Balancing Work and Care During the Covid-19 Pandemic
A review of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs 'Golden Hour' Initiative
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Authors: James Shaw and Ciarán Madden, Research and Evaluation Unit
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The Golden Hour Initiative was a pilot initiative designed to help DCYA staff members who are parents to balance home working and care during the Covid-19 pandemic response. The initiative consisted of an hour from 12:00-13:00 on working days, which parents were encouraged to spend at play with their children.

The DCYA Human Resources (HR) Unit developed the Golden Hour and piloted it in the Department during the month of May, which coincided with the promotion of the Department’s ‘Let’s Play Ireland’ national initiative. The Golden Hour pilot continued into June, while schools and Early Learning and Care facilities remained closed.

Summary of Key Findings

An evaluation of the Golden Hour initiative was conducted by the Research and Evaluation Unit in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs during the months of May and June. The evaluation was conducted on behalf of the Human Resources Unit, who led on the initiative. The key findings from the evaluation, as outlined in this report, are as follows:

Over 80 per cent of respondents to the staff surveys thought that the ‘Golden Hour’ initiative was worthwhile and should be continued

- 81 per cent of respondents in the mid-month survey agreed or strongly agreed that the Golden Hour was a worthwhile initiative that should be continued while staff are home working during Covid-19. This rose to 89 per cent in the end of month survey.

There was a near consensus on the positive impact of the Golden Hour on the wellbeing of staff and children.

- 84 per cent of parents in each survey agreed or strongly agreed that the Golden Hour had a positive impact on their personal short-term wellbeing.
- 88 per cent of parents in the mid-month survey agreed or strongly agreed that the initiative had a positive impact on their child/children’s wellbeing, rising to 100 per cent in the end of month survey.
- 84 and 92 per cent of parents in the respective surveys agreed or strongly agreed that the initiative had been good for their relationship with their child/children.
Around two-thirds of parents agreed that the Golden Hour had helped them to balance work and care.

- 64 per cent of parents in the mid-month surveys agreed or strongly agreed that the initiative had helped them to balance work and care responsibilities, rising to 71 per cent in the end of month survey.

There were challenges around balancing workload with participation in the initiative, particularly for senior managers. For the most part, these challenges related to the timing of the hour.

- 48 per cent of parents in the mid-month survey reported attending meetings during the hour, and 42 per cent in the end of month survey. This was more likely among senior managers, reaching 100 per cent among Principal Officers and Management Board members in the end of month survey.
- The majority of parents who participated in the initiative agreed (79 per cent mid-month; 83 per cent end of month) that having a set hour was a suitable approach to managing home working and care. In both surveys a majority of participating parents also agreed (78 per cent; 89 per cent) that 12:00-13:00 was an appropriate time for the Golden Hour.
- However, the main theme to emerge from respondents in both surveys, when asked how the initiative might be changed or improved, was that there could be more flexibility in choosing the timing of the hour, in order to fit work and caring schedules.

Staff faced minimal disruption to accommodate the initiative.

- 93 per cent of respondents in the mid-month survey reported having to make either no adjustments or a slight adjustment to accommodate the initiative. The corresponding figure in the end of month survey was 91 per cent.

Parents engaged in activities to support children’s social, physical and educational development.

- The most popular activities that parents reported engaging in during the hour were: ‘chatting with my children’ (80%), ‘going for a walk or cycle outdoors’ (68%), ‘eating’ (66%) and ‘helping with homework’ (61%)\(^1\).

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\(^1\) The percentages for activities engaged in are the averages across both surveys.
Context and synopsis of relevant literature

Staff at the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) have been home working since mid-March. With most non-essential workers in Ireland and across Europe home working, governments and organisations have tried to find ways to support employees to balance home working and caring responsibilities. Many employees who previously relied on Early Learning and Care (ELC) services and primary and secondary school to balance work and parenting responsibilities, have faced the closure, or partial opening of these education and care services in many countries, including Ireland. In that context, the DCYA developed the Golden Hour initiative to support staff members who are home working and caring for children.

The Golden Hour initiative was piloted in the DCYA during the month of May, where any staff member who is a parent (or acting in the capacity of a parent) was encouraged to set work aside for one hour between 12:00 and 13:00 to spend with their children. Staff members participating in the initiative were not asked to make up for the time elsewhere during the day. For parents (and those acting in the capacity of a parent), the initiative was intended to alleviate the burden of balancing home working and care. For children, it was intended to support uninterrupted play and education with their parent/carer by setting aside one hour per working day.

A brief search of the international policy and human resources literature by the Research and Evaluation Unit in the DCYA did not yield evidence of studies on equivalent initiatives. However, the Golden Hour is an example of a flexible working arrangement, defined by UNICEF as:

“alternate arrangements or schedules from the traditional work setting”, such as: ‘flexible time’, ‘flexible time off’, and ‘flexible location/roles’. (UNICEF, 2020a)².

International evidence points to the effectiveness of flexible working arrangements to help parents to balance home working and care (UNICEF, 2020b³; Yap, 2020⁴). UNICEF (2020a)
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guidance on flexible working emphasises that flexible working arrangements should benefit employers and employees through increased morale and more efficient working, as long as the arrangements are understood across the organisation and fit the business schedule. A global survey of HR managers found that 77 per cent of respondents rated improved work-life balance and 42 per cent rated increased productivity, as among the main benefits of flexible working arrangements (LinkedIn, 2019⁵).

Guidance on implementing flexible working recommends that policies should be communicated to all employees, along with details of new arrangements and opportunities, to allow employees to adjust (Queensland Government, 2016⁶).

An OECD (2016⁷) policy brief on flexible working found that across OECD member states, there was little difference in the prevalence of flexible working between employees with or without dependent children, but that employees with dependent children were significantly more likely to provide care or education at least several times per week. The authors (ibid.: 2016) recommended that employers provide access to flexible working arrangements on the basis of fairness and to encourage working parents’ labour market participation.

The international response to the Covid-19 pandemic has challenged traditional conceptions of a separation between work and family life. According to UNICEF (2020c⁸):

“The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has upended family life around the world. School closures, working remotely, physical distancing — it’s a lot for parents to navigate”.

For children, a structured schedule with a plan for how time would be spent each day was regarded as important for maintaining a sense of normality, while schools were closed (UNICEF, 2020d⁹). As this report will show, setting aside an hour in every working day for staff to spend with their children has facilitated a sense of structure for both parents and their children. In turn, this has promoted a routine. UNICEF (2020c) have advised that routine is important for helping children to learn at home and recommend planning sessions up to 45 minutes in duration.

⁷ http://www.oecd.org/els/family/Be-Flexible-Backgrounder-Workplace-Flexibility.pdf
Within this context, the DCYA’s Golden Hour initiative has represented a novel and innovative response to the disruptions experienced by parents and children in recent months. The initiative provides a structured time during each working day for parents to spend with their children, thus fostering routine in a time of unprecedented disruption with regard to work life, school closures as well as social distancing from wider family and/or childminding supports.

Evaluating the Golden Hour Initiative

In order to evaluate whether the ‘Golden Hour’ initiative has been achieving its objectives and whether it may be of value to continue beyond the initial pilot period of May 2020, the Research and Evaluation Unit (REU) conducted an evaluation that demonstrated a combination of process and outcome-based evaluation features. The evaluation included two survey questionnaires, which were open to all DCYA employees. Responses were invited from those participating, and not participating, in the initiative. The surveys included both closed and open questions. Thematic analysis was carried out on the open questions to identify the main themes arising. A content analysis, measuring the frequency that specific concepts were raised, was also conducted to triangulate the thematic analysis. The REU then conducted one-to-one interviews with DCYA staff at Assistant Principal (AP) and Principal Officer (PO) grades. In the survey results, respondents at these senior grades had been found to be most likely to only partially participate in the initiative, due to work pressures. The interviews looked to explore why this may have been occurring. A total of 13 DCYA staff (7 APs and 6 POs) were chosen randomly from the DCYA organisational chart by the Research and Evaluation Unit, and asked to participate in the interview. 6 interviews were conducted, with 4 employees at Assistant Principal (AP) and 2 at Principal Officer (PO) grades and with an even gender split.

The remainder of this report presents the high-level findings from the surveys and interviews. All data has been anonymised. The evaluation was conducted by the DCYA Research and Evaluation Unit, on behalf of the DCYA Human Resources Unit, who are responsible for the implementation of the Golden Hour initiative.
Mid-month Survey

A mid-month DCYA staff survey was conducted between May 13th and 17th in order to capture staff opinions and experiences at the mid-point of the Golden Hour pilot. The results of the survey were provided to the Human Resources Unit, to inform the ongoing delivery of the pilot throughout the month of May.

A total of 72 DCYA staff members completed the mid-month survey, representing approximately one quarter of the DCYA workforce. Of those who responded, 68 per cent were women and 32 per cent were men. By grade, 33 per cent of responses came from APs or equivalents and 21 per cent were from POs or Management Board members (MB members). 6 per cent were from Clerical Officers or Services Officers (COs/SOs). See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Percentage of mid-month survey respondents, by gender and grade

36 per cent (n=25) of respondents were participating in the Golden Hour initiative as a parent or as an individual acting in the capacity of a parent; 26 per cent (n=18) were not participating but knew of at least one colleague in their Unit who was; and 39 per cent (n=27) were neither participating in the initiative nor knew of anyone in their Unit who was participating. See Figure 2.
End of month survey

A second survey was conducted in early June, to capture the opinions and experiences of DCYA colleagues as the initial phase of the pilot came to a close. The results of this survey were also provided to the Human Resources Unit. A decision was taken in the context of a parallel initiative aimed at staff caring for other family dependants that the Golden Hour initiative be continued beyond the pilot period, into the month of June.

66 members of staff responded to the end of month survey, of whom 24 reported that they had not responded to the mid-month survey, which made for a total of 92 unique respondents across both surveys. As in the mid-month survey, more women responded (61 per cent) than men (36 per cent), and 3 per cent reported a gender identity of ‘Other/Prefer not to say’. There was a wider spread of respondents by grade than during the mid-month survey: ranging from 10 per cent Higher Executive Officers (HEOs) and 12 per cent COs/SOs to 23 per cent APs or equivalent and 24 per cent EOs. See Figure 3.
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Figure 3: Percentage of end of month respondents, by gender and grade

36 per cent (n=24) of respondents were participating in the Golden Hour as a parent (or acting in the capacity of a parent), while 32 per cent (n=21) were not participating but knew of at least one Unit colleague who was, and 32 per cent (n=21) were neither participating nor knew of any Unit colleagues who were. See Figure 4.

Figure 4: Percentage of respondents in the end of month survey participating/not participating in the initiative

- Yes, as a parent or acting in the capacity of a parent
- No, but I know at least one colleague in my Unit is participating
- No, nor do I know of any colleagues in my Unit who are participating
Impacts on Wellbeing, and Balancing Work and Care

A ‘worthwhile’ initiative that staff members would like to see continued

Survey respondents generally had a positive view of the Golden Hour initiative. 81 per cent of respondents in the mid-month survey agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: “I think the Golden Hour is a worthwhile initiative and would like to see it continued while staff are home working during Covid-19”. This rose to 88 per cent by the end of the month. See Figure 5.

There was some variation by grade although a majority expressed agreement across all grades. In the mid-month survey, POs/MB members were most likely to agree or strongly agree with this statement (93 per cent), compared to 62 per cent of Administrative Officers (AOs) and there was a similar pattern in the end of month survey. There was little variation by gender in the mid-month survey but men were more likely than women to agree or strongly agree with this statement in the end of month survey (96 per cent vs. 83 per cent).

Figure 5: Staff agreement/disagreement with whether the Golden Hour is a positive initiative and should be continued while staff are home working during Covid-19
Wellbeing and the parent-child relationship

Respondents were asked about the impact of the Golden Hour on their personal wellbeing and how they perceived its impact on their child/children’s wellbeing. Parents generally had a very positive view on the effects of the initiative on wellbeing and on their relationship with their child/children. In both the mid-month and end of month surveys, 84 per cent of parents agreed or strongly agreed that the initiative had a positive impact on their personal wellbeing. Meanwhile, 100 per cent of parents agreed or strongly agreed in the end of month survey that the initiative had had a positive impact on their children’s wellbeing, which increased from 88 per cent at the mid-month point. 92 per cent of parents in the end of month survey also agreed or strongly agreed that the Golden Hour had been good for their relationship(s) with their child/children, rising from 84 per cent at the mid-month point. In terms of respondents’ perceptions around the DCYA’s role in the initiative, 87 per cent of parents in the mid-month survey agreed or strongly agreed that the initiative showed the DCYA valued their wellbeing and that of their family. This figure rose to 100 per cent by the end of the month. See Figures 6-9.

Figure 6: Extent of parents’ agreement or disagreement with the statement: ‘Participating in the Golden Hour has had a positive impact on my short-term wellbeing’
Figure 7: Extent of parents’ agreement or disagreement with the statement: ‘I feel that participating in the Golden Hour has had a positive impact on my child/children’s wellbeing’

Figure 8: Extent of parents’ agreement or disagreement with the statement: ‘Participating in the Golden Hour has been good for my relationship with my child/children’
The broader impact of home working on the parent-child relationship was also explored through open questions, where parents were asked what the main difference was in the time spent with their children since they had started home working. The main theme in parents’ responses was having ‘more time’ with their children – including ‘more quality time’ to be involved in their children’s development. In the end of month survey, four parents reported that there was ‘less stress’ at home due to saving time and effort in not commuting, although two parents cited the challenges of fulfilling multiple work and parenting roles while working at home.

Parents were also asked in an open-ended question what the main benefit had been of participating in the Golden Hour. Again, the theme of being able to spend more time with children emerged as the main benefit, mentioned by 14 parents in the first survey and 13 parents in the second survey. Across both surveys, 10 parents reported feeling that the time was ‘guilt-free’, especially given that the initiative was recognised by DCYA management. Eight parents also reported that having a set hour provided structure to their day and facilitated the planning of activities, with their children appreciating that this hour was ‘guaranteed’. However, some respondents questioned the appropriateness of having a set hour, or noted that the timing of the hour did not suit their work and/or parenting schedules.

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10 This was mentioned by 12 parents in the mid-month survey and a further 12 times in the end of month survey.
The timing of the hour will be discussed in more detail in the section on ‘Challenges to Participation’.

**Balancing Work and Care**

A majority of parents reported that the Golden Hour initiative helped them to balance work and care responsibilities, although this was higher among mothers than fathers. In the mid-month survey, 64 per cent of parents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: “The Golden Hour has helped me to balance work and care responsibilities”, which rose to 71 per cent in the end of month survey, see Figure 10. Among fathers, only 25 per cent agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, compared to 79 per cent of mothers.

![Figure 10](image.png)

Taking the average across both surveys, 63 per cent of APs and 88 per cent of POs/MB members agreed or strongly agreed that the initiative helped them to balance work and care responsibilities. However, ‘senior level work pressures’ was cited by some parents as a reason for not participating in the initiative. Of APs and POs/MB members who did participate, the data also showed that most did not take the hour every day. In the mid-month survey, no POs/MB members and 13 per cent of APs reported taking the hour every day. POs/MBs members were most likely to have taken the hour ‘once or twice a week’ (75 per cent) and APs were most likely to have taken it on ‘most days’ (50 per cent). By comparison, 75 per cent of HEOs reported taking the hour ‘every day’ and 67 per cent of AOs. None of the EOs
who answered the surveys reported taking the hour every day, although 75 per cent reported taking it most days. There was a similar pattern in the end of month survey, where again no POs/MB members and 13 per cent of APs reported taking the hour every day. See Table 1.

Table 1: Percentage of staff who reported taking the Golden Hour at different frequencies, by grade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Mid-month</th>
<th>End of month</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Every day</td>
<td>Most days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Once or twice a week</td>
<td>Less than once a week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO/SO</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EO</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AO</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEO</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP/equivalent</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PO/MB member</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Challenges to Participation

Reasons for not being able to participate fully in the initiative were explored in the interviews with senior managers. The main themes to emerge were difficulties around the timing of the hour and balancing the initiative with workload.

Balancing Workload

Work pressure proved a significant issue for those at senior management levels. For example, one PO who was interviewed reported intending to participate in the initiative more regularly, but that during the month of May their Unit had been ‘under the cosh’, noting that the initiative was ‘about spending time with kids but I would have missed out on time with my kids in the evening’. Also citing the difficulty of balancing work and care, an AP reported that ‘there needs to be recognition that it’s hard to deliver as much at the moment’, and
suggested ‘maybe it should be made clear which work to prioritise and which to not’ to facilitate balancing workload with the initiative.

**Scheduling Meetings**

Although HR advised that meetings be scheduled outside the hour of 12:00-13:00, the data suggest that this was not adhered to uniformly. The results of the mid-month survey found that approximately half (48 per cent) of respondents had agreed to attend meetings during the Golden Hour, which was most likely among POs/MB members (75 per cent). There was a slight reduction in the end of month survey in those reporting to have agreed to attend meetings during the hour (42 per cent). A total of 50 per cent of respondents in the end of month survey also reported having read or replied to emails during the hour, which was similar to the mid-month findings. When asked why they had agreed to attend meetings during the hour, ‘urgency’ was the most commonly cited reason in the mid-month survey (35 per cent) and ‘to avoid falling behind’ was the most commonly cited reason in the end of month survey (33 per cent). There was variation in agreeing to attend meetings by grade seniority. See *Figure 11*. In the end of month survey, 100 per cent of POs/MB members and 75 per cent of APs reported agreeing to attend meetings during the hour, compared to no EOs and AOs, and 25 per cent of COs/SOs. This may have reflected the embedding of the initiative among EOs and AOs, while for APs and POs, workloads and a sense of ‘urgency’ and risk of ‘falling behind’ may have increased as the month progressed.
Figure 11: Percentage of respondents who reported that they had agreed to attend meetings during the Golden Hour, by grade

In the interviews with senior management, one PO made the following point in relation to meetings:

“Meetings have been organised at 12 as often as they have at any other time in the day. They should bracket a time to say no meetings. It’s hard to do and you can’t be absolute...but I think an explicit instruction that this is the hour where there will be no meetings and people would structure them (meetings) around it”

In the mid-month survey, of those who reported that they had agreed to attend meetings during the hour, 17 per cent reported that they had done so once a week or more often. This rose to 50 per cent in the end of month survey. As noted, HR issued an initial correspondence to all DCYA staff requesting that meetings be scheduled outside the hour, however a key learning from the initiative may be that additional communications to remind staff of the initiative, and its parameters, could serve to concretise them more fully.

Choosing the timing

Another reason cited for not being able to participate more fully in the initiative was the timing of the hour. Flexibility regarding the timing of the hour emerged as the most common theme (raised spontaneously by 19 staff members) in relation to how the initiative might be changed or improved in the mid-month survey. It also emerged as a common theme in the
end of month survey, although less frequently, where it was mentioned by 6 respondents. Calls for greater flexibility in the timing of the hour were also made in three out of six interviews with senior managers. Respondents cited various reasons as to why the hour, or any set hour, did not suit their schedule. These included reasons such as: work pressures, an hour not being sufficient time for young children, the Golden Hour being too close to lunch-time, and it being nap-time for some children.

Notwithstanding the cohort of respondents who called for greater flexibility to choose the timing of the hour, the vast majority of parents who participated in the initiative agreed or strongly agreed that ‘setting aside an agreed hour is a good approach to managing home working and care during Covid-19’. 79 per cent and 83 per cent of respondents to the respective surveys agreed or strongly agreed with this statement at the mid-month and end of month intervals. In a separate question, 78 per cent of participating parents reported that 12:00-13:00 was an appropriate time for the Golden Hour, rising to 89 per cent in the end of month survey.

It is clear from the survey and interview evidence that it would be difficult to select an hour that would have suited all staff members, and while some staff members would have preferred greater flexibility to choose when to take the hour, a majority of those who participated agreed that having a set hour, and the time chosen, was appropriate. As discussed, an absence of guilt over spending time with children due to the initiative being promoted by DCYA management arose as a theme in both waves of the survey. If the initiative were to rely on local arrangements for the timing of the hour, this could undermine the strong sense of senior management commitment to the initiative. Having local Golden Hours at different times in the day could also entail logistical challenges, such as scheduling meetings. Nonetheless, given the polarisation over having either a flexible or set hour, it may be that some of those whose schedules were not suited to the hour chose not to participate in the initiative at all. In the interviews with senior management, 2 respondents noted that they did not participate in the initiative for this reason, while it emerged as one of the most common reasons (in response to an open-ended survey question) among parents who did not participate in the initiative. In summary, there was a significant difference of opinion across respondents on this issue, which may be inevitable when choosing a uniform time for
a large cohort of people with varying workloads, schedules and parenting responsibilities. There is no evidence that another time would have been more popular than the time chosen.

Accommodating the Initiative

The results of the mid-month survey indicated that most staff members only had to make a slight adjustment to accommodate either their own or colleagues’ participation in the Golden Hour. In the end of month survey, 46 per cent of respondents reported having to make a slight adjustment and 45 per cent reported not having to make any adjustments, while 9 per cent of respondents reported having to make a significant adjustment. See Figure 12. Those who were participating as a parent were more likely to report having to make a significant adjustment (13 per cent) than those who were not participating but knew of at least one Unit colleague who was (5 per cent). The high levels of those who reported making either no adjustment or a slight adjustment in the mid-month and end of month survey suggests that the initiative involved minimal disruption to business practice.

In an open question about the main lesson learned from the pilot, one of the main themes that emerged was being able to maintain and even increase productivity while taking time to spend with children. This was the fourth most common theme and was mentioned by six respondents.
Parent-Child Activities

A very high proportion of parents felt that the initiative had a positive impact on their child/children’s well-being and on their relationship with their child/children. To gauge the types of activities that parents engaged in with children during the hour, parents were presented with a list of 18 possible activities. In the mid-month survey, the most popular activities that parents reported engaging in at least once in the previous week, were: ‘chatting with my children’ (88 per cent), ‘going for a walk or cycle outdoors’ (72 per cent), ‘helping with homework’ (64 per cent) and ‘eating’ (64 per cent). The most popular activities were very similar by the end of the month, with ‘chatting with my children’ (71 per cent), ‘going for a walk or cycle outdoors’ (67 per cent), ‘eating’ (63 per cent) and ‘helping with homework’ (58 per cent) being the most regularly reported activities. See Table 2.

Parents reported engaging in 16 of the 18 activities listed in the mid-month survey, while in the end of month survey parents reported engaging in all 18 of the listed activities. The range of popular activities indicates the potential for the initiative to support children’s physical and mental health, as well as their educational development.
**Table 2: Percentage of parents who reported engaging in different types of activity with their children at least once during the previous week**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of activity</th>
<th>Mid-month</th>
<th>End of month</th>
<th>Mean(^{11})</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chatting with my child/children</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going for a walk or cycle outdoors</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping with homework</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking/baking</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts and crafts</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing music/dancing</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing sports</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gardening/planting</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other(^{12})</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing board games</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching TV/playing video games</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online activities</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoga/mindfulness</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing for fun/correspondence</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dressing-up/playing make believe</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Respondents could choose multiple activities

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\(^{11}\) Assumes an equal weight for each of the surveys

\(^{12}\) Other activities cited by parents included general minding, preparing lunch, and playing with Lego®.
Children’s Experiences of the Initiative

With the permission of parents, children were also invited to share their experiences of the initiative. Across both surveys, children reported having positive experiences relating to their own engagement with the initiative. The most commonly reported ‘best thing about the Golden Hour initiative’ among children who responded was spending ‘time with my mam’, mentioned by four children in the mid-month survey and four children in the end of month survey. This was followed by ‘being able to play together’, and receiving ‘help with home school’. Figure 13 is a piece of art that was completed by a DCYA staff member’s child and submitted to the Research and Evaluation Unit for inclusion in the evaluation report. The picture, titled ‘eating cake with my mum under a rainbow’ depicts the child’s positive experience of the Golden Hour initiative.

Figure 13: Example of artwork completed by a participating staff member’s child, depicting her experience of the Golden Hour initiative

Conclusion and Key Learnings

The surveys of DCYA staff at the middle and end points of the initial May 2020 pilot period for the Golden Hour initiative, showed high levels of support for the initiative among DCYA staff, with over 80 per cent of staff at both waves favouring its continuation while staff are home
working during Covid-19. Among parents who participated in the initiative, over 80 per cent at both waves also reported that the initiative had a positive impact on their wellbeing, the wellbeing of their children, and on their relationship with their children. These results reflect a very favourable view among staff towards the initiative and evidences the benefit to staff who are parents of having an hour set aside from their working day to spend with their children.

The results also showed that over 80 per cent of participants felt that the initiative demonstrated that the DCYA cares for their wellbeing and that of their family. From a HR perspective, this could offer advantages in terms of increased morale, motivation and loyalty to the Department. Of concern in introducing a new initiative is whether it will disrupt business practice, however, the data showed that for the most part, staff had to make either no adjustments or only a slight adjustment. While the data indicate that the initiative did not disrupt normal business, the initiative may not have been fully embedded by the end of the month. For example, it was found that 32 per cent of respondents had neither participated nor did they know anyone who had participated in the initiative. In some of the interviews with senior management that meetings were occurring between 12:00 and 13:00, regardless of the initiative. These findings suggest that additional Department-wide communications about the initiative could help further embed it within everyday practice. While an initial email was issued outlining how the initiative would operate, follow-up correspondence may have concretised the parameters more fully.

There was a high level of agreement that the initiative had had a positive impact upon (short term) staff wellbeing, as well as on their perceptions of their child/children’s wellbeing. A strong majority (over two thirds) of parents also agreed that the initiative had helped them to balance work and care responsibilities. This was particularly true among staff at Executive Officer (EO), and Higher Executive Officer (HEO) grades, and less true among Senior Grades. The qualitative data showed that staff with more complex caring responsibilities, such as caring for very young children, were less likely to participate in the initiative because they felt an hour was not sufficient for their children’s needs. In some instances, separate local arrangements were in place to support those staff to balance home working and care.
This speaks to the difficulty of designing a Department-wide initiative that will suit all schedules. In the case of senior managers, the data shows that some were not able to participate in the initiative, or typically to a lesser extent, due to work pressures. This may be due to expectations that Senior Managers will work more flexible hours. A separate reason given by respondents for not participating in the initiative was in relation to timing, with the surveys finding a divergence of opinion over whether the hour should be fixed or staff should be able to choose the timing. Among those who participated in the initiative, over 80 per cent agreed with the approach and time chosen, but a significant minority of participants would have preferred to have more flexibility, while others did not participate in the initiative because the timing did not suit their work or caring schedule.

In conclusion, this evaluation shows that the Golden Hour initiative achieved its objectives of helping parents to balance home working and care helped support the wellbeing of staff and their children. DCYA staff wanted the initiative to continue beyond the pilot phase, for as long as staff are home working, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. A key challenge for further rollout of the initiative is to ensure that as many staff members who are eligible for the initiative are able to participate and enjoy the benefits that it offers.
Appendix

Appendix 1: Communication from HR outlining the parameters of the Golden Hour Initiative

HR Staff Communication

Let’s Play DCYA!

To all our colleagues who are parents or acting in a parental/guardian role at this time.

We are all working in different ways at the moment. Staff are making tremendous efforts and showing enormous commitment to the Department while adapting to a home working environment. Due to closures of early learning and care settings and schools, there are additional challenges faced by many staff who are balancing work commitments while caring for their children.

We are aware of the necessity for some parents to work at different times of the day in order to manage this new situation and this is difficult. HR would encourage staff to liaise with their line manager in relation to any necessary flexibility at this time.

HR would like to continue to support staff in whatever way we can in managing this new way of being.

As this is the month of May, HR is piloting an initiative under the Let’s Play Ireland initiative. HR is supporting what we are calling The Golden Hour. This is protected time for you during the working day to spend at play with your children. You are encouraged to avail of this.

HR is suggesting to managers that The Golden Hour should commence at 12 midday and are asking managers to schedule meetings outside of this hour to support our staff to engage with this initiative, and this includes managers.

Our experts in the Department tell us that play is central to children’s physical, mental, social and emotional health and wellbeing. Children learn through play while developing resilience, flexibility and understanding of their world. Play in families enriches childhood and, right now, in the midst of these uncertain and troubling times, play is more important than ever.

It is challenging to set aside family time in a working day in a home working environment. Therefore we need to give ourselves permission to stop and spend some dedicated time during the day with our children.

This initiative is offered to you in a supportive way to offer you a window in your working day where you can give your children some undivided attention. It might give you a chance to set up some activities for them or you might just want to hang out.

3 simple ideas of how you might use the time;

Sit together for brunch and have a laugh.
Stick some music on and have a dance around the kitchen.

Go for your morning walk together.

The DCYA now have 3 web resources to support parents and children. You can access them at


https://first5.gov.ie/parents

REU has kindly agreed to evaluate this initiative at the end of May so you can expect to hear from them and we welcome your feedback.
Balancing Work and Care During the Covid-19 Pandemic | A review of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs 'Golden Hour' Initiative