

All work and no play?

How working unsocial hours affects family life



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The concept of Monday to Friday, nine to five as the normal working week is a thing of the past. Work outside these times is now normal for most working parents. Yet while work patterns are changing, the structure of the school week remains the same. The result is that many parents are now at work when their children are at home. From what we know about the importance of family time for children, this suggests we need to think carefully about legislation and employment policy not just in terms of individuals, but taking full account of the effect of working patterns on family relationships.

This report is a product of the Relationships Foundation's 'Keep time for children' initiative that was set up to investigate the effects of working patterns on family life and to campaign for policies that protect parents' time with their children, particularly at weekends. It draws on findings from two major research projects by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) to show for the first time in detail both the scale and the impact of working unsocial hours on family life.

Background

It's common sense that if parents are at work when their children are home from school it's going to affect the time that they can spend together. And from a wealth of research we know that time for interaction with parents is of fundamental importance to children's cognitive, social and emotional development. But the exact effect on family life when parents work unsocial hours, and the scale of the problem need careful study.

Previous research shows that work during unsocial hours is both widespread and felt to be damaging to family life. Parents who work unsocial hours are considerably less satisfied than those who don't with the time they can spend with their partner and their children, and with the kinds of activities they can do together. But around three out of four feel that they have little choice. Those with the least sense of choice are the individuals in low-income jobs, whose families face the greatest financial need and who are reluctant to request changes to their working hours for fear of losing their job.

The purpose of the two research projects by NatCen was to find out how many families are affected by work at unsocial hours and whether the subjective feelings of parents who work these hours can be confirmed by objective measures of family time.

The Scale

While a working week of Monday to Friday, nine to five might be considered 'normal', in fact only a minority of families do all their work within this time. Amongst families with dependent children where at least one parent works (which from here on we will call 'working families'), only 17% do their work in these conventional hours, and if both parents work the figure is less than 1%.



Since work outside of 'normal' hours is, ironically, so normal, the definition of unsocial hours adopted in the latest NatCen research is any work that is done outside the hours of 8am to 7pm, Monday to Friday. This allows us to distinguish the many people who start a little before nine and end slightly later than

*"Saturdays and Sundays are precious time when kids are at school all week."**

five from those genuine unsocial hours workers who are working an early morning or evening shift. However, it does mean that those who work 'social' hours could still be missing out on time with children, particularly between 4-7pm after school.

Only 17% of working families with dependent children do their work in the conventional 'Monday to Friday, nine to five' hours

Three out of four working families are affected by weekend working

Of those who work unsocial hours, fathers do an average 13 hours a week while mothers do an average of ten

Yet even with this expanded definition of normal working hours, a significant proportion of parents are still working outside it. Nearly nine out of ten working families where both parents work have at least one parent who works at unsocial hours. Looking at mothers and fathers separately, around eight out of ten working fathers and over half of working mothers work some unsocial hours.

Weekend working

When it comes to weekend working, three out of four working families experience some weekend work. In over half of these – 2.41 million families – at least one parent is working regularly at weekends. As we might expect, the proportion is higher on Saturdays than on Sundays (38% of families compared to 24%), but more than one in five working families have at least one parent who regularly works both days.

For two-parent (couple) families it seems that most manage to 'shift-parent' where necessary at weekends, leaving at least one parent to look after the children. So while 42% of working couple families have one or both parents regularly working at weekends, only 4% have both working on the same weekend day. Yet for lone-parents, even though fewer of them work at weekends (28%), their children are missing out on time with their only resident parent while they work.

The Effect

Unsocial hours

Working at unsocial times affects a significant proportion of families. But the percentages don't tell us the precise effect on family life.

To determine this, NatCen have analysed data from daily diaries completed as part of the UK Time Use Survey 2000 that shows what people were doing throughout the day and with whom they were doing it.

From this analysis, we can see that fathers in couple families who work at unsocial times (outside of 8am-7pm, Monday-Friday) do an average of 13 hours of unsocial work per week, with a third of them doing over 15 hours. Working mothers on the other hand, whether single-parents or in a couple, do an average of ten unsocial hours with over a quarter doing more than 15. The biggest potential impact on family time is at the weekend, with fathers who work on a weekend day doing between seven and eight hours on that day, while mothers do between five and six.

"Sometimes my husband gets called out to work [at weekends] so he can't look after our daughter while I work. We have to try and find family to help as the child minder doesn't work weekends – she says that's her family time."*

For couples who both work unsocial hours, there is again evidence of shift-parenting so that on average the overlap of hours worked at unsocial times is only two and a half hours, or three and a half hours if both parents work the same weekend day. Although this means that on the whole children have at least one parent to look after them, it does suggest that shift-parenting families are missing out on time 'as a family', with both parents present.

For lone-mothers, there is of course no option to shift-parent, so the average ten hours of unsocial work must either be covered by formal or informal childcare, or the children are alone.

Time with children

The important question is how this translates into the amount of time spent with children. The fact that some parents don't work unsocial hours doesn't mean that they are with their children all of that time. Equally, those who do work unsocial hours may be able to rearrange other aspects of their life to maintain the same amount of time with their children.

However, analysis of the data shows that working at unsocial times does reduce the amount of time parents spend with children. Regardless of other potentially responsible factors such as the parent's educational qualifications or the number and age of children, we find for example that:

- The average couple mother who works at unsocial 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.
- Fathers in sole-earner families (i.e. whose partner doesn't work) who work at unsocial times spend approximately ten and a half hours less with their children over a whole week.
- Relatively few parents spend significantly more time with their children to make up for the time lost by their partner working at unsocial times.



Case Study

A man who had worked for the same employer for many years had his shift pattern changed unilaterally to include some weekends, which coincided with when his wife worked. The employer wouldn't fit shifts around partners. Although they both had rights to request flexible working they were too scared of losing their jobs to do anything.

Courtesy of Working Families

*Quotes by parents who work unsocial hours – from a survey by Usdaw

So working unsocial hours certainly reduces family time, whether directly because the parent is at work while the children are out of school, or indirectly because parents need to use time that would otherwise be spent with children to make up time lost through unsocial working. The next question is how unsocial work shapes family time.

Activities

While time itself can, to an extent, be made up, certain activities can only happen at certain times. We might therefore expect that unsocial working not only squeezes the amount of time parents can spend with their children but also the kind of activities they can do together.

Since the diary data shows what parents are doing throughout the day and who they are with at the time, we can see how unsocial working affects their time with their children. For example:

- Mothers' work at unsocial times significantly reduces time spent eating with children. Fathers who work evenings also miss out on family mealtimes.
- Dual-earner fathers (i.e. whose partner works) who work on Sundays spend less time playing, reading and teaching with their children over the week. Mothers miss out on these activities if they work early mornings or evenings.
- Dual-earner mothers who work unsocial hours spend less time on sport and social activities with their children.

- Where time is being lost by one parent's unsocial working, there is very little evidence that it is made up by the other partner in spending more time with their children on these activities.

All of these activities are of significant importance to child development, yet children are clearly suffering from the effects of unsocial working.

Having looked at parents' diaries, we can also see the same situation from the perspective of the children. From their records, we see for example that:

- For 8-10 year-olds, Sunday work by their parents reduces the amount of time spent reading and on hobbies and games.
- 11-13 year-olds whose parents work on a Saturday spend significantly more time on their own.
- For 14-18 year-olds, Saturday work reduces the amount of time they spend on homework and increases time spent on social life and entertainment.

Who does it affect?

Unsocial work affects families of all kinds, but certain types of parents are more likely to work at unsocial times than others.

While there are some higher skilled and higher paid workers whose overtime and long-hours work encroaches into unsocial times, most workers contracted to work at unsocial times tend to be lower skilled and lower paid. On weekends, those with lower educational qualifications are more likely to be working – 15% of those educated to degree level work weekends compared to 38% with no qualifications. Weekend working is also associated with income – 38% of working parents whose family are claiming housing or council tax benefits work at weekends compared to 28% of those whose family doesn't.

So we can see that those families most likely to suffer from the effects of unsocial working are those that are already at a social disadvantage.

*"Sunday is the only day I get to spend with my four little children, so when I have to work I do not really see them."**

In a variety of different ways, unsocial work is having a marked effect on family life. In fact, if the number of parents in each category in the survey had been greater, the trends in the data suggest that we would have seen many more significant effects.

This would seem to confirm evidence from previous studies and the experience of parent support organisations that most unsocial, and certainly weekend working parents do not work these times out of choice but because they feel they have no alternative.

Case Study

A recently widowed man asked to stop working weekends as he wanted to spend time with his children and was having trouble finding childcare. His employers refused point blank as they felt it would set a bad example (he is a manager). He feels the only option open to him is his resignation.

Courtesy of TUC/Working Families





Couple mothers who work unsocial hours lose around eight hours a week with their children; sole-earning fathers lose ten and a half

The Outcomes

The two research projects by NatCen give only snapshots of working patterns and family life at single points in time, so we cannot say for certain how unsocial working patterns influence children's outcomes. However, we know that family time together and activities such as eating, reading and playing together

parenting and family life, as it claims to be, it needs to draw up new measures to support working parents. Since unsocial work has been shown to have a major impact on family time at weekends, parents of school-age children should be protected by law from a requirement to work both days in any one weekend. More generally, parents should be given the right to ask not to work at certain

Children are clearly suffering from the effects of unsocial working

*"It is becoming increasingly difficult to have a 'home life' due to the pressures of companies who like to open all but 24 hours a day."**

are fundamental for a child's healthy development, and that these are all affected by unsocial working. This makes it highly likely that unsocial work as it now stands, and certainly if it becomes more extensive, could have a significant detrimental effect on children.

The Implications

Policies that influence parents' working patterns, whether at the level of legislation or employment practice, are not only significant for the immediate effects on businesses or on employee satisfaction. If unsocial work does have a negative impact on child development as the research suggests, then we need to recognise that working patterns of parents could have a long-term effect on the sustainability of our society. Today's employment policies could influence the calibre of tomorrow's academics and sporting stars.

We believe therefore that if the Government is serious in wanting to promote good models of

unsocial times, or at least, if unsocial hours are required by the job, to be able to request that they be limited. Finally, as an immediate step we urge the Government to extend the right to request flexible working to all parents of school-age children so that they can arrange their work as far as possible to correspond with their children's school hours.

We also believe that there is a serious need not only for legislation, but for changes in business culture. Despite rights to request flexible working or opt out of certain types of unsocial work, evidence from trade unions is that many parents do not use these rights for fear of losing their job or damaging their career prospects. We therefore urge employers of all types to adopt family friendly policies and practices, not only for their own benefit through increasing employee satisfaction and engagement, but also as a fundamental part of their social responsibility. ■

Families most likely to suffer from the effects of unsocial working are those already at a social disadvantage

Working patterns of parents could have a long-term effect on the sustainability of our society



This report is produced from the findings of two research projects by the National Centre for Social Research:

- Keep time for children: The incidence of weekend working. Barnes and Bryson (2004)
- Working atypical hours: what happens to 'family life'? Barnes, Bryson and Smith (2006)

These reports are available for £15 and £17 respectively direct from NatCen on 020 7250 1866 or info@natcen.ac.uk

For further reading, see:

- Happy Families? Atypical work and its influence on family life. La Valle et al (2002), Rowntree Foundation
 - Families and Work in the twenty-first century. Dex (2003), Rowntree Foundation
- Time, Health and the Family: What working families want. Swan and Cooper (2005), Working Families

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'Keep time for children' is an initiative of the Relationships Foundation, a think-and-do tank that studies and promotes the benefits of healthy relationships across society.

Keep time for children exists to promote the importance of family time, particularly at weekends, to parents, employers and government.