

Return to work: parental decision making ^[1]

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Source: Government Equalities Office

Format: Report

Publication Date: 30 Apr 2018

AVAILABILITY

Full PDF online ^[2]

This research report, commissioned by the Government Equalities Office, seeks to gain insight into how parents make decisions about the sharing of childcare responsibilities and returning to work. The report outlines "testable interventions to encourage parents to equalise (or move closer to equalising) the gender balance of work and childcare responsibilities, in particular by motivating fathers to take a more active caring role."

Executive summary

Despite progress towards greater gender equality, significant inequalities persist in the way that childcare responsibilities are divided up and shared, with women in the UK doing on average about twice as much childcare as men. This disparity contributes to gender gaps in both employment and earnings, with women being substantially disadvantaged relative to men. For example, in April to June 2017, 91.7% of fathers aged 25-34 were in work compared to just 67.7% of mothers (ONS, 2017d). The Government Equalities Office (GEO) seeks to promote gender equality across society in the UK, with a focus on closing the Gender Pay Gap. The Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) carried out this project for GEO with two main aims:

1. To understand parental decision-making about the sharing of childcare responsibilities and return to work.
2. To design testable interventions to encourage parents to equalise (or move closer to equalising) the gender balance of work and childcare responsibilities, in particular by motivating fathers to take a more active caring role.

To answer these questions, we conducted a literature review of the key drivers of parental decision making; in-depth interviews with thirteen couples in the UK who were first-time parents; an analysis of the 2014/15 UK Time Use Survey on time spent on childcare by men and women in the UK; and two online experiments designed to test potential solutions for encouraging parents to share parental leave and childcare responsibilities more equally.

Key findings: drivers of parental decision making

Based on the literature review and the interviews, the project identified six key categories of factors that influence parental decision making:

- **Implicit decision-making:** Couples often make decisions about the division of childcare and return to work without explicit discussion or negotiation, despite these decisions having a substantial impact on both parents' lives.
- **Financial factors:** Many couples experience a strong financial incentive for the mother to take on a bigger share of childcare responsibilities. This is because women tend to earn less than their partners, and most employers offer enhanced maternity pay but not enhanced Shared Parental Pay. At the same time, couples tend to disregard or not be aware of the long-term cost to mothers of taking time out of the labour market.
- **Work-related factors:** Parents' engagement with their employer can influence how they choose to divide childcare responsibilities. Parents often lack a clear understanding of Shared Parental Leave (SPL) eligibility rules, and are not aware that it is a legal entitlement for eligible parents. Parents may also see flexible working and parental leave as being acceptable for women, but not for men.
- **Emotional factors:** Parents are influenced by concerns about their child's safety and guilt (a particular issue for mothers), which often result in a strong preference for home childcare. Further, loss aversion, which is the sensitivity that people have to losing something and which can be felt quite keenly, discourages some women from 'giving up' leave and time with their child to their partner to accommodate SPL.
- **Social factors:** People are strongly influenced by the behaviour and expectations of those around them, and parents use these behaviours and expectations as cues to guide their own decisions regarding childcare and return to work.
- **Attitudes:** The relationship between attitudes regarding gender roles and behaviours is often not straightforward due to multiple external factors.

To illustrate the interplay between the different factors, we constructed a typology of couples based on the interviews. The typology describes couples whose decision making is driven either by their attitudes or by external factors and provides a conceptual tool for policy makers when thinking about how to drive behaviour change among new parents.

Key findings from online experiments

The first experiment tested whether different behaviourally informed messages increase behaviours related to more equal sharing of childcare among prospective fathers - namely the father's interest in and stated intention whether they would take up SPL or flexible working. We found that:

- Overall, behaviourally informed messages did not increase fathers' interest in SPL and flexible working.
- However, behavioural messages increased engagement (as measured by willingness to read more information) as well as stated intentions to take SPL among men who already had children, while decreasing them among those who did not yet have children.

The second experiment tested whether providing simplified information about SPL increases prospective parents' understanding of the scheme and their stated willingness to use it, compared to standard government communications. We found that:

- Providing prospective and current parents with simplified information about SPL improved parents' comprehension of the scheme.
- Highlighting SPL as a legal entitlement for eligible parents improved parents' comprehension of the scheme and also reduced the perceived effort related to taking up the scheme.

Our findings point to the importance of providing clear and user-friendly information, but also finding other, more radical ways to encourage parents to consider sharing childcare responsibilities in a more equal way.

Region: Europe ^[3]

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