

One thought 'to make a judgement on whether it's good or bad isn't helpful', and smaller families are what works in the current society (14). Another woman felt that if a person could afford a big family and that's what they wanted then it is completely acceptable (9). However, she also pointed out that she did not agree with people who decide to have big families but depend on the government for support.

Wanting quality time with children and giving them greater care and attention was preferred to having too many and being stretched both emotionally and financially (2, 3, 12, 18). One woman also believed that smaller families could have a potentially positive impact on society as a whole,

'If there are more families with smaller numbers of children then I think you've got more to give to them so they should be more rounded people I would hope.' (15)

Smaller families was also felt a benefit in terms of being able to provide more opportunities for children, such as private education. As stated by one respondent,

'I think it's a good thing. Well, the fewer the better actually, you can raise them better, you can give them more attention I think and you can certainly provide more with less children.' (19)

One woman knew several couples who do not want to make the commitment required in starting a family (17). Such people value their freedom to do what they want to do when they want to do it.

'They travel quite a lot and that kind of thing, and don't want to be tied down with a new responsibility, I suppose.' (17).

Expectations about having children were discussed including pressure from others to have children following marriage. Six of the women with children (5, 11, 12, 13, 16, 19) and one of the women with no children (3) had received comments regarding having children. Most of these comments were made in a joking way without any real expectation of an answer,

'Yes I got comments at work, you know quite specific comments like, 'oh it'll be you next' if someone gets pregnant which they would never have done before. It was only done in a jokey way, not any serious pressure.' (3)

Other women reported being annoyed and hurt by comments made. Following her marriage, the father-in-law of one respondent kept asking when her and her husband were going to have children. When asked how she reacted to his question, she said,

'I felt like saying **** off. It was never when are you going to have children? It was, when are you going to give me grandchildren? I hated it.' (11)

Another respondent also reported comments from her in-laws about trying for a baby. This was particularly hurtful, as she had lost one baby early in pregnancy,

'I had a miscarriage just before I had Grace...and we ended up saying something then because it was just getting...It was upsetting anyway and I was just like pleased that we did it because it completely shut them up. All of a sudden it hit them that oh, maybe they are trying, it hadn't even crossed their minds I don't think.' (5)

Ideas about the cost of children

The cost of having children was a concern for almost half of the respondents (6, 8, 10, 11, 18, 19, 20). Future costs, for example, when the children were older and wanting to go to university, were more of a concern than costs incurred for babies and younger children,

'At the moment I don't think they make much difference, especially the second when you've already got your pram and things. I mean he's just nothing, a few nappies and some wipes. I'm more worried about when they get older.' (16)

For one mother the expectations of her children themselves was also an issue,

'Your kids expect you to give them more than I ever expected my parents to me. I wouldn't have dreamt of asking my mum and dad for money for driving lessons. I had a Saturday job when I was 14 and that was it. You want something you go and get it. Now they expect you to pay for all these things.' (18)

Only two of the mothers, however, felt that the cost of childcare was not an acceptable burden (6, 15). Others felt that it was their own choice and you just get on with it. All three of the women without children thought that their cost was acceptable, although one admitted the cost may determine whether she has one or two children (2).

Ideas about children and working mothers

Ideas about whether mothers should stay at home and take care of children while they were young were mixed. Some of the respondents felt that to be able to stay at home with children all day was a privilege and depended upon being financially well off (8, 16). Others felt that choosing to work or not should be a personal decision (3, 5, 9, 11, 12, 19). Returning to part-time work was considered by some of the respondents to be more acceptable than returning to full-time work (3, 11, 15, 16, 18). Some of the respondents stated that going back to work full-time seemed pointless and selfish (3, 8, 13, 15, 16).

'I think if you're going to have a family you should be with them...I just don't think it's right. I used to work in a nursery and there were children there that were dumped off at 8.30 am and didn't get picked up until 6 pm. They were the first to get there and last to go five days a week and I just think what was the point of having that child.' (16).

One of the mothers interviewed, who works full-time (12), stated that different mothers need different things. She also stated that before she actually had a child she

might have agreed that mothers should stay at home with young children. Following the birth of her son however, she said,

‘It is really difficult to stay at home with a child and keep the child happy and keep yourself happy. You really do need to make a lot of effort to get out and meet other people and do things and keep your brain going. So not necessarily, I think it’s better if the mother is happy and if that means going to work then that’s a good thing’. (12)

Another woman was certain her decision to return to work was the best scenario for herself and her child.

‘Speaking personally I am a better mother for A) having had a full-time career, and B) having my daughter at nursery. If Ella were home with me all day, I would be a witch and I would be deeply unhappy. And because I would be deeply unhappy, she would be deeply unhappy.’ (9)

Part-time work was more generally acceptable and felt to be good even for both the mother, who is stimulated mentally, and the child who gets to socialise with other children, as well as having time alone with the mother (3, 7, 11, 15, 16, 18). These women believed that achieving a balance between a career and parenthood was vital and that at least some part should be played in the child’s upbringing.

One of the respondents stated that she herself would not think anything of a mother going back into part-time work,

‘though to be honest if someone went back to work full-time I would be one of those (tuts) well you know why did you bother having children if you were going back to work full-time.’(16)

British society was viewed as being supportive of women combining work and family by only seven of the mothers (7, 8, 10, 11, 17, 19, 20) and one of the women without children (3). For a couple of the mothers this very much depended upon the area in which they lived. For example, one woman felt she benefited from living in the London borough of Islington that she felt was quite forward thinking in that it had made a decision to try and help women work (20). Another respondent felt the opposite about her area in which she wasn’t happy to bring up her children because of racism (12).

Other mothers said that it very much depended upon the type of work that you do (11, 15). As stated by one respondent,

‘The majority of businesses are fairly unsupportive, I mean you go into London and nine out of ten companies just don’t really care about if you’re having children or whatever, they don’t care about giving you maternity leave and that sort of thing, they’d rather get rid of you and have somebody else in’ (11)

Other respondents spoke about the general attitude of work colleagues towards women going back to work after having children. One woman encountered an,

‘undercurrent of disapproval...when people have returned (to work) after having a baby’ (3)

Another reported a generation gap in attitudes, with older women making comments about colleagues returning to work when their children are still young.

‘We didn’t go back to work until they were five, you know. We had our families, gave up work completely and then went back to work.’ (16)

One of the women who had gone back to work full-time found the attitude of people quite interfering.

‘I think generally people are very moralistic about mothers and they feel that they can tell mothers what to do and how to behave even if they don’t know them’. (12)

Other women felt that society is reasonably supportive of women with young children going back to work and as stated by one, much more than it used to be a decade ago (3). Another woman with no children said,

‘More and more women are going back to work and therefore more and more people are accepting of it but maybe not understanding of it.’ (1)

The government was also cited as supportive. Two women mentioned benefits provided. One of these is eligible for the Working Families Tax Credit, which pays for half of her childcare (10, 19). She said,

‘I think it is encouraging women to go back to work after having children’.
(10)

On the other hand, another respondent, with reference to policies of other European countries, stated that current British social policies are not supportive of women going back to work at all (4). She cited Scandinavian countries where women get a long maternity leave, and fathers get a generous paternity leave. As a consequence of such family friendly policies, she assumes their childcare must be “brilliant” as well.

Among the social and economic changes that would make it easier for women with young children to go back to work, cheaper and subsidised childcare was mentioned, in addition to greater choice of childcare. More tax allowances for childcare would make a difference, as would more child benefit. It was felt that companies and businesses could be more supportive in providing flexible work hours, more maternity and paternity leave, and in-work crèches. As stated by one respondent,

‘The Government might think it worthwhile to put more money into crèches or providing businesses with extra money to do that, because more

women would go back to work and therefore more money generated. It could be a benefit added into a package with our salary.' (13)

Three of the mothers interviewed believed that it is getting harder for women to combine work and family (9, 15, 18). Two women felt that the expense of childcare made it harder for women to enter the labour force (15). Three women did not know, as they had not followed policy changes over time (4, 13, 14) and one woman felt that it was about the same (17). Of those who felt that it was getting easier for women to combine work and family among the reasons given were the acceptance of society generally (3), the provision of different benefits and allowances (11, 12, 19) and the fact that women have fought hard for their rights (5).

The women were asked whether or not Britain was a good place to bring up children. Nine women believed this statement to be true (5, 7, 8, 10, 13, 14, 17, 19, 20). They cited the opportunities available to children such as education, travel, economic and employment opportunities. However, one woman felt that in an urban environment like London, it is less safe than it's ever been and she finds herself being 'extremely vigilant' (14). Better weather was wished for by several (10, 14, 17) with some admitting that the winter months are tough (14).

One woman did not like the phrasing of the question, asking "Compared to where? Britain for whom? Britain for middle class with lots of opportunities as opposed to somebody on the dole?" (17). Another woman noted that she is sure Britain is a good place to bring up children compared to a lot of other countries since it is a free democracy, has a beautiful countryside and the people are fair (20). She felt that other countries, such as New Zealand where she lived for 10 years and Canada where half of her family comes from, could be equally as good,

'I mean as long as your children are happy, I don't think they care where they are, really.' (20)

Five women did not know how to answer the question (3, 8, 9, 15, 16). One woman admitted she had nowhere to compare Britain to, but finds Britain to be an increasingly frightening place to bring up kids. (9) She mentioned paedophiles, streets that are not safe, child-mothers, and schools that seem out of control.

'I don't think there is anywhere you can hide anymore – these sorts of things I talked about happen everywhere. I think that perhaps it's just modern society – the things we have been talking about.' (9)

Six women did not think Britain was a good place to bring up children (1, 4, 6, 11, 12, 18). One woman felt that perhaps she thought so because she lives in London (4). She cited gangs, but then said they were probably everywhere. She finds British kids too materialistic, but perhaps again that is due to living in London. She also mentioned the quality of the education system, finding it 'a bit dumbed-down' in Britain, compared to countries such as France where philosophy is a compulsory subject.

Another woman's immediate reaction when asked if Britain was a good place to bring up children was 'No, it's not!' (6) She spoke of a holiday she took in Britain where the family stayed in so-called family friendly hotels which turned out to be "the worst experience" of her life since people were so unfriendly and unhelpful.

'Your child sort of cries or drops a fork over breakfast and heads turns, you know, 'Why are you bringing your child here?'' (6)

However, upon further questioning she did have a positive impression of the British school system. Other respondents also mentioned the lack of facilities for children, for example, changing facilities in shops (11, 15). Other respondents felt that it very much depended on where in England you live and how financially well off you were as to whether Britain is a good place or not to bring up children (11, 12).

One respondent compared Britain now to the 70's and 80's where everyone just seemed less stressed. She believes now that,

'Britain's just lost it, there's no discipline, we've got a real youth culture problem and I blame partly parents and partly the government. I think they've created a big 'have/have not' divide again in this country.' (18)

Summary

The women interviewed were very accommodating and interested in this study. All were very happy to talk about their children and how their personal and work lives have been influenced as a result of being a parent. Every woman had a different story to tell based on their individual circumstances - place of employment prior to having a child, the decision to return to work or not, and the type of childcare they found most appropriate for their child.

The decision to have children was influenced by various factors for almost all of the women. The effect on work and career and the overall financial cost of raising children were the main issues raised. Despite this concern regarding finances, only one woman actually calculated the costs of having a child prior to becoming pregnant. The cost of childcare and other financial constraints were not an issue in starting a family although as family size increased it tended to become more of a concern.

Most of the respondents remarked on the expense and lack of childcare facilities. This was felt to be an area where major improvements could be made both by the government in assisting with the cost of childcare and also by individual companies. Many would have liked on-site crèches provided by their employer. Nevertheless, no one mentioned that work crèches would only be a practical option for those that lived near their place of employment. There was a definite split between those women who thought that their current or last workplace was family friendly and this depended upon job type and their terms of employment.

The attitudes of the women towards other mothers going back to work following the birth of a child were surprising. Some felt that going back to work was a personal decision whilst others were very disapproving of women who went back to work full-

time. They stated that this was selfish and made having a family pointless. On the other hand those mothers who were working full-time were adamant that this was a good thing both for themselves and for their children.

All of the women experienced, to a greater or lesser degree, constraints following the birth of a child. This was particularly true of economic constraints irrespective of level of income. Having a child also had a major impact on the career of most of the women because it is inevitably a career break, even for those who return full-time after their maternity leave. For other women it meant giving up work or taking on working part-time. In any case, the opportunity to work part-time hours and flexibility in the workplace were highly valued by a lot of the women.

References

Paull, G., Taylor, J. and Duncan, A. (2002) *Mothers' employment and childcare use in the UK*. Institute for Fiscal Studies, London.