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WLB Focus Group – UK

A discussion forum was conducted with six local Harlow fathers around issues related to their roles within their families, their involvement in childcare, and issues related to balancing work and family life. The main findings are outlined below:

Definitions of work-life balance

Fathers were asked to describe what they felt constituted 'work-life balance' for them. The main thing that fathers said was important to their concept of a 'work-life balance' was having adequate amounts of time to spend with their children and partner. The fathers who participated in the focus group tended to feel that having an adequate work-life balance meant having sufficient time to spend with their family, rather than needing to or having to work such long hours, that little time is left for their families. Although dads also discussed the importance of having time for themselves and for other activities that they enjoyed doing, there was widespread agreement amongst focus group participants that spending 'quality time' with their families was central to their concept of having a 'work-life balance'. Dads discussed the importance of making sure that work didn't dominate their lives to the extent where family life suffered. As one dad said:

"You need to draw a line...ring fence your own time or time for your family or time to do stuff you want to do as well."

Fathers also highlighted the notion of 'balance' as very important, stating that for them, work-life balance was not about spending all of their time with their families, but rather about achieving a 'balance' of work and family life. As well as ensuring that work doesn't become too dominant in their lives, participants also spoke about the importance of making sure that family life isn't taking up all of their time and meaning that work suffers as a result. As one dad said:

"You can get the balance wrong the other way as well, where you're not really justifying what you're being paid...so the word balance, is key."

Another father who spends a lot of time caring for his child, felt that perhaps he and his child spend too much time together and that his child might benefit

from socialising more with other children and adults, and thereby not become too dependent on him.

Priorities and roles

To probe the area of 'balance' more deeply, participants were asked about their priorities in life, and where work and family fitted within these. Overwhelmingly, dads stated that their family rather than their work or career was the priority in their lives. Although these dads tended to view work as important and tended to enjoy working, for them, work was typically defined as a means to an end - a way of earning money to support their families and help to provide a decent standard of living for them. The primary reason given for working, was to earn money for their families. As one father said:

"For me, priority is my family...work is...I have to do it, but my family comes first, anything I have to do, I have to think about family."

Another father commented:

"I think a lot more people these days consider that work is a means to an end, rather than something that's on a level footing or even more important to them than their home life. So yeah, work is a means to an end [for me]."

It was clear from the discussion that being a father was important to all participants. This was highlighted by the fact that a number of participants stated that they were or had been the main carer for their child(ren) at certain times, and that they would be happy to care for their children full-time in the future. Thus, fathers tended not to define themselves simply as breadwinners and providers, but also as carers and nurturers for their children.

Focus group participants discussed not feeling that their main role in their family was 'breadwinner', and agreed that society had changed a lot and that nowadays men and women shared roles a lot more. Dads agreed that most families in the UK today need both parents to earn a wage in order to provide a good standard of living, and that this has contributed to a shift in men and women's roles in the family, and in the way that men view their role. One participant used the term 'co-breadwinners' to describe the roles of many parents today, and other dads agreed with this. As another dad said:

"One income is a luxury."

Another societal change highlighted by participants, was related to society's views of men as carers. Dads stated that there is now a wider general appreciation and acceptance that men can be carers for their children. Some dads who had first become fathers a number of years ago, stated that the experience of being a male carer today is quite different from, say, ten years ago. One dad described the experience of having difficulty changing his child's nappy when he was out in town a number of years ago, since public baby-changing facilities were in the women's toilet, and inaccessible to

fathers. He said that changes such as having parents and changing facilities that can be accessed by dads, are evidence that societal attitudes towards men as carers were changing. Another dad, who has been the main carer for his child at some points during his life, also said that things had changed for the better. He said that things were better now, but that:

"[A few years ago] It definitely felt that as a man pushing round a pushchair – you're a bit odd."

However, although most dads felt that attitudes towards men as carers are more positive today than they were ten years ago, some dads did say that they had still felt out of place and awkward using some services for children and families, as they had been the only dad there. These dads also said that some mothers could be initially suspicious of men attending groups or sessions for parents and children, or find a man's presence strange, but that attitudes were generally changing for the better.

In addition, one dad stated strongly that he felt there was a lack of resources and help for fathers in balancing work and family life. He felt that the issue of work-life balance is often discussed in terms of mothers, but rarely in terms of fathers. Another father felt that dads were often unaware of their rights as fathers, and that often little was done to inform them about these. He felt that employers and the media could do more to highlight the rights of fathers.

Parenting

Dads briefly discussed their and their partner's roles as carers in the lives of their children. In particular, participants discussed the parenting styles of men and women, and the ways in which they differ. One father felt that women were more instinctive carers, but the majority of fathers did not share this view. There was widespread agreement, however, that men and women often parent differently.

Although participants were keen not to generalise, most dads felt that fathers tend to allow children to take slightly more risks, whilst mothers tend to be more protective and worry more about children. For example, one dad described how his wife worried far more than he did about the health of their children. Another dad said that he felt that not being overly protective of children was important, in order to allow them space to develop and learn about the world. He said:

"It's not just wanting your child to be macho, it's wanting them to experience the world. And, y'know when your child first goes to the park and they get on a climbing frame, they may fall, but that's all part of their development to learn to climb...and I think that men will do that more than women will."

There was an agreement amongst most fathers that dads tend to be the ones who do most of the disciplining of children in the family. Participants appreciated that this would differ from family to family, but felt that in general,

men were often the main discipliners in families, particularly as children, especially boys, get older.

Difficulties and pressures in balancing work and family life

Participants agreed that balancing work and family life could be difficult, and recounted a number of specific examples of times when they had felt under pressure to reconcile the two areas. Dads stated that depending on circumstances and commitments, either work or family life might become particularly demanding or hectic, and this could result in difficulties in devoting enough time to one or other aspect of their lives. In particular, dads stated that they sometimes felt that either work or family life was being neglected and suffering as a result. On focus group participants said:

“It’s an added pressure, because you often feel that you’re short-changing one or the other. In periods when it’s intense work, you feel as though you’re not giving enough to your children, to your family life, or periods where you are spending time with them, but you feel as though you are letting things slip at work.”

Another dad said:

“I think it’s a catch-22 really, because you’re going to work to provide for your family, but at the same time you’ve gotta spend the time with your family. So if you’re working 40, 45, 50 hours a weeks and say Christmas is coming up, you’ve still gotta remember that you’ve got to spend some quality time with your family, it’s not work, work, work.”

For one father, work-life balance pressures are particularly acute when both he and his partner are working at the same time, and a childcare issue requires one of them to take time off work.. They both have full-time jobs, and he described the way that he and his partner negotiate who will take time off to deal with childcare-related issues. He said that reaching a decision about this was sometimes difficult. He said:

“That’s really hard because one of us has to give, and you get into kind of arguments about whose work has the most value. You can look at it really crudely about who brings in the most money, or you can look at who has which deadline.”

For this father, he often ends up taking on more childcare responsibilities in these cases, as his partner’s work often has more pressing deadlines.

Dads also discussed the implications of work-life balance difficulties for them, their families and their work. In a number of cases dads spoke about having to prioritise certain events in their children’s lives and ensure that they were present at these, and seemed resigned to the fact that work commitments would mean that they would inevitably miss some key events. Dads also spoke about the impact that taking time off for family-related issues can have

on their work, saying that they sometimes felt under increased pressure from employers or work colleagues to catch up with their work.

One dad said:

"You do end up missing some of these key things, whether it's the final assembly or something at schools, through working. You have to make those compromises and you can't go back and replay them."

One father, who said that he would soon be increasing his hours of work, said that as a result:

"At the moment I go to everything [at my child's school], but [when I work more hours] I'm gonna have to pick out what's really important and what's not so important [to attend]."

Another commented:

"Whether it's freeing yourself up to go to a school assembly in the morning, it always creates problems, it always takes your eye off the ball a little bit with what you're doing at work."

Dads generally agreed that they sometimes felt guilty when they were unable to balance work and family commitments, or when they needed to take time off work for family-related reasons. This guilt could take many forms, and included feeling guilty that they were not spending enough time with their children or family; feeling guilty that they had not performed well enough at work; being made to feel guilty by colleagues or employers for taking time off; or feeling guilty that their absence had created more work for their colleagues.

One dad said:

"I think there's kind of a pressure to feel guilty if you're not giving 100% at work all the time, and I think the media pushes this as well."

Another stated:

"If you're in a team, you can feel as though you're letting part of the team down."

Dads discussed their feelings of guilt as being related to three different factors: their own expectations of what they could or should be doing, the expectations of employers, and colleagues' expectations and attitudes. Participants said that their own expectations about how they should be balancing work and family life sometimes leads them to feel guilty when they don't feel that they manage to balance everything in a way that they are happy with. Some dads also felt that among employers, there is a lack of understanding of the need for dads to balance work and family life, and a lack of help for them in doing this. For example, one dad gave the example of taking time off for family reasons, but having to work even harder to catch up

when he returned to work - thereby increasing the pressure on him. In addition, where dads have the type of job where work is shared amongst a team, time off for family commitments can mean additional work for colleagues, and this may cause problems between team members or feelings of guilt on the part of the father.

Employers and work-life balance

Dads related some of the problem with balancing work and family life to a lack of understanding and support from employers. In particular, some dads felt that there was still an expectation from employers, that if there is a need for time off to deal with childcare-related issues, then it should be the mother rather than the father who takes time off. For some dads, this lack of understanding had led to employers or managers being reluctant to give them time off. These dads felt that it is generally easier for mums to get time off for childcare-related issues than dads. As one dad said:

"I think things are changing a little bit, but it seems a lot more acceptable that the mum will go to a child's assembly or whatever...and I think that as a guy, asking an employer for time off for those things, it's almost as if you shouldn't be asking which I think is wrong."

Another dad said:

"I can't imagine going up to my boss and saying: 'can I come in a bit later tomorrow because my child's got an assembly.'"

Dads discussed current and past experiences of trying to balance work and family life whilst working for different employers, and the role of employers in facilitating this. There were a number of differing experiences related, with some fathers talking about having flexible, understanding employers and managers, and others saying that there was a lack of flexibility and understanding. A key factor influencing dads' experiences of flexible working appeared to be their line-manager. Fathers discussed being treated differently in relation to flexible working by different line managers within the same organisation with the same flexible working policies. Thus, even where a flexible working policy was in place, dads said that their line-manager might interpret or implement that policy differently. A number of dads said that how they were treated in relation to flexible working sometimes came down to your manager and how flexible and sympathetic they were, rather than the flexible working policies per se. As one father said:

"On the face of it all the policies and procedures are very good, but there was still the work, there was still huge deadlines to meet ...and sometimes you feel that the real attitude doesn't live up to the policies and procedures. It's there on paper but..."