

**JUGGLING ACTS: HOW PARENTS WORKING NON-STANDARD HOURS
ARRANGE CARE FOR THEIR PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN**

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Abstract

Little is known about the childcare arrangements of New Zealand parents who work non-standard hours (outside the hours of Monday to Friday 8.00 am to 5.00 pm). This research took an exploratory case study approach to understand how some parents juggle the complexity of their family and non-standard work commitments. Twenty-two parents and three grandparents, plus employers in seven workplaces, were interviewed. The study found that the nature of non-standard work -- such as very early starts, working overnight or weekends, and being on-call -- meant more planning was required, and usually a mix of different types of care were used to meet parents' childcare needs.

BACKGROUND

Finding a balance between work and family commitments is a challenge faced by all working parents with dependent children. Where parents have pre-school-aged children and are working non-standard hours, the challenge is more complex.

Early childhood education (ECE) services for children before they start school can help parents and caregivers to balance their family responsibilities and paid work. Access to quality ECE enables a family to make choices about its lifestyle, workforce participation and other activities. High-quality ECE also has positive educational and social outcomes for children (Ministry of Education 2008).

The Families Commission was interested in exploring why some families face barriers to accessing and participating in ECE. The accessibility, availability and affordability of childcare are issues that have been raised in previous Families Commission consultations with families. Consequently, in 2008 the Families Commission undertook two research projects about participation in ECE. This paper describes one of those studies. The other project interviewed parents of pre-school children who had recently migrated to New Zealand and for whom English was their second language. The latter project was published in December 2008. Both these studies are part of the Families Commission's "Even Up" work programme on paid parental leave, out-of-school services and flexible work.

INTRODUCTION

People who work non-standard hours tend to have a different rhythm or routine to their days and week from people who work standard hours. Their sleep patterns may be different. Their

¹ The Families Commission undertook this research project in partnership with Roberta Hill and Ken Wilson from the Centre for Research on Work, Education and Business (WEB Research). The researchers acknowledge the parents and employers whose experiences form the basis of this research report. We also acknowledge the assistance of the research team: Karen Stewart, Karen Wong, Anne Broome and Helen Moore.

access to services may be more limited -- they may be working or sleeping when banks, shops and childcare services are open. The hours they work may be antisocial -- they may be working or sleeping when family and friends socialise. Their days of work may also be constantly changing, so it is more difficult to establish a routine in their household.

There are also advantages to non-standard work. Some people choose to work non-standard hours so they can be at home with their pre-school-aged children during the day, or when their children return home from school. Some couples choose to work “mirror” shifts for this reason. Pay rates can be better for jobs requiring non-standard hours. Seasonal work can provide work opportunities for people living in rural communities.

The Department of Labour’s 2004 work/life balance consultation raised long working hours, multiple job-holding and working unsociable hours as key issues affecting New Zealand workers, with stress the main manifestation of imbalance. A Department of Labour survey (Fursman 2006) of 1,100 employers and 2,000 employees found that, of the workers in the survey:

- 40% had variable hours
- 18% worked shifts, with two-thirds working rotating shifts
- 22% worked at least some of their hours between 10.00 pm and 6.00 am.

This paper describes an exploratory study undertaken by the Families Commission of how parents working non-standard hours make care arrangements for their pre-school-aged children. The purpose of the research was to gain a better understanding of the issues for parents who work non-standard hours when they access ECE. Three case studies are included at the end of this paper to illustrate, in the parents’ own words, how some families in the study managed their childcare and work commitments.

METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of this study, “non-standard hours” were defined as paid work where either the hours are regular but outside standard working hours (8.00 am to 5.00 pm, Monday to Friday), or where hours are irregular (for example, rotational shift-work) and may be unpredictable.

We selected a range of industries, occupations and workplaces where non-standard hours are worked. Approaches were made by letter, followed up by phone calls to management and human resources staff at each workplace. Once the employer consented to participating in the study, they facilitated access to employees who were parents. Interviews were then arranged between each parent and the researchers at a time and place convenient to the parent and the employer.

We recruited parents with pre-school-aged children:

- who worked non-standard hours or days
- who needed access to ECE services outside standard hours and days of work (Monday to Friday, 8.00 am to 5.00 pm)
- whose children were cared for while they worked by someone other than a primary caregiver or parent of the child, which could include an extended family member (such as a grandparent)
- who made, or jointly made, the decision about how the child would be cared for.

Twenty-two parents (19 mothers and three fathers), three grandmothers, and employers in seven workplaces were interviewed in the following non-standard workplaces: freezing industry, recruitment centre, rest home carers, airport quarantine officers, midwives, and horticultural seasonal workers. Two semi-structured interview schedules were developed: one for parents and one for employers.

Although the primary purpose of the study was to explore what type of ECE parents working non-standard hours use, we were also aware that other types of care are likely to be used. We categorised these two types of care as “formal” (ECE) and “informal”. Formal care or ECE includes: education and care centres (sometimes referred to as daycare or crèche); home-based services; kindergartens; kōhanga reo; licence-exempt playgroups; and parent support and development programmes. Informal care includes: care provided by a family member such as a grandparent, aunt or uncle, older sibling, or step-child; baby-sitter; neighbour; friend; or work colleague.

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the Families Commission Ethics Committee. All participants were given information sheets outlining the aims of the study, what their participation would involve, that information would be confidential, and that recordings of interviews would be destroyed at the conclusion of the research. All participants signed consent forms.

Since little is known about the childcare arrangements of New Zealand parents working non-standard hours, an exploratory case study approach was used to allow an in-depth consideration of the parents’ experiences. The small size of the study does not, however, allow for the findings to be generalised to the wider population of New Zealand parents who are engaged in work with non-standard hours. It was also not possible to make comparisons across the parents included in the study on the basis of their age, gender or ethnicity, or the number of children they had. Parents who could not find a balance between their childcare needs and their non-standard work, and therefore were not working, were not interviewed. Further research would be useful to explore the barriers to ECE and issues faced by these parents.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The form of non-standard work that presented the most challenge to parents in the study was shifts that started early in the morning, went overnight, or were during the weekend. Some forms of non-standard work, particularly on-call and seasonal work, meant parents were significantly less able to plan ahead and make childcare arrangements. As noted by one mother interviewed in the study:

“Although we have daycare, it doesn’t really help us at all with work as such. The hours just don’t cover what we do ... it is not ever going to cover the hours that I work.” (Airport quarantine officer)

Consequently, parents in the study used different types of informal care and formal ECE services, and often a mixture of both. Informal care included grandparents, other family

members, step-children, friends, colleagues and neighbours. Informal care was usually -- though not always -- unpaid.

The availability and willingness of their partner to actively participate in the childcare arrangements was significant to the parents interviewed in this study. Parents worked together as a unit to support each other's work commitments and complemented each other's care of the children. Many partners had flexibility in their work to allow them to start later, finish earlier or work from home. Some parents chose to work mirror shifts so that their pre-schooler could be cared for predominantly at home (for an example, see Case Study X).

Many pre-schoolers were cared for at some time by their grandparents while their parents worked. Eleven grandmothers and one grandfather cared for their grandchildren predominantly on their own, while two grandchildren were cared for by both their grandparents. Some grandparents lived in the same household as the pre-schooler. Others were involved in transporting children between an ECE service and the child's home before a parent returned home from work. Some grandparents had made significant changes in their lives so that they could care for their grandchildren, such as moving cities and changing jobs (for an example, see Case Study Y). In some cases, grandparents were paid or compensated for the time they spent caring for their grandchildren. Parents in the study were conscious, however, of not overburdening grandparents for such reasons as health issues, work commitments and the other social activities they were involved in.

Formal ECE services used by parents in the study included kindergarten, education and care services, home-based services and *kōhanga reo*. Most ECE services used by parents in the study were situated in the family's home neighbourhood. Parents living in rural locations who worked early shifts tended to use home-based caregivers who were able to begin caring for the children from around 6.00 am. Other parents with early starts relied on their partner or grandparents to care for their children early in the morning.

All but one ECE service was offering 20 hours free ECE for three- and four-year-olds. With just one exception, the parents in the study seemed to be receiving their entitlements for free ECE, the Childcare Subsidy and Working for Families. Many expressed gratitude for this funding, and it seemed to ease some of the pressures on them and their family.

Parents were asked about their satisfaction with ECE services, and mostly they described very good experiences. They described how the care provided had positive effects on their children, and spoke highly of their children's caregivers. However, we also observed that some children were attending multiple childcare services in one day (up to four in a day) or were in care for long periods (up to 57½ hours a week for one child), and some home-based caregivers were working very long hours (for example, one home-based caregiver often worked from 5.30 am to 10.00 pm).

Parents in the study reported making decisions about the care of their pre-schooler with their partner, and sometimes with grandparents who were going to be involved in the care. More often than not one parent had a greater role to play in decision-making, and this was usually the mother. Parents' beliefs about the value of their work and their role as a parent, including the relationship they wanted to have with their child, played an important role in shaping their decisions about childcare. Some parents had chosen to work non-standard hours because it allowed them to spend more time with their child or because their child could spend more time being cared for by a family member. The household in which the parent lived also

affected their childcare arrangements. For example, parents in a two-parent or extended family household with early shifts were usually able to leave their pre-schooler sleeping in their bed when they left for work, whereas two solo parents took their children in their pyjamas with them to a home-based caregiver early in the morning before starting their early shift.

Most parents in the study reported satisfaction with their childcare arrangements. These parents tended to have fairly stable arrangements. Most also had back-up plans, although these were limited where parents did not have support available from a partner or from their wider family, including grandparents.

When asked what their “ideal” childcare arrangements would be, parents had varying answers. Some would have preferred to not work and to be at home caring for their child; others would have liked reduced working hours. Some parents felt pressure to work because of their financial situation. Some expressed a preference for their child to be cared for by family members, while others wished for more flexibility in ECE services; for example, ECE services that were open longer hours, open over the weekend, had more flexibility in the days their child could attend (so the care could match their rotating shift roster) and the ability to attend and pay for part rather than full days. Most said they would like to pay less for childcare. In contrast, a few parents said they already had their ideal childcare arrangements.

Working non-standard hours placed significant pressures on the parents in the study. Their pattern of work affected the parents’ relationship with their child: for example, they were not always present when the child woke in the morning, or at mealtimes, bathtime or bedtime. They talked about being tired, and how precious and limited quality family time could be. Some parents in the study noted the negative effects of working non-standard hours on their couple relationship. Others talked about the ongoing stress associated with organising childcare arrangements and working unpredictable and unusual hours.

Parents in the study reported varying levels of flexibility in their workplace to accommodate their childcare needs. Some could alter their shifts or take leave to pick up their pre-schooler from an ECE service. The employers interviewed in the study generally expressed a willingness to consider and accommodate the childcare needs of their employees. The extent to which they could be flexible was influenced by factors such as local labour-market dynamics, and the flow and type of work and workers required.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Working non-standard hours adds a level of complexity to a parent’s work/life balance. The experiences of the families who participated in this study point to a number of areas where further research could be undertaken, and have some implications for policy.

The parents in this study made active choices about the type of care they arranged for their pre-school children. They mixed and matched formal and informal care services to fit their individual circumstances and family preferences. Enabling a range of formal ECE services to be available would allow parents to continue to make choices and match the type of care with their family’s needs and preferences. The regulation of ECE services should continue to allow for flexibility and diversity in service provision, while at the same time emphasising quality care.

Families in the study tended to use ECE services located in their home neighbourhood. The development of ECE services within residential neighbourhoods should be encouraged. Further consideration should also be given to the viability of locating ECE services as part of workplaces. This option was discussed with some of the employers interviewed in the study. While some had considered opening an ECE service at their workplace, none were actively pursuing the idea. They noted several drawbacks, particularly compliance with regulations and policies.

The study found a small number of children who were spending long hours in an ECE service, sometimes with multiple caregivers. We also heard of caregivers in home-based services who were working very long hours. There is insufficient evidence to draw conclusions about the impact on children of spending long hours in ECE.² Further research on this subject would be useful.

Free ECE and financial support provided by the Government for working parents seemed to be easing pressures on the parents in this study. Nevertheless, a number of parents wished to pay less for having their child in a formal ECE service. The pressure to work (usually due to financial pressures, particularly servicing a home loan) significantly compromised some parents, who would rather have been at home caring for their child.

The interviews conducted with employers for the study identified that the flexibility provided to employees varied across workplaces. The nature of some workplaces (such as the production line) limited the amount of flexibility that could be offered. Labour markets in some industries meant that in some places mothers were seen as key employees and, consequently, employers were finding ways to be flexible to accommodate parents' needs while still meeting the demands of their business. Employers should continue to be assisted and encouraged (for example, through Department of Labour work/life balance initiatives) to offer flexibility to their parent and caregiving employees.

The support and involvement of partners and grandparents in childcare emerged as a dominant theme in the study. The willingness and availability of partners and families to care for the children of parents who worked non-standard hours was a key factor in parents' decision-making about their childcare arrangements. The ability of a number of the partners of parents interviewed in the study to work flexible hours made childcare arrangements even more manageable. Recognition should be given to the key role that is played by grandparents in the care of pre-school-aged children. The Families Commission is undertaking a research project on the changing role of grandparents, particularly where they have childcare responsibilities.

The study did not include parents of pre-school-aged children who were unable to find a balance between their caregiving responsibilities and working non-standard hours. Further research could consider the barriers faced by these parents.

APPENDIX: THREE CASE STUDIES

² The Ministry of Education (2008) literature review on the outcomes of early childhood education notes: "US studies report more hours (more than 30) of non-maternal child care (including care by relatives, not simply ECE) per week is associated with moderately more *antisocial/aggressive* behaviour at the time of attendance or shortly after school entry. Studies following children for longer periods do not report such findings" (p. 5).

Three case studies of parents interviewed for the research are provided next. Key themes emerged from each case study.

Case Study X found that:

- the parents both worked shifts so their children could be cared for predominantly by a family member in their own home
- the parents shared caregiving and work responsibilities
- their pre-school child attended kindergarten and was cared for by her grandmother, who had made significant changes in her life so she could undertake that role
- positive and negative impacts and stresses associated with working rotating shifts were clearly identified.

Case Study Y found that:

- the grandmother played a significant role in caring for the pre-school children, and mutual benefits associated with this role were identified
- the unpredictability of midwifery (i.e. having to be immediately available to attend a birth at any time) requires a back-up plan for care to be in place at all times, and this is challenging.

Case Study Z found that:

- some parents have complex childcare arrangements, including long hours and multiple caregivers, and some caregivers work long hours
- parents working shifts that start early in the morning have to use home-based caregivers or informal care from family or friends.

Case Study X: Working Around the Children

Working opposite shifts and family support mean the Pepa family don't have to leave their children with non-family members while they are at work, but it also means less time together as a family and less energy when they are together.

Meet the Pepa family

Sina and Sione Pepa have two girls aged four and eight. Sina is employed as an airport quarantine officer and works four days on, four days off, on one of four rotating shifts: 4.30 am to 3.45 pm, 5.30 am to 5.00 pm, 3.45 pm to 3.15 am, and 5.10 pm to 4.30 am. Her husband, Sione, works a permanent night shift from Monday to Friday, 5.00 pm to 2.00 am.

Their story

Sina Pepa loves her job and has been doing it for seven years. "I think this is the only full-time job that suits around my kids with the job Sione has," says Sina. "[My employer is] quite flexible to getting time off with the kids and being able to shift-swap ... Sione could get a day job but it is just better for us, not financially, but for the kids."

After getting home from work after 2.00 am and getting a few hours' sleep, Sione gets up to take the children to school and kindergarten, and then goes back to bed, setting the alarm for when he has to pick the youngest one up from kindergarten. They then have an afternoon nap together and the alarm is reset for 2.30 pm, when it's time to pick up the other child from school.

“He has broken sleeps, sometimes he won’t sleep if we’ve got school events on ... at the moment he’s managing, but I can say only just,” says Sina. “When I’ve got my days off I relieve him so he can get that sleep. If he did it continuously then I think we’d have a problem there.”

When their second daughter was born, Sina’s mother dropped back to part-time work to help the Pepas look after her because they were unable to get her into an early childhood programme until she turned three. They pay the mother some money, but it works out less than her full-time job.

“We are paying her so that is helping,” says Sina.

“Because we’ve got to, well we don’t have to but ... I mean it’s not cheap, petrol these days and she is working part-time [so she can be there to care for her grandchildren]. It comes out of our income and we are working full-time these days so we can manage. Just the times that she is there, just depends on [our financial situation], how much money we are left with. And she’s quite happy with it because in the end she is spending time with her grandchildren ... I get paid fortnightly so probably [we pay her] \$100 for the first week and the next week \$150.”

Sina’s rotating shift pattern means no week is ever the same in their home. However, it also means they are able to plan in advance.

“At the very beginning of the year we’ve got to sit down and do a year planner. My holidays and childcare are always planned a year in advance, especially if we are going to try and save money. We all sit down and talk about it, because my parents go on holiday too, so I can’t really depend on them all the time.”

There are some downsides to their work hours.

“Sione wants to take [the children] to sports and things like that. I think that’s what my girls are missing out on, is that we can’t keep to a commitment. Sione is working night shift and I’m working night shift. And we can’t, as much as we’d want to. I just think it would be dangerous to put them in a commitment like that because we’ll be driving real tired, fatigued, and we’d have an accident. If we did put them in another commitment it would be more work for my mother. So there are things like that we can’t do.”

“And shift work does make you tired, so I’m not getting that much time with them anyway ... quality time with them.”

In the weekends they try to spend time with the children, doing various outdoor activities, so there is little time for rest. But it is the unplanned events that are the most stressful.

“What happens if the girls are sick? Who is going to take time off? When they are sick you don’t plan it ... a lot of time [thinking about it], lose sleep sometimes, but you get through it ... when you’ve got the nine-to-five jobs with parents it is so much easier because they’re home to get them from school, and you’re home to spend tea and do homework with them, and you can commit to the sports and other educational needs for the kids. Whereas us that work shift work, you just can’t ... quite scary to think about [having more children]. I’d love to if everything was much easier than it is now.”

She also feels like she is missing out on some things by not always being there for the day-to-day stuff.

“My time away, my time with them, I am missing a lot. Probably educational stuff like doing their homework with them ... My mother is there. But there are other things you'd like to be teaching [your children] but you're not home. There are a lot of things I'd like to teach my girls. I'd probably like to do spelling and maths. I'm not too sure my mother will go through [those things] with them. She'll probably just go through their standard homework. Whereas there are computer programmes [that can help with their learning] that I would use.”

Sina says her company is largely sympathetic, but its priority is business.

“Basically if you work for a company you have to put your own commitment in and that's what a lot of the staff are struggling with. Because we have work and we have children, and you are always going to say work is going to be a little above because you are providing for your children.”

When asked what her ideal work and childcare arrangement would be, Sina said, “Work part-time with the same pay and spending more time with the children. Every parent would like to spend more time with their children.”

Case Study Y: Working On-call with Back-up

Xena Hartley would not easily have been able to work as a midwife and care for her young children without the support of her mother and husband.

Meet the Hartley family

Xena and Dave Hartley have three children aged three, six and eight years old. Xena works part-time as an independent midwife, working within a collective of eight midwives. Dave works Monday to Friday with standard hours.

Their story

Xena's mother moved nearby when she retired to help look after the children while Xena studied midwifery full-time. “She stepped in and did a lot of the picking up stuff, and if it was a day where I was called out to a birth she would step in and do it,” says Xena. “Because in your training you have a practice component and you have to attend so many births.” Now Xena works part-time, making her appointments with clients for when her children are at school or daycare.

However, the need to be immediately available to attend a birth at any time is a challenge.

“Between 3.00 pm and 5.00 pm is my real Achilles heel. It's quite stressful actually. Because I've got no immediate care. From 5.00 pm the previous night till 3.30 pm the next day I've got care and I'm covered. Between 3.00 pm and 5.00 pm it's a bit of a stressful time so if anything were to happen between those times it's going to take me longer to get someone to come and look after them.”

If Xena has been at a birth all night, Dave will call her mother and ask her to pick the children up so that Xena can get some sleep.

“It is the after hours that's the most difficult thing. My husband went away for a conference for a week and that was a really stressful week. I got my mum to come and stay. Because I thought if I needed to get up in the middle of the night and ring her it would be a nightmare. I've got no one else who could step in and do that. What would be ideal would be someone like mum. Someone I could call up and say I need you now ... to know that they were always there.”

Xena says the support of her mother has been invaluable, but she is becoming less involved in childcare as she gets older.

"I think [my mum has] had enough now. I think she's quite pleased that [my youngest son] is now in full-time childcare. She found it very hard, very tiring. She is 68. She's looked after her own kids. From the beginning it was her idea to move up here and look after the kids. She was pleased for herself to be in that role, because it is an important role. I suppose when you're retired [you ask] what is your role. You're not working ... She was important to us and that was a really nice part of it for her. She got to do something that a lot of grandparents don't do because they are working. She's got such a fantastic relationship with the kids. She's their second mum. So it worked in a positive way for her, for everybody. Now she's had enough! Now she's getting into so many different activities. I think she's made a transition. She was important [in her caregiving role for us] and now she's into a lot of other things. I think that she's quite happy that her role has finished. I think that she'd kill me if I ever got pregnant again!"

Case Study Z: Seasonal Work with Multiple Carers

Three-year-old Millie is looked after by a home-based care service during the horticultural season so that her mother can work.

Meet the Raupata family

Hine and Lee Raupata have five children aged three to sixteen years old. They live with extended family in a small town. Hine works at a rural pack-house processing horticultural produce from January to June on the early shift, starting at 7.00 am and finishing at 4.00 pm. When she isn't working the season in the pack-house, she receives a Work and Income benefit. Lee has a job that also starts early in the morning.

Their story

During her working months Hine drops her three-year-old daughter, Millie, with a home-based caregiver at 6.00 am and then drives 30 minutes to work.

"The [caregiver] takes Millie to kindy at 8.30 am and then at 2.30 pm one of the other caregivers that works for the company that the kids go to picks her up and then drops her off to the lady who watches her and then we pick her up [at 4.30pm]," says Hine. "So there are four people in [the ECE service] who look after her. It gets quite confusing. If I ask [my husband] to go and get Millie he's like, 'Well, where am I going?'"

Hine is happy with the care Millie is receiving. "They get to go to play group. They get to go to music and movement. I mean they are still getting all the, apart from us ... apart from having the parents, they're still getting everything that they should."

She also recognises that the week can be tiring for Millie, so on Fridays Millie goes to the home-based caregiver all day rather than attending kindergarten as well.

"By that time she's just lost the plot. At least she gets to have a sleep and stuff at daycare, where at kindy it's just too hard. So like today she said to me, 'Mum, don't wake me up, I'm tired, I don't want to go'. The lady that the kids go to is really good, considering she has got children of her own. It is probably a bit harder for her because if the children chose not to go back to sleep or if the baby is unsettled, then ... we've been pretty lucky because at the moment it hasn't managed to wake her house up. I can see it's probably not the easiest thing for her, but she's in the position where the extra money does help her too."

If a machine breaks down at work everybody has to do overtime, and then it could be 5.30 pm before picking Millie up. While the employer often releases them in those circumstances, it can be hard because most employees have children. “If everybody clocked out at 4.00 pm to pick up children there would be nobody here to finish the process. The majority of people have children, whether they are pre-school or primary-aged kids.”

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