

Families and work: Revisiting barriers to employment

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Introduction

In recent years, considerable effort has been put into supporting parents to make the transition into work. This study was commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to explore whether these incentives were helping parents to overcome the barriers known to impede their engagement in the formal labour market.

The report is based on fieldwork conducted in 2009. However, the concluding chapter considers the significance of the findings in light of proposals for the introduction of the Universal Credit and other reforms of the tax and benefit system proposed by the Coalition Government.

The research approach focused on two main tasks. First, the re-analysis of data from a previous study commissioned by DWP and delivered by the same team (Fletcher *et al.*, 2008). This involved revisiting transcripts from in-depth, qualitative interviews with 67 parents, paying particular attention to the interaction between parenthood and work. Subsequently, a series of additional interviews explored issues of relevance to the follow-on study that had been left untouched or remained unclear following re-analysis of interview data from the original study. Twelve repeat interviews were conducted with parents who participated in the original study, and 38 in-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted with new respondents.

Full-time parenting and decisions about returning to work

The decision to stay at home to look after children was often reported to be a conscious choice, in order to enable parents to provide the care and support their children need to develop emotionally and educationally. Staying at home was also sometimes presented as a necessity in order to fulfil responsibilities, including looking after children with health or behavioural problems; responding to cultural expectations about the role of mothers; or looking after the household. These factors were not always perceived as barriers to work. Looking after sick or disabled children or conforming to cultural pressures was often accepted as part of being a parent, rather than being framed more instrumentally as a constraint on labour market engagement.

Some parents explained decisions to stay at home in terms of a lack of employment prospects. This was sometimes attributed to personal barriers such as poor health and a lack of suitable childcare. Respondents also highlighted a shortage of appropriate work, with concerns centring on the limited financial gains associated with a return to work and the lack of part-time work that could fit around nursery or school hours. There was also a widespread reluctance to use formal childcare. However, despite the value placed on parenting, the prevailing view across both lone and dual parent households was that it was important to work because of the personal benefits it provides and the positive example it sets to children. The key decision was when rather than if it was appropriate to return to work.

Job search: important considerations

Four themes emerged as key influences on experiences of searching for work:

- **Constrained job opportunities** – This related both to limitations on the feasible geographical scope of job search (or commuting), and to the restricted hours that primary carers (usually mothers) felt they were able to work. In many cases the two combined with reliance on public transport links to constrain the number and range of job opportunities open to mothers. Thus, most women reported that they were only interested in part-time work that they could fit around the school day, given their responsibility for dropping off and picking up their children. This meant that the competition for such jobs was intense.
- **Work experience and confidence** – A number of women thought that motherhood had served to distance them from the labour market, even though they were now making strenuous efforts to find work. Those who had children at a relatively young age reported that they had little or no training or work experience before having their first child. Even mothers who had some previous experience of work said that being out of the workforce for many years while caring for young children had negative consequences when they started looking for employment again.
- **Gendered roles** – Most of the women interviewed explained their position in relation to the labour market with reference to their role and responsibilities as a mother, no matter how determined they were to find a job. In contrast, hardly any of the men who were interviewed made any reference to issues of childcare and parenting responsibilities when discussing barriers to work.

- **Family and household support** – For those women who lived in a two-parent family or in multi-generational households (for example, living with parents), the availability of support with childcare duties improved the viability of finding and retaining paid work. However, this did not necessarily open up the option of seeking better quality jobs. Rather, it meant that they were more disposed to regard the generally low paid, part-time, often casual, work that was on offer in a positive light.

Easing the transition into work: transitional and in-work benefits

It has long been acknowledged that some people in receipt of benefits are fearful about coping financially with the transition into work and do not necessarily recognise paid employment as a financially viable or realisable option. In response, a number of policies have been introduced in recent years in an attempt to help ease these worries. These have concentrated on ensuring that work pays; supporting the transition into work; and providing advice and assistance about moving into work.

These initiatives were found to have had only limited impact on the concerns of parents about leaving out of work benefits and the financial uncertainties they associated with being in work. In part, this reflected the limited awareness, knowledge and understanding of these initiatives among the parents interviewed. This finding points to the importance of any reform of the tax and benefit system ensuring that the ways that work can pay are more obvious and easier to understand. However, even people who were aware of the complex regime of initiatives, benefits and supports designed to help people to move into work reported concerns about the financial risks of being in work. This finding suggests that previous efforts to ensure that the financial gains of moving into work are substantial have failed to convince.

These findings support the case for moving to a single system of working-age benefits, in a bid to minimise the confusion inherent in the present system and make it easier for individuals to ascertain whether they would be better off in work.

Experiences of work

Parents who had returned to work associated various positives with being in employment. These included social benefits such as the sense of purpose, independence and self-esteem work afforded, as well as the opportunities for social contact. Some parents reported gaining financially from returning to work. Some of the parents who had returned to work recounted negative experiences. These centred on the loss of quality time with children; a lack of time for domestic chores; difficulties with benefit payments; and a lack of flexibility from employers making it difficult to balance parenting responsibilities and work commitments.

Several factors were reported to support a return to work and to aid job retention. These included working part time, support from family and friends, the flexibility of employers, and job satisfaction. This finding suggests that the ability to balance work with parenting responsibilities is underpinned by the structure of employment opportunity within local labour markets, as well as the personal resources an individual can draw on within their own social networks (informal social capital).

Policy implications

- Policies to make affordable childcare more readily available help some parents return to work. Any overall reduction in the availability of free places could undermine policies to encourage parents to return to work.
- For mothers, the return to work is shaped by their ability to find work that fits around nursery or school hours or, alternatively, to access trusted sources of informal childcare. Childcare policies will have little impact on this group. Instead, policy will need to further encourage employers to offer employment with ‘family-friendly’ hours that fit around the nursery or school day.
- The requirements of Lone Parent Obligations do not always align with parental views about the appropriate time to return to work, in terms of the age of the youngest child. Enforcing Lone Parent Obligations will involve overriding the concerns of some parents about what is best for the well-being of their children. As a result, employment advisers working on the frontline may well find this a difficult policy to administer.
- Policies seeking to encourage parents back into the labour market by ‘making work pay’ will clearly therefore ‘speak’ to some parents, but will not necessarily counter the strongly-held views that some other parents hold about their role and what represents an appropriate time to return to the labour market.
- Combining parental responsibilities and work demands access to local employment opportunities. For this reason, many parents talked about wanting to work in schools, either as midday supervisors or teaching assistants. Any reduction in non-teaching posts in schools is likely to impact negatively on parents, particularly mothers, with pre-school or school-age children who clearly value this type of employment opportunity.
- Lone parents who want, or are required, to look for work are likely to benefit from training or work placements designed to reintroduce them to the workplace environment. One option would be to stipulate that contractors delivering elements of the Work Programme for lone parents offer training and work placements, as was the case under the New Deal for Lone Parents programme.

- Judging by responses to this study, the move to a single system of working-age benefits, in the form of Universal Credit, has the potential to provide greater transparency and certainty about the financial implications of moving into work. The proposed reduction of high marginal tax rates for a large proportion of parents returning to work may also help to alleviate some of the concerns that parents have about the financial gains of moving into work.

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 953 6. Research Report 729. March 2011).

You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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