

## How does parental use of flextime impact child wellbeing?

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Over the past few decades, the line between work and family has become increasingly blurred, leading many employers to create a responsive workplace for their employees. Responsive workplaces are characterized by offering alternative work arrangements that help their employees meet family responsibilities. Of these arrangements, one of the most common and widely used is flextime (Cherlin, 2002). Although the definition of flextime varies greatly, the basic concept enables employees to manipulate their hours so that they work full-time, but are not necessarily in the office during typical work hours. In 1998 it was found that 68% of companies allowed periodic change of starting and quitting times and 24% of companies allowed change on a daily basis (Galinsky & Bond, 1998).

There is a prevailing assumption that use of flextime by parents assists children. The question of whether this assumption is backed by empirical evidence is timely because of the recent introduction of the "Family Time and Workplace Flexibility Act" into Senate. This act is designed to provide flextime and comp time to the general public. While introducing the act into Senate, Senator Judd Gregg based his argument on the assumption that flextime benefits children, stating:

They [employees] are working hard to meet their family's economic needs as well as their emotional needs. And while government can't mandate love and nurture, it can get out of the way and eliminate barriers to opportunities for love and nurture.

In fact, although the benefits of flextime to the employer and to the employee have been studied, the impact on the children of employees has not yet been studied empirically.

We can gain some insight into how flextime may affect children by looking at the existing research on how flextime affects parents. This body of literature does not provide a clear picture, however. The use of formal flextime programs have been found to assist with parents' perception of balancing work and home (Ezra & Deckman, 1996), but have not been found to affect measurable variables such as stress, family satisfaction or general well-being (Shinn, Wong, Simko & Ortiz-Torres, 1989). Interestingly, having the perception of work schedule flexibility--regardless of whether the person actually had access to a formal flextime program--has been found to aid with work-family balance (Hammer, Allen & Grigsby, 1997; Hill, Hawkins, Ferris & Weitzman, 2001). In addition, Barnett & Gareis (2002) point out that control is both a workplace and a non-workplace factor. They found that if a person has high control over their working hours but that control causes them to have less control over the choice of activities during nonworking

hours, their marital role quality will actually be lower than if they worked full-time with no control.

Thus, perceived flexibility may be more important than formal flextime use, and control over one's situation, both in content and scheduling, seems to be beneficial to parents. Although there are not yet any clear answers as to how flextime affects children, based on the existing literature the following hypothesis can be drawn: Having a perception of flexibility in work schedule may increase the parent's perception of their child's wellbeing on various measures. However, observable, objective outcome measures for children may not actually be influenced by their parent's perceived flexibility or formal flextime use.

Overall, it is currently unclear whether flextime actually assists children's well-being, regardless of whatever impact it might have on the perceptions of parents. Clearly a carefully conducted empirical study of this issue is needed to test whether our society's assumption that flextime benefits children is founded. If it is not supported, employer resources may be better spent on endeavors other than the instituting of formal flextime, such as working to increase the perception of control and flexibility within all aspects of the work environment, that will actually assist parents' psychological well-being and in turn benefit children.

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