Mothers caring for children and young people with disabilities: Intent to work, patterns of participation in paid employment and the experience of workplace flexibility.

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1. The Question/Problem

For many primary caregivers, most of whom are mothers, caring for their children with disabilities alters plans to return to work and changes career trajectories. Little is known however, about mothers' desire to be in paid employment, their patterns of workforce participation across the lifespan, or their experiences of flexible workplace conditions. While there are significant benefits for children with disabilities to be cared for in the family home, there can be huge personal and financial consequences for parents if their own needs are not met. A greater understanding of how mothers in particular strive to balance work and care responsibilities is necessary to ensure appropriate support is provided to this group.

2. The Method

The Juggling Work & Care study was undertaken in 2012 with carers of children and young adults with disabilities who were clients of Novita Children's Services and South Australian Disability Services. A large scale paper based and online survey provided information about workforce participation, work-care balance and psychological well-being of carers. Survey items enabled comparison with national data. Responses to the survey represented approximately one third of the Novita client group and a quarter of the sample of surveys sent to carers of Disability Services clients. A total of 415 surveys were completed by primary carers of children and young adults (0-25 years of age) with physical, intellectual and other disabilities and 234 surveys were completed by secondary carers. This presentation will report exclusively on the results of quantitative and qualitative data from the Juggling Work & Care survey in relation to mothers who were primary carers who were in a couple relationship (69.1% of the sample of primary carers).

3. The Findings

Results of the Juggling Work & Care study showed that 61.5% of mothers in couple relationships, who were primary carers of children and young adults (0-25 years) with disabilities, reported they were in paid employment. Trends in the data suggested that rates of employment drop as children get older, in stark contrast to patterns of employment participation for mothers in the general Australian population. The proportion of mothers in the study in full time work (35 hours or more per week) was low and, unlike mothers in the general population, rates did not increase significantly as children got older. Forty per cent of the sample of mothers in the study regularly worked outside of traditional 9am-5pm hours. While the majority of mothers in the Juggling Work & Care study achieved their planned aim of returning to paid work after the birth of their child, over a quarter had not done so and cited caring has having impacted on this. Conversely, one in five mothers who had not intended to return to work after the birth of their child indicated that they were currently in paid employment, with the majority indicating that this was for financial reasons. Flexibility of working arrangements is especially important for carers. From January 1 2010, as part of the Australian national employment standards, parents of children under 18 years with a disability have a 'right to request' (RTR) flexibility from their employer. Results of the Juggling Work & Care study however, indicate that only one in ten working mothers caring for children with disabilities were aware of their RTR, well below rates for mothers in the general population. Rates were even lower for those mothers in the study who were working part time. Only 50% of mothers working full-time felt they could access flexibility to meet their caring responsibilities. Qualitative information relating to reasons why mothers of children with disabilities perceive that they could not obtain flexibility in their workplace, and the type of flexibility that they consider would have the greatest benefit to their work-care balance will be discussed during the presentation.

4. Policy Implications

National Disability Services Australia estimates that if 20% of Australian carers returned to work then the economic impact would be around $32 billion. This presentation highlights an important group of mothers for whom caring for their child with a disability has prevented their participation in paid employment. Significantly more should be done to ensure that mechanisms are in place to help mothers with an additional caring role get the hours that they prefer. This could include: further support of good quality and easily accessible childcare, suitable for children with disabilities; and ongoing leave entitlements that are not restricted to the age of the child. Flexible working arrangements can benefit employers and employees. The Juggling Work & Care study highlights a lack of awareness of the right to request flexibility at work in this vulnerable sample of mothers caring for children with disabilities. These findings suggest that targeted information to this group, as well as for employers, is urgently needed. As well, results point to the need for RTR legislation to be both strengthened and extended so that carers have a right of appeal and can request flexibility across the lifespan of their child.