

Working atypical hours: what happens to family life?

In conclusion, our study adds to the research evidence that work at atypical times should be a priority for policies on family-friendly work and childcare.

At its simplest level, our study shows that the vast majority of families has at least one parent who works at atypical times, often for a considerable number of hours. It also highlights that mothers' and fathers' atypical work patterns may be very different.

Our study raises important questions for policy makers about family-friendly working practices. For example:

- Could employees be given the right to request to work fewer or no atypical hours?
- Is the right to request a particular working arrangement sufficient, as the employer is currently under no obligation to agree to the request?
- Given what we know about the effect on children of different ages, should the right to request flexible working arrangements be expanded beyond parents of children under six?

There are two broad implications for childcare policy:

- There is a growing economic drive for work to be done at atypical times. This points to the need to look at expanding formal childcare provision to cover atypical hours.
- Increasing the availability of good quality, affordable childcare during conventional hours would make it easier for parents to choose to work during normal hours rather than atypical hours.

Our study provides evidence that – for some parents – working outside conventional hours is associated with spending less time with children – overall and on particular child-centred activities. This and other studies of child outcomes indicate that work at atypical times might have an association with differential child

outcomes. However, we should also look at children's perceptions of their lives and how they are affected by their parents' working patterns. We find that the daily lives of many children are different if their parents work at atypical times.

Methodology

- The findings from this study are based on analysis of the UK 2000 Time Use Survey (UKTUS).
- The survey provided a unique data source for investigating the association between atypical work and the time that parents spend with their children. It is a quantitative 'fly on the wall' look at the ways in which families in the UK spend their time, collecting information on how family members spend their time and whom they spend it with.
- All household members aged eight and over were asked to complete two 'in their own words' one-day diaries (one weekday, one weekend day) and a seven-day 'overview' diary.
- Fieldwork was carried out during 2000 and 2001 at over 6,000 households, involving over 11,000 individuals, yielding a total of more than 21,000 completed one-day diaries.
- The UKTUS was co-funded by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), a consortium of other government departments and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

To obtain a copy of this report...

The full report of these research findings, *Working atypical hours: what happens to family life?* by Matt Barnes, Caroline Bryson and Ruth Smith (2006) is published by NatCen. For more information, contact Sue Johnson or e-mail info@natcen.ac.uk

Working atypical hours: what happens to family life?

Matt Barnes, Caroline Bryson and Ruth Smith



How does work outside of the traditional working week affect family life? This question is at the core of a new report by NatCen. The report is based on a study funded by the Nuffield Foundation and carried out in collaboration with the Relationships Foundation. The findings are based on analysis of the UK 2000 Time Use Survey.

- Our study complements existing research into the large numbers of parents who work at weekends, early mornings, evenings and nights – that is at 'atypical' times. It provides quantitative evidence about the relationships between these working patterns and the amount of time that parents spend with their children, and how they spend that time.
- For some parents – particularly mothers – working atypical hours is related to spending less time with their children. Most of this 'lost time' is at the weekends.
- Few parents seem to 'make up' time lost on a day when they worked atypical hours by spending more time with their children on another day. Moreover, few partners of atypical workers 'compensate' for time that

is lost between children and their atypical working parent.

- This suggests that children of atypical working parents spend less time with their parents overall than children whose parents work conventional hours.
- This 'lost time' encroaches on important parent:child activities, such as mealtimes, reading, playing and social activities, especially when it is the mother, rather than the father, who works atypical hours.
- Some children whose parents work atypical hours spend less time on learning activities. In particular, weekend work is associated with 8- to 10-year-olds spending less time reading and 14- to 18-year-olds spending less time on their homework.

Working atypical hours: what happens to family life?

Existing research can tell us about the large numbers of parents who now work at atypical times and about their views on the impact this has on their family life.

We know that some parents choose to work at non-traditional times in order to share between them the responsibility for looking after their children (i.e. 'shift-parenting'). For some this is a positive choice not to use childcare; for others it is to avoid its cost. Beyond childcare decisions, other parents work these hours because they need to do so – for financial reasons, to meet employer expectations, or to fulfil shift contracts.

Our new study provides quantitative evidence about the relationships between working at different atypical times and the amount of time that parents spend with their children – and what they do with that time. This issue is of particular concern given the large numbers of families involved – eight out of ten working fathers and over half of working mothers work some non-traditional hours – together with evidence that children who spend more time with their parents have improved educational outcomes.



For some parents – particularly mothers – working at atypical times is related to spending less time with their children.

Although the story is complex – as it depends on when the work is done and which parent is doing it – the evidence from our study leans towards the fact that work at atypical times has a greater effect on working mothers' time with their children than it has on fathers' time.

We found no significant evidence of parents 'making up' for time lost on a day when they work at atypical times by spending more time with their children on another day. Conversely, the loss of time on one day can be seen to 'spill into' other days (potentially because of a need to fit more into fewer hours). As a result, most time is 'lost' at the weekends, even if much of the work is being done at other non-traditional times.

We might have hypothesised that partners of atypical workers would 'compensate' for time that is lost between children and their atypical working parent. However, there is little evidence that this is the case. This suggests that children of parents who work outside conventional hours spend less time overall with their parents than children whose parents do not work at these times.

This 'lost time' encroaches on important parent:child activities, such as mealtimes, reading, playing and social activities.

We looked at what parents did with their children, focusing on activities that have particular importance to children's social and educational development. Thus, we looked at time spent in the following ways:

- eating together;
- playing, reading, teaching;
- taking part in sport or social activities.

Again, mothers' work at atypical times is more strongly associated with a loss of time on these activities with their children than fathers' work at atypical times. Particularly for mothers, work (of most kinds) at

unconventional times means less time on key activities with their children.

Working mothers – whether in lone or couple families – spend less time eating with their children if they work at atypical times. For fathers, working in the evening appears to have the most detrimental association with time spent at family mealtimes.

For working couple mothers, doing atypical work during the weekdays (early mornings and evenings) is associated with less time reading, playing and teaching with their children. This may suggest the importance of being around before and after school to get involved in these activities. Sunday working has a detrimental association with fathers' time with their children playing, reading and teaching. This may be because Sundays – for fathers who do not work on them – are a traditional time for spending time with their children.

Working couple mothers spend less time on leisure, sport and social activities if they work at atypical times. No such association is found for fathers.



Some children whose parents work at atypical times spend less time on learning activities – particularly under 11s and over 13s.

Parents' work patterns can potentially affect the time that parents spend with their children as well as children's time use more generally, for certain activities



that do not require direct parental involvement may need the co-ordination, facilitation or support of parents. We found that parental atypical working patterns raise different issues for children of different ages, with most effect on those under 11 and over 13.

Among children aged 8 to 10, those with parents who work evenings spend more time on social life and entertainment. Children of this age whose parents work Saturdays spend more time on sport than those whose parents do not work at those times. (It seems likely that this might be because 8- to 10-year-olds are rarely left wholly unsupervised and therefore need childcare such as out-of-school clubs in the absence of parental supervision.) 8- to 10-year-olds whose parents work on Sundays – traditionally a day that parents and children spend together – spend less time on activities such as reading, hobbies and games.

On the other hand, 11- to 13-year-olds do not need the same degree of parental co-ordination and facilitation as do 8- to 10-year-olds and yet are still dependent on their parents in some respects e.g. for transport. Perhaps surprisingly, there appear to be no associations between parental atypical work patterns and the time that 11- to 13-year-olds spend on activities.

14- to 18-year-olds whose parents work on a Saturday spend less time on their homework and more time on social life and entertainment – a likely result of the lack of parental encouragement to teenagers to engage in their studies.