

*Having the time and energy to successfully combine work and family life can be a particular challenge for parents working long or non-standard hours. CHRISTINE MILLWARD presents findings from a new British study which examined the consequences for family life when parents worked early mornings, evenings, weekends or shifts. Issues common to both British and Australian policy makers and working parents are discussed.*

# Work rich, family poor?

## Non-standard working hours and family life

**H**ow to combine paid work and parenting responsibilities successfully has increasingly become recognised as a significant social and political issue for Western societies over the last quarter of a century. During this time, Australia has experienced substantial growth in maternal employment and in marital separation (ABS 2000a). Now the majority of Australian children live either in two-parent, dual income families, or in one-parent families where the only resident parent is in paid work. Only around one-third of dependent children in couple families and half of those in lone-parent families now have a “stay at home” parent (Buchanan and Thornthwaite 2001).

More partnered than lone mothers have jobs, and recent welfare reforms in Australia, Britain and the United States include policies to encourage more lone parents into the labour force. However, concerns are emerging about the possible negative impact of parental work commitments upon parents, children and family life. These include time “squeeze”, role overload stress,

and deterioration of parent–child or marital relationships (FaCS 2001; Pocock et al. 2001; Probert et al. 2000; Dex 1999; and see Weston, Qu, and Soriano in this edition).

In Australia, some areas of work–family needs are well recognised by public policies, while others appear to have been overlooked or only partially catered for. For example, there is renewed emphasis on provision of before and after school care places (FaCS 2001) but very few federal awards or Workplace Agreements explicitly mention workers’ child care needs (Buchanan and Thornthwaite 2001). Further, while 39 per cent of female employees were covered by workplace agreements with paid maternity leave provisions in 2000, many mothers work in the casual labour market and so have no access to paid maternity, carer’s or sick leave – provisions that might facilitate work–family integration (DEWRSB 2002; Buchanan and Thornthwaite 2001).

This article focuses on the effect upon family life of parents working non-standard hours – hours that have



## THE BRITISH STUDY

The *Atypical Work Patterns and Family Life Study*, conducted in 1991 by the National Centre for Social Research with funding from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, used a follow-up sample from a 1999 child care demand survey of 5000 English and Welsh parents, drawn as a random sample from Child Benefit records of parents with children aged 0-14 years.

This follow-up study was based on households where there was a child aged up to 16 years whose parent(s) had been in paid employment in 1999 and were still in paid work (eight or more hours per week) when re-contacted in 2001.

Since one of the aims of the study was to compare the impact on families of a variety of work patterns, families were selected to achieve an adequate number of cases in both partnered and lone-mother groups who had non-standard versus standard work hours.

For sampling purposes, parents were classified as having non-standard hours if, at the time of the 1999 survey: they sometimes or usually worked shifts or Sundays; they usually worked on a Saturday; or they worked 41 or more hours a week.

The data were weighted to correct for the differential selection probability so that results generally represent the position of English and Welsh working parents with children aged 16 or under (but it excludes first-time parents with children under the age of two).

The telephone survey was conducted in early 2001 with 1165 mothers. Of these, 966 were partnered mothers, who also provided information on their partner's employment circumstances and participation in family life. Qualitative in-depth interviews were then conducted in mid-2001 with 40 respondents, this time including some of the fathers.

traditionally been regarded as “family times”, such as evenings, nights and weekends (La Valle et al. 2002). Today's so-called “24-hour economy” and growth in service industries have contributed to the increase in “flexible” job conditions and hours. In turn, this flexibility has resulted in an overall growth in both longer and non-standard work hours (ABS 2000b; Healy 2000; Probert et al. 2000; Wooden 2000; Brannen et al. 1997; DfEE (UK) 2000).

Furthermore, the fact that women are over-represented in service and retail sector jobs means that mothers are likely to be required to work at non-standard or “unsocial” times (Heiler 1998; Probert et al. 2000). For example, two of the Australian industries with high proportions of female workers also have the highest proportions of shift workers (ABS 2000b). These are “health and community services” and “accommodation, cafes and restaurants” (where 32 per cent and 31 per cent respectively work shifts). In addition, long hours are particularly prevalent among men, and the number of hours

worked in some male dominated occupations has risen by up to 45 per cent since 1989 (Wooden 2000).

This article presents selected findings from a new British study which examined the consequences for family life of mothers or fathers working long or non-standard hours. The study, “Atypical Work Patterns and Family Life”, was conducted in 2001 by the National Centre for Social Research in London, and funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Where possible, British findings will be compared with Australian research, and some general conclusions will be drawn about issues common to both British and Australian policy makers and working parents.

### *British findings*

The study surveyed 1165 mothers who were working at least eight hours a week and had children aged 16 or under. Partnered mothers provided information about their partners, and 40 parents, including some fathers,

**Table 1** Patterns of British parents' work hours

|   | Mothers<br>% | Fathers<br>% |
|---|--------------|--------------|
| <b>Weekly working hours</b>                     |              |              |
| 1-29  | 51           | 2            |
| 30-40   | 37           | 48           |
| 41-48   | 7            | 20           |
| 49-59   | 3            | 18           |
| 60 and over                                     | 3            | 12           |
| <b>Early morning work<br/>(6.00- 8.30 am)</b>   |              |              |
| Several times a week                            | 21           | 41           |
| Several times a month                           | 8            | 17           |
| Less often                                      | 4            | 6            |
| Never   | 67           | 36           |
| <b>Late afternoon work<br/>(5.30- 8.30 pm)</b>  |              |              |
| Several times a week                            | 25           | 45           |
| Several times a month                           | 14           | 20           |
| Less often                                      | 11           | 8            |
| Never   | 50           | 27           |
| <b>Evening/night work<br/>(8.30 pm-6.00 am)</b> |              |              |
| Several times a week                            | 14           | 17           |
| Several times a month                           | 7            | 17           |
| Less often                                      | 6            | 12           |
| Never   | 74           | 55           |
| <b>Weighted base (all mothers)</b>              | <b>1165</b>  | <b>966</b>   |

Source: La Valle et al. (2002).

**Table 2** Weekend and shift work, and being on call outside normal working hours: British parents

|   | Mothers<br>% | Fathers<br>% |
|---|--------------|--------------|
| <b>Saturday working</b>                         |              |              |
| Every week                                      | 13           | 19           |
| Every 2-3 weeks                                 | 16           | 22           |
| Once a month                                    | 9            | 13           |
| Less often                                      | 15           | 18           |
| Never   | 48           | 27           |
| <b>Sunday working</b>                           |              |              |
| Every week                                      | 7            | 8            |
| Every 2-3 weeks                                 | 12           | 14           |
| Once a month                                    | 7            | 9            |
| Less often                                      | 10           | 17           |
| Never   | 64           | 53           |
| <b>Shift working</b>                            |              |              |
| Usually/often                                   | 19           | 23           |
| Sometimes                                       | 7            | 8            |
| Never   | 75           | 69           |
| <b>On call outside normal<br/>working hours</b> |              |              |
| Usually/often                                   | 7            | 16           |
| Sometimes                                       | 11           | 20           |
| Never   | 82           | 66           |
| <b>Weighted base<br/>(of all mothers)</b>       | <b>1165</b>  | <b>966</b>   |

Source: La Valle et al. (2002).

were also interviewed in depth. Both quantitative and qualitative findings are reported here. Although the sample was selected to represent parents who worked standard and non-standard hours, data were weighted to correct for the differential selection probability. Therefore, results generally represent the position of English and Welsh working parents with children aged 16 years or less, but it excludes first-time parents with children under the age of two years (see box on previous page).

### Parents' work patterns

In the British study, non-standard hours were defined as working well outside school hours – such as early mornings (before 8.30am), evenings (after 5.30pm), nights or weekends – times when many families would expect to have the opportunity to be together. Long weekly hours also invariably entailed some non-standard hours.

Table 1 shows that half of the fathers in the study worked more than 40 hours per week, compared with 13 per cent of the mothers. Fathers were also about twice as likely as mothers to work early mornings or evenings several times a week, and one-fifth of mothers and one-third of fathers worked late evenings or nights several times a month.

Table 2 shows that 38 per cent of mothers and 54 per cent of fathers also worked at least one Saturday a month, while 26 per cent of mothers and 31 per cent of fathers worked at least one Sunday a month. Similar proportions of mothers and fathers usually or sometimes worked shifts, but fathers (36 per cent) were twice as likely as mothers (18 per cent) usually or sometimes to be "on call" outside normal working hours (La Valle et al. 2002).

Parents were considered to work frequent non-standard hours if they worked any of the following patterns: early mornings (before 8.30am), evenings (after 5.30pm) or nights several times a week, or at least one in three Saturdays or Sundays. When defined in this way, nearly half of the couples in the study (43 per cent) were both working some form of frequent non-standard hours; for an additional 36 per cent this applied to the father only. Just over half (54 per cent) the lone mothers were working frequent non-standard hours as defined here.

### Why non-standard hours?

The non-standard working hours of fathers, and to a lesser extent mothers, were linked with low occupational level and qualifications, indicating a relatively weak position in the labour market, with reduced job choice and bargaining power with employers (La Valle et al. 2002).

When asked why they worked these hours, three-quarters of mothers said they had no choice. Even so, nearly a quarter said they worked non-standard hours for ease of making child care arrangements, and in the case of the partnered mothers nearly 30 per cent said it was because their partner could provide child care while they were at work (Table 3). This suggests that even though employers stipulate hours or days, up to one-third of mothers working non-standard hours had managed to find a job, or manipulate hours, which fitted in with their child care needs.

In the qualitative interviews, lone mothers expressed feeling more restricted in choice of hours than did the

couple mothers, because they had to rely on relatives for outside hours child care (that is, in the evenings and weekends). Lone mothers said they would like to limit their work to school hours only, even though in reality they were just as likely as the partnered mothers to work frequent non-standard hours. Both partnered and lone mothers reported having to put their work aspirations on hold as they tried to tailor jobs and hours to suit their family's needs (La Valle et al. 2002).

On the other hand, fathers tended to say they worked non-standard hours due to financial rewards, with those in professional or managerial roles citing work ambitions or challenges. However, those with lower occupational levels and qualifications were in a weaker position, which limited their choice. It seemed that parents in professional jobs were more likely to be able to choose from a range of employment and child care options which suited their views about parenting, as well as their career aspirations.

According to La Valle et al. (2002), a number of mothers said they wanted to avoid using formal child care for pre-schoolers. This was for a broad range of reasons, including perceived costs, lack of trust or different values of care workers, the desire for stability of relationships for children, or previous bad experiences. Availability of formal child care was also an issue, as parents were more likely to be able to use formal care if they were working relatively limited non-standard hours. If overtime or Saturday work was required, this posed a real problem, particularly for lone mothers who did not have a partner available to help. Many couple mothers did not need outside child care due to a "shift-parenting" arrangement with their partner whereby when one parent was at work the other could care for children.

### **The impact on family life**

Parents were asked what impact working non-standard or long hours had upon their experience of parenting, family life and intimate relationships.

They tended to talk about effects of their work hours in terms of things that they missed out on in relation to their children, or how it affected the relationship with their partner. Fathers working long hours were concerned about not seeing their children every day, particularly if they had to be away from home for periods of time. Mothers tended to speak about feeling "guilty" or not feeling like a "proper mother" if they felt they were not spending "enough" time with their children (La Valle et al. 2002).

Parents' main concerns were not being available for children after school, and especially to help with homework, not being able to attend school functions or sports days, and not being able to do things together at weekends or eat together as a family. However, it should be noted that, although some of these activities (such as evening meals) were restricted by work outside standard work hours, some activities (such as after-school

**Table 3 British mothers' reasons for working non-standard hours by family structure**

|                                       | Partnered mothers<br>% | Lone mothers<br>% | Total<br>%  |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|-------------|
| No choice, job requirement            | 73                     | 83                | 75          |
| For ease of child care                | 25                     | 21                | 24          |
| Partner can look after children       | 29                     | n/a               | n/a         |
| Absent parent can look after children | n/a                    | 8                 | n/a         |
| <b>Weighted base</b>                  | <b>966</b>             | <b>199</b>        | <b>1165</b> |

Base: mothers who worked early a.m., late p.m., evening or night several times a month, or weekend at least once a month, or shifts or more than 40 hours a week  
Source: La Valle et al. (2002).

activities, or school sports) were affected by either work outside school hours, or by working at all.

Many parents felt that certain everyday events (such as the main meal of the day, or children's bedtime) are an important part of family life and should be shared. Most of the families regularly had an evening meal together, but parents who frequently worked non-standard hours were less likely than others to do so. Nearly



**Mothers tended to speak about feeling "guilty" or not feeling like a "proper mother" if they felt they were not spending "enough" time with their children.**

60 per cent of mothers who worked frequent non-standard hours said their job prevented them from sharing an evening meal with the rest of the family several times a week, compared with a quarter (25 per cent) of mothers who had more standard hours. Fathers' work was seen by mothers as being even more disrupting, with 83 per cent of those whose partner worked frequent non-standard hours saying that their partner's job often prevented them from sharing an evening meal (La Valle et al. 2002).

Overall, mothers worked fewer hours than their partners, and mothers' non-standard hours were considered less limiting for family activities. Table 4 shows that the impact of frequent non-standard hours on family activities appeared similar for partnered and unpartnered mothers. For example, 56 per cent of lone mothers with frequent non-standard hours, compared with 75 per cent with standard hours, said that work never limited their time spent reading to, playing with, or helping children with homework. For couple mothers, the comparable percentages were 59 per cent and 77 per cent. Fathers were less involved. Only 37 per

cent of mothers whose partner worked frequent non-standard hours said his work never interfered with at-home child-centred activities.

Visits to friends or relatives, shopping expeditions and other family outings seemed the least affected by parental work patterns, while everyday activities with the children were affected the most (Table 4). Even so, in the qualitative interviews, some parents emphasised the quality of time spent with children, rather than the quantity, and it was not necessarily seen as essential for both parents to be with the children simultaneously, or “as a family” (La Valle et al. 2002).

#### **Relationship satisfaction and work preferences**

Mothers working frequent non-standard hours were less satisfied with the amount of time they spent with their children than were mothers working standard hours, and lone mothers were less satisfied than partnered mothers. Although financial need partly dictated working hours, the general preference of the mothers was to limit their hours and not work on weekends. Of those mothers who did work weekends, around 70 per

cent said they would prefer not to do this, and of those working 41 or more hours per week, around 75 per cent said they would prefer fewer hours (La Valle et al. 2002).

However, mothers’ concerns about insufficient time spent with children or as a family were not restricted to the effects of non-standard hours. Some mothers working standard hours expressed a preference for working hours closely aligned with school hours (approximately 9am – 3pm) and for not working during school holidays. It should be remembered that half the couple mothers’ partners were working long hours, so those mothers, like the lone mothers, were undertaking the bulk of parenting duties alone (La Valle et al. 2002).

#### **Mediating factors**

The number of hours worked was one factor mediating the impact of work on parenting. Another factor was how predictable work hours were, so that activities or time together could be planned and counted upon. On the other hand, flexibility was important if parents had some control, that is, if they could change their hours, or

**Table 4 Whether British parents’ days and/or hours of work limit family activities: lone mothers and partnered parents**

|   | Lone mothers                  |           | Partnered mothers             |            | Partnered fathers             |            |
|---|-------------------------------|-----------|-------------------------------|------------|-------------------------------|------------|
|   | Frequent non-standard hours % | Not %     | Frequent non-standard hours % | Not %      | Frequent non-standard hours % | Not %      |
| <b>Reading, playing, helping children with homework</b>         |                               |           |                               |            |                               |            |
| Every week  | 37                            | 16        | 32                            | 12         | 46                            | 18         |
| Less often  | 7                             | 9         | 10                            | 11         | 18                            | 22         |
| Never   | 56                            | 75        | 59                            | 77         | 37                            | 60         |
| <b>Involvement in children’s recreational/ sport activities</b> |                               |           |                               |            |                               |            |
| Every week  | 30                            | 14        | 26                            | 15         | 41                            | 28         |
| Less often  | 20                            | 36        | 22                            | 22         | 32                            | 31         |
| Never   | 50                            | 50        | 52                            | 64         | 26                            | 41         |
| <b>Outdoor activities with the children*</b>                    |                               |           |                               |            |                               |            |
| Every week  | 21                            | 17        | 24                            | 14         | 36                            | 18         |
| Less often  | 19                            | 11        | 16                            | 10         | 24                            | 17         |
| Never   | 60                            | 72        | 60                            | 76         | 40                            | 65         |
| <b>Family visits to friends/relatives</b>                       |                               |           |                               |            |                               |            |
| Every week  | 15                            | 12        | 20                            | 9          | 25                            | 10         |
| Less often  | 26                            | 11        | 25                            | 12         | 28                            | 15         |
| Never   | 59                            | 77        | 55                            | 79         | 47                            | 74         |
| <b>Going shopping with the family</b>                           |                               |           |                               |            |                               |            |
| Every week  | 12                            | 8         | 18                            | 7          | 28                            | 8          |
| Less often  | 9                             | 8         | 11                            | 9          | 18                            | 14         |
| Never   | 78                            | 85        | 71                            | 84         | 54                            | 78         |
| <b>Family outings</b>   |                               |           |                               |            |                               |            |
| Every week  | 16                            | 10        | 17                            | 5          | 20                            | 7          |
| Less often  | 18                            | 9         | 21                            | 10         | 29                            | 18         |
| Never   | 66                            | 82        | 62                            | 85         | 52                            | 75         |
| <b>Weighted base (all mothers)</b>                              | <b>107</b>                    | <b>92</b> | <b>508</b>                    | <b>458</b> | <b>761</b>                    | <b>204</b> |

Note: \*This question was asked only if the youngest child in the household was aged 14 or under  
Source: La Valle et al. (2002).

work from home, to fit in with specific family needs. Also important was the ability to secure work hours in the first place which complemented their partner's hours. This was easier for some than others, depending upon their occupational qualifications and the range of jobs available (La Valle et al. 2002).

### The Australian picture

There is no directly comparable Australian study which systematically links specific work patterns with impacts on family life for a large sample of parents with diverse occupations and backgrounds. However, having noted the British outcomes, the prevalence of non-standard work hours among Australian parents will be examined and the likely scope of such effects assessed. Various Australian sources are then drawn on to build up a picture of the likely interactions between work patterns and family life for Australian parents.

#### Prevalence of non-standard hours

A comparative analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics time use surveys revealed that standard working hours are now less typical for both men and women than in the mid-1970s and that people are now more likely to work on weekends, particularly women (Bittman and Rice 1999). It has also been estimated that up to two-thirds of Australian fathers work more than 41 hours per week, and that parents are working a considerable amount of overtime, for which mothers are less likely than fathers to be paid (Buchanan and Thornthwaite 2001; ABS 2000b).

Table 5 presents selected work arrangements of Australian parents with children under 12 years of age (note the British parents had children under 16 years of age). The Table shows that in Australia fathers are more likely than mothers to have flexible start and finish hours, work regular overtime, work shifts or weekends, and to have paid leave entitlements. Much of this is related to them being predominantly in full-time jobs (defined as 35 or more hours per week). Mothers are more likely than fathers to have fixed hours and variable work days, which is consistent with part-time or casual jobs (ABS 2000b).

So Australian families with fairly young children have a variety of work patterns which include quite substantial overtime, shifts and weekend work. Also, nearly 40 per cent of Australian working mothers with children under 12 have no recourse to paid holiday or sick leave.

#### Why these work patterns in Australia?

Empirical research into the social or economic impetus for labour market change suggests that the growth in service industries has led to much of the change in work patterns and conditions (Healy 2000; Wooden 2000). Therefore, both occupation and industry can dictate hours and conditions.

Union-sponsored studies have, therefore, examined workers' experiences in selected industries, to help develop industrial policy (Probert et al. 2000; Pocock et al. 2001). An example is a recent ACTU-sponsored study of 50 parents across 12 industries. All were selected because they worked long hours (more than 45

per week), unpredictable hours, split shifts or unpaid overtime. In qualitative interviews, some parents just said they needed the money or did it because they were committed to, or enjoyed their job. This was much more likely for those in professional or managerial positions. However, some said their work patterns were due to under-staffing, or to workplace cultures which expect unpaid overtime as a normal part of the job, particularly for career advancement (Pocock et al. 2001). These findings echo the reports of the British parents who felt they had little control over hours.

The issue of flexibility is also high on the agenda of employer or industry-based research. The obligation to work long hours for the sake of a career, the non-return of mothers after childbirth, and managerial discretion in granting leave or part-time working arrangements have all been documented (Zetlin 1998; Biggs 1998; Pilat 1998; Wolcott 1998). Access to family-friendly work practices has certainly been shown to apply differentially within the same workplace, since highly skilled employees are the most likely to be offered flexible start and finish times, or permanent part-time employment (see Gray and Tudball in this edition).

#### Work-family interference

Although not focusing specifically on non-standard working hours, several large studies conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies have examined work and family interactions. One is the Australian Family Life Course Study (1996), where Glezer and Wolcott (1999) found that twice as many women and men working over 40 hours a week felt work interfered

**Table 5 Selected work arrangements in main job of parents with children under 12 years of age in Australia, 2000**

|  | Mothers<br>%     | Fathers<br>%   |
|--|------------------|----------------|
| <b>Full-time or part-time job</b>                      |                  |                |
| * Full-time  | 36.1             | 93.1           |
| <b>Flexible hours</b>                                  |                  |                |
| Start & finish times not fixed                         | 31.9             | 41.4           |
| Start & finish times are fixed                         | 68.1             | 58.6           |
| <b>Overtime</b>  |                  |                |
| Worked on a regular basis                              | 21.5             | 45.5           |
| <b>Shift work</b>                                      |                  |                |
| ** Worked shifts in the last 4 weeks                   | 13.1             | 15.6           |
| <b>Days of week usually worked</b>                     |                  |                |
| Varies week-to-week/month-to-month                     | 16.9             | 12.4           |
| Work weekends only, or some weekdays and some weekends | 11.5             | 16.6           |
| <b>Leave entitlements</b>                              |                  |                |
| # Has leave entitlements                               | 60.6             | 81.1           |
| <b>Total N</b>   | <b>1,117,100</b> | <b>783,300</b> |

Notes: \* Full-time work is 35+ hours per week.  
 \*\* Shift work includes "split", "rotating" or "on call".  
 # Includes paid holiday leave or paid sick leave only.  
 Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2000b.

with home life, as did those working fewer hours. Those working full-time or longer hours were also most likely to feel rushed and tired, particularly if trying to cope with the demands of young children. Extended hours increased the sense of time pressure thereby adversely affecting satisfaction with life in general (see Weston, Qu and Soriano in this edition).

Data from the 1995 Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey showed that satisfaction with work and family life balance has decreased for a quarter of all employees (Morehead et al. 1997, in Wolcott 1998) and that long hours are associated with higher levels of job stress and stress-related illness, particularly among women (Wooden 2000). This may relate to the fact that care of sick children and other family members still falls predominantly on wives and mothers (Glezer and Wolcott 1999). Indeed, Australian Bureau of Statistics data show that among parents with a child under 12 years mothers were twice as likely as fathers to be absent from work due to "family reasons", and they were less likely to be on paid leave (ABS 2000b).

was informal support. Help from extended family in particular could make a big difference to the feasibility of taking on various jobs, particularly if they involved non-standard work patterns (La Valle et al. 2002).

In qualitative interviews with 69 Australian parents, Lewis, Tudball and Hand (2001) found that some had made significant changes to the way they work during the lifetime of their children. But this also came at a financial cost: "Some parents had changed jobs to reduce pressure, although they lost work status and income. Some rejected jobs that involved too much travelling. Some parents who had chosen shift work as an ideal arrangement when their children were young because it meant that children were always cared for by parents, had re-evaluated the suitability of such work as their children got older" (Lewis, Tudball and Hand 2001).

Glezer and Wolcott (1999) also point out that the main strategy used by mothers to ensure time to care for children or other family members (such as elderly parents) was to work part-time. However, this is not always possible, and for lone mothers can involve claiming some government income support. It can also still mean working non-standard hours.

Aside from noting the importance of flexible conditions and taking family leave, the parents in the British study had a number of other suggestions on how to make work more family-friendly (La Valle et al. 2002). These were: to enforce legislation, for example, by honouring a cap on maximum hours; to change organisational cultures that expect unpaid overtime; to provide state-subsidised child care in the evenings and week-

ends (particularly to cover lone mothers' needs); and to make Outside School Hours Care programs more attractive to children, by offering more outdoor or sporting activities.

## Conclusions

Although industrial relations systems and employment rates and opportunities may differ between Britain and Australia, there is common evidence that, in an increasingly deregulated labour market, many parents now work not only outside school hours but also outside the hours offered by child care services.

The tension between working "standard" hours and the demands of the growing service sector industries (Wooden 2000) has led some to suggest that working parents' rights and needs are necessarily in conflict with employers' rights and needs (Pocock et al. 2001; Healy 2000; Probert et al. 2000). In contrast, others maintain that the growing diversity in working arrangements can benefit workers, both in terms of salary and flexibility in hours or conditions (Wooden 2000).

The British study certainly found that work at non-standard times could be beneficial for parents if they had considerable choice and control over their working

*Fathers' work often prevented them from becoming involved with their children at an early age, so family (parental) leave was recommended for men.*



The ACTU-sponsored study (Pocock et al. 2001) also found that some mothers resented getting little or no parenting support from their partner. Long or unpredictable hours and shift work also limited time together as a couple, so that "time squeeze" was having a detrimental effect on their marital relationship.

## Strategies for combining work and family commitments

The qualitative component of the British study asked parents about their strategies for combining work and family demands, and for their views on how employer practices and industrial legislation could improve their situation.

Parents wanted to be able to make work decisions according to both their career stage and aspirations, and their children's ages and specific needs (La Valle et al. 2002). For instance, it was thought that fathers' work often prevented them from becoming involved with their children at an early age, so family (parental) leave was recommended for men. It was not only helpful to their partner, but good for establishing a father-child relationship. The need to make time for themselves and as a couple was also considered important, as

arrangements. Being able to “shift-parent”, limit non-standard hours, work from home, or compensate for weekend work by taking days off during the week, all helped. Nevertheless, working frequent non-standard hours interfered with many basic family activities and diminished satisfaction with the time spent with children and partners. Fathers’ long hours in particular were a problem and, of the substantial proportion of parents working on Saturdays or Sundays, the vast majority said they would prefer not to do so. Australian research similarly notes increased work–family stress for those working long or unsocial hours.

The standard way to cope with a partner’s heavy work demands was for a mother to work part-time, often in a casual job. However, because mothers tended to restrict their own job choices and career aspirations in order to take the main responsibility at home, they were also compromising their future earnings potential, which could lead to financial vulnerability if they were (or became) a lone parent.

Therefore, a wider choice and availability of child care options was stressed, particularly for mothers working non-standard hours, or who were the sole breadwinner. Evening and weekend care might not be commercially viable for every child care centre, but a wider coverage of hours might better support the flexibility of mothers’ work options and encourage more investment in the labour force, particularly by lone mothers.

The time parents spent together as a couple was also seen as a casualty of non-standard work patterns, as time for children took priority. A reduction in long hours worked by fathers and a more equitable division of domestic and child care labour might, therefore, both reduce levels of marital stress and help overcome time constraints resulting from family-unfriendly work demands.

In short, time for both children and partners could be improved by parents prioritising family time, assisted by employers who enforce workplace policies that address the culture of “overwork” and respect leave entitlements, particularly for fathers. The spill-over of parents’ work-related stress into home life might also be reduced via workers’ access to affordable extended hours child care, more control over days and hours worked, and financial compensation for working disadvantageous hours.

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