A fine balance: **managing work and family life**

Tess Ridge's and Jane Millar's interviews with lone mothers and their children reveal that managing work and family life is an undertaking that involves the whole family. Rather than being a barrier to employment, they show that children play an important role in supporting their mothers stay in work.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council,[1] started in January 2004 when we interviewed 50 lone mothers and their 8 to14-year-old children. The mothers had all left income support between October 2002 and October 2003 and had started working and receiving tax credits. In the first interviews we talked about the impact of the move into work on their lives. We have recently been back to talk to the families again about how they are managing over the longer term, but here we focus on our material from the first interviews. This provides a very rich source of material, revealing something of the complexities and insecurities involved for everyone, not just the mothers, in making the move from 'welfare to work'.

Here we focus on just a small part of the overall story, looking at how both mothers and children experienced the costs and benefits of work, and at the ways in which the family members contributed to managing work and family life. However, not all the women were still in work by the time we interviewed them – usually about 12 (ranging from about four to 18) months after leaving income support. There were seven women who had been unable to sustain

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employment and were back on income support. We are, therefore, concentrating here on those women who had successfully negotiated their first year or so in work. Those in work were mostly in jobs with a high female workforce (retail, care work, office work, cleaning and so on) and were earning around average part-time wages for women – about £5-£6 per hour.

'The fear of ending back up on income support, that depresses me'

About three-quarters of the women had been on income support for at least a year and many had had more than one spell receiving benefits since they became lone mothers. Not surprisingly, it was the experience of living on income support that provided the main point of comparison for both the mothers and the children.

The financial difficulties were remembered the most strongly. For the mothers, this meant restricted spending, a lack of luxuries or treats, worries over meeting bills, reliance on families for loans and other forms of financial support and, for many, running up debts. The children also talked about having no money, about difficulties accessing transport, and about exclusion from many of the everyday activities and services that children in more affluent families take for granted. They reported negative effects on their school lives, for example difficulties buying books and equipment, not being able to go on school trips and take part in activities, and not feeling included in the overall social and academic environments of their schools. Feeling left out was a common theme and something that the children found particularly hard.

Thus, although there were aspects of working life that both the mothers and the children found

'… I think myself I work very hard at balancing it and as a family we balance it because you know the children go out and do their bit… So we all, we work, I suppose we all, the three of us, work together very well… It's hard work to keep at it… I've been lucky in that I've got two children who really, really do support me as well.'

challenging, overall there was a strong commitment to sustaining employment. Sometimes the mothers missed the security of income support and the freedom to spend their time as they liked and with their children. And the same was true for the children, especially the younger ones, who missed time with their mothers. But both the mothers and the children were making time and money trade-offs and often explicitly recognising these as such. For example, Roshan,[2] aged 12, looking back on when the family were receiving income support, said:

> *'It was good because she spent lots of time with me, but then the bad thing was that you couldn't do anything at that time because there was no money coming in.'*

For Alice, who had been on income support for eight years, this trade-off had been central to how she explained the change to her nine-year-old son, Simon. She said:

> *'I asked him what he thought about it and, like I say, he was… – 'I don't want you to go and why can't you stay at home' – but I tried to explain then that me going back to work there'd be that little bit more money coming in, he'd get bits and pieces, you know, that he's asked for before and I've not able to afford to do… I think he's come round to the idea, but I still think there's a little bit of doubt in him that he doesn't want me to go, I think he'd rather have me at home…'*

'I'm the breadwinner'

However, this is not simply a time/money trade-off. If it was, for some families the trade-off would not favour work, since they were only marginally better off in work than they had been on income support and in some cases were worse off, after meeting various expenses. For most families, there were also other perceived positive aspects to work. For the mothers, work provided an opportunity to do something different apart from domestic and care work; it got them out of the house, provided social contacts, and so on. They also thought it was good to encourage their children to be more independent, to be engaged in after-school and other activities, and to spend time with other family members. They felt that their children were old and settled enough to be able to benefit from them working, and that this showed them a more positive role model.

But, not surprisingly, few mothers escape some feelings of concern about combining work and motherhood. For example, Joanne who works 30 hours a week and has two children, said:

> *'I do think sometimes, well, the children do miss out… because you don't drop them off at school… they seem to become excluded sometimes from certain activities, social activities, because I don't know about them, because I don't know the friend's parents… They have to do more around the house… So when I went back to work full time I did worry about those things, but I had no option really because I'm the breadwinner…'*

'It's a lot better... not just for me and my brother but for mum as well'

In general, the children did feel that their lives had improved since their mothers started work. This was evident in various ways, including not only basics such as better food but also more pocket money, more scope for leisure activities, more material possessions and holidays. Increased income also meant increased access to transport and this had opened up possibilities for shared reciprocal activities with friends and access to a wider range of social opportunities. For these children, with their recent experience of poverty and social exclusion, the increased status of having a mother in paid work also provided a welcome boost to their own self-esteem.

As well as changes in their own lives, children were also very aware of the changes employment had brought to the lives of their mothers. Several were positive about the impact of work on their mother's wellbeing, saying they felt good about their mothers working and were confident that their mothers were also gaining by the experience. These children tended to have mothers who were working school hours, much the preferred option for the children. But others expressed concern about the physical and emotional costs for their mothers. Even some of the children who were happiest with the changes in their financial wellbeing expressed anxiety about their mothers' welfare.

However, overall both the mothers and the children wanted the mothers to continue in work, not only because of the fear of returning to poverty on income support, but also because they believed that working was better for them as a family. Many of the children would have preferred that their mothers work fewer hours, or only work in school times. And some of the mothers were unhappy about various aspects of their jobs. But in most cases, the family were working together to try and sustain employment.

Meeting the hidden costs of work

Making the move from income support into

work was a major step, surrounded by uncertainties which the mothers had to manage. Some made the transition over a period of time, sometimes several years, via voluntary work, training and part-time work. Many were helped by personal advisers, and received financial support in the form of benefit run-ons and back-to-work bonuses. These were an important help, as were the tax credits, which provided a significant boost to low, often part-time, earnings. But many of the women did have problems in getting tax credits and housing benefit, in particular, paid correctly and on time, and this added to the stress of starting work. Alongside financial uncertainty there was also job uncertainty and several of the women changed their hours or even jobs in the first few months. Managing work relationships could also be stressful, particularly at first. Most of the women were working part time, but some were in two, or even three, jobs to make up the 16 hours needed for tax credits. Some worked shifts and/or worked at nights. The women, therefore, had to manage their time carefully, especially to meet complex schedules of work, travel, childcare and school.

The children were also engaged in a range of caring and coping strategies to manage the changes in their lives and to support their mothers in employment. This included taking on extra responsibilities themselves. They were doing more to help around the house. Many of the older children were caring for themselves, letting themselves in at night, or leaving last in the morning and some were responsible for caring for their siblings. Others were carers on a more irregular basis, making sure that their mothers had time off and a break from responsibilities and care of young children when they were not at work. Some children were worried about their mothers' wellbeing and tried to offer emotional support, in practical and other ways. For example, they not only helped to make sure that the house was tidy, that chores were done and siblings cared for, but they also helped in other small ways – making cups of tea, having quiet time without demands, talking about things. For example, Jake, aged 10 years, said:

> *'Sometimes when mum's struggling and she needs to talk to us all, I help… I like… talk to her with my brother and sister in bed, and we have a really good chat about what's happening and everything.'*

There were many other examples of the ways in which children tried to help their mothers, often in ways that could involve costs to themselves. These included, for example, going to school even if they felt ill so that their mothers would not need to miss work, going to childcare that they did not like very much and getting their own part-time jobs. In general, the children were both protective and supportive of their mothers and clearly understood some of the challenges they faced trying to manage work and home life.

Welfare in work

The focus here is on those women who had stayed in work and most were still working when we talked to them again about 12 to 18 months later. The policy environment – especially the help from personal advisers in making the transition to work and the ongoing financial support from tax credits – undoubtedly made an important contribution to this. Several of the women said that they could not have worked without the additional income from tax credits. Some said that they had tried before but found it impossible financially, others that they would have returned to work much sooner if the current levels of support had been available at the time. Nevertheless, staying in work required some tenacity and commitment, in the face of some major changes in family life, and in the context of what were often relatively low-paid and potentially insecure jobs.

The children clearly played an important role in supporting their mothers to stay in work. In much of the policy discussion of 'barriers to work' for lone mothers, children are seen as part of the problems that must be solved before mothers can work. But, when we look inside the family, it is apparent that this construction of children as simply the passive recipients of care is very partial and incomplete. The children play an active role in helping to sustain the mothers' employment and these practical, social and emotional responsibilities are not usually visible. They are certainly not very evident in policy debates, which are usually focused on longer-term child outcomes (their school performance, for example) rather than on children's current experiences. Promoting welfare in work, and not just welfare to work, should take account of the needs and circumstances of all family members, as they seek to manage the complexities of life in a low-income lone-mother family. ■

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More information about the study can be found at www.bath.ac.uk/casp/home.htm, and in *Cash and Care: policy challenges in the welfare state*, edited by Caroline Glendinning and Peter A Kemp, published by the Policy Press.

1 Reference RES-000-23-1079
2 All names have been changed

'We all got our keys cut not long ago when mum started doing night duties because we can lock the doors behind us and stuff because we all go out at different times. And, like, if she leaves about nine and we didn't want anything to eat, we'd make ourselves dinner… it's alright, like you have a bit of independence and responsibility so it's not too bad.'