

# Mothers work

*Health visitors may be party to mothers' deliberations about when, or if, to return to work after maternity leave—but whatever their choice, they need support and for their contribution of caring in the home to be valued.*

Having my two young grandchildren and their parents to stay during building work at their home has been a pleasure; but it has also reminded me of the sheer, grinding hard work involved in child and family care. How galling, then, for mothers who have no paid work outside the home to be described as 'workless'—as if their contributions count for nothing.

This new attitude is a shift from post-war thinking when the welfare state was developed, based explicitly on the idea of fathers as sole wage-earners and mothers staying at home to care for the children. Bowlby's (1953) theories of 'maternal attachment' were harnessed to convince women that children would suffer if left in anyone else's care.

Now, there are new sticks to beat mothers with, which can also create a sense of guilt and of somehow failing their offspring. Mothers need paid work, it is claimed, to counter the adverse impact of poverty on children, to enable pre-schoolers to benefit from

early years education and prevent their infants from accepting 'welfare dependency' as a norm.

Rosso et al (2015) examined data from the UK Labour Force Survey to seek an explanation for an apparent growth in 'workless households'. They firmly debunk negative stereotyping of such families as inconsistent with the analysis, describing so-called 'intergenerational worklessness' as 'vanishingly rare' (Rosso et al, 2015: 9). Both households and employment status are subject to change, but the data do not distinguish whether unemployment has lasted for days or years, or how long a household has held its current form.

Households where no one has ever worked account for less than 10% of all workless households, with young people over-represented in the 'never-worked' figures. Over 80% of workless households contain only one adult, either living alone, or as a lone parent. The report concludes that the phenomenon of 'never-worked households' reflects a life stage rather than a persistent state. This gives a sensible basis for health visitors to help parents plan for a time in future when they might wish to seek employment, if that seems right for them.

Work was once regarded as a route out of poverty, but that is no longer necessarily the case. Hirsch (2015) has examined the impact on living standards of the 2015 Summer Budget, focusing particularly on safety net benefits (tax credits etc), which will change as the new national living wage (NLW) is phased in by 2020. He concludes that families with both parents working full-time and earning the NLW are likely to be marginally better off by 2020, despite planned cuts

to in-work support. Where one parent works full-time and one part-time, they may still gain, depending on how much they use the proposed additional free childcare. However, lone parents and households where one parent works while the other stays at home will lose out.

Tax and welfare policy, it seems, is now based on a new norm of both parents working full-time while paying a different adult to care for infants and young children outside the child's home. However, not every child thrives in daycare, attachment still matters and evidence about the relative benefits to children of home or organised childcare remains immensely contested. Both personal choice and the childcare provided at home need to be valued.

Perhaps health visitors could borrow the hashtag #valuecare adopted by 'Mothers at Home Matter' ([www.mothersathomematter.co.uk](http://www.mothersathomematter.co.uk)), a group that campaigns for equity in tax and benefits, to help reinforce the value of the care that mothers (and fathers, too, although it is usually mothers) provide.

Health visitors are often party to mothers' deliberations about returning to paid work. Those conversations sometimes focus on practicalities, but emotional support and explicit acknowledgement of the work involved in caring for their infants—what we once called 'mothering'—is important, too. **JHV**

Bowlby J (1953) *Child Care and the Growth of Love*. Penguin, London

Hirsch D (2015) *Will the 2015 Summer Budget improve living standards in 2020?* Joseph Rowntree Foundation, London

Rosso A, Gaffney D, Portes J (2015) *What explains the growth in 'never-worked' households?* Joseph Rowntree Foundation, London



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