

Sharing the earning and caregiving

The early days of fatherhood can feel stressful if you're worrying about money or struggling to find the time you'd like to have at home.

Male breadwinners and female caregivers

For a long time, fathers in the UK – and most other countries – have been held responsible for earning money, and mothers for childcare and domestic work. In recent decades, work-care arrangements have become more diverse, as more women stay in paid work after becoming mothers, and fathers' involvement in unpaid childcare has increased¹.

But we are still a long way from equality between men and women, and the 'mother as primary caregiver, father as main breadwinner' model remains the norm in many UK families. Some parents may be happy with this arrangement, but there's a growing awareness that both mothers and fathers can lose out as a result. Many working mothers experience a 'motherhood penalty'² in their careers, while fathers can miss the opportunity to develop close, nurturing relationships with their children³.

Why does this model persist?

Although parents may want to spend equal time with their children, many drift into identifying a main carer and a main earner – and current UK employment and childcare policies effectively enforce this model (particularly in the baby's first year) through gendered parental leave entitlements, limited options for flexible and part-time work, and expensive, inaccessible childcare.

Our gendered statutory parenting leave system restricts choice, and steers parents into a traditional division of childcare. Employed mothers

¹ Schmidt, E.-M. (2018) 'Breadwinning as care? The meaning of paid work in mothers' and fathers' constructions of parenting', *Community, Work & Family*, 21(4), pp. 445–462

² The 'motherhood penalty' refers to mothers' lower earnings and career advancement. Pregnant Then Screwed found that in pay terms, mothers in 2023 earned [24% less](#) per hour than fathers

³ Gaunt, R., Jordan, A., Tarrant, A., Chanamoto, N., Pinho, M., Wezyk, A. (2022). Caregiving dads, breadwinning mums: Transforming gender in work and childcare? [Link](#)

are entitled to 52 weeks' leave in the baby's first year – often leading them down the path of taking the sole or main responsibility for childcare, and compromising their working lives by taking longer leave, working part-time, or seeking flexibility at the expense of her career advancement⁴.

Employed fathers, meanwhile, are eligible to just two weeks' paternity leave, paid at a rate so low as to be unaffordable in many families – especially given that in most families the father is the higher earner⁵.

If you're an average-earning man, you're effectively swallowing a pay cut of more than £1,000 if you take your full two weeks' paternity leave entitlement at the statutory rate, compared to what you'd earn if you kept working⁶. And if you're self-employed, not classed as an 'employee', or changed employer up to six months before you apply for your leave, you aren't eligible in the first place. [Understand your rights here](#).

This sets families up for gendered traditionalism: fathers in couple households with dependent children are still much more likely than mothers to work full-time, especially when the children are young⁷; and to work long hours⁸. As a result, they lose out on family time and the opportunity to develop close intimate connections with their children as main caregivers⁹.

Depressingly, the longer term impacts of this on father-child closeness are clear to see: although surveys find that adolescent children consider

⁴ Gaunt, R., Jordan, A., Tarrant, A., Chanamoto, N., Pinho, M., Wezyk, A. (2022). Caregiving dads, breadwinning mums: Transforming gender in work and childcare? [Link](#)

⁵ Among UK families with at least one working parent, only one mother in five (22%) earns even half the family income; even in families where both parents are in paid work, only a third of mothers contribute half or more. Cory, G. and Stirling, A. (2015), 'Who's breadwinning in Europe? A comparative analysis of maternal breadwinning in Great Britain and Germany.' London: Institute for Public Policy Research

⁶ Our calculations show that if an average-earning, full-time working man took two weeks' statutory paternity pay, he would be £1,023.04 worse off, compared to what he'd usually bring home in that time. Qualifying employee fathers in the UK are eligible to two weeks' paternity leave. The statutory rate for paternity pay is £184.03 per week (from April 2024). Two weeks' statutory paternity pay is £368.06 (2 x £184.03). Two weeks' pay at the UK average for a full-time working man (£695.60 per week: Office for National Statistics, April 2023: median weekly full-time pay for full-time men) is £1,391.20 (2 x £695.60). The difference is £1,023.04.

⁷ 84.6% of fathers, and 34.2% of mothers, with a youngest dependent child aged 0-2 were in full-time paid employment. Source: ONS 'Working and Workless Households in the UK' (Oct-Dec 2022).

⁸ In couple families, 75.4% of fathers (53.1% of mothers) with a youngest dependent child aged 0-2 work 30-44 hours per week and 18.1% of fathers (4% of mother) work more than 45 hours a week. Source: ONS 'Labour Force Survey' (April - June 2021).

⁹ Gaunt, R., Jordan, A., Tarrant, A., Chanamoto, N., Pinho, M., Wezyk, A. (2022). Caregiving dads, breadwinning mums: Transforming gender in work and childcare? [Link](#)

their relationship with their father to be important¹⁰, many more confide in their mother than in their father¹¹; some lose touch¹²; and US research found more fathers than mothers of young adults saying they were less involved in their lives than they'd have liked to be¹³.

If you're lucky, and you and your partner are a) eligible for shared parental leave, and b) can make the finances work (unfortunately this is only true for a small minority of families¹⁴!) it's well worth taking the opportunity: families who have done so have found it transformative. Check your eligibility [here](#) and explore [these case studies](#), developed by researchers at Manchester Alliance Business School, with support from Working Families and the Fatherhood Institute.

Similarly, if your employer offers an enhanced paternity package (most don't, and those who do tend only to offer enhanced pay for two weeks, rather than a longer leave), take it. The more leave you can take, the better – and if you really want to optimise gender equality in your household, try to take a chunk of leave later in your baby's first year, where you look after them SOLO. Throwing yourself in the deep end as primary caregiver, even for a few weeks, can make a huge difference to how both you and your baby's mother collaborate as co-parents.

Lessons from the Covid19 pandemic lockdowns

The Covid19 pandemic lockdowns offered an alternative approach to paid employment, with employed parents increasingly working from home and therefore gaining time thanks to spending less time commuting¹⁵.

¹⁰ 68% of 13–14-year-olds reporting getting on 'very well' with their father in a 2013-14 study (Baker et al, 2014, cited in Fatherhood Institute, 2023. The kids are alright: Adolescents and their fathers in the UK. [Research Review](#)).

¹¹ 51% of 11-14 year olds confided in their mother and 28% in their father (Keung and Rees, 2010, cited in Fatherhood Institute, 2023. The kids are alright: Adolescents and their fathers in the UK. [Research Review](#)).

¹² 15% of 17-year-old children were living with or in touch with their birth father, according to data from the Millennium Cohort Study, cited in Fatherhood Institute, 2023. The kids are alright: Adolescents and their fathers in the UK. [Research Review](#)).

¹³ 33% of fathers and 22% of mothers with a child aged 18-34 said this, in a [study](#) by Pew Research Center.

¹⁴ The Government's [evaluation of shared parental leave](#) found that 1% of eligible mothers and 5% of eligible fathers had taken SPL.

¹⁵ Fatherhood Institute, 2022. 'Closing the Gap'

As a result, working fathers spent an increased amount of time with their children (with the majority reporting a better father-child relationship¹⁶) and on domestic work¹⁷; whilst working mothers used the extra time to increase their engagement in paid work¹⁸. These trends continued for some fathers after the lockdowns ended¹⁹.

Increased home and hybrid working positively impacted family life for many fathers, improving relationships with their children. Visibility of caregiving fathers has increased, but societal perceptions still position fathers as secondary to mothers in this role.²⁰

How can I balance my roles at work and at home?

Structural barriers prevent many parents from sharing earning and caring more equally. As well as parenting leave (see above), these include the lack of flexible working options, and the high cost of paid-for childcare²¹.

The good news is that you now have a [right to request flexible working](#), which can be a gamechanger in allowing you to juggle your earning and caregiving responsibilities. Working from home, flexible hours, reducing your hours, and seeking work which is output-based (rather than time-based) can all be helpful in managing work and childcare²².

The bad news is that fathers who try to work flexibly can face pushback from their bosses and colleagues – something researchers have termed ‘fatherhood forfeits’. Dads may be viewed suspiciously, face mockery, and be seen as idle when they seek flexibility – and this can act as a barrier to paternal involvement in caregiving²³.

¹⁶ Among a representative sample of fathers of children aged under 12 surveyed during the spring 2020 covid19 lockdown, 65% of all fathers and 73% of fathers who were full-time at home, reported a better father-child relationship after the spring 2020 lockdown. Burgess, A. and Goldman, R. 2021 ‘Lockdown Fathers: the untold story’ *Contemporary Fathers in the UK* London: Fatherhood Institute

¹⁷ Fatherhood Institute, 2022. ‘Closing the Gap’

¹⁸ Fatherhood Institute, 2022. ‘Closing the Gap’

¹⁹ Working fathers’ time spent working from home, as a proportion of overall time spent on paid work (excluding commuting), rose from 6% in 2014/15 to 37% in 2022. Data from ONS (2022), collated and analysed by Fatherhood Institute in ‘Closing the Gap’, December 2022.

²⁰ Kelland, J. (2023) ‘Fatherhood Forfeits post-Covid’ [Link](#)

²¹ Gaunt, R., Jordan, A., Tarrant, A., Chanamoto, N., Pinho, M., Wezyk, A. (2022). Caregiving dads, breadwinning mums: Transforming gender in work and childcare? [Link](#)

²² Gaunt, R., Jordan, A., Tarrant, A., Chanamoto, N., Pinho, M., Wezyk, A. (2022). Caregiving dads, breadwinning mums: Transforming gender in work and childcare? [Link](#)

²³ Kelland, Jasmine, Duncan Lewis, and Virginia Fisher. 2022. “Viewed with Suspicion, Considered Idle and Mocked-Working Caregiving Fathers and Fatherhood Forfeits.” *Gender, Work & Organization* 29(5), 1578–1593

There's no simple answer to this, although hopefully the new Day 1 right for any employee to request flexible working, wider cultural acceptance of dads' caregiving roles²⁴, and culture-change initiatives like Elliott Rae's [#ParentingOutLoud](#) campaign, will make it progressively easier for fathers like you to achieve the work-life balance you seek.

²⁴ In the [British Social Attitudes survey](#), the percentage of respondents agreeing that a man's job is to earn money and a woman's is to look after the home and family declined by 39 percentage points from 48% in 1987 to 9% in 2022.