



# Timescapes Policy Briefing Paper Series

Editors: Sarah Finney & Sarah Morton

*Children & Working Parents*

*Experiences of Managing Time,  
Place and Caring.*

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## Introduction

Many studies have looked at how the demands of work and family are managed by working parents but much less is known about children's views on this. Children are active family members who contribute to the family-work project. This briefing draws on a recent qualitative longitudinal study and examines some of the issues involved in managing time, places and caring for children raised by members of working families.

## Background

Changing employment patterns in recent decades, particularly the increase of working mothers, have led to many studies investigating how the demands of work and family are managed by working parents. However, less attention has been paid to children's views and feelings about their parents' employment, for example, whether and how this has an impact upon their experiences of time, places and care. It is important to examine parents' and children's experiences, though doing such 'multiple perspectives' research in families is particularly challenging.

In the UK, four out of five families have at least one parent working 16 or more hours per week (55 per cent of lone parents and 57 per cent of couple families both work 16+ hours per week) (Maplethorpe et al., 2010). Despite a raft of policies intended to support working families parents face continuing challenges when trying to negotiate employment and family life. Children's lives are interwoven with the 'family-work project' and some children, particularly in low income families, actively contribute in a range of ways.

The management of competing demands of time, place and space dominates research into adults' everyday experiences of combining parenthood and employment. The pace of work

## Key points

- **More is known about adults' perspectives on working parenthood than those of children**
- **Children's lives are interwoven with the 'family-work project' and children may contribute in a variety of ways**
- **Childhood in working families is experienced in a particular way, very much affected by the demands of work schedules**
- **The pace of work and family life is claimed to have accelerated, and weekday mornings before school and work raise particular challenges for parents and children**
- **Weekends and holidays may be seen as 'cold spots' which compensate for the rush of daily lives**
- **Home is still seen as a special location of childhood, and parents and children often express a wish to spend more time at home together**

and family life, and associated pressures of time frames and schedules, are claimed to have accelerated in recent decades, for both parents and children. However, in these more 'harried' lives, there may also be time for 'cold spots' when time is experienced at a slower pace and emphasis placed on the quality of interaction with others, such as time spent relaxing together as a family on holiday and at weekends (Southerton 2003).



Researchers have also examined the perspectives of working parents on their management of the spaces and places of work and family, such as home. For family members, 'what happens in, and definitions of, the domestic sphere are influenced by processes and characteristics of the public sphere, and vice versa' (Blunt and Dowling, 2006:18). Less attention has been paid to examining how the home is significant to children.

## The Study

We report findings from a qualitative longitudinal study entitled 'Work and Family Lives: The Changing Experiences of 'Young' Families' (WFL). We investigated everyday experiences of families in dealing with issues raised by working parenthood; how such issues impacted on family practices; and how these changed over time. During 2007-2009 there were 3 waves of data collection with working parents and at least one primary-school aged child. The sample comprised 14 families of varying composition and socio-economic circumstances. All parents, except for two retirees due to ill health, were in paid employment.

Individual interviews were conducted with parents and children in Waves 1 and 3, with a family group interview in Wave 2. Interviews were semi-structured; children's interviews also included some activities (e.g. drawing, vignettes, choosing from stickers of faces showing a range of emotions) to stimulate discussion; parents responded to some of the vignettes. Each wave had a specific focus (e.g. experiences of time during a working day; leisure time and holidays; values in relation to employment). Changes over time regarding work, family, childcare, leisure were also explored. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, all potential identifiers were anonymised and analyses were conducted between interviews and waves to feed into subsequent data collection. We particularly ensured that children's and adult's accounts were given equal consideration.

## Findings

What happens in childhood must be understood against the background of the social, cultural and economic contexts in which it takes place. Parents in this sample all said that they valued employment; working parenthood seemed to be accepted as the norm in these families and working for a living was evidently valued by both parents and children. However, such a way of life has implications for everyone's lives, not least those of the children themselves and the kinds of childhoods they experienced.

**It was evident that contradictions and tensions, between values, attitudes and everyday practices were being raised, faced and negotiated in these families; many of these coalesced around issues of time, place and caring for children.**

### Weekday mornings

Weekday mornings, before school and work, encapsulate the 'scheduling demands' which working parents and their children experience on a daily basis. In working families, mornings are a time of complex synchronisation as multiple people, of different ages with potentially varying temperaments and priorities, need to be conveyed from sleep to 'readiness' within timescales, and at a pace, dictated by the demands of work and school.



Therefore, exploring children's accounts of weekday mornings sheds light on their experiences at the interface of work and care.

Children's descriptions of weekday mornings could be divided into two groups according to how their parents' mornings were shaped by their caring responsibilities (e.g. need for childcare before school, location of childcare/school etc.) and their employment (e.g. location of workplace, start time, workplace culture etc.). For the first group of 9 children there seemed little scope for flexibility in the mornings. Children said they felt tired and also that the tempo of the mornings was too fast, describing them as 'busy', 'hectic' and 'very rushed'. As Hannah(10) said:

**What happens is big rush. It's like, 'Have you packed your school bag?' 'Yep.' 'Get your jacket on.' 'Okay.' 'Get your shoes on', but usually a lot quicker.**

The second group of six children lived in households where parents' lives were less tightly structured by employment because one parent was retired, worked from home, worked evenings or had a short work commute. These children also said that they felt tired most mornings and did not like getting up but, in contrast, described weekday mornings as 'quiet' and 'calm', suggesting a more leisurely tempo. Usually, one parent left for work whilst the other remained at home and was available to get children ready and take them to school. Robert (9) described how his mother got up and ready for work, waking him up to give him breakfast before she left. He said his retired father was 'usually relaxed because usually after he drops me off [at school] he either goes to the gym or sometimes he does his volunteer job.'





**All of the children placed high value on unstructured time in the mornings, for example to watch television, play games consoles or just 'potter about'. They described efforts to carve this out for themselves, highlighting their wish to have greater control. However, the level of control they were able to assert varied according to the time-space demands of their parents' employment.**

### Down-time

The children, like their parents, distinguished between weekdays, weekends and holidays. These calendar times were described as involving different tempos, emotions and personal and family practices. Almost all respondents contrasted weekends and holidays much more favourably with their weekday lives, whether at work or school. There seemed to be an unspoken assumption that the constraints on children's lives throughout the working week were compensated for by different, and sometimes suspended, family practices during weekends and holidays.

When asked how they felt at the weekends, compared to during the week, many parents and, interestingly, several children specifically commented that weekends were more 'relaxed'. For many children, this seemed to involve being able to sleep in at weekends, mirroring their complaints above that they were tired and reluctant to get up during the working week. Jack's(10) response was typical:

**Well I feel more relaxed on the weekends because I don't need to rush about that much. (I: And so what's good about feeling relaxed?) Well I get more of a lie in and usually (though the week) I'm all worked up and stuff and sometimes I get really cross and shout at my brother on some days.**

Not only were weekends described as having a different tempo and emotional feel for all family members, but also a greater freedom of choice for children as well as parents. Evocatively, Ashley(9) commented, 'during the week I feel quite bored, but in the weekend I'm a free spirit'. Charlotte(9) said, 'on Saturday

and Sunday we've got our own free time to roam'. Taking family holidays was also described as a priority by all the families; often being put forward by children and parents as one of the reasons for parental working. Many of the special qualities of weekends were also put forward by children as characterising holidays. When Hannah(10) was asked, 'what else was good about being away on holiday?' she replied

(echoing the responses of parents in the study), 'just spending time together'. The frequent use of this rationale for holidays is perhaps an indicator that such spending time together as a family was experienced as qualitatively different and not so easily achieved in the routines of everyday working family lives.

### The importance of home

Parents' and children's interviews also suggested that 'home' was viewed as a special location of childhood. Almost every parent spoke about how, at times, they felt guilty about work taking them away from being at home with their children, or related some reaction or protest about this from their child. Most examples concerned children expressing wishes to have parents with them at home more. Emma Phillips said:

**I think they'd like to be here (at home) more, and they keep saying things like, why can't you pick us up at half past three when we finish. Cos then you're likely to work less hours, but then if I work less hours they can do less things and go less places.**

Half the children were regularly looked after elsewhere after school (and most were occasionally) because parents were at work. Many comments suggested that being able to be at home with a parent, after school, was what children themselves, as well as their parents, preferred. For example, when Calum(10), who came home to a childminder two days a week, was asked What is it about 'home' that was important;

**'is that just as good as coming home and your mum and dad being there?', he replied, 'No, not really cos like when I get to see my mum and dad it's nice, cos like we love seeing them and stuff'.**



## Implications for Policy

Although working for a living was accepted as the norm by these families, after school time for children, and being at home with parents, emerged as key points of contention which illuminated the contrast between everyday practices and values, and expectations around parenting and childhood.

Where parents' employment circumstances afforded a greater degree of flexibility in the mornings, children's experiences of time, space and care seemed of a comparatively better quality.

These findings, drawing on children's voices as well as parents', lend weight to the case that 'family-friendly' working practices should not exist only as policy rhetoric but represent an attainable option for working parents.

what did this mean for images of childhood; and why might this be challenged by the practicalities of working parenthood? Children and parents said that being at home meant that you could relax and not be organised by others. Some children spoke of having greater freedom of choice and action in their own homes; others emphasised the importance of familiarity, and having their own space and possessions.

Achieving those elements of well-being through being at home was put forward as an important element of childhood which was hard to replicate elsewhere. A further element involved the significance of social relationships associated with being at home. Children's friendships were often mentioned but so too was spending time with their parents; several children specifically said that if they went home after school they would see their parents.

## References and Further Reading

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