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Family and work in France: innovative experiences in care services

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Introduction

Balance between work and family life represents a main issue in a majority of developed countries. This problem of "reconciliation", to use the European Commission's terminology, is the result of many factors: high level of female labour market participation and, therefore, lower availability of women for caring tasks; slow evolution of the men's attitude towards domestic tasks and caring responsibilities; increase in the number of households where both parents are working full time, or where a single parent has to combine a professional activity and look after one or several children; increase in job situations with atypical or flexible working hours, which are difficult to reconcile with the offer of formal childcare services.

In this debate, France is generally considered as one of the more « family friendly » European Welfare State (Martin, 1998), between the universal regime of the Scandinavian countries, where public services are the main childcare providers, and the corporatist ones, characterized by a compromise between market, third sector and

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family solidarity as the way to conciliate family responsibilities and work life. Nevertheless, France is confronted with important challenges: one of the highest fertility rate and female labour force participation in Europe, a high division of caring and domestic tasks between genders, a more and more flexible labour market with atypical working hours compared to a standardized offer of childcare services. After a short presentation of the main characteristics of the French childcare system, this chapter focuses on local experimentations that aim to complement this formal offer of services toward parents confronted to non-standard hours of work.

I. The French childcare system confronted to new demands

The childcare system in France is very diversified, fragmented and decentralized. Many different partners are concerned: local public actors as the “Caisses d’allocations familiales” (family fund institutions), the “Conseils généraux” (departments), and municipalities; but also third sector and associations, which manage about 40% of the childcare services and finally enterprises, which contribute to the financing of the family policy.

The high employment rate of women³ and the relatively high level of fertility (1,9 in 2003) in France are strongly related to the public services devoted to young children. Children have access to quasi-free of charge pre-elementary school, even for the two-year old children. In 1998, 100% of the three to five-year old children were in a pre-elementary school, and even 35% of the two-year old. In the west of France, around 60% of the two years old children are in a pre-elementary school in 2003. The French situation is very specific, compared to other European countries, even if many needs are not covered.

1. An important offer of services for standard hours of work

Pre-elementary schools, day care centres (*crèches collectives*) and childminder’s homes (*crèches familiales*) offer almost 500,000 places in 1999 for the 2.2 millions under three children, which means almost 20% of the potential needs. To these services, one may add the « *crèches parentales* » (8,500 places) and the « *Halte-garderies* » (70,000 places) (DREES, 2000).

³ 62,5% of women between 15 and 64 are on the labour market in 2003 (source Eurostat).

Nevertheless, it is important to underline the local variations of these services inside the country. The difference may be very significant for a family living in a big city, compared to another living in the countryside. Accessibility and availability of the different types of services are quite different.

Table 1: Situation of the under 3 and under 6 children in France and types of structures

Age of the children	Structures	Number of places (01-01-1999)
Children under 3 years old	Pre-elementary school (children under 3 in 1998-1999)	255,000 (56%)
	Crèches collectives	138,400 (30,5%)
	Crèches familiales	61,000 (13,5%)
	Total number of places in the collective structures for the children under 3 years old	454,500 (100%)
Children under 6 years old	Haltes-garderies	68,100

France métropolitaine, Source: DREES, Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité, 2000

The main objective of the system over the past 20 years was to diversify this offer of services to facilitate the parents' "free choice". As a matter of fact, they have different options to take care of their children:

- at home, with the support of a flat rate paid parental leave ("Allocation parentale d'éducation" or APE) or with the contribution of a non professional childminder, whose payment is partly covered by an allowance called "allocation de garde d'enfant à domicile" (AGED) (home childcare allowance) (see box 1);
- outside home, either in pre-school, from 2 or 3 years old, or in a registered childminder's home, whose payment is supported by another allowance called "aide aux familles pour l'emploi d'une assistante maternelle agréée" (AFEAMA: allowance for the payment of a registered professional childminder).

Box 1: childcare after the 2004 reform

A new "family plan" presented in April 2003 proposes to replace all the previous allowances by a unique, almost universal, allowance called PAJE: *prestation d'accueil du jeune enfant*:

Up to 2004, parents usually received:

- APJE, *Allocation pour jeune enfant*, a mean's tested allowance from the 5th month of pregnancy up to the 3rd year of the child, about 159€ per month ;
- AFEAMA, *Aide à la famille pour l'emploi d'une assistante maternelle agréée*, which helped parents who employed a professional carer who keep their child(ren) at her own house to pay the welfare costs ;

- AGED, *Allocation de garde d'enfant à domicile*, which helped parents to compensate up to 75% of the cost of a carer who care for their child(ren) in their own home;

- APE, *allocation parentale d'éducation*, a flat rate non means-tested parental leave (495 € for a full allowance) for the parents with two or more children who want to stay home and stop their professional activity completely or partially,

For the children born after January 2004, the PAJE is composed by different elements depending on the resources and choices of the parents:

- a birth bonus : around 800€ just before the birth of a child;
- a flat rate means-tested allowance of 165€ per month with a ceiling revenue of 4120 € (5 times the minimum salary), distributed up to the 3rd year of a child ;
- a complement for those who wants their child to be cared for by a registered childminder or in a « crèche », and to stay on the labour market, which depends on the revenue of the household and of the type of carer (registered childminders, non professional carers, crèche).
- A complement for the parents who decide to stop their professional activity to care for their child, a paid parental leave, which is 340€ per month. This allowance may be paid for the family with two children up to the 3rd year of the youngest, with a condition of activity (at least 2 years in the last 4 years). It could be paid also for the first child, but only during the six months after the maternity leave and if the mother worked during the past two years.

The government proposes also a fiscal incentive to invite enterprises to develop private childcare solutions.

In fact, this childcare policy is segmented in different ways:

- depending of the incomes: the well-off are encouraged to recruit a maternal assistant to take care of their children in their own home; the middle class generally prefers the professional childminders and the crèches are more accessible for the more disadvantaged;
- depending of the hours: the more flexible solutions are those where childcare arrangement is organised in the parents' home compared to collective institutions like crèche;
- depending of the localities: collective structures are rare in rural areas.

When parents cumulate some of these characteristics (living in a rural area, working with atypical timetables and/or having low income), they may be confronted to the following alternatives: an informal caring arrangement (grand-parents), or to stop working, with or without a parental leave.

The offer of care services in France is important, but it mainly covers the needs during the day: for children under three years old, there are either *crèches* (day care centres) open from 7.30 to 6.30 or *assistantes maternelles* (childminders). Over three

years old⁴, children can go to school, from 8.30 in the morning to 4.30 pm, and it is a completely free service (except the cost of the lunches). Before 8.30 am and after 4.30 pm (until 6.30-7pm), each school in France has a *garderie* (care centre), financed by municipalities, whose cost is very low for families (around 1 euro per hour). Finally, on Wednesdays, children can be cared for in municipal day care centres, where they have many activities (around 100 € per year). Therefore, the main problem for French families is to find solutions when care services are closed, that is to say, before 7.30 am and after 7 pm, and during week ends.

2. Working time flexibility: a new challenge

With regard to the evolution of the labour market, the Fordist standard represents a main reference in the aftermath of the Second World War : that is to say, a situation marked by full-time work with relatively homogenous, regular hours, synchronised with the other social hours. Previously considered as the pivot of our social organisation, this standard has, for about ten years, tended to shatter in favour of increasingly sustained recourse to flexibility (Bouffartigue & Bouteiller, 2003). Many factors explain these transformations: globalisation, increased competition, looking for short-term profitability, but also technological and social reasons (Fridenson and Reynaud, 2004).

Working atypical hours is certainly not a new phenomenon, since industrial work already imposed specific working hours and rhythms: shift work, evening work or night work. It is the same in the business, arts and crafts sector; working on Saturdays, even Sundays, is a phenomenon which has been more or less developed depending on the country for many decades. However, the development of direct services to households and the precariousness of jobs in many sectors, such as retail or transport, for example, have intensified this phenomenon over the last decade.⁵

At the European level, it is possible to distinguish three main categories of countries: those in which atypical working hours are particularly developed and have given rise to the development of an offer of adapted services; the countries where atypical working hours are somewhat less frequent, but where the service offer has not yet taken account

⁴ In some regions, schools even accept children from 2 years old.

⁵ . Many recent inquiries developed this issue recently at the European level (Fagnani, 1999; Marcil-Gratton et Le Bourdais, 2000; Vendramin, 2001; La Valle et al, 2002; Boisard et al, 2002; Cottrell et al., 2002; Statham & Mooney, 2003; Rochette, 2003).

of these specific demands, and finally, the countries where these working hours are considerably less frequent and the offer of services non-existent. Finland, France and Portugal are characteristic of these three configurations (see table 2).

Table 2: Percentage of workers per country working in the following situations:

	Different number of hours each day	Different number of days each week	With variable hours	Long days	Work shifts
Finland	47,6	26,6	39,9	17,9	22,9
France	39,3	22,4	29,2	13,5	20,9
UK	36,1	20,9	31,8	10,1	25,2
Italy	31,8	19,6	23,4	8,6	26,3
Portugal	20,1	10,6	18,6	6,8	10,4
<i>European Union</i>	<i>36,6</i>	<i>21,9</i>	<i>28,2</i>	<i>10,1</i>	<i>22</i>

(Source Boisard et al., 2002, p.36)

Hence, for almost all types of atypical working hours, Finland is placed very much above the European average and often in first place: whether it concerns the proportion of workers concerned by night work (25% work at least one night a month, followed closely by the United Kingdom with 22%), by working more than 10 hours a day (48% work at least one day like this in a month, followed by Sweden with 46%), by evening work (57% of workers are concerned, topped only by Spain with 61%⁶), by Sunday work (35% work at least one Sunday a month, topped only by Sweden with 36%), or by changes in working hours during the month (30% of employees are concerned, topped only by Sweden and Germany with 45% and 35% respectively).

France is in an intermediary situation, slightly above the European average: 18% of employees work at least one night a month, 42% at least one evening a month, 23% at least one Sunday a month, 26% work at least one day of more than 10 hours a month. The reduction in working hours (*Réduction du temps de travail* or *RTT*) has hardly improved the situation for people who have fewer qualifications and are paid less: “The RTT has introduced more irregularities in working hours, whatever the gender or the socio-professional category. But the proportion of employees who have more variable working hours since the RTT is significantly higher with blue collar workers or unqualified workers, particularly for women (23%), than in the other categories” (Estrade and Ulrich, 2003, p.70).

⁶ . Probably because of the tradition of long closing during the hottest hours of the day.

Out of all these indicators, Portugal is clearly under the European average: 13% of employees work at least one night a month, 28% at least one evening a month, 16% at least one Sunday a month, 16% work at least one day of more than 10 hours a month.

Looking more precisely at the French case, one can underline a few more elements about the impact of atypical working hours (see table 3).

Tableau 1 : % of workers with non-standard hours in France

	<i>(en %)</i>	Men	Women
Visible atypical working time tables			
Night work		20.4	6.4
Working on saturday		49.1	45.1
Working on sunday		27.0	22.5
Working more than 40 hours		28.6	14.7
Stop working after 19:30		14.3	11.8
Invisible atypical working timetables			
Impossible to change working hours in case of unexpected events		39.6	43.2
No days off within 48 hours		19.1	22.8
Work more than every three saturdays		26.2	32.2
Work more than every three sundays		12.2	12.7

Source : Supplement « Working conditions », Employment inquiry 1998, (Silvera, 2005 : 269).

The expression “flexibility” is used to qualify this progressive transformation of jobs, both insofar as status (increase in the number of fixed term contracts, temporary jobs, enforced part time jobs, etc.) and insofar as work conditions (development of atypical working hours). The flexibility of working hours has important consequences on the daily rhythm of households, particularly those who look after children or elderly people that have become dependent. It is however difficult to appreciate the effects induced, without taking account of a whole series of variables (type of atypical working hours, level of job qualification, household structure and resources, importance and quality of the support obtained by households for caring tasks, etc.).

The development of atypical working hours and increase of the number of households where two people work has considerably changed the request for care services. A large percentage of these new requirements are regulated by the households themselves, which organise more or less stable and adequate arrangements, combining formal resources (childcare system) and informal resources (network of relations, kinship and neighbours), which often, however, implies a large amount of pressure and heavy mental load on a daily basis. Faced with this change in requirements, the responses of the public authorities are still uncertain. How far must they go to face up to

this increasing complexity of the childcare arrangements? Should they cover periods of the day which are deemed to be incompatible with the normal working hours of the public services (mornings from 5am to 8am – evenings after 7pm, even nights)? Should this offer be proposed by the local authorities, by the third sector or left up to the interested parties who might find responses on a new “market”? Should the companies who are at the source of these flexible and atypical working hours get involved regulating these new requirements and in what forms?

3. Defining atypical hours of work

Atypical hours of work refers to very different working conditions. The common point is that these hours are staggered, which means that they are not in phase with the standard hours of work or with the normal opening of many public and private services (8am-6pm). Two elements must be taken into account when defining atypical times of work: the variability/invariability and the regularity/irregularity.

First characteristic, the possible variation of these hours (morning and/or afternoon) which, depending on the case, may be *invariable* or *variable*. For example, the working hours of Louisa, a French shopkeeper, are invariable staggered hours (5am – 1pm and 4pm to 8pm + Saturdays) since these hours and her days off never change. The daily organisation of her work is consequently facilitated since it hardly changes. In numerous other cases, the working hours of certain employees may change from one week to the next, even from one day to the next. Two configurations are then possible: the variability of the working hours may be *regular* or *irregular*. Hence, it is appropriate to integrate this additional indicator, i.e. the *regularity*, which will help us to analyse the (potential) fluctuation of the working hours. The *regular variable working hours* generally correspond to work shifts (organised in 2x8 or in 3x8). This is one of the most popular forms of atypical working hours. This is the case for Laure, a French nurse, whose working weeks alternate between mornings (6.30am - 2.15pm) and evenings (1.45pm - 9.30pm). These working hours, which are already complex, do however correspond to a working organisation where the change is repeated at regular intervals from one week to the next (one week of mornings / one week of afternoons). For Eric, a chain store salesman, the time unit is 24 hours since his working periods change every day, whilst still having a fixed nature. The variable, so-called ‘regular’ working hours, generally enable quite a stable organisation, insofar as the alternation

can be theoretically predicted, unlike the *irregular variable working hours* which correspond to working hours which may change from one day to the next without ever being the same. Mathilde, a nurse for three years now, is undoubtedly the most characteristic example of this irregular variability, which she feels to be exhausting. Although she works 3x8, her working days and weeks never repeat in the same way. She lives along with her 9 years old son and described to us the complexity of her working schedule:

“Currently, I’m working 3x8... but this is very strange because I work in psychiatry and we have to work all types of hours. (...) So to talk in concrete terms, I’ll work.... a fortnight of nights, then I go onto days for one month and then that month, I’ll do as many mornings, evenings or days... Then I return to working a fortnight of nights and then I’ll do a period of days but this could be somewhat longer, i.e. a month and a half, more or less. And afterwards it goes back to a fortnight of nights, one month of days, a fortnight of nights, a month and a half.... that’s how it goes on. And in the months where I work days, it’s quite complicated.... I have to work 3 evenings in a row, then I go onto a few days of mornings, then a full day... it’s not fixed, it’s so damn complicated... and even though I’ve been working there for three years now, I still don’t understand my schedule. I can never plan too much in advance...”

This lack of stability, caused by changes in working hours, requires a great deal of effort to adapt which obviously has consequences with regard to the reconciliation between family and professional responsibilities.

Two main factors impacts on family life and parental responsibilities: the *predictability/unpredictability* of the timetables and the possibility for parents to *negotiate* their working schedules. In reality, what is at stake in the irregularity of the different working hours is their *predictable* or *unpredictable* nature. In fact, in a number of job sectors, employees are being informed at the last moment of their working timetables over the days or weeks to come. Whilst shift work can be planned, which enables relatively stable solutions to be arranged, this is not the case for the types of jobs that have totally unpredictable working hours. From one week to the next, even from one day to the next, the solution has to be reinvented, often informally, calling on a network of relatives or neighbours.

But atypical working times can also have positive effect (Le Bihan, Martin, 2004a) For some workers, atypical times of work are both a choice and a positive source of flexibility, enabling them to adjust their time at work to their needs in terms of care arrangements or parental time (intellectual work or telecommuting, for example). In

these cases, we can speak about an auto-regulation of the constraint or about adjustable, *negotiable* working hours. Adjustment between work and care is then very flexible. Bernard teaches at university in France. He is divorced and has the custody of his two daughters half of the week. The flexibility of his times of work gives him the opportunity to group his teaching at the beginning of the week and to care for his two daughters the second part of the week. Therefore, atypical times of work for him does not mean constraints, but choice and flexibility.

II. The development of experimental services

There are a few childcare experiments in France whose offer is focussed on these parents confronted to atypical working hours, early in the morning, late in the evening, or over the weekend. We have studied four childcare experiments: three systems of the same programme, the GEPETTO programme⁷ and another system, the Parendom service of the Association Parenbougé⁸ in Rennes (Martin, Le Bihan, Campéon, Gardin 2005). At an experimental stage at the moment, these four systems are common in offering, at a price that is affordable for everyone (from 1€ to 9€ depending on the level of income), a home-based childcare service, when no traditional childcare service is open (see table 4).

⁷ “Bambino Service Plus” was created in 1999 in Lorient. This experiment has been extended in 8 other sites in France with the support of an « Equal » European program called GEPETTO program (Garde d’Enfants Pour l’Equilibre du Temps familial et du Temps professionnel et son Organisation). We studied 4 of them: Bambino; “1, 2, 3 Soleil à domicile” which exists since 2001 in Vernon and the “Temps DEM” experiment launched in 2003 in Poitiers.

⁸ The Parendom system was created in 2003 within the Parenbougé association, a group which welcomes young children, which also includes a nursery and a crèche financed by several companies whose working hours are also atypical.

Table 4: Presentation of the four studied experimental systems

		Bambino	1,2,3 Soleil	Temps DEM	Parendom
Territory of the services		Labour pool of Lorient (31 municipalities)	A pool of 50 municipalities in the department of Eure	A pool of 10 municipalities around Poitiers	Rennes
Costs		The cost of the service per hour is around 26 €. The contribution of the families varies from 2,44 to 8,13 € per hour, depending of their ressources. An annual contribution of 10 or 20€ is required.	The contribution of the families varies from 1,52€ and 9,15 €	The contribution of the families varies from 2,29€ to 7,62€. Annual contribution between 8,5€ and 15€.	The cost of the service per hour is 24€ The contribution of the families varies from 1€ to 9€. Annual contribution: 5€
Employees	Administrative	Director and a coordinator	Director and a coordinator	President of the association and a coordinator	Director and a coordinator
	Home care-taker	6	3	3	12

It is difficult to obtain homogenous data to compare the activity of the different sites. But the elements we have on two of these sites (see table 5) show that there is a real need for childcare at atypical hours. The professional activities concerned are varied and the families are mostly single parent families (around 70% of the families concerned are lone parents).

Table 5 : Elements on the activity of two experimental services: Bambino and Parendom

Bambino	Parendom
<p>In 2001, the demand of child care was of 3 287 hours. The service has answered to 2439 hours.</p> <p>38 families have used the service (71% lone parents).</p> <p>Work activities of the parents are varied: health professionals, shop keepers, socio-educational sector, factory employees, employees working in local authorities.</p> <p>In 2002: 50 families have used the service (72% lone parents)</p> <p>In 2003: 5210 hours of work, 66 families have used the service (73% lone parents)</p>	<p>In October 2003: 35 families were using the service (68% lone parents).</p> <p>The work activities are mainly: health and social sectors, trade sector.</p>

1. Three main principles

The experimental services are based on three main principles: a partnership principle, a professional principle and a complementary principle.

1.1 A partnership principle

Making available to users an offer of home-based childcare services, requires the socialisation of the cost of these services and therefore the mobilisation of multiple partners. The services are developed at a local level, and are funded by two main financiers: the municipality and the *Caisse d'allocation familiale* (Family Social Fund). Other partners can be involved to support the service, such as the *Direction départementale du travail, de l'emploi et de la formation professionnelle* (Work and Employment Local Administrations), the *Délégation régionale aux droits des femmes* (Women's Rights Local Administration), the *Bureau des Temps* (Time Agencies), the *Section régionale interministérielle de l'action sociale* (Local Intergovernmental Section of Social Affairs, depending on the local configurations). The financial partnership is, of course, indispensable to the existence of such services: it is based on agreements which specify the commitments of each partner involved and its duration. In fact, the financial assistance may take on several forms. It may be selective, supported for such or such an aspect, or targeted on the start-up of the service; it may also be defined for several years. Regardless of the form, it is this financial investment which determines the ability of services to respond to the demands of the users.

Other types of partnerships must be distinguished. It may be based on technical assistance: it may be to advise, to reflect on or even to get involved in the organisation of meetings.

Finally, the absence of the companies and firms, yet directly concerned by the issues of reconciliation between family and professional life, must be underlined. Indeed, even though the organisation of services contributes to the good operating of the activities of the firms, they are not directly involved in the development of the experimental services. And whilst this necessity for partnership with the companies is something that

is discussed at great length with the different partners in practice, it is still difficult to mobilise them⁹.

1.2 A professional service

The four experimental systems propose a quality childcare service, based upon professionalisation. Two elements contribute to this quality: the recruitment of a qualified personnel and the organisation of a real supervisory structure, ensured by a director and a coordinator on each of the sites (table 2). Therefore, the childminders are professionals and they provide the quality that families do not always have when they employ a baby-sitter. Indeed, three main problems can be identified concerning the recruitment of a baby sitter. First, the variable hours requested do not necessarily suit students who wish to earn a bit of money whilst doing their studies. Secondly, this type of recruitment does not guarantee the quality of the service. Indeed, the request made by the families can be precise, particularly in terms of educational practices (especially home works). Finally, the hourly cost of a babysitter (seven euros / hour on average) represents a certain sum, sometimes even a significant part of the salary earned, for someone who have children looked after for two of three hours in a row, several times a week.

Nevertheless, these services imply that the employees will also work on atypical hours: they are requested early in the morning, in the evenings after 6pm or during the weekend; they may therefore also be confronted with difficulties of reconciling professional and family life. The age of the people employed is significant. Indeed, they are either young, about twenty years old, or, older - over forty years old, which corresponds to times of life where childcare is not yet a problem, or no longer a problem. The variability of the schedule proposed to the childcare workers represents another issue: in fact, depending of the families' request, the number of hours may vary every week.

Therefore, the success in the development of these experimental services depends on the stabilisation of the recruited personnel. The interviews carried out with the different managers of the sites enable us to identify two possibilities for the services: developing

⁹ One must note that a service funded by different firms has been created. This service belongs to the same association as the Parendom service. It is not home-based childcare but a crèche, which proposes to care for the employees' children during working hours.

diversity in the tasks of the childcare workers; developing the complementarity of the activities of the care workers, who could have different types of jobs in the childcare sector. Hence, they would have the possibility to combine a home-based childcare job and a job in a collective structure with more traditional working hours, which would constitute a stable activity base. This stake of the complementarity does not only concern the workers; it relates to the global functioning of the services.

1.3 A complementarity principle

When the first of these experimental services was created, in 1999, one of the main arguments was that of its complementarity with the existing childcare services. In fact, the objective was not to create a service which would be a competitor to the existing offer, but to propose a childcare solution at times of the day when the traditional structures are closed and when no possibility – other than employing a person to stay at home, whose cost is important – is offered to the families. Furthermore, so as not to compete with the existing childcare offer on the different territories, the services propose an “information and guidance platform” for the families. When the families make a request for childcare, the parents do not always know what the local childcare offer is. The first thing to do, therefore, is to give them information. And the experimental service is not always the solution proposed. There may be others. It all depends on the demand of the families.

In practice, this principle of complementarity is not always adapted to the situations. Applied strictly, it may put the families, and more specifically the child, in a difficult situation. Indeed, if the service only intervenes when the traditional existing services are closed, it appears as a certainly complementarity childcare solution, but multiplies the services used to care for the child. This is even truer given that the formal childcare offer is not the only resource used by the families. In fact, the parents also ask close family or friends to look after their children; which multiply the number of people involved in the childcare arrangement. The living situation of the children is therefore taken into account: when the presence of a childminder is required early in the morning, he/she takes the child to school by 8.30am, avoiding the use of the school childcare service which opens from 7.30am. Likewise, in the evenings, the childminder will pick the child up before the after-school services close (between 6.30pm and 7pm, depending on the towns), avoiding too long days at school for the child.

The principle of complementarity must be adapted to the living conditions of the children. The stake is therefore to offer families a quality childcare service, and to give the children the best possible conditions, by looking after them at home, in their familiar environment.

2. Advantages and limitations of these innovative systems: two case studies

The childcare services studied are one of the resources used by the families and the existence of such a childcare response is essential to enable families to combine family life and professional life as harmoniously as possible. The ability of the experimental services to intervene regularly and therefore to stabilise the childcare arrangements is a determining factor. Two opposing situations can be identified: that of Béatrice whose childcare arrangement is organised as things arise, depending on her professional constraints and the availability of her childcare resources; that of Laure, much more stabilised, whose arrangement relies on the involvement of the experimental service which regularly cares for her son.

Béatrice is 40; she lives alone with her two daughters aged 6 and 8. As a bus conductor, she works atypical hours and her schedule varies from one week to the next. She may have to work early in the morning or late in the evening, or on weekends. Sometimes the working hours are the same every day of the week, or they may vary from one day to the next. She is informed of her schedule for six weeks; the new schedule is known about a week before the end of the other one. With each new schedule, the question of looking after her children arises. Béatrice has a certain number of childcare possibilities and every week tries to organise an arrangement according to her needs. Generally, Béatrice has to find a solution four to five times a week and the experimental service can only intervene once or twice. She therefore mobilises her personal network to organise the care arrangement. When she works in the evenings, the childcare problem arises between 6.30pm, when the day-care centre closes, and 9.30pm. She contacts her friend Paul who often accepts picking up her daughters from school and looking after them in the evenings until 9.30pm. She also tries to see if she can arrange things with one of her colleagues, who has a 4 years old daughter and knows the problem well. When she begins at 6am, she now leaves her two daughters to get up on their own and go together to the close-by school. If she works on weekends and has not

managed to change her schedule with a colleague, she asks her ex-partner's mother, or her own mother. In this case, she has to drive her daughters to her mother's house on Friday evenings and pick them up on Sundays. Her mother lives 75km away; so it is not one of the easiest solutions. The difficulty is not only linked to the fact of having her daughters looked after when she is working, but also everything this implies on a daily basis: the necessity to anticipate the lack of an immediate solution, to look at her schedule, to find colleagues in order to exchange certain days ... All this is a permanent source of stress. This is a mental load which Béatrice carries everyday and which does not make her day-to-day routine easy. To this is added the necessity to make her two daughters understand and accept the situation.

Laure is a psychiatric nurse. She is also a single mother with a 7 years old son. As Béatrice, she works variable hours. She knows her work schedule one month in advance and her atypical hours can be defined as regular and predictable. Indeed, she either works mornings and starts at 6.30am, or she works afternoons and does not get home before 10pm. She also works every two weekends. With this type of working schedule, she can either take her son to school or pick him up every day of the week, but she must also have him looked after every day and every two weekends. But, unlike Béatrice, she has found a stable and financially affordable childcare solution: in the week, a childminder from the experimental service comes to Laure's home – at 6.15am or after the school custody at 6pm – and looks after her son until school starts or until she gets home. On Wednesdays, she takes him to or picks him up from the play centre where he spends the day. On Saturdays, the childminder looks after him from 6.30am to 2.30pm or from 2.30pm to 10pm. Finally, on Sundays, as it is difficult for the services to find childminders, Laure has found another solution. It is her parents, who live nearby, who takes care of her son. Thus if she works early in the morning, she takes him there from Saturday evening; otherwise, she drives him there for lunch.

The two situations are interesting to compare (table 6), as they have a certain number of similarities: two lone parents with their children, working atypical, variable hours, with a predictable working schedule but requiring a flexible childcare arrangement.

Table 6: Comparison of the situations of Béatrice and Laure.

	Béatrice	Laure
Working hours	Variable and irregular Predictable (schedule is known 6 weeks before) Some week ends	Variable and regular Predictable (1 month before) 6.30am-2.15pm / 1.15pm-9.30pm Every two week ends
Care needs	5 times per week and sometimes during week ends.	5 times per week and sometimes during week ends.
Care Resources	Experimental service School custody service, Play centre, baby-sitter A friend, colleagues, the grand-parents	Experimental service School custody service, play centre, The grand parents (her parents) Ex partner (during holidays only)
Care Arrangement	Unstable Arrangement Experimental service once a week in the evening (6.30pm-9.45pm) Other evenings: a friend Mornings (6.30am-8.30am): the girls are alone Week ends: a friend or the grand mothers (40km-70km) If no solution she brings her daughters with her.	Stable Arrangement Experimental service (6.10am-8.30am or 6pm-22pm) Wednesday: experimental service in the morning or in the evening and the day at the play centre. Every two Saturdays: the experimental service (6.10am-3pm or 1.45pm-22pm) Every two Sundays at the grand-parents' home

The services' ability to respond to the family's requirements is a determining factor to enable both women to reconcile professional life and family life. The experimental service is not able to respond to Béatrice's frequent requests; she has to rely on her own resources. Laure also combines several childcare arrangements, but the organisation thus constituted is stable and planned one month in advance. Then, every Thursday, she calls the experimental service to know who will come to look after her son during the week. If we look from the point of view of the children, the differences are obvious. Béatrice's daughters never exactly know in advance who will be picking them up in the evening, if it's their mother's friend or if they are going to the home of their mother's colleague, or if Béatrice is going to take them to one of their grannies. On the contrary, Laure's son knows his mother's work schedule changes one month in advance and, every week, he knows precisely the name of the persons who are going to look after him in the morning or in the evening or on Saturdays. Every other Sunday, he also knows that he will spend the day at his grandparents.

The ability of the families to combine the childcare arranged through the service and other resources is the second important variable to ensure the stability of the arrangement, particularly when the childcare requirement is extensive. Thus, Laure can

rely on her parents every Sunday – day when the experimental services can not ensure the availability of a childminder. Whereas Béatrice must ask for help from many people, as she does not precisely know who will be available.

Conclusion

Several elements intervene in the organisation of a childcare arrangement: working conditions, working time schedule, the existence or non-existence of an offer of services, incomes, the family situation, the idea we have of the link between professional and family life, the extent to which the working hours can be arranged or negotiated to suit. These different elements are combined and constitute a particular life situation, which leads to putting in place such or such arrangement. As a family friendly Welfare State, the French childcare system looks like an efficient one in terms of conciliation between work and family life. The high level of fertility registered during the past 4 years (around 1,9 children per woman) and the high women's employment rate seem to confirm this idea.

Nevertheless, this statement doesn't take into account the high level of pressure which experiment many households nowadays: lack of time, stress, tiredness, tension between parents, etc. The development of flexibility on the labour market and, in particular, the working time flexibility enhances this pressure. More and more parents are confronted to non-standard hours of work, which may be almost incompatible with parental responsibilities.

Some experimental services try to give an answer to these needs. These services, which develop throughout the country, have three main advantages: their cost, their professional dimension, and their home-based principle. Thus, children are kept at home, in their familiar environment, by professionals. This solution is necessarily complementary to the standard childcare services. The experimental phase of these services has proved the existence of a real need for care at atypical hours and the importance of such services for lone parents who have even more difficulties to combine work and family life. These services are still waiting for official recognition to be generalised. They are also confronted to a difficulty: mobilizing and stabilizing professionals who have to work themselves on non-standard hours. But it is clearly a promising answer to the evolution of the labour market. At the same time, the role of the enterprises has to be underlined in the promotion of such solutions.

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