



The Social Security (Lone Parents and Miscellaneous) Regulations 2008:
A Briefing from One Parent Families|Gingerbread, Child Poverty Action Group and
Family Action, The regulations are being debated at 8.55am on 30th October 2008

What do these regulations do?

The Social Security (Lone Parents and Miscellaneous) Regulations 2008 ('the regulations') start the process of denying Income Support to Lone Parents with progressively younger children, announced in the Government's Green Paper last year, *In work better off*.

Lone parents will instead have to claim Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) if they have a health problem or disability, or, in the majority of cases, will be asked to claim Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA).

Parents claiming JSA must attend the Jobcentre fortnightly, actively seek work, and can lose up to 40 per cent of their benefit if they fail to do so, or if they fail to take up a job which they have been offered.

The date at which the regulations come into force, the age of child which they apply to, and the number of parents expected to be affected is set out below.

Date (new claims will no longer be entitled at this date, existing claims will be transferred throughout the year).	Age of youngest child at which parents lose entitlement to Income Support	Number of parents on benefit expected to be affected
24.11.08	12	100,000 +
26.10.09	10	68,000
25.10.10	7	121,000

What are the main problems with these regulations?

The independent Social Security Advisory Committee stated that: "Overall we have considerable reservations about the proposals, both in terms of their potentially negative impacts, and their potential to improve the situation of lone parents and their families, and to reduce child poverty."

"For parents of younger children, this regime is untried and its chances of success rest heavily on support services that have yet to be delivered in the quantity and variety that will be needed.....we have noted the underlying tensions between government policies to promote greater personal responsibility for their children, and greater engagement in securing their health and well being, and policies that may

have the effect of forcing lone parents to give priority to paid employment and the demands of employers.”

They recommended that Government ‘do not proceed’ with these recommendations.ⁱ

Lone parents will be entering a tough labour market, and Jobcentre Plus is under considerable pressure

Unemployment is rising rapidly: October’s unemployment figures show that unemployment increased by 164,000 over the quarter to reach 1.79 million. Not only will lone parents be therefore entering a tough labour market, but Jobcentre Plus will be placed under considerable additional pressure. Lone parents will be competing for jobs with applicants who may be more desirable to employers in terms of experience, skills and availability, and there are fears that Jobcentre Plus will prioritise those closest to the labour market at a time of rising unemployment.

Jobcentre Plus is already dealing with an increased workload, including the introduction of the new Employment and Support Allowance. Last year Jobcentre Plus managed to meet only three out of its six key performance targets. There are therefore serious doubts about whether it will be able to deliver the personalised support that has been promised as part of these reforms.

Suggestions have been made that legislation to allow flexible working for parents of older children should be delayed in the light of the current stress on business. The market at a time of rising costs and increasingly erratic childcare provision should also be recognised. 70 per cent of parents surveyed by One Parent Families|Gingerbread said that a lack of work at flexible hours was their greatest barrier to employment.

The regulations do not take account of the additional needs of children on lower rate care of disability living allowance (who often have behavioural problems). Lone parents of these children will still be required to sign on and look for work. We believe this is not in the best interests of these children as an award of DLA indicates a higher need for care is required.

The regulations place too much faith in the discretion of Jobcentre Plus advisers

The regulations allow lone parents who cannot find ‘suitable, affordable or appropriate’ childcare to turn down a job on these grounds. A recent report for *4 children* found that there was only one place for every 200 children aged 11 – 14.ⁱⁱ Though government argues parents will decide on the appropriateness of childcare (including for parents with disabled children, or those experiencing problems at school), the onus remains on the parent to persuade Jobcentre Plus if the parent believes a childcare option is not appropriate – leaving the ultimate decision at the discretion of Jobcentre Plus advisers. Moreover the proposals increase the complexity of the regulations and place much of the onus on lone parents to justify limiting their availability or not taking up a job, because of their child’s or family circumstances.

The regulations limit the ability of lone parents to participate in education and training

Forty per cent of lone parents on benefits lack any formal qualifications. But the transfer from Income Support to Jobseeker’s Allowance means that many will lose the opportunity to participate in full time education and training. Government aims to compel lone parents with children aged seven and under to undertake a skills health check. But this will be of little use to parents who separate when their children

are aged seven or over, and find themselves out of work, unskilled, and with no opportunities to retrain. We are already hearing from lone parents worried about this situation.

The regulations make no provision for lone parents who have experienced domestic violence

Analysis of the British Crime Survey shows that around 6 per cent of women have experienced domestic violence in the past twelve months. We also know that lone parents are more likely to have experienced domestic violence. Research by Family Action and One Parent Families|Gingerbread earlier this year found that while lone parents who had experienced violence wanted, in the long term, to return to paid work, in the short term, the physical, emotional and practical consequences of violence made this difficult. Unlike the Australian and American systems, these regulations propose no exemptions from the requirement to seek work for women who have experienced violence.

What alternative approaches would work better?

We are keen to see an increase in the number of lone parents who enter sustainable employment that lifts them and their families out of poverty. A voluntary approach has seen a dramatic rise in the number of lone parents in work over the past ten years of 11 percentage points, and 57 per cent of lone parents are now in work. Now is not the time to introduce legislation that will punish those parents who fail to make their way in a tough jobs market. Rather than proceeding with these regulations we recommend that the Government:

- Pilots this approach with parents of children aged 14 and over, and reviews the impact before introducing JSA for parents of younger children.
- Introduces exemptions from the requirement to seek work for parents who wish to take full time education and training for periods of up to one year.
- Improves access to decent, affordable childcare.
- Introduces an exemption from the requirement to seek work for an initial period of one year for parents who have experienced domestic violence.
- Does not delay introduction of proposals to introduce the right to request flexible working for parents of older children.

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ⁱ *The Social Security (Lone Parents and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2008, Report by the Social Security Advisory Committee (October 2008) Cm 7480.*

ⁱⁱ Buck K (2007) *Still Home Alone? Developing 'next generation' care for older children* 4Children.