



For both fathers and mothers, engagement with children is greatest in the preschool years and, between 2000 and 2005, the time fathers of pre-schoolers spent engaging with their young children rose from a mean of 54 minutes to 84 minutes – a remarkable half-hour increase over just five years (O'Brien et al, 2015; figures adapted from Lader et al. 2006).

Crucially, in the past dads might have looked after children under the supervision of mothers, but now they are much more likely to be 'in charge'. A fifth (21%) of fathers of under-fives are solely responsible for childcare at some point during the working week; and among fathers of school-aged children, 43% provide care before/after school (EHRC, 2009). Increasingly, children in separated families are spending more time at 'dad's place' (Cheadle et al. 2010) with many of these separated fathers prioritising childcare over work (Gatrell et al. 2015).

So while the pressure on dads to 'bring home the bacon' still exists, there are new pressures on them to be involved fathers as well. These come from their partner, themselves, and from cultural expectations (Scott & Clery, 2013).

## Dads and work-life balance

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, it is dads, rather than mums, who are least happy with their work-life balance. Despite, and perhaps because of, their much greater involvement in their children's lives, many dads struggle to carve out time with them: in 2012, 47% of men said that in the previous year, worries about family responsibilities had interfered with their concentration at work, and 67% reported that time spent at work had stopped them from fulfilling family responsibilities (Scott & Clery, 2013). Fathers are worst affected: a recent poll of 1,000 dads found that almost two-thirds (62%) had missed a parents' evening, and a third had missed 'most or all' of their children's Christmas plays (Kirkova, 2015).

A quarter (27%) of parents feel resentful towards their employer about their work and family balance, according to Working Families' Modern Families Index – and fathers are more likely than mothers to feel this way (31% vs 24%). Resentment is particularly pronounced amongst younger fathers: figures rise to 45% for fathers aged 16-25 and 36% for fathers aged 26-35 (Working Families, 2015).

## Negative factors

Working Families suggests this resentment arises from a lack of flexible working opportunities; an employer culture not conducive to work-life balance; line managers opposed to flexible working; employees' lack of control over their own workload; and workloads that are difficult to deal with because of their volume, intensity, or both. A large quantitative study has found these kinds of factors having a profound, negative impact on fathers' mental health (Cooklin et al., 2015). This, naturally, will have substantial impact on their work performance as well as on their family lives. Separation and divorce often follow, costing employers dear in terms of reduced productivity and fathers' increased physical ill health.

And evidence suggests that there's a strong gendered element to all this. Understandably, employers are more used to recognising and supporting women's caring roles; it's structural, thanks

to our 52-week maternity leave vs 2-week paternity leave model – the most gendered in the developed world.

Recent evidence suggests that many working fathers in Scotland had not been offered family friendly arrangements (including shared parental leave) and flexible working options, or were unaware of the availability of such options in their workplace. Many more mothers than fathers reported having access to part-time working as well as choosing to work part-time after the birth of their child; a similar pattern was seen in relation to job-sharing. Scottish fathers working for small employers, and those on the lowest incomes, are much less likely to take paternity, parental and annual leave after the birth of their child. (Kadar-Satat and Koslowski, 2015).

## Changing attitudes

Shared Parental Leave offers a great opportunity for employers to start to shift the balance and embrace the goal of healthy work-life balance for dads as well as mums. The universal right to request flexible working can also help all of us rethink how best to organise our time and priorities.

Things won't change overnight. Fathers can feel stymied by their commitment to breadwinning; and even if on paper it's no longer the case, many men feel that flexible and less-than-full-time working options are less open to them than to their female colleagues.

Younger fathers in particular may lack confidence that their requests for work-life reconciliation will be heard sympathetically – justifiably, perhaps, given that they're likely to be in relatively junior positions.

Many dads still don't feel comfortable discussing work-life issues with their employer, or are concerned about the acceptability of taking time off work for family reasons. In fact, more than a third (36%) of dads surveyed for the Modern Families Index said they had faked being sick to meet family obligations, and 44% had lied or bent the truth about their family responsibilities that got in the way of work. For dads aged 16-35 these figures rose to 48% and 58% respectively.

Such untruths speak volumes about employers' failure to establish an open and honest dialogue with men about their fatherhood. The need to address this is not just about fairness or 'fatherhood and apple pie' – it's about cold, hard cash too.

## The bottom line

Work absence has been estimated to cost employers an average of £554 per employee each year (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2015). And evidence about the impact of separation on men's working lives suggests that the cost of losing and having to replace male employees, and of their work absences, has the potential to be huge (Fatherhood Institute, 2012).

There's much more employers could be doing to support dads through difficult times, and more generally to allow dads to 'own' their fatherhood, and be honest and upfront about their domestic worlds and struggles, in a manner most of us would consider 'normal' for working mums.

In these employers' resources for Year of the Dad, we outline some key steps towards making clear to men as well as women that being actively involved in family life, and shaping their work around it, is a genuine and realistic option, rather than career suicide.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The most up-to-date 'sweep' of MTUS time diaries has been taking place during 2014-15, but analysis had only just begun and reporting was scant, at time of writing.

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