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A question of balance: Lone parents, childcare and work

By Alice Bell, Naomi Finch, Ivana La Valle, Roy Sainsbury and Christine Skinner

This qualitative study aimed to increase understanding of lone parents' attitudes towards and experiences of childcare, their decisions about childcare and work, and their views and experiences of recent and imminent policy initiatives and changes. The research was carried out during 2004 by the National Centre for Social Research and the Social Policy Research Unit at the University of York.

Seventy-eight face-to-face interviews and eight focus groups were conducted with lone parents with at least one child aged ten or under living in the household. The sample included lone parents who were both in and out of paid employment.

Views, attitudes and beliefs about work and childcare

In making decisions about work, lone parents act under a range of influences including their personal orientation towards work, their attitudes towards parental and non-parental childcare, and their views about different types of formal and informal non-parental childcare.

Lone parents' orientations towards work and parental care

'Work orientation' refers to the extent to which a person is disposed to working, and the strength of his or her motivation to work, while 'parental childcare orientation' refers to a parent's level of attachment to the idea of caring for the children themselves. Lone parents' work orientations could be high, for example because work formed an important part of how they perceived themselves, because it had a high social value for them, or because they thought working

provided their children with a positive role model. Orientations towards parental childcare reflected lone parents' views about the rights and responsibilities of being a parent, the emotional value attached to parenting, and their ideas about meeting the needs of children.

Interaction between work and parental care orientation

Lone parents could be roughly categorised as having either a high or a lower orientation towards work and parental childcare respectively. Combining these orientations produces a four-fold typology of lone parents:

- Lone parents with a high work orientation and a strong desire to care for their children themselves typically experienced tensions in reconciling these. While some parents found jobs that allowed them to fulfil both work and childcare aspirations, others made compromises in relation to one or both.
- Lone parents with a high work orientation and a lower orientation towards parental care experienced fewer tensions about combining work and childcare, and were more likely to use non-parental care in order to be able to work.
- Lone parents with a lower work orientation and a high disposition towards parental care typically chose to stay at home to care for their children viewing motherhood as a 'job' in its own right. Some worked if they could still meet their primary desire to care for their children.
- Lone parents with a lower work orientation and a lower disposition towards parental care typically chose to stay at home with their children, but this was not necessarily linked

to negative views about non-parental childcare.

A range of factors shaped work and parental care orientations, including the parent's own upbringing, education and work history; children's ages, life stages, and personalities; and the timing and circumstances of becoming a parent or lone parent. Work and parental care orientations could also shape and be shaped by beliefs and preferences about various forms of non-parental childcare.

Trust was typically the overriding factor in lone parents' preferences for informal care provided by friends, grandparents and other family members. Informal childcare was generally perceived as reliable and familiar - a setting in which children would be happy. Formal childcare providers in schools and nurseries were also considered trustworthy, while lone parents' strongest concerns about trust and safety were related to childminders.

Lone parents held varied views about what types of childcare were appropriate for children at different ages. Opportunities for socialisation and stimulation were especially valued by parents of older children, and tended to lead to a preference for provision such as nurseries and out-of-school clubs. Some lone parents saw childminders as appropriate for young children and babies, while others did not feel confident about leaving a young child in an individual's care.

Lone parents' decisions about work

Lone parents' decisions about work were typically complex, being the product both of their overall orientations towards work and parental childcare and of a range of more 'pragmatic' factors, including:

- 'parent-centred' considerations (for example, enjoyment of work and other social and personal needs);
- 'child-centred' factors (for example, benefits of parental care, or providing a positive role model);
- issues that affected the whole family (for example, financial needs and benefits).

Lone parents made decisions about work in different ways. Some parents, typically those who were highly work-orientated and well-informed, undertook systematic 'calculations', sometimes with the help of a New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) adviser. The financial help available through the childcare element of Working Tax Credit (WTC) could be important in making a decision to look for work. Other parents' decision processes were more 'partial' or short-term in nature, focusing on some issues and disregarding or postponing others, while a third group made decisions about work primarily on the basis of perceived norms derived from family or other social networks. For some lone parents, however, the decision to enter work was prompted by a specific event (for example, an offer of work or childcare) or by a situation that acted as a 'gateway' into the labour market, such as study, training or voluntary work.

The (perceived) feasibility of finding a suitable work-childcare combination could have a strong influence both over the initial decision of whether to work, and the extent to which it was possible to put this decision into practice. Ideally, such a combination would incorporate *both* work and childcare that were available, obtainable, desirable and capable of being coordinated with other aspects of family life.

Decisions about type of work were influenced by:

- a parent's employability and the availability of suitable jobs;
- hours, days and times of the job;
- employers' flexibility over working hours and contingencies such as a child's sickness;
- location of work.

In addition to their attitudes towards different forms of childcare, parents took cost, availability and accessibility into account when assessing the suitability of childcare providers.

The period of transition into work could be difficult and stressful for lone parents. For some, it was difficult to know whether to look for a job first and then seek childcare to fit around the job or vice versa. This could result in parents having to look for work and/or childcare under time pressure, increasing the level of stress associated with moving into work.

Parents also described a financial gap between leaving benefits and waiting to receive either earnings or WTC. One particular issue was the way that WTC did not allow parents enough time to feel satisfied that their children had settled in at a childcare setting, before starting work.

Lone parents' experiences of managing paid work, childcare and education

Coordinating work time with childcare and education time was often problematic. The simplest arrangements involved parents transporting children themselves, while the most complex involved parents relying on others for support with children's transport, often alongside the provision of 'wraparound' care. Family members played an important role here. Non-resident parents (mainly fathers) were rarely described as providing wraparound care or help with transport.

Coordination was more complex where a parent's working hours were long or extended beyond the school day, or where they spent a relatively long time travelling to and from work (over 30 minutes), for which additional support with children's transport and care was usually required.

Strategies for effective coordination included:

- creating proximity between home, workplace, education and childcare;
- negotiating agreements with employers over working hours;
- negotiating agreements with family and friends for informal childcare and coordination support.

Where there was inflexibility in either working hours or childcare arrangements, the task of coordination became difficult for lone parents and could result in a decision to change jobs or to give up work or study altogether. Some lone parents who had negotiated agreements with employers to alter their working hours reported that they felt guilty for receiving these 'favours', and that what they 'paid back' in unpaid overtime far outweighed the time taken off.

The ways in which lone parents reached agreements with grandparents to provide

childcare varied widely and tended to be implicit in nature. Some lone parents, for example, expected grandparents to provide childcare as of right, while others expected no help at all; grandparents' expectations also varied according to their capacity and willingness to provide childcare. A wish to 'pay back' informal childcare providers, in cash or kind, was more strongly associated with friends – and sometimes other relatives – than with grandparents.

Lone parents' policy messages

A range of general policy messages emerged from the discussions with lone parents about how to balance work and childcare.

Financial support

Working Tax Credit could make the difference between working and not working. Some lone parents felt that the childcare element of WTC should be increased or focus more on lone parents and low-income families. Some also felt that the eligibility criteria could be improved, for example by extending the support to parents working a very small number of hours.

Support from an NDLP adviser worked best when it was collaborative, flexible, and sensitive to both the work and childcare needs of the lone parent.

Lone parents felt that the Government should respect and support parents who choose not to work, especially during the early part of a child's life. This referred to both financial and personal support (for example, facilitating social interaction to prevent lone parents becoming isolated).

Childcare services

Lone parents saw a role for the Government in increasing the number of good quality, affordable nurseries for pre-school children, and expanding out-of-school and holiday care. Some parents felt that informal carers should be eligible for subsidy via the WTC.

Employers

Lone parents viewed part-time work (particularly during school-hours), flexible hours and job

sharing very positively. They also felt that employers should be urged to take a flexible approach with regard to contingencies such as a child's sickness. Workplace crèches could be attractive to parents nervous about leaving their children with other childcare providers.

Information on childcare

Current provision of childcare information was seen as 'bitty' and 'disjointed'. A single, well-publicised source of such information, easily accessible at the point when parents needed it, was considered a priority. However, recommendations from other parents were typically regarded as the most valuable source of childcare information, suggesting that there could be benefits to setting up local parent networks alongside other formal sources of information.

Conclusion – the lone parents typology and policy intervention

Classifying lone parents according to the typology of work and parental care orientation can help inform thinking about appropriate policy interventions for different kinds of lone parent family.

Lone parents with a high work and high parental care orientation need a mix of policies that allow them to do work that fits around childcare and/or raises their willingness and confidence to use non-parental childcare. These might include flexible working arrangements, extended paid maternity or parental leave, better information on childcare services, trial periods of childcare ('tasters'), and financial support for informal carers and during the 'settling in' period. Also of benefit would be childcare measures targeted at those with older pre-school and school-age children.

Parents with a high work and lower parental care orientation were comfortable with the idea of using non-parental care. The extent to which they would benefit from flexible working arrangements therefore largely depends on whether there is an expansion in affordable, accessible and flexible formal childcare provision,

for example nearby day care provision or out-of-school and holiday childcare, provided at times when lone parents need them.

Lone parents with lower work and high parental care orientation also need to be assured that non-parental childcare is acceptable and reliable, but in addition could be encouraged and supported to make use of 'gateways' to work such as learning opportunities or voluntary work. These could prove particularly effective if childcare is available alongside them.

Parents with a lower work and parental care orientation similarly could be encouraged to access jobs, and learning and voluntary work opportunities. Although these parents are already amenable to using non-parental childcare, tackling the affordability of childcare could particularly benefit this group. For example, more parents could be financially supported in employment by taking advantage of the childcare provisions of Working Tax Credit.

In thinking about policy, however, it should be recognised that lone parents' deep-seated beliefs and attitudes about work and childcare may not always be very amenable to change. Policy interventions which reflect the wide diversity of lone parents' views and preferences about work and childcare could prove to be most effective in removing barriers to work and childcare use.

The full report of these research findings is published for the Department for Work and Pensions by Corporate Document Services (ISBN 1 84123 775 2. Research Report 230. February 2005).

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