

# **Has a New Age of Post Pandemic Work Arrangements Allowed Parents to More Equally Share Childcare Chores?**

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## **Abstract**

The onset of the covid-19 pandemic brought new, radical, large-scale changes in work, including the normalisation of and increases in working from home. These changes may present a new opportunity to renegotiate work-life balance, including childcare allocation between couples, raising questions about how childcare has changed within families. Childcare has been persistently gendered, with women performing more than men, even in crisis situations such as covid-19 lockdowns and even when they also engage in paid work. Pre-covid, the gendering of childcare has been studied from social policy, time use, and routine versus nonroutine/enrichment perspectives, but less specific attention has been given to the individual chores of childcare (i.e. dropping children off at school or nursery, putting children to bed, staying home with children when they are ill). The gender division of these aspects of childcare may vary by type of chore and may be particularly influenced by who in the household works full time or part time, and who can work from home and who has to travel to their place of work. We ask, 1) How are different kinds of childcare chores divided by gender? 2) Does the gender division of childcare chores vary with the couples' household work arrangements? and 3) How does working from home change these associations? We use the first ever UK Generations and Gender Survey (2022-23) which contains uniquely detailed data on the division of individual childcare chores and working arrangements of the respondents and their partners, focusing on heterosexual partners with young children.

## Extended abstract

### Introduction

The covid-19 pandemic radically changed work in the UK. Even now, several years after pandemic onset, hybrid working and home working remain prevalent, accounting for the work arrangements of over 40 percent of working adults (2023). This dramatic change in work raises questions about how workers' home lives have also changed, particularly the gendered allocation of childcare responsibilities, which has a strong and established link with work (Lewis 2017). Previous studies have demonstrated the unequal division of childcare and the gendered changes in work patterns during the covid-19 pandemic, even when women also work (Kreyenfeld and Zinn 2021, Zamarro and Prados 2021, Nagy, Geambaşu et al. 2023), possibly because families with children did not have the bandwidth to adapt under the circumstances (Rodríguez Sánchez, Fasang and Harkness 2021). This may have been in part because in addition to work changes, the pandemic also caused myriad complications in childcare, due to government mandated school and childcare closures, home schooling, an excess of sickness absences, and constantly changing quarantine rules preventing children from attending school or childcare settings, sometimes for up to 10 days at a time (Hobbs and Bernard 2021, Roberts and Danechi 2022). Although the childcare pressures related to covid-19 have eased significantly, changes in working arrangements have persisted, including the normalisation and legitimisation of home working (Chung, Birkett et al. 2021, 2023).

This paper studies how childcare is divided, approximately three years after the first UK lockdown, and how new work patterns may be related to different kinds of childcare allocation under more normal circumstances. The combined pressures of the pandemic, expanding childcare responsibilities, and work changes may have prevented adaptation during lockdowns and other pandemic related restrictions. In a post pandemic context, we have the opportunity to examine work changes and childcare without the same pressures, when families may have more bandwidth to adapt to different patterns. We ask, 1) How are different kinds of childcare chores divided by gender? 2) Does the gender division of childcare chores vary with the couples' household work arrangements? and 3) How does working from home change these associations?

Although women are still, on aggregate, the lead caregivers (García-Mainar, Molina and Montuenga 2011, McMunn, Bird et al. 2020, Churchill, Kornrich and Ruppanner 2023), men may be more likely to engage in some types of childcare, such as enrichment childcare (i.e. transport to extracurriculars, help with homework, playing sports) and less likely to do routine care (i.e. – feeding, dressing, bedtime) (Musick, Meier and Flood 2016, Walthery and Chung 2021). Looking at individual childcare

tasks may bring new insights into the gendering of childcare in a post lockdown and covid restrictions context.

Economic bargaining theory suggests that people who work more and thus earn more money have the economic agency to buy themselves out of doing domestic work in the home (Bittman, England et al. 2003). However, this is often applied to housework, assuming that housework is inherently unpleasant and something people would always prefer to avoid. Childcare may have a different pattern as parents may prefer to do some of the tasks themselves, especially childcare tasks that are linked to higher satisfaction (Musick, Meier and Flood 2016). Moreover, there is evidence that in couples where women contribute more financially, women still continue to do more domestic work than men (Kühhirt 2011). Examining childcare division patterns by different work arrangements (i.e. dual earners compared with male breadwinners, female breadwinners etc.) will allow us to explore whether gender patterns suggest different preferences or whether bargaining theory is more relevant and whether that differs by type of childcare task.

In addition to economic bargaining theory, time availability theory (Bianchi et al., 2006; Raley et al., 2012) posits that people who work or work longer hours -typically men- may do less domestic work because they have less time. Working from home might affect this pattern and as it can free up time spent preparing to go into a workplace and the actual commuting time, which may then be spent on reducing work-family conflict (Laß and Wooden 2023). On the other hand, pre-covid studies focused on housework found that working from home could have the opposite effect and in fact reinforce traditional patterns by expanding the time spent on housework for women and time spent working for men, exacerbating inequality (Chung and Booker 2023, Wang and Cheng 2023). We investigate working from home to gain further insight into how having more time at home is related to the gender division of childcare, among couples who work.

Previous studies of work and gendered childcare have looked at the “motherhood penalty” in the workplace (Andrew et al. 2021, Budig and England 2001), the use of social policies such as parental leave for fathers (Lewis 2017), and the gendered division of childcare according to hours spent (García-Mainar, Molina and Montuenga 2011, Xue and McMunn 2021, Chung and Booker 2023). However, less attention has been given to different specific daily chores of childcare and how those chores relate to gender equality in childcare and work. Most people in the UK have children, and those who do very likely have multiple children, and children need daily, intensive care for most of their dependent lives, making childcare relevant to a large proportion of the population for a sizeable proportion of their lives. Although women have been employed at increasingly higher rates over the last few decades (including full time work), they are still hindered from economic

engagement due to their caring responsibilities (Buchanan, Pratt and Francis-Devine 2023), putting them at risk of economic vulnerability. Moreover, situations of marked childcare inequity between partners impact family building decisions (Dommermuth, Hohmann-Marriott and Lappegård 2017) and have adverse effects on well-being, psychological distress, and mental health, further highlighting the relevance and importance of this study (Seedat and Rondon 2021, Xue and McMunn 2021, Zamarro and Prados 2021).

## Data and methods

### Data

We use the Generations and Gender Survey collected for the first time in the UK from 2022-23 using a push-to-web design, with data on 18-59 year old UK residents using a push-to-web design. The Postcode Address File was used to sample 86,400 households to whom a written invitation to participate was sent. Only one person per household aged 18+ was asked to participate. 7,203 individuals completed the whole questionnaire – a response rate of 14%. The survey focuses on young and middle-aged adults who are more likely to be in the intensive phase of providing care for young children. Survey weights are used in all analyses.

Our analytic sample is heterosexual partnered people with coresidential children under the age of 10 who answer the childcare chore questions (n=1,072).

Our main independent variables of interest describe dyad level work arrangements and are derived from individually reported data on respondents' work and partner's work – including who works full time or part time or is not in paid work, and who works from home. The first variable contains five levels 1) dual fulltime workers (reference group), 2) full time male worker only (1 male) 3) full time male worker & part time female worker (1.5 male), 4) full time female worker & part time male worker (1.5 female) OR full time female worker only (1 female) 5) both in part time work or both not in paid work. We combine 1 female and 1.5 female categories due to small samples sizes, as these arrangements are less common. The working from home variables describe in a binary fashion whether the male partner works from home at least once a week (yes/no) and whether the female partner works from home at least once a week (yes/no). For analyses using these variables, we drop households where neither partner is in paid work and combine 1 (male) and 1.5 (male) categories in order to avoid empty cells (i.e. structural zeroes in cells).

Our outcome of interest is who within the dyad does a specific childcare chore – always/usually the female partner; equally both partners; always/usually the male partner. We exclude 22 cases where the respondent says that someone other than themselves or their partner does the chore or that the children do it themselves. We examine five different childcare chores which we believe will have

different gender patterns, based on the survey question “Please indicate, who in your household does these tasks?” including 1) Seeing that the children are properly dressed 2) Staying at home with the children when they are ill 3) Putting the children to bed 4) Playing with children 5) Drop off and pick up children at childcare / school.

Staying home with ill children is relevant to work because unless you can work from home or make up work time later with flexible work hours, whoever stays with the children also needs to miss work. The childcare chores of dressing children and putting children to bed are also important because they are tasks that must be done daily and could potentially encroach on typical work hours. Playing with children is different from the other chores because it can be done on non-workdays, does not necessarily need to be done daily, and the associated time expenditure can vary. Finally, dropping off and picking up children at school and childcare is also important because it is a daily task that occurs on weekdays for most of the year and can also interfere with typical working hours, particularly preventing full time working hours, especially if the parent cannot work from home.

## Methods

We use multinomial logistic regression to test the relationships between couple level work arrangements and the gender division of each chore. The dependent variable has three outcomes: 1) always/usually the female partner; 2) equally both partners; 3) always/usually the male partner. Given that different childcare chores may have different gender patterns of division, we analyze each chore separately. Response rates differ slightly between chores as well, meaning the analytic sample sizes per chore also vary slightly (i.e. from n=942 to n=1,072).

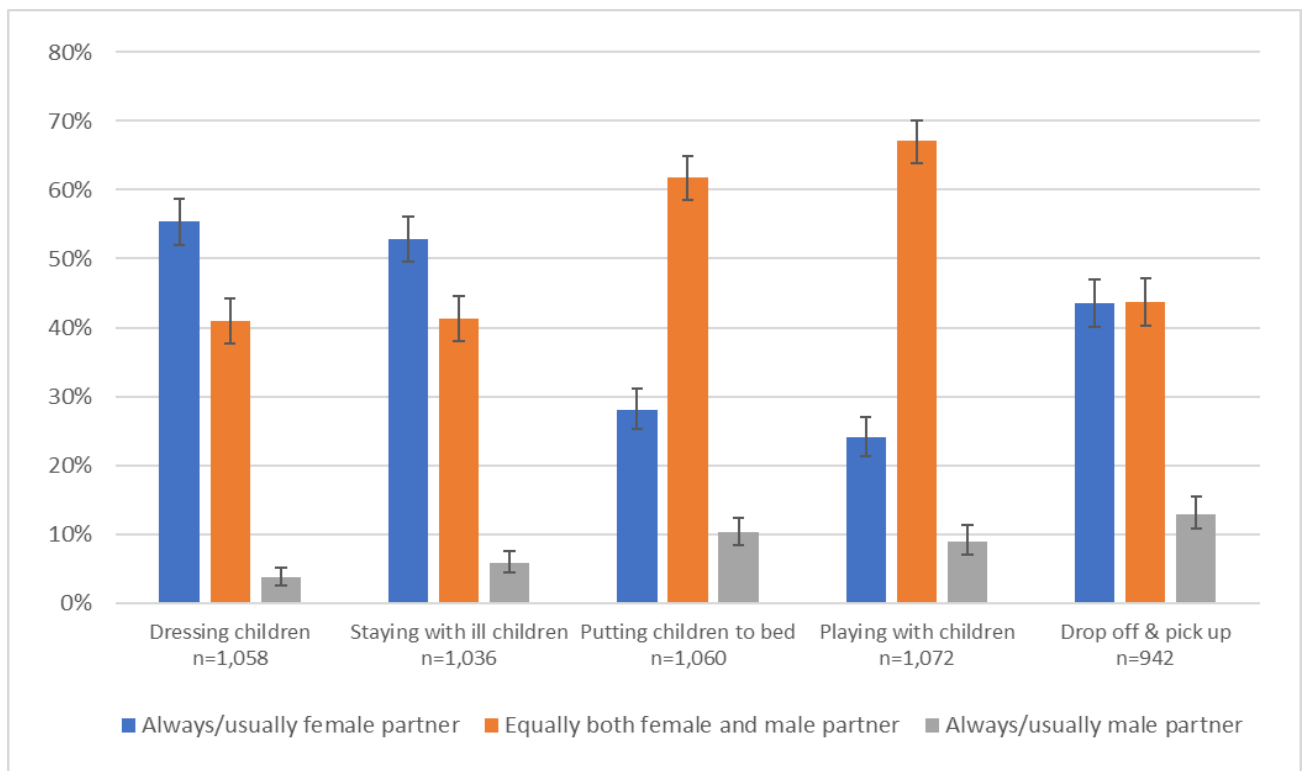
For each chore, we run two models - 1) a model containing couple level work arrangements and control variables (table 1) and 2) a model containing variables describing male and female partners' work from home status, couple level work arrangements, and control variables (table 2). Cases where neither partner is in paid work are dropped for the second model. Because so few households report male-led chores, we focus on the risk of female-led outcomes, relative to equally-led.

We also control for standard demographic variables that are likely to be associated with the outcome- education, age, household income, and respondent sex. For example, women may be more likely to report that a certain chore is female led and younger or highly educated people may be more inclined toward a gender equal division of chores.

## Initial findings

Descriptive analysis shows the gender division of childcare chores differs, depending on which chore is in question (Figure 1). For all chores, the male partner leading is always the least likely situation. However, while seeing children are properly dressed, and staying home with children when they are ill are more likely to be female-led than equally-led, the reverse is true for putting children to bed and playing with children, which is more likely equally-led, and dropping off and picking up children from childcare or school which is nearly evenly split between female- and equally-led.

Figure 1. Distribution of responses to childcare chores questions



### Model 1: Gender division of childcare chores and work arrangements

We find in model 1 that making sure children are dressed, staying home with sick children, and dropping children off/picking them up at school or childcare have a pattern with work arrangements. Generally, for these three chores, couples where the male partner works more (1 male or 1.5 male) will have increased risks, ranging from 1.5 to 4 times higher, of the chores being done always/usually by the female partner relative to equally divided, compared with dual income couples. The couples where the female partner works more (1 and 1.5 female) have a 60 to 70 percent lower risk of chores being female led, compared with equally led. Putting children to bed and playing with children do not have the same patterns; partners' work arrangements are not related to who does the chores. This reflects the more equitable pattern seen in the descriptive figure 1. The one

exception is that couples with 1 male earner are 1.84 times more likely to have “playing with children” be female led, compared with equally led.

Table 1. Relative risk ratios of “always/usually female partner” outcome against baseline group “equally both” outcome

	Dressing	Ill children	Bedtime	Playing	Drop off
<b>Work status - ref. 2 earners (male + female)</b>					
1 earner (male)	1.89 **	4.23 ***	1.25	1.84 **	2.48 **
1.5 earner (male)	1.25	1.44 *	0.77	1.27	1.58 *
1 and 1.5 earners (female)	0.30 **	0.40 *	1.05	1.17	0.34 *
Both in part time work or less	0.45 **	0.62	0.93	0.62	1.19
Constant	1.50	2.58	1.23	0.45	0.41
n	1058	1036	1060	1072	942

Controls for age, education, household income, respondent sex; NB smaller sample size for “drop off” due to children not in school or formal childcare \*  $p>0.05$  \*\*  $p>0.01$  \*\*\*  $p>0.001$

Table 2. Relative risk ratios of “always/usually female partner” outcome against baseline group “equally both”; for working couples only

	Dressing	Ill children	Bedtime	Playing	Drop off
<b>Work status - ref. 2 earners (male + female)</b>					
1 and 1.5 earner (male)	1.46 *	1.99 ***	0.85	1.42	1.63 **
1 and 1.5 earners (female)	0.27 **	0.37 *	1.01	1.18	0.32 *
Both in part time work	0.40 *	0.32 *	0.58	0.89	1.42
Female partner work from home (ref. no)	0.93	1.44	0.70	1.00	0.67 *
Male partner work from home (ref. no)	0.55 **	0.68	0.81	0.98	0.66 *
Constant	3.90	7.41	1.32	0.69	0.85
n	922	904	925	936	818

Controls for age, education, household income, respondent sex; \*  $p>0.05$  \*\*  $p>0.01$  \*\*\*  $p>0.001$



## Model 2: Relationship with working from home

Model 2 shows us that when the male partner works from home, this decreases the likelihood of women always/usually getting children dressed and always/usually dropping them off at school or childcare by 45 and 34 percent respectively. When women work from home, this also decreases the likelihood of women dropping children off at school or childcare by 33 percent. Model 2 also shows very similar work patterns for making sure children are dressed, staying home with sick children, and dropping children off at school or childcare, with 1 and 1.5 male earners having increased relative risk of “always/usually” female led chores, compared with dual earners, and 1 and 1.5 female earners having lower relative risk of “always/usually” female led chores. Couples where both work part time are also more inclined to divide dressing children and staying home with sick children equally.

## Next Steps

Our results so far suggest that for parents today in a post lockdown and covid restrictions context, men working from home may improve gender equality for some chores – getting children ready and dropping them off or picking them up from school. Home working does not seem to be linked with who stays home from work with sick children or who plays with children or does bedtime. Importantly, women working from home does not seem to worsen unequal division of childcare chores. In next steps, we will test for interactions between household working arrangements and working from home. We will also add flexible work (i.e the ability to distribute working hours throughout the day/week) as another independent variable to capture in more depth the constellation of different work arrangements available to young families now. Finally, we will look at whether patterns differ by the age and number of children, since this will affect the intensity of childcare responsibilities.

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