This week’s [briefing from the IFS](https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/bns/bn186.pdf) on the gender pay gap was illuminating on the role that becoming a parent has on pay inequalities:

‘There is, on average, a gap of over 10% even before the arrival of the first child… there is then a gradual but continual rise in the wage gap and, by the time the first child is aged 12, women’s hourly wages are a third below men’s.’

Depressingly, this came as little surprise to us at the Family and Childcare Trust. Our ongoing work on childcare and family friendly employment make it clear just how difficult it is for parents, and mothers in particular, to balance caring responsibilities with their careers. Too often mothers end up paying the price when they are frozen out of the jobs market or can only find opportunities below their skill level. The gender pay gap will not be closed until all parents have access to family friendly employment opportunities, and high quality, affordable and flexible childcare to enable them to take up these opportunities.

The cost of childcare is widely discussed. [Our research](http://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/childcare-survey-2016) found the average cost of a part time nursery place is an eye watering £6,000 per year, leaving some parents paying to work. While childcare is obviously only needed for both parents (in two parent households) to work, we know that more often than not, the cost of childcare is weighed against the mother’s earnings.

Even if parents want to work, and can afford childcare costs, they may struggle to find childcare that matches their working pattern. Typically childcare is available 8am to 6pm Monday to Friday. For parents working outside these hours finding suitable childcare is even more of a struggle. Childcare providers shouldn’t have to cater to bad working practices, but we need a childcare market that caters for parents who don’t work the classic nine to five.

Instead, currently mums alter their working practices to fit with available and affordable childcare, including reducing their hours in order to reduce their childcare costs. Often, there is also a pay penalty for part time working. IFS’s analysis found that part time work was paid less than full time work – on average £3 per hour or 25 per cent. So mothers become stuck in low pay and low hours.

There is a clear role for employers in solving this conundrum, and the good news is that it makes good business sense. Increasing flexibility in working practices, including part time working, will enable them to get the pick of the best talent out there. There is currently a pool of highly skilled mums who are not working or working below their skill level because there is a lack of part time opportunities or childcare. It would also encourage employers to hire for the jobs that need doing rather than trying to stretch or squeeze workloads to fit 40 hours per week.

There is also the need for culture change in the workplace that encourages fathering. The IFS briefing includes startling graphs on how few fathers work part time compared to mothers. I fear that until part time working stops being seen as gendered, it will continue to be under paid.

Decisions about parenting and working are some of the most personal there are. Parents are uniquely placed to know what works best for them and their children, and many will choose to take time out of employment. But it is the gendered nature of this that is brutally unfair: after having children women’s earnings stall while men’s continue to rise. We need changes to childcare and employment practices that enable mothers and fathers to make positive choices about working and parenting. Childcare is part of the modern state’s infrastructure: it enables parents to work and children to thrive, and needs to be a pillar in any strategy to reduce the gender pay gap.