

## **Risk in dual-earner and working lone parent households: parents' and young people's perceptions<sup>1</sup>**

Sophie Sarre, London School of Economics

### **Abstract**

Parents want to protect their children, and parents are working more. At the same time, it is claimed, we are all living with a heightened state of risk-awareness and individual responsibility for risk management. This paper looks at perceptions of risk around the work-life balance for teenage children and their working parents. It explores the questions 'How do parents see and deal with the potentially conflicting demands of earning and caring?' and 'What are the risk perceptions of teenage children in households without a stay-at-home parent?' It is based on qualitative interviews concerning parents' and young people's own (changing) experience of their families' work life balance and their attitudes to other work-life balance arrangements.

**Key words:** risk perception, work-life balance, teenagers

### **Theoretical background to the study**

In the literature of social theory it is widely accepted that we live with a heightened sense of risk and a heightened sense of responsibility for managing risks to ourselves and to our families (Beck 1992; 1995; Giddens 1990; 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Beck-Gernsheim 2002). How does this square with parents' attachment to the labour market?

Research on the work-life balance has begun to reflect the growing centrality of mothers' employment to their own identities and to family life. Just as mothers' work is decreasingly seen (by themselves, their families and by policy makers) as a sideline - "working for pin money" - so the study of it is no longer restricted to merely

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<sup>1</sup> The project that this paper is based on is funded by the ESRC (grant no. L326253054) as part of the Social Contexts and Responses to Risk (SCARR) research network. The work on teenagers and their parents is part of a wider study of 'Risk in Intimate Relationships'.

counting heads and hours. Innes and Scott (2003) examine the practices and meanings of 'care'. Backett-Milburn et al (2001) in their qualitative study of Scottish mothers returning to work describe a 'new motherhood' in which caring and providing were integral aspects of maternal identity, rather than seen as opposing preferences. McKie et al (2002) use the term 'caringscapes' to describe ways in which women navigate through their contexts of paid 'work' and unpaid 'care'.

Children appear to be growing up faster. In the 'sociology of childhood' studies indicate that, individualization in general, and parents' increased labour force participation in particular, children are gaining independence at an earlier age (Büchner 1995; Solberg 1997) and also performing more household functions (Brannen 1996; Brannen et al 2000; Backett-Milburn and Harden 2004; du Bois-Reymond 1995a and b; Such and Walker 2004). Miller (2005) argues that children of working parents have reverted to being 'useful' after a period of being 'priceless'. Third Way socio-economic policies promoting the "social-investment state" that treat children as 'citizen-workers of the future' (Lister 2003) also help to bolster the increasing centrality of employment into the ways in which we 'do families'. What are the perceived risks associated with this?

## The 'real world' background

### Work-life balance in the UK

Labour market changes have seen the flexibilization of labour, the decline in male full-employment (ILO 2000) and the rise in female employment. The UK currently has a one-and-a-half breadwinner system. There has been a steady increase in *mothers* working. In 2004, on average 67% of women with dependent children were in paid work (Walling 2005) and employment rates increased with higher age-bands of children. There has been a rise in the numbers of mothers working full-time (Reynolds et al 2003). Employment rates for fathers are higher than average male employment rates – 90% of fathers<sup>i</sup> and 70% of men<sup>ii</sup> were employment.

The rise in mothers' employment levels generally, and the rise in mothers' full-time employment specifically, are bound to reduce the amount of time mothers spend with

their children. The UK has a tradition of long part-time work (affecting mothers) and, *fathers* work longer hours than non-fathers. Furthermore, in the UK, employed parents are more likely to work 'atypical' hours than other workers. Thirty eight percent of mothers and 54% of fathers work at least one Saturday a month, and around one quarter and one third respectively work at least one Sunday a month (La Valle et al 2002).

From a policy point of view, as Lewis (2001; 2002) points out, despite the flexibilization of labour there is considerable convergence between different EU countries and the US in terms of promoting an 'adult worker model family'. This relies on a dual breadwinner model in which each adult is expected to be self-provisioning. In the UK there have been a number of initiatives aimed at reducing child poverty and social exclusion by increasing attachment to the labour market. Some of these have been focussed particularly on mothers.

In conjunction with employment-related policies (the carrot) there have been a number of policies that increase and / or lengthen the dependency of children and young people on their families. These policies, whether intentionally or not, act as the 'stick' or driver towards parents' greater attachment to the labour market. From the 1980s, during the New Right government, there was a move to withdraw state support to young people, based on the assumption that families will take up the slack. New Labour policies on higher education funding and wages for young people also increased dependency on families. The period of dependence has generally lengthened. Despite a number of other policies under New Labour that have increased financial support and services to families, the policy and employment context in which families find themselves means that some sort of dual wage model is a necessity for the vast majority. Since 1997 there have also been a number of symbolic but relatively low-impact initiatives aimed at addressing the work -(family) life balance (Dex 2003). These policies are time-limited and for the most part unpaid, which could explain their lack of impact.

### Adolescence in the UK

Adults feel that teenage life now is very different from in their own day. Much of this change is to do with the world being a riskier place and with young people's risk-

taking behaviour. Eighty six percent of adults thought that children were experimenting with drugs and sex at a much earlier age than in times past (Bradshaw 2002), and in fact teenagers in Britain have the worst sexual health record in Western Europe. There has also been an increase in teenage smoking, drinking and drug use (Bradshaw 2002; Thomas and Hocking 2003; MORI 2004). Psychological problems such as depression, eating disorders, suicide and attempted suicide have all become more common amongst young people (Furlong and Cartmel 1997). Twenty six percent of respondents in the MORI survey had committed a criminal offence in the last 12 months.

Forty nine percent of mainstream 11-16 year olds said they had been the victim of a criminal or anti-social offence. Young people can be seen as a threat to each other. Seventy four percent had been the victim of bullying or a criminal offence by a perpetrator under the age of 18 (MORI *ibid*). In other studies the 'strangers' whom children and teenagers feared were often children or teenagers themselves, rather than adults (Backett-Milburn and Harden 2004; Kelley et al 1997).

#### Previous studies on the effects of parental employment on children

In 2003/4, 28% of children were living below the poverty line in the UK<sup>iii</sup>.

Unemployment is a major contributor to poverty, whatever the household type: seventy eight percent of households where either the head or the spouse was unemployed lived in poverty. Having children is also a factor: forty-seven per cent of those in lone parent households, and 20% in two-parent households were poor – roughly double the percentages of equivalent childless households (Flaherty et al 2004). The clear indication is that parents in the UK are at risk of poverty if they are not employed.

A number of studies link low levels of parental monitoring with a heightened incidence of various conduct and educational problems in children<sup>iv</sup>. It may be assumed that the increase in parents' employment (and the resultant decline in time spent with children) would lower the levels of parental monitoring and thereby pose a risk to the children's development. Studies show that fathers commonly rely on mothers as a key source of information on children and parenting (Bumpass et al 1999; Gillies et al 2001), so does the increase in *mothers'* employment mean that both

mothers and fathers will lose touch with their children? Interestingly, a US-based study on the inter-relation between parents' work and their knowledge about their children's daily lives in dual-earner households (Crouter et al 1999; Bumpass et al 1999) showed that mothers' work hours did not affect their knowledge. On the other hand fathers' knowledge of their children was greater when their wives worked more. The implication is that fathers get more involved in childcare when their wives are working more.

There are other important factors in the work-life balance beyond simply the numbers of hours worked. Many studies indicate that stressful work conditions affect family dynamics (see Bumpass et al 1999 for numerous citations). Other studies show that evening and weekend working is particularly stressful and unpopular with parents and children (La Valle et al 2002). A qualitative study of the impact of mothers' employment on family relationships (Reynolds et al 2003) found that work stress and lack of autonomy to manage work time had a detrimental effect on family relationships. Family-friendly employment policies and the workplace ethos were helpful in mothers' attempts to reconcile work and family demands.

Although there is an emerging literature that takes children and young people as subjects, rather than objects of research, almost none of it centres on their views on and experiences of the work-life balance. Galinsky's US study (1999) is a notable exception (see also Klammer *et al*). One UK study of care and family life (Brannen, Heptinstall and Bhopal 2000) asked 10-12 year olds their views on the *ideal* work-life balance. The sample was fairly evenly split between those favouring a dual-earner arrangement and a male breadwinner model. In their comments on vignettes (i.e. theoretical situations rather than personal experience) respondents were negative about the effects of long work-hours on family life, and thought that the "proper job" of parents when the child was at home was to spend time with their children and help them with their homework.

## The Study

### Methodology

The study used two iterative rounds of interviews. The first set of interviews was with twelve to sixteen year olds and each of their working parents. The second set of interviews was with fourteen and fifteen year olds, but not their parents. The second sample and interview schedule were designed to focus in on particular issues that had interested us from the first round of interviews<sup>v</sup>.

Originally the 12 - 16 age group was chosen because it covers the period of compulsory secondary education in the UK. When children start secondary school they often start to travel to school independently, and because secondary schools are more dispersed, the majority of pupils have to use public transport. Even those who may be given a lift to school would not countenance being accompanied into the playground. This change, symbolically, as well as practically, marks the beginning of greater independence from parents. Furthermore, there is a drastic decline in childcare provision post primary-school age. The secondary school years are associated with greater risks to children and greater risk-taking by children.

In the 'family' interviews with 12 – 16 year olds a recruiting agency was used to recruit families in a variety of socio-geographic areas in the south east of England. Part of the recruitment criteria was that households should be dual-earner<sup>vi</sup>, with each parent working at least 16 hours per week. Two interviewers visited each home, one interviewing the mother, and the other interviewing both the father and the child separately.

Having completed the family interviews with 12 – 16 year olds we wanted to build on that data and explore certain areas. Firstly we wanted to talk to more young people who frequently and regularly had time at home without any parent because the parent or parents were out at work. We wished to explore the perceptions of risk associated with being at home without adult supervision and any differences in risk-taking behaviours (amongst other things) between what are commonly termed "latchkey children" and those who normally have a parent at home. Secondly, the family interviews had shown us that, for a number of our areas of interest, 14 and 15 year-

olds were the most relevant age group. Thirdly, we thought we might get a franker discussion with young people if they were out of their home environment. Consequently we looked to recruit Year 10 pupils through their schools, and to even up the numbers across the combined sample of young people who usually had time at home without a parent while their parent(s) were at work and those who didn't. The sample came from schools across six LEAs.

A number of ethical and practical considerations meant that we sampled very broadly. We thought it important, both in gaining the confidence of schools, parents and students, and in order to keep the process simple for respondents, to keep the sampling questions to a minimum.

While we acknowledge that statistically speaking there are differences on a number of indicators between, say, household types, our interview data indicate that there is so much variation within each classificatory heading that purposively sampling in order to achieve a categorically homogenous sample would have been fruitless, and purposively sampling in order to gain a representative sample across all relevant sub-categories would have required a sample too large for the project to handle.

### The sample

The sample used in this paper consists of the 52 working parents (26 dual-earner couples) and 72 young people aged 12 – 16 with a working lone parent or in a dual earner household. The sample of young people consists of equal numbers of males and females. The majority - fifty-eight (80.5%) were aged 14-15. Ten (14%) were aged 12 - 13, and four (5.5%) were aged 16 and in further education.

Fifty-two of the young people came from 'two parent' families, nine from step-families, nine from lone parent families and two lived in other household types<sup>vii</sup>. We did not sample for ethnicity in either round of interviews, but in the second round we avoided schools with very high percentages of any *one* ethnic group (including white British). The young people's sample used here was 65% 'white British', but there was a wide spread of ethnic minority groups with the exception of certain Asian categories.

In the parents' sample (where occupational data was obtained from parents) there was a good mix of employment types. From the interviews with young people at school this also appeared to be so for the rest of the sample. In the parent sample there was also a spread of educational qualifications. On average the women in our sample had higher educational attainment than the men.

## Findings<sup>2</sup>

### Parents' Perspectives: Managing Work

Parents we interviewed spoke of the material advantages of two incomes but also saw their work in terms of personal development and equity within the couple. However, a significant number of parents put limits on their work for the benefit of their children. These strategies were used by mothers and fathers, but were more commonly used by mothers. Limiting strategies were:

- Working part-time
- Choosing a job with flexibility
- Downgrading job / career
- Refusing promotion
- Defining work as a 'job' rather than a 'career'

In the parent sample all of the fathers worked full-time. Eight mothers worked at least 35 hours per week, 9 worked 25-34 hours per week, and 9 worked 16-24 hours. Six of the mothers (all of them part-timers) worked term-times only, and a further one changed to night shifts in the holidays. In our full sample (i.e. including the schools interviews) twenty respondents had parents who worked non-standard hours – either fixed or changing shifts and / or weekend work.

'Atypical' working could be a blessing or a curse. It could allow shift-parenting, or a greater amount of 'family time' than the norm. It could also mean that in order to maintain the desired amount of parental availability the standard worker put *extra* limitations on their work. One mother limited her work hours so that she was available in the early evenings to ferry her children around because her husband's irregular hours meant that his help could not be relied upon. Another had not gone on

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms have been used.

training courses to advance her career because her husband's nighttime working meant that she couldn't be away from home over-night. She had also kept to part-time working so that she was home after school for the children, and to see her husband before he went to work.

There were many dimensions to 'flexible' working, and a system that led to genuine flexibility for some did not necessarily do so for all. Parents had often striven to manoeuvre themselves into jobs that gave them the flexibility they were seeking. Some parents had 'structured flexibility'. 'Structured' working arrangements that parents regarded as genuinely family-friendly could involve self-employment, working from home, working term-times only or flexi-time. Of the seven mothers who worked term-time only, three were self-employed and chose not to work in the holidays, three worked in schools and one had a job with a bank that offered term-time only contracts. Two fathers and three mothers worked from home. Aside from this 'structured flexibility' parents (mothers especially) relied on, and were grateful for, "informal flexibility" at work. This was often down to the nature of the work (which could be caught up with at a later date), a sympathetic boss or colleagues that "pulled together". Two mothers reported leaving jobs because they were not flexible enough. The possibility of government endorsed 'flexible full-time' work was not seen as a solution for the part-time mothers. School holidays remained an issue, especially when public childcare provision in holidays for teens is almost absent, and private childcare for teenagers, such as may have been provided by grandparents when they and the children were younger, was seen as inappropriate.

In emotional and value terms the balance was strongly tipped towards family life. The majority of both fathers and mothers *regardless of job status* referred to their work as a job rather than as a career. Mothers, more than fathers, tended to base the distinction between the two on the fact that their commitment (in terms of time and energy) was to their children. Despite the higher educational level of mothers over fathers in this sample, mothers had often not got onto a career path in the first place because they anticipated having children. Others had stayed in employment for which they were over-qualified because it suited their childcare requirements.

Fathers' job-family fit was seen as a given. They may have declined promotion that would have required more time away from the family, or more stress, but they were on the whole reactive to employment circumstances. So, for instance, redundancy may have led to job change, or a cut in over-time opportunities may have meant that they had stopped working week-ends, or got home earlier. Mothers, on the other hand, actively sought employment that suited their children's (and to a more limited extent their partner's) needs. It was mothers who chose part-time work; it was mothers who took jobs in schools; it was mothers who worked shifts that allowed them to be at home regularly at the end of the school day; it was mothers who despite having further or higher education took cleaning jobs which they did while their children were at school. In other words, despite any academic findings to the contrary, parents felt strongly that there was a risk to their children if some degree of 'coming home to mum' was not maintained.

#### Latchkey children?

For analytical purposes we can divide the sample along this divide: young people who regularly (at least once a week) do not have a parent or carer at home at the beginning and / or end of the school day for at least half an hour because their parent(s) were at work (those we might commonly term 'latchkey kids') and those for whom this is not the case ('non latchkey kids'). What became clear from the interviews was the complexity of real life experience.

Forty-one of the seventy-two young people were classified as 'latchkey'. For twenty-four of them this was the case every school day. For seven this was three to four times a week, for three one to two times a week. For seven of the respondents, ironically, we can only use the term 'regularly'. These young people commonly have a parent absent, but the patterns may be spread over more than one week or, where both parents work shifts, this may occur even more randomly. Time spent with an absent parent also alters the 'pattern'. Thirty-two of the forty-one continue to have time at home alone during the school holidays, whilst the others have at least one parent who works term-times only. Conversely, nearly half the respondents whose parents were usually at home at the beginning and end of the school day, nevertheless worked during the school holidays and left the young people without a parent / carer. In sum

fifty-six of our sample (seventy eight percent) have regular experience of being home without a parent / carer, either in term-time or holidays or both.

Being a 'latchkey kid' didn't necessarily meant returning to an empty house. Fourteen respondents whose parents worked outside school hours had older or adult sibling who were sometimes at home. Understandably, even when asked explicitly, this was never presented by the young people in terms of supervision or a household arrangement. However, this does not mean that the likely presence of older siblings did not play a part in the work-life balance decisions of parents.

### Young people's perspective: The effects of parents' work

#### 'Home Alone'

We asked young people what they liked and disliked about having time at home without a parent. Almost without exception the interviewees spoke positively about it. They enjoyed being able to do their own thing (watch telly, go on the computer, not talk) without having anyone "on their back" or "under your feet". Both the elements of self-determination and unstructured time were appreciated.

Many respondents nevertheless displayed some ambivalence. They liked aspects of having the house to themselves but they also enjoyed being able to chat about the day and having company. On a practical level they liked having someone there to help with their homework if necessary, to give them money, to cook or to ferry them to activities.

"when I have the house to myself I get more done work-wise. Yes, sometimes it's nice but sometimes I get a bit lonely. ... Sometimes I'd rather have people around like mum and dad but it just depends really what kind of mood I'm in."

*(Sophie, 15 year-old girl)*

"It's nice that she's [mum's] not there all the time. Yeah. So I think it's a good balance that she's not there all the time but is there quite a lot of the time"

*(Charlie, 15 year old boy)*

"It's nice having her home but also when you come home and she's not there, you can get straight on with your homework and you have more, I don't know,

when she's at home I have to tell her about my day kind of thing." (*Phoebe, 14-year-old girl*)

Only one respondent 'took advantage' of the fact that she had the house to herself regularly because of her parents being at work. While rueing the absence of a cook, she celebrated the fact that she could do what she wanted, which included having people over, drinking, smoking and going out. Although she would always inform her mother if she were going out, she said that when a parent was actually at home "it's easier for them to say 'no'" (*Aisha, 16 year-old girl*).

Three respondents admitted to being, either currently, or in the past, nervous about the safety aspect of being alone in the house.

#### Particular work effects

When asked about the pros and cons of their parents' working patterns the young people did not tend to articulate the dis/advantages of a *different* pattern to the one they experienced. They were more forthcoming about the pros and cons of their own experience. Generally speaking young people, like parents, appreciated not only the material advantages of employment, but also saw work in terms of personal development:

"I think it's important for her to work and get out there and get her own life because I wouldn't be happy if she was just, you know, in the house. ... I think it's important for her to go and work, yes. ... Yes, not just you know – it wouldn't be nice for her to just stay at home all the time. She wouldn't be staying at home all the time, but it would be nice for her not just to do shopping and stuff like that." (*Eniola, 14 / 15 year old female*)

The majority of young people were happy with the specifics of their parents working lives, though there was quite a strong implication that their attitude was one of acceptance rather than preference. There were several uses of the expression "I've got used to it". There was a sense that children who had some reservations about a parent's work-life were somehow caught up in supporting "the project of work"<sup>viii</sup>.

Young people were affected by their parent's *attitude* to their work. For instance, if a child knew that their parent enjoyed their work they were more positive about it. Conversely, if a parent was unfulfilled or over-stretched by their work then this also had an effect. The *type* of work could also be important. For instance, one young man said he liked his mother working because she did a useful job in the voluntary sector. A few children expressed concerns about their parents' health and safety, either because of the type of work they did, their working conditions (i.e. long hours) or their physical health.

There were a few comments from children about wanting more time with a particular parent. In other words, simply having *a* parent at home was not necessarily enough. If one parent was frequently absent during 'home time', either through long work hours or 'unsociable' work hours then this was felt acutely by young people. For example, one young woman whose mother had just left a job that meant she was out of the house from 6.30am – 10.00pm said:

"I wasn't particularly happy. I didn't tell her that because at first she was happy and I didn't want to say 'oh mum, I don't want you to do this because I'm not happy'. If she's enjoying it then I'm going to let her enjoy it. But as time went on I saw she wasn't happy at all and I said 'well I see you're not happy, I'm not happy and you need to do something about it'." (*Aimee, 15-year-old female*)

Another whose mother worked every evening said,

"When I go to their [friends] houses I see their mums at home doing the cooking for them just relaxing in the living room with their children as well and I get a bit jealous about that as well." (*Nicole, 14 / 15 year old female*)

Only two children mentioned that their parents' work meant that they could not always make school functions.

#### 'Pulling one's weight'

Ten of the young people whose parents were at work after school had younger brothers or sisters. Six of these had some kind of explicit responsibility for their younger siblings. This varied from travelling back from the same school together, to

getting straight home in order to be in with a younger sibling, to collecting them from another school and taking them home, to (in one exceptional case) getting them ready in the mornings, taking them to school and collecting them from school. For the most part the care element was 'soft' and often unarticulated, and young people were accepting of the situation. This type of 'soft care' could be an understanding that siblings would travel home from school together, to "keeping an eye" on a brother or sister, or not leaving a younger sibling alone in the house too long.

We gathered some information on the frequency with which young people performed various domestic tasks, either for themselves or for the wider household. In fact it proved difficult to interpret the raw data. Contextual elements, which were not measured in detail, muddied the water. Some households operated a rota system; others tied housework to money in a more or less complicated way; some households had cleaners. Actual hours worked by parents is likely to be relevant, as well as numbers of hours worked.

### Communication

It was clear from our interviews with parents that communication between them and their children was key. Both parents and young people viewed parental monitoring of children as an appropriate role for parents – what was going on in their lives and how they were feeling, as well as where they were, who they were with, what time they were coming home etc. Children often said that they talked to mum more than dad about worries "because she's there more". The desire to pick up on the child's emotional state at the end of the school day was commonly behind parents (predominantly mother's) work patterns.

"I think just being with him more, like you know you will be driving to school everyday and some mornings he is quieter than others and you start to think then 'oh is he being bullied, is there a problem?' and sort of ask those things... like for example, his great leisure activity is [-] so every weekend I am taking him, we are 20 minutes in the car, so you do talk." (*Mother of Aidan, a 13 year-old boy*)

"inevitably if me or [husband] or both of us are coming back feeling drained, tired, stressed, we're much less likely to pick up on any little indications that

there might be that something is wrong. So I am very aware of that. ... I do worry that I may not be as in tune with her [daughter's] needs as I would be if I was at home more and had less going on outside the home that was taking up brainpower." (*Mother of Sophie, 15 year-old girl*)

The desire to 'be there' was overwhelmingly for purposes of emotional rather than physical monitoring. From children's accounts it was rare for parents to phone home to check up on their child while they were still at work. There was, however, a degree of touching base, which often involved a parent keeping children informed about their own whereabouts – "I'm leaving work now" or "I'm running a bit late". This is the sort of communication that regularly occurred between *all* family members. Only two mothers mentioned that they wanted to be at home at the end of the school day in order to make sure that their child came straight home.

The "quality time" child-focussed activities that are encouraged between working parents and their younger children do not fit well with older children who have a developed social life and activities and interests of their own, as well as feeling the need to define some sort of personal space. With this age group issues or worries were often touched on or talked about casually whilst watching TV together or driving, and parents and young people enjoyed the opportunities for communication that time "rubbing along together" brought.

#### Separate but safe

Parents and children both regarded the home as a 'safer' place than outdoors. However, parents had a number of 'keeping safe' rules that applied when a child was alone at home, such as not answering the door or phone and not cooking. For some of the 14-16 year olds these rules had dropped away.

Except in a couple of cases young people were *not* more likely to engage in risky behaviour if their parents were at work. Because of the restrictions of the school week young people were very conservative in their behaviour on a normal school day. They would come home, do their homework and be in bed by a certain time. A few had a regular out of school activity that they did once or twice a week. Summer months allowed a bit more freedom to play outside for a while, or visit local friends.

It was not only parents' work that imposed a separation between parent and child outside school hours. The children's own elected activities were equally significant, especially amongst the older children. Unlike many of the younger sample, the 14-16 year olds regularly travelled independently (either alone or with friends), both to and from school and when going out and about. The use of mobile phones often meant that children were allowed further afield than they would otherwise have been. Parents' rules for being out and about had been absorbed by the young people, and had become part of their toolkit of 'keeping safe' strategies. These were having a phone on them (in credit but kept discrete), keeping valuables hidden and not drawing attention to themselves. They also avoided certain areas, and only visited others in groups. It was rare for young people to travel without an adult after dark. A few did so if they were with friends, but even then it was only locally.

During the times that they were without adult supervision the young people would generally inform a parent where they were going, with whom and what time they would be home. A few young people admitted to being economical with the truth about their exact whereabouts. There were a few instances where young people had overtly broken the trust of their parents, say by not answering their phone or by missing a curfew. The sanction of "grounding" had been a successful deterrent to re-offending. Even respondents who hadn't broken the rules in the past, were aware that if trust were to be broken then the clock would be put back, and the independence and freedoms that they had won over time would be eroded.

#### A Parent's Job - Fostering Independence

We had thought that there might be a relationship between young people spending unsupervised time at home while their parents were at work, and levels of independence afforded to them. In other words that parents whose work patterns meant that their children were home alone, would allow their children greater freedoms and responsibilities generally. In fact this did not appear to be the case. Many young people who came home to an empty house after school, nevertheless had very strict rules about going out, curfews, etc. And many young people who always came home to a parent were given a long rein. Moreover, and crucially, it was not only parents' work that imposed a separation between parent and child outside school

hours. The children's own elected activities were equally significant, especially amongst the older children. Parents frequently limited their work-time and their own leisure time in order to facilitate their children's activities outside the home.

Keeping children safe was seen universally as a central function of parenting. However, during the secondary school years the function of fostering independence grew in importance. Parents could be strategic about incremental steps to independence. One young woman spoke of her mother first popping to the shops and leaving her at home alone. When she got to the age where she wanted to go clothes shopping without her mother she was initially allowed to go to a shopping mall, which was enclosed, and later to a small and pedestrianised shopping area. Another young woman wanted to go on a day trip to a seaside town with her friends, so her mother planned an advance trip there for the whole family so the daughter could familiarise herself with the territory.

The potentially contradictory functions of protection and independence were a feature of parenting young people, particularly from the age of around 14. The opposing pulls were to "wrap them up in cotton wool" as one mother described, and getting them to stand on their own two feet. This latter required a degree of letting a child make its own mistakes but also equipping it to navigate risks. Parents frequently talked about the being over-protective in terms of it preventing their children becoming "street-wise". Also mentioned was the danger that a child would go behind a parents back. This obviously presented too great a threat to the role of monitoring and keeping children safe.

## Policy Implications

The social and economic context is likely to encourage ever-greater labour market participation by parents. This research has exposed a number of implications for parents, young people and employers, as well as society generally.

The types of childcare that government is extending for younger children are not seen as relevant to young people in their secondary school years. Both parents and young people see formal childcare as inappropriate for this age group. At the same time, care

of adolescents by grandparents is also problematic. Families vary as to the amount of unsupervised time they are happy with, but on the whole this increases with age. Many parents and children are happiest with a balance within the week of unsupervised time and a parent being at home after school. The issues being balanced are, on the one hand, independence and autonomy of young people; and on the other, the opportunity for easy communication and keeping in touch with the child's emotional state.

School holidays are a big issue. Many parents chose to take jobs that enabled them to work term-times only. A number of children whose parents chose work that allowed them to be home after school, nonetheless had to go out to work during the school holidays. The study indicates that parents (particularly mothers) are working in jobs for which they are over-qualified in order to achieve the sort of work-life balance (in terms of hours at least) that they are happy with. Parents may also be passing up opportunities for training and promotion.

There are a number of issues around flexible working. All of the parents in our sample commented that flexible full-time work did not answer the problem of school holidays. At the same time, flexi-time, working from home, *regular* atypical hours and term-time-only working were valued for the fit they allowed with family life. On the other hand flexibility where the employee had no control (i.e. irregular shifts, unexpected overtime work, enforced week-end work etc.) posed difficulties for all family members. Those people who have the power to *choose* their jobs are likely to avoid working under these conditions. Informal flexibility was valued for allowing parents to deal with irregular demands of children (illness, teacher training days etc.) but by its nature could not be guaranteed.

## Conclusion

Looking at work-life balance through the lens of risk perception provides some useful insights. For instance, instead of just looking at the perceived risks and benefits of being / having working parents, we can analyse this in the wider context of perceived risks.

The central question of the paper was how parents and their adolescent children perceived and coped with the risks attached to, on the one hand going out to work and on the other protecting children. Where possible parents limit their working lives in a number of ways. Many parents thought it was important to be accessible to their children at the end of the school day regularly, and to be able to pick up on any troubles early on. It was mothers who tended to pro-actively seek work that fitted in with this perceived need. Non-standard working hours produced winners and losers. The key features were regularity of shifts, control over working hours and flexibility.

Young people experienced the “spillover” effects not only of working patterns, but also of parents’ job satisfaction and stress-levels. They worried if their parents were at risk physically or mentally because of their work.

Young people were, for the most part, happy with their own families work-life balance. Having a parent at home after school meant company and having someone to chat to. “Having the house to themselves” gave autonomy. The majority of our sample currently experienced a mixture of both.

When children are left unsupervised out of school hours they follow a number of parental rules about keeping safe. But parents being out at work was only one factor in young people being without adult supervision. Young people’s own activities took up an increasing amount of time at the weekends as they got older. This was the time that young people were furthest away from parental supervision. Central to parents’ attitudes to this whole area of freedom, independence, responsibility and potential danger was the fact that one of the risks that parents sought to avoid was for their children not to learn to navigate risks independently by becoming “streetwise”. In other words, to be over-protective of children was seen as a risk in itself.

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<sup>i</sup> In Spring 2004 (Walling, Annette 2005)

<sup>ii</sup> In Spring 2006 (ONS 2006)

<sup>iii</sup> Defined as 60% of median income, adjusted for household composition.

<sup>iv</sup> See Crouter et al (1999) for extensive citations; also Van den Akker and Lees (2001)

<sup>v</sup> This is what Glaser and Strauss (1967) have called “theoretical sampling”.

<sup>vi</sup> The small sample of the first set of interviews meant that we wanted to keep it as homogenous as possible. For this reason we excluded lone parent families.

<sup>vii</sup> Categorisation by household type is indicative only, since it has been derived ‘informally’ from the interviews, and not taken from self-completion forms. For instance, where a respondent answered the

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question 'Who lives in your household?' with 'Mum and dad' they have been categorised as 'Two birth-parent', without questions on blood ties. The respondents categorised as 'step-families' had actually referred to one parent as a step-dad / mum.

<sup>viii</sup> Work on younger children in lone parent households leaving benefit has shown that facilitating work is a family affair (Ridge 2007)

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