

# Fathers, Work and Care

## Opt Out or Lock Out?



### Examining Fathers' Participation in Primary Care of Preschool Children

The Fathers', Work and Care study explores the work and family experiences of contemporary fathers in the Australian workplace. The study draws on survey data from 951 fathers and semi-structured interviews with 14 couples parenting at least one preschool child in the home. The sample comprised of working fathers from public sector employers along with a small sample from a large, professional services firm. All fathers in the study were the primary earners in their household at the time of survey.

#### Rationale

There is a paucity of research on fathers in the work and family context. Traditionally, research efforts have been centred on mothers in an attempt to understand the relationship between caregiving and women's ongoing economic and occupational disadvantage over the life course. However, we know comparatively little about men within this domain and in particular why fathers seldom participate in primary caregiving even when leave for such care is available. There is some evidence to suggest that gender ideals and more structural barriers might play a role in locking men out of primary caregiving. This emerges most strongly over the preschool years. The precise mechanisms of these influences remain contested however and they have been largely unexplored within the Australian policy context. This study responds to this gap. It explores the following aspects of work and care from fathers' perspectives.

- ▶ What are fathers' attitudes and beliefs regarding work and care?
- ▶ What are their ideal policy conditions and provisions for taking up a primary caregiver role?
- ▶ What are fathers' current practices regarding leave and work adjustments for care?
- ▶ How do fathers' account for differences between their ideal and actual care arrangements?

#### Findings

The fathers in this study paint a picture of an employment and social context that assumes and privileges care responsibility to the mother and full time work and earning to the father. Fathers report they are keen to contribute as primary caregiver and believe in having equal access to paid leave to do so. However, they are limited in their care contributions as a result of their primary earner status in the family. This is often left unaddressed in parental leave policy. In this study, fathers said they would be unlikely to take up a primary caregiver leave if doing so resulted in a financial loss to the family. Not surprisingly, economic feasibility was the main driver of primary care arrangements for fathers over the preschool years and very few fathers in this sample took up a primary caregiver role during this time. The interviews further suggest that only cost neutral care decisions are considered by the couple with workplace factors heavily contributing to the primary care options available. Within this realm, the workplace, perhaps unwittingly, can play a decisive role in the distribution of work and care between primary earner fathers and their partners. A lack of paid primary care leave for fathers more often than not means the most 'cost neutral' arrangement is mother centered care.

#### Implications

Findings from this study highlight the need for public and employer policies to move beyond mere provision of 'gender neutral' leave to support gender equality in work and care. There is strong evidence that out-dated ideal worker and carer norms persist in contemporary workplaces. These are steeped in gender stereotypes that undermine a more substantial contribution of care from fathers, and operate in ways often left unexamined— at times by the couple, but almost certainly amongst managers and the workplace at large. The results suggest when employers and Government provide gendered access to work and family policy and practices, gender specialisation at home and work is reinforced. Working fathers are becoming increasingly frustrated with such dichotomy. For authentic gender equality to be achieved, the taken for granted assumptions regarding caregiving must be exposed in concert with policy change that actively supports and encourages fathers to pursue their aspirations for combining caregiving alongside their careers.



## Summary of Results

### Attitudes and Beliefs

- Eighty-five percent (85%) of fathers agreed they would step away from work to look after their baby for 3 months or more if there were no financial barriers.
- Eighty-seven percent (87%) agreed that each partner should have their own entitlement to Paid Parental Leave for primary care.
- Almost 90% of fathers reported they felt pressure to earn the money for the family, yet only 33% felt it was 'natural' that they be the primary breadwinner when children came along.
- Only 16% of the sample felt that fathers were as accepted as carers in the workplace as mothers.
- The majority of fathers (63%) reported they would be more likely to step away from the workplace to care for their child when younger than twelve months of age if formal childcare was the only other care option.

### Ideal Policy Conditions

- Just over 86% of fathers said they would be more likely to take Paid Parental Leave when paid at replacement rates of pay compared to only 10% when paid at the Federal Minimum Wage.
- Fifty-five percent (55%) of fathers selected replacement rates of pay as the most necessary condition to taking up a leave to be the primary caregiver.
- Forty-four percent (44%) said a leave allocation of their own was imperative.

### Fathers' Leave Taking and Contribution to Care

- Less than 21% of fathers reported they had been a primary caregiver for their children in their working life.
- No more than 7% of the sample reported taking leave to be the primary caregiver of their youngest preschool child.
- Most fathers took concurrent leave (Paid Paternity Leave) with their partner around the birth of their youngest preschool child. On average fathers reported taking 4.1 weeks of various leaves with their partner after birth.

### Primary Care Arrangements

- From birth to 6 months of age almost 93% of fathers reported the mother as the primary caregiver. This reduced to 66% for children after 12 months of age.
- The use of formal child care did increase as children got older. The most significant change occurred when children were over 12 months of age.
- Instances where primary care was provided by the father were minimal. The mean hours of primary care from fathers did not change over the preschool years.
- Once a primary care plan was in place it tended to stay the same for the entire preschool period.

### Influences on Primary Care Arrangement

- *Financial Viability* was the most decisive influence for fathers on the primary caregiver arrangements across all three age spans measured by the survey (Birth-6 months, 6-12 months, and over 12 months).
- *Partner's Preferences* were the second most influential factor for fathers followed by *Health of the Baby*.
- Fathers reported *Partner's Preferences* as the main driver for their partner in making primary care decisions.
- *Fathers' Preferences* for care of the child did not feature in reporting of influences on primary care arrangements.

### Insights from the Interviews.

The interview data suggests that workplace provisions are likely to establish the range of options for care that are available to a couple and most especially the inclusion of the father as a primary caregiver. The mother appears to be the central influence on final arrangements where her attachment to career and the workplace, underscored by paradigms of ideal caregiving shapes her selection of final primary caregiver arrangements. Whilst these were positioned as 'preferences' in the survey, in reality, these were usually constrained. Mothers were only able to select from financially viable options. This made primary care from the father highly governed by leave provisions.

The interviews further suggest that workplace factors moderate the degree of care fathers provide to the family. This influence is beyond that of the primary care policies such as Paid Parental Leave. The implicit and explicit sanctions on paternal care from managers and other key influencers in the work environment appear to temper the scope and form of paternal care contributions.

## Next Steps

This study affirms that fathers no longer consider their parental role synonymous with earning. Dismantling ideal worker and carer norms is essential to building a truly gender equal enterprise.

Future research will do well to include:

- Replication of the present study to determine if the findings are applicable across other work contexts and policy regimes.
- The development of a predictive model of paternal care to inform design of best practice policy within Australia, where supporting a more equal distribution of work and care is a central policy goal.



This research is part of a doctoral study conducted by Samone McCurdy – Monash University. No part of this study including its findings can be redistributed, reproduced or communicated without the express permission of the researcher.

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