

Daddy's not home

More and more teachers are acting as father figures to hundreds of other people's children while their own families rarely see them. Could a new EC directive change that? asks Mary Hampshire

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Michael Lewis works a 70-hour week. A glance at his diary for a month ahead reveals 12 evening meetings and one Saturday already booked. Like many other teachers, he struggles to balance his home and work life. "Even though I love my job, there's a high price to pay," admits the 48-year-old father-of-two and headteacher-of-1,560. "Quality time with my family is non-existent during the week, and I can't compensate for it. I admit I'm not a wonderful juggler, but I feel there's a fundamental structural problem in the profession which also needs addressing."

A report from the Equal Opportunities Commission says working fathers are missing out on raising their children because of the long hours they spend at work, even though they would like to play a more active role. Many feel that having been present at the birth, they would also like to see their children grow up. Work and Parenting, released in October, points out: "Men's long working hours seriously curtail their opportunity for active involvement in family life, yet there is increasing evidence that fathers want to take leave and reduce their working hours following the birth of their children."

Many mothers can take a break from employment or work part-time during the early years of their children's lives - although this can damage their careers - but men have no statutory leave. Kamlesh Bahl, EOC chairwoman, says: "People should not be forced to choose between being good parents and good workers. Employers need to recognise that parents, increasingly fathers as well as mothers, need to combine working with caring."

If he is lucky, Mr Lewis snatches a few hours away from King Edward VII School in Sheffield to help Daniel, 11, and Benjamin, 9, with homework and music practice. He often works on Sunday nights, preparing paperwork for the following school week. The best time for togetherness with the family is during the holidays when they all leave Sheffield to detach themselves from his job. "There's an irony right through the system that people who are ostensibly in caring positions find themselves leading a lifestyle that doesn't show a lot of care for themselves or those close to them," says Mr Lewis.

Giles Drew, 49 - head of the 1,090-pupil St Edward's Church of England Comprehensive in Romford, Essex - works up to 80 hours a week, leaving little time for his three children, Armored, 19, William, 17, and Eleanor, 11. "I usually

arrive home at 7.30 when we are all about to eat, which I feel is important so that we can talk together about our day. But sometimes it's a microwave job. "When the children were younger I wasn't much help. They'd ask me to read through their GCSE coursework, which was a case of as and when. My son is very sporty, yet the only time I've watched him play basketball was when his school competed against mine. "But," he adds, "there are advantages, such as the long holidays. And, to be frank, I feel the situation is worse for women teachers who are mothers because they are under double pressure to do both jobs well."

The EOC believes both mothers and fathers should have a right to three months' unpaid parental leave, and a few days of family leave each year for emergencies such as childhood illness or accidents. "I think there should be some sort of paternity leave," says Derry Wiltshire, 47, who has two children Andrew, 16, and David, 15, and is head of Amherst County Junior School in Sevenoaks, Kent, which has 375 pupils. "One advantage of being a teacher," he explains, "was that both the boys came through this school, so I was able to see them grow up. "But now they've left and the job takes up so much time, I've missed out on their school plays, sports days and parents' evenings. "Most days I'm lucky if I finish work by 10pm. I don't know how much longer I can keep the pace up."

Pete Flynn, 46, is deputy head of Wadebridge Primary, Cornwall, with 600 pupils. He has three step-children aged 25, 22, and 19, and three of his own aged 14, 12, and 5. He admits: "Sometimes I arrive home, say 'hello' to the kids and disappear straight up to my office. "My wife says, tongue-in-cheek: 'You can put us down on your schedule too you know. Don't forget you've got a family.' " John Bills, 57 - father of Liz, 22 and Sarah, 19 - tells a similar story. "By the time dads get home, they've no energy left and they want to put their feet up," says the head of the 500-pupil Causeway Green Primary in Sandwell, West Midlands. "Then they've got more preparation work to do. They're not at their best for their own kids, so they get neglected."

Keith Old, 39, heads three departments at Balby Carr Comprehensive in Doncaster where there are 1,200 pupils. His commitments include helping to run the Doncaster Schools football team and the Duke of Edinburgh awards. This means working weekends and during some half terms - and less time for nine-year-old Carly and five-year-old Jonathan. "It all adds up to a lot of hours, and I do feel very guilty about it because I'm missing out on seeing my children grow up. I leave the house before they get up, but I always make sure I'm around at bedtime and bedtime to read them a story, and try to finish any work I bring home between 9pm and 11pm. "But sometimes I'm not in at 9pm, and I'll not see either of the children all day. Sundays are the only days when we are able to spend real time together. My wife often complains that she never sees me."

There is another side to the coin. Not all male teachers feel the demands of the job are stacked against their personal life. Steve Martin, 34, became a father for the first time in October, and is head of science at St Aidan's County High, a

grant-maintained school with 900 pupils in Carlisle. "Teaching is a family-friendly job compared to other occupations," he says. "I keep my weekends free, and at least we get long holidays. I'm usually home by 5.30, and spend two nights a week marking homework, setting tests and planning lessons. At the moment, I don't have any burning ambition to become a headteacher because I want a decent family life and I don't want to end up working crazy hours. The problem is that the job is becoming more regulated by directed time which is not very flexible for working parents."

Keith Blackwell, 52, manages to juggle school, family and personal interests. He is head of Churchill Primary School in Sevenoaks, a part-time fireman and the Crystal Palace football club mascot. He has two grown-up children - Lucy, 23 and Tom, 20. "Your job is only part of your life, but to some people it becomes the be-all and end-all. Yes, you want to run a successful school, but the bottom line is that your family must come first. You have to keep things in proportion. When the children were younger I popped home during lunchtimes so they saw more of me, and I wanted to give my wife a break. I felt lucky I was a teacher because I was always home by 4.30 unlike other dads, yet to catch their commuter train back from London. It was a positive thing because I was always there for them at teatime and bedtime. I only bring work home occasionally. "

Yet teacher-fathers like Keith are in a minority. The evidence suggests that three months' unpaid parental leave and more family-friendly employment policies - as suggested in the EOC report and due to be introduced under the EC's parental leave directive - would be welcomed in principle by many working fathers in our schools. But unless their workload is drastically eased, few will be able to take advantage of such flexible working arrangements.