

The Gender  
Equity  
Initiative



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE

# Equal Sharing of Care

Evidence Review



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES .....	3
LIST OF FIGURES .....	3
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY .....	4
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	4
<b>1. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1.1. Our Approach .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1.2. Recommendations .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>2. PARENTAL AND SICK LEAVE POLICIES .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2.1. Government parental leave policy .....</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1.1. Equality in access .....	13
2.1.2. How does Australia compare to the world? .....	13
2.1.3. Country comparison .....	18
<b>2.2. Workplace parental leave policy .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>2.3. Benefits of fathers accessing parental leave .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>2.4. Utilising sick leave to support care .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>2.5. Summary and key research takeaways .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>3. EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACES .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>3.1. The rise of the dual-earner couple .....</b>	<b>28</b>
3.1.1. Australia: High rates of mothers working part-time .....	28
3.1.2. Stay-at-home parents: mothers vs fathers.....	29
<b>3.2. Parents' experiences at work .....</b>	<b>30</b>
3.2.1. Career penalties for caregiving.....	30
<b>3.3. Family-responsive workplaces .....</b>	<b>31</b>
3.3.1. Childcare provisions.....	31
<b>3.4. Flexible work access.....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>3.5. Lack of effective role modelling.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>3.6. Summary and key research takeaways .....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>4. HEALTHCARE SYSTEMS AND SERVICES .....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>4.1. Pregnancy and prenatal care .....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>4.2. Mental health .....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>4.3. Research and program recruitment .....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>4.4. Current support service and program offerings .....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>4.5. Summary and key research takeaways .....</b>	<b>39</b>

<b>5. GENDER NORMS.....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>5.1. Gender norms and masculinity.....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>5.2. Norms and systems world-wide .....</b>	<b>43</b>
5.2.1. Australian context.....	43
<b>5.3. The movement towards new fatherhood norms.....</b>	<b>44</b>
5.3.1. Generational shifts in fatherhood norms.....	45
5.3.2. Reinforcing gender norms through childhood socialisation .....	45
<b>5.4. Maternal gatekeeping .....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>5.5. Cultural and community context .....</b>	<b>47</b>
5.5.1. Migrant and refugee fathers.....	47
5.5.2. Queer fathers.....	47
5.5.3. First Nations fathers.....	48
<b>5.6. Summary and key research takeaways.....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>6. CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>7. RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>7.1. Government .....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>7.2. Workplaces .....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>7.3. Campaigns and programs .....</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>7.4. Research .....</b>	<b>55</b>
REFERENCES.....	56

## LIST OF TABLES

<b>Table 1:</b> Key changes to the Paid Parental Leave Scheme .....	11
<b>Table 2:</b> Paid Parental Leave in Norway.....	18
<b>Table 3:</b> Companies offering generous parental leave schemes and key characteristics .....	21
<b>Table 4:</b> 7 Ways employers can support men to be more engaged fathers.....	32
<b>Table 5:</b> Australian support services and programs for fathers and partners.....	37

## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>Figure 1:</b> Public expenditure on maternity and parental leaves.....	14
<b>Figure 2:</b> Users of paid paternity leave.....	14
<b>Figure 3:</b> Paid leave reserved for fathers.....	16
<b>Figure 4:</b> Reserved and shareable paid family leave entitlements.....	17
<b>Figure 5:</b> Percentage of women and men in full-time and part-time employment, selected years, 1982-2022.....	28

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1.



# Introduction

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, societal norms traditionally assign distinct parenting roles to mothers and fathers, shaping their approaches and contributions to childcare. However, new fatherhood is challenging these historical perceptions of parenting by redefining and highlighting men's capacity to provide nurturing and equally enriching care to young children as women<sup>1,2</sup>. As this review will show, recent research indicates that the positive impact of engaged fathering extends beyond simply benefiting children and fathers themselves; it also positively affects their partners, communities, and workplaces<sup>3-5</sup>. To achieve an equal sharing of care, men must step into these roles and become actively engaged fathers who are committed to challenging traditional gender norms and proactively participating in all aspects of caregiving.

In the Australian context, there is a discernible shift towards greater paternal involvement in childcare compared to previous generations. National reports have revealed that Australian men have increased their time spent in a range of care activities<sup>6,7</sup>. Despite these positive trends, there remains a substantial gap in addressing the barriers and identifying the opportunities to promote the greater role of all fathers in achieving an equal sharing of care. Holistic initiatives spanning governmental policies, workplace practices, public campaigns, targeted programs, and comprehensive research hold the potential to promote a culture that supports boys and men to be engaged and nurturing fathers of the future.

The transition from pregnancy into the first year of a child's life is a critical stage to encourage and increase fathers' engagement with childcare. Focusing on this period is important for disrupting gender inequality amongst parents, as research in Australia indicates that it is during this time that gender roles traditionalise<sup>8</sup>, women reduce their employment resulting in long-term implications for their careers<sup>9</sup>, and unequal divisions of paid and domestic labour (e.g., childcare and housework) are cemented<sup>10</sup>. To address this, promoting fathers' involvement from pregnancy to the child's first year of life through policies, programs, research, and initiatives is essential to achieving an equal sharing of care.

Global research shows that men's active involvement in childcare is critical to the health and well-being of fathers, families, and communities alike. Children with engaged fathers have better cognitive, emotional and physical outcomes<sup>11 3 12</sup>, whilst their partners report greater relationship satisfaction<sup>13-15</sup>. Workplaces also benefit from the skills men develop through caregiving – building stronger social and emotional skills, and transformative<sup>16</sup> and task orientated leadership behaviour, such as problem-solving and planning<sup>17</sup>. However, to achieve this, fathers must be encouraged to take a portion of paid parental leave through use-it-or-lose-it schemes in the first year of their child's life to equalise the gender division of housework and childcare in the short- and long-term<sup>3,11</sup>. Finally, fathers themselves also experience a range of personal, emotional, and professional benefits when they spend more time providing and engaging with childcare. This is particularly evident when fathers take on the role of primary caregivers<sup>12 18 19</sup>.

To eliminate obstacles and promote proactive measures that increasingly facilitate fathers' involvement in caregiving, this review provides evidence-based recommendations. These range from individual solutions (e.g., role modelling), to organisational strategies (e.g.,

encouraging greater uptake of leave and flexible working arrangements), and government reforms (e.g., developing childcare policies that support families). While this evidence review focuses on the role of fathers in children's first year of life, it is important to note that the topics identified here provide broad insights for Australian families, workplaces, and governments. Facilitating fathers' care in children's first years builds their confidence, skills, and capabilities in care. And, these resources are key to creating healthier, more resilient and inclusive futures for all.

## 1.1. Our Approach

This report is structured to provide the depth of evidence on the equal sharing of care across a range of topics. We start at the macro-level, providing insights into the role of policy levers to create systematic change. We then discuss the experiences at the meso-levels, assessing how employment and workplaces and healthcare systems and services structure fathers' experiences in care. We next tackle the individual experiences, focusing on the role of gender norms impacting fathers' unique caregiving roles. We conclude with evidence-based recommendations. While we move from the macro to the micro across the report, we note that the experiences are interconnected – individuals' gender norms are structured by policy and workplace environments and vice versa. Thus, these findings should be thought of as interlocking parts within a broad social ecosystem. The benefit of this interconnectedness is that fostering change in one part of the ecosystem can impact the whole. Our recommendations are provided within this frame.

To document the current state of knowledge on equal sharing of care in Australia, we conducted a thorough examination of academic articles, government publications, reports, and policy documents, ensuring a broad and comprehensive perspective.

To identify the key barriers and enablers for men engaging in care and unpaid labour, we implemented a systematic search strategy that prioritised sources offering rigorous insights into diverse experiences across the country. We undertook a detailed review of the global and national literature to identify effective initiatives, policies, interventions, strategies, and tools to inform concrete and actionable recommendations. Our approach also involved a critical analysis of gaps in the existing literature, to highlight where further research is needed to drive impactful change.

We acknowledge the limitations of this report. First, our analysis is primarily focused on the experiences of heteronormative different gender couples with children. This is a data limitation issue. In Australia, there is limited data and evidence collected on varying family structures, and this report heavily relies on publicly available statistics and academic research. Heteronormative different gender couples are also currently the most common family structure for raising young children in Australia, and thus forms the bulk of the available data and evidence. Over time, these patterns might change and thus it is critical that data collection

works in lockstep to document these shifts. Second, it's important to acknowledge that language is constantly evolving. We recognise that one label or description may not be able to capture the diversity within the LGBTQIA+ community. Our intention is to be as succinct as we can, but inclusive of all. Where research is provided for more diverse family forms, we provide an overview of its contents. Third, it is critical to note that scholarship requires a more comprehensive analysis of intersectional family identities; this is a major gap in the literature. Despite these limitations, our recommendations are designed to be inclusive of diverse family forms and thus have clear benefits that could impact other family units.

## 1.2. Recommendations

- **Government** - Establish national care policies with priorities and targets aimed at reducing and redistributing care work equally between men and women, including greater recognition for the importance of fathers' involvement in caregiving.
- **Workplaces** - Eliminate barriers to fathers reducing hours and accessing workplace adjustments in paid employment following the birth of a child.
- **Campaigns and programs** - Advocate across government, workplaces, and community the importance of equal sharing care for children, including depictions of new fatherhood and caring masculinities in practice.
- **Research** - Investigate fathers' contributions to and patterns of caregiving, including their utilisation of parental leave and access to healthcare services, to identify obstacles and advocate for greater equity in care.



2.



# Parental and Sick Leave Policies

## 2. PARENTAL AND SICK LEAVE POLICIES

### 2.1. Government parental leave policy

Paid parental leave policies are a key mechanism for promoting equal sharing of care. Parental leave schemes can be seen through the typology of:

- 'Equality impeding', these are policies limited to mothers or are unpaid so therefore often taken only by mothers.
- 'Equality enabling', these are policies that remove gendered distinctions, but do not have mechanisms to encourage shared use of entitlements.
- 'Equality promoting', these are policies that encourage families to share parental leave in an egalitarian way<sup>20</sup>.

Australia's current system, both government and the leading employer policies, can be seen as 'equality enabling', a shift from previous policies that were 'equality impeding'.

Paid parental leave is important because it is implemented at such a critical point in the life-course – childbirth, and thus has the ability to influence parental behaviour<sup>21</sup>, and can drive attitudinal shifts<sup>22</sup>. In a recent survey of 12,000 people across 15 countries<sup>i</sup> it was found that 87 percent of mothers and 85 percent of fathers think that taking paid care leave will benefit both their partner and children<sup>4</sup>.

Australia first introduced its Federal Government funded Paid Parental Leave (PPL) scheme in 2011. The Paid Parental Leave scheme is governed by the Paid Parental Leave Act 2010, whereas rights to unpaid leave are governed by the Fair Work Act 2009<sup>23</sup>. Australian law states that all employees regardless of gender are entitled to 52 weeks unpaid leave from their employer when they or their partner gives birth to or adopts a child, given they have completed at least 12 months of continuous service with the employer<sup>ii</sup> <sup>24</sup>. Parenting payment income support is provided to residents on a declining scale based on income<sup>25</sup>.

The Paid Parental Leave Act was amended in 2022 with the aim of making the payment "more accessible, more flexible and gender-neutral"<sup>26</sup>.

The Paid Parental Leave scheme consisted of two payments paid at the rate of the national minimum wage, which is roughly 43 percent of the average full-time wage. These included the PLP (Parental Leave Pay) which allowed up to 18 weeks of pay and was eligible to the primary carer, and the Dad and Partner Pay (DaPP) which allowed up to two weeks of pay and was eligible to the secondary carer<sup>iii</sup> <sup>27</sup>. Although the scheme was called Parental Leave Pay it was highly gendered, evidenced by the fact that in 2017-2018 less than 0.5 percent of parents

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<sup>i</sup> Male (n=7,110); female, (n=4,702), and other gender identities (n=187); Argentina, Australia, Canada, Chile, China, Croatia, India, Ireland, Lebanon, Mexico, Portugal, Rwanda, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Türkiye, and USA.

<sup>ii</sup> This includes casual employees that have worked on a regular basis for the previous 12 months and that are expected to continue this work. The leave can be taken as a single continuous period or flexibly up to 100 days within 24 months.

<sup>iii</sup> DaPP was introduced in 2013.

using the Parental Leave Payment were men<sup>3</sup>. Further, in 2021-2022, 178,778 people claimed the Parental Leave Payment, while only half that number claimed the Dad and Partner Pay (97,863)<sup>28</sup>. According to the Grattan institute this accounts for roughly a quarter of all new fathers<sup>3</sup>.

Key changes to the scheme were put into effect as of July 1<sup>st</sup> 2023<sup>29</sup>. More changes are under review, including a phased increase to 26 weeks by 2026<sup>26</sup>.

**Table 1:** Key changes to the Paid Parental Leave Scheme

Area Of Change	Before July 1 <sup>st</sup> 2023	After July 1 <sup>st</sup> 2023	Outcomes
<b>Gender Neutral</b>	Distinguished between primary, secondary, and tertiary claimants. PLP and DaPP 18 weeks and 2 weeks, respectively.	PLP and DaPP have been combined to extend the Parental Leave Pay (Enhanced PLP) to 20 weeks (100 payable days) and the DaPP has been abolished. <sup>iv</sup>	Reduced administrative burden on fathers, simplified claiming process. Removes the need to be aware of the separate DaPP, a barrier to taking leave, especially for low-income parents <sup>30</sup> . Expected to reach 2,600 new fathers and partners <sup>26</sup> .
<b>Non-Transferable (Use-It-Or-Lose-It)</b>	PLP and DaPP 18 weeks and 2 weeks, respectively.	Two weeks PLP 'use-it-or-loose-it' basis for each claimant, each parent must take at least two weeks for the full 20 weeks to be received. The amount of leave reserved for each parent will increase with each incremental increase of the total PLP <sup>26</sup> .	Estimated in approx. 85 percent of families, fathers and partners will claim PLP to access at least two weeks of payment <sup>26</sup> .
<b>Income Test</b>	Individual income test where the birth mother must not earn more than \$150,000, even if her partner earned less and they intended to transfer a portion of the payment <sup>31</sup> .	Combined family income test of \$350,000.	Removes preference towards men breadwinner households.
<b>Residency Test</b>	Both parents had to wait two years to be able to access the payment, except for some exemptions <sup>32</sup> .	Migrant fathers still have to wait two years to access the payment, but is available to fathers whose partner does not meet the residency test <sup>26</sup> .	Increase the number of migrant fathers who are eligible, or fathers with partners who are newly arrived migrants.

<sup>iv</sup> The rate of pay is still set at the national minimum wage

<b>Work Test<sup>v</sup></b>	Fathers and partners could access the DaPP, even if their partner did not meet the work test <sup>33</sup> .	Both parents need to meet the work test to access the PLP <sup>34</sup> .	Approximately 23,500 DaPP recipients would not be able to access the PLP, these would mostly be fathers whose partners do not meet the primary claimants work test <sup>26</sup> ; note: this is the only change that reduces the number of eligible fathers and partners in the new scheme.
<b>Flexibility</b>	<p>PPL consisted of a continuous block of up to 12 weeks and 30 flexible paid parental leave days. Claimants could not be working during the PPL period<sup>29</sup>. To utilise flexible leave days both parents had to not be working<sup>35</sup>.</p> <p>Father or partner had to be on unpaid leave to access payment<sup>32</sup>.</p>	<p>Each claimant can take up to 10 days at the same time, the whole leave can be taken flexibly. Can be taken in multiple blocks (as small as a day at a time), to be used within two years of the birth or adoption. Can have returned to work<sup>29</sup>.</p> <p>Can now access PLP while on paid leave from their employer<sup>32</sup>.</p>	<p>Fathers now have the option to take solo leave when partners return to work.</p> <p>Removes the deterrent to fathers accessing the leave due the rate of replacement, the act of negotiating unpaid leave when it could be easier to access annual leave instead<sup>3</sup>.</p>

Australia has a relatively short allocation of leave for fathers and partners (14 days)<sup>vi</sup> at a low replacement rate (minimum wage approx. 43 percent of the average wage), which up until July 1<sup>st</sup> 2023 could only be taken while on unpaid leave from employment<sup>36</sup>. This structure is a major deterrent for Australian fathers to take up the leave.

Australian fathers, for whom breadwinning is normatively and financially important to the family, are taking up parental leave schemes at very low rates, with 85 percent of fathers taking fewer than four weeks of leave<sup>36</sup>. This leads mothers to take the bulk of the paid parental leave, meaning current policies are designed to financially incentivise households to reinforce a traditional division of work and care. As a result, mothers report lower lifetime earnings than non-mothers<sup>37</sup>. By contrast, fathers earn more than non-fathers over their lifetime but are penalised for taking time off for childcare with lower hourly wages or demotions<sup>38</sup>. This

<sup>v</sup> Having worked for 10 of the 13 months before the birth or adoption of your child and this needs to be roughly at least 1 day week and you cannot have more than a 12 week gap between each work day in that 10 month period.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>vi</sup> This is expected to increase to at least 4 weeks in 2026.

penalisation combined with limited wage replacement disincentivises fathers from taking leave.

### **2.1.1. Equality in access**

Individuals face inequalities in access to leave schemes due to their attachment to the labour market, and/or residency or immigration status<sup>39</sup>.

Australia's parental leave system is a combination of a government scheme, company policies and bargained outcomes at the workplace or enterprise level<sup>23</sup>. In this regard, Australia provides relatively wide coverage for paid parental leave that includes the self-employed, seasonal and casual workers, contractors and family business workers, a characteristic that is not as common in other countries. However, the prospect of increasingly fragmented and insecure work, dependent self-employment and the rise of platform work that is often associated with interrupted employment<sup>vii</sup> means there is a risk that Australia's relatively broad reaching scheme could decline in coverage and deepen access division<sup>40</sup>. This is especially true for young people who are increasingly working in insecure and fragmented work, especially within the platform economy<sup>41</sup>. The scheme could also be missing students, those working on short-term grants or fellowships, interns, creative workers operating under grants and certain migrants who work outside of official systems<sup>42</sup>. Further, newly arrived migrants must wait two years to be able to access the PLP payment, except for some exemptions, which limits their coverage<sup>32</sup>.

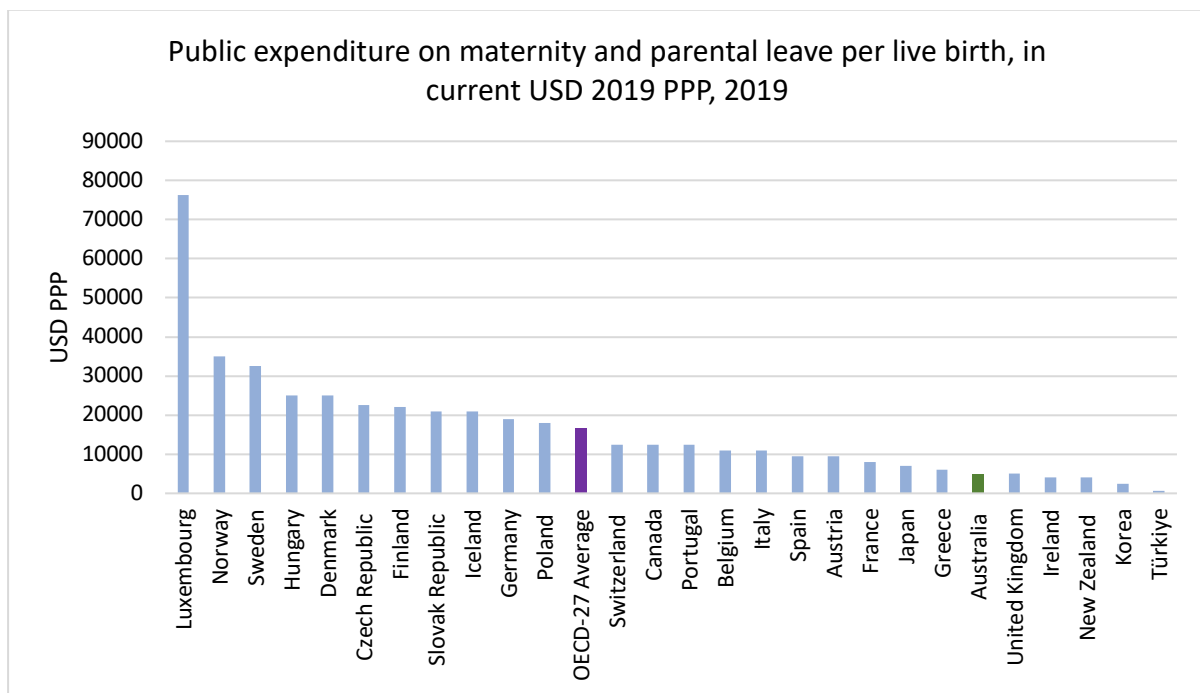
### **2.1.2. How does Australia compare to the world?**

Before the introduction of the national paid parental leave scheme, Australia, along with the United States were the only two countries in the OECD that did not provide a national scheme<sup>23</sup>. Worldwide, nearly every country offers paid leave for mothers around the birth of a child, while just over half provide paternity leave<sup>43</sup>. Australia stills lags behind the OECD average in terms of length of leave and amount of pay replacement, and subsequently the uptake of leave for both mothers and fathers. Australia also invests very little in comparison to other countries, with the most recent figures presented in Figure 1 below<sup>44</sup>. And, father's uptake is significantly lower than comparable OECD nations as depicted in Figure 2<sup>45</sup> below.

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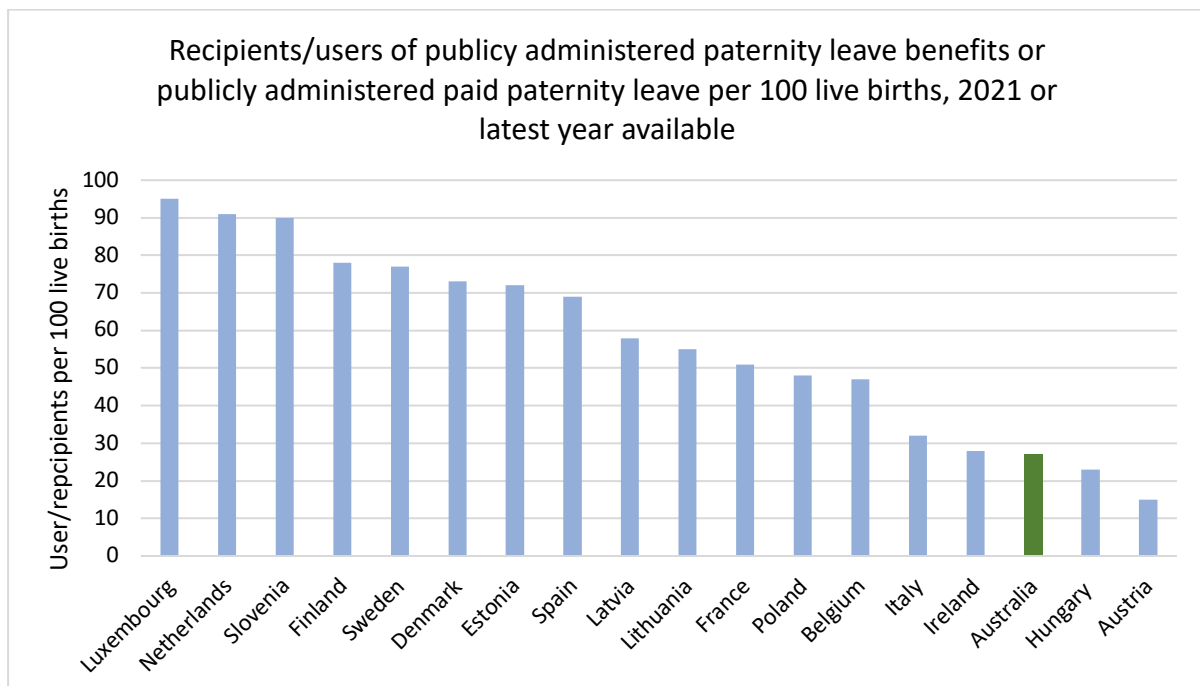
<sup>vii</sup> To meet the work test you cannot have more than a 12 week gap between work days in the 10 month period preceding leave.

**Figure 1:** Public expenditure on maternity and parental leaves



Source: adapted from OECD Family Database PF2.1, 2022; OECD Social Expenditure Database and OECD Health Statistics<sup>44</sup>.

**Figure 2:** Users of paid paternity leave



Source: adapted from OECD Family Database PF2.2, 2022; OECD calculations based on information from national ministries, statistical offices, and an OECD questionnaire to national authorities<sup>45</sup>.

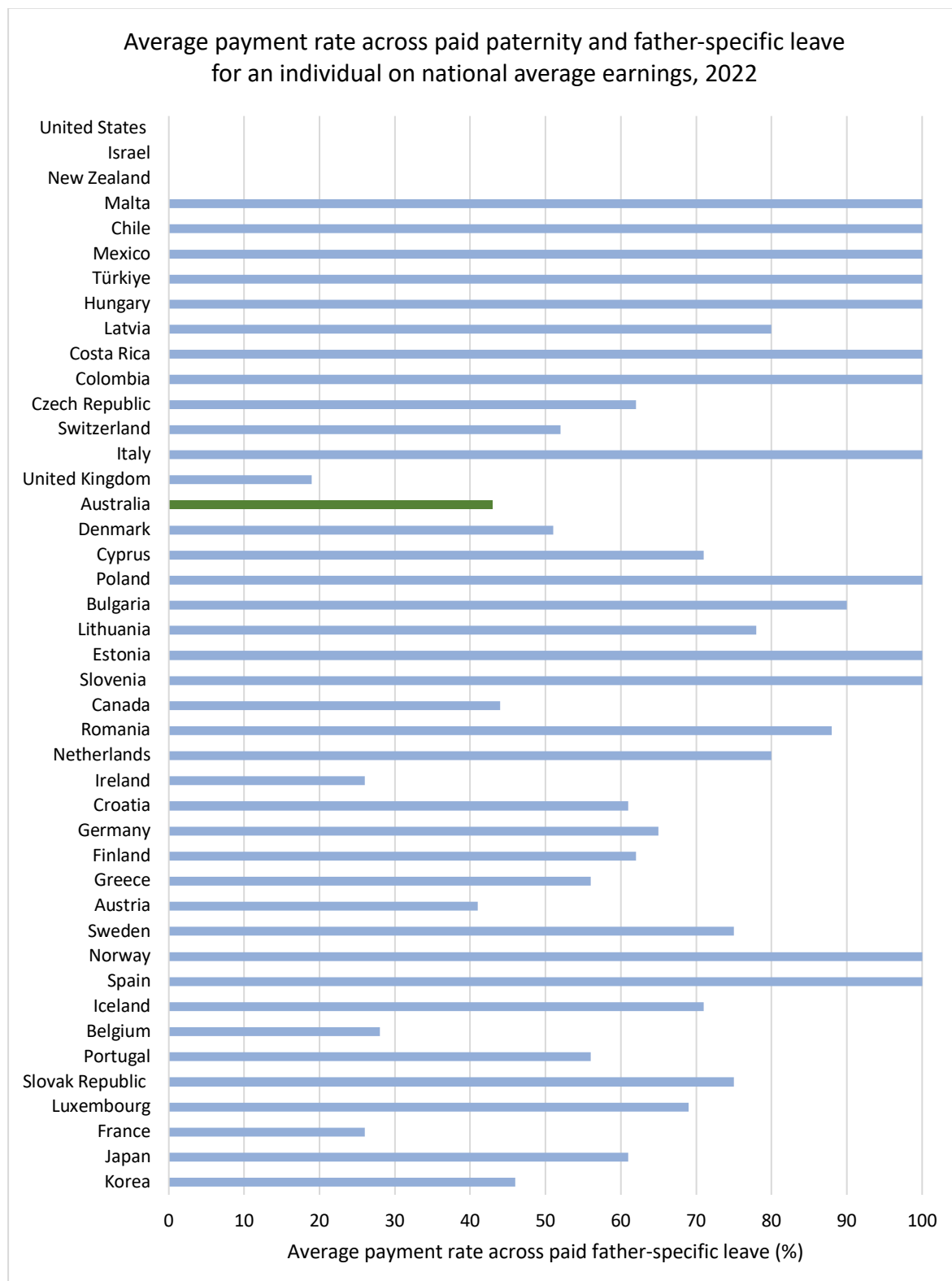
While most OECD countries reserve leave for fathers or partners, the length, flexibility, and the level of pay replacement vary significantly. Australia, however, trails its OECD counterparts, providing some of the least generous leave with some of the lowest uptake<sup>3</sup> as shown in Figure 3 and 4<sup>44</sup>. Currently the average length of leave across the OECD earmarked for mothers is 24.6 weeks, while 10.4 weeks is reserved for fathers and 25.4 weeks is theoretically available for either parent, Figure 4<sup>44</sup>.

Fathers uptake of leave is greatest when: (a) there is a combination of high income replacement (at least 50 percent of earnings); and (b) leave is for an extended duration<sup>46</sup>. Gender norms<sup>3</sup> and workplace experiences also play a key role in facilitating fathers leave use<sup>4viii</sup>.

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viii To be expanded on in sections 3 and 5

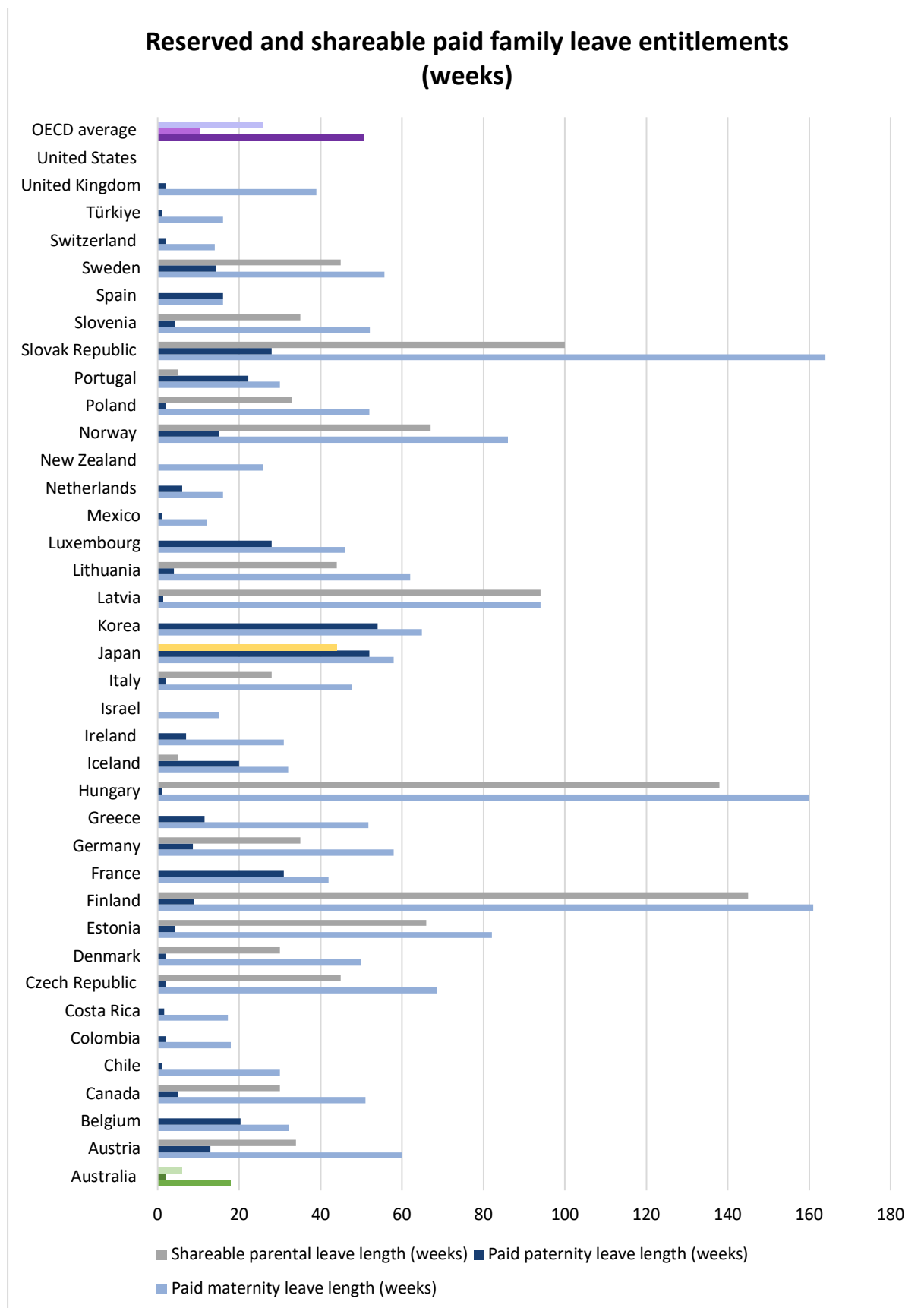
**Figure 3:** Paid leave reserved for fathers



Source: adapted from OECD Family Database PF2.1, 2022<sup>44</sup>.



**Figure 4:** Reserved and shareable paid family leave entitlements



Source: adapted from OECD Family Database PF2.1 Parental Leave Systems, 2022<sup>44</sup>.

Note: For Japan, the 44 weeks of the individual parental leave entitlements for the mother must be taken used simultaneously with the father if both parents are to use the entirety of their entitlement. The bar is therefore a different colour.

### 2.1.3. Country comparison

Norway has a generous scheme with high up-take. In terms of driving gender equity around care, the scheme reserves the same amount of leave for both mothers and fathers (15 or 19 weeks, excluding the 3 extra pre-natal weeks for mothers), which is also a feature in countries such as Sweden<sup>47</sup> and Spain<sup>48</sup> as shown in figure 4.

**Table 2:** Paid Parental Leave in Norway

Type Of Leave	Paternity Leave "Daddy Days"	Parental Leave
<b>Duration</b>	2 weeks.	46 or 56 weeks depending on payment level. Additional 3 weeks before birth (total of 49 or 59).
<b>Reservable And Shareable</b>	Can be used by someone else to assist the mother i.e. grandparents.	Mothers: 18 or 22 weeks non-transferable (3 pre-natal).  Fathers: 15 or 19 weeks non-transferable (not to be taken within the first 6 weeks).  16- or 18-weeks family entitlement (shared).
<b>Payment</b>	Unpaid. Depends on individual or collective agreements with employers.	Mothers: 49 weeks at 100 percent of earnings.  Fathers: 59 weeks at 80 percent of earnings <sup>ix</sup> .  Non-employed women receive a flat-rate payment per child.
<b>Flexibility</b>	Can be used 'in connection with the birth' generally two weeks before or after birth. May be split by days.	Can be used within first three years after child's birth.  After first six weeks mothers can postpone payment and one or both parents can combine payment with part time work.  Can be taken in one block or split into smaller blocks.  Can be used concurrently.
<b>Up-Take</b>	89 percent of fathers take time off around the birth of a child, including using Paternity leave, annual leave, and other options.	70 percent of fathers take exactly the number of weeks reserved for fathers.

<sup>ix</sup> Up to six times the national insurance benefit payment. Employees pay difference between the cap when there is an agreement in place.

90 percent of eligible fathers take some leave.

90 percent of mothers are eligible for parental money.

Source: *International Review on Leave Policies and Related Research 2022*<sup>48</sup>.

Quebec instituted a father-only leave at a high replacement wage in 2006; in response, fathers' uptake of leave grew from 28 to 80 percent. These rates are significantly higher than elsewhere in Canada where the uptake is around 15 percent<sup>3</sup>.

In 2007, Spain introduced paternity leave of 16 weeks at 100 percent pay replacement; the current uptake is roughly 88.9 percent of eligible fathers and 70.4 percent of new fathers, a steady increase since its introduction<sup>x 48</sup>.

Globally, we learn that instituting longer leaves at higher wage replacements are only one piece of the puzzle. Entrenched gender roles and norms in society and workplaces also structure fathers' use of leave. In the Republic of Korea, fathers report relatively low parental leave uptake at around 17 percent in 2018 (up from under 2 percent in 2011), despite the government increasing the rate of payments and creating a national campaign on the benefits of balancing work and home<sup>49</sup>.

Japan, has had relatively low uptake of generous parental leave entitlements<sup>48,49</sup>, due to strong men breadwinner norms<sup>52</sup>, a lack of broad family-friendly policies including, childcare and working hours, and workplace culture that discourages fathers from taking Parental Leave<sup>53</sup>. In contrast Nordic countries with generous schemes and high uptake from fathers, encourage gender equality between men and women by implementing social policy measures to create a dual-earner/dual-caregiver society. Important policy measures such as publicly funded parental leave schemes, universal high quality childcare and access to reduced and flexible working hours are important to support both working mother and fathers<sup>1</sup>. The Nordic countries began introducing these reforms in the 1970's and have expanded policies that allow parents to combine work and family in an equal way<sup>47</sup>. Further, in a Norwegian study, fathers reported that employers had positive attitudes and supportive practices which facilitated their use of leave<sup>54</sup>. Norway is often held up as a gold-standard for these reasons.

In relation to gendered social norms rankings recently released by the United Nations Development Programme, Australia is more closely aligned with Nordic countries such as Sweden than that of Japan or Korea<sup>5,7</sup>. However, politically, and institutionally Australia has a prominent men breadwinner framework which can drive traditional gendered division of labour. And compared to other liberal welfare regimes such as the UK and the United States, who also have men breadwinner ideologies and long employment hours, Australian mothers are much more likely to exit the labour force after the birth of their first child, and are more likely to return to part-time work than US mothers. These factors can support gendered role specialisation in the home<sup>56</sup> and may impact leave taking patterns.

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<sup>x</sup> Young Spanish Families 2021 survey cited in 18th International Review on Leave Policies and Related Research

The following quotes are drawn from in depth interviews with fathers for the 2022 book 'Engaged Fatherhood for Men, Families and Gender Equality'<sup>1</sup> they exemplify the varying degrees of conflicts fathers can feel around the dual roles of breadwinner and caregiver.

Norway (Kvande) *"If you want to be a good parent, or a good father, then you have to take the daddy leave."*

Korea (Bueno and Oh) *"It is natural to focus on working when you become a father. I will be working harder for my family, for my child, as head of the family."*

Spain (Bueno and Oh) *"If I could afford [part-time unpaid parental leave], I would not mind at all. Of course! But, [my work] is not very flexible..., not even with women. I can't even imagine how they would be with men."*

Australia (Borgvist) *"I have never asked for flexible work arrangements for childcare because I do not want to be seen as someone who tries to get out of doing work."*

These quotes illustrate the challenges in achieving a dual-caregiver model given the attitudinal and institutional limitations to men's greater access to caregiving.

Finally, expanding leave to migrants is also essential to increasing fathers' access to entitlements. In Europe, recently arrived migrants are more likely to be the recipient of lower tiered benefits which also means that access to the benefits is more likely to be gendered<sup>57</sup>, with mothers taking more time out of the labour market for leave and fathers continuing to work due to higher wages. Research in Sweden and Finland showed that immigrant fathers were less likely to take more than the allotted quota of leave than native-born fathers. This was even more prevalent among immigrants from non-Western backgrounds<sup>58</sup>.

In Australia, first generation migrant mothers are more likely to leave the labour force compared to second and third generation mothers after childbirth<sup>xi</sup>. This suggests unique work-family pressures for these families<sup>59</sup>. Yet, a research gap remains to understand migrant fathers' decision about accessing parental leave and care for children demonstrating a need for more research to understand the intersection of gender, culture, and structural barriers in migrant fathers' leave use in Australia given its unique migration patterns<sup>58</sup>.

## 2.2. Workplace parental leave policy

Major Australian employers led the way in introducing gender neutral leave schemes that remove the distinction of primary and secondary carers. Many are also extending the timeframe during which the leave can be used, expanding the window of use. As a result, many organisations have seen an increase in the proportion of men taking parental leave<sup>3</sup>. Deloitte reports an increase in the use of fathers taking their scheme from 20 percent to 40 percent<sup>60</sup>. Table 3 below provides an overview of parental leave offerings in some of Australia's major corporations. The most comprehensive leave offers longer length, high pay replacement, is

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<sup>xi</sup> These mothers also have lower employment rates prior to childbirth.

gender neutral and flexible in its use, has no waiting period and continues to pay into superannuation while the employee is on leave. As the table illustrates, few organisations are comprehensive in offering these range of components.

**Table 3:** Companies offering generous parental leave schemes and key characteristics

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Length</b>	<b>Gender Neutral</b>	<b>Flexibility</b>	<b>Waiting Period</b>	<b>Super</b>
<b><i>KPMG</i></b>	26 weeks	No distinction between primary and secondary carer	Flexible in the first 24 months	Immediate	
<b><i>PWC</i></b>	26 weeks	No distinction between primary and secondary carer	Flexible in the first 24 months	Immediate	Up to 12 months
<b><i>Spotify</i></b>	26 weeks (6 months)	Regardless of gender	Maximum of 3 separate blocks in the first 36 months	Immediate	
<b><i>Diageo australia</i></b>	26 weeks	No distinction between primary and secondary carer		Immediate	Unpaid component up to 26 weeks
<b><i>Ashurst</i></b>	26 weeks	No distinction between primary and secondary carer	One or two blocks or incorporate a fixed-term, part-time arrangement	12 months	
<b><i>King &amp; wood mallesons</i></b>	26 weeks	No distinction between primary and secondary carer	Flexible in the first 24 months	Immediate	
<b><i>Clayton utz</i></b>	26 weeks	No distinction between primary and secondary carer		Immediate	Both paid and unpaid leave up to 52 weeks
<b><i>Allens</i></b>	26 weeks	No distinction between primary and secondary carer	Flexible in the first 24 months	Immediate	Unpaid component up to 26 weeks
<b><i>Accenture</i></b>	18 weeks	No distinction between primary and secondary carer	Flexible in the first 24 months	Immediate	Paid component

<b>Deloitte</b>	18 weeks	No distinction between primary and secondary carer	Flexible in the first 36 months	Immediate	Unpaid leave up to 52 weeks
<b>Grant Thornton</b>	26 weeks	Primary carer regardless of gender	Flexible	1 year	Unpaid component within first 12 months
<b>Telstra</b>	16 weeks	No distinction between primary and secondary carer	Flexible in first 12 months	1 year	

Source: Telstra; Australian Financial Review<sup>61,62</sup>.

In Australia we have limited data on employer-paid primary carer leave; it is only collected from large private sector organisations<sup>48 xii</sup>.

To increase uptake, organisations have focused on pay replacement rates. According to WGEA, 84 percent of private sector companies pay their leave at employees' full salary, 10 percent pay the gap between government scheme and employees' salary, and 6 percent pay it as a lump sum<sup>63</sup>. In spite of these generous schemes, overall fathers' uptake of employee-funded primary carers leave remains low at 13 percent<sup>63</sup>. Data is limited on which companies are incentivising or promoting fathers' equal sharing of paid parental leave through clauses, policies or workplace norms that would lead to more equitable outcomes<sup>23</sup>.

The availability of employer funded leave increases in line with the size of the organisation<sup>63</sup>. Many parents and fathers work for small and medium sized businesses or are self-employed and therefore will be unable to access such generous schemes<sup>23</sup>, highlighting the importance of a robust government funded scheme. Further, there are long eligibility periods with an average of 12.1 months. And, paid parental leave is more common in women dominated industries, with 48 percent of employers in men dominated industries not offering any form of paid primary carer's leave compared to 25 percent of women dominated industries<sup>63</sup>.

The introduction of gender-neutral leave policies is important. By normalising fathers taking leave it becomes easier to ask for it, minimising expectations that fathers will face a career penalty for requesting leave<sup>3</sup>. This is especially important for lower-income fathers who often face harsher penalties for requesting leave; they can receive lower performance ratings, are viewed as inferior workers and face future earning penalties<sup>64</sup>. This is also true for migrant fathers where workplace stigma creates real or perceived barriers to requesting and accessing leave; these barriers are exacerbated for migrants who are less likely to be eligible for leave benefits, may face discrimination in the workplace and experience additional challenges accessing employment<sup>58</sup>.

<sup>xii</sup> WGEA collects data on the non-public sector employers with 100 or more employees.

### 2.3. Benefits of fathers accessing parental leave

Parental leave, when taken by both mothers and fathers, has been shown to enhance the well-being of parents, support maternal recovery, improve children's health, and increase women's employment and workforce participation<sup>65</sup>. When both parents have equal access to parental leave, it promotes a more equitable distribution of unpaid caregiving responsibilities<sup>21,66</sup>. Active engagement of fathers in caregiving duties during the infant's first year can lead to a sustained increase in their involvement with caregiving past the initial leave period for up to three years<sup>21,67-69</sup>. Further, fathers' use of paid parental leave enables them to achieve a better work-life balance, while allowing mothers to advance their careers<sup>36</sup>. Gender-equal parental leave policies also serve to normalize fathers' active roles in childcare, benefitting both individual families and society more broadly<sup>36</sup>.

The benefits of fathers' involvement in childcare from an early age are tremendous. Research shows that fathers who engage in childcare from the start of children's lives, tend to stay more involved in parenting as their children grow. This can lead to better cognitive, emotional, and physical outcomes for children<sup>11 3</sup>. Moreover, children's development benefits from supportive fathers, as their increased involvement fosters better social skills, language development, and overall well-being. Having concentrated time with children following childbirth establishes a pattern of greater lifelong participation in childcare which can contribute to their own happiness, as well as that of their partner and children<sup>12</sup>.

Involved fatherhood also enhances the life satisfaction and mental health of fathers. Research highlights the positive benefits of involved fatherhood, such as improved mental and physical health and better relationships<sup>18</sup>. Fathers who are involved in meaningful ways with their children are also more likely to report that this relationship is one of their most important sources of wellbeing and happiness<sup>12</sup>.

Increasing fathers' involvement during parental leave brings a range of benefits. An analysis of 35 countries showed reserving a share of parental leave for fathers increased equality in couples' divisions of domestic labour<sup>70</sup>. In Norway, the introduction of 4 weeks of father-only "use it or lose it" parental leave led to an 11 percent drop in conflicts over household division of labour and a significant increase (50 percent more likely) in the equal division of laundry<sup>xiii66</sup>. A 2014 analysis of Denmark, Australia, United States, and United Kingdom showed fathers who took leave were more involved in children's first year of life than fathers who didn't take leave; they were particularly more active in the primary care of children including nappy changing, bathing, and putting the child to bed<sup>21xiv</sup>.

The length of leave also impacts outcomes. Longer leave periods contribute to more frequent father engagement in activities like reading and playing<sup>67</sup>. Extended leave periods also lead to

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<sup>xiii</sup> This was 15 years after the reform was introduced.

<sup>xiv</sup> Annual leave was included in this study as a type of leave. DaPP was not available at this time.

more equitable division of parenting responsibilities,<sup>71-73</sup> and fathers engaging in one-on-one solo care of children<sup>56</sup>. The time increase is significant – up to 2.2 additional hours per week<sup>74</sup>. Solo time with children can increase equality in other household activities. A German study found that fathers who took more than 2 months, or took solo leave increased their share of housework and childcare<sup>75</sup>.

A Swedish study has found that fathers taking longer leaves are associated with: (a) fathers spending more time with children; (b) fathers staying home with a sick child; and (c) children seeking comfort from the father<sup>73</sup>. Despite longer leaves intensifying fathers' contributions at home, mothers remained disproportionately responsible for the organisation of the family – including corresponding with the preschool and fixing clothes<sup>73</sup>.

#### **2.4. Utilising sick leave to support care**

Caring for children does not stop after infancy and there is less attention given to parallel paid sick leave and other family entitlements or caregiving needs beyond this time. Globally, illness is a leading cause of children missing school<sup>49</sup> and is especially common amongst young children as they start childcare or school, with the average child under 2 acquiring up to 8-10 colds per year<sup>76</sup>.

The division of care for sick children is related to the division of household work in general and is therefore an interesting case to study in terms of equal sharing of care<sup>77</sup>. While there is limited research on gender inequalities in caring for children's health or urgent childcare<sup>78</sup>, what is available suggests that inequalities exist. Research in Denmark showed that Danish mothers are responsible for handling more than 90 percent of children's medical services rather than their fathers<sup>79</sup>, and a US study found that mothers are more likely to miss work to provide childcare<sup>78</sup>.

In Australia, sick leave is dependent on labour force attachment. Under the National Employment Standards (NES) in the Fair Work Act, full time employees can take 10 days a year for carers and sick leave, and part-time employees get pro rata 10 days each year, paid for by their employer<sup>80</sup>. This leaves more than one third of employed Australians without pay when they are off sick and fails to reach those working casually, as gig-workers or contractors<sup>81</sup>. The Victorian Government has introduced a Sick Pay Guarantee which provides casual and contract workers in some jobs with 38 hours of sick pay a year paid at the national minimum wage with responsibility for payment on the employer in the long-term<sup>1</sup>. This differs from the NES minimum entitlements as it is paid for by government rather than employers. Newly arrived permanent residents need to wait up to four years before being eligible for Sickness Allowance<sup>82</sup>. The current scheme also disadvantages families with higher number of children and single parents.

While the details of sick leave entitlements vary widely from country to country in the OECD, Australia, the Netherlands, and Sweden have wide qualifying criteria that includes family



members and/or household members in addition to the standard coverage for partners/spouse, parents and sometimes siblings. In countries like Finland, Switzerland, Spain, and Estonia, leave for non-serious illness is granted per episode rather than a set number of days per year. On each occasion that a qualifying family member requires care, employees are entitled to take a varying number of days or weeks in response which expands sick leave access<sup>83</sup>.

In Sweden for example, parents receive up to 120 days per year/per child until the child is 12 years old, at 77.6 percent of earnings for sick leave<sup>84</sup>. Because most children in Sweden are home until they are 2 years old<sup>77</sup>, most sick days are used when children have just started day-care and thus vulnerable to repeated illnesses. On average, Swedish parents take 11.4 days a year for 2-year old's and around 6.1 days for 7-year old's in sick leave to care for children<sup>84</sup>. In Australia roughly 30 percent of 1 years olds and 45 percent of 2-3 year olds are in formal early childhood education care<sup>85</sup>, which makes them vulnerable to repeated episodes of illness. However, sick leave provisions in Australia are less generous than other family-responsive nations. And, we have limited understanding of how this leave is allocated between parents.

## 2.5. Summary and key research takeaways

This section discusses the role of paid leave on fathers' inclusion in care. Below we summarise the key takeaways across these sections:

- Drawing global lessons, we can identify that **longer duration, greater wage replacement** (including **superannuation contributions**) and more **egalitarian gender norms** are a critical combination to increase fathers' uptake of paid parental leave.
- In Australia specifically, paid leave reserved for fathers and partners is too short in duration and inadequate in wage replacement rates (including superannuation) which limits fathers' uptake.
- Migration status and employment type are barriers to equal access in paid paternity leave.
- Despite the host of benefits for children and fathers alike, paternity leave in Australia has some of the lowest uptakes in relation to comparable OECD nations.
- For-profit organisations provide innovative models for expanding paid leave and increasing uptake.
- Paid leave brings a range of health, well-being and developmental benefits to fathers and children.
- Fathers greater time in one-on-one care with children during leave improves the gender division of unpaid work, with a more equal distribution of household responsibilities.
- Access to sick leave is critical especially for children in their first few years who often experience multiple illness episodes but also for children with chronic illnesses.

- Fathers who take extended leaves are more likely to take time off to care for sick children, and children are more likely to go to fathers for comfort.

3.



# Employment and Workplaces

### 3. EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACES

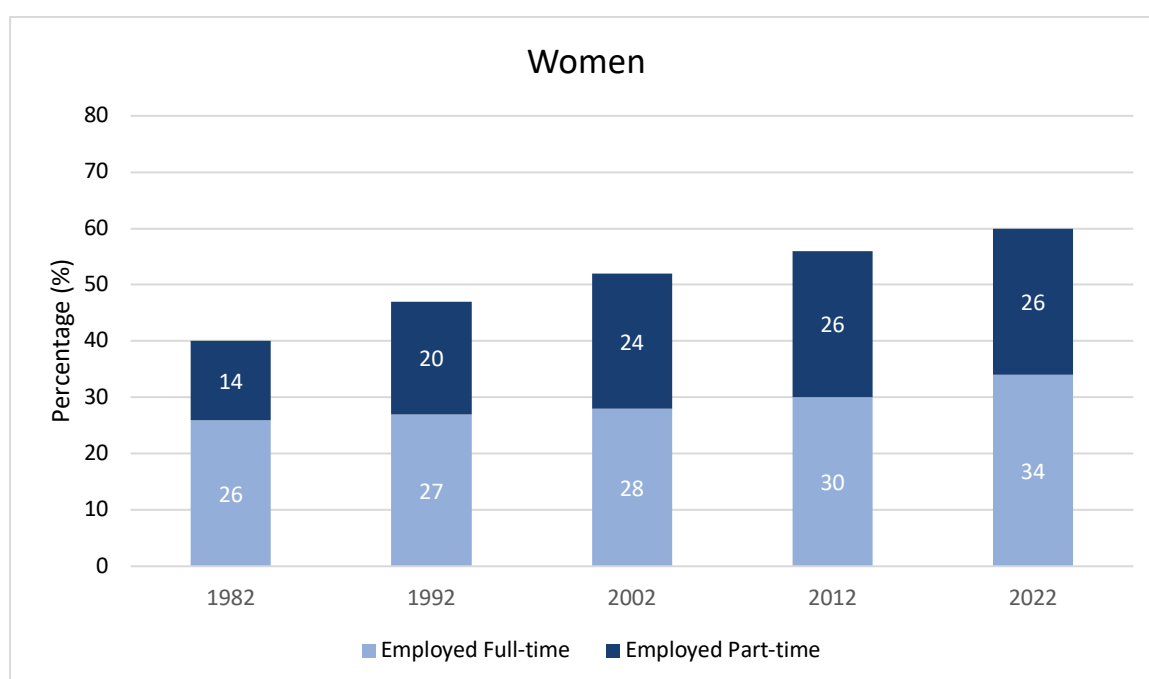
#### 3.1. The rise of the dual-earner couple

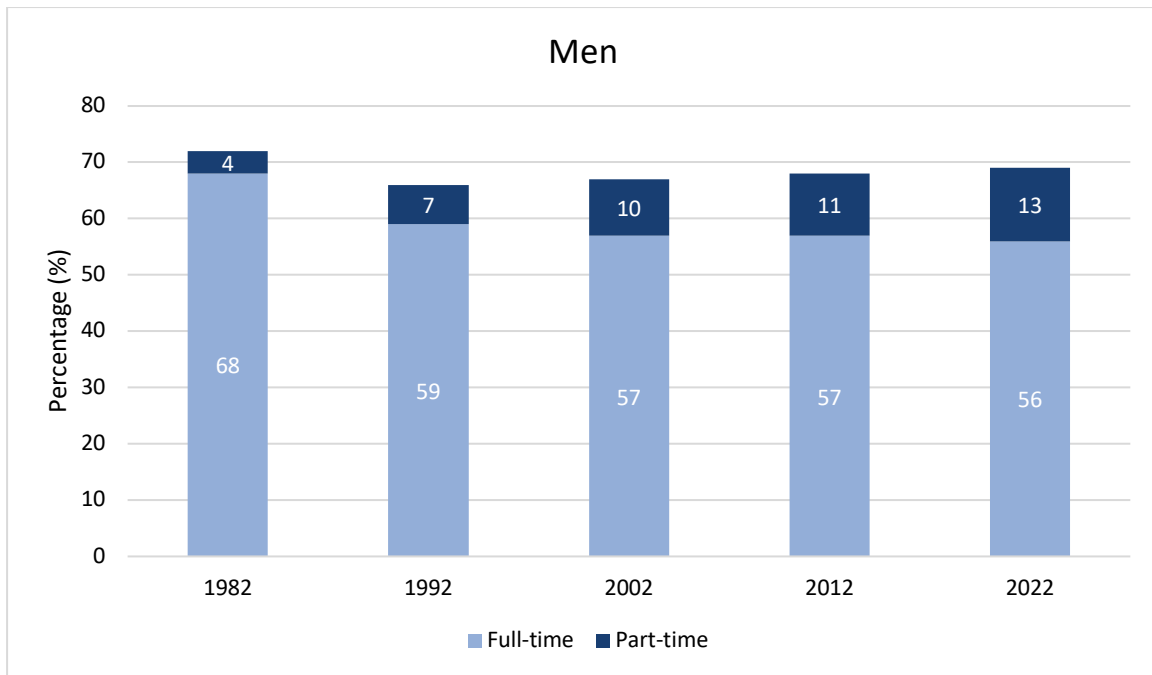
In recent generations, a significant shift has occurred with the emergence of dual-earner couples, where both parents are actively engaged in paid employment. As reported by the Australian Institute of Family studies, in 2022, 71 percent of Australian couple families with children under 15 years had both parents employed. This is a significant increase compared to 40 percent in 1979 and 56 percent in 2000<sup>86</sup>. In 2021, amongst employed couples, 31 percent had both parents employed full-time; 36 percent had one parent working full-time and the other part-time, 26 percent had one parent not employed and the other either part-time or full-time employed, 4 percent had both parents working part-time, and the remaining 4 percent had neither parent employment<sup>86</sup>. Thus, most children will have both parents working at some point in their childhood.

##### 3.1.1. Australia: High rates of mothers working part-time

Australia stands out globally due to a significant decrease in mothers' working hours following the birth of a child. Australia has some of the highest part-time employment rates amongst mothers in the OECD, with 37 per cent of mothers working part-time in 2021, compared to the OECD average of 17 per cent - making it similar to countries like Austria, Germany, Netherlands and Switzerland<sup>87</sup>. Across the Australian labour market (see Figure 5 below), women's part-time work rates have increased from 14 percent in 1982 to 26 percent in 2022. Men are much less likely to work part-time, but their rates have also increased from less than 5 percent in 1982 to 13 percent in 2022. Thus, part-time work is more common for working Australian women, especially amongst mothers.

**Figure 5:** Percentage of women and men in full-time and part-time employment in Australia, selected years, 1982-2022





Source: adapted from Baxter, 2023<sup>88</sup>.

Parents reduce work to part-time for multiple reasons: (1) to balance work and caregiving<sup>88</sup>; (2) because the parental leave schemes incentivise reduced work days<sup>89</sup>; (3) childcare is expensive<sup>90</sup> and often lacks quality and availability<sup>89</sup>; and (4) gender norms emphasize mothers as primary carers following the birth of a child<sup>89</sup>.

Despite mothers disproportionate clustering in part-time work, the biggest change to parents' employment over the past decade is the rise of the dual full-time working couple and the challenges associated with a two-career family<sup>88</sup>.

### 3.1.2. Stay-at-home parents: mothers vs fathers

Analysis from the Australian Institute of Family Studies using ABS census and survey data shows that among couple families with a child under one year, 61 percent had a stay-at-home mother but only 2.5 percent had a stay-at-home father<sup>86</sup>. Rates of employment are even lower for single mothers with 71 percent out of employment when they had a child under one year of age<sup>86</sup>. However, as the youngest child reached one year of age, employment rates for mothers increased to 69 percent for those in couples and 38 percent for single mothers<sup>86</sup>. In contrast, coupled fathers' employment rates remained consistent and were not affected by the age of the youngest child.

Although mothers often return to work in the first year of children's lives, the sequencing and timing of second or third births can also have implications for mothers' employment<sup>91</sup>. Australia's fertility rate is declining from 1.93 total births per woman in 2012 to 1.63 in 2022,<sup>91</sup> meaning Australia is witnessing an increase in more women having one or no children in their lifetimes. Amongst those who have two children, the median spacing is 34 months or roughly 2.8 years<sup>93</sup>. This means many Australian mothers with multiple children will have parental leaves in close succession, which can have larger-than-anticipated consequences for their

careers<sup>9</sup>. Our research shows that second births double mothers' and fathers' experiences of time pressure with significant impact on their mental health<sup>94</sup>. We showed fathers time pressure increased from first to second births, but was half that of mothers<sup>94</sup>. Thus, the pace and spacing of second children is important to consider in developing interventions to support the equal sharing of care.

In Australia, the percentage of stay-at-home fathers has increased over the past decades, but their demographic profiles look very different to stay-at-home mothers. In 2022, 4.6 percent of couple families with children had stay-at-home fathers which is a slight increase from less than 3 percent of couple families with children in the 1980s<sup>86</sup> <sup>6</sup>.

Stay-at-home fathering occurs later in life when both fathers and children are older. While half of stay-at-home mother families have a youngest child under 3 years of age present, more than half of stay-at-home fathers have a youngest child aged 6-14 years<sup>6</sup>. They are also more likely to provide care for only one child<sup>95</sup>, and have lower educational attainment than fathers in dual-working families and stay-at-home mother families, as well as compared to their own partners<sup>6</sup>. Parallel to their lower levels of education, stay-at-home father families also have lower household income, on average, than stay-at-home mother families and may not identify with a stay-at-home father role<sup>6</sup>. Rather, they may identify as unemployed, a student, or a caregiver for a child with a disability. From these figures it is clear that the process through which men become stay-at-home fathers is largely driven by financial and personal circumstances; for stay-at-home mothers, it is mostly driven by the birth and presence of a young child in the home<sup>6</sup>.

## **3.2. Parents' experiences at work**

### **3.2.1. Career penalties for caregiving**

Parents who take employment leave often face penalties at work. Career gaps to caregiving are seen as violating 'ideal worker norms' that emphasize workers undevoted commitment to workplaces and expectations to "always be on"<sup>64</sup>. Career gaps and the utilisation of flexible working arrangements reinforce the notion that caregivers are unreliable and uncommitted<sup>64</sup>. Guilt is a major driver of mothers' considerations to reduce employment<sup>96</sup>. Research in Ireland found that mothers were three times more likely to leave their jobs during the pandemic because they felt guilt around being a 'good mother'<sup>97</sup>. Organisational culture plays a critical role with mothers experiencing more guilt than fathers in workplaces that emphasize traditional gender norms<sup>98</sup>. By contrast, mothers and fathers experience similar levels of guilt in organisations with more egalitarian gender norms. Despite spending, on average, less time with children, fathers want to be more engaged in their children's lives; the Pew Research Center found that fathers are twice as likely to express a desire to spend more time with their children than mothers (46 percent fathers versus 23 percent mothers)<sup>99</sup>. Ultimately, this body of research demonstrates working longer hours at the expense of time at home with children no longer fits with expectations of working fathers<sup>98</sup>.

Fathers also expect a career penalty – shorter career ladders and fewer promotions – if they take extended leave<sup>100</sup>. In a study we conducted using fictitious CV's to apply for real jobs, we found fathers with caregiving leaves were significantly less likely to be contacted for a job interview than men without leaves and mothers with and without leaves<sup>101</sup>. This was especially true in jobs that are men-dominated. These experiences are likely exacerbated for those with intersectional identities, yet the research on this is absent. Of course fathers are not alone in these consequences – mothers also receive career penalties for leaves<sup>38</sup>.

### 3.3. Family-responsive workplaces

#### 3.3.1. Childcare provisions

Given the heavy association of men's family responsibilities with performance, presence, and recognition at work<sup>103</sup>, efforts to more closely link childcare and work are sure to facilitate a similarly close link between their roles at home and in the workplace. For example, the provision of on-site childcare has proven to significantly benefit working parents and actively engage fathers more equitably in early childcare. Co-located childcare centres offer the double benefit of providing children valuable early social learning opportunities *and* supporting parents to more effectively balance work and family life when their children are young<sup>51</sup>. The barrier to utilising this lies in the financial costs many parents face<sup>104</sup>. However, on-site childcare is commonly only available to professional white-collar office workers, as it is difficult to locate childcare on-site for employees that either work in various locations or on temporary worksites. Workplaces are critical to providing accessible and affordable childcare to their employees through: (a) on-site care or; (b) subsidies for external care centres or independent providers<sup>51 105</sup>. Some organisations provide extra childcare funds, supplementary to government funding, to access discounted nearby and/or associated day-cares, referral services, and back-up care benefits (e.g. such flexible spending accounts that cover babysitting costs, one-off day-care fees, etc.)<sup>106 107</sup>. Global organisations who have utilised such funds report higher rates of productivity, employee retention and longer engaged work hours<sup>108 109</sup>.

#### 3.4. Flexible work access

Flexible work arrangements are also critical to fathers' engagement in early childcare; flexible work can include changes to hours, patterns and locations of work. For example, greater control over start and stop times, job sharing, and working from home are examples of flexible work employees can utilise<sup>110</sup>. Although flexible work rose during COVID-19 and is now more common than ever before, workers may be penalised for its use. A Family Friendly Workplaces 2019 National Working Families Report showed over 50 percent of its 6,300 participants disclosed that the "commitment to their job was questioned if they used family friendly work arrangements"<sup>37</sup>. Fathers are less likely to utilise flexible work than mothers (78 percent of mothers, compared to 69 percent of fathers<sup>111</sup>) in part because they anticipate being penalised at work, including fear of being demoted, downsized, or overlooked for a promotion<sup>112</sup>. Job flexibility<sup>113</sup>, and remote work has been found to increase fathers share of childcare<sup>114,115</sup>. In an

Australian study, job autonomy and flexibility positively impact fathers' mental health in the postpartum period<sup>116</sup>. The correlation between increases in other forms of domestic labour and remote work are affected by partners' employment status and the fathers' rationale for working from home. For example, in a US study fathers who were mandated to remote work and whose partners worked part-time or not at all performed the least amount of housework, compared to fathers who chose to work from home and whose partners also worked full-time<sup>115</sup>. Thus, while fathers are less likely to use flexible work, when they do use it, their outcomes look different to flexible working mothers.

### 3.5. Lack of effective role modelling

Barriers to father's uptake of leave are embedded in workplace culture and practices. A lack of managerial role-models exemplifying the use of leave and other work-family benefits can have a negative impact on fathers' use of such policies in the workplace<sup>117</sup>. Fathers often report feeling guilty when using parental leave or flexible working arrangements<sup>118</sup>, and report feeling uncomfortable or uncertain when requesting to utilise any entitlements beyond mandated paid parental leave<sup>117,118</sup>. The Fairwork Ombudsmen highlights role modelling as a component of best practice when implementing flexible work policies. Particularly from leaders, role modelling is an effective way of showing what can work and what is encouraged<sup>110</sup>. WGEA lists workplace culture as a challenge for men and partners taking up parental leave<sup>119</sup>. According to a report on caring and gender equality in the Victorian Public Sector, the impact of seeing working fathers equitably manage their time and priorities away from work and more towards their dependents set a role modelling domino effect that encouraged other working fathers down the chain of management to mimic similar work arrangements and attitudes<sup>120</sup>.

Evidence from Sweden and the UK found that fathers' requests for leave and flexible work arrangements are often dictated by what is deemed 'acceptable' in their organisation<sup>118,121</sup>. Further, research conducted in the UK found that behavioural modelling of work-family balance was a factor in the utilisation of polices and leave. Importantly having a supportive line manager is a significant factor to fathers taking longer periods of leave<sup>118</sup>. This is reflected in a North American study showing that worry about how they would be perceived by co-workers, in particular managers and supervisors, is a key influence in fathers not taking leave<sup>122</sup>. Research from Switzerland found higher uptake of paternity leave in a men-dominated work environment, likely due to the fathers' exposure to other men using leave benefits<sup>123</sup>. Strategies to create a workplace environment conducive to fathers being actively engaged in care are presented in table 4 below.

**Table 4:** 7 Ways employers can support men to be more engaged fathers

Support Mechanism	Description	Example
<b>Grant flexible work arrangements to all staff, including men</b>	Allows fathers to respond to the needs of their family and do their fair share of unpaid care work while still	ING's 'FlexING Program' - includes provisions for varying start and finishing times to help people



	meeting their workplace commitments.	manage school pick ups and peak hour traffic <sup>124</sup> .
<b>Provide childcare support to fathers too</b>	Supporting fathers, either financially or by setting up workplace childcare facilities, allows men to take on an equal share of caregiving and family responsibilities, especially when childcare hours coincide with work hours.	Melbourne-based medical supply company CSL's \$5 million investment in creating an on-site childcare centre to address their poor retention rate for parents returning to the workforce (less than 50 percent in 2011) and plug their attrition from the workforce <sup>125,126</sup> .
<b>Offer paternity and parental leave, and incentivize fathers to take it</b>	Paid leave is also increasingly shown to be good for business, improving retention of employees, increasing job satisfaction and productivity, minimizing absenteeism and turnover, and reducing training and staff-replacement costs.	See table 1.
<b>Ensure men know about available family policies and how to use them</b>	Ensuring that men employees know what supportive arrangements are available and how they can utilise them will help encourage more men – and thus, their entire families – to receive the benefits of such policies.	Policies can be explained to staff through information/training sessions, staff meetings and induction sessions. They should be reiterated periodically. <sup>127</sup>
<b>Create a workplace culture that values men as fathers and caregivers</b>	Ensuring zero tolerance for discrimination against fathers, and by taking measures such as creating a peer-support network for working fathers.	Dads Group, Dads at Work Program helps employers support new parents as they transition to parenthood. Including fatherhood activation events, where they encourage peer networking <sup>128</sup>
<b>Encourage senior men employees to lead by example</b>	Many men don't take parental leave because they fear it will have a negative impact on their career. Men managers can help address this by being role models: their taking paternity leave and using other parental benefits normalizes these choices for all male employees.	Men who take leave could be profiled in internal or external publications or on organisations website or intranet. Managers can talk to men employees and encourage them to take this leave <sup>129</sup> .
<b>Recognise the benefits to employees and the company</b>	Many of the skills developed by parenthood – leadership, ability to adapt to change, time management – can be transferred to the workplace. By recognizing these skills as valuable and investing in both male and female parents and caregivers, businesses can benefit from a more productive and skilled labour force with greater employee retention.	Australian Super recently piloted the Parenting Work Skills Certificate hosted by Gender Equity Initiatives at the University of Melbourne which is designed to validate, demonstrate and beyond that, recognise, the value of parental skills in the workplace <sup>130</sup> .

Source: MenEngage, UNFPA 2020<sup>131</sup>.

### 3.6. Summary and key research takeaways

This section identifies the changing landscape of Australian parents' employment and the role of workplaces in supporting fathers' care. Below we summarise the key takeaways across these sections:

- Dual-earner households where both parents are working full-time have increased dramatically over the past decades, exacerbating work-family conflict for both mothers and fathers.
- Australian fathers' rates of part-time work have increased, but are half that of mothers' who have some of the highest rates of part-time work in the world.
- Mothers are likely to exit the labour market altogether (stay-at-home) during children's first year of life, whilst fathers are more likely to exit the labour market when children are school aged.
- Labour market exits for caregiving have serious career penalties for parents, mothers, and fathers alike.
- Workplace culture plays an integral role in parents proactively accessing and utilising policies and services to balance work and care.
- Supportive managers and supervisors facilitate a greater uptake of leave and workplace adjustments.
- Role modelling flexible working arrangements and leave taking for care by men senior leaders, managers, and colleagues is essential to the uptake of these policies.

4.



# Healthcare Systems and Services

## 4. HEALTHCARE SYSTEMS AND SERVICES

### 4.1. Pregnancy and prenatal care

Pregnancy also forms a key transition point into traditional gender norms. Mothers take leave early to prepare for the birth of a child<sup>132</sup> positioning them for taking on a larger domestic work share following the birth of a child<sup>133</sup>. On average, fathers time in employment, by contrast, remains unchanged during pregnancy and into children's first year of life<sup>7</sup>.

Fathers are increasingly active in participating and supporting mothers during the prenatal period. Two-thirds of men attend an ultrasound or other key check-ups, while 85 percent are present in the delivery room<sup>12</sup>. Research has found that engaging men early in prenatal visits, during childbirth, and immediately after the birth of a child can bring lasting benefits, with men more likely to establish a pattern of greater lifelong participation in childcare<sup>12</sup>.

Despite fathers' greater involvement, healthcare and social services have been slow to catch up to reflect the new narratives of involved fatherhood. Many services, particularly in maternal, new-born and child health (MNCH), childcare, and early education, are designed only for women. This reinforces unequal gendered expectations about who should not only provide care for children, but also receive care themselves<sup>134</sup>. Thus, healthcare services are critical to establishing a clear expectation around the involvement of men in prenatal care visits and post-childbirth recovery<sup>135</sup>. It is essential that employers also provide fathers with time off to engage in appointments to support their partners' and children's health and wellbeing, as well as their own.

### 4.2. Mental health

Fathers also report significant mental health impacts following the birth of a child. Beyond Blue estimates that 5 percent, or one in twenty fathers, develop postnatal depression in the first year of their child's life<sup>12</sup>. DadsGroup<sup>136</sup> similarly reported that 25 percent of fathers experience depression 3-6 months after the birth of their child, whilst 39 percent of first-time fathers experienced high levels of psychological distress in the first year. Overall, 56 percent of new fathers did not seek information or support from any source during stressful periods. However, it is reported that men who take care of their emotional selves are 2 to 8 times more likely to care for a family member<sup>4</sup>. Hence, we can see a positive correlation between men taking care of their mental health, and their engagement and capacity to provide care to others.

While there are no systems to systematically screen for depression and anxiety amongst Australian fathers, there are several initiatives emerging to improve service delivery to new fathers. The University of Newcastle under the Paternal Perinatal Depression Initiative launched the SMS4dads project, a self-monitoring system and detection service of depression/ anxiety among new fathers delivered through a free text service to early parenting centres<sup>12</sup>. Innovative services such as SMS4dads provide critical mental healthcare support to fathers in pregnancy and first years of children's lives.

### 4.3. Research and program recruitment

In Australia, health and social services are actively recruiting fathers into programs and research initiatives, adapting promotional materials and program content to be father-friendly and inclusive, and ensuring support for fathers through policy development and staff training by adapting language and framing to reflect the needs of new fathers<sup>135</sup>. Kangaroo Island Children’s Services applied father-focused recruitment and retention strategies to encourage and engage local fathers with their programs by approaching fathers in men-friendly environments (such as local football clubs), and ensuring sessions were held in the evening to account for work hours<sup>137</sup>.

Research conducted in Australia identified that mother-focused early parenting interventions in programs, policies, promotions, and advertising are a key barrier to father’s increased participation in children’s lives<sup>138</sup>. Mothers were more likely to attend these programs, in part, because of wording and branding that specifically targeted women. By excluding men from descriptions and depictions of involved parenting, fathers felt a stigma and lack of confidence to attend group-based programs and often felt unwelcome. Fathers further indicated that social norms and self-stigma were barriers to involvement in parenting and parenting interventions, as their gender role was pre-defined as solely being a ‘provider’ or ‘breadwinner’ for the family unit<sup>138</sup>. Another Australian study further confirmed that the use of “parent-focused” rather than “father-focused” online recruitment leads to an under-representation of Australian fathers in parenting and child health research<sup>139</sup>. Australian fathers themselves have reported feeling marginalised from these services which they perceive as being designed for access by mothers alone<sup>136</sup>.

### 4.4. Current support service and program offerings

Australia has a diverse range of services and programs for fathers at both national and state levels. Delivered by government agencies, healthcare services, community groups, and private sector organisations these offerings address various aspects of fatherhood. Available both online and through in-person initiatives, they engage men by covering a spectrum of topics relevant to different stages in a child’s life, from pregnancy and birth to the first year and beyond. These resources, highlighted in Table 5, underscore Australia’s commitment to fostering positive and involved fatherhood experiences.

**Table 5:** Australian support services and programs for fathers and partners

Program/ Service	Format	Description
<b>Gidget Foundation Virtual Village</b>	Online forum	<b>The Gidget Virtual Village</b> is a moderated Facebook group by Gidget Foundation Australia, offering a safe online space for expectant and new dads in Australia. The group facilitates connections, shared experiences, and compassionate peer support, creating a supportive virtual community for dads with children up to school age <sup>140</sup> .

<p><b>Australian Dads Network</b></p>	<p>Online forum</p>	<p><b>The Australian Dads Network</b> provides a supportive platform for dads nationwide to connect, share experiences, and discuss various aspects of fatherhood and personal growth. This judgment-free space encourages open conversations on challenging topics not easily broached in traditional circles. Members can ask questions, share wins and struggles, and organise local meetups. By joining, dads access a resourceful network, fostering friendships and empowering them to be the best fathers possible.</p>
<p><b>Dadstuff</b></p>	<p>Webinar</p>	<p><b>DadStuff</b> offers free workshops for dads, father-figures, and families, providing valuable insights and options for navigating fatherhood, strengthening partner relationships, and fostering connections with kids. The program, conducted over two workshops, allows ample time for discussions, learning, and connecting with fellow dads. Topics covered include the various building healthy family relationships, bonding with kids, and connecting with other fathers<sup>141</sup>.</p>
<p><b>The Fathering Project, New Dads: The Connected Dads Video Series</b></p>	<p>Video series</p>	<p><b>New Dads</b> is an eight-part video series, where experts and healthcare professionals address common concerns during pregnancy and birth. From understanding hormones and building confidence to bringing your baby home and breastfeeding support, each segment offers valuable insights. The series covers crucial aspects like the significance of self-care and concludes with a perspective on a new dad's experience<sup>142</sup>.</p>
<p><b>The Fathering Project, Dad's Groups</b></p>	<p>Community dads' group</p>	<p><b>The Dads Group</b> initiative encourages fathers across Australia to join or start their own local Dads Groups. Collaborating with dads and men role models, the program fosters positive family engagement with the aim of supporting fathers in building strong, involved families. This, in turn, benefits both their children and the broader community<sup>143</sup>.</p>
<p><b>Dads Group</b></p>	<p>Community dads' group</p>	<p><b>Dads Groups</b> bring together new fathers weekly, providing a space for them to meet with their kids over coffee and often at a playground. The peer-to-peer approach of these groups establishes an evidence-based and effective support framework, addressing a gap in the existing fatherhood experience in Australia. While led by a new father, groups typically receive support from a local council worker, particularly during the establishment stage. In the last five years, over 70 Dads Groups have been successfully established across Australia<sup>144</sup>.</p>
<p><b>Dads Group, Welcome To Fatherhood- Intro To Antenatal Class</b></p>	<p>Hospital program</p>	<p><b>The Dads Group Hospital Program</b>, co-designed with leading health industry experts, offers an innovative approach to antenatal classes for new fathers and mothers. Facilitated both in-person and remotely, the program features the co-delivery of sessions by an experienced midwife and a trained mental health fatherhood expert with lived experience. The "Welcome to Fatherhood - Intro to Antenatal Class" provides an introductory session specially crafted for new and expecting dads. This session aims to foster learning and sharing of</p>

		helpful tips and information to support fathers at the beginning of their fatherhood journey, strategically addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by expectant parents <sup>145</sup> .
<b>The Royal Women's Hospital, 'Talking Dads Group'</b>	Hospital program	<b>The 'Talking Dads' Group</b> is tailored for prospective dads seeking insights into their role in pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding, while also offering support during the transition to fatherhood. Conducted monthly by an experienced health professional facilitator, the program addresses common early questions prospective dads have. Sessions cover crucial topics such as supporting your partner during pregnancy, the partner's role in the birthing suite, supporting breastfeeding, transitioning to parenting, developing a relationship with the newborn/child, and nurturing the relationship through the change to parenthood <sup>146</sup> .
<b>Parenting Work Skills Certificate</b>	Online course & workshop	<b>The Parenting Works Skills Certificate</b> is an online course delivered by the Gender Equity Initiative at The University of Melbourne. The course critically links caregiving experiences with in-demand future of work skills to help parents who have had a career break return to work. Parents are equipped with an understanding of how to identify and evaluate key parenting skills that are essential for the future of work, and importantly, how to showcase these skills to current or future employers.

Note: This is a selective list of healthcare services and programs on offer in Australia.

It is important to note, however, that these programs currently have several limitations. Most programs and services are hosted online, necessitating fathers to actively seek out the support they need. Yet, research shows that men are less likely to look or ask for support of their own volition<sup>148–150</sup>. Only a few initiatives, typically found in hospitals and healthcare centres, proactively engage with fathers directly in-person. However, these programs often lack ongoing events and available sessions, potentially leaving fathers without immediate support for an undisclosed period. The high cost associated with several programs, even when readily available, further acts as a barrier which limits accessibility for fathers seeking assistance. Collectively, these observations underscore the need for more comprehensive, targeted, and accessible healthcare and support services designed to meet the specific needs of fathers across various stages of parenthood.

#### 4.5. Summary and key research takeaways

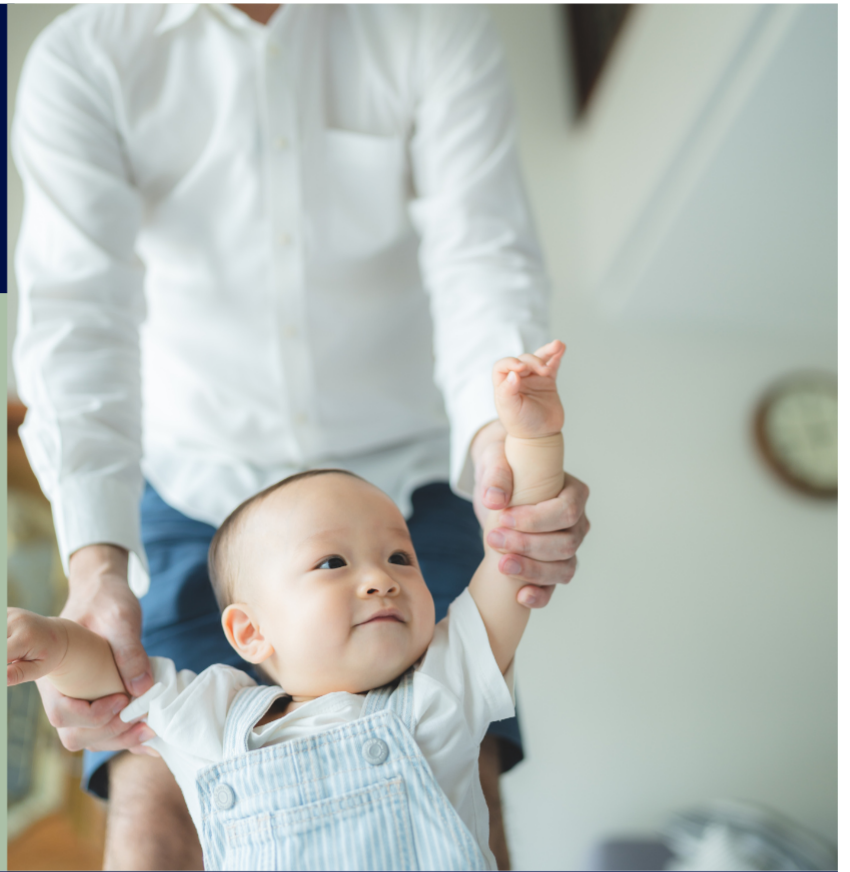
This section underscores the prenatal period as critical to incorporating fathers into the pregnancy and care. Below we summarize the key takeaways across these sections:

- Mothers start to scale back employment prior to the birth of their child positioning them as primary caregivers with long-term implications for the gendered division of housework and childcare.
- Engaging men early in prenatal visits, during childbirth, and postpartum can facilitate lifelong participation in care.

- Support services and programs for fathers across Australia provide extensive resources and information on parenting and fatherhood, but they have limitations in accessibility, visibility, and framing.
- Many healthcare services remain mother-centric, establishing expectations around their involvement and making it difficult for fathers to participate in prenatal care visits and post-childbirth recovery.
- “Father” focused language is more effective at recruiting men into parenting programs and research than “parent” centric framing.
- Fathers remain under-represented in research and early childhood interventions
- Australian fathers’ mental health is impacted after the birth of children, with many not seeking information or support.



5.



# Gender Norms

## 5. GENDER NORMS

### 5.1. Gender norms and masculinity

Gender norms are the conscious and subconscious beliefs and attitudes we hold surrounding the expectations of what men and women should do or are capable of doing. These norms impact our behaviour in three ways: 1) how we perceive ourselves, 2) how we perceive others, and 3) how institutions are organised<sup>151</sup>. One form of social norms that impact gender relations is patriarchy. Fundamentally, patriarchy encompasses a range of relationships, beliefs and values that are embedded in political, social, cultural and economic systems that structure and perpetuate gender inequality between men and women<sup>152</sup>. Patriarchal relations influence both the private and public spheres of an individual's life, as well as that of the collective, ensuring that men dominate both domains.

As a result, attributes pertaining to men that are regarded as 'masculine' are privileged, while 'feminine' traits are undermined and undervalued<sup>152</sup>. This leads to a range of social norms associated with each gender: masculinity stereotypically reflects dominance, confidence, strength, competition and rationality; and femininity is stereotypically associated with submission, nurturing, caring, sensitivity, and emotion<sup>153</sup>. Even if individuals themselves do not hold these patriarchal norms, they operate within systems (e.g. families, workplaces, schools, and governments) that have institutionalised patriarchy. Thus, we often operate within these systems regardless of our personal beliefs<sup>154</sup>.

Patriarchal norms are maintained in a variety of ways, including<sup>155</sup>:

- Upbringing – reflecting the expectations of parents, peers, and community.
- Discrimination – in hiring, promotions, and opportunities.
- Social arrangements – family, church, and labour.
- Force – rape, battering, and harassment.
- Lack of facilities – for childcare, sexual education, and training.
- Laws and policies – unequal wages, age discrimination, and occupational exclusion<sup>155</sup>.

Patriarchal norms continuously disadvantage women in various ways within societal and organisational contexts. They can reinforce attitudes that exclude women from political and economic positions (e.g., political office, governing boards, directors and CEOs), as well as discussions, that directly impact their lives and the choices they can make<sup>155</sup>. But, they also impact men, leading to fewer caregiving opportunities, riskier behaviours and decision-making, and poorer health outcomes. Indeed, men in more patriarchal societies are at higher risk for drinking, accidents and death, and sleep worse than those in countries where women have access to more social, economic, and political equality<sup>156</sup>.

Two patriarchal beliefs are often expressed as stereotypes that limit men's ability to care. The first is the notion that "good" men are financial providers and family breadwinners. This places men in a position of valuing career over care investments. The second is the notion that men are incompetent, and by contrast women are naturally superior caregivers. This limits men's

opportunities to care from early ages and positions women as the experts in care, further reinforcing gender stereotypes<sup>157</sup>. It is when these gender norms and stereotypes impede an individual's choices or opportunities that they can reinforce gender gaps and lead to vastly different life outcomes between men and women<sup>158</sup>.

## 5.2. Norms and systems world-wide

Norms surrounding the equal sharing of care differ greatly around the world, but global reports on the division of care work suggests that social norms, systems, and institutions are slowly shifting towards a more equal sharing of care and egalitarianism in gender relations. These increases are positively linked with women's greater labour market participation and employment, as well as with men's increasing involvement in housework and care<sup>18</sup>. In 2020, the Pew Research Centre reported that 72 percent of participants interviewed from 34 countries around the world say that a marriage where both the husband and wife have jobs and take care of the house and children is more satisfying than a life where the husband provides for the family and the wife takes care of the house and children<sup>19</sup>. However, globally, only 19 percent of men spend their total non-leisure time on unpaid work compared to 55 percent of women<sup>4</sup>.

There are a multitude of ongoing international commitments to tackling biased gender norms. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 aims to achieve gender equality in social, economic, and political life. All 191 UN Member States, including Australia, have agreed to commit to achieve this goal by 2030. Under the target is a specific commitment to "recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate"<sup>20</sup>. Thus, fathers increased, and equal participation is key to achieving this agenda.

### 5.2.1. Australian context

Australia witnessed some of the biggest increases globally in attitudinal support for gender equality from 2005 to 2014, ranking third globally in its reduction in bias against women in politics, economics, education, domestic violence and reproductive rights, as reported by the United Nations Development Programme<sup>161</sup>. Australia's world gender equality ranking again jumped 17 places from 43rd in 2022 to 26th in 2023. Despite these broad trends, there is evidence that in a number of areas gender equality is slowing or stalled throughout Australia, in part due to persistent discriminatory gender norms<sup>162 163</sup>. The consequences are significant; it is estimated that persisting gender inequality are costing Australia on average \$128 billion per annum<sup>151</sup>.

Research from VicHealth determined that most Australians recognise that traditional gender stereotypes are limiting and harmful for boys and men<sup>164</sup>. However, a backlash exists with 30 percent of Australian men reporting that gender inequality doesn't exist – with younger generations more likely to hold such conservative views<sup>165</sup>. Research conducted in the UK has

found that social media plays an increasing role in socialising young men into hostile sexist and patriarchal norms<sup>166</sup>, but direct research in this area and in Australia specifically is limited.

While there are arguments that Australian attitudes towards gender norms are gradually becoming more progressive, persistent institutionalised gender inequality remains. While Australia has the 4th highest level of tertiary educated women in the OECD, women of all ages spend on average 9 hours a week more on unpaid work and care than men. Similarly, Australian women do more unpaid housework than men even when they are the primary breadwinner, while earning 86 cents for every dollar earned by a man<sup>163 151</sup>. Further, a study from The University of Melbourne reveals that many Australians disagree with traditional gender roles about paid and caregiving responsibilities, but through time use surveys we can see that they still exhibit unequal allocations of time to paid employment, unpaid housework, and childcare. This study underscores this discrepancy between attitudes and actions which has limited progress towards gender equality in Australia over the past century<sup>168</sup>. It is important to note these patterns are further exacerbated when accounting for intersecting forms of disadvantage or discrimination based on identity, including characteristics such as Indigeneity, age, disability, ethnicity, race, and religion<sup>169</sup>.

### 5.3. The movement towards new fatherhood norms

The transition into parenthood is a critical point for gender role attitudes. Research applying longitudinal data from Australian parents documents a movement towards traditional gender norms following the birth of a child. Specifically, Australian parents, mothers and fathers alike, report greater support for the notion that mothering is a women's most important role in life after the birth of their first child compared to the period prior to birth<sup>8</sup>.

More broadly, social norms around good fatherhood have shifted over time with important implications for caregiving. The rise of "caring masculinities" captures a reconfiguring of masculine identities away from value of domination and aggression, towards attitudes that prioritise family support and care. These nurturing, caring identities allow men to engage more deeply in family life which helps positively alter men's behaviour and perceptions of gender<sup>170</sup>. Specifically, men who adopt caring masculinities report more emotionally, physically, and psychologically enriching lives<sup>170</sup>. For example, a study conducted in the US shows that stay-at-home fathers reported shifts in gender role norms and masculinity as they assumed more primary care of children<sup>171</sup>. This led them to report: (1) higher levels of satisfaction in caring for their children; (2) greater emotional connections with others; and (3) an increased respect for caregiving more generally. The men stated that caring for their children helped them become more nurturing and sensitive parents.

The second attitudinal shift is that of 'Involved Fathering'. Similar to caring masculinities, it refers to men who are more engaged, accessible, and nurturing in their children's lives but are still employed full-time. Involved Fathering further emphasises that when fathers are more involved in the lives of their children, they can experience increased job satisfaction, greater

work-family enrichment, and lower work-family conflict<sup>172</sup>. In their research, Ladge & Humberd<sup>172</sup> identify the conflict fathers working in full-time professional careers feel, in which they believe that caregiving should be divided equally, but acknowledge that this is not the current reality in their families. This creates internal conflict for men who want to be deeply engaged in their children's lives but cannot access the time required to be full-time carers. This creates multiple conflicting expectations of what it means to be a father that are often in conflict between work and family. A US study similarly found that although the fatherhood role continues to be aligned with 'breadwinner' and 'disciplinarian' identities, there is an increasing number of men striving to be both good providers and equal partners in parenting<sup>2</sup>. This leads men to unlearn breadwinner norms to embrace more gender-neutral expectations of these social roles. Our recent research also finds these patterns are evident in the mental loads of fathers as well.

### **5.3.1. Generational shifts in fatherhood norms**

These new approaches to fathering are partly due to generational shifts in attitudes and approaches to parenting that have seen fathers' time-use in caregiving and household tasks increase in the past few decades. Our US-based research showed each generation of fathers—from Baby Boomers to Gen X to Millennials – has increased their contribution towards the primary care of children and core housework tasks<sup>173</sup>. Yet, mothers have maintained their childcare and domestic contributions across these generations, highlighting how fathers' larger contributions have not closed the gender gaps in unpaid and paid time use.

This increase of men's childcare and housework contributions has rapidly occurred and transitioned in a short period of time<sup>173</sup>. While women's political power and socioeconomic status took several centuries to increase, men have exhibited new fatherhood, or modern fatherhood, in one generation<sup>174</sup>. As our interviews on the mental load are showing, this rapid shift creates incredible challenges for men, given the absence of clear new fatherhood role models.

Roy & Allen<sup>175</sup> revealed that ideas of fatherhood and masculinity have been reconceptualised through intergenerational family-level processes. They recognise that "men's lives have changed dramatically over the past half century, usually in tandem with deep shifts in the lived experience of women in families as well". Thus, societal changes have aided intergenerational shifts in attitudes towards fathering and are recent but dramatic shifts in norms associated with the father role. Like all major paradigm changes these can be messy, disjointed, and non-linear<sup>176</sup>.

### **5.3.2. Reinforcing gender norms through childhood socialisation**

An important mechanism through which traditional gender norms are instilled or disrupted is through childhood socialisation<sup>177</sup>. Gendered childhood socialisation is significantly influenced by family structure. McHale et al.<sup>178</sup> document that the co-presence of same or opposite sex parents and/or siblings socialises children into gendered family roles and behaviours from a young age. Specifically, fathers who hold more traditional gender role attitudes treat sisters

and brothers differently which reinforces gender-based behaviour. Additionally, as mothers spend more time with children from birth through to adolescence, children are socialised into feminine-typed behaviours enacted by the mother. In most cases, children identify with the parent of the same gender and thus acquire their social relational behaviours and roles which are distinct, salient, and easy to learn<sup>178</sup>.

In addition to parents, siblings also shape gendered socialisation by serving as role models and reinforcers of sex-typed behaviours to their younger siblings<sup>179</sup>. Siblings provide sources of social comparison and, since exposure occurs daily within the family unit, the accumulation of such experiences differentiates brothers and sisters from one another based on gender role expectations.

As a result of gender-based childhood socialisation, some scholars argue that men are socialised from a young age into gender appropriate behaviour that defines men as disinterested and incapable of providing or contributing to unpaid work, particularly the adequate care of children<sup>182</sup>. However, our research shows that men's confidence in caregiving can increase through direct experience caring for children<sup>157</sup>. Thus, the process of childhood socialisation can be disrupted by direct involvement in caring for young children. Recent research indicates that the vast majority of parents believe that sons and daughters should be taught to do care work, with 80 percent of men and women disagreeing with the statement that "boys should not be taught how to do household chores and care work during childhood"<sup>4</sup>. This is a positive sign of change that highlights how childhood socialisation does not have to be a gendered process, but rather a period of transformational learning for young boys and girls alike.

#### **5.4. Maternal gatekeeping**

Mothers also play a critical role in shifting traditional fatherhood roles and including fathers in the primary care of children. Research conducted in the US identified maternal gatekeeping as a process in which mothers keep their partners at arm's length from meaningful parent-child interactions<sup>183</sup>. They argue that this is most evident when mothers act as household managers and situate father as helpers. By sustaining the manager-helper dynamic, mothers maintain primary responsibility for family work and influence paternal involvement by choosing which activities fathers may and may not participate in. It is argued that mothers manage or oversee their partners active involvement in childcare because they are enacting traditional gendered beliefs that fathers can't do it right without the supervision of mothers who are assumed to be more competent. This can significantly impact the confidence and self-esteem of fathers, which is further reinforced by social norms that define fathering as a role that men generally perform inadequately<sup>184</sup>.

Additionally, maternal gatekeeping is usually reinforced by encouragement and/ or criticism mothers express about the father's capability to adequately care for their children. A US study<sup>185</sup> showed greater maternal encouragement was associated with higher participation

and involvement of fathers in caregiving even if the couples hold more traditional gender norms or have poor relationship quality. By contrast, when mothers are discouraging of fathers' participation, fathers report lower rates of involvement and confidence in caregiving<sup>183</sup>.

It is important to note that maternal gatekeeping is complex for mothers themselves. An Israeli study identified that a mother's self-esteem influences maternal gatekeeping behaviours, as providing care to children is intrinsically linked to notions of being a 'good mother'<sup>186</sup>. Our research on the mental load indicates mothers anticipate social penalties for getting caregiving wrong and expect undone or poorly executed work carried out by the father to come back to them tenfold. Thus, it is important to note the mechanisms through which mothers' experience maternal gatekeeping, including social norms that penalise them for being 'bad' mothers. As our research is showing, mothers who 'do it all' for the family report high levels of fatigue, exhaustion, and burnout.

## **5.5. Cultural and community context**

A final dimension of gender norm socialisation that is critical in the Australian context is the role of culture and community. In Australia, studies suggest that the diverse identities and backgrounds of fathers contributes to a distinctive and individualised experience of fatherhood.

### **5.5.1. Migrant and refugee fathers**

Research carried out by the Working with Refugee Families Project through the University of South Australia<sup>189</sup>, found that many immigrant families came from cultural backgrounds in which the roles of men, women, and children were well-defined and reflected the traditional, economic, and religious characteristics of their country of origin. In many instances, participants came from countries where patriarchal structures were the norm, and men are considered the head of the family who both wives and children are expected to obey. For a small number of participants, the changing roles of family members was welcomed when they moved to Australia; however, many expressed that these changes created confusion and concern surrounding their gender role identity. There were additional tensions created when the traditional family hierarchy was challenged by perceptions of Australian cultural practices and government agencies. This included, refugee parents noting a 'cultural clash' that extended from diverse values, lifestyles, roles of family members and parenting practices<sup>189</sup>. Such cultural differences can create tensions between certain communities and their uptake of government policies and support to achieve an equal division of care.

### **5.5.2. Queer fathers**

In a similar context, various communities have adopted the practice of seeking caregiving support beyond the traditional family structure. For example, research indicates that within queer communities, there is a prevalent trend of turning to community-based care to look after their children. This preference is influenced in part by the safe, inclusive, and supportive environment it creates for families to embrace their identities and foster a shared sense of

belonging<sup>190</sup>. It's also important to acknowledge that in LGBTQIA+ family structures, queer fathers diverge from traditional gender role expectations in caregiving. In two-father families, where there isn't a 'mother' to fulfill the primary caregiving role as prescribed by traditional gender norms, caregiving responsibilities are negotiated and divided in ways that are distinct from those in heterosexual couple families<sup>191</sup>. This offers an opportunity to highlight to society more broadly that caregiving tasks are not inherently gendered, and that an equal sharing of care is possible amongst men.

### **5.5.3. First Nations fathers**

Within First Nations communities, the historical context of childcare and caregiving for fathers is intertwined with a legacy of trauma since colonisation<sup>192</sup>. In particular, the policies of the Stolen Generations, implemented from the late 19th century well into the 20th century, centred caregiving around the notion of assimilating Indigenous children into mainstream Western culture<sup>193</sup>. This resulted in the forced removal and separation of children from their families, severing familial bonds and disrupting traditional parenting roles. First Nations fathers endured the anguish of having their roles and titles as fathers systematically stripped away. The impact of this practice continues to reverberate through generations and has left lasting imprint on First Nations communities<sup>194,195</sup>.

Today, cultural gender roles may also have implications for how caregiving responsibilities are approached and distributed among community members, influencing the dynamics within families. This includes recognising that while family includes the most immediate members of a child's environment (i.e., mothers, fathers, and siblings), it equally includes and refers to extended member such as aunties, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and family established through clans, kinship systems, and other members of the community<sup>196-198</sup>. Each of these members can have a significant impact on the caregiving and development of the child. It is essential to consider these cultural nuances and historical factors when examining the experiences of First Nations fathers in the realm of caregiving, as they navigate through a complex interplay of tradition, historical context, and contemporary challenges<sup>199</sup>.

## **5.6. Summary and key research takeaways**

This section provided an overview on the research about gender norms and their impacts on fatherhood in Australia. Below we summarise the key takeaways across these sections:

- Australia overall has exhibited a movement towards greater attitudinal support for gender equality in social, economic, educational, and political spheres.
- Key transition points are critical for reinforcing traditional gender norms, notably the transition into childhood/teenage years and parenthood.
- Men are exhibiting fatherhood norms that are distinct to previous generations that emphasise the importance of spending more time with and caring for children.
- Young men are increasingly vulnerable to social media that reinforces traditional gender norms and harmful ideologies.



- Fathers find it challenging to identify role models that exhibit engaged fatherhood norms, as these changes are relatively recent.
- Mothers play a key role in facilitating fathers' engagement with children.
- Cultural and community context plays a critical role in Australia in adopting new fatherhood norms.
- Migrant and refugee fathers can experience greater tension in adopting new fatherhood norms.
- Research around queer family units provide an alternative framework for care that can be community based.
- Historical context, contemporary challenges and traditional notions of family and fatherhood are essential considerations when engaging First Nations fathers in conversations about parenting practices; this work should be carried out by First Nations scholars and communities.

6.



Conclusion

## 6. CONCLUSION

In summary, the transition from pregnancy to a child's first year represents a critical juncture in reshaping the dynamics of both work and family life for parents. Extensive research conducted in Australia emphasises the persistence of traditional gender roles after childbirth, resulting in lasting consequences such as limited employment opportunities for women and the perpetuation of unequal divisions in both paid and domestic responsibilities. To effectively combat this gender inequality, it is crucial to focus efforts on intervening during this pivotal phase.

An effective strategy involves actively encouraging fathers' involvement from pregnancy through the child's first year. International research advocates for mandatory paternal participation in paid parental leave during this period, presenting a proven method to balance household and childcare responsibilities in both the short and long term. Fathers who invest more time in childcare report numerous personal, emotional, and professional benefits. Notably, current trends indicate a strong desire among fathers to take on a more active role in the primary care of their children, bringing benefits to families, fathers, communities, and workplaces alike.

To address the barriers preventing men from embracing caregiving roles, a comprehensive, evidence-based approach is essential. Individual solutions include providing clear role models that showcase the intricacies of engaged fatherhood, boosting men's confidence in caregiving. Organisational changes, such as establishing supportive workplace environments free from fear of penalisation and more inclusive healthcare services, are imperative. Additionally, governments play a central role in formulating policies related to childcare, parental leave, and sick leave, to alleviate the overall costs associated with caregiving.

While the primary focus of this evidence review is on fathers' roles during a child's first year of life, the insights provided extend beyond this timeframe. Facilitating fathers' active care during these formative years not only enhances their confidence, skills, and capabilities but also contributes to the development of healthier, sustainable, and inclusive futures for all. This transformative approach seeks to break the cycle of entrenched gender roles and promote a more balanced and equitable society.

7.



# Recommendations

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following evidence-based recommendations emphasise the interconnected nature of policies, workplace environments, healthcare services and systems, and gender norms. These cross-complementary recommendations are designed to facilitate change across Australia's social networks and infrastructure, where improvements in one facet can positively affect others.

### 7.1. Government

Establish national care policies with priorities and targets aimed at reducing and redistributing care work equally between men and women, including greater recognition for the importance of fathers' involvement in caregiving:

1. Expand paid parental leave to 52 weeks, ensuring a minimum of 14 weeks non-transferable father and partner leave.
2. Increase the wage replacement level to at least 80 percent of earnings, ensuring that superannuation payments continue while on leave.
3. Conduct annual monitoring of changes made to enhanced paid parental leave, especially fathers' uptake and experiences.
4. Reduce eligibility criteria, including a review of the activity test, for paid parental leave, ensuring wider access to demographics including migrants, students, interns, and grant recipients.
5. Remove income tests requirements for paid parental leave recipients.
6. Remove the requirement that **both** parents must meet the work test.
7. Expand accessibility to sick leave, especially for parents with children in their first few years and chronically ill children.
  - a. Grant sick leave on a per episode basis, rather than allocating a set number of days per year.

### 7.2. Workplaces

Eliminate barriers to fathers reducing hours and accessing workplace adjustments in paid employment following the birth of a child:

1. Enact role modelling through the promotion of men senior leaders, managers and staff taking leave and utilising flexible working arrangements to accommodate their caring needs.
  - a. Ensure unified messaging and practices in the uptake of father's leave and use of flexible working arrangements across organisations, especially amongst immediate, middle and senior management.
2. Ensure information regarding leave entitlements and flexible work policies are transparent, readily available, and actively disseminated to fathers, enabling them to easily comprehend and take advantage of their workplace benefits.
3. Increase access to flexible working arrangements for fathers, in particular to raise visibility for other workers.

- a. In workplaces where remote flexible work is not feasible, increase access to schedule control, pace, and control of work to allow workers to better integrate work and family life.
4. Conduct annual auditing of pay and promotions amongst workers, to determine the extent that caregivers receive fewer workplace rewards, earnings, and promotions.
  - a. Ensure the audit includes mothers, fathers, and those providing other forms of care.
5. Encourage and advocate for fathers applying for career advancement opportunities.
6. Ensure fathers are provided with adequate flexibility to leave work to participate in prenatal and early childhood appointments, visits and classes.
7. Increase personal and sick leave entitlements to supplement government schemes for working parents.
  - a. Ensure HR departments monitor patterns in requests for, and use of, these entitlements amongst fathers.
8. Recognise and promote the transferable skills built through caregiving, and their value to employers and companies.

### 7.3. Campaigns and programs

Advocate across government, workplaces, and community the importance of equal sharing care for children:

1. Invest in public campaigns which promote the importance of fathers' care for children in early ages (e.g., Thrive by Five campaign).
2. Support and amplify initiatives promoting gender equality in caregiving responsibilities at home, particularly in campaigns, television programs, and other media.
  - a. Emphasise the importance of authenticity in public campaigns showcasing fathers' active involvement, avoiding superficial portrayals.
  - b. Strive to validate the unique challenges men face while attempting to balance caregiving responsibilities, distinct from the experiences of their fathers and without clear role models.
3. Showcase the ways in which diverse families utilise alternative approaches to caregiving that operate beyond the confines of traditional family structures.
4. Engage with online personalities and influencers to create social media campaigns that target young men.
  - a. Showcase men influencers who engage in caregiving (e.g., for siblings, grandparents).
  - b. Clearly communicate messages about redefined and new expressions of masculinity.
5. Provide hands on opportunities for boys to learn and practice care.
  - a. Engage parents, teachers, peers, and coaches to encourage their participation.

6. Engage healthcare workers in programs that equip them with the tools and language to actively encourage and promote increased paternal involvement in prenatal care.
7. Elevate selected programs through healthcare providers (e.g., flyers, posters) to increase visibility of pregnancy and early childhood initiatives to fathers attending medical appointments.
  - a. Engage with organisations to co-design or strengthen pre-existing programs.
8. Implement new and innovative programs to incorporate parents back into the workplace (e.g., see our Parenting Work Skills Certificate).
9. Ensure the inclusion of fathers in programs and training by targeting locations with a predominantly men-focused presence, leveraging influential role models, and offering programs after standard work hours.

#### 7.4. Research

Investigate fathers' utilisation of parental leave and caregiving patterns to identify obstacles and advocate for equity in care:

1. Periodic disaggregate data collection on the uptake of Paid Parental Leave schemes by age, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity.
  - a. Highlight the proportion of new parents accessing leave within this data set.
2. Fund research into the utilisation of parental leave by fathers working in precarious employment and/or the informal economy to identify and document any gaps in coverage.
3. Enhance healthcare research by using father-inclusive language which specifically targets the recruitment of “fathers” rather than “parents”.
4. Conduct additional research into the frameworks, messaging, and barriers that exclude fathers from actively participating in various early-life interventions for children.
5. Invest in research focusing on fathers’ experiences of caregiving and their identified barriers to care at home, work, and life. This will provide a more comprehensive understanding of their barriers to care across their lives.

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