

# The Parenting Trap – Does freelancing really work for parents?

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**Juggling work and parenting is tough. Deborah Talbot looks at whether freelancing is a better option for parents and what – if any – statutory benefits they should get.**

Becoming a parent can offer many unexpected challenges for people's working lives. Employment practices still favour 'nine to five,' Monday to Friday presenteeism. The world of work is getting ever more exhausting, with employees putting in long hours to satisfy demanding bosses.

Meanwhile, children are – quite rightly – demanding. Something has to give. More often than not, the job is the first to buckle under the strain. So does freelancing offer a viable alternative?

Firstly, it's important to observe that men and women may have very different experiences.

All figures point to the fact that it's usually mothers who encounter problems with mainstream employment. [Research by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills \(BIS\) and the Equality and Human Rights Commission](#) found that one in nine mothers said they had lost their job or

felt they were forced to leave – which could amount to 54,000 women a year. One in five mothers said they had experienced negativity and even harassment relating to pregnancy and flexible working.

The figures are starkly different for men. Various research studies have shown that becoming a father can give men a career boost.

In this context, it's unsurprising that more women embrace freelance work when they have children than men. Figures from Instant Offices show that the amount of women freelancing has increased by 55% since 2008. And new mothers choosing to freelance after having a baby, rather than return to full-time work, grew by 79%. Meanwhile, the number of men opting to go freelance has risen by a smaller 36%.

When Annie Ridout, editor of The Early Hour and author of the forthcoming book The Freelance Mum: A flexible career guide for better work-life balance, lost her full-time freelancing copywriting contract with a tech startup after she gave birth, she turned to freelancing.

The transition was hard but fruitful, she says: "I'd been there a couple of years and felt like I was part of the company so this was hard for me. However, it gave me the opportunity to rethink the structure of my career, and to design one that would enable me to spend more time with my daughter."

Annie launched and monetised her parenting platform The Early Hour, wrote freelance for publications like the Guardian, Stylist, and Red, and eventually secured a fractional contract with the women's hypnotherapy company Clementine. So what does freelancing offer that regular employment doesn't?

"For me," she says, "freelance work offers the flexibility that I need as a mother." And that flexibility becomes particularly important when things go wrong.

"I recently had a rather difficult week in the hospital with my son, as he had pneumonia. He was on the kids' ward for five days, and I stayed with him every night. I didn't do any work at all and was so grateful that I could simply tell clients that I'd make up for it the following week.

"I kept thinking: thank god I don't have to negotiate this time off with an employer. I imagine the inflexibility of most workplaces would mean other parents might return to work sooner than they wanted to after something like this. I was able to keep my son at home the following week, too, and work when he napped and in the evenings."

For Ridout, freelancing allows women to take back power and "become the boss. There's no one making them feel guilty if they clock-off on time to collect their kids or miss a morning for a school concert."

And if all this sounds like making the best of a bad situation – where women are forced out of work and therefore have to improvise – it's not. She argues that freelancing offers "the scope for climbing the ladder as fast as you like – if you work hard – and earning what you deserve."

But not everyone thinks freelancing is compatible with parenting. Communications Officer Catherine Mulvey recently went back to work after solely freelancing because of the benefits of having a regular income. "It's easier to plan ahead," she argues "and know where you stand. I still do a bit of freelancing but, for example, this month alone I have had one client mess me about which meant not getting money I was expecting."

While trying to fit work around school holidays and sickness is annoying, she says, "at least I can get paid time off rather than forfeiting pay to look after them."

Danielle Georgina Jones also returned to regular employment after freelancing. "Freelancing gave me the experience and contacts (not to mention the belief in myself), but I'm fond of being paid regularly and on time!"

Ridout also revealed that "I'd be open to being employed if I was offered a job that gave me the flexibility I have from freelancing. After all, the one downside of freelancing is the financial instability." But even so, she says, having repeat clients can make it feel like you are employed.

So freelancing offers flexibility and mostly guilt-free parenting, but many people point to issues of financial instability (when having children often underscores the need for regular income). And freelancers often struggle with the lack of employment rights, or indeed any rights at all.

Take maternity or parental leave. A [report in the Guardian](#) by journalist and mum Cherry Casey showed that you are only entitled to the full maternity allowance (currently £145.18 or 90% of your earnings, whichever is lower, for 39 weeks) if you have been employed or self-employed for 26 weeks out of the 66 weeks falling before your due date, earned at least £30 per week and have paid national insurance contributions for 13 out of the 66 weeks. If getting pregnant is not a great time to start a new job (since you often forfeit maternity benefits) nor is it a good time to start a business when initial earnings are likely to be low.

While formerly it was only employees in the UK who received subsidised childcare through childcare vouchers, everyone can now take advantage of tax-free childcare. Ridout says that amounts to £500 every three months for her son (who is under three). "This helps," she says, "but we could do with more than this as it is tight, covering nursery and ensuring there's enough surplus income to make it worth working at all."

Working parents of three and four-year-olds are also now entitled to 30

hours per week free childcare if they meet the eligibility criteria – that each parent must earn between the equivalent of 16 hours on the minimum wage and not more than £100,000 per year. The earnings limits do not apply if you are self-employed and started your business less than 12 months before.

But while those in regular employment can get statutory and non-statutory benefits such as higher rates of maternity leave, parental leave (paid or unpaid), flexible working arrangements and workplace nurseries in the UK – if you have a professional job, that is – there is little equivalent for freelancers.

Businesses benefit financially and organisationally by hiring freelancers. Research by Kelly Services showed that 57% of global talent managers use ‘free agent talent’ (freelancers) to save on labour costs, and 43% of those who use freelancers save at least 20% on labour costs. Almost three-quarters of talent managers surveyed felt that a “much more flexible and fluid workforce will emerge as a way to navigate an increasingly dynamic, global business climate.”

In other words, not only does freelancing save businesses money: in our current economic climate, being able to pivot is crucial as market conditions change. So why not use some of these savings to improve conditions for freelancing parents?

The government needs to look at how parents can be better supported, whether they are in regular jobs or are freelancing.

But it also comes down to employer and client attitudes. If your employer is willing to be flexible and consider arrangements such as part-time working and work from home days, with excellent employee benefits, then regular work can work for people. Similarly, if clients pay a fair rate – in recognition that they are saving money on employee benefits and pensions – and if they pay on time, that can also work for parents.

Ultimately, we need to rethink the nature of work, whether regular or freelance. Ridout argues, rightly, that everyone needs flexibility, whether it’s to take care of children, take on a caring role or just looking after your own health. “We can’t be moving through life regretting how little time we spend as a family,” she says.