance
- 37% for those with household income under £25k

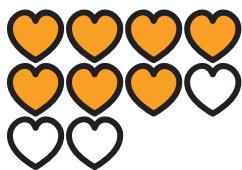
A right to a more predictable contract has been promised as part of the Employment Rights Bill. When asked if they would use such a right in the future, 75% of shift workers said they would be likely to use this right. Those parents who would most likely use this right were those receiving Universal Credit, those working multiple jobs or who have insecure contracts and parents in receipt of Carers Allowance. Parents from minoritised ethnic backgrounds were more likely to say they'd use a right, with 75% agreeing compared to 60% of White respondents.



**8 in 10 fathers** report working additional hours.

### Working all hours

The majority of parents said that they regularly work more hours than they're contracted to. The main driver for this was financial – almost a third of all parents were doing so to increase their income, but for Black and mixed ethnicity parents this is 38% and 40% respectively, and rises to 44% for those with insecure contracts.



**7 in 10 mothers** report working additional hours.

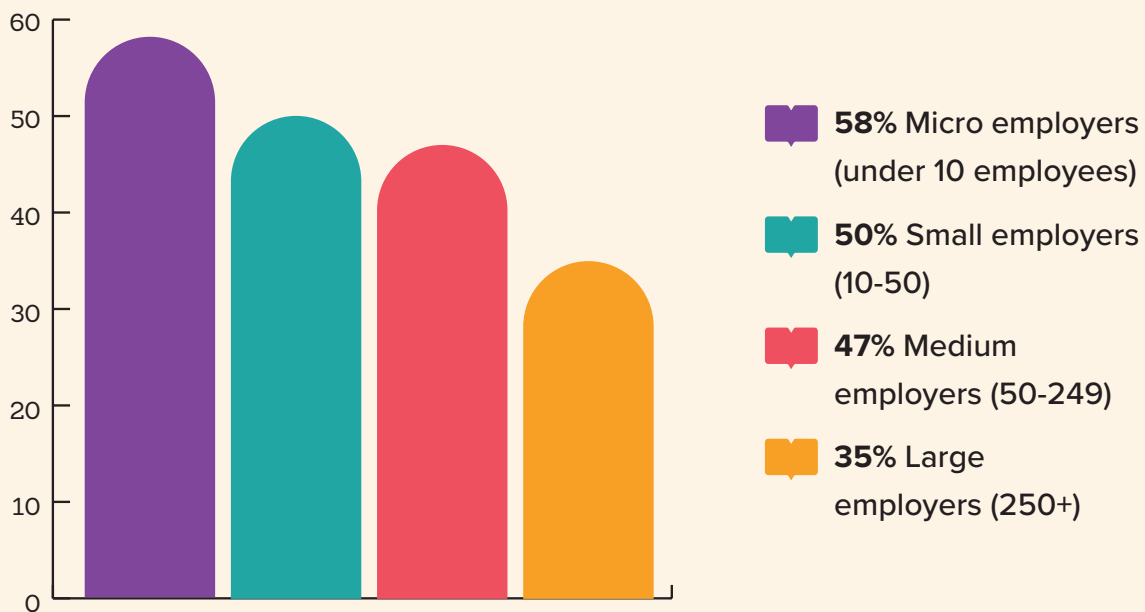
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Almost a quarter (23%) of parents were driven to work above and beyond to manage their workload, rising to 37% for those on Carers Allowance, suggesting that jobs aren't being designed appropriately or that many parents and carers who are reluctant to leave jobs which permit flexibility feel obliged to work long hours to hold onto these jobs.

Workplace culture was a large culprit in parents working overtime, particularly for fathers and those working in London. Reasons behind this varied from it being the norm, it being valued or managerial expectation, which was especially rife in smaller organisations.

### Proportion of parents who said their manager expected them to work overtime, by size of employer:





## Attitudes in the workplace

Having a supportive culture is central to a thriving workforce, and yet, the picture of workplace attitudes is mixed. More than half of working parents said they felt confident their employers were understanding of their circumstances. The figures show a steady rise from 2020 Index, indicating that the pandemic may have softened views on the caring experience in the workplace.



**Almost 6 in 10 (59%) parents** said they feel confident discussing family-related issues with their employer up from 55% in 2020.

For those parents who didn't have this confidence, a lack of support can impact their ability to cope and overshadow their working experience. For the one in ten mothers or the 15% who didn't believe they'd be treated fairly, an additional level of stress was layered onto managing home and family life.



**Over 6 in 10 (62%) parents** said they were confident their employer would take account of family responsibilities and treat them fairly, up from 57% pre-pandemic.

Black parents are at a particular disadvantage in discussing family-related issues, with 44% lacking confidence to talk to their employer. The sense that open conversation could be met with negativity chimes with research by the TUC that questions whether minoritised ethnic employees feel safe in their working environments as flexibility, stigma and racial discrimination intersect.

Gendered workplace cultures and attitudes still unfortunately persist. Overall, almost half (47%) of parents said they felt it was more acceptable in their workplace for women to work part-time than men, a figure that was higher amongst men (53%). Similarly, the gender split around flexibility was weighted towards women. When asked about perceptions around flexibility and gender within their workplaces, a higher proportion of respondents felt flexibility was a genuine option for women (63%) than men (55%).

“Such applications were reluctantly granted to men. Private organisations prefer to grant only women.”



## Recommendations to improve access to flexible and family-friendly working arrangements

### Recommendations for government

The Government must deliver the Employment Rights Bill and Plan to Make Work Pay, making basic employment rights available from day one, ensuring that reasons for rejecting flexible working can be contested, workers have greater security, and employees are protected from the intensification of work and the blurring of boundaries via a right to switch off.

The Government should ensure the regulations and ACAS guidance that accompany the new flexible working legislation define reasonableness and provide examples for employers. The Employment Tribunal backlog should be addressed with reviews undertaken to establish whether penalties for Employment Tribunal claims are high enough, and how better mediation can reduce pressure on the system and support employees keep their jobs.

As part of the proposed Gender Pay Gap Action Plans, large employers should be encouraged to advertise jobs as flexible and be transparent about their workplace benefits.

### Recommendations for employers

Employers should ensure that jobs are designed and advertised with flexibility in mind so they can attract a wide range of talent and be equipped to handle flexible working requests when they arise.

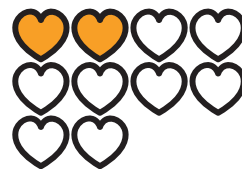
To help lower-income workers employers should ensure that they offer a minimum of 16 hours per week and offer compensation for last minute shift changes.



**23% of parents** aren't just looking after young children but also have caring responsibilities for an adult over 18.

### The carer experience

Carers face a particularly challenging situation. Whilst they are more likely to have flexibility formalised in their contract, they are also more likely to be working additional hours to manage their workload, and when they work shifts, to have less than a week's notice. The picture highlighted is one of carers struggling to keep their heads above water when it comes to completing their work, and overcoming constant hurdles in managing care.

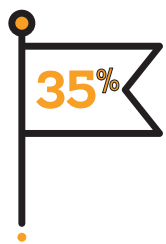


**2 in 10 with a caring responsibility** for an adult received Carers Allowance.



**A third of parents over 55** have extra caring responsibilities.

Parents from an Asian background or mixed ethnic background were most likely to be taking on additional caring responsibilities. Interestingly, there was a slightly higher than expected proportion of fathers acknowledging their role as a carer, which echoes findings from previous indexes.



**35% of people** with additional caring responsibility said they were not aware of the right to unpaid carers leave.

Legislation passed in 2023 that recognised the need for carers to have dedicated leave, whilst unpaid, was a step in the right direction that will hopefully lay the groundwork for more support in future. In the meantime, there is evidently work to do to ensure all carers are aware of their rights.



**65% of those carers** who were unaware of this right were likely to use it.



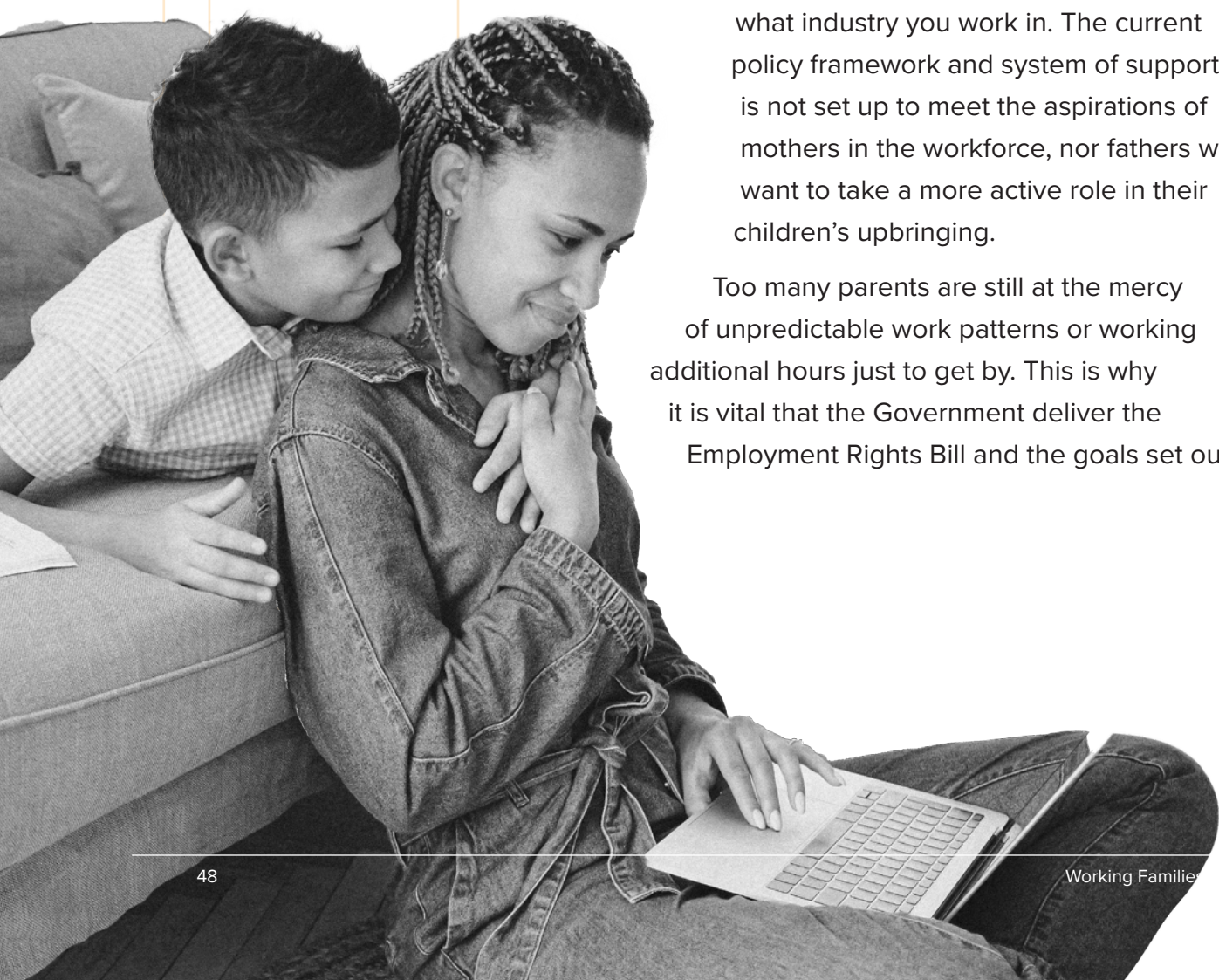
## Conclusion

**There is still road to travel before flexible and family-friendly working works for everyone.**

This year's Index shows us that although there is cause for optimism, the caring experience is still marred by inequality. The ever-increasing numbers of parents working flexibly and shifting attitudes are a sure sign that society is edging toward flexible and family-friendly working becoming the norm. The Index points to the potential positives of implementing flexible and family-friendly working; employers benefiting from enhanced loyalty from their workers, and new families having enough time off thanks to parental leave.

However, the Index's findings also lay bare a labour market in which experiences of parenthood differ between genders and ethnic groups and are still determined by how much money you earn or what industry you work in. The current policy framework and system of support is not set up to meet the aspirations of mothers in the workforce, nor fathers who want to take a more active role in their children's upbringing.

Too many parents are still at the mercy of unpredictable work patterns or working additional hours just to get by. This is why it is vital that the Government deliver the Employment Rights Bill and the goals set out



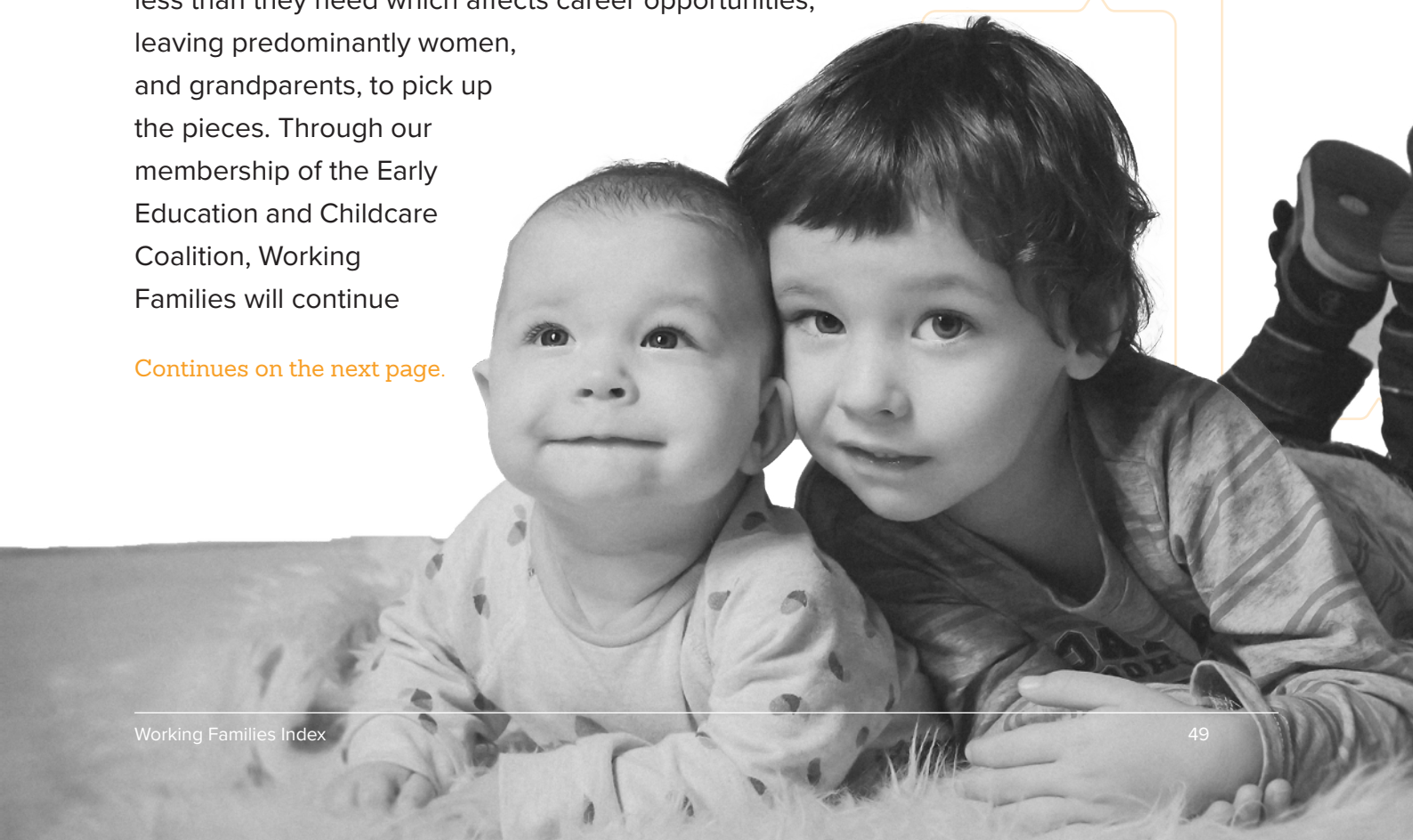


in the Plan to Make Work Pay. Ensuring basic employment rights such as parental leave from day one will give parents the confidence to change jobs, hopefully injecting movement into the labour market, boosting productivity and family finances.

Proposals to make flexible working easier to access and provide greater predictability should also be a turning point for those who are currently struggling to get the flexibility they need, or the security they require to plan their lives and arrange regular childcare. Promises made by the Government to review parental and carers leave could translate into future action that paves the way for fathers and carers to afford to take the time they need away from work.

The gaping holes in the childcare system is having an impact on families; causing undue stress, putting parents in financial turmoil and forcing parents to use less than they need which affects career opportunities, leaving predominantly women, and grandparents, to pick up the pieces. Through our membership of the Early Education and Childcare Coalition, Working Families will continue

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to collaboratively campaign for genuinely affordable and accessible options, so that women's engagement and progression in the labour market can continue to move in the right direction.

Effective and sustainable family-friendly working is not going to be achieved by legislation alone. Employers have a significant role to play if we're to achieve the culture change families need, including addressing the erosion of boundaries between home and work life. Being open about family challenges, enhancing parental leave, designing and advertising flexible jobs with realistic workloads will pay dividends in future with a happier, more committed, more productive workforce.



Get in touch

# We would love to hear from you

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