

EXPLORING PARENTS' VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES OF WORKING FROM HOME: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

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WHY THIS RESEARCH, AND WHY NOW?

The 'great disruption' of the COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented changes to parents' work-care routines.

- Pre-existing gender, work and socio-economic inequalities were heightened
- New stratification: working at work vs. working from home
- Parents were particularly vulnerable to mental health adversity
- ..but also to new routines, and new opportunities?

Need for evidence about what supports work participation alongside family wellbeing for Australian parents now.



AIMS

1. To explore parents' views and experiences of working from home now and since the COVID-19 pandemic
2. To explore the impacts of working from home on parents' jobs, work-family balance, parenting and family relationships, and wellbeing
3. To explore parents' strategies and boundary management tactics, as well as the workplace supports and job conditions, that enable parents to effectively work from home.



METHOD

- Qualitative design, underpinned by boundary theory and self-determination theory
- Semi-structured interviews with parents who regularly worked from home
- A parent sample previously recruited to a survey study in 2020-21 were invited via email in 2024
- Interviews were 30-65mins long, and conducted via telephone or videoconference
- Data analysed using thematic analysis informed by Braun & Clarke (2023) and Green et al (2007)

SAMPLE

17 parents

- 11 mothers, 6 fathers
- Mean age 46 years (range 39-55)
- Located across Australia
- Two-thirds born in Australia
- Four single/separated parents
- Two-thirds had a youngest child in primary school
- Paid work hours ranged from 28-45 hours
- Diverse industries and occupations
- Half in managerial roles



FINDINGS

1. Time control facilitates parents' work-family balance, wellbeing and recovery, and family wellbeing

2. Autonomy promotes family relatedness, parenting competence and productivity at home

3. Home/hybrid work benefits job productivity, but parents work harder to stay visible and connected in the workplace

4. Internalised expectations, pressures and boundary challenges

THEMES

5. Managing others' expectations and boundary violations can be challenging

6. Parent-led strategies and skills enable a competent home/hybrid worker

7. Organisational policies and practices that normalise remote work motivate parents to work from home well

8. Family visibility and relatedness in the workplace affirms parenting role

THEME 2

***“I’m way more present with my kids”*: Autonomy to integrate parenting and household responsibilities promotes family relatedness, parenting competence and productivity at home**

Autonomy over work hours and location enabled parents to integrate family needs across the workday, particularly in the context of school hours:

- do school drop off and pick up
- participate in school activities
- take children to extracurricular activities
- simply be at home with their children

Flexible work hours and location **enriched parenting role** and **strengthened parent-child relationships**.

Parents felt **working from home benefitted children** because they were more engaged and present.

“It’s really transformed my life. I’m very pleased that in years into the future [child] will be able to say, “Dad was there to pick me up from school.” I can’t really emphasise how important that is to me.”
[P4, father]

“I’m just around for them a lot more. They probably feel like I’m more interested in what they’re doing as well.... So, I guess I feel a lot more connected with the kids, and I think it benefits them too.”
[P1, mother]

“[Child] said to me that they really like the fact I’m at home, so they can talk about what’s happened that day when they walk in the door.” [P10, mother]

THEME 3

***“You just get more done”*: Home/hybrid work benefits job productivity, but parents work harder to stay visible and connected in the workplace**

Working from home enabled greater job productivity and focus than onsite:

- Fewer distractions and disruptions from colleagues
- Greater control over interactions
- Easier to focus on cognitively demanding tasks or deep work
- Home/hybrid work well suited to job role

Work tasks, demands and pace differed when working onsite or at home – parents had autonomy to structure and organise tasks according to location.

Mix and balance in job location benefitted parents’ ability to do their job, improving performance and efficiency across the workday and week.

“I just feel I get more done. It’s just easier to focus. Because some of my work relies on me being very focused to make sure I don’t make a mistake.”

[P6, mother]

“I know those interactions, that part of work, are extremely important so that’s why I cherish my days in the office. But I need to accept that I’m not going to achieve as much as when I work from home” [P7, mother].

“At home I tend to do things more at my own pace... When you’re in the clinic there’s people coming through, there’s phones going and emails and there’s much more to do... You can’t plan it, it’s more reactive.” [P5, father]

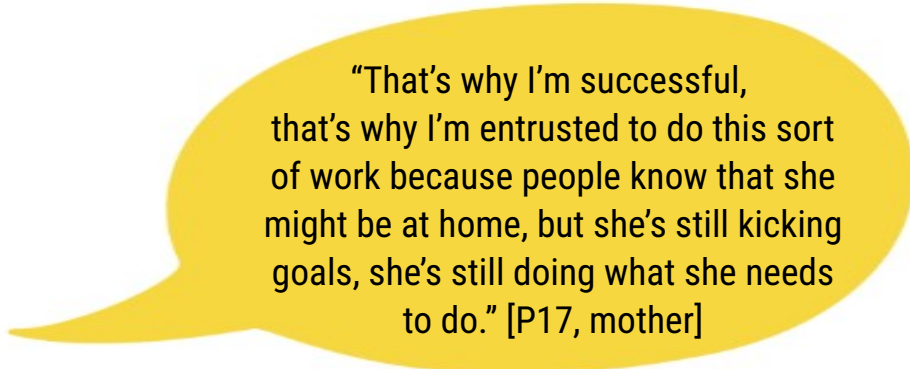
THEME 3

***“You just get more done”*: Home/hybrid work benefits job productivity, but parents work harder to stay visible and connected in the workplace**

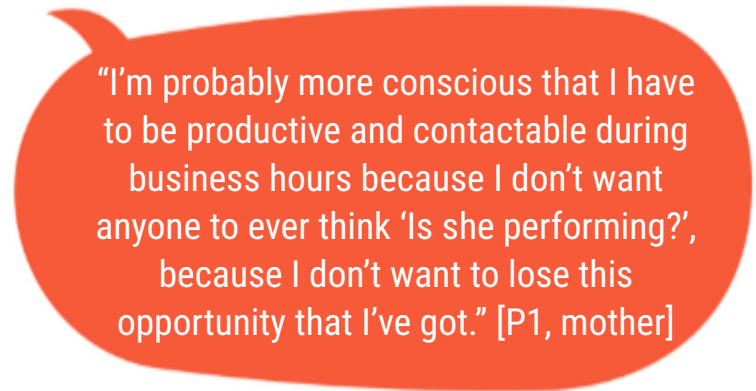
Some mothers and one father felt they had to achieve more or prove themselves for the privilege of working from home.

They made a determined effort to be productive, took on extra roles and responsibilities, and ensured they were visible while working remotely.

Some parents were proud to be a productive employee working from home.



“That’s why I’m successful, that’s why I’m entrusted to do this sort of work because people know that she might be at home, but she’s still kicking goals, she’s still doing what she needs to do.” [P17, mother]



“I’m probably more conscious that I have to be productive and contactable during business hours because I don’t want anyone to ever think ‘Is she performing?’, because I don’t want to lose this opportunity that I’ve got.” [P1, mother]

THEME 3

***“You just get more done”*: Home/hybrid work benefits job productivity, but parents work harder to stay visible and connected in the workplace**

Limited social connection with colleagues was a caveat to the perceived productivity benefits of working from home.

- Reduced or limited opportunities for serendipitous conversations, peer debriefing and engaging at a deeper level
- Establishing and maintaining work relationships was the primary challenge for full-time remote working parents

Prioritising family connection required parents to be more intentional in maintaining professional relationships and mitigating social isolation.

Parents had adapted to ways of working from home, and colleagues had learnt how to effectively work together online

“I do enjoy meeting my colleagues, I think that’s very nice to have some face-to-face time. If I don’t go to the office at all, I think that will be not so good... I would feel a bit more isolated.”
[P2, single mother]

“Now it’s become the norm... it’s kind of like everyone knows the etiquette of working from home”
[P7, mother].

THEME 4

***“You’re never officially finished for the day”*: Internalised expectations, pressures and boundary challenges**

Parents recognised the risk of getting caught up in housework or becoming too distracted by the home environment.

Work intensification was a common challenge. Parents tended to work longer hours when working from home:

- Worked through commuting time
- Lost track of time during focused work
- Difficult to mentally switch off or disconnect from technology

The lack of an end-of-workday transition was another disadvantage; some missed the opportunity to decompress during a commute.

“... that’s probably the thing I like least about working from home, you constantly have to be conscious of what you’re actually doing with your time while you’re at home.” [P13, father]

“Sometimes it feels like you never leave work when you’re working at home. There’s no disconnect... You’ve never officially finished for the day.” [P14, single father]

THEME 6

***“I’m good at task switching and multitasking”*: Parent-led strategies and skills enable a competent home/hybrid worker**

Parents had adapted well to remote work and had mastered the skillset and mindset required to effectively work from home.

This was often in the face of limited workplace supports to specifically manage work-family boundaries.

Overall, parents recognised which strategies were more or less effective for them, having learned over time which tactics best suited their personality and needs.

Parents drew upon a range of strategies to:

- maintain focus and productivity
- protect their home environment from distractions and interruptions
- facilitate the end-of-workday transition

PARENT-LED STRATEGIES

Parent-led strategies to help make working from home, work

- Time management and organisational skills e.g., blocking out time in calendar every day for focused work, planned tasks or a lunch break
- Scheduling meetings on work from home days or office days (preferences were mixed)
- Turning off work emails and Teams for focused work
- Setting up goals for the workday
- Having a dedicated workspace
- Closing home office door and wearing headphones
- Communicating with (older) children about work demands
- Not using personal phone during work time
- Performing rituals to facilitate the end-of-workday transition e.g., changing clothes, packing laptop away, going for a walk
- Consciously switching off from work-related technology

“...having that clearly marked out work day and being clear about what you want to get done on that day is probably the thing that I find most helpful at focusing myself and not getting too distracted”

The noise-cancelling headphones help, and they are also our recognised signal that someone's not to be interrupted. [P13, father]

“I don't have emails on my phone or anything, because I felt like there is enough of my work at home that I need boundaries in when I finish.”

THEME 7

***“Everyone’s okay with it”*: Organisational policies and practices that normalise remote/hybrid work motivate parents to work from home well**

Changes to organisational policies and cultural norms that normalised flexible

Organisations encouraged and supported flexible work arrangements for *all* employees, regardless of caregiving responsibilities, seniority and job role.

Open dialogue and mutual trust between parents and managers were essential

“It’s a non-issue, it’s not even a thing that needs to be discussed... If you need to work from home, you do. And everyone’s okay with it” [P13, father].

“The whole narrative is around flexibility for everybody” [P9, mother]

“My director is very relaxed and very much supports us [working] the way that we work best” [P2, single mother].

“I’m probably more productive because I appreciate the flexibility. I don’t have to ask permission every time I want to have a lunch break in the morning ” [P1 , mother].

THEME 8

***“They’re all parents, so they all understand”*: Family visibility and relatedness in the workplace validates parenting role**

Working from home had positively shifted workplace views on combining work and care. Family life had become more visible to workplaces, and workplaces were more understanding of parenting demands and more accepting of children.

Positive experiences were underpinned by a family-friendly workplace culture. Parents felt supported because managers had overtly expressed a family-first attitude and encouraged staff to prioritise children over work.

Having a manager who was a parent was an important feature of a supportive workplace.

“... all of a sudden the daughter will turn up with a hairbrush and she’s doing her hair, tying her hair and off she goes. And no one is saying, ‘Oi, that’s a bit bloody wrong’, because she’s focused on the meeting, she’s just doing something in between, 30 seconds, off you go. Would never have happened in the past.”

[P12, mother]

“He’s very family-friendly, like kids come first... the kids are priority. Same as if there was something on at the school. Like, “Kids come first, we don’t miss out on the important stuff.” So, yeah, he was fine with the working from home” [P8, mother]

“They know my circumstances as a single parent...and they’re all parents, so they all understand” [P14, single father].

IN SUMMARY

- Remote/hybrid work can continue to help working families 'work'.
- Parents recognise and are responsive to challenges; parents are expert in ways to stay connected and productive at work AND at home.
- This protects them, and their work: benefits include increased productivity, better work-family balance, improved well-being and parenting competence.
- Benefits extend to children, partners, family relationships and household functioning.
- Parents value trust and regular connection, and flexible, family-friendly supportive cultures that understand individual needs.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Relatively advantaged sample
- Parents had adapted well to working from home and reported remote/hybrid work as an ideal arrangement
 - Limits transferability of findings to more diverse parents, new parents, and those with less-favourable experiences or who do not value remote/hybrid work as highly
- Differences in experience by gender were not a dominant feature in the dataset
- Views of employers and managers remain under-explored

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

- Continue to normalise and embed working from home across organisations
- Support flexible working arrangements and home/hybrid working for all employees
- Greater autonomy in managing work and workloads
- Prioritise workplace trust, culture, connection and family-friendly support
- Recognise that home/hybrid working benefits both employees and employers



THANK YOU

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