

Trying times: how might the lockdown change time use in families?

IFS Briefing Note BN284

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Copy-edited by Judith Payne

Published by

The Institute for Fiscal Studies, April 2020

ISBN 978-1-912805-74-7

Funding from the ESRC-funded Centre for the Microeconomic Analysis of Public Policy (ES/M010147/1) is gratefully acknowledged.

Executive summary

The coronavirus pandemic, and the measures put in place to combat it, have changed almost everything about how people live their day-to-day lives. More than ever before, life today is being conducted behind the nation's front doors.

For families with children, this represents a particularly big change. Since 23 March, schools and nurseries have been shut for most children across the UK, and social distancing rules preclude most activities outside the home – such as team sports, going to the playground, and meeting up with friends and relatives. Informal childcare by grandparents and other friends and family has mostly been ruled out, and even contact between parents who do not live together is likely to fall. Parents are facing greater responsibility for supervising and educating their children at the same time as many are trying to adapt to working from home.

In this piece, we analyse just how big these changes are for children's and parents' day-to-day lives. We use data on time use collected for parents and children aged 8 and older in 2014–15 to describe how they spent their time prior to the COVID-19 lockdown, and to shed light on groups that might be particularly affected by the social distancing rules now in place.

Key findings

School closures are a big change to children's schedules, but not the only one. Before the pandemic, children aged 8 and older spent on average around 30 hours a week at school during term-time. But 8- to 16-year-olds will also need to change the average 22 hours a week they spent on activities outside the home, which are now largely ruled out by current social distancing measures.

For some groups of parents, combined responsibilities for work and childcare could take up virtually the entire day. Before the pandemic, working parents already spent roughly 60% of their non-sleeping time either working or with their children. If they need to be with their children – for example, playing or supervising schoolwork – during most of the time that children would have been in school or outside the home without their parents, childcare and work responsibilities would take up virtually the entire day.

For working parents to be able to meet both work and childcare commitments, they will need more flexibility on when – not just where – they can work. More than four in five working parents worked exclusively during core business hours before the crisis. However, not all jobs will be able to support fully flexible working.

In this context, the Chancellor should consider extending 80% wage replacement to employees who reduce their working hours to accommodate childcare responsibilities. The current furlough scheme allows parents to give up work completely to look after children, but it does not reimburse them for working shorter hours. This incentivises couples to have one parent give up work completely while the other works their regular hours, which is likely to increase gender inequalities. To help avoid this, the government should consider reimbursing employees who reduce their hours, but not to zero, to manage childcare or other caring responsibilities.

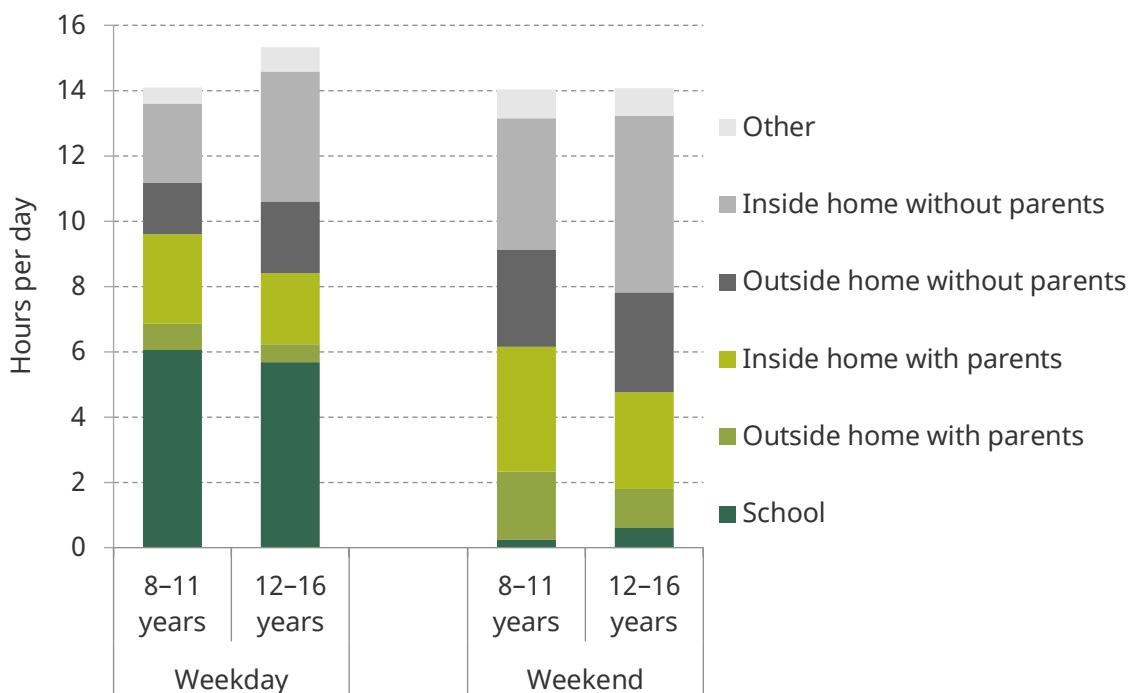
1. Children's time use

Figure 1 shows how children aged 8–16 spend their time during term-time whilst awake. It splits this time into five categories: in school; outside the home with and without parents; and inside the home with and without parents.

Clearly, with schools closed to most children, the six hours a day that children spent at school during the week during term-time will change. But Figure 1 shows that the school day only accounts for around three-fifths of the disruption to children's activities caused by the social distancing measures. During the week, children also spent between two and three hours a day – 18% of their waking hours – on activities outside the home (for example, travelling to and from school or meeting friends). On weekends, activities outside the home account for four to five hours a day of children's time. While some of these activities, such as limited outdoor exercise, might still be permitted, the majority of this time will be disrupted.

Figure 1 also makes clear that, with time in school, in scheduled activities and with friends now largely replaced by time at home, parents should expect to be spending substantially more time with their children. Previously, children spent around 21% of their time awake with their parents during the week and 35% on weekends.

Figure 1. Children's time use (excluding sleep) during term-time, 2014–15



Note: Activities are categorised based on the location they occurred in and who was with the child at that time. Around 2% of observations have no recorded location; these are classified as 'other' activities. Figure excludes time spent asleep.

Source: Authors' calculations using Time Use Survey 2014–15 data.

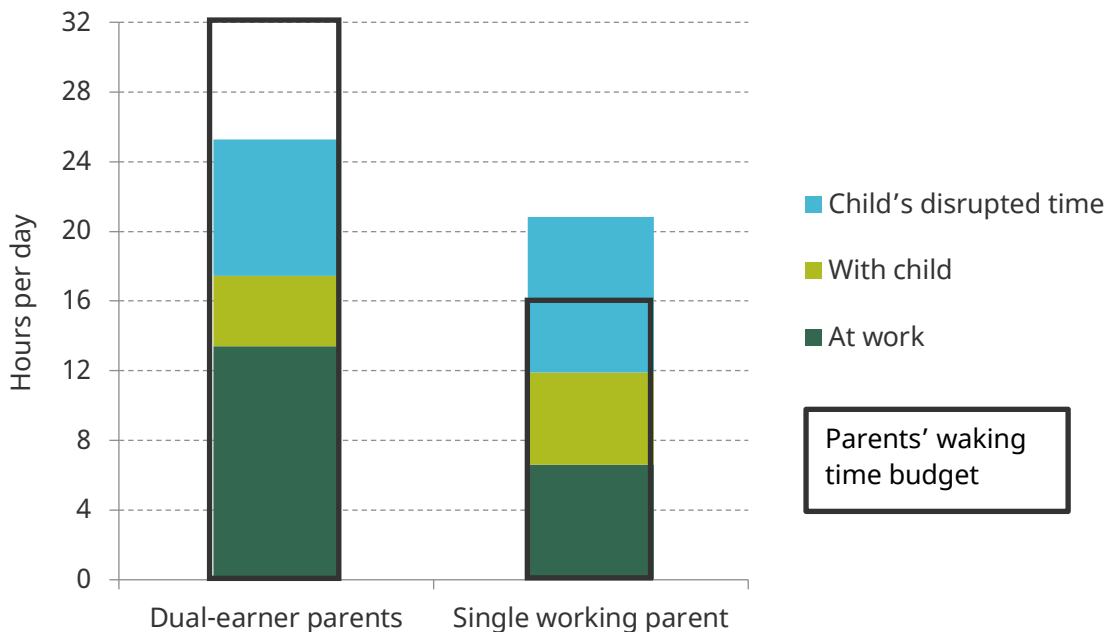
The data behind Figure 1 are only collected for children aged 8 and older. But social distancing measures will also have a major impact on how younger children, including those too young for school, spend their time. Data collected by the Study of Early Education and Development in the early 2010s suggest that the average child in his first year of life spends around 8 hours a week in childcare (whether in a paid setting or with grandparents or other friends). This rises to around 13 hours for 1- and 2-year-olds and to 21 hours for 3-year-olds. (Of course, the weekly hours for people who use such childcare are much higher – between 20 and 22 hours at all ages.) For non-key workers, virtually all this childcare will need to be replaced by parents looking after their children in their own home.

2. Parents' time use

In addition to supporting their children through a difficult period, many parents are also facing significant financial and logistical challenges. In some families, this means less time spent working, as parents are furloughed, lose their jobs or shut down their businesses.

In families where parents are still working, balancing work and family will be an even trickier act to pull off than it was before the crisis. We can think of households having a daily 'budget' of adult time awake – roughly 16 hours per adult, or 32 hours in all for a two-parent family. This is shown in Figure 2 with black outlines. The figure also shows how single-child families¹ allocated this time prior to the pandemic, focusing on their time spent working (dark green bar) and with their child (medium green). For example, in two-earner households (just under half of families with one child), parents together spent 13 to 14 hours a day at work during the week (on average, 8 hours for men and 5½ hours for women), and a joint total of 4 hours a day with their child. This accounts for 17 of the 32 waking hours that these parents might have had notionally available.

Figure 2. Weekday time use during term-time in single-child families with all adults in work, 2014–15



Note: Child's disrupted time includes time at school and time outside the home without parents. Dual-earner parents' time is shown jointly.

Source: Authors' calculations using Time Use Survey 2014–15 data.

¹ Since siblings can spend some or all of their disrupted time together, for families with more than one child it is not possible to quantify the 'maximum' potential disruption to parents' time use. We therefore focus on single-child families in Figure 2.

The light blue bars in Figure 2 show the average number of disrupted hours for a child in each of these families – that is, the total amount of time children spent at school and outside the home without parents, which will be disrupted by social distancing measures. At the extreme, if parents needed to supervise their child for all of these hours (now that they are at home), this would add another 8 hours to the two-earner family’s time ‘budget’ – meaning that the parents would spend 25 of their 32 joint hours either working or looking after their child. Of course, it is unlikely that older children especially will need constant supervision from their parents. But these stylised numbers do drive home the scale of the challenge facing two-earner families, assuming that both parents continue to work through the COVID-19 crisis.

And some families are facing even tighter time constraints. Working lone parents (around a quarter of families with one child) spent, on average, 6½ hours a day working and 5 hours with their child pre-pandemic. Adding in their child’s 9 hours of disrupted time brings their total time use to over 20 hours a day.

So far, this analysis has focused just on *how many* hours families have available for different activities. But an equally important question is *which* hours they are. Before the pandemic, over four-fifths of working parents worked exclusively during core business hours (from 8am to 6pm on weekdays).

But parents in two-earner households might now find that they need to take childcare responsibilities in shifts, including during these core business hours. An earlier study has reported that this was already happening to some extent:² the work schedules of parents with children overlapped by about an hour less each day than the schedules of childless couples. But parents’ need to work in turns will be exacerbated as childcare responsibilities increase during the pandemic. This means that meeting work commitments during this unprecedented period might in many cases depend not only on the ability to work from home, but also on the flexibility to work at different times from usual.

Childcare and the Job Retention Scheme

Parents who are unable to balance their working and caring commitments during the pandemic can ask their employers to furlough them, allowing them to stay employed without working any hours. These parents will be eligible for the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, under which the government will pick up the tab for 80% of their salaries below £3,125 a month.

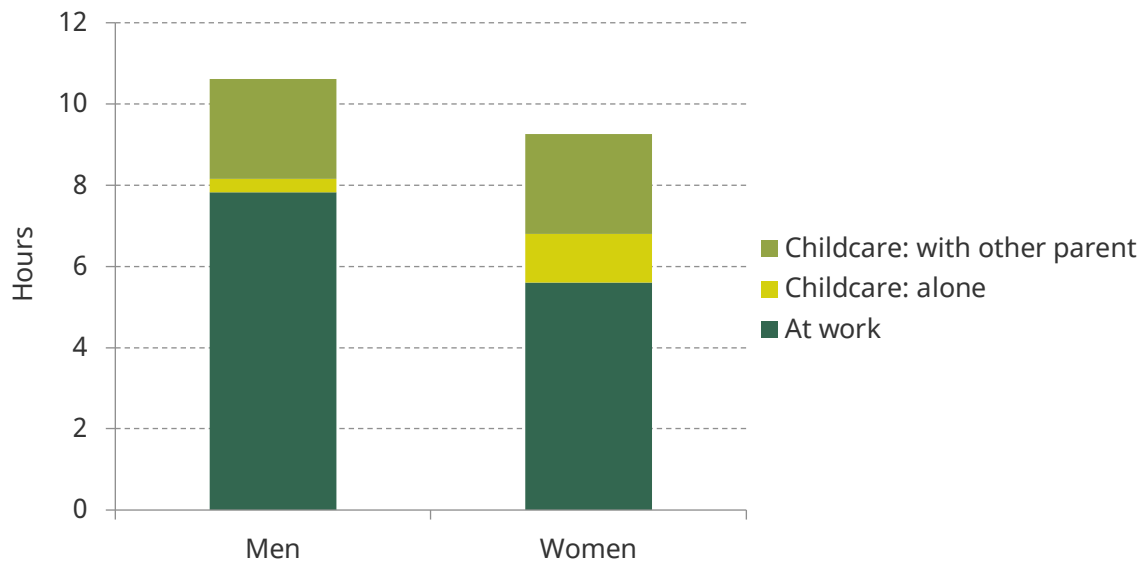
Furlough is an all-or-nothing proposition – it does not allow employees to reduce their hours while continuing to work. This means the design of the programme might incentivise dual-earner couples struggling with childcare responsibilities to have one parent continuing to work their usual hours while the other is furloughed.

This, in turn, could affect the gender balance in how childcare and paid work are distributed between couples: as Figure 3 shows, even in families where both parents work, this is already happening to some extent. Women average 5.6 hours a day of work on

² M. L. Bryan and A. Sevilla, ‘Flexible working in the UK and its impact on couples’ time coordination’, *Review of Economics of the Household*, 2017, 15, 1415–37, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11150-017-9389-6>.

weekdays, but spend 1.2 hours alone with their child. By contrast, men work nearly 8 hours a day on average, but do much less childcare on their own – just 20 minutes a day. Most time with children includes both parents – for example, at a family meal or doing an activity together. If the Job Retention Scheme encourages mothers to accept furlough more than fathers (for example, because they work fewer hours, or earn less per hour, and so earn less per week), it could exacerbate existing inequalities in childcare responsibilities and beyond.

Figure 3. Weekday pre-pandemic time use in term-time among single-child, dual-earner couples



Note: Childcare time is categorised based on who was with the respondent at that time.

Source: Authors' calculations using Time Use Survey 2014–15 data.

For single parents who do not have the ability to divide up responsibilities between partners, the furlough scheme offers a more binary choice between continuing to balance between work and childcare commitments, or refraining from work for the time being at the cost of 20% of their earnings. And for all parents, the ability to access the Job Retention Scheme depends on their employer's willingness to furlough them and do without their work.

For employees furloughed because their workplaces are closed and they cannot work from home, the design of the Job Retention Scheme makes sense. However, for those accessing the programme because of their difficulties in combining work with caring responsibilities, the Chancellor should consider allowing the programme to reimburse a share of earnings from reduced hours. There would be an administrative challenge to ensure that these employees did not work more than their reduced hours – but this is similar to the challenge that HMRC faces in ensuring that those already furloughed are not in fact still doing some work for their employer.

It is likely that extending the scheme in this way would add considerably to its cost, though it is not clear why those who need to reduce their hours of work due to increased childcare commitments should be entirely excluded from getting additional support that those stopping work can receive. Furthermore, the extension would allow families with children greater freedom to make the decisions that best fit their circumstances.

3. Conclusion

The ongoing pandemic is, first and foremost, a health crisis. But the social distancing measures being taken to contain it are having enormous consequences for daily life, especially for families with children. School closures and restrictions on leaving the house will directly impact around half of children's waking hours.

On average, parents are likely to struggle to fill the gap. Parents adjusting to working from home, especially those in dual-earner couples or who do not live with another adult, will not be able to reconcile their new responsibilities for childcare and home learning with the demands of their work without significant flexibility on when they work.

High-quality and timely data are urgently needed to assess how families and children have responded to the lockdown, and what longer-term implications this could have. IFS researchers are working to survey families to gather some of this information. In the meantime, flexibility – from employers and from government – will be paramount for supporting hard-pressed parents.