

Weekend Workers: Part-time Parents?



The case for the Family Day Bill

Weekend Workers: Part-time Parents?

*The case for the Family Day Bill giving a
weekend day off for parents to spend time
with their children*



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Wellbeing Series

Why Relationships?

The Triple Test

When Relationships Go Wrong/Go Right

Weekend Workers: Part-time Parents?

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Weekend Workers: Part-time Parents?

Families – of all shapes and sizes – are hard pressed on every side. In this pamphlet we argue the case for relieving the stress in one area – the ever-increasing pressure on parents to work at weekends, the very time when their school-age children will be at home and in need of parenting. We believe that the time has come for a Family Day Bill.

The Family Day Bill we are here proposing and offering to parliamentarians of either House and all parties would give every parent of children under the age of 16 the right in law to a weekend day off each week. This right would be established through an extension to current flexible working legislation. It would address the increasing prevalence of ‘shift-parenting’ and of young children being left ‘home alone’.

Time is the currency of relationships and relationships are crucial to wellbeing. Without face-to-face time for communication and sharing it is difficult for mutual understanding and support to grow. For most working parents the weekend provides the main opportunity to spend time with their children.

Three quarters of mothers working at weekends say that weekend work is a job requirement, rather than a choice, and the vast majority would prefer not to do so. Weekend working causes dissatisfaction among parents. It also causes many problems for children as the recent Good Childhood Report by the Children’s Society found.

Journalist Madeleine Bunting has warned about the way a 24/7 society erodes family life. ‘A future beckons of a 24/7 society in which we stretch childcare to cover round-the-clock flexibility, from breakfast clubs to after school clubs. At what point does the flexibility which employers want snap the fragile threads of interdependence on which human life is based? How is it that we have so little time –

the most basic requirement of human engagement – to give each other?’¹

The Relationships Foundation recently argued that all public policy should be subject to the Triple Test – economic, environmental *and social*. The argument for the Family Day Bill is a good example of how such thinking can be put into practice. The enormous costs of family breakdown, which we demonstrated in *When Relationships Go Wrong/Go Right*, are met by the taxpayer. When parents have no time to help their children with their homework, teachers have to step into the gap or the children fail at school. We spend billions on supporting the adult casualties of educational failure in our prisons, job centres and hospital wards.²

We think it proper and essential that the state enables thriving lives for children and families by motivating, encouraging and supporting parents in their responsibilities towards their children. We believe that the Family Day Bill will help to build and sustain productive relationships. This legislation is the meeting place between choice and responsibility. It is not about prescription but about potential. It gives parents the choice to spend weekend time with their children. It protects single mums who have no choice but to agree to work weekends. Government must set the framework in which relationships can flourish naturally and properly.

Michael Trend

Executive Director, Relationships Foundation

1 **Why a Family Day Bill?**

The UK has a serious and growing problem – the impact of working long and atypical hours (evenings, weekends and nights) on parenting and family life. The rise in double-income families has simply multiplied the scale and nature of the problem, especially for those who have children. Many parents feel they spend too little time with their children, whilst the Good Childhood Inquiry found that children feel they have insufficient time with their parents.³ Both parents and children recognise the problem, which is seriously harming the wellbeing of children – the UK was recently placed last out of 21 OECD countries in a UNICEF report on children's wellbeing.⁴

The Evidence

Much of the evidence which supports the argument of this pamphlet comes from our just-published report *Unsocial Hours: Unsocial Families?*⁵ The report is an international literature survey examining the impact of long and atypical working hours on family life. It takes its place in a line of important reports looking at the damage being done to children.

In 'Freedom's Orphans', the IPPR noted that research consistently highlights that the home environment and parenting have the biggest impact on children's outcomes across many domains.⁶ If parents are working long hours and weekends, they simply cannot spend time with their children. Children who spend little or no time with parents are 1.6 times as likely to engage in antisocial behaviour.

The UNICEF report into child wellbeing, referred to above, sought to assess 'whether children feel loved, cherished, special and supported,

within the family and community, and whether the family and community are being supported in this task by public policy and resources'.⁷

Most recently the Good Childhood Inquiry noted the increasing number of households in which both parents work and the rising levels of family break-up. One of the few absolutes left in life is that children need to be loved. This basic need requires an enduring tie to at least one specific person. Building this sort of attachment takes time, which simply does not exist when both parents are working long and atypical hours.

While the issues we are raising are not new, the solution is.

The Bill

The Family Day Bill would give all parents of children under the age of 16 the right in law to a weekend day off each week. The law cannot force parents to spend time with their children, but it can and should support those trying to meet this basic responsibility. The Bill would allow parents to choose to fulfil their responsibilities towards their children at the weekend, when their children are not at school.

We are suggesting that this development in pro-family policy should be achieved by extending recent flexible working legislation. The right of parents to request flexible working has been such a success that in April 2009 it will be extended to parents of children up to 16. When the government commissioned Imelda Walsh, HR Director at Sainsbury's, to review flexible working she found that the benefits of any extension significantly outweigh the costs, and that currently 91% of applications are successful.⁸ We believe the proposed Family Day Bill is the logical next step in the developing series of legislation giving parents the right to request flexible working.

Research shows that three out of four working families experience some weekend work and in over half of these – 2.41 million families – at least one parent is working regularly at weekends. More than one in five working families has at least one parent who regularly works both weekend days.⁹ This means parents are spending less time with their children – relational poverty is being added to financial poverty.

Not surprisingly, mothers and fathers who work at the weekend spend less time with their children on the day that they work. Unfortunately, there is no significant evidence of parents ‘making up’ for lost time on another day, meaning that in aggregate children of weekend working parents spend less time with their parents than children whose parents do not work at weekends.¹⁰

The Bill would allow parents to spend one significant period of time with their children each week. It would enable more people to support their children’s participation in team sports, community activities and volunteering – and enable more parents to coach and lead such groups for the benefit of other children. The Bill would strengthen family units but also has the potential to support struggling communities, and lead to significant savings in long-term public spending.

The legislation would also encourage employers to facilitate parents having the same weekend day off. ‘Shift parenting’, where children are passed between parents, describes the routine of too many families. This lifestyle means that children only see one parent at a time and that parents have little time for each other. Naturally this puts pressure on the couple relationship, increasing the chance of breakdown. A shared weekend day off would strengthen not only the relationship between parents and children but also the relationship between parents themselves.

Under current legislation all workers are entitled to two days off a fortnight – meaning employees are not even guaranteed one day off each week. Presently, an employee's day off is governed by their contract of employment. Historically most employees have had most, if not all, of their time off at the weekend. Legislation was not necessary to ensure families had time off together as the culture lent itself to that arrangement. As we move towards a 24/7 culture this has changed, and more and more employees are expected to work at the weekend, leaving them less quality time with their families. The implications of this are clear from the facts and figures outlined earlier.

The Family Day Bill would:

- Include qualified employees under the Employment Rights Act 1996 as amended. As of April 6, 2009 this will include all parents with children under 16 and parents of disabled children under 18
- Give those included the right to request either weekend day off
- Require employers to consider the day off of the other parent as a relevant factor (though not absolutely determinative)
- Require employers to comply with any request, unless they could show good business reasons to refuse the initially requested day, in which case they must grant the other weekend day
- Require employers to grant a weekend day off to those who request it – they can legitimately refuse one day, but not both.

2 The Problem

A 24/7 Culture

One in seven adults (around 7 million people) now operate in a 24/7 lifestyle and by 2020 these figures are expected to have increased to one in four (13 million adults).¹¹ The United Kingdom already has the highest prevalence of atypical hours and the longest working hours in Europe.¹² This impacts on people's health, their relationships and their productivity at work. It is easy to understand why low-paid workers, faced with rising food prices, mortgage and energy payments and other debts, might be willing to work long hours and both weekend days, but the price they pay and the damage this could do to them and their families should concern us all.

Atypical Hours

- Men in the UK are more likely to work on a Saturday or Sunday, or both, than men in other EU countries.
- 44% of female UK employees work at least one Saturday a month and 30% work at least one Sunday a month.
- The UK has the highest proportion of workplaces requiring employees to work regular nights – 13% compared with 9% for the EU-21 as a whole.

Atypical or unsocial hours have become a significant problem in the UK. Definitions of atypical working hours vary between studies and between countries but generally include early mornings, evenings/night work, as well as Saturday and/or Sunday work. Atypical working hours were considered a minor issue while the male breadwinner model was predominant in the UK as one parent (usually the mother) was available to care for children. However, 68% of couple families with dependent children now rely on double

incomes.¹³ The combination of dual income households and atypical working hours is having a detrimental effect on family life, in particular the welfare of children.

In 2007 the UK topped a table of 21 European countries when it came to the regular deployment of at least 20% of staff during atypical hours – night work and weekends.¹⁴

Table 1.1: Ranking of atypical working hours within EU-21 (04/05).¹⁵

	Night work	Saturday work	Sunday work	Index
UK	1	1	1	3
Sweden	3	7	2	12
France	4	3	8	15
Finland	5	8	3	16
Germany	7	5	5	17
Czech Republic	2	13	10	25
Luxembourg	10	6	11	27
Cyprus	16	2	9	27
Denmark	8	14	6	28
Latvia	15	9	4	28
Ireland	18	4	7	29
Austria	11	11	12	34
Belgium	13	10	13	36
Slovenia	9	15	14	38
Poland	6	19	17	42
Italy	14	12	16	42
Hungary	12	17	18	47
Netherlands	17	18	15	50
Greece	21	16	20	57
Spain	19	20	19	58
Portugal	20	21	21	62

The Eurofound report discovered that almost 40% of UK establishments require their employees to work regularly on Saturdays compared with an EU-21 average of 25%. Similarly, the UK has the highest proportion of establishments requiring their employees to work regularly on Sundays (27%), well above the EU-21 average of 15%. The report found that larger establishments (employing over 300 employees) are the most likely to require regular weekend work. These larger establishments would be well placed to enable staff to have one weekend day off.

The 2005 EU Labour Force Survey also collated evidence from across Europe on the prevalence of Saturday and Sunday working (at least once a month) for both male and female employees (Table 1.2).

Table 1.2: Share of employees ‘usually’ or ‘sometimes’ working Saturdays and Sundays, 2005.¹⁶

	<i>Saturdays</i>		<i>Sundays</i>		<i>Both days</i>	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
UK	60	44	40	30	32	22
Denmark	40	38	33	32	29	29
Ireland	53	41	28	28	25	25
France	50	48	28	25	23	20
Belgium	33	35	23	24	21	21
Portugal	46	34	22	19	20	17
Sweden	22	31	20	29	18	26
Austria	17	41	24	22	19	19
Italy	45	41	19	15	16	12
Finland	29	33	20	24	15	19
Spain	25	32	13	17	12	15

No data available for Germany, Norway or Holland.

More men in the UK work at weekends than in any other western European country, with a high proportion of women in the UK also working on Saturday or Sunday. Those with lower levels of education and lower incomes are more likely to work at weekends. Three-quarters of mothers working at weekends say that weekend work is a job requirement, rather than a choice, and the vast majority would prefer not to do so. Weekend working appears to cause great dissatisfaction among parents.¹⁷

Long Hours

- The UK has the third highest average full-time hours in the EU-27 countries, at 41.4 hours per week.
- British men work the longest hours in Europe and are second to Australia within OECD countries for working long hours.
- Men with children worked significantly longer paid hours than those with no children – an average of 65 minutes more for men with preschool children compared with men with no children in the household.
- 84% of mothers who work 49 hours or more a week would prefer to work fewer hours.

Long hours leave less time for relationships, but they also involve working at atypical times – you cannot work a 60 hour week without evening and weekend work. The increase in employment rates for women (and particularly married mothers) across Europe, North America and Australia since the 1970s, combined with the fact that married men tend to work longer hours than those who are unmarried, means that many couples with dependent children are now spending more time in the workplace.

The latest figures produced by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions show that the UK has the third highest average full-time hours in the EU-27 countries, at

41.4 hours per week.¹⁸ Only Bulgaria and Romania are higher at 41.7 hours. The weekly average for the EU-15 countries is 39.5, with France having the lowest average of 37.7 hours.

These latest figures are not surprising, as OECD data has shown for several years that the UK has one of the highest full-time average weekly working hours in Europe. Table 1.3 summarises a cross-national comparison of average weekly full-time working hours for men and women, undertaken by the OECD in 2006. The UK is third highest for both its average male figures (44.6 hours per week) and for its combined figures for men and women (42.9 hours per week).

Table 1.3: Average number of hours worked per week (employed men and women only in full-time employment).¹⁹

	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>All</i>
Australia	45.9	41.1	44.1
Austria	44.7	40.9	43.3
UK	44.6	40.1	42.9
Spain	43.1	40.2	42.0
Italy	43.0	39.7	41.9
Portugal	42.3	40.3	41.4
Germany	42.2	39.3	41.1
France	42.4	38.7	40.9
Ireland	42.2	38.6	40.9
Belgium	41.9	38.7	40.8
Finland	41.9	38.8	40.4
Denmark	41.8	37.3	39.9
Sweden	41.3	38.0	39.8
Netherlands	40.4	36.4	39.3
Norway	39.8	37.2	38.8

Focusing on *average* working hours masks the number of individuals working very long hours. Table 1.4 shows the significant variation by country in the proportion of men and women working very long hours (defined here as over 50 hours per week). The UK is ranked second in terms of long working hours.

Table 1.4: Percentage of employed people aged 15-64 working long hours by gender and country.²⁰

Country	45-49 hours		50-59 hours		60 hours or more		Total 50 hours +	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Australia	12	6	15	5	13	4	28	9
UK	16	6	16	5	9	2	25	7
Austria	10	5	12	4	12	4	24	8
France	8	4	10	4	9	3	19	7
Spain	10	5	12	4	6	3	18	7
USA	7	4	11	5	6	2	17	7
Italy	10	5	11	4	6	2	17	6
Canada	5	2	8	2	7	2	15	4
Belgium	5	3	7	3	7	2	14	5
Portugal	9	5	7	4	5	3	12	7
Denmark	10	5	9	2	6	1	15	3
Germany	4	2	7	2	7	2	14	4
Finland	5	3	7	3	6	2	13	5
Ireland	6	2	8	1	7	1	15	2
Sweden	3	4	5	1	4	1	9	2
NL	1	0.4	4	0.5	5	1	9	1.5
Norway	4	2	4	1	4	1	8	2

Note: Usual weekly working hours are defined differently by different countries.²¹

British men work the longest hours in Europe. Recent figures show that over 9% of women in paid employment work more than 45 hours per week.²² However, these figures give us only the number of hours worked in the *main job*, and the higher OECD figures suggest that many people are working in more than one job. If we add together the hours worked in *all* jobs, the proportions of men and women working very long hours would be significantly higher. This suggests that many couples with children are working very long *combined* hours.

There was a small but steady overall reduction from 1998 to 2007 in the number of people working long hours, despite the growing workforce.²³ However, in the spring of 2007, this trend started to reverse and has continued to do so, with the number of workers who work long hours increasing by 180,000 to a total of 3.3 million.

The figures above refer to the workforce in general rather than parents specifically. However, analyses of the 2005 UK Time Use Survey showed that men with children worked significantly longer paid hours than those with no children.²⁴ Using the UK Time Use Survey, Barnes, Bryson and Smith also found that 7% of women in dual-earner families with dependent children work in excess of 48 hours per week.²⁵

Dr Susan Harkness of the University of Bath found that over one-third of men with children in the household worked more than 50 hours per week in 1998, compared with 27% of men without children.²⁶ For women, the figures were somewhat different, with 7% of women with children working more than 50 hours per week in 1998, compared with 12% of women without children. These figures had all risen over the previous decade.²⁷

Using a representative sample of working parents in the UK, *Happy families*, published in 2002, reported that 50% of fathers worked in

excess of 41 hours per week: of these, 18% worked between 49 and 59 hours, and a further 12% worked more than 60 hours per week.²⁸ These are higher than the figures for the population in general.²⁹

Working parents frequently express dissatisfaction with long working hours. For example, *Happy families* found that 79% of those mothers who work 41-48 hours per week, and 84% of those who work 49 hours or more, would prefer to work fewer hours.³⁰ Mothers expressed similar preferences for their partners who work such long hours. The latest TUC report into long working hours also states that 62% of all workers would like to cut their working time.³¹ The majority of these (71%) are not receiving overtime pay and are more likely to be white-collar workers.

The UK has one of the highest proportions of men working very long hours of all OECD countries, and men with children work longer hours than men without children. Working long hours is on the rise again in the UK and is likely to increase even further.

3 The Impact – Who Pays?

Children

The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) found that 75% of working families experience some weekend work and in over half of these – 2.41 million families – at least one parent is working regularly at weekends. More than 20% of working families have at least one parent who regularly works both weekend days.³² For many families financial pressures impact on their decisions, but there is a danger of substituting financial poverty with relational poverty, especially in those families with school age children.

NatCen found that work at unsocial/atypical times is now the norm, rather than the exception, particularly for fathers. Eight in ten working fathers and half of working (lone and couple) mothers work at atypical times.³³ Within dual earner couples, four in ten work at least some atypical hours, and there is a tendency to shift parent. On average they spend only two and a half hours working the same atypical hours, though this was mainly at the weekend, traditionally a key period for ‘family time’.³⁴

The NatCen report also highlighted the following:

- Dual-earner mothers who worked on Sunday spent less time with their children on that day.
- Fathers who worked on Sunday spent less time with their children at the weekend generally.
- Sunday working has a detrimental impact on fathers’ time with their children, especially on playing, reading and teaching.³⁵
- Mothers and fathers who worked on Saturdays spent less time with their children on that day.

- There was no significant evidence of parents 'making up' for lost time on another day. The lack of compensating for lost time means that in aggregate children of parents who work weekends spend less time with their parents than children whose parents do not work at weekends.
- There is little evidence that parents made up for time lost by their partner's atypical work patterns, by spending more time on important activities such as reading.
- 42% of working parents work on one or both weekend days – 34% work on Saturday and 25% work on Sunday.
- Sunday work appeared to affect time spent with children more than any other form of atypical work, with reading, playing and homework help being the activities most affected.

Analysis of the data shows that fathers in sole-earner families who work at atypical times spend approximately ten and a half hours less with their children over a whole week than those who do not. The average couple mother working at atypical times spends approximately eight hours less with her children over a whole week and is particularly likely to miss out on time with her children at weekends.

The NatCen research found that the biggest potential impact of atypical working hours on family time is at the weekend, when school-age children are at home, with fathers who work on a weekend day doing between seven and eight hours on that day, while mothers do between five and six.

Levels of parental satisfaction with working atypical schedules are lower than for those who work standard hours, even when working hours are relatively low. Parents who feel they have little choice over their working arrangements *and* work long atypical hours also view the effects of work on family life as primarily negative. Research by

Working Families found that half of parents are unhappy with their work and family balance. 90% of parents surveyed felt that working long hours was damaging to their family life. This response reflected concern at not being able to help their children with their homework, take their children to after-school activities or even be home in time to put their children to bed.³⁶ Failure to teach appropriate behaviour and to discourage their children from spending time with peers who are a bad influence can also lead to anti-social behaviour in adolescence.³⁷

UNICEF found that children in the UK have the lowest levels of wellbeing of any OECD country, and are among those most likely to engage in early alcohol consumption, early sexual intercourse and other risky behaviours. There is some ambivalence as to whether these behaviours vary by occupational class of their parents. As professional and managerial employees are more likely to work long hours and employees engaged in routine and manual work are more likely to work shifts or atypical hours, the negative outcomes for children whose parents are from different occupational groups may in fact be quite similar.

The conclusions are simple and the implications are far-reaching. Parents who work at weekends see their children less on the day they work, and less overall. Atypical workers do not make up for the time they were working and their partners do not in general compensate by spending more time with the children. What suffers? Eating together, time spent playing, reading and teaching, and time spent on sport and social activities.

Couples

Britain currently has the third highest divorce rate in Europe, and a very high proportion of single parent families. The presence of children decreases the amount of time couples spend together, as working couples prioritise their children's needs above their own.

Many parents choose to work shifts to share childcare and minimise costs; this also means that couples spend less time together. Shift parenting has particularly negative effects for women, especially if fathers do not combine childcare with extra domestic work. Low-income families may be at special risk of relationship breakdown when working atypical hours, due in part to a lack of affordable childcare and lower control over start and finishing times at work.

Time is the currency of relationships. Time to relax together and talk is a necessary precursor for affection and intimacy. Working long and atypical hours leaves insufficient time for a couple for companionship, recreation, shared interests and activities that are essential to sustain a relationship. Those who report high work/family conflict are also less likely to interact socially with their families, even when they are at home.

A UK study by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development found that 27% of couples had strained relationships with a partner because of working hours, 11% had experienced relationship break-up and 3% of workers who work long hours had divorced because of the long hours.³⁸ One in every two divorces involves families with children under 16, with all the confusion and distress this can cause.

Couple relationships break down for many reasons: working long and atypical hours is only one of them. However, given the pain and distress it creates for those involved and any children they have, measures that may prevent breakdown deserve attention.

Individual Health

Whilst respecting people's right to choose how they live, there is concern about the long-term health effects of working hours in the

UK. Working at atypical times, as well as working shifts, has a negative impact on physical and mental health for both men and women.

- 25% of the UK workforce are working more than five days a week.
- 54% of people who work more than five days a week do so because it is required by their employer.
- 32% of these employees work in an environment in which they are expected to work more than 48 hours per week.
- 61% of those working more than 48 hours a week are not paid for the extra hours they work.
- 50% of them say that it is damaging their health.
- 75% of these people expect this to continue or worsen over the next year.³⁹

In a representative sample of UK workers, working more than 48 hrs a week, 1 in 4 reported some sort of negative impact on health and 2 in 5 reported a negative impact on their relationships.⁴⁰ Insufficient rest and sleep creates stress that can seriously affect people's mental and physical health.⁴¹

Two thirds of the respondents (66.9%) to a work/life balance survey felt that they had suffered ill-health because of stress at work.⁴² Highlighting the seriousness of stress amongst British employees, TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber said, 'People who suffer from stress aren't wimps, and their symptoms can make them really ill. Stressed out employees are more likely to experience weight loss, high blood pressure, depression and even heart attacks.'⁴³

Work stress is rising in the UK and has been shown to be a risk factor in coronary heart disease. Work stress has also been shown to have

severe consequences for employers and government, costing employers an estimated £3.7 billion per year, with around 13 million working days lost for this reason. Almost 40% of people drawing incapacity benefits have a mental health condition, with the annual cost of these benefits being around £12 billion.

Community Life

Every mature, democratic society needs time for ‘associational activity’ – for participation in community activities, volunteering, amateur sport, music, drama, and other recreational pursuits. Madeleine Bunting has observed that despite the domestic labour-saving technologies at our disposal the amount of leisure time we have has increased by only 20 minutes a day since the 1960s.⁴⁴

‘Volunteering is the bedrock of healthy communities.’⁴⁵ Volunteers play a crucial role in organising and coaching sports teams. This is especially true in run-down city areas where socially excluded young people can join gangs and become involved in anti-social behaviour. Baroness Neuberger has underlined the importance of sports volunteering, particularly at the local level in deprived areas, for the achievement of targets for improving health and community cohesion.⁴⁶ She referred to Department of Health predictions that 13 million people in England will be obese by 2010 if they do not lead more active lives. ‘We already know that volunteering aids community cohesion but its contribution to physical fitness is often overlooked.’

Scout and Guiding groups are turning children away due to a shortage of leaders.⁴⁷ Most weekend activities for children rely to a large extent on parents to facilitate them happening. As more and more parents are working at weekends, they spend less time with

their own children and less time coaching teams or running organisations for other children.

We All Pay

In 2003, the Home Office estimated that anti-social behaviour cost all agencies in England and Wales £3.375 billion.⁴⁸ Even if only a fraction of this was caused by young people the costs are clearly significant. Research cited in the British Medical Journal found that by adulthood antisocial children have cost the public 10 times more than children with usual social behaviour.⁴⁹ The study found that the costs fell across a wide range of agencies. It noted that reductions in antisocial behaviour in childhood could result in large cost savings in areas such as health and education services, state benefits, and crime agencies.

Mick Brookes, the general secretary of the Association of Head Teachers, commented, 'If you choose to have children, there's a responsibility in the early years to look after them.'⁵⁰ He complained that children were being offloaded onto schools – by 2010 all schools must make childcare available from 8am to 6pm for all pupils.

Children can also suffer from poor-quality childcare. Most parents can attest to the difficulties in finding and paying for good quality childcare. Weekend workers find cover even more difficult and sometimes there is no caregiver at all, with children simply left home alone.

The most serious consequences can arise when the couple relationship ends. The annual cost to the taxpayer of relationship breakdown is estimated at £37 billion.⁵¹ Workplaces and public policy have not caught up to these new realities. The burden to adjust and adapt to the changing workplace has fallen squarely on the backs of working parents. And the true costs of our outdated employment system are borne by children.

4 The Solution – The Family Day Bill

The Background

Under current working time legislation workers are entitled to:

- A rest period of 11 uninterrupted hours (12 for young workers) between each working day.
- One whole day off a week (2 days for young workers). Days off can be averaged over a two-week period, meaning workers can take two days off a fortnight.
- Only work a maximum 48-hour week (averaged over 17 weeks). Employees can sign an opt-out from this part of the legislation.

Under current legislation, there is no legal requirement that parents be given any time off at the weekend when their children are not at school. The government has introduced the right to request flexible working to those who have a child under 16 years old (as of April 6, 2009), a disabled child under 18 years old, or who have adult care responsibilities. The reason for the request must be to allow the applicant to care for the child or adult covered under the legislation. The employer is required by law to give the request serious consideration, but can turn it down for good business reasons.

To qualify for flexible working (from April 2009) applicants must:

- Have a child under 16 years old, or under 18 years old if the child receives Disability Living Allowance
- Make the request no later than two weeks before the child's sixteenth birthday (or eighteenth, for a disabled child)
- Be responsible for the child and the reason for the request must be to care for the child

- Have worked for an employer for at least 26 weeks when making the request
- Not be an agency worker or a member of the armed forces
- Not have made another application under the same right during the previous year

A request must contain the following to be covered by the legislation:

- Be in writing and dated – this includes emails and faxes
- State that it is an application under the statutory right to request flexible working
- Confirm having responsibility for the upbringing of the child and state the relationship to the child.
- Explain what, if any, effect the change would have on the employer and how this could be dealt with.
- State what working pattern is being applied for
- State the desired date for the change to start
- State whether a previous application has been made and if so when (only one application a year can be made)

The employer must arrange a meeting to discuss the request within 28 days of receiving the request and give a decision within 14 days of the meeting. A request can only be refused on one or more of the permitted reasons. These are:

- Burden of additional costs
- Detrimental effect on ability to meet customer demand
- Inability to reorganise work among existing staff
- Inability to recruit additional staff
- Detrimental impact on quality
- Detrimental impact on performance
- Insufficiency of work during the periods the employee proposes to work
- Planned structural changes

Some may have reservations about the Family Day Bill because of the perceived costs involved. But it is the costs, financial and otherwise, of not passing such a piece of legislation that should worry the government. As we noted above, everyone pays when children are not looked after and relationships breakdown. *Breakthrough Britain* noted that we spend billions on supporting the adult casualties of educational failure in our prisons, job centres and hospital wards.⁵² Educational failure is just one of the many problems that can arise from parents not spending enough time with their children. Report after report shows that the wellbeing of British children is suffering. This should be a cause for concern in and of itself, but also because of the financial implications. Those with a good mix of social capital have greater wellbeing and tend to be more 'hired, housed, healthy and happy'.⁵³ The opposite is also true.

The law cannot force parents to spend time with their children, but it can and should create the opportunity to exercise this responsibility. When family breakdown occurs, it is the government that steps in to pay many of the bills. When parents have no time to help their children with their homework, teachers have to step into the gap or the children fail at school. Either way there are cost implications for the taxpayer. When Scout groups and sports teams cease to exist because of lack of volunteers the state either employs people to run alternatives or ends up dealing with the problems of antisocial behaviour amongst young people.

The Bill

The Family Day Bill would extend recent legislation relating to flexible working for parents.

It would include all those listed as qualifying employees under section 80F (8) of the Employment Rights Act 1996 as amended – ie, parents with children under 16 or parents with a disabled child under 18.

Parents would have the right to request either weekend day off. Employers would still be able to decline the requested weekend day off for the reasons given in section 80G (1) (b). However, if employers declined the requested weekend day off they would be required to grant the other weekend day off. Employers could decline one weekend day for business reasons, but could not refuse both.

The day off of the other parent would also be a relevant factor for the employer to consider under section 80G (1) (b). For example, if an employer is faced with two applications requesting Saturday off, and can only grant one for business reasons, preference would be given to the parent who can show that the child's other parent is also off on the same day.

The sanctions and enforcement procedures would be the same as those currently in place for flexible working.

The Benefits

We believe the change would be subtle, but significant. Parents would not be forced to change their lifestyles, but any excuse for not doing so would be removed. This Family Day Bill does not seek to be prescriptive, but is, rather, about releasing potential.

Eleanor Rathbone described the family as 'an end in itself and the means to all the rest'.⁵⁴ The multifaceted functions performed by it, makes it a much-needed and valued institution in society. Its functions include raising the next generation and teaching them social skills, and the provision of emotional and physical care for all relatives, especially the elderly. Everyone is part of a family in one way or another. It is here where we learn many of the fundamental skills of life. It is the most significant source of relational support – physical, financial, emotional and spiritual.

The family is the repository and conduit of a received and valued way of life, whose persistence and welfare is basic to national identity and interests. It is the key link in the chain mediating between the individual and other institutions, the glue that holds society together. The failure of societies to value families and communities is felt by many to be a key indicator that such civilisations are in decline.⁵⁵

There are many areas in which the family has a positive role to play – where family relationships can build capacity, exert influence and give support. Families are a primary source of care in times of ill-health and during old age, the means by which children establish a sense of identity and self-esteem, and a source of contacts for employment and finance when economic times are tough. But families are under pressure and need support. Breakfast clubs and after school activities are all very well, but children need their parents. Economic growth is important, but we must also invest in social capital.

This pamphlet has highlighted the negative impact of unsocial working hours on family life. Most parents want to be responsible parents – the Family Day Bill gives them the choice.

Endnotes

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- ⁵ C Lyonette and M Clark, *Unsocial Hours: Unsocial Families?* Available at www.relationshipsfoundation.org/unsocialhours
- ⁶ J Margo, M Dixon, N Pearce and H Reed, *Freedom's Orphans: Raising youth in a changing world*, (London: ippr, 2006).
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- ⁸ Imelda Walsh, 'Flexible Working: A Review of How to Extend the Right to Request Flexible Working To Parents of Older Children', (BERR, May 2008).
- ⁹ Barnes, Bryson and Smith, *Working atypical hours: what happens to family life?* (NatCen, 2006).
- ¹⁰ *Working atypical hours*, p 3.
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- ¹⁴ In 2004, Eurofound launched its first Establishment Survey on Working Time (ESWT) in 21 European countries. The survey was a questionnaire-based, representative sample survey in more than 21,000 establishments, analysing working time arrangements and work/life balance issues at the workplace by interviewing personnel managers and employee representatives.
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- ¹⁷ *Unsocial Hours: Unsocial Families?*, p 43.
- ¹⁸ The European Foundation for the improvement of Living and Working Conditions, September 2008. Available at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/studies/tn0804029s/tn0804029s.htm#hd4> (Accessed 02/03/09).
- ¹⁹ OECD data sources, 2006.
- ²⁰ Family Database, (OECD, 2005). Available at www.oecd.org/els/social/family/database (Accessed 03/03/09).
- ²¹ Usual weekly working hours per week defined as the most normal weekly working schedule during a typical week. Data are taken from both National Labour Force Surveys and the European Labour Force Survey (ELFS). In the ELFS, only hours worked in the *main* job are reported in the usual weekly working hours database. However, some countries (Australia, Finland, Norway) report hours worked in all jobs.
- ²² Labour Force Survey (Newport: Office of National Statistics, 2008).
- ²³ In all, the number of employees who work long hours fell from 3,803,000 in winter (January-March) 1998 to 3,096,000 in winter 2007, which had the effect of reducing the excessive working time problem by about one fifth. (TUC Report, June 2008 '*Return of the Long Hours Culture*').

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- ³⁵ The *Working atypical hours* report suggested this may be because Sundays – for fathers who do not work on them – are a traditional time for spending time with their children.
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- ³⁷ 'Literacy changes lives', the National Literacy Trust, 2008.
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- ⁴⁴ *Willing Slaves*.
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