

The State of the Modern Family

Citizens'
forum

The Millennium Cohort Survey (MCS), the most comprehensive study of its kind, surveyed nearly 30,000 parents at the start of the millennium and again in 2003. The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) has combined a new analysis of this study with other recent research to identify key trends in the shape and behaviour of new families in the 21st century.

The study confirms the demise of the 'breadwinner dad' and 'homemaker mum'. Both parents today often want to contribute to the family income and be more closely involved with their children. The MCS has found that there is no link between a mother working and developmental problems for their children. It also shows that formal childcare at 9-10 months is linked to a lower likelihood of developmental problems.

The key challenge facing society today is the divide between 'have' and 'have-not' families. For the 'have-nots', this means less paid time-off work for both parents with their babies and less money on the table, which this research suggests can lead not just to poverty but also to more child development problems. Increases in paid paternity and maternity leave and the expansion of formal childcare have helped to reduce this divide but more support is needed for low-income families.

The MCS, along with EOC research on shared caring, has found that better outcomes for children are delivered by:

- High family income and educational attainment of both parents.
- Formal childcare while the mother is working.
- Positive involvement of the father.

But income divides are creating families of 'haves' and 'have-nots'. Low-income families were less likely to have:

- Both parents in employment.
- Adequate income during maternity and paternity leave that is topped up by their employer.
- Access to formal childcare.
- A range of family friendly provisions offered by their employer.



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A social revolution in fatherhood is taking place

The MCS illustrates how crucial fathers' roles and behaviour are to their children's development. This comes in the midst of a social revolution in fatherhood, when dads report feeling as confident at caring as their partners and want to spend more time with their children. Family policy must therefore look at the roles and needs of both parents if it is to fully benefit children.

- The MCS found that developmental problems at age three were more common where the father took no time off at the birth of the child or did not use flexible working.
- Millennium dads were heavily involved with their three-year-old children; half read to them daily and over three-quarters played with them daily.
- The EOC report *Dads and their Babies* found that 4 out of 5 new fathers said they would be happy to stay at home and look after their baby.¹
- 70% of new dads want to spend more time with their children.¹
- In 2005, only 44% of mothers with babies believed that women are naturally better than men at childcaring.¹⁰

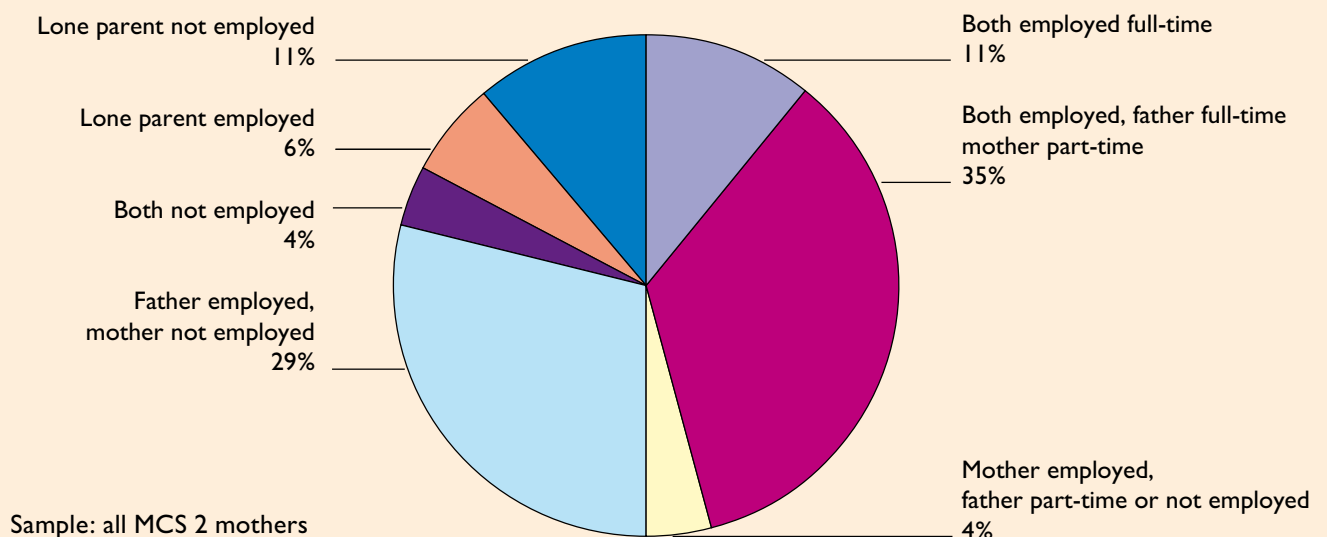
Both parents want time off with the baby

Income was a crucial factor in determining how much paid time off millennium families had with their babies. In poorer families, mothers returned to work earlier and dads had less access to paternity leave. New rights to longer paid maternity leave and paid paternity leave have reduced this divide, but many dads in low-income families are still unable to afford time off.

- The MCS found that in 2001, 49% of mothers employed in semi-skilled or unskilled occupations returned to work within three months of the birth compared to 28% of mothers in managerial and professional occupations.
- 80% of dads took time off around the birth of their child.
- *Dads and their Babies* found that in 2005, two years after new entitlements to paid leave came into force, 90% of mothers took at least six months leave while 94% of dads in work took time off around the birth of their child.¹
- 76% of working dads in high-income families took at least two weeks leave compared to 64% of dads in low-income families.
- Despite having less access to family-friendly policies, the MCS found that low-income fathers were more likely to use flexible working where it is available and recent research shows they are keener to use additional paternity leave.

The 'breadwinner dad, homemaker mum' family model represented less than 3 in 10 millennium families.

Millennium families when their child is 3, partnership and economic status



Working parents want to provide both income and childcare to support their family

The MCS identified time spent with children and family income as crucial to children's development and health. Parents are increasingly using flexible working to combine work with family commitments but there are still limited opportunities, often attracting low pay and poor prospects. The increase in working mothers is well documented. However, a significant minority have never worked, which is connected with being a teenage mother, having few or no educational qualifications and living in a low-income family. The MCS uncovers a strong link between never working, child poverty and developmental difficulties.

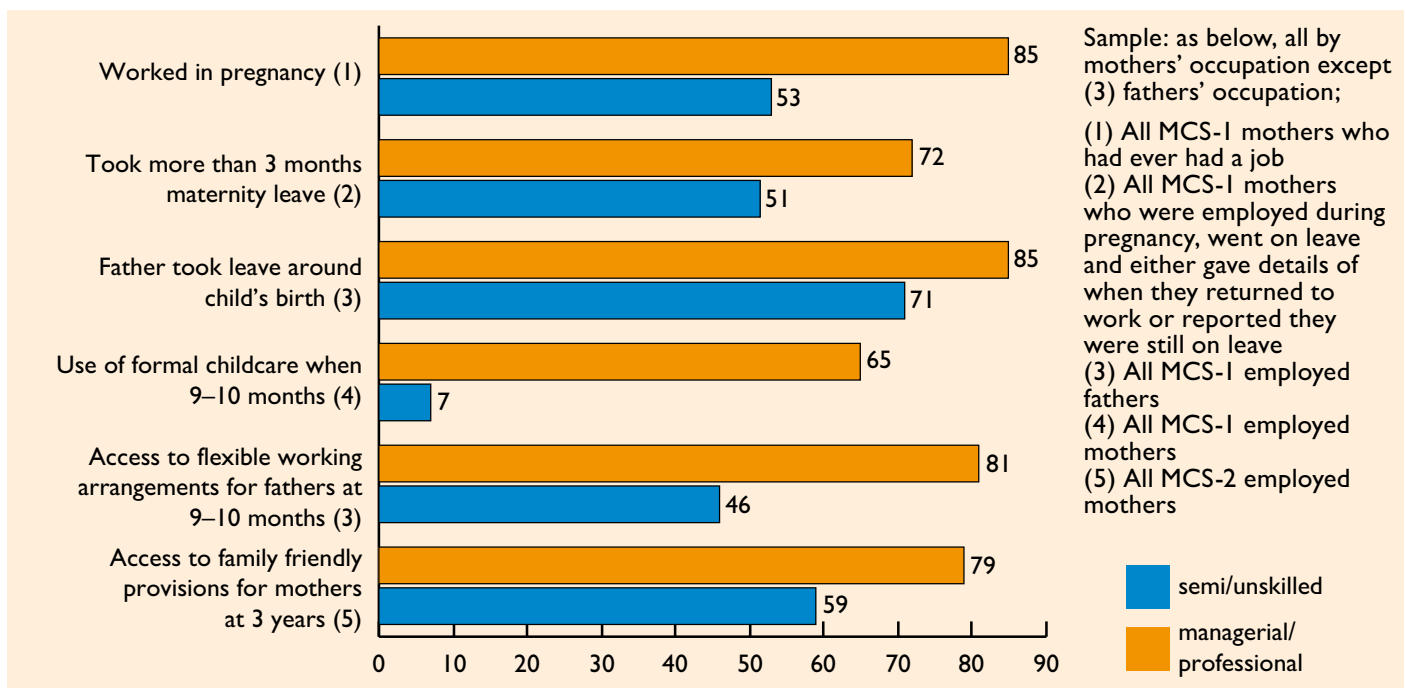
- The MCS found that 70% of degree-educated mothers with a child aged three worked, compared to 23% of mothers with no qualifications.
- 64% of working mothers with children under five work part-time. Women working part-time earn 37.6% less than men working full-time.
- 63% of full-time working fathers felt they did not spend enough time with their 9–10 month baby.
- The EOC's *Working outside the box* report found that half of the working population, 52% of men and 48% of women, say they want to work more flexibly.²

Formal childcare is good for children but too expensive for many parents

The MCS found that formal childcare at 9–10 months reduces the likelihood of development problems amongst children. But in 2001, access to formal childcare was mainly used by richer families. Access to formal childcare is increasing but it remains too expensive for many parents.

- In 2001 two-thirds of mothers employed in managerial and professional occupations used formal childcare compared to less than one in ten of those in semi-skilled and unskilled occupations.
- 57% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi working mothers used grandparents for childcare, compared to 45% of white working mothers.
- Formal childcare was most popular where both parents worked full-time, while fathers were the most popular carers of children where the mother was the main earner in the family.
- A DfES report found that the number of families using formal childcare and early years provision increased from 31% in 2001 to 41% in 2004.³
- The Daycare Trust estimates that parents in the UK pay on average 70% towards the cost of childcare, compared to 30% in Europe.⁴

The MCS has uncovered a significant divide in access to family support between richer professional families and poorer low-skilled families.



The ageing population and the demands on parents and carers

Support for modern families does not just mean childcare. Millions of people care for older relatives or friends and 1 in 4 carers also have dependent children to look after.⁵ The increasing expectation of disabled and older people to be able to live independently can only be achieved by effective social support services. At the moment much of this support is provided by unpaid carers, many of whom face real difficulties in finding work that fits with their caring responsibilities.

- 301,000 people take on a caring responsibility every year.⁶
- Over the next 30 years the number of carers could increase to 9 million.⁶
- Nearly 1 in 5 carers had left or turned down a job because of their caring responsibilities.⁷
- Extending the right to request flexible working in April 2007 will benefit 2.6 million carers.⁸
- 3 in 4 of people believe that more resources should be invested to help disabled people live independently in their own homes.⁹

Notes

Unless mentioned otherwise, all data are from: Dex, S. and Ward, K. (2007) *Parental care and employment in early childhood. Analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) Sweeps 1 and 2*. Manchester: Equal Opportunities Commission.

Endnotes

1. Thompson, M., Vinter, L. and Young, V. (2005) *Dads and their babies: leave arrangements in the first year*. Manchester: Equal Opportunities Commission.
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8. Department of Trade and Industry (2006) *Work and Families Act 2006. Draft flexible working regulations – summary of responses and Government response to the 2006 consultation*. London: Department of Trade and Industry.
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Providing support for families is the new political battleground

Traditionally considered a private sphere and outside the realm of the government, people now recognise the role of the state in supporting families. EOC polling has found that two-thirds of people say politicians risk making themselves less electable if they do not directly support parents and carers.⁹

To increase support for families the EOC wants to see:

- Targeted support for low-income fathers, who often cannot afford to take paternity leave without it being topped up by their employer.
- Parental choice over who looks after the baby, with the early introduction of the promised additional paternity leave, which can be taken by either parent in the second 6 months.
- Greater access to affordable childcare, so that lower income families are able to use it.
- Helping mothers who have never worked, but would like to do so, to develop their skills and find work that suits their families. This would help to break the cycle of child poverty amongst many of these families.
- The extension of the right to request flexible working to everyone, so that flexible working opportunities become the norm in every workplace and become more widely available.
- Better social support services to help people with a disability or long-term health condition to live independently.

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