

## **Parents: Quality Time Hansard 18<sup>th</sup> March 2008**

**The Right Revd Bishop of Southwell and Nottingham** asked Her Majesty's Government what plans they have to help parents of school-age children, especially those on low incomes, to spend quality time with their children at weekends.

The right reverend Prelate said: My Lords, I am very grateful to have secured this debate, and I thank all those who have come to take part in it. The purpose of this Question is to explore how best to enable parents of school-age children to spend quality time with their children at weekends, and to make the case for extending the right to request flexible working to parents of all children up to the age of 18, so that they are able to do this.

The concept of Monday to Friday, 9 to 5, as the normal working week has long ceased to be the norm for a lot of working people. Around eight out of 10 working fathers and more than half of working mothers work some unsocial hours. Yet the structure of the school week remains exactly the same, so that many parents are now at work when their children are at home.

The impact of unsocial working on the time parents have with their children is exacerbated when the parents also have to work at weekends. Three out of four working families experience some weekend work and in more than half of these—about 2.4 million families—at least one parent is working regularly at weekends. For lone parents, the impact of weekend work can be even more significant.

The Government's strategy for children, *Every Child Matters*, recognised that parents, carers and families are the most important influence on outcomes for children and young people. However we define good parenting, it involves spending quality time with the child and not in work. The patient, long-term creative process of making another human being, which continues into young adulthood, is one of the most important tasks of a parent—whether mother or father.

Research by the National Centre for Social Research found that working-couple mothers, working atypical hours during weekdays, spend less time reading, playing with and teaching their children. It also found evidence that children whose parents work evenings and weekends spend less time on homework and more time on social life and entertainment. That was true both of children aged eight to 10 and 14 to 18 year-olds. As noble Lords will be aware, the nurturing of children does not get easier as a child gets older. Children of secondary school age will benefit particularly from parental support through the often difficult transition to secondary school in years seven and eight, and subsequently through the often turbulent teenage years, particularly at examination and other crisis points. The availability of flexible work options would help parents to provide that key support by being with their children when they are most needed. This points to the strong desirability of extending the right to request flexible working to parents of children up to the age of 18.

The longitudinal Edinburgh study of youth transitions and crime found that the higher the level of parental supervision, involvement in their child's life and parental trust, the lesser the chance of delinquency. However 72 per cent of parents feel that they do not have enough time to get involved in their children's education because of work

commitments, childcare difficulties and lack of time in general. Many couples currently use “shift parenting” as a way of managing their time to avoid childcare costs and to get round inflexible work schedules. If this regime is maintained over a prolonged period, both family time and a couple’s relationship itself can suffer severely. Nearly half of parents say that work has stopped them being home to put their children to bed, and more than half said that it affected their ability to help with homework, or take children to after-school activities.

Let us think about who is most likely to be working unsocial hours. Workers contracted to work unsocial hours tend to be the lower skilled and lower paid. The families most likely to suffer from the effects of unsocial working are those that are already at a social disadvantage. Low-income workers are most vulnerable to requests to work at weekends and the least likely to be able to resist the request.

The Government have to be congratulated on the progress they have made in making flexible working a reality for many families. In 2003 they introduced the right to request flexible working for parents of children under six and all children with disabilities, and then in 2006 they included carers of disabled adults. The good news is that while this has benefited families, businesses and employers that have allowed flexible working have also reported benefits. They have benefited from improved productivity, reduced sickness and absenteeism, and improved retention rates. The Work-Life Balance Employer Survey revealed that 92 per cent of employers believe that people work best when they can balance their work and other aspects of their lives. We must remember that the right to request is not a right to have flexible working. Legislation provides businesses with eight reasons why they may legitimately turn down a request to work flexibly. However, providing a legislative right to request means that employers and employees have a formal route to discuss the issue. They can have a formal basis for the conversation.

In summary, I believe there to be five reasons why the Government and policy-makers should act on all this evidence and extend to all parents of children under 18 the right to request flexible working. The first reason is the need to adapt public policy further in step with changing patterns of work. A major part of government policy in combating poverty is to maximise the number of people in work. However, it is also increasingly emphasising the responsibility of parents. Flexible working is the essential link that would help to make these two policies compatible.

Secondly, the Department for Children, Schools and Families continues to promote the important role that parents play in all aspects of a child’s life, and substantial public funds are now targeted at parenting education. In light of this, it makes sense to extend the right to request flexible working to all parents of school-age children so that they are able to play their part in their children’s education. The third reason is that parents working long, unsocial hours threaten family stability. Family breakdown is potentially damaging to couples and especially their children. Society also bears an increased demand for housing and welfare benefits when families fragment and break up.

The fourth reason why the Government should be concerned is that the combination of relational poverty and material poverty is socially unjust. Most parents working unsocial hours and weekends do not do so out of choice, but because they feel they have no alternative. We need to give all parents real choices about how they manage

their work-life balance. The fifth reason is that there are potentially significant gains to be made in terms of savings in public expenditure by reducing anti-social behaviour and other symptoms of social breakdown.

Those five reasons all point in one direction: that the case for extending the right to request flexible working to all parents of children up to 18 is overwhelmingly strong. This in turn will enable parents of school-age children to spend quality time with their children at times when they are not at school, particularly at weekends. I very much look forward to listening to the contributions of other noble Lords and to the Minister in his summing up.

**Lord Elton:** My Lords, I apologise to the House and to the right reverend Prelate for missing the first few sentences of his introduction. I plead the fact that I arrived here at the stroke of half-past seven, which I understood was the earliest time we could get going.

I had hoped to make a speech out of the points that the right reverend Prelate omitted to make. Unfortunately he has left me very little material with which to work. However, I endorse the general drift and some aspects of what he said from my own slightly different point of view.

There are two aspects that I can bring to your Lordships that need emphasising. The first is the criminological one: the vast majority of crime is committed by young people. Almost all of them are under 25, but a very large number is under 18. The years between six and 18 are typically the years in which children become criminals. The Government need no persuading of the importance of parental involvement in education, for instance, in raising standards of educational attainment.

The other aspect, which links with the first, is from a long time ago, before present legislation that your Lordships have been invited by the right reverend Prelate to consider, was introduced. I was teaching in a comprehensive school with 1,500 pupils, all of whom were boys, incidentally, which means that it was not truly comprehensive at all. It was a rather violent place; the man who mended the windows was always four windows behind the summer holiday repairs than he had been the previous year. I had a knife drawn on me once. The feature that I want to draw to your Lordships' attention is parents' evening.

The school was banded and the top third had a lot of academic ability. The correlation was that I was lucky to get home by 11 pm. It took me three-quarters of an hour to get home and a quarter of an hour to clear up after the parents had gone. I seem to remember that the evening started about half-past five. For the middle band of the school, I could be home comfortably to have a meal at half-past seven. The bottom band took only three-quarters of an hour. That correlation between parental interest and academic performance was stark and it has remained in my mind ever since. Therefore any change to legislation or regulation we can make to give parents who wish to have the opportunity to involve themselves in their children's education is very much to be argued for.

The formative years between six and 18 are when such involvement is most acutely in demand if it is to ward off criminal behaviour and tendencies. One does not like talking about children and criminality in the same breath, but children are often

launched on that course as the result of academic failure. It is the frustration of failing to express oneself and be appreciated in class, the failure to be able to deploy a child's interest and communicability—possibly because of undetected dyslexia but also for other reasons—that most frequently vents itself initially in anti-social behaviour. That leads to exclusion so that the child is on the streets with nothing to do and nobody to look after it. Very soon that child coalesces with others, is probably permanently excluded and is then well on the road to a criminal career.

I do not want to overstate the connection, but I am absolutely certain that the Government's conviction that academic behaviour is in some important respects influenced by parental involvement goes equally for social behaviour. In this House Ministers have to think on behalf of the whole of Government, so not only is there a department of education aspect to this, but also aspects involving the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office. These departments have a common interest in improving the lot of society as a whole. An important part of that will be that if we can get even a small but significantly higher percentage of parents involved in their children's education, it will yield a pay-off. In my days at the Department of Health, I discovered that I was responsible for the welfare of children in local authority secure accommodation. Through that route I was introduced to non-custodial sentences which immensely benefited children and reduced their reoffending rates. But by the time they were reoffending, they were the responsibility of the Home Office, so the Department of Health could save no money by pursuing that policy. And when I got to the Home Office, it was not interested in spending money on children before they had reached the age at which they became that department's responsibility.

If we are now in an age of joined-up government thinking, I hope that the Minister will ask his colleagues in other departments to consider whether we cannot achieve greater parental involvement in children in school by many different means, including by giving the parents of children between the ages of six and 18 the right to apply for, if not the right to have, flexible working hours. We could then nibble away at some of the eight excuses that can be given in response to their request.

**Lord Addington:** My Lords, I thank the right reverend Prelate for introducing this subject, and the noble Lord, Lord Elton, for a speech which covered the area I call, "If ever in doubt, one can always ask for joined-up government". He very elegantly reflected the fact that it is required in virtually all areas of government activity. Whether it will be any more successful with this department than it is in others remains to be seen, but the fact is that the knock-on from what one government department does to another is unavoidable. One should always bear that in mind.

The title of the debate turns on the issue of school-age children, quality time, low incomes and weekends. I thought that maybe I could score an easy hit here by talking about keeping Sunday special. But then I thought, "Aha! Tony Hancock and the dreadful traditional British Sunday afternoon". I recall how he went on about there being nothing to do and how dreadful it all was, hanging around waiting for the next badly cooked meal to turn up. Sadly I cannot remember exactly the eloquence of his language, but that is roughly the image conjured up. However, this is about something else: the fact that we do not have designated rest time at the same time, so we cannot interact.

Many of the positive things in life depend on people being able to gather together. I was trying to avoid talking about organised sports again, but I am afraid that there is a knock-on here. We should encourage people to take part in sporting activities. Let us face it, for any form of sport you need at least two people, and for the most common sport you need 22 people. No, let us make that 23 because you cannot play football without a referee. Twenty-three people must gather together in a formalised structure, all turning up and leaving at roughly the same time. We can then bring children into it with coaching, but it definitely needs some more co-ordination.

It is said that everyone is in favour of preserving their weekends, but everyone is also in favour of doing the shopping, having houses cleaned, and the service industries being available. There are no two ways about it; that results in a degree of conflict. We are not going to go back to the dreadful Sunday afternoon, even if the Sunday league sides did manage to get out in the morning. Indeed, the right reverend Prelate is probably in direct competition with those Sunday league teams. Those days are gone. But if we are going to compensate for that type of activity, we need to make it easier to do.

The right reverend Prelate referred to families on low incomes, and thus put his finger on a very important point. If you have sufficient income, you can get round the problem by employing people to do the running around for you. Although that is not as good as the parents being there, there is some compensation because at least the child is safe, being cared for and some attention is being paid to it. Let us face it, certain parenting skills may not be apparent in the parents so they may get someone in to do the job for them. That is the service industry taken to its nth degree, if you like. But that is not a choice for those with low incomes, and for one-parent families there are real problems.

Let us not beat about the bush: flexible working does not provide all the answers. No matter how flexible the hours, if you are a single parent on a low income, you have to shuffle half a deck of cards and there is a limit to how many good hands you can get from it. We have to ensure that parents are given some support, and that often means that the state must be the provider in the form of local government for sporting activities or other structured leisure pursuits that are most appropriate and accessible to those with the least spare time.

How are we going to balance this? We can chase the argument for hours, but as the noble Lord, Lord Elton, said, the fact is that if you do not expect people to achieve in, for example, academic pursuits, the parents are not going to waste time on them. That is particularly so if they are under time pressure and have to meet the expense of getting to parents' evenings. It may mean that they have to miss a shift at work. The lower your income, the less likely you are to give up some of it. It is a vicious circle.

Do the Government have some answers to this? How do they think they can encourage those on low incomes to take part in social activities together? Although the idea of families sitting at home reading to each other is commendable, if there are low intellectual skills or there is dyslexia—I thank the noble Lord, Lord Elton, for mentioning it before I did—they will not do it. They need to get involved in something outside. Do the Government have any ideas for how they can engage this group? Although flexible working will help, it is not the answer unto itself. For this

group, that is harder to reach, we need to find more creative means. If the Minister has answers in the form of schemes, I will be very interested to hear about them.

I come back to the point about sports. Any ideas for how parents can assist in organised activities would be welcome. It may be Dad sitting on the touchline, screaming at his child to get faster up the wing and get that cross that he never could, but at least it is involvement. If you can also get Dad to take a coaching course, that is a much better type of involvement. How are the Government expecting to facilitate this type of activity for those on low incomes? On a low income, most of the compensatory factors that other people will bring in are simply not available.

**Lord Dearing:** My Lords, we are in debt to the right reverend Prelate for engaging our minds on a major issue and for offering a practical solution—or contribution to a solution—to a problem we know about. When the White Paper *Every Child Matters* was published in 2003, it devoted a whole chapter to the issue of parents. It said:

“The bond between the child and their parents is the most critical influence on a child’s life. Parenting has a strong impact on a child’s educational development, behaviour and mental health”.

It recognised that public policy had not in the past paid sufficient attention to that. It said:

“By bringing policy on parenting into the DfES”—

as it was then—

“alongside policy on children, the Government has put it at the heart of children’s services”.

Substance was given to this statement in the 2003 White Paper when, under Mr Brown’s Government, we had established a Department for Children, Schools and Families—however difficult it may be to remember absolutely rightly the sequence in which those words come.

The right reverend Prelate’s Question draws attention particularly to families on low incomes. Those who are not disabled from work by incapacity or illness but who are in poverty find it necessary to accept long hours, working whatever hours they can—the anti-social hours that people do not want, including especially weekends. There is therefore a particular detriment to family life for those who live with the least of the world’s resources. They have the most difficulty in offering their children the support and personal engagement that the Government and all political parties now recognise is essential for the well-being of the child and of our society.

I again picked up the UNICEF report on child well-being in rich countries that was published last year. It brought home how relevant the issue of parenting is and how much it matters in our personal judgments and our own lifestyles to think through again our responsibilities as parents to our children. That of course applies equally to the duty on all of us, acting together as a society, to change our priorities. The UNICEF report makes uncomfortable reading for all of us. There has been criticism of it but you cannot get away from the central message. It put us at the bottom of the

league of 21 nations. In two areas in particular, the two with the most direct relevance to parenting, we were outstandingly at the bottom, yards below the rest in the tables. The first was the behaviour of our young people and the other was what was described as a risk-taking culture. In those areas we were at the bottom of the 21. Both are closely related to family and to family engagement with young people.

Since poverty and the concept of poverty lay so close to the heart of this issue, I very much welcomed the Chancellor's announcement in the Budget that the Government's intention is to commit £1.7 billion over the next two years to halving the number of children in poverty by 2010. But as it was said that it will be 2020 before we remove the rest from poverty, there is work to be done by other means. That brings us back to the right reverend Prelate's point.

When I first read this document on the subject—which no doubt descended from heaven, with excellent briefing on the subject—as an old civil servant I thought: “You've got to be reasonable. You can't expect to jump all in one go from provision that covers children up to age six to provision that includes 18 year-olds. Let's compromise and go for 12”. But then I read the evidence in the UNICEF report and realised that we have a specific problem in teenagers. The right reverend Prelate is therefore right. I am with him on going the whole way. The UNICEF report talks about behaviour in terms of eating and exercise, smoking at 15, engaging in violence or being a recipient of it, sexual involvement and use of contraceptives, and excessive drinking. Those are the kinds of thing where the family—if they are there and have the energy—can engage with their kids, take the issue on and attempt to deal with it. If they are not there and the kids are out in the streets, that behaviour is going to happen. We must address this issue within the age-range that the right reverend Prelate proposes.

As I have two minutes left, I should like to widen the discussion slightly by referring to one other issue which is relevant to the issue of poverty: the working tax credit. Thanks to a footnote in that briefing, I picked up a report by the Institute for Public Policy Research which devotes a chapter to the working tax credit. It says:

“The problems that have led to tax credit overpayments”—

which currently amount to £4,000 million—

“have been devastating in their effect”.

Of course we are talking about the low paid and the poor. The effect of this—the worry and stress it has caused in families—is that:

“A recent survey of tax credit recipients found that almost half (49 per cent) were either less likely or definitely not going to make a claim in the future due to their experience”.

That is another area where the Government can do something. But it is very complex, and the staff administering the scheme are overwhelmed by the scale of the problem.

I come back to where we started and to the right reverend Prelate's Motion. I congratulate him. Here is another practical thing the Government can do, and I hope the Minister and his colleagues will think about it.

**Baroness Walmsley:** My Lords, earlier today when I mentioned to the noble Lord, Lord Oxburgh, that I would be speaking in this debate, he suggested a four-word speech as a solution to the Question posed by the right reverend Prelate: chuck out the telly. Think about it, my Lords.

I congratulate the right reverend Prelate on giving us the chance to talk about this issue today. I recall that he and I fought the good fight on the Work and Families Act when we tried to persuade the Government to extend the age limit of children whose parents can ask for flexible working. I very much support his call for the Government to increase that to the age of 18, because it is important for children of all ages to have their parents available when they are at home. It can be particularly hard for single parents, as I well recall. At a time when the Government are going to insist that single parents should go out to work once the child reaches 12, and that children should stay in education or training until they are 18, a bit of joined-up thinking is required. The age limit should certainly rise to 18.

Schools are pretty consistent in their timings, apart from a week here and a week there at the beginning and end of the major holidays. There are some small flexibilities in the school day, mainly to avoid traffic jams in the morning and evening rather than to help parents. But what is the scope, now that the Government are concentrating on the concept of personalised learning, to have a flexible school day? If personalised programmes of work are to be developed, what is to stop a child asking for flexible working hours at school to fit in with his parents' working hours? Now there is a novel idea. The main need, however, is for parents to understand how important it is that they should spend time with their children. We should teach them that before they become parents—in other words, when they are at school themselves in parenting classes.

I shall turn now to what parents can afford to do with their children when they are spending time with them. Of course, by “spending time with the child” we do not mean sitting alongside them on the sofa watching TV—although there is a place for a bit of that. How much better to do things together, such as sport, walking, birdwatching, astronomy, outings to places of interest, cinemas, theatres, music and so on. However, this can be an awful problem for families who do not have much money. Fortunately, many local authorities have schemes to help young people use council facilities such as swimming pools, gyms, tennis and basketball courts, libraries and so on at very little cost. Many local sports clubs and other interest groups do not cost much to join either, especially for juniors.

It is really important that the local children's information services give parents information not just about childcare services but about activities that they can do with their children: toy libraries, playgrounds, council services and so on. Although it is important for councils to have subsidised schemes to help young people to pay for leisure activities, would it not be even better if poorer parents could also get the cost covered so that they could do those things together with their kids?

One thing that really is a bonus these days is the family railcard, through which families can now have ridiculously cheap train trips if they plan ahead. That has come in since I was a young parent. Another good development since I had young children is the way in which museums have become so child-friendly. At very little or no cost, parents can take their children to some splendid museums where the interactive exhibits can keep them fascinated for hours. You can spend the whole day and have a meal, and of course they learn a lot quite painlessly. There are many I could name; the Natural History Museum in London, the Liverpool Museum and the science and transport museums in Manchester are ones that I would recommend, but there are lots more. I commend the museum curator profession for the way they have risen to the challenge of serving children and young families. Museums are also very good at making their facilities accessible for disabled children.

I recommend one more thing that costs very little and many children enjoy: gardening. Children love to grow things, and a packet of seeds costs very little. It can give them a real sense of where food comes from and can contribute to their understanding of what makes a healthy diet. Growing your own veg has really taken off in the UK recently, thanks to TV programmes presented by people like Carol Klein and Jamie Oliver. I appeal to them not to forget the kids and to put some ideas into their programmes for busy parents to get kids interested in growing things, whether they have three acres or a pot on a balcony.

It takes time and effort to be a good parent and some parents may not feel like it when they are tired. When a child wants a bedtime story it may be very tempting to say, “I’m too tired, get to bed”. However, I recommend reading to children from the earliest age. It can be great fun; it can instil a sense of the joy of books and it will be remembered fondly by the child when he or she grows up as a very warm and intimate time. Only very recently my granddaughter read me a bedtime story, and I really enjoyed that. This does not have to cost money as our libraries are very child-friendly places these days. A child who can read need never be bored. Children’s authors today are so wonderful at stimulating the imagination, and even the classics that we remember from our own childhoods are coming back into fashion and being reissued in modern editions.

I heard of a wonderful initiative the other day, sponsored by Dolly Parton—I am really name-dropping tonight, aren’t I?—in her home state in the USA and here in the UK, in what she calls “Rotherhayam”. It is called the Imagination Library. The scheme sends books to young children on their birthdays so that, however deprived they are, at least they have some chance of owning their own books. Hooray for Dolly, I say. Perhaps the Minister could say something about the funding for museums and libraries to ensure that they remain affordable for the poorest families to use with their children.

When kids say they are bored and have nothing to do, it may be because they have never been taught by their parents how to spend their time constructively. The best way to do that is by example. I know parents who spend all their free time doing sport with their children, not just standing on the touchline, taking them on days out, taking them to football and so on. I have enormous admiration for their energy and dedication and I know their children will never be bored because they know how to occupy themselves. However, I agree with the right reverend Prelate that it is

important for the Government to do all they can to enable parents to be at home when their child needs them.

**Baroness Morris of Bolton:** My Lords, I add my thanks to the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Southwell and Nottingham for securing this important debate. I know from working with him during the course of the then Work and Families Bill in 2006 that these are issues that he cares about deeply and on which he speaks with passion and authority.

The family is the most immediate and significant group within which people share responsibility for one another's well-being. It is no surprise that at our spring forum in Gateshead my right honourable friend David Cameron said it was his ambition to make Britain more family-friendly, because families should be the most important thing not just in our lives but in the life of our country.

We are all too familiar with the depressing statistics of what happens when children are not taught the vital core values of respect, hard work and what is right and wrong. We have anti-social behaviour and crime, of which my noble friend Lord Elton spoke with such great knowledge. We also have gangs, drugs, binge drinking and underachievement at school. It is vital that families, in all their guises, are supported.

My right honourable friend's speech at the weekend was spot on and touched on many of the issues we are debating tonight. He said:

“Being a parent is the most difficult job there is ... Everyone feels they can't cope ... with getting up at 4am and then having to somehow get enough sleep so you can function at work. Everyone runs around in a panic in the morning getting the kids ready while making breakfast and ironing a shirt”.

He went on to ask:

“What can the government do about this? After all, it can't feed the kids or iron your shirt. But it can start by getting the framework right so the system works with parents not against them”.

Juggling a job and family responsibilities is still not easy, especially—as the noble Lord, Lord Addington, said—if you are on a low income. It is therefore hardly surprising that EOC polling showed that seven out of 10 people were concerned about what family life would be like for them and their grandchildren, with six in 10 expressing concern about spending enough time with their families.

As the right reverend Prelate pointed out, the concept of a Monday-to-Friday, nine-to-five working week is a thing of the past. However, as the daughter of small shopkeepers who worked six days a week and, if the right reverend Prelate will forgive me, all the hours God sends, and as a working Peer, Monday-to-Friday and nine-to-five is not something that I have ever recognised. Many jobs now require unsocial hours, with three out of four families experiencing some weekend work.

However, it is interesting to note in the excellent briefing that the right reverend Prelate so kindly gave us that, where parents were in control of their working hours, that work was seen as beneficial. The issue of being in control of our lives is a vital

component of the whole area of general well-being. Flexible working—one of the great themes in our debates on the Work and Families Bill—is one area where people feel in control of their working lives, and where they can balance work and family life. The right to request flexible working has undoubtedly been a success, with the vast majority of requests being accommodated.

When we were discussing the subject of extending the right to request flexible working to those with children under the age of 18 during passage of the Work and Families Bill—and I fully acknowledge that the right reverend Prelate and the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, fought the good fight on this issue—my party was looking carefully at a whole raft of employment issues. However, the timing was just wrong for that legislation. As noble Lords will know, I was personally sympathetic to this extension. I was therefore delighted when David Cameron announced that our party policy would be to extend the right to request flexible working to all parents and that we would make sure that the public sector—Britain’s biggest employer—becomes a world leader in providing flexible working opportunities.

As the right reverend Prelate pointed out, research shows that the long-hours culture in many organisations stops parents taking as active a role as they would wish in bringing up their children—such as taking part in after-school activities, helping with homework, putting their children to bed and reading them bedtime stories.

It is imperative, however, that we take business with us. Can the Minister say how many hours per week a small to medium-sized business spends on compliance with regulations, filling in forms, endlessly trying to reach government departments and pressing buttons one, two or three? This has a damaging effect on family life. Deregulation is a family policy too.

If employers felt less frustrated by regulation and more able to concentrate on their core business they would be less stressed and happier when they returned home. Freeing up that time might help small to medium-sized businesses think outside the box and consider more family-friendly policies for their employees. Research suggests that a majority of managers are not yet comfortable with flexible working. Can the Minister say what the Government are doing to make the case for greater flexible working to the business community?

There is a whole host of other things we need to look at. Perhaps I may give just one example. I recently received a letter from a teacher in the north-west, a single mum who is prevented from spending time with her children because of the different ways that neighbouring local authorities plan their holidays. Can the Minister comment on that? The odd arrangements over the Easter holidays are a classic case in point. I do not favour national standardisation but some common-sense contact between neighbouring authorities might help.

The noble Lord, Lord Dearing, said that it was good news when the Government brought together under one department children, schools and families. He should try saying DCSF as a dyslexic. The Conservative Party thinks that it is of the utmost importance that we do our bit to raise children and family issues up the political

agenda. It is essential that we give our children time and space to grow up and that parents are able to give them their time and support as they are growing up.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Children, Schools and Families (Lord Adonis):** My Lords, the House is indebted to the right reverent Prelate the Bishop of Southwell and Nottingham for securing this debate. When I first read the Question on the Order Paper asking Her Majesty's Government what plans they have to help parents of school age children spend quality time with their children at weekends, I was wondering whether the right reverend Prelate was rising to complain about having had to spend a clerical career working on Sundays. Indeed, I was not even sure what the reference to "especially those on low incomes" meant and wondered whether this was him asking the Archbishop, through the House, for pay rises all round. However, I am glad that he is inviting us to trespass on the affairs of the nation and not on the affairs of the church. He did so in a typically powerful and thoughtful speech, to which I am glad to be making a response.

As the right reverend Prelate rightly said, parenting is now generally recognised as the single greatest factor in a child's personal development and educational attainment. It outstrips class, ethnicity and even disability in terms of its influence on the path that children take as they grow up. All of the contributions to this debate have reflected this fact. As the noble Lord, Lord Elton, said, Governments of all political persuasions need no persuading of the importance of parenting to a healthy society. As the noble Lord, Lord Dearing, said, we created the Department for Children, Schools and Families to bring most areas of government action on children and families within the purview of a single department.

I also strongly endorse what the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, said about the excellent work of those many public institutions which provide worthwhile activities for children and families at weekends. She particularly highlighted the role of libraries and museums, which do outstanding work, and is quite right to highlight the modernisation in our museum infrastructure in recent years. She asked what we are doing to promote access to museums for those on lower incomes. I can immediately respond that the abolition of entrance charges to museums is one of the most worthwhile changes we have made in recent years to promote access to museums for those on all incomes.

I first emphasise the Government's commitment to supporting parents and the fulfilment of parenting responsibilities, not just with words, but by describing the actions and the substantial public investments we have made in recent years. We have increased maternity leave from just 14 weeks in 1997 to a year and doubled statutory maternity pay to £112.75. We have introduced two weeks paternity leave, paid at the same rate, and we are consulting on extending this further. We have invested more than £21 billion in early years and childcare since 1997, increasing spending fourfold, so that, today, every three and four year-old has a right to free nursery education. Children on lower incomes have a right to full-time placements where appropriate and wanted by their parents. From April 2010, when the latest changes come into effect, the average household with children will be £2,000 better off in real terms as a result of the Government's reforms to the tax and benefit system since 1997.

We have also, for the first time as a matter of law, made it possible for parents to request flexible working. It is hard to think of a more universally applauded reform, as

we have seen in the debate this evening. The right reverend Prelate focused his remarks particularly on flexible working, so I shall do the same in response. Recent years have seen a revolution in employment patterns. Many more women and significantly more men are now combining parenting with paid work. More and more parents are caring for elderly relatives as well as bringing up children, and working hours are much more varied than they used to be. These developments are largely positive for society. They offer workers, especially women, more flexibility, opportunity and independence than they have ever had before, and they make for a larger, more diverse workforce and a more dynamic economy. However, they also put pressure on family life. We know that parents want to be able to spend more time with their children, but it can sometimes be hard to find the time.

It is for precisely that reason that, in 2003, the Government—with the consent of Parliament—gave parents with children under the age of six, or disabled children under 18, the right to request flexible working and have their request taken seriously. In April of last year, we extended this right to carers of adults. The right reverend Prelate has already described the broad success of this policy. It has contributed to a culture change in our workplaces, with 14 million people—some 56 per cent of all employees—now working flexibly, or having done so at some point in the past year, regardless of whether they have the statutory right or not. Comparison with our European neighbours makes this positive impact clear. In 2007, the European working rights survey found that 85 per cent of UK workers said that their working hours could fit well with their family or social commitments, compared to the European average of 79 per cent.

The changes have been good for employers, too, for the reasons set out by the noble Baroness, Lady Morris. They have benefited from access to a larger pool of skills and talents in the workforce, improved recruitment and retention, and increased staff morale and productivity. In November, my right honourable friend the Prime Minister announced that we are looking to extend flexible working further, for parents with older children. We know that we must act sensitively in this area for the reasons given by the noble Baroness, Lady Morris. We want to minimise any potential negative impact on businesses of extending this right and, above all, we want to retain the willing engagement of employers. Without it, the law, which provides a right to request flexible working, could be less effective. The current law is supported by employers; they accept four out of five requests for flexible working. As we seek to extend this right to parents of older children, we are anxious to maintain employer support.

It is for precisely this reason that the Prime Minister has asked Imelda Walsh, the director of human resources at Sainsbury's, to lead an independent review to recommend a new upper age limit. This review will report in the spring and there will then be a public consultation before the Government recommend to Parliament firm proposals for change. I hope that the right reverend Prelate and all other noble Lords who have contributed to this debate will make their views known to Imelda Walsh at this highly formative moment in the development of national policy on flexible working. I will certainly ensure that she receives a copy of the Hansard report of this debate where the views of the House are fairly strongly made.

As the right reverend Prelate pointed out, flexible working can be a particular challenge for low-skilled families on low incomes. Let me stress that flexible working

does not necessarily mean parents working fewer hours for less money; it can and does often mean matching working hours to family life. However, it is true that low-paid jobs can often involve working unsocial hours and weekends; low wages can force parents to work long hours; and our own research suggests that those on low incomes are less likely to have access to flexible working.

I should like to make two points about this issue. First, although work can have disadvantages and the work/life balance is often a real challenge, the disadvantages of unemployment are far more serious. A child's risk of poverty, with all the negative consequences that this entails, falls from 58 to 14 per cent where one or both of his or her parents are working. So the Government, I believe, are right to continue their policy of promoting sustainable work as the surest way out of poverty. Secondly, for low-income families, especially those who cannot afford to work anything other than long and unsocial hours, the right to request flexible working is certainly not a cure-all. Low-paid parents also need more fundamental support to help them spend more time with their children and to improve their quality of life more generally.

This is why we have introduced the national minimum wage, significantly boosting the wages of the low-paid; it is why we are doing more to promote job search by the low paid and, through schemes such as Train to Gain and local employment partnerships, to help those without skills to access the training they need to improve their job prospects; it is also why we are providing increased direct financial support to those on lower incomes. Last week's Budget mentioned by the noble Lord, Lord Dearing, included an extra £950 million over the next three years to increase support to low-income families and to make those most in need better off in work. From April 2009 we will increase child benefit to £20 a week and no longer count it as income when calculating housing and council tax benefits, we will increase child tax credit by £50 per year in real terms and we will invest £125 million in piloting new approaches to supporting low-income families in the long term. These changes, together with others since 1998, will mean that from April 2010 households with children in the poorest fifth of the population will be £4,500 better off in real terms compared to the position in 1998. Flexible working can help all families to spend more time together but for those on low incomes, the Government are also seeking to provide the wider support they need, including increased direct financial support, to enable them to bring up happy and healthy children and to get a better work/life balance.

So far I have spoken mostly about income and helping parents to spend a greater quantity of time with their children. The Government are also seeking to help vulnerable parents improve the quality of their parenting. The noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, referred to the importance of parenting support. It is precisely for this reason that we are improving general guidance—for example, investing in the Parent Know-How service which draws together existing and new information and advice for parents, making it available through telephone helplines, on the internet and through innovative challenges such as text messaging. The Government are also seeking to ensure that families have access to better community facilities for children and teenagers. This is one of the reasons behind my department's new focus on play and also the continuing importance of sport and youth services mentioned by the noble Lord, Lord Addington. The noble Lord particularly mentioned community sports and I am glad to be able to tell him that to sustain and develop community sport, my right honourable friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport announced in

September £5 million of investment over the next three years, specifically focused on enabling 10,000 parents and others in 70 of the most deprived areas in the country to become volunteer sports coaches in order to stimulate the sports activity on which he rightly placed so high a premium.

In conclusion, I once again thank the right reverend Prelate for initiating this debate. We have had a timely reminder of the arguments for further extending the right to flexible working. We take those arguments very seriously, which is why we appointed the Walsh review. The benefits of helping parents to spend time with their children as they grow up are undoubted and the Government are committed to doing all that we reasonably can to advance this cause.

**Lord Elton:** My Lords, before the noble Lord sits down, will the consultation of which he spoke take on board the fact that 47.1 per cent of all people employed in industry and commerce are employed by small employers who have much greater difficulty in providing flexible time? If it does not, can he tell us how else we can address this problem?

**Lord Adonis:** My Lords, the independent review will take full account of that issue. Indeed, it is because of the need to balance the needs of employers with those of parents that the Government have stood back from this issue and asked for independent advice before reaching a decision.

**Baroness Crawley:** My Lords, I beg to move that the House do now adjourn during pleasure until 8.30 pm.

Moved accordingly, and, on Question, Motion agreed to.