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Survey on Childcare

A report into childcare responsibilities of IOP members



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“Flexible working helps. I have requested a laptop and remote access so I can work from home and in the evenings when required, making me more available and allowing me to work round my childcare arrangements. This is a win-win for me and the company as far as I can see.”

Female, part-time, industrial research

Introduction

The Institute of Physics' Women in Physics Group initiated an online survey of IOP members in the summer of 2009, to find out more about the barriers or issues that members had with regard to childcare responsibilities and what issues in particular they may have had in accessing and funding out-of-hours childcare.

Overall, 1544 Institute members responded to the questionnaire. Of these, 641 indicated that they currently had childcare responsibilities and 577 of these had children under 16. 67% of those responding were male (470) and 33% were female. 90% of respondents worked in the UK. The majority of respondents had younger children (59% of respondents had at least one child in "early years" [i.e. pre-school]).

Although more than 80% of respondents worked full-time, almost 50% of women respondents worked part-time compared with only 3.5% of men. However, a significantly smaller proportion of women with childcare responsibilities worked part-time in permanent university roles than in other areas. A possible explanation for this is that university staff may feel that they have relative flexibility to organise their commitments enough and work at home when the need arises. However, there might also be an issue regarding the perception that your career may be "over" if you work part-time and that may mean people see working part-time as too much of a risk. More work might need to be done in this area.

Respondents were asked about the childcare arrangements that they normally used during working hours. The most popular forms of childcare reported during working hours were a private nursery (34%) and one's partner (33%), with similar numbers of instances of these reported. However, a significant difference was found between men and women in using a partner or spouse, with women being significantly less likely than men to report this, clearly reflecting the fact that men are much more likely than women to have a partner who takes a career break to look after children.

1: Childcare and working out-of-hours

“Three-quarters of all respondents reported attending fewer conferences once they had caring responsibilities for children.”

Respondents were asked to indicate the ease with which they could make arrangements for childcare in addition to that which they normally use.

Around 80% of respondents found making additional childcare arrangements “difficult” or “very difficult”. The use of friends and relatives, including grandparents, increased from 20% during working hours to 64% out-of-hours, which was not surprising given the strict opening and closing hours of some paid-for childcare.

“The lack of flexibility is restrictive – I wish I could stay in the office/lab for as long as it takes to finish a paper/experiment, but this hardly ever happens and I need to work nights if I want to be uninterrupted. Also, organising schedules takes a lot of time and energy.”

Female, full-time, university permanent

A significant difference was found between men and women respondents who found it “very difficult” or “difficult” to find additional childcare when compared with those who found it “easy” or “very easy”. As men were more likely than women to use their partners for childcare, this was not surprising, but it follows that women with childcare responsibilities were more likely to have less flexibility than men in a similar position.

“The main problem for me is going to conferences. Because my wife works full-time as well, any conference is associated with breaking a routine and with very complicated childcare arrangements.”

Male, full-time, university contract

Respondents were then questioned about their attendance at events in comparison to before they had caring responsibilities. Almost three-quarters

of all respondents reported attending fewer conferences once they had caring responsibilities for children. The majority of both men and women with caring responsibilities were affected in this way, although again, women were affected to a significantly greater extent.

Almost all respondents reported that they were able to attend one-day meetings either routinely or with some warning and more than 80% also reported that they were able to attend multi-day (national) meetings either routinely or with some warning. Only a relatively small proportion of respondents indicated that they could attend international workshops or take a sabbatical, but more than half the respondents said that they would now turn down such invitations.

“I avoid attending international meetings unless unavoidable – in a multinational company that amounts to putting your career on hold.”

Female, part-time, industrial research

70% of respondents reported that they had not attended conferences solely because of childcare issues. 85% of women fell into this category compared with 62% of men, another significant difference. Therefore, having childcare responsibilities did affect the ability of the majority of respondents to attend conferences and training events, and significant proportions of both men and women changed their conference/event attendance behaviours once they had children. In addition a significantly greater proportion of women reported finding it more difficult to attend conferences and reported having missed conferences due to childcare issues.

When asked about recovering additional childcare costs, 86% of respondents reported that they had not been able to recover any additional costs and, therefore, where people had to pay for childcare because of additional work-related activities, this was a further cost to be borne.

2: Childcare and career progression

Respondents were asked whether they felt that childcare issues had impeded their career progression. Overall, 58% of respondents perceived that their career progression “had been” or “might have been” impeded, but when this was disaggregated by gender, 80% of women fell into these categories compared with only 47% of men. Women were therefore significantly more likely than men to report that their careers had been affected by childcare responsibilities.

“Career progression is an issue and I have been told verbally that due to my pregnancy I have slipped back in my career.”

Female, full-time, government research

There was also a significant difference in the distribution of full-time and part-time working, with those working part-time more likely to report that their career progression had been affected than those working full-time. However, when this was investigated only for women, although there was a difference between full- and part-time workers, it was not significant. Although the data do show that women working part-time are more likely than those working full-time to report that having childcare responsibilities had affected their career progression, what is surprising is that the difference is not greater.

“I have been told that I won’t be considered for managerial-type positions if I don’t work full-time.”

Female, part-time, industrial research

Respondents who suggested that their career progression “had been” or “might have been” impeded were invited to give more details. The three main reasons related to: attendance at conferences and

meetings, and having to restrict travel; the need to restrict hours worked to meet childcare responsibilities; and the relative lack of flexibility. Both men and women gave these reasons.

Conference attendance was more frequently mentioned by respondents in academia, but issues relating to restricted hours were mentioned by respondents in all work areas.

“Before having a child, I could afford to be much more selfish with my time. Now I have to think about what I do more carefully. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing though. Sometimes it’s good to say ‘no’ to activities that are unlikely to be of any use.”

Male, full-time, university permanent

A range of other reasons were also given by respondents but the frequency with which they were mentioned was significantly less than the top three. Among these were the feeling that childcare meant that respondents were limited in how far they could move to a better job, and a feeling that having childcare responsibilities had led to restricted opportunities being offered by employers. Some respondents specifically mentioned the issues surrounding having a disabled or seriously ill child and the additional care that this requires.

Some felt that part-time working had limited their promotion or progression.

“I’d like to have the option to work fewer days per week so I can spend time looking after my children. Employers should not be allowed to discriminate against those who don’t work five days by not allowing them to hold senior positions.”

Male, full-time, industrial research

“Women were more likely than men to report that their careers had been affected by childcare responsibilities.”

3: Suggestions for improvement

“There needs to be a shift in the attitudes of managers and a wholesale change in the culture of a number of organisations.”

Respondents were also asked whether they had any suggestions that would have helped them with specific childcare arrangements or career issues. The most frequent suggestions fell into two main groups: suggestions regarding the provision and cost of childcare; and suggestions concerning the need for flexible working and a change in attitude and culture in respect of those working part-time and those with children.

The suggestions relating to childcare ranged from provision of on-site childcare by employers, especially large employers, through to the provision of emergency childcare, or at least that employers held lists of approved providers of emergency childcare, to suggestions regarding subsidies for childcare.

“As someone who works for a global organisation, with thousands of employees on the same site, it astonishes me that crèche facilities are not available through the company. I will happily pay if they will provide.”

Male, full-time, unknown employment

A number of respondents suggested that not all larger employers were taking up childcare voucher schemes, while others suggested that vouchers should be allowed to be used more widely, or that childcare costs should be tax deductible. The hours for which childcare is available was also an issue. Respondents suggested that more schools should provide pre- and after-school clubs and that childcare in holidays was also a major issue.

“It would make a big difference if additional childcare costs would be allowable expenses as part of travel expenses under a research grant.”

Male, full-time, university permanent

Respondents also suggested that better support for childcare should be available at conference venues or hotels and that travel grant schemes should allow childcare costs to be claimed.

Respondents felt that more opportunities for flexible working would have improved their abil-

ity to balance childcare responsibilities with work demands, whether working full-time or part-time. Some commented that employers should seek to hold important meetings in core hours to enable flexibility in respect of needing to drop off or pick up children. The fact that men with childcare responsibilities felt that their careers were impeded, or at least recognised that their partner’s careers have been significantly affected, means that there is increasing support among both sexes for changes in workplace culture. A number of respondents indicated that they would appreciate more help, support and understanding from their employers.

It was suggested that there needs to be a shift in the attitudes of managers and a wholesale change in the culture of a number of organisations.

It should be noted that although women were significantly more likely to be working part-time, and to have reported that their career progression had been impeded by childcare responsibilities, men as well as women expressed a good deal of frustration about current employment arrangements for those with childcare responsibilities. It was clear from the comments made that childcare cannot be regarded as just a “women’s issue” by employers any longer.

“Recognition that working outside of normal hours, either in the office or at home, can be more effective than being in the office. This would enable me to be more flexible and look after the children, when ill for example, during the working day at home and then work in the evening when they are in bed. The mentality of senior managements needs to change. Flexible working and work-life balance are good buzz-words but not actually demonstrated in action.”

Female, full-time, industrial research

The need to provide ongoing childcare while allowing two careers to progress is an issue that might also affect a significant number of physicists with children. More needs to be known about dual-career couples in physics, such as how couples make decisions as to which partner’s career takes precedence and the numbers of dual-career academic couples.

4: Conclusions

In conclusion, the survey on childcare has found that around 80% of respondents reported finding making additional childcare arrangements “difficult” or “very difficult”, which in turn affected a person’s ability to attend out-of-hours work events, such as conferences, training, and national and international workshops.

As a result, women physicists were significantly more likely than men to report that their career progression has been impeded by childcare responsibilities, resulting from a lack of flexibility and restriction of working hours and an inability to attend additional events and conferences. As men were more likely than women to have a partner at home looking after the children, it follows that women had even less flexibility than men in this regard and that the bulk of childcare responsibilities fell to the woman.

Very few respondents could claim back the costs

of additional childcare and, as a result, any paid-for out-of-hours childcare was an additional cost to be borne. Qualitative responses suggest that respondents felt a number of changes would help mitigate against the effects of childcare responsibilities on career progression, including changing attitudes to and more access to flexible and part-time working, and better, more flexible, subsidised childcare.

One final observation is that very few of the findings outlined in this report are specifically physics-related. A number relate to general observations about the workplace and career pathways, and to general issues about the availability and cost of childcare. Clearly, some issues relating to culture may be related to physics and male-dominated environments but without comparative studies no definitive conclusion can be drawn. Nonetheless, the findings in this report are likely to find currency in other professions.

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5: Recommendations

Based on the results of the survey, including the comments made by respondents, the following recommendations are made:

- The Institute should continue to promote the benefits of Project Juno in improving practice in academic physics departments, in particular in terms of supporting staff with caring responsibilities.
- The Institute should consider how it might work with its industrial employers to promote the benefits of flexible working and support those with caring responsibilities by, for example, providing guidance on the new Equality Act.
- The Institute should carry out research on what constitutes good practice in respect of the provision of support for childcare to enable those with caring responsibilities for children to attend conferences more easily. Furthermore, the Institute should look to implement such good practice (e.g. provision of childcare grants for conference attendees; provision of crèche facilities at conferences) for its own conferences.
- The Institute should carry out follow-up research to establish why women with childcare responsibilities working in universities are much less likely than women physicists in other areas to work part-time.
- The Institute should carry out research to learn more about dual-career couples in physics, such as how couples make decisions as to which partner’s career takes precedence and the number of dual-career academic couples.
- The Institute should consider repeating a revised survey in a few years time.
- In recognition of the fact that many of the findings of this childcare survey are likely to be generic, the Institute should distribute this report to other learned societies and organisations and recommend to them that they carry out similar work or at least use the findings of this survey to inform their own policy positions.

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