



Finding the Balance

Young people's views on parental employment

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The NSPCC's purpose is to end cruelty to children. Our vision is of a society where all children are loved, valued and able to fulfil their potential. The NSPCC's mission is to end cruelty to children and it is working to protect children from abuse.

The NSPCC is the UK's leading charity specialising in child protection and the prevention of cruelty to children. For over 100 years, it has been protecting children from cruelty and is the only children's charity with statutory powers, enabling it to act to safeguard children.

Introduction

Finding the balance has been published to coincide with the first NSPCC/Parents at Work (PaW) Family Friendly Award in November 2003. With the Award and this publication we wish to reframe the debate about work-life balance. The NSPCC would like work-life balance policies to be child-friendly as well as family-friendly.

Our aims

1. Work-life balance policies and practices have largely developed from the needs of parents with babies and young children. We want similar emphasis from both the Government and employers on the needs of parents with older children (over six years old).
2. No picture of the current pressures on families is complete until we know the views of children and young people on parental employment. This will help guide future policies on work-life balance.
3. The applicants to the NSPCC/PaW Family Friendly Award demonstrate the advantages of good policies and a strong commitment to both the employer and the employees. We want to see more employers move in this direction.

There are three parts to this publication

Why the debate needs to change

This section contains a statement of why the NSPCC has supported this award and why family-friendly employment is important to us all – businesses, families, parents and particularly children. This is primarily directed at:

- **The UK Government** which is reviewing the existing work-life balance policy;
- **Employers** who can amend their existing work-life balance schemes.

The Family Friendly Award

This section contains an account of the first NSPCC/PaW Awards, launched in 2003. We feel this is important because the project has broken new ground by talking to young people about this issue. Traditionally employment has been seen as a matter for adults – for negotiation between employees and their employers. In this project we asked groups of young people for their views about what constitutes a good family-friendly employer.

Why work-life balance is an issue

This section contains some research evidence which points to the current pressures on working parents.

Young people's views

The quotations contained in this publication come from two sources. Some are from the participants of the discussion groups with young people run in 2003. Some were collected in a similar exercise run with young people in 2001. See: Elizabeth Lovell (2001), **Child Friendly Employment Policies: What are they? Why are they important?**, NSPCC.

Parents lose out

Young people recognised that parents can lose out:

“I think that parents should get to spend more time with their children and bosses shouldn't be as strict as they are.”

“I think that parents get to know more about their children when they spend time with them.”

When asked whether their parents spent too much time at work, one respondent commented:

“I don't mind that she works such long hours but I don't think it's good for her.”

A note on terminology

Most commentators now use the expression work-life balance to describe the initiatives, policies and practices that enable employees to manage their work and home lives more effectively. Work-life balance is an inclusive term that could apply to all employees.

In promoting this award and in this publication we have used the expression family-friendly employment as well as work-life balance. This term was widely used in the 1990s when employers would often describe themselves as family-friendly employers.

In using the term family-friendly for this award we want to emphasise that those who care for others have particular dilemmas in managing their work and home lives. This is recognised by Government which uses the term work-life balance but nevertheless restricts almost all new flexibility rights to employees with responsibility as carers, particularly for young children.

Why an award?

This award is different in many ways. Groups of young people have been involved in the process from the beginning. They were asked to develop the criteria for the award and were involved in judging the winners. Parental employment has a major impact on the lives of children and young people, yet they are rarely asked about their views and concerns (See Section 2).

The award has focused on the positive actions that employers have taken. It demonstrates that employers can help all parents to have a better work and home life. We believe that over time this will help business, parents and their children.

Winning the Family Friendly Award does not signify that NSPCC or Parents at Work approve of everything the winners do. It provides formal recognition to those employers who are providing the best examples of support to parents at work. We hope it will celebrate the actions of the few and motivate others to do better. It should help bring this issue to the forefront.¹

The case studies of the finalists can be downloaded from www.nspcc.org.uk/inform and www.parentsatwork.org.uk



This is a summary of the main recommendations contained in this publication. They are directed at three major audiences – researchers, the Government and employers. The recommendations to Government and employers have largely been made before. On the other hand, the call for more knowledge about how parental employment affects the lives of children of school age is new.

To researchers

We need to know more about what kind of culture and flexibility in the workplace would particularly suit parents with older children.

We need to undertake research with young people to find out their own positive and negative experiences of their parents' employment.

To Government

All parents with children living at home should have rights to appropriate breaks from employment and rights to flexible working arrangements. We would like these to be introduced as part of the Government review of its work-life balance policy.

A co-ordinated campaign against long hours in work is needed along the lines of the work-life balance campaign, with a mixture of good practice and regulations.

To employers

We would like to see all employers commit to improving the work-life balance of their employees.

First, action is needed to counter the trend towards longer working hours.

Secondly, employers need to embrace work-life balance more fully in order to secure the best business benefits.

Thirdly, we would particularly welcome moves to give all parents, not just those with young children, opportunities to work flexibly.

Younger children

The young people agreed that it is generally more important for parents to be there for younger children:

“I think they should spend some time at home especially with little kids, they should spend more time at home.”

“Because if there’s little ones then they’ll want to spend more time with their parents.”

But they were clear about how much they needed their parents:

“Younger children need their mums to be there to look after them and that but so do older children. But older children need to be able to sit down and talk about things that they can't sit down and speak to other people about.”

“Little 'uns like under 10 year olds they need her [mum] for whatever they need her for. Children above 10 need her for personal stuff and she should just be there to hold our hands.”

“Because they're not always there... sometimes when you need them, they're not there.”

“Someone to scream at. Sometimes when you are annoyed with them you need them there just to shout at them.”

Why the debate needs to change

The NSPCC has a unique contribution to the debate on family-friendly employment (or work-life balance) due to our child-centred point of view. We are particularly concerned with the impact of parental employment on children's emotional health and well-being. We would like to see a change in the UK's working culture that recognises that children's well-being is an important and relevant consideration in the wider debate on employment matters.

On employment matters, we have consistently argued to the Government and others that the best way to help children is to give their parents choices about working time. This can be in the form of improvements to paid employment breaks, such as maternity and paternity leave for parents with babies. Along with many other organisations, we have argued that parental leave should be both flexible and paid if it is to be of use to the majority of parents. Finally, we have argued that all parents should have the right to work flexibly. Legislative change is clearly vital to all these changes.²

More recently we have also urged that business can and should adopt a more flexible approach to working parents. There is evidence that this brings help to families. We also know that any costs of this are low and that many employers have secured distinct benefits, such as reduced staff turnover, improved recruitment and enhanced staff loyalty.³

Employment is clearly a critical part of family life. It provides status and self-esteem for parents and financial independence for families. Employment can give parents choices about their lifestyle and how they spend time with their children. It is also a route out of poverty which is a major contributor to the stresses that families face.⁴

Why we should ask young people

There is now considerable research into many aspects of family-friendly working and work-life balance. Some of this has focused on the impact of maternal employment on the development of young children.

This has been locked into a sometimes polarised public debate about whether mothers – but never fathers – should work in the early years of a child's life. Until recently, this research has largely ignored the impact of fathers' employment on the educational, social and emotional development of young children. The evidence suggests that the positive sides of parental employment tend to outweigh any negative features.⁵

Nevertheless there are two major omissions from this research work.

- First, there has been little research on the impact of parental employment on the lives of older children, therefore widening the debate on work-life balance.
- Secondly, no significant work in the UK has looked at the views of children and young people about parental employment.

“While “family-friendly” policies may benefit employers and their parents, their effects on children have not been the focus of attention and remain unclear. The Commission supports the development of employment policies that will take account of children’s needs.”

Childhood Matters – Report of the National Commission of Inquiry into the Prevention of Child Abuse, The Stationery Office (1996), pp70

² www.nspcc.org.uk/publicaffairs

³ NSPCC et al (2003) **Getting it Right – Improving work-life balance in your business** pdf copy downloadable from www.nspcc.org.uk/InformNews/GettingItRight.asp

⁴ End Child Poverty (2003) **Work and Child Poverty** Briefing Paper available at www.ecpc.org.uk

⁵ “After several decades of studies in which the children of employed mothers have been compared with the children of mothers not working outside the home, the conclusion reached is that maternal employment in and of itself has very little impact on children.”

Ellen Galinsky (1999) **Ask the children: what America's children really think about working parents**, New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.

The NSPCC is recommending that these two gaps in our knowledge should be filled.

First, we need to know more about what kind of culture and flexibility in the workplace would particularly suit parents with older children.

Secondly, we need to undertake research with young people to find out their own positive and negative experiences of their parents' employment.

Ellen Galinsky, who carried out research of this kind in the USA, argues that asking children what they need and would like is simply part of good parenting. "The information we receive from children helps us make better decisions as parents - it doesn't at all imply that we are abdicating our responsibility for parenting to children."⁶

There is also a major issue about the role of fathers in the debates about work and the family. The fathers' role is largely assumed to be a constant. Fathers are seen as primarily providers rather than carers. This issue is being raised by other organisations like Fathers Direct.⁷

Why should we listen to children and young people?

A key feature of the Family Friendly Award is that it is right to ask young people about matters that concern them. We hope this will influence the wider debate on employment and work-life balance.

There are several reasons why:

- Parents have to juggle their work and home commitments on a daily basis. Discussion and negotiation about working time with children should be an everyday part of life.
- Securing the views of children and young people helps provide a much more complete understanding about the current pressures on family life. In the long term this will help employers to design and manage their work-life balance policies. It ensures that we get a fuller picture. "It is important to have children's perspectives represented within the whole body of research. Otherwise research, like practice, risks misrepresenting the wishes, needs and interests of children."⁸
- The rights of children to have their views taken into account when making decisions on matters which affect their lives is enshrined in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This was ratified by the UK Government in 1991.⁹

⁶ Ellen Galinsky (1999) op cit.

⁷ See **Father Facts** Vol 1.1, Issue 1, at www.fathersdirect.com

⁸ M Hill (1997) '**Participatory research with children,**' in *Children and Family Social Work*, Vol. 2, Issue 3, pp, 171 -183.

⁹ See David Cutler (2001), **Taking the Initiative: promoting young people's involvement in public decision making in the UK**, Carnegie Young People Initiative, pp.5.

Why the debate needs to change – *continued*

- The concept of children and young people's participation has been gaining recognition in recent years. Children are increasingly being listened to in a variety of ways. The Government has developed a set of core principles and a strategy for involving children and young people. Throughout Britain, many of the key organisations serving young people now have a policy to support their involvement in public decision making. The Government is also producing guidance on how schools should take children's views into account.¹⁰
- Some businesses are also demonstrating their willingness to listen and respond to the views of children and young people, not simply in terms of market research but also on product development and service delivery.¹¹

What the Government is doing

The Government has responded to the pressures on working parents by introducing a series of work-life balance measures as part of a wider campaign. Initially, this was a response to European Union Directives – particularly the Working Time and Parental Leave Regulations in 1998-99.

More recently, following the Work and Parents Green Paper, the Government introduced revisions to maternity leave and pay, and new rights to paid paternity and adoption leave. Most controversially it introduced a new duty on employers to seriously consider applications to work flexibly from parents of children under six and parents of disabled children.^{12 13}

The NSPCC has welcomed these new rights. They have been linked to tax changes and other incentives linked to combating poverty. They are particularly important in helping employees with young children manage their dual responsibilities at home and work. Where employees have taken up these new rights they can help provide a better balance between work and home life when children are young.

Nevertheless, the focus is almost entirely on parents with babies and young children. In this, there is an implicit assumption that parents with older children (over six years old) do not need similar rights to more flexibility in the workplace. Yet we know that parenting older children does not get any easier. Parenting continues while children remain at home and beyond.

Finally, co-ordinated action is needed to counter the long-hours culture that afflicts many workplaces. This goes beyond the current work-life balance policy.

¹⁰'Core Principles for the Involvement of Children and Young People' **Listening to Learn**, The Department for Education and Skills – involving children and young people (Progress Report 2003). pp.10-11, www.dfes.gov.uk/listeningtolearn

¹¹See '**Seen and Heard**' www.bt.com/listening

¹²For details of all these Government initiatives see www.dti.gov.uk

¹³NSPCC et al (2003) **Getting it Right – improving work-life balance in your business** pdf copy downloadable from www.nspcc.org.uk/InformNews/GettingItRight.asp

Recommendations to Government

The NSPCC would like to see parents of all children having rights to appropriate breaks from employment and rights to flexible working arrangements. We would like these to be introduced as part of the review of the current work-life balance policy.

There needs to be a co-ordinated campaign against long hours in work along the lines of the work-life balance campaign with a mixture of good practice and regulations.

What employers are doing

Prior to 1997, it was employers who led in the development of family-friendly initiatives as there were few external regulations. Initially, family-friendly measures were introduced to respond to requests from employees. Later many businesses found that there were good business reasons for thinking differently about working time.¹⁴

Since 1997 the Government has introduced a range of new employment rights which have led to changed employment practices.

By and large most employers continue to do the legal minimum. Few have plans to make major changes in the near future. Yet 74 per cent of large organisations have considered how to reduce stress at work – perhaps a response to the long-hours culture. Nevertheless, 40 per cent of the largest employers had asked staff to opt out of the Working Time Directive.¹⁵

Recommendations to employers

The NSPCC would like to see all employers commit to improving the work-life balance of their employees.

First, action is needed to counter the trend towards longer working hours.

Secondly, employers need to embrace work-life balance more fully in order to secure the best business benefits.

Thirdly, we would particularly welcome moves to give all parents, not just those with young children, opportunities to work flexibly.

¹⁴Dex, S and Scheibl (1999) 'Business performance and family-friendly policies.' **Journal of General Management**, 24 (4): 22-37

¹⁵See Robert Taylor, (2003) **Managing Workplace Change**, ESRC available from www.esrc.ac.uk



The Family Friendly Award

The Family Friendly Award was organised in conjunction with Parents at Work (PaW), an organisation that helps children, working parents and their employers find a better balance between responsibilities at home and work. The award was offered as one of five awards to employers. The others were:

- PaW/Lloyds TSBS Scottish Employer of the Year Award for employers with the best work-life balance policy and practice in Scotland.
- PaW/Ford Driving Diversity Award for work-life balance initiatives that have made a significant contribution to a business by increasing diversity.
- PaW/BT Carers in Employment Award, in association with Carers UK, for employers who can demonstrate they have created a 'carer-friendly' working environment.
- PaW Innovation Award for leading edge work-life balance policy and practice.¹⁶

The award was launched in March 2003 with a major mailing to thousands of UK businesses. UK employers were invited to apply by nominating themselves and were given 10 weeks to complete the on-line application form.

The completed applications were rigorously shortlisted in July 2003 by staff from NSPCC and PaW. The quality of the applications was very high.

The 12 shortlisted candidates were then asked a series of supplementary questions. This information was used to reduce the shortlist to six finalists. It was clear at this point that of the six finalists, three were large organisations with over 250 employees and three were small or medium sized. We agreed at this point to offer a joint award.¹⁷

Representatives of each of these six organisations were interviewed in October by a panel including young people who had been involved in developing the original criteria. The two winners were not notified until the day of the award ceremony.

Reality

“You really have to have both parents working. The ideal situation is that you'd have a parent at home but you can't do that anymore because you have to pay off the mortgage.”

“It is really only for people doing higher level jobs. The companies paying less money aren't going to want to do anything are they?”

¹⁶See www.parentsatwork.org.uk

¹⁷Case studies of all the six organisations are contained on www.nspcc.org.uk/inform

The involvement of young people

Young people were involved at two critical stages of this work.

First, three groups of young people in different parts of the country were consulted about the impact of parental employment on their lives. These discussion groups developed the formal criteria for the awards.

Secondly, representatives from the groups were involved in judging the winners of the awards at the interviews. Prior to this the young people were given some background training in undertaking formal interviews.

Developing the criteria

The main aim of the discussion groups with young people was to find out their views on parental employment. We conducted sessions with three different groups of young people ranging in age from 11 to 17. Each discussion group took place in Young People's Centres and lasted for approximately one hour.

The session started with a 'dot-voting' exercise. We asked the question "how do young people want parents/carers to look after and spend time with them?" We discussed how young people and parents spend time together and how parents care for their children. We encouraged the young people to identify which aspects of parenting they most valued. We also discussed how they thought parental employment affects young people's lives; whether children or work should take priority; and whether young people prefer quality or quantity time with their parents.

The session then moved on to what they thought employers could do to help parents and carers to look after and spend time with their children. This exercise aimed to move young people's thinking on from ideas of parenting to how employers can help parents and carers to balance working and parenting. Unprompted, the young people identified some family-friendly employment policies currently offered to employees.

We discussed whether employers should offer family-friendly employment practices. Discussion focused on eligibility for these practices particularly regarding gender and whether parents with children of all ages should be entitled.

Time

While recognising the importance of providing for the family, children and young people placed a high priority on time spent with parents. The majority said they would prefer parents not to work longer hours than they do now, and would prefer their parents to spend the weekend with them rather than go out to earn more money.

"I think it's important you still spend time at home... time is important."

"To be there for you, be there to hang around with you, being at home when you get in from school, helping with school work, things like that."

"The mentality that being rich is more important than looking after your children is completely and utterly wrong for me."

"Money is worth less than happiness. You can be happy at home with your Mum and Dad but even if you didn't get much money you'd still get to see your Mum and Dad... and you'd still be able to live and see everyone. 'Cos I see my Dad a lot but if he worked even more I'd not see him as much as I'd like to, so I don't think that's right."

"I don't want to see my Mum and Dad less. But they're okay already."

The Family Friendly Award – continued

We devised a number of scenarios of parents or carers in a particular predicament about balancing their work and parenting commitments. We asked the young people how the ‘world’s best boss’ could help the parent or carer in each scenario to look after and spend time with their children. The young people worked through a variety of scenarios in pairs, one taking on the role of the employer and the other the employee. We asked the young people to imagine themselves in the situation in the scenario and to discuss what they would do to resolve it. We wanted to find out young people’s views on how the ideal employer would assist working parents and carers.

We finished each session with the ‘ear of business’ exercise. We asked young people what they would like to tell employers to help working parents and carers to look after and spend time with their children. We drew a large ear on some flipchart paper and the young people were encouraged either to stick suggestions onto the chart or to call out comments for researchers to write down. The young people also identified some of the advantages of family-friendly employment initiatives for children, parents/carers and employers.

Each group of young people was highly engaged and enthusiastic. They came up with lots of fresh ideas and were very pleased to have been listened to on a subject where their views are often overlooked.

The criteria

Promotion

The entrants were asked how they promoted their family-friendly employment policies to their staff. The young people thought awareness raising by employers was very important so that every member of staff knows which benefits they are entitled to.

Availability / eligibility

Employers were asked whether the employment policies were targeted at any particular group of parents. The young people identified the importance of recognising the specific needs of single parent families, parents on low incomes, parents with older children and parents with disabled children.

They also thought that employers should treat men and women equally.

Ideal world?

One young person suggested:

“Like the summer holidays they should give all the parents the time off but still pay them.”

Another was more realistic:

“That’s not possible, the world doesn’t work like that.”

Meeting employees' needs

The employers were asked how employees wanting to make use of family-friendly employment policies could do so. The young people thought that family-friendly employment policy packages should be designed to meet the needs of each employee. They thought that there should be regular negotiation between the individual employees and their managers so that both remain happy with the family-friendly arrangements made.

Advantages and disadvantages

The young people thought employers should have family-friendly employment opportunities and that these should benefit all parties - children, parents and the employer as well as customers and clients.

Effectiveness

The employers were asked how they knew that their family-friendly employment policies were effective. The young people were sceptical. They wanted evidence that family-friendly employment policies created real, practical and effective benefits for children, working parents and employers.

Stressed

The young people frequently used the word "stressed" or "stressful" to describe their parents' work:

"She does like it but sometimes it gets a bit too much."

"When my mum worked at the school, sometimes the children stressed her out and she takes it out on us."



Why work-life balance is an issue

Long working hours, the pressures of time and work-life balance are debated almost daily in some parts of the media. A new language of work rich/time poor and work poor/time rich has been used to describe sections of the population.

There is strong evidence that employees are now working very long hours at a very intensive pace. This reverses the trend in the first 80 years of the 20th Century when working time decreased. These pressures on parents (and their children) are increasing as the percentage of households dependent on two incomes increases.

There is now considerable evidence that the work-life balance for many people is poor.

- Employees in the UK work longer hours than workers in every other European Union country.¹⁸
- The DTI has estimated the high costs of stress on employers. The costs of employee absence to cope with family crises were estimated to be £11 billion in 1999. Further stress and ill health were estimated to have cost between 4.4 and 8.5 million working days - equivalent to £360 million in the same year.¹⁹
- *Management Today* in its regular survey of managers has found that the conflict between career and personal and domestic pursuits has reached crisis point.²⁰
- A recent DTI survey of 4,000 employees found that nearly half would choose flexible hours as the benefit they would most like in their next job. One third said they would rather have the option of working flexibly than receive £1,000 a year more pay.²¹

¹⁸See Robert Taylor (2002) **Britain's World of Work – Myths and Realities** for a discussion of the links between long hours and dissatisfaction at work.

¹⁹DTI (2000) **Work and Parents: Competitiveness and choice. A research review.**

²⁰**Management Today**, Aug 2000, pp 46-52.

²¹See special report in **The Observer**, 19 January 2003.

The situation is particularly problematic for parents. They are spending more time at work and working harder than they have done in the recent past. This is putting their families under stress.

- The percentage of mothers in employment with a child under five has increased from 43 per cent in 1991 to 54 per cent in 2001.²²
- Over half of fathers and 13 per cent of mothers regularly work over 40 hours a week. Thirty per cent of fathers and six per cent of mothers regularly work over 48 hours a week.²³
- Parents are more likely to work outside the typical working week. Thirty eight per cent of mothers and 54 per cent of fathers work at least one Saturday a month. One quarter of mothers and just under one-third of fathers work at least one Sunday each month.²³
- Some parents (29 per cent of partnered mothers) have adopted a kind of 'shift parenting' where each parent works at times of the day that do not overlap with the other in order to manage child care.²³
- Nearly half of employed mothers say they would prefer to stop work altogether and stay at home to look after their children if they could afford to do so.²⁴
- More than half of parents (56%) believe the most important change in policy would be to make flexible working a right, not just something they ask for.²⁵

Information from research and attitude surveys is consistently telling the same story. Parents are working harder and longer and many are looking for some relief from this as it is interfering with their ability to lead a balanced life.

²² **Labour Market Trends, 2002**, Office of National Statistics

²³ La Valle, Ivana, Arthur, Sue, Millward, Christine, Scott, James and Clayden, Marion, (2002). **Happy Families? A typical work and its influence on family life**, The Policy Press.

²⁴ Bell, Alice and La Valle, Ivana (2003), **Combining self employment and family life**, The Policy Press.

²⁵ NFPI (2003) **Making Britain Family Friendly**, available from www.nfpi.org



Registered charity number 216401
NSPCC, Weston House, 42 Curtain Road, London EC2A 3NH. Tel: 020 7825 2500
Visit our website at www.nspcc.org.uk

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Cruelty to children must stop. **FULL STOP.**