



Government  
**Equalities** Office

Putting equality at the heart of government

**Flexible working:  
benefits and barriers  
Perceptions of working  
parents**

Research conducted  
for GEO by BMRB

April 2009

# Summary of main findings

- Around half (51%) of working parents feel their relationship with their children would improve if they could work flexibly. Two-thirds (66%) of working parents agree it would be helpful to work flexibly as their children get older.
- More than half (53%) of working parents feel their job prevents them spending the amount of time they would like with their children. Mothers who work full time are more likely than fathers who work full time to agree that their job prevents them spending the amount of time they would like to spend with their children (72% and 59% respectively).
- Around half (51%) of working parents of children aged 11-16 year said they would 'help with homework' if they had more time. More than half (56%) of working parents with children under the age of six said 'read to them' when asked what they would do more of, if they had more time.
- Many working fathers feel they are missing out on key times of their children's day. A third (33%) of working fathers said they miss out on and would like to be there for breakfast with their children and just under a fifth (19%) would like to be there for bedtime.
- Around three in five (59%) working parents think that flexible working would improve staff morale. Two in five (40%) working mothers think flexible working would reduce absence.
- Many working parents can identify barriers to requesting to work flexibly, which might stop them asking their employer. Just under a third (32%) thought it would mark them out as uncommitted to their job.
- Where parents have asked to work flexibly, the majority did not seek advice on how to do it prior to asking.

# Background

Children are more likely to benefit when both parents are able to play an equal role in their upbringing. Parents who are able to work flexibly are more able to spend quality time with their children and give them the best start in life. That is why the Government introduced the right to request flexible working in 2003 for working parents with children aged up to six, and with disabled children, and extended that right to carers in April 2007. On 6th April 2009 the right was extended further to include working parents with children aged 16 and under.

Flexible working not only benefits children and families but also helps to create dynamic workplaces that can help to strengthen our economy in the future. Businesses can draw on the talents of the best people, not just those who can work nine-to-five.

This research explores what working parents think about flexible working, and the benefits it can bring for their families. It also explores their perceptions of the barriers they may face to exercising the right.

The research sets out the results from BMRB's online survey with a representative sample of 1,004 working parents of children aged 0-16 in Great Britain, who use the internet. The fieldwork was conducted in March 2009.

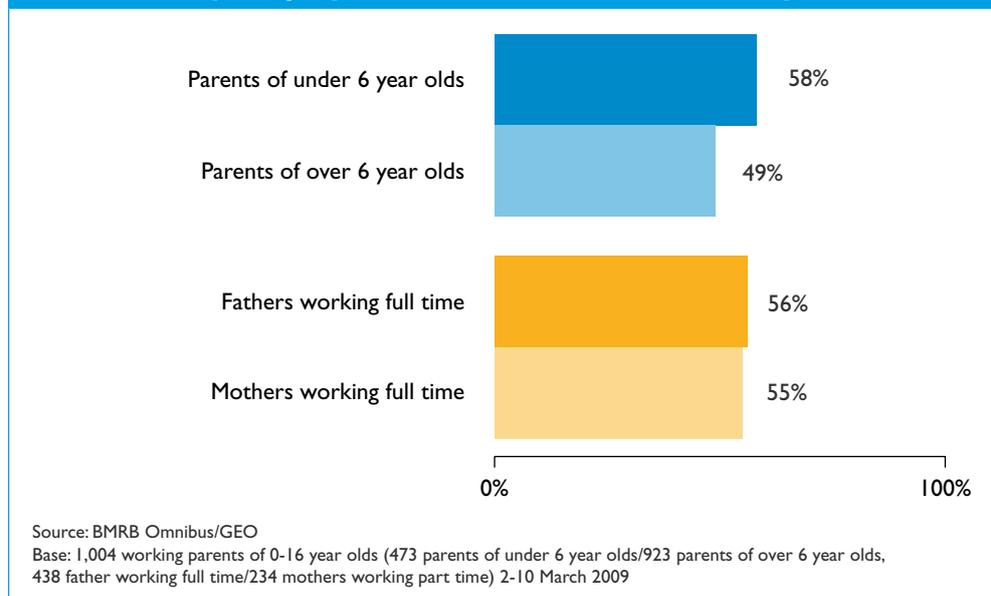
# Research findings

## Perceived benefits of flexible working

Around half (51%) of working parents believe they would have a **better relationship** with their children if their employer allowed them to work flexibly. The parents of young children tended to agree. While there were no differences by gender and full time working status: similar proportions of full time working mothers and fathers were likely to agree with the statement “I believe I would have a better relationship with my child/ children if my employer allowed me to work more flexibly” (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Thinking about your relationship with your child or children, which of the following statements do you agree with?**

**I believe I would have a better relationship with my child/ children if my employer allowed me to work flexibly**

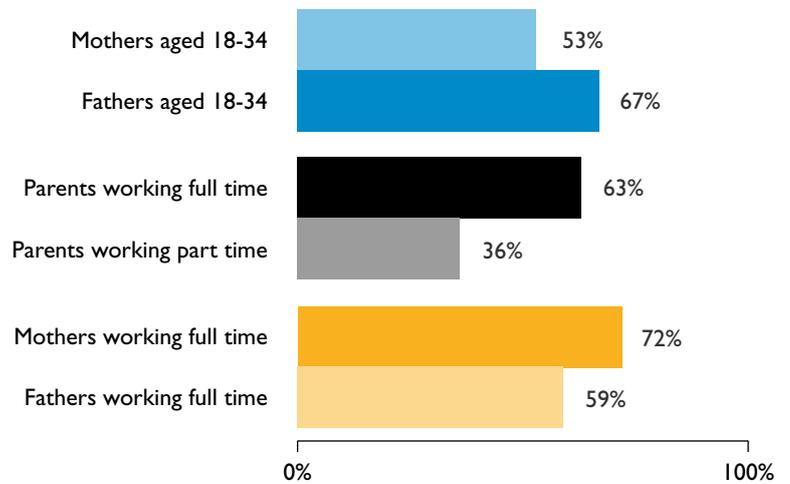


Two-thirds (66%) of working parents agree it would be helpful to work flexibly as their children get older. Around three-quarters (76%) of parents of children aged 0-3 agreed that it would be **helpful to work flexibly as their child/children get older**. Similar proportions of working mothers and fathers agreed that it would be helpful to work flexibly as their child/ children get older, although mothers of children aged under 6 years were more likely to agree strongly compared with fathers with children of the same age (48% and 35% respectively).

Flexible working could have benefits for children. Around three-quarters (74%) of working parents said they would take their children on more days out if they had more time. Half (51%) of parents of 11-16 year olds reported they would like to 'help with homework' if they had more time. Around one in two (56%) parents of children under the age of six said they would 'read to them' if they had more time.

Many parents feel their current work arrangements **prevent them from spending the amount of time they would like with their children**. This is particularly felt by parents who work full time as well as younger fathers (aged 18-34 years), as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Does your job prevent you spending the amount of time with your child/children that you would like? – Yes**



Source: BMRB Omnibus/GEO  
 Base: 1,004 working parents of 0-16 year olds (163 working mothers aged 18-34/145 fathers aged 18-34, 672 parents working full time/332 parents working part time, 234 mothers working full time/438 fathers working full time) 2-10 March 2009

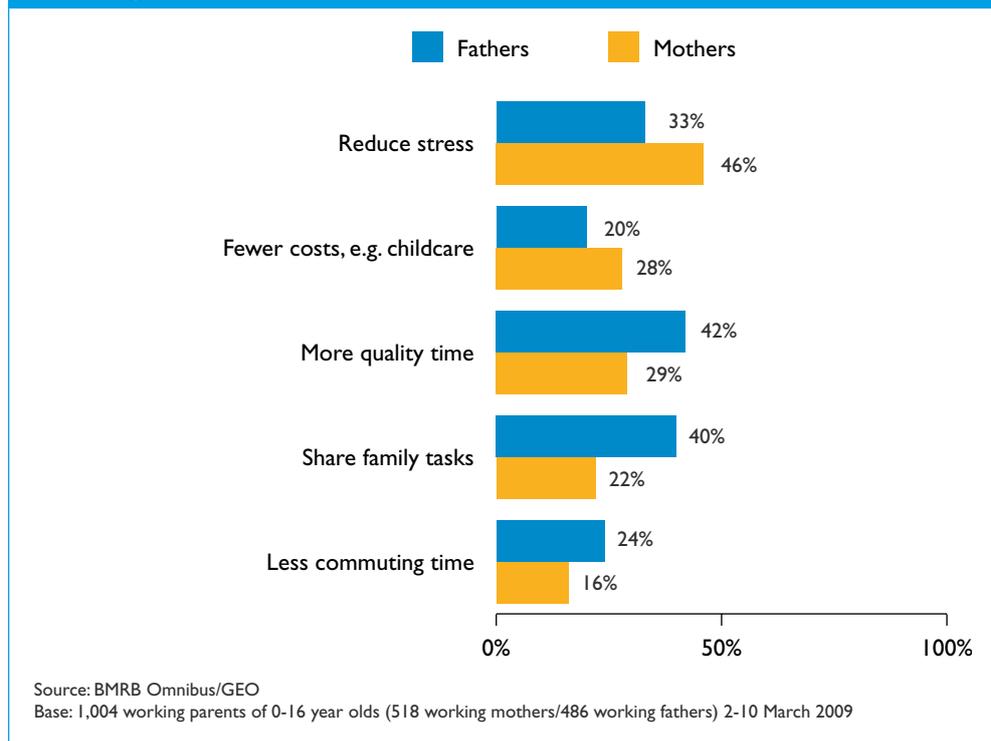
Mothers who work full time are more likely than fathers who work full time to agree that their job prevents them spending the amount of time they would like to spend with their children (72% and 59% respectively).

As well as not being able to spend time with their children, working parents currently feel that they **miss out on certain times of day when they would like to be there for their children**. Just over a third (36%) of parents reported they missed out on and would like to be there to pick their children up from school. Just under a quarter (24%) said they would like to be there for breakfast with their children.

A number of working fathers feel that they miss out on certain times of the day with their children: around two-fifths (41%) said they would like to be there to pick up the children from school, while nearly a fifth (19%) of fathers reported they miss out on and would like to be there for bedtime with their children.

Around two-fifths (39%) of working parents believed that a benefit of flexible working would be less stress.

**Figure 3: Apart from time with your children, what do you think are or would be the other main benefits of flexible working for YOU?**



In terms of the perceived benefits of flexible working to employers, around three in five (59%) working parents suggested that flexible working would be beneficial for their employer as it would lead to **happier staff** and **improve staff morale**. Around a third (34%) suggested it might help reduce absence. Mothers in particular, compared with fathers, were more likely to identify this benefit than fathers (40% and 29% respectively).

### Perceived barriers to requesting flexible working

Two-thirds (66%) of parents expressed some concern about making a request to work flexibly to their current employer which might prevent them from doing so. Around a third (32%) thought that if they made such a request that it might mark them out as being **uncommitted to their job** and just under a quarter (23%) thought that such a request may **affect their promotion** prospects.

In particular, younger parents tended to identify potential barriers to requesting flexible working, yet these are the group who feel it would be most beneficial. Around three-quarters (73%) of working parents aged 18-34 identified factors which might prevent them from asking their employer to work flexibly, compared with around three-fifths (62%) of working parents aged 35 or over. Around a third (32%) of parents aged 18-34 thought that making such a request would negatively affect their promotion chances and 36% of this group reported they thought it would mark them out as uncommitted to their job.

### Awareness of the right to request flexible working

The survey found that as well as identifying perceived barriers to requesting flexible working, many working parents demonstrated a **lack of awareness** of the right to make such a request. When asked about what might stop them asking their employer if they could work flexibly, a fifth (20%) of working parents said they did not know whether flexible working was available at their workplace and just under a fifth (18%) said they were not entitled to work flexibly.

Older parents are more likely to think they are not entitled to work flexibly than younger parents. Just under a quarter (24%) of parents aged 45-64 mentioned this compared with 16% of parents aged under 45.

The survey data also indicate that many working parents appear to be unsure about where to seek advice from. There was **no single source of information** from which parents sought advice before requesting the right to work flexibly from their employer. Parents tended to seek advice from work colleagues (7%), friends and family (4%), Direct.gov (4%) and unions (4%). However, the levels of parents seeking advice from all these sources are low.

# Conclusions

The majority of working parents perceive there to be many advantages to flexible working, for their children, themselves and their employer. Flexible working is perceived by parents to give them the opportunity to spend more quality time with their children, which is important, not just while they are young, but as they get older too.

However, there appears to be limited awareness of the right to request flexible working and working parents are unsure where to seek advice on this issue. Some working parents are concerned that making such a request might have negative consequences, either adversely affecting their promotion prospects or marking them out as uncommitted to their job. However, if parents have more advice on how to ask to work flexibly, which they can find on [Direct.gov](https://www.direct.gov.uk), as well as more clarity about the potential benefits of flexible working for their employer they may feel more confident about making a request.

# About the project

Author: Penny Bowden, BMRB.

The Government Equalities Office (GEO) commissioned BMRB Omnibus to undertake an online survey amongst working parents to measure their awareness of the right to request flexible working. The research also examined perceived barriers and benefits to flexible working.

BMRB Omnibus conducted a representative quota sample of 1,004 working parents of children aged 0-16 in Great Britain, who use the internet. The survey was conducted online between 2nd-10th March 2009. Data are weighted to ensure that demographic profiles match those for all working parents of children aged 0-16 in Great Britain who are aged 18-64 and use the internet.

This research was commissioned by GEO but the findings and recommendations are those of the authors.

# Annex I: Survey top line results by gender

- BMRB interviewed 1,004 working parents of children aged 0-16 in Great Britain, who use the internet. The fieldwork was conducted online in early March 2009.
- The data are weighted to ensure that demographic profiles match those for all working parents of children aged 0-16 in Great Britain who are aged 18-64 who use the internet.
- Where percentages do not sum to 100, this may be due to computer rounding or to multiple answers.
- Unless otherwise stated, results are based on all respondents weighted. Throughout the tables, an asterisk (\*) denotes any value of less than half a per cent, and a dash (-) a response that was not identified by anybody.

**Q1. Does your job prevent you spending the amount of time with your child/ children that you would like??**

	All	Fathers	Mothers
Yes	53%	56%	50%
No	47%	44%	50%
Unweighted base	1004	486	518

**Q2. What would you do more of with your child/children if you had the time?**

	All	Fathers	Mothers
Go on more days out	74%	77%	71%
Playing generally	61%	64%	58%
Baking/cooking	47%	34%	61%
Participate in sport/active leisure pursuits with them	44%	50%	38%
Help with homework	43%	45%	42%
Visit museums/galleries	40%	42%	38%
Read to them	38%	37%	39%
Crafts/painting	37%	29%	44%
Visit extended family	35%	32%	39%
Gardening/growing things	31%	30%	32%
Take them to watch sport	27%	39%	14%
Watch them play sport	27%	33%	21%
Play games	*	1%	-
Others	1%	1%	*
None/nothing	4%	4%	4%
Unweighted base	1004	486	518

**Q3. What time/s of day do you miss out on that you would like to be there for??**

	All	Fathers	Mothers
Breakfast	24%	33%	14%
Dropping at school	24%	30%	19%
Lunch	22%	24%	21%
Picking up from school	36%	41%	31%
Playing after school	36%	41%	32%
Dinner	17%	22%	11%
Bathtime	11%	16%	7%
Bedtime	14%	19%	10%
All time/any time	*	*	*
Day time	*	*	*
Evening	1%	1%	*
School holidays	1%	1%	1%
Weekends	2%	1%	2%
Others	1%	1%	1%
None/nothing	24%	18%	31%
Unweighted base	1004	486	518

**Q4. You will be eligible to make a request to work flexibly if your child is aged up to 16 from 1 April 2009. Thinking about asking your employer if you can work flexibly (or more flexibly if you currently do so), which of the following might stop you from asking?**

	All	Fathers	Mothers
Could mark me as not being committed to the job	32%	31%	33%
Might negatively affect my chances of promotion	23%	25%	21%
Fear of being refused	22%	22%	21%
Not knowing whether it is available at my workplace	20%	21%	19%
Worried about reaction from colleagues	18%	15%	21%
I'm not entitled to work flexibly	18%	19%	16%
It's not the right time to ask	16%	20%	13%
None of the above	34%	31%	38%
Unweighted base	1004	486	518

**Q5. If you have already asked your employer to work flexibly, did you seek advice on how to do it from any of the following sources?**

	All	Fathers	Mothers
I have not asked about this as of yet	45%	45%	45%
Work colleagues	7%	6%	7%
Friends and family	4%	5%	4%
Direct.gov	4%	5%	3%
Your union	4%	4%	3%
Citizens advice	2%	3%	1%
Magazine/newspaper articles	2%	3%	1%
Already agreed/work flexibly	1%	1%	1%
Others	1%	1%	1%
None/nothing	38%	39%	38%
Unweighted base	1004	486	518

**Q6. Apart from time with your children, what do you think are or would be the other main benefits of flexible working for YOU?**

	All	Fathers	Mothers
Reduced stress	39%	33%	46%
More quality time with my partner	36%	42%	29%
Being able to more evenly share family tasks with my partner	31%	40%	22%
Fewer costs – for childminding/nursery for example	24%	20%	28%
Less commuting time (e.g. working from home)	20%	24%	16%
Job security if my employer is reducing my hours instead of making me redundant	11%	11%	10%
Flexibility with working day (start/finish times/ around school run)	1%	1%	1%
Time/more time for myself/own interests	1%	1%	1%
More time/less stress for family childminders (e.g. Grandparents)	*	-	1%
I don't believe there would be any benefits for me	19%	18%	21%
Unweighted base	1004	486	518

**Q7. What do you think are, or would be, the main benefits of flexible working for your EMPLOYER?**

	All	Fathers	Mothers
Happier staff/better morale	59%	56%	61%
Reducing absence	34%	29%	40%
Improved staff retention	29%	26%	32%
Incentive to attract staff	26%	29%	24%
Increased productivity	17%	18%	16%
Cost savings	15%	15%	14%
Being able to change the hours of business depending on when staff wanted to work	11%	12%	9%
Being able to stay in business during the recession	7%	10%	4%
Not applicable – Self employed	*	*	1%
Staff available to work longer days/unsocial hours	*	1%	*
I don't believe there would be any benefits for my employer	19%	19%	19%
Unweighted base	1004	486	518

**Q8. To what extent do you agree or disagree that it would be helpful for you to work flexibly as your children get older?**

	All	Fathers	Mothers
Strongly agree (5)	32%	27%	36%
Tend to agree (4)	34%	36%	33%
Neither agree nor disagree (3)	20%	21%	19%
Tend to disagree (2)	7%	9%	4%
Strongly disagree (1)	2%	2%	2%
AGREE	66%	64%	68%
DISAGREE	9%	11%	6%
Don't Know	5%	4%	6%
Unweighted base	1004	486	518

**Q9. Thinking about your relationship with your child or children, which of the following statements do you agree with?**

	All	Fathers	Mothers
I don't believe I would have a better relationship with my child / children if my employer allowed me to work more flexibly	21%	21%	20%
Not applicable, I am still on maternity/paternity leave	2%	1%	3%
None of these	15%	12%	19%
Don't Know	11%	12%	10%
Unweighted base	1004	486	518



Government Equalities Office  
5th Floor  
Eland House  
Bressenden Place  
London SW1E 5DU

Tel: 020 7944 0601  
Email: [enquiries@geo.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@geo.gsi.gov.uk)  
**[www.equalities.gov.uk](http://www.equalities.gov.uk)**

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