

What influences mothers' decisions about returning to work after having a baby?

Understanding the role of childcare in returning to employment – an Understanding Society and Coram Family and Childcare briefing

We know that employment rates of mothers in the UK are much lower than those of fathers or women without dependent children. For some women, this difference is down to personal choice, but difficulties in finding affordable childcare or making work pay may also be affecting the decisions women make about returning to work. To delve deeper into this issue we combined data from Understanding Society, the UK Household Longitudinal Study, with data held by Coram Family and Childcare on local childcare prices¹. We looked at women in the UK from the year before they had a baby to up to three years afterwards to investigate what could be influencing their choices about paid work.

What were women's employment patterns?

For women, before having a baby, 67% were in some form of employment:

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| 37% were employed full-time | 17% were employed part-time | 13% were self-employed | 33% were out of the labour force |
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Three years after having a baby 55% were in employment:

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| 20% were employed full-time | 28% were employed part-time | 7% were self-employed | 45% were out of the labour force |
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Childcare prices and returning to work

Women who lived in the 25% most expensive areas for childcare were less likely to return to work than women who lived in areas where childcare was cheaper. Areas which have high childcare prices often also have high earnings, but childcare prices still had an effect after this was taken into account for women who returned to work part time. Childcare prices seem to be a particular barrier to work for low earning and/or part time working women.

Does access to informal childcare make a difference?

Women who used informal childcare, such as having grandparents care for their child, were much more likely to return to work than those who didn't have this option. 74% of mothers who used informal childcare had returned to work or started working three years after the birth of their child, compared to 47% who didn't have this option.

Looking after other people in the family

Whether women were looking after other people, as well as their child, made a difference in whether they return to work. Mothers with caring responsibilities were more likely to leave employment after having a child, even if they had worked before motherhood. Three years after the

birth of their child, 43% of women with other caring responsibilities had returned to work, both full- and part-time, compared with 57% of mothers without additional caring responsibilities.

Single mothers

Raising a child without a partner who lives with you makes it more difficult to work. The proportion of mothers who returned to work or took up employment is much higher among women who lived with a partner when their child was born compared to lone mothers. Single mothers who had a job before the birth of their baby were less likely to return to work – in both full- and part-time roles – compared to mothers who lived with their partner.

Gender attitudes towards work and family life

Understanding Society asks people about what they think and feel, as well as recording what they do. When we looked at the gender attitudes expressed by women in the study we found that mothers who agreed with the statement '*pre-school children suffer if a mother works*' were much less likely to return to work. 22% of mothers agreed with the statement, 47% disagreed, with 30% not expressing a strong feeling either way. Of those who agreed, only 35% had returned to work after three years, compared to 69% of the group who disagreed with the statement. However, although there appears to be a strong link between gender attitudes and women's decision to return to work we need to be careful how we interpret these figures as we know that people have a strong tendency to rationalise their behaviour and agree or disagree with positions that reinforce their own life choices.

New fathers

In comparison to women, relatively few new fathers changed their employment pattern within three years of having a baby – almost 80% of fathers either stayed in full-time work or stayed self-employed.

What does this mean? Recommendations from Coram Family and Childcare

Supporting mothers to remain in or return to the workplace increases family income, reduces the need for benefits and improves productivity by retaining women's valuable skills in the economy. Women taking long breaks at the start of their child's life will often find it hard to return to work at their previous skill or salary level.

This research confirms that policy interventions can make a real difference to families' decisions about returning to work and caring. Mothers who live in areas with higher childcare costs are less likely to return to work from maternity leave. Those trying to combine part-time work with caring responsibilities are particularly hard hit. Interventions which reduce the cost of childcare – whether through free provision or support with costs – may help more women return to work, particularly at the point just after maternity leave, when childcare is most expensiveⁱⁱ.

The analysis also tells us that family networks matter. Women with co-resident partners and access to informal childcare are more able to return to work. Childcare that was available and cost-effective for all mothers would help ensure that all women could return to work.

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For more information on this research and how we think government and employers can make a difference please email us: info@coramfamilyandchildcare.org.uk

ⁱ The population for this study is mothers who had at least one baby born between 2009 and 2015 and continuously lived in the same local authority in Great Britain for four consecutive years. The study does not cover Northern Ireland as we do not have price data here. Childcare prices refer to average prices for full-time childcare for children under two in each local authority.

ⁱⁱ Because of the need to follow families for four years, this research does not include Tax Free Childcare or Universal Credit. Free childcare for 3 and 4 year olds will not be relevant to mothers of under 3s unless they have older children. Some 2 year olds will have been entitled to 15 hours per week of free childcare if the family had a low income.