

Father's access to flexible schedules and involvement in childcare in France

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Abstract

The paper investigates how fathers' access to flexible working hours affects their childcare involvement and the division of care within couples in France. Drawing on the job demands–resources model and work–family border theory, we consider the dual nature of working-time flexibility: it may ease work–family conflict, but it can also heighten work demands. While flexibility is often presented as family-friendly, its use by men is ambivalent: some studies link flexibility to greater paternal participation, while others report no effect or even reduced family time. However, the effect on childcare involvement can vary depending on the type of task: mothers tend to take on most routine and cognitively demanding care, whereas fathers tend to be more involved in leisure and enrichment activities. Using data from the Families and Employers survey, we analyse a composite indicator of childcare division across task types, alongside parents' reported childcare time. The analytic sample consists of 9,245 cohabiting couples with coresident children under age 15. Findings reveal that flexibility supports a more balanced division of childcare, particularly when fathers work not more than 40 hours or when mothers' hours are similar to partner's or longer. Effects are strongest for work-interfering tasks, while non-work-interfering activities remain largely unchanged. Interestingly, fathers' overall childcare time does not increase, while mothers' time declines. These findings suggest that flexibility acts as a mechanism of redistribution, shifting care from mothers to fathers without broadening paternal time investment.

Extended abstract

Background and motivation

This paper examines how fathers' access to flexible working hours shapes their childcare involvement and the division of care within couples. While flexibility is often presented as family-friendly (Frodermann et al., 2018; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Kelly et al., 2011), its use by men is ambivalent. The job demands–resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) and work–family border theory (Clark, 2000) suggest that flexibility can reduce work–family conflict but may also blur boundaries and heighten work demands. Empirical findings confirm this duality: some studies link flexibility to greater paternal participation (Carlson et al., 2021; Kuang et al., 2025), while others report no effect or even reduced family time (Wang & Cheng, 2023; Wanger & Zapf, 2022).

The type of tasks fathers perform is critical. Mothers still take on most routine and cognitively demanding care, while fathers are more involved in leisure and enrichment (Chung et al., 2021; Musick et al., 2016). Flexibility may encourage fathers to assume routine, work-interfering duties such as school drop-offs or caring for sick children, which can ease mothers' burden and support their employment (Buchler & Lutz, 2021; Langner, 2018). Yet this shift does not necessarily expand fathers' overall childcare time and may come at the expense of play or quality interaction.

Organisational culture also shapes outcomes. “Flexibility stigma” (Chung, 2020), rooted in gendered expectations (Davies & Frink, 2014), often leads fathers to signal work devotion by increasing effort. Employers may reinforce this dynamic by treating flexibility as conditional on greater availability (Lott & Chung, 2016).

We therefore expect flexibility to promote a more equal division of childcare, primarily by reducing mothers' responsibilities rather than substantially increasing fathers' involvement, with outcomes conditioned by the tasks assumed and organisational context.

Data & Methods

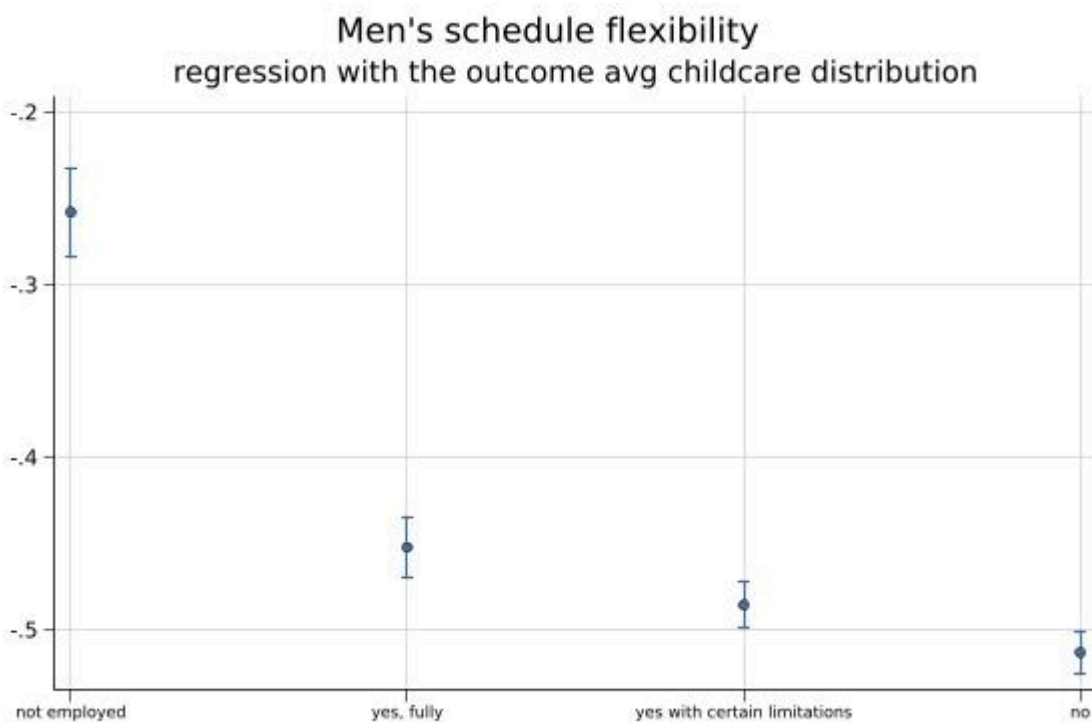
We draw on the first wave of the French longitudinal survey *Families and Employers* (FamEmp). The analytic sample consists of 9,245 cohabiting couples with coresident children under age 15. Childcare involvement is measured in two ways. First, we construct a synthetic indicator of the division of childcare tasks between parents, where higher values reflect greater paternal involvement relative to mothers. This indicator is examined for all tasks combined and separately for work-interfering versus non-work-interfering tasks. Second, we use measures of daily childcare time reported by fathers and mothers separately.

The main explanatory variable is fathers' access to flexible working time, categorised as full access, access with limitations, or no access. To capture the organisational context and working-time demands, we examine interactions with both partners' working hours. Additional controls include fathers' characteristics (age, country of birth, education, self-employment, working hours, income), mothers' schedule type, parental characteristics (number of children, age of the youngest child), and couple-level factors such as union type, relative working hours, and relative income contributions. Linear regression models are used for the analysis.

Results

The analysis shows that fathers' access to flexible working hours is linked to a more balanced division of childcare, though it does not overturn the overall gender imbalance, as mothers continue to carry the larger share (Figure 1). Flexibility increases paternal involvement among fathers working fewer than 40 hours per week, but has no effect when working hours are longer. Considering both partners' schedules, flexibility supports fathers' participation when mothers work more or when hours are similar, but not when fathers remain the main earners.

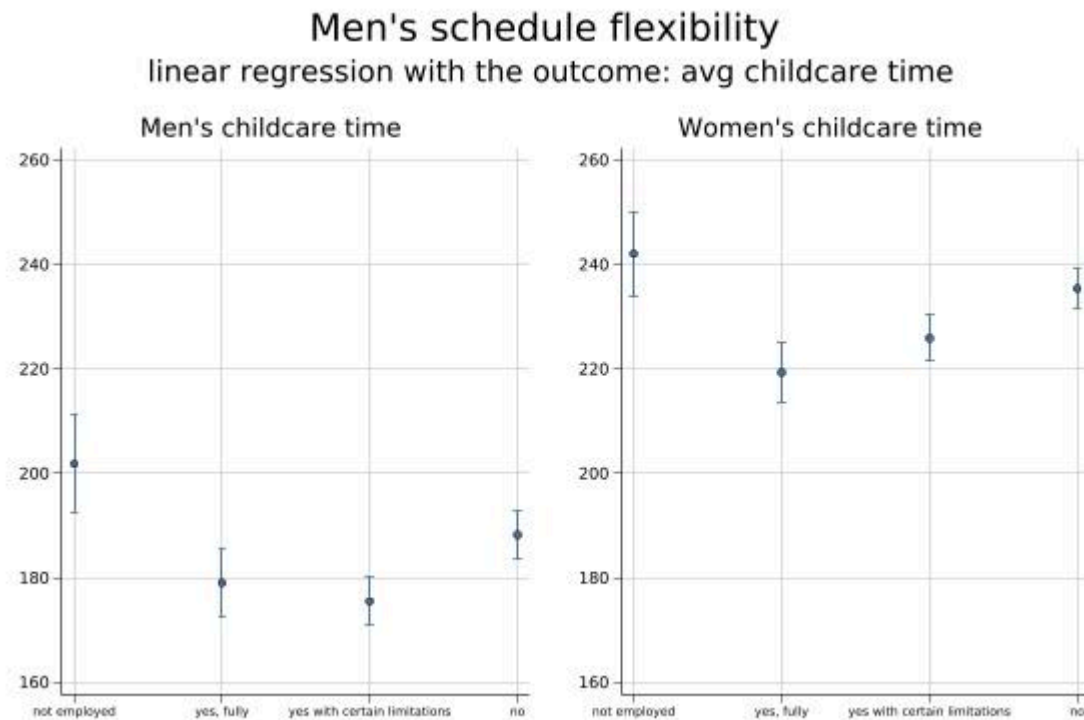
Figure 1. Men's schedule flexibility and the average childcare division



Task-specific patterns are also evident. Flexibility facilitates work-interfering responsibilities such as school drop-offs, dressing children, or caring for them during illness. Still, it has little effect on non-work-interfering activities like play or enrichment. In this sense, flexibility helps fathers manage duties that overlap with work time rather than broadening their engagement in other forms of care.

Considering total time, fathers' childcare hours do not increase significantly with flexibility (Figure 2). Strikingly, those with only partial flexibility report spending even less time with children than fathers with no flexibility. Mothers, by contrast, report spending less time on childcare when their partners have access to flexibility, regardless of whether it is full or limited.

Figure 2. Men's schedule flexibility and the average childcare time



Conclusions

Flexibility reshapes how childcare is shared, but it does so by shifting responsibilities rather than expanding fathers' engagement. Fathers step into tasks that overlap with work schedules, while mothers' involvement decreases, suggesting that flexibility functions as a tool of redistribution more than transformation.

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