

***If you're going back to work and you've got children, you can get financial and practical help with childcare. From tax credits to flexible working arrangements, there's lots of support available to make your life easier.***

All three and four year olds are entitled to twelve-and-a-half hours of free early years education a week, for 38 weeks a year, with a 'registered provider' such as a nursery or playgroup, regardless of income or circumstances.

Some large employers provide registered early years education at the workplace or a childcare benefit scheme based on "salary sacrifice". The schemes take advantage of a Government initiative which allows employers to assist their employees with their childcare costs. Some employers may offer a childcare allowance or vouchers as part of the salary sacrifice' scheme. It may be worth asking your line manager, personnel or human resources department whether your employer runs a scheme like this.

**Will I be better off accepting childcare vouchers in return for a salary sacrifice or by claiming tax credits help towards my childcare costs?**

This will depend upon your individual circumstances. Generally speaking, your family will be better off accepting childcare vouchers in return for a salary sacrifice if you can answer "yes" to one of the following:

- Your eligible childcare costs are more than £175 per week if you have one child or £300 per week if you have two or more children. In this case you will always be better off accepting childcare vouchers to cover your childcare costs above these limits.
- You are receiving tax credits at the family element (£545 per year, or £1090 per year if you have a baby aged under one) or less and you are claiming for your childcare costs.

Your family will generally be worse off or, at best, no better off accepting childcare vouchers in return for a salary sacrifice if you can answer "yes" to both of the following:

- You are receiving tax credits of more than £545 per year (or £1090 per year if you have a baby aged under one) and you are claiming for your childcare costs.
- Your eligible childcare costs are no more than £175 per week if you have one child or £300 per week if you have two or more children.

**These are only general pointers and there can be exceptions to these rules. You should always base any decision you make on your particular circumstances**

**If your employer offers you help to meet your childcare costs (e.g. through childcare vouchers), your entitlement to tax credits is likely to be affected.** This is because you can only claim help through the childcare element of Working Tax Credit on childcare costs that you meet yourself. If your employer meets any of your childcare costs, even if your pay has reduced in return (a salary sacrifice) these costs do not count.

### **Child Tax Credit**

Child Tax Credit is a means-tested allowance for parents and carers of children or young people who are still in full-time education. Nine out of ten families with children qualify for Child Tax Credit.

### **Working Tax Credit**

If you're working more than 16 hours a week and you're on a low income, you may be able to get Working Tax Credit too.

The Working Tax Credit includes a specific element to support the cost of registered or approved childcare for working parents. The childcare element can help with up to 80 per cent of your eligible childcare costs.

There are limits on the weekly costs you can claim. If you pay childcare for:

- one child, the maximum you can claim is £175 a week
- two or more children, the maximum is £300 a week

### **Time off ('parental leave')**

If you're a working parent, you can take up to 13 weeks parental leave for each child until their fifth birthday (you get more than this if you have a disabled child). Your employer doesn't have to pay you when you take this leave, but they might as part of your employment package.

### **Flexible working**

Flexible working lets you ask your employer for a new working pattern to help you care for your child. You have a right to request a flexible working pattern if you've got a child aged under six or a disabled child under 18. Your employer has to consider your request seriously.

To have the right to ask for flexible working, you must:

- have worked for your employer for at least 26 weeks
- be the child's mother, father, adopter, legal guardian or foster parent - or be the partner of one of these
- have responsibility for the child's upbringing
- be making the application so that you'll be able to care for the child

You'll need to fill in an application form when you apply for flexible working. You can only make one application a year.