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Summer holiday childcare: no let up for working mums

A TUC Gender Equality Briefing

Section one

Summary

The last 18 months have been difficult for everyone, the Covid-19 pandemic has turned our lives and our communities upside down, with devastating consequences. Women have been on the frontline of this crisis, as workers, as carers and as parents. Previous research from the TUC has shown the disproportionate impact the pandemic has had on the lives on women, and particularly mums, as they juggled work and care, shouldering much of the responsibility for home schooling, and domestic chores on top of their jobs.¹

But as restrictions are lifted, a crisis in childcare continues, with mums facing a summer of trying to manage their jobs and a patchwork of childcare to get through the holidays.

Between the 23 June and the 4 July, the TUC put out a survey to find out how working parents were going to manage childcare over the summer holidays. Over 36,000 mums responded.

Our research found that working mums are facing a tough summer with no respite from the impact of the pandemic on their load as they try to balance childcare and work:

- Nearly two thirds (63 per cent) of mums with primary aged children do not have sufficient childcare for the summer holidays. This rises to three quarters (76 per cent) for single parents.
- Three in five (60 per cent) will find managing childcare harder over the summer holidays this year than in previous years. Nearly a fifth (18 per cent) had already used up all their annual leave to manage school closures during lockdowns. And around one in eight (13 per cent) do not have access to their usual holiday clubs or school playschemes because they have not restarted as restrictions have been lifted.
- Nearly half (48 per cent) will be using some form flexible working to help them manage childcare over the 6-week holidays, with two in five (39 per cent) combining working from home and childcare. Over a quarter (27 per cent) will be working more flexibly than usual.

But for many mums their only option is to take a financial hit to manage childcare over the holidays:

- Around one in eight mums responding to our survey said they will have to take unpaid leave.
- One in eight said they would have to reduce their hours.

¹ TUC, (2021) Working mums and Covid-19: paying the price, available at <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-04/WorkingMums.pdf>

Key recommendations

Employers

As restrictions lift, many workers who have been able to work remotely may be forced to return to the workplace, this will only add to the challenges facing many working mums. It is essential that employers ensure that those with caring responsibilities can continue to work from home to support them with managing childcare. But working from home should not mean working all hours of the day to try and juggle work and care. Workloads need to be manageable, and workers should have a right to disconnect.

For those who cannot work from home, employers need to assess what other flexibility can be made available with no loss of pay. With the summer holidays just around the corner, employers need to review their current flexible working policies immediately, consulting with employees and trade unions to balance the needs of staff and the organisation and ensuring that working parents who need flexibility now are supported.

But this should not just be a short-term response to the pandemic. The TUC is calling for employers to adopt flexibility by default. Employers should consider what flexibility is available in different roles and ensure this is included in all job adverts going forward. The advert should set out the types of flexibility available rather than include a generalised statement. Current employees should have the opportunity to access the same flexibility as well. Flexibility includes compressed hours, flexi-time, working from home, predictable hours and greater notice of hours.

Government

Around six per cent of respondents to our survey did not have access to any form of flexible working. We know from our flexible working research that lack of flexibility is much more widespread, particularly for those in working class jobs.²

Government should introduce a legal right to flexible work for all workers from their first day in a job and a duty on employers to consider which flexible working arrangements are available in a role and include these in job adverts with the new postholder having a day one right to take up the advertised flexibility. Flexible working can take lots of different forms, including having predictable or set hours, working from home, job-sharing, compressed hours and term-time working.

Currently parents have no statutory right to paid leave to look after their children. The government should introduce 10 days paid carers leave, on full pay, from day one in the job, to support all working parents.

Government must invest in childcare. We need more funding for good quality, affordable childcare to support working parents and help the sector recover from the impact of the pandemic.

² TUC, (2021), The Future of Flexible Work, available at <https://www.tuc.org.uk/reports>

Section two

The immediate challenges facing mums

Working mums face a difficult summer trying to piece together a patchwork of solutions to manage work and childcare. 60 per cent of respondents to our survey said they would find managing childcare more difficult this summer in comparison to previous years. This rose to 70 per cent for mums in single parent households.

Of those who said they would find managing childcare more difficult this year, nearly a fifth (18 per cent) said they had already used up all their annual leave to accommodate school closures during lockdowns. The same number (18 per cent) said they could not afford to take any unpaid leave; this rose to nearly a quarter (23 per cent) for mums in single parent households.

Around six per cent said they did not have access to any flexible working options to help them manage childcare over the summer holidays.

A fifth of respondents said that they do not have their usual network of friends and family outside of their household for support. And 1 in 8 do not have access to the holiday clubs and school playschemes they would usually rely on because they have not restarted as restrictions have lifted.

Respondents told us about the challenges and worry they were facing in terms of cost, lack of flexibility, how they would be piecing together a patchwork of care to get through the holidays, and how the pandemic has left them without their usual support networks of grandparents, friends, and holiday clubs.

"I am simply dreading the summer holidays. Last year in the month of August I earned £800 (due to taking unpaid leave) + paid £1100 in childcare so I could earn £800. The maths doesn't add up. It's so stressful. Help."

Mum working full time in the private sector

"had to work 7 days away from home in the first lockdown without coming home as I'm a residential care worker with children in care. This was a hard as there was no other options available. This affected my children and our little family in a big way. So having to leave them here there and everywhere in the 6 weeks holiday is going to be hard. I have 2 weeks off only so have the other 4 weeks to try and juggle. Me and my husband Re both keyworkers and our work has been hard and stressful in the pandemic and with a lot of stuff still with restrictions its going to be tough on parents and children. I can't really afford to take unpaid leave but sometimes there may not be an option."

Mum working part-time in the private sector, key worker

"Currently have uncertainty about potentially being asked to go back into the office starting during the school holidays not knowing what will actually happen makes it extremely difficult to plan."

Mum working full time in the private sector

"As we don't have family who can help out, especially since the pandemic, I felt there was little alternative but to drop out of the workplace this year until my youngest child gets his free hours. It's a logistical and financial nightmare and we were completely unaware of how restrictive childcare would be on our finances as working parents."

Mum temporarily not working, previously worked in public sector

"There is absolutely no acknowledgement from my workplace that school holidays might prove difficult. I cannot choose when my holiday is taken. This year 3wks of my leave combine with the school break. Next year, only one. My husband does the same job."

Mum working full-time in the private sector

"I'm working much longer hours in covid. Not logging off until 11pm/midnight. No idea how I'm going to manage the mayhem in summer."

Mum working in private sector, key worker

This is taking a huge toll on working parents and particularly mum's mental health, which our previous research showed had already suffered during the pandemic due to juggling childcare, domestic chores, home schooling and work.³

One respondent told us:

"I am exhausted after the pressure of working full time and doing all domestic responsibilities over the course of the pandemic. I am completely burnt out and have NOTHING left in my tank. I cannot access enough help to properly recharge so that I can be the parent I want to be, the spouse I want to be or do my job the way I want to, let alone think about who I want to be."

"It's a very stressful patchwork quilt of different sources."

Mum working full time in the private sector

Others told us:

"The mental capacity to occupy children whilst working after so much disruption over the last 18 months feels like a huge challenge. Clubs are too expensive to use for all my work days, so the juggle continues. We are all exhausted."

Mum self-employed working in the third sector

"I'm absolutely exhausted - like we all are and can't see where the break is going to come - I fear for my mental health at times and therefore, the overall well-being of my family."

Mum working in the third sector

³ TUC, (2021) Working Mums and Covid-19: paying the price, available at <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-04/WorkingMums.pdf>

"I also feel the stress and anxiety which comes with finding a solution to caring for children, mainly falls to the women. So not also do I have to flex my situation, I also have huge amounts of anxiety and stress about how I juggle everything, how to have conversations with my employer, how to manage working with kids around etc. The stress and anxiety are huge."

Mum working full-time in the private sector

One key worker told us:

"It's always tricky but as a key worker (nhs mental health) who is literally just about clinging on to my sanity summer holidays makes me feel sick. I've used so much annual leave to cover various home schooling and school isolation periods and a huge chunk of annual leave just to keep myself from signing off sick. And it's not even half way through my annual leave year. Honestly I've seriously considered signing off sick or just quitting work (the job that took me ten years to qualify in, including doing a doctorate while pregnant/with a baby)."

Mum working part-time in the public sector, key worker

Section three

Mums are being forced to construct a patchwork of care

Our survey found that mums were having to piece together a patchwork of care to get through the holidays.

Many mums told us that they are relying on being able to work more flexibly to help them cope. Nearly half (48 per cent) of respondents told us they would be working more flexibly during the holidays so that they could manage childcare. Two in five (39 per cent) said they would be combining working from home and childcare, and over a quarter (27 per cent) said they would be working more flexibly. Almost half were having to rely on friends and family throughout the holidays. For one in eight they have little choice but to take unpaid leave or reduce their hours, taking a financial hit and causing further stress and anxiety.

Respondents were invited to tell us more about the challenges they were facing this summer, sharing with us the often costly and stressful juggling act they were having to manage to get through the holidays:

“During the summer holidays the only school club we are able to get a place at only covers 3 weeks of the school holidays. I can only take 1 weeks leave which leaves me with another 2 weeks to arrange cover. I have had to rely on family members, who have their own commitments and jobs to support us with these 2 weeks, but my childcare should not fall to the goodwill of family and there should be more affordable choices available. The club I managed to get my son into is £120 a week for school hour care - which means my husband will have to finish early to collect our son for the 3 weeks he’s in school club. My husband is self-employed so will take a big hit to his income.”

Mum working full-time in the public sector, key worker

“Both myself and partner are self-employed - I (mother) am reducing my working hours to 2 hours a day to take care of our child. I have managed to book ONE week of club (£180) over the six-week period. That is all that was available. Can’t afford to take a break (unpaid leave) as a family but we are able to put food on the table - the work has return and we are now able to pay our bills.”

Mum self-employed working in the private sector

“My children are doing a combination of 4 different holiday clubs, time with grandparents and time with us this year - but much more in clubs than usual due to lack of annual leave due to lockdown childcare provision/ Feb & Easter half term childcare when no clubs were open and isolating earlier in the year and due to my husband starting a new job so less holiday available- it’s basically a 7 week spreadsheet of passing my children round, we won’t know whether we are coming or going and I will be making up hours on evenings and weekends in order to ensure I

work my contracted hours.”

Mum working full-time in the private sector

“Really concerned as my child had 7 weeks off. Literally trying to plan having him at clubs, use annual leave (that I have left) and off days with family. It’s going to be tough.”

Mum working full time in the private sector

“I have recently become a single mother again, and the cost of childcare with my sole wage would cripple me this summer. I have managed to take 2 weeks leave and will rely on my sister and her spouse to help me during the remaining weeks as my mum cannot help me as much this year due to her health risks. I earn a good wage but if I paid for childcare, I would put myself in severe debt,”

Mum working full-time in the public sector

Section four

An issue that goes beyond the summer holidays and the pandemic

Our survey highlights the challenges working parents and particularly mums are facing this summer and that things are going to be harder this year than in previous years because of the pandemic. But mums also told us that juggling care and work, especially over the holidays is *always* a struggle.

Many told us how expensive childcare is and how a lack of flexible working and support from their employer and a lack of childcare provision was the norm.⁴ This reflects previous TUC research which showed one in three requests for flexible working were turned down by employers. Working mums also said they were concerned about how lack of support from employers for those with caring responsibilities impacts their earnings and careers, and how the burden always falls on them.

“I feel like this problem is going to be in my life for the entire time my son attends school. Also, not just for the summer holidays. My workplace is open 365 days of the year, so all school holidays and bank holidays are a problem which businesses don’t really consider. This is my sons first year at school, he has been in nursery previously which was open 50 weeks of the year.”

Mum working full time in the private sector

“Access to childcare dictates my working life, I choose to restrict my ambition because of this one issue as my husband has zero working flexibility and earns far more than me. It feels like most women have to choose lesser roles and not achieve their full potential because of this shortfall.”

Mum self-employed working in the third sector

“I gave up a job I loved as childcare was too expensive and so wasn’t financially viable to work. My husband is the main earner but his hours are long, varied and rostered jobs change at a moment’s notice so it was also stressful as can’t always rely on his availability for childcare.”

Mum, homeworker

“Holiday juggle is a stressful nightmare and it feels like we are set up to fail.”

Mum working full-time in the third sector

“We are haemorrhaging cash paying for nursery and wrap around care. Our youngest is disabled and won’t be able to access the normal school camps when they start primary. I’m terrified about next year and what we’ll do to cover the holidays.”

Mum working full-time in the private sector

⁴ TUC, (2019), “One in three flexible working requests turned down”, TUC poll reveals, available at <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/one-three-flexible-working-requests-turned-down-tuc-poll-reveals>

"It should be mandatory to be given flexible working over the summer holidays. It is very stressful to manage and expensive. In the past I have had to ask family to help pay the costs. It's not just the price, it's the mental exhaustion. This year I organised cover for three days a week three months in advance. It's non-refundable even if another lockdown occurs. But I had to as I know from experiences places are in short supply. I was lucky I had the money. I don't know any dads who research the best summer camps for their child or book it in advance. This always seems to fall on the mum. Why can't some workplaces provide childcare? Why can't we claim some money back? We are expected to do the impossible. Hold down jobs and look after children and ensure they have a good summer where we make the most of every minute. The pressure is real!"

Mum working part-time in the public sector

Dropping hours, taking unpaid leave, not having supportive and flexible workplace and parental leave policies all further compounds pay inequality as highlighted through gender pay gap reporting.

It also leaves women worried about their jobs particularly during the pandemic. Previous TUC research at the start of 2021 found that a quarter (25 per cent) of working mums were worried about losing their jobs either through being singled out for redundancy, sacked or denied hours.⁵ TUC analysis of Office for National Statistics data showed that the number of women being made redundant at the peak of this crisis so far was 76 per cent higher than the peak of redundancies in the global financial crisis in 2009.⁶

We also know women are more likely to have been on furlough working in sectors that have been most impacted by lockdowns. Latest figures show over 2.4 million employees were still on furlough at the end of May 2021 and 48 per cent were women.⁷

And the childcare sector itself is in crisis. Women's Budget Group analysis of Ofsted data shows that there were 3,292 fewer childcare providers and 14,385 fewer childcare places in March 2021 in comparison to August 2020. This translates into the closure of over 7,500 providers over this period and the loss of 64,000 childcare places.⁸ As well as the impact this has on working parents, we know most childcare workers are women.

All of this points to women being forced out of the labour market and pushing back women's progression and conditions in the workplace.

Women, and especially mums have already borne the brunt of the pandemic in so many ways, they cannot be side lined in the recovery. That means government and employers need to act now to give immediate support to working parents, and make sure that the

⁵ TUC, (2021) Working Mums and Covid-19: paying the price, available at <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-04/WorkingMums.pdf>

⁶ TUC, (2021), Jobs and Recovery Monitor – Gender, available at <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/jobs-and-recovery-monitor-gender>

⁷ HMRC CJRS statistics, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme-statistics-1-july-2021>

⁸ Women's Budget Group, (2021), Access to childcare in Great Britain – Briefing, available at <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Briefing-Childcare-FINAL-version.pdf>

longstanding inequalities women face are tackled and not further entrenched by the fall-out of the pandemic.

Recommendations

The crisis has shone a light on the patchwork of care that enable mums to maintain their employment.

The summer holidays this year will be tougher than previous years for many, but for many mums they are constantly trying to manage schooling, wraparound care, informal childcare support, annual leave, formal childcare and holiday provision and a careful arrangement of hours between adults in the household. Pandemic or no pandemic. As one respondent to our survey put it, it is *'like a complex military operation'*.

Employers

Employers need to be supportive of their employees and recognise the challenges working parents and particularly mums face. Losing the skills and talents of so many women by forcing them out of the workforce will not benefit anybody.

In the first instance, with restrictions lifting, it is essential that employers ensure that those with caring responsibilities who have been able to work from home during the pandemic can continue to do so to support them with managing childcare. But working from home should not mean working all hours of the day to try and juggle work and care. Workloads need to be manageable, and workers should have a right to disconnect.

For those who cannot work from home, employers need to assess what other flexibility can be made available with no loss of pay. With the summer holidays just around the corner, employers need to review their current flexible working policies immediately, consulting with employees and trade unions to balance the needs of staff and the organisation and ensuring that working parents who need flexibility now are supported.

But this should not just be a short-term response to the pandemic. Employers should adopt flexibility by default. Employers should consider what flexibility is available in different roles and ensure this is included in all job adverts going forward. The advert should set out the types of flexibility available rather than include a generalised statement. Current employees should have the opportunity to access the same flexibility as well. Flexibility could also include predictable hours and greater notice of hours. Advertising jobs as flexible benefits workers and employers. The Government Equalities Officer found that jobs advertised flexibly attracted 30 per cent more applicants than those that did not.⁹

⁹ Government Equalities Office (GEO),(2019), Encouraging employers to advertise jobs as flexible, available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/843571/Encouraging_employers_to_advertise_jobs_as_flexible.pdf

Government

The government must help working families balance paid work and childcare, by reforming the system of parental leave and flexible working rights:

- Government should introduce a legal right to flexible work for all workers from their first day in a job and a duty on employers to consider which flexible working arrangements are available in a role and include these in job adverts with the new postholder having a day one right to take up the advertised flexibility. Flexible working can take lots of different forms, including having predictable or set hours, working from home, job-sharing, compressed hours and term-time working.
- Currently parents have no statutory right to paid leave to look after their children. The government should introduce 10 days paid carer's leave, on full pay, from day one in the job, to support all working parents.

The government must focus on policies that drive progress in equalising care between mums and dads so that women are not disproportionately affected by the economic fallout of the Covid-19 crisis. This must include:

- investing in childcare – we need more funding for good quality, affordable childcare to support working parents and help the sector recover from the impact of the pandemic
- reform of shared parental leave to include an individual, non-transferable right for each parent on a 'use it or lose it' basis.

The government Equalities Office should review and where necessary redraft the gender equality roadmap to reflect the current context and challenges working mums face, including a clear timetable for taking action on the findings.

The government should also carry out and publish equality impact assessments on all its policies, as it is required to do – but seems rarely to do in practice. The pandemic does not affect men and women equally. As the Women and Equalities Select Committee has highlighted, the Covid-19 crisis has led to a disproportionate impact on women, the same committee also argued that many of the government's actions during the pandemic have worsened the situation for women. The government must assess the possible impacts of its policies and decision-making prior to implementation and monitor the impacts thereafter.

Methodology

The TUC ran a self-report internet survey in partnership with Mother Pukka between the 23 June and 4 July. There were 38,959 respondents. Participants were self-selecting, 36,108 saying they were female, equivalent to 92 per cent of respondents (over 2000 respondents did not participate in any demographic based questions).

96 per cent of respondents have children of primary school age living with them. Nearly 8 per cent (3027) are single parents.

Half worked full-time, 31 per cent part-time, nearly 8 per cent are self-employed, over 6 per cent are temporarily away from work. Nearly 59 per cent were working in the private sector and 30 per cent were working in public sector. 34 per cent are key workers (65 per cent in the public sector and 30 per cent in the private sector).

Just over 40 per cent of respondents are from either London or Southeast, but all regions or nations (apart from Northern Ireland) had at least 1000 responses.

Findings for this report are taken from the women who responded who had children of primary school age. We had 652 dads respond to our survey, while this is not a large enough sample to for us to feel confident in our findings, we want to acknowledge and share their responses. These are set out below:

- 96 per cent have children of primary school age.
- 87 per cent are working full time.
- 31 per cent are key workers.
- 95 per cent live with a partner.
- 57 per cent said they did not have sufficient childcare for the summer holidays.
- 32 per cent said they would be working more flexibly than usual to manage care.
- 44 said they would be combining working from home and childcare.
- 65 per cent will find managing the summer holiday more difficult this year than in previous years.
- Nearly a fifth have used all annual leave to manage previous lockdowns.
- Nealy a fifth cannot afford to take unpaid leave.
- 5 per cent do not have access to any flexible working options.