

# *Mothers' reflections* about work *and family life*



*Drawing on new Institute research, **KELLY HAND AND JODY HUGHES** report that mothers have diverse views about combining paid work with raising children. Further, many mothers acknowledge that the decisions of other mothers may be different from their own and made in response to individual circumstances and desires.*



Understandings of motherhood are embedded in social and cultural circumstances – and hence mothering is practised in diverse ways. Women “do mothering” in different ways according to “material and cultural resources and constraints . . . within specific historical circumstances” (Glenn 1994: 3).

In fact, research about mothers’ decisions about paid work shows that there is considerable diversity in the ways in which mothers who are broadly similar on a range of material and cultural characteristics approach mothering and paid work (Duncan and Edwards 1999; Hakim 2003; Himmelweit and Sigala 2003). Research suggests that a range of factors shape decision making. These include beliefs about the compatibility of paid work and “good parenting”, employment opportunities and access to child care, and the expectations and support provided by others (Barlow and Duncan 2000; Duncan and Edwards 1999; Hakim 2003; Jordan et al 1992; Swinbourne et al 2001).

Mothers themselves also appear to recognise diversity in the ways they respond to work and family needs. For example, Probert and Murphy (2001: 30) found that when asked what they would say to other parents about these issues, many mothers said that these decisions are essentially a private matter, and they did not wish to “impose their views on others”. This suggests mothers are aware there are many possible ways of doing things, and not one agreed upon right or wrong way.

Other research has considered not only the circumstances and beliefs involved in mothers’ decisions, but also the discursive frames they use when talking about these decisions (Bailey 1999 and 2000). In Bailey’s research in the United Kingdom, women’s identities as

While this theory could be said to over-state the extent to which people are able to consciously change and construct their own identities, it has useful application to decisions and transitions associated with having children and doing paid work. It could be argued that in negotiating their roles within the sphere of the family and the workplace, mothers might reinvent themselves to at least some extent at different points in their lives, in light of new information, changed experiences, circumstances or desires.

This article explores these themes using data from the Institute’s Family and Work Decisions study. Mothers were asked to look back over their lives and reflect on the different decisions they had made about parenting and paid work. Their reflections were based on the decisions they had made in their own lives, and the advice they would give to other parents about combining the two.

### Family and Work Decisions Study

The data presented in this paper are drawn from the second stage of the Australian Institute of Family Studies’ *Family and Work Decisions Study*. The first stage of the study involved a telephone survey of 2,400 mothers, half of whom were lone mothers and half of whom were partnered. The survey was conducted in December 2002. Participants were recruited from the population of mothers with dependent children aged less than 15 years, or with dependent students aged 16-24 years, who were receiving a family payment from Centrelink. All were therefore in receipt of some type of government benefit at the time of selection into the sample.

The second stage involved in-depth interviews with 29 of the lone mothers and 32 of the partnered mothers who

participated in the telephone survey. These interviews were conducted approximately one year later. The mothers had children of different ages, diverse work circumstances and diverse employ-

ment histories. Interviews were conducted in metropolitan, rural and remote areas of Victoria and South Australia; including socio-economically advantaged and disadvantaged areas, and areas of average socio-economic status.

The in-depth interviews were semi-structured in nature and took a life history approach, covering the different ways mothers and their partners had combined paid work with having and caring for children, the ways they had made decisions about this, the events and circumstances that influenced this process, and how they changed over time and in relation to other circumstances and events.

One of the questions mothers were asked was: “What advice would you give to other parents about doing paid work while bringing up children?”. Responses were mostly based on mothers’ reflections about their own lives. The themes that emerged highlight some of the key tensions driving mothers’ decisions about combining work and family.



mothers and workers were seen as an ongoing project starting from pregnancy, and changing and responding to different parts of the life course of being a mother. Like Himmelweit and Sigala (2003), who suggest that women’s preferences about paid work change to adjust to the circumstances they find themselves in, Bailey (2000) also found that mothers’ perceptions of their identities can change, with the spheres of motherhood and work each influencing the other.

The adjustment of one’s identity to fit changed circumstances is explored in the work of Giddens who argues that late modernity is a time of “radical reflexivity”, where individuals need constantly to remake their identities as they go along (Giddens 1991; 1992). As the old certainties of the “right way” to live (as framed by morality and religion) have increasingly given way to modern “experts” (among whom there is often little agreement), individuals face greater uncertainty and the challenge of responding to changes in their own lives (Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

### *The “right time” to have children*

For many mothers, their advice was related to the timing of having children and about the types of things women might wish to achieve or plan for before having children. These responses seemed to reflect their own experiences.

“I’d say, in all cases, have your children earlier than you’d think you’d want to. I was 32 when I had [my daughter], but I despair for people who’re kind of having their first child at 37, 38. Y’know, it’s something worth thinking about. Just the fact that the kids are going to be home until you’re 60 or something.” (Partnered, one child in primary school, works full-time)

“Don’t have the kids too early, even though I’ve enjoyed having mine, I was only 20 when [my son] was born, but I think, I’ve said to [my daughters] don’t have any kids until you’re 30. Enjoy yourself and get settled. That’s my advice.” (Partnered, two children at secondary school, not in paid work)

The importance of becoming established in paid work or gaining qualifications before having children was echoed in the comments of other mothers.

“The other thing I would say to younger people that don’t have children yet, is to get yourself a career, establish yourself somewhere as something before you have children. That I regret not to have done. I really do.” (Lone parent, one child in primary school and one in secondary school, works part-time)

“Well nowadays it’s really important to have qualifications. To basically have a piece of paper that says you’re a such and such.” (Lone parent, one child in primary school, works part-time)

In addition to qualifications and work experience, other mothers also spoke about the importance of planning financially before having children.

“Save your money. Get everything you want and do everything you want before you have kids [laughs]. And just make sure you have something to fall back on when they’re old enough and you’re ready to go back into the workforce so you’ve got something to fall back on.” (Partnered, one child in primary school, looking for work)

“My advice to my son and his fiancé is to work before they have their kids – get their house, get financially settled before they have their kids. Then if they, after they have them, if they want to go back to work at least they’re not trying to save for a deposit on a house with kids. They’ve got the house already.” (Partnered, two adult children and two children at secondary school, not in paid work)

These comments reflect themes emerging from other sections of the interviews where mothers spoke about both their regrets at not having maintained some attachment to paid employment and the difficulties they now faced in finding paid employment. A lack of qualifications and skills was also raised by several mothers in the study – not only in regard to difficulties in gaining employment but also in relation to earning a high enough income to make it financially worth working.

Overall these statements emphasise the importance of planning ahead to mitigate against future risks (Lupton 1999) - to ensure you have skills to fall back on when you want or need to return to the labour market, and ensure you have the ability to earn an adequate income. They also reflect other recent Australian Institute of Family Studies research from the Fertility Decision Making Project, commissioned by the Office for Women. This research indicates that Australians “remain concerned about their capacity to create and maintain a family environment in which children can be nurtured and

supported financially and emotionally” (Weston, Qu, Parker and Alexander 2004: 151). In this study, which focussed on mother’s fertility decisions, respondents emphasised the need to have both “a secure, stable and adequate partner and a secure, stable and adequate income stream” before having children (Weston, Qu, Parker and Alexander 2004: xiii).

### *Prioritising caring for children*

Another strong theme that emerged was about the importance of focusing on the care of children rather than work, particularly when children were small. This is perhaps not surprising given that half of the women interviewed were not in paid work at the time of our first contact with them.

“I’m not prejudiced against people who do go back to work or anything like that. But I just think they are so young for such a short period of time and it does go by that quick, and – umm – its definitely not boring, and its definitely not sitting at home on your bottom all the time. Yeah. It’s hard work.” (Partnered, one pre-school age child, not in paid work)

While many mothers emphasised that staying home is important because their children needed them, other mothers also spoke about staying home in terms of the pleasure this can bring.

“Oh, it’s been basically the same since they’ve both been born. They’re only kids for a short amount of time, you might as well enjoy them. Because it’s other people that get to see their first steps. The first time they go ‘mum’. Everything. I wouldn’t have traded it for quids. (Partnered, two pre-school aged children, not in paid work)

These sentiments are similar to those found in previous research on mothers work and care decisions which has found that mothers prioritise being home with children when they are young, both because of a desire to be with children over paid work, and because of a feeling this is the right thing to do (Duncan and Edwards 1999).

### *Money doesn’t matter*

Some mothers who felt it was important to spend time at home with their children acknowledged that the decision to limit their participation in paid work had financial costs, but sought to emphasise that this was a worthy sacrifice, with money being less important than the wellbeing of themselves or their families, or their relationship with their children and partner.

“Money isn’t everything, family is. Be willing to sacrifice so that your children will know who you are and you will know who your children are, that’s about it.” (Partnered, four children – two secondary school and two primary school age – not in paid work)

“I guess the main thing is just to look after yourself and know your limits because in the end money isn’t going to keep you happy and healthy. And just to be able to have the time to be with your children and especially your partner because that’s a big suffering part. Especially if you’ve got children and a job.” (Lone mother, two children – one in secondary school and the other one in primary school – works part-time)

These sentiments are similar to those found in earlier work in this study about the importance of money and its influence on decisions to participate in paid work (Hughes, Hand and Renda 2004), and other research that suggests that most people report placing a higher

value on their relationships and spending time with family than on material gain (Hamilton 2003).

Regardless of these sentiments however, many mothers in the study had returned to work earlier and worked longer hours than they felt was appropriate or desirable because they felt it was financially necessary. Previous research shows that many parents work long hours in Australia despite feeling stressed and concerned about the impact this has on family life (Buchanan and Thornwaite 2001). This suggests that mothers are conscious that their decisions about work and family involve making trade offs between financial and non-financial goals and needs - and that the decision to prioritise spending time with children and family means making adjustments in other areas of life.

### **Combining parenting and work**

Some of the mothers' advice about parenting and paid work addressed ways to fit work around family life.

"Just try and find a good boss. It's hard. But get a job that you know that they're not quite so rigid I suppose. I'm lucky that [employer] is such a big place and the shifts are so long, often 5.30 to 12 o'clock at night, that they can juggle school kids and things and that they've got the added employees. It's easy to replace me if I leave or I want a day off or something like that." (Partnered, preschool age child, works part-time)

"Don't get married and have kids! [Laughs] No. Be brave enough to run your own business and fit it in around things." (Lone parent, one child in primary school, works part-time in own business)

and fitting paid work around children's needs, such as only working during school hours, were common themes. Similarly, having some participation in paid work was important for many women - for their own wellbeing and to maintain their skills for future employment. These findings are consistent with previous research which shows that most Australian mothers would like some level of participation in paid work, at some stage, even if there is no financial need; and that access to part time work and flexible work hours and arrangements are very important in enabling mothers to combine paid work with caring responsibilities (Thornwaite 2002).

### **Child care**

Mothers in the *Family and Work Decisions Study* had quite diverse views about child care and this was reflected in the advice they gave for parents around child care use. Some mothers felt that using child care when children were small was not good for children and advised others not to use it if possible:

"I don't think mothers should work when they've got [children] at home. Um, because you put em in child care or family day care ... it's not quite the same. And children aren't quite how you want them to be; they pick up things, and it's harder to get them out of habits. It's good that they mix with other children, but there are other avenues for that. I reckon for the first four and a half, five years you should stay home with them, really." (Partnered, five children - two in secondary school and three in primary school, works part-time)



***Australians "remain concerned about their capacity to create and maintain a family environment in which children can be nurtured and supported financially and emotionally".***

Other mothers spoke about maintaining a connection to the labour market for the sake of their own wellbeing - and for preventing difficulties in returning to paid work when children are older.

"Don't ever lose the work. Always work if you can, even a few hours a day, even a few hours a week, to maintain your independence and your brain. I think it's important, I really do. And also because of the future, because things change all the time, if you don't work for a long time, it's so much harder to get back to it." (Lone parent, two children - one child in secondary school and one in primary school, works part-time in own business)

"I think you need to do it [work] just for yourself, to remember you are a human being, an adult, because sometimes you are constantly with the kids and you forget to be an adult, a woman, attractive, intelligent. You know, you've got to pick up the paper, go and take time out, and do it with other adults. I think it's so important." (Lone parent, two children - one in secondary school and one in primary school, works part-time in own business)

The advice given by these mothers reflects the variety of beliefs about paid work found in the study. Finding the right job that supported parenting responsibilities

Other mothers thought that using child care was a positive experience for children, but that it was important to find the right child care:

"The key is to find a really good day care centre - one you're comfortable with. You need one where your kids, you hit the gate, and they're gone because they love it so much. It makes your day so much more worthwhile because you're not away worrying, like, "Oh I hope they're not crying still!" The day care centre is your key, it really is." (Lone parent, three children - one in high school and two in primary school)

Others spoke about using child care in order to have some time out from the children and household.

"Do what you want to do, and what you feel is best. Like, if you're not happy staying at home with the baby full-time, go out. You've got to be happy to put the baby in. Like, I know people who put babies in day care just for time-out so they can go do whatever. I don't think any less of people who do that, or anything like that. It's their choice. I know what its like to be stressed out ... " (Partnered, preschool aged child, not in paid work)

Others suggested that limiting the amount of time spent in care was also important.

"I think if I was a young mum I wouldn't opt for putting my kids into child care full-time, but if a position came up to do two days a week, or a couple of half days, I'd go for it, because it's good for [their social skills]." (Partnered, three children – one at university, two at high school, works part-time)

These themes reflect findings from the rest of the interview about mothers' use of and access to child care and their ideal child care arrangements. Previous research also shows that mothers have a range of beliefs about child care and whether it is good or detrimental for children, and a range of reasons for using it (Duncan, Edwards, Reynolds and Alldred 2004; Himmelweit and Sigala 2004), and that mothers' beliefs about child care are one of the most important factors influencing their work decisions (Glezer and Wolcott 1997).

### *"Everyone is different"*

The most consistent theme is the way mothers' talk about everyone being different and there being no right or wrong way of doing things. Like other Australian research, many mothers said that making decisions about working and caring for children isn't easy – that as a result of competing desires and demands you can feel quite conflicted and even for oneself there may be no "one" right choice (Pocock 2003). One mother summed up this idea:

their children but also enjoying paid work. For these women, any decision made meant compromising to some degree – which was at times a stressful and upsetting process. These mothers may be seen to be managing risk as well as desire – for example, the risk of neglecting an "appropriate" mothering role and the desire to maintain their place in the "public" work sphere.

As well as acknowledging that there is a diverse range of choices mothers can make about work and family, a consistent theme in mothers' responses was that it is inappropriate to judge other mothers whose decisions were different from their own. This did not mean that mothers did not have a strong opinion about what was the best or right decision in a given set of circumstances. However, they were hesitant to appear to be judgemental of the choices of other mothers.

Some mothers spoke of there not being one right "choice" for parents when making decisions about work and family life. In these responses, mothers asserted that different families have different needs – and that other parents should do what is best for themselves and their families.

*"No, there's just too many factors that for each individual ... If you love your job you'd still want to keep it. If you've got a fantastic family network supporting you so that the child care is never an*



*Alongside an underlying discourse of moral judgement about the right way to raise children, mothers' reluctance to openly judge others suggests an understanding that work and family decisions are shaped by both circumstances and desires, and hence necessarily highly individual and dynamic.*

"I don't know, I suppose you've got to make decisions. It's hard to, because people have to work and have to earn money, and you can never afford to have children, I don't think. It's pretty impossible to say we can afford to have kids now, unless you're 50 and you own your own house, and then you're a bit old. But, umm, I don't know. You just have to think: 'Now, do you want to have a big family or a small family?' 'Are you going to stay home and look after your children, or are you willing to have somebody watch your children in the most important years of their life, and go out and work and that?' It's a big decision, and I don't think you'll know what you'll do until you're in that circumstance. We've had completely different thoughts and then we've had kids, and then it's like we don't want people looking after them and yet we want to work. It's very hard, it's something you have to experience for yourself, and really look at what you want to do." (Partnered, four children – one at primary school and three pre-school age, works part-time in family business)

This response sums up what a number of mothers articulated in the interviews – that making decisions about working and having children is difficult. Similar to Giddens' (1991) notion of reflexivity, mothers talk about a process of constant reflection and change; and as in other research (Himmelweit and Sigala 2004), they talk about responding to both internal and external pressures. While many mothers had very clear and strong views about what was right for them, other mothers talked about wanting to do both – being home all the time with

issue, or ... There's just so many things thrown in. And it's what you yourself want. I know that what we've worked out has suited us; and it's because we felt it was really important to be at home or around the kids a lot when they were young. And we've never changed that." (Partnered, three children – two at secondary school and one at primary school, recently returned to paid work)

"I don't know. Honestly. I mean, I hated getting advice from other people. I would just say work out the pros and cons and do whatever's the most comfortable for you and your kids and your family. If you've got a husband that expects you to be home cooking tea blah-blah-blah, then you've got to work out what comes first." (Partnered, one pre-school aged child, not in paid work)

These comments are similar to those in another Australian study by Probert and Murphy (2001) that also found mothers were reluctant to criticise the choices of other women in regard to their work and family arrangements. However, these quotes also show that most mothers continue to express a view about the "right" decisions for parents to make in a given set of circumstances, despite an apparent reluctance to judge decisions different from their own.

For example while acknowledging that not all women had the opportunities to make choices as they had, some women at the same time made strong statements about what the "right" choices were:

"The only advice that I'd give them is, if it's possible, stay at home with them. Stay at home with them while they're so little. If it's not possible – oh, golly, if they have to work, I suppose they have to. It's hard because it was my choice not to most of the time. If you have to, try to make things flexible so that you're not missing out on too much." (Partnered, one child in secondary school, not in paid work)

This suggests that while a discourse of individual choice and tolerance of diversity is dominant among the mothers in our study, underlying this rhetoric many mothers still have strong moral views about the appropriateness of particular choices. Other research has also found that mothers feel judged by others about their work and family decisions regardless of whether they engage in paid work or remain at home (Pocock 2003). This finding is also consistent with our finding in other parts of the interviews that many mothers feel judged by others for the decisions they have made:

"Oh, because they [other women] all have their own say in it. You know what people are like. You can't go back to work. You can't leave her. You can't do this. ... [Other mothers] are fine. They've all got their hubbies. You know, shitloads of money." (4279425-lone mother, 4 kids aged 16 years to 3 months, working part time. Referring to leaving her youngest child in care of others in order to work)

## Conclusion

Mother's responses in the Australian Institute of Family Studies' *Family and Work Decisions Study* highlight the diversity of beliefs about mothering and how best to combine paid work with having and raising children. Alongside an underlying discourse of moral judgement about the right way to raise children, mothers reluctance to openly judge others suggests an understanding that work and family decisions are shaped by both circumstances and desires, and hence necessarily highly individual and dynamic.

These findings are consistent with previous research that highlights the diversity and fluidity of beliefs about mothering (Hakim 2003; Probert and Murphy 2001; Duncan and Edwards 1999; Himmelweit and Sigala 2003), and with the literature on individualism and personal identity that suggests decisions about work and family are seen as part of highly individualised life projects (Giddens 1991; Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

Mothers' reflections on their own experiences also suggest that being a mother and/or being a worker is a reflexive process – like Bailey's (1999, 2000) participants, women seek to reinvent and vary emphases on their identities as mothers and workers at different stages of their lives. Thus while being a mother might be one's priority when children are small, being seen, as one of the participants put it, "to be an adult, a woman, attractive, intelligent" through participation in career or paid work may be a priority at another stage of life when the opportunity to work is created through children being old enough to be cared for by others or to care for themselves.

In contrast, other mothers' reflections take the form of regrets – that they had failed to reinvent themselves, for example, at the right time, such as trying to return to paid work "too late" and finding themselves unable to find employment. Advice from these women warned others of making similar mistakes. Other warnings came in the form of managing future risks such as financial difficulties or lack of experience in paid work

by delaying having children and saving or gaining experience in the labour market, creating a strong enough version of oneself that would protect them from future risks of poverty and unemployment.

The interplay between an underlying moral discourse about mothering and paid work, and an expressed tolerance of diversity, perhaps reveals a stress or tension faced by women as they "do gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987). It would be interesting to see if any such tension existed among fathers if they get the opportunity, as the mothers in this study have done, to give voice to their thoughts about parenting and to give their own advice.

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