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How can policy support fathers to be more involved in childcare? Evidence from cross-country policy comparisons and UK longitudinal household data

Submitted to the 'Fathers and the Workplace' Inquiry by Dr Helen Norman, Professor Colette Fagan and Professor Mark Elliot, School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester.

This report is based on findings from our Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded project, which explores what makes fathers involved in their children's care (see <http://projects.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/involved-fathers/>). Our analysis shows that there are employment-related barriers to fathers sharing childcare more equally with their partners. We recommend three policy changes that would better support fathers to fulfil their caregiver roles.

1. Executive summary

Our research shows that:

- Fathers are more likely to become and remain involved in caring for their children if they are engaged at an early stage after the birth.
- The employment hours of both fathers and mothers shape how involved a father is in his child's care.

This means that:

- Creating the conditions for the father to take paternity and parental leave is pivotal for a more equal division of childcare, as are fostering working hours for men and women which are compatible with family life.
- Good quality childcare is vital for supporting mothers' full-time employment, and thus fathers' involvement in childcare, as are stepping up efforts to close the gender pay gap.

2. Background

In most countries, mothers spend more than double the amount of time on childcare than fathers. In the UK, dads spend an average of 24 minutes caring for children for every hour that is done by women (OECD 2016; Flood 2016). However, most dads agree that they should be as involved in childcare as the mother (Norman 2010), and many would prefer to spend more time caring for their children than they currently do (e.g. see Working Families 2017; Equality and Human Rights Commission 2009).

3. Why are childcare responsibilities unbalanced between mothers and fathers?

Current work-family policy in the UK, combined with the lower earnings of women, creates an economic driver for mothers to take the primary responsibility for childcare rather than for both parents to share childcare more equally.

Firstly, the policy emphasis has focused on helping mothers, rather than fathers, to adapt their employment hours and schedules after having children. In the UK, mothers can take up to a year of maternity leave whereas fathers are limited to two weeks of

paternity leave. Even though both parents have the right to request flexible working to fit in their caring responsibilities, men are less likely to make a request and are more likely to get their request rejected when they do (e.g. see Tipping et al. 2012). Flexible working continues to be more commonly taken up by women, particularly mothers, in the form of part-time work.

Secondly, childcare is expensive – equivalent to 41% of the average wage (OECD 2011) – which discourages the lower earner (usually the mother) from going back to work after having children because it isn't financially worthwhile. The current statutory free childcare entitlement only covers 15 hours a week over 38 weeks of the year for children aged three and four (and some two year olds from disadvantaged backgrounds). Not only is it difficult for mothers to find a job which is compatible with these hours, there is a childcare gap between the end of maternity leave and the start of the free provision.

A positive childcare development is that the government are extending the free early years education entitlement for three and four year olds from 15 to 30 hours a week from September 2017. This may help some women reconcile work and family but the provision needs to be flexible to be compatible with full-time employment. In 2015, average full-time hours in the UK were recorded to be much longer than 30 hours (42.9 per week) (Eurostat 2016) suggesting the provision will not be compatible with many full-time jobs, and purchased childcare to top up this provision remains expensive.

4. Have the recent improvements to parental leave improved matters?

The introduction of Shared Parental Leave (SPL), which allows parents to share up to 50 weeks of leave and receive statutory pay previously only available to the mother, is a step in the right direction because it is a policy which recognises the importance of a father's role at home. However, only a minority of fathers are taking it up¹ because they cannot afford to, the policy is too complex and/or their partner is reluctant to give up part of their entitlement (e.g. see My Family Care 2016; Working Families 2016).

Previous assessments of parental leave arrangements in other European countries have found the schemes which stimulate the best take up rate by fathers are those with a quota of leave reserved for the father underwritten by a high replacement rate for earnings plus flexibility in when and how the leave may be taken. Such schemes provide an incentive for fathers to take parental leave compared to family based allocations that can be shared by parents but in practice are mainly taken up by mothers (Fagan and Norman 2013; 2015). A 'daddy quota' helps to promote parental leave as an explicit right for fathers and is more effective in promoting gender equality in the home than gender neutral parental leave policies. For example, in Sweden the 'daddy quota' of parental leave (90 days) is paid at 80% of earnings, and over 80% of fathers take at least some of this entitlement up (Duvander et al. 2016).

The perception of leave as a right for fathers also makes it more acceptable in workplace cultures for fathers to use reconciliation policies – and fathers make more use of parental leave schemes when they have a supportive workplace environment (Fagan and Norman 2013; COWI 2008). Against this backdrop of policy learning, SPL in the UK has only had a limited impact.

¹ The Government predicted take-up rate amongst fathers of just 2-8%

5. What else influences fathers to share childcare?

Our project has found that the way in which family and work-time is arranged, during the first three years of parenthood, is pivotal to fathers being involved in childcare at an early stage in the child's life, and remaining involved at later stages (Norman et al. 2014; Fagan and Norman 2016; Norman and Fagan 2017; Norman 2010). We used the UK's Millennium Cohort Study to explore what influences fathers to share childcare roughly equally with their partner.

Fathers are more likely to be involved in childcare when the baby is 9 months old if they work standard full-time (30-44 hours a week) rather than long (45+ hours a week) hours, and if the mother works full-time.

We also found that the work and care arrangements established in the first year of parenthood set up a pattern of care-giving that persists two years later. Firstly, fathers were more likely to be involved when the child was aged three if they shared childcare equally when the child was nine months old, even when we took account of other factors which may influence father involvement in childcare, such as the presence of other children, fathers' attitudes towards work and family roles and the father's occupational class. Secondly, both parents' employment hours when the child was nine months old affected how involved a father was when the child reached age three. Fathers were more likely to be involved when the child was aged three if the mother worked full-time, and if the father worked standard rather than long full-time hours when the child was nine months old.

The way in which parents organised their work-time when the child was aged three also affected how involved a father was at that time. We found that a father was more likely to be involved when the child was aged three when he worked standard rather than long full-time hours when the child was aged three, and when the mother worked full-time. Our analysis also showed that when the child was aged three, the mothers full-time employment hours had a stronger influence on fathers' sharing childcare compared to the fathers own employment hours.

6. What does this mean for UK work-family policy?

If the policy goal is to enable fathers to become more involved in raising their children, it is important to create conditions to foster working-time adjustments from birth onwards. Creating the conditions for the father to take paternity and parental leave is pivotal, as is fostering working hours for men which are more compatible with family life. Progress towards this goal is more likely to be made in the UK if: (i) parental leave entitlements for fathers are improved beyond the current limited provision available through the SPL policy; (ii) there is more effective implementation of the 'right to request' flexible working in workplaces for men as well as women, and (iii) there are measures to reduce the long full-time working hours which characterise many of the jobs and workplaces that men are employed in.

Our research finds that fathers are more likely to be involved in childcare when the mother is employed full-time. In the UK, mothers are more likely to be employed full-time both nine months and three years after childbirth if they had a higher occupational position prior to the birth, the likelihood of which is greater for the highly qualified (Fagan and Norman 2012). Hence measures to enable all women to make a smooth resumption of employment after childbirth are conducive to a more gender equal

parenting arrangement. Good quality, affordable and flexible childcare is critically important.

Finally, it is important to reduce the gender pay gap which increases the likelihood that the father will earn more than the mother, creating a short-term financial logic for the father to invest his time in employment and the mother to leave employment or switch to part-time hours to care for young children. Such situations reduce the likelihood that the father is involved in caring for his children. This observation was also made by the Women and Equalities Committee (2016) report on the gender pay gap published last March.

7. Policy recommendations

Based on this evidence, we recommend the Government:

1. Reforms SPL so that it includes an individual, father's quota of leave with an earnings replacement rate of at least 80%.
2. Improves the supply of affordable, good quality and flexible full-time childcare, and extends the statutory provision to all children from the age of two (i.e. at the end of the maternity leave allowance).
3. Steps up measures to close the gender pay gap as this creates a financial logic for women to reduce their employment and take primary responsibility for childcare. Fawcett Society (2016) calculations show it will take another sixty years to completely close at the current rate of progress. We therefore welcome mandatory pay gap reporting for large companies from 2018 but recommend that alongside this, companies are obliged to publish action plans detailing how they will close the gender pay gap.

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