

FATHERS AND PARENTAL LEAVE

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OVERVIEW

Just one in 20 Australian fathers take primary parental leave¹, which is a low number by global standards. This article looks at why Australian fathers are reluctant to take parental leave as well as the benefits for both families and businesses of shared parental leave.

KEY MESSAGES

- A lack of legislated 'shared parental leave', continued adherence to traditional gender roles and the gender pay gap are preventing many fathers from taking parental leave.
- Having shared parental leave allows for more equal parenting and career roles within families.
- A positive work-home balance can lead to higher levels of work satisfaction, which directly affects productivity.

INTRODUCTION

The needs of modern Australian families have changed but the current parental leave system is not keeping up. Australian fathers are at a disadvantage, and the consequent impact of this on mothers, partners, children and the wider business community is considerable. If Australia is to eliminate gender inequality and offer both mothers and fathers an equal opportunity to thrive both at work and within the home, significant changes need to be made to foster an inclusive, flexible and accepting environment.

The use of parental leave by fathers in Australia is very low by global standards. Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) show that just one in 20 fathers take primary parental leave, with 95% of all primary carers leave taken by mothers (ABS, 2017). A 2014 study by the Human Rights Commission (HRC; 2014) showed that 85% of the fathers and partners surveyed took less than four weeks leave.

¹ ABS Gender Indicators, Australia, Sep 2017 (4125.0). 'Work and Family Balance'.

Yet despite the low uptake of parental leave amongst fathers, men do want to be involved in the lives of their children. Three in four dads told the HRC that they would have liked to take additional leave (HRC, 2014). Another study by the Boston College Center for Work and Family found that regardless of how dads were classified (as 'egalitarian, divided or traditional' in their parenting role), all working dads wanted more time with their children (Harrington & Sabatini, 2017).

WHY AREN'T FATHERS TAKING LEAVE?

So why is this happening? There are both social and economic challenges that are stopping fathers from taking leave. Firstly, Australia does not have a nationally legislated 'shared parental leave' approach and, as such, fathers are often labelled as 'secondary carers' – and most organisations provide limited parental leave allowance for secondary carers, if any at all. This divide is reinforced by entrenched social views of the breadwinner/homemaker gender ideals. Fathers are conscious of a stigma and bias around taking extended leave, especially when they are unable to see many of their male colleagues taking leave.

The gender pay gap means that men traditionally earn more in the family, and this too affects a father's decision to take extended leave – many organisations do not provide any financial security or incentive around leave, particularly 'secondary' carers leave. Further to this, many businesses are uncertain of the financial impact shared parental leave may have, and assume that it is too costly to implement – especially for fathers. However, the opposite is true – an American study that surveyed more than 250 employers showed that 87% said paid parental leave did not result in any cost increases for the business (Applebaum & Milkman, 2011).

THE BENEFITS OF SHARED PARENTAL LEAVE

Despite these challenges, the benefits of fathers taking parental leave are many and have wide-reaching impacts, for businesses and families. When parental leave options are more equally available to both mothers and fathers, then the levelling of unpaid care work is also more equal. Fathers are able to have a better balance between work and family, and spend more time with their children, and mothers are given that same balance too, and have the opportunity to pursue their career with flexibility and purpose. A Swiss study in 2014 showed that if parental leave policies are available to each parent, it enables a more equal division of work between women and men by fostering parental involvement in the care of the child (Lanfranchi & Valarino, 2014). This means work in both an employment setting and the non-paid care that is needed at home and with family.

Economically, shared parental leave is unequivocally good for business. The retention of talent and lower rates of staff turnover, resulting in lower recruitment and training costs, is a key reason some employers provide paid family leave. As demand grows for more equal parental leave, these policies set companies apart from others. A survey by Deloitte (2016) found that 77% of employees with access to benefits reported that the amount of paid parental leave had some influence on their choice of one employer over another.

NEEDED CHANGE

Shared parental leave improves engagement, morale and productivity. It makes sense that if employees are satisfied with their work and home balance and their care-giving responsibilities, then their levels of satisfaction at work is higher, and this directly affects productivity. A 2016 Ernst & Young study of more than 1,500 employers found that more than 80% of companies that offer paid family leave reported a positive effect on employee morale, and more than 70% reported an increase in employee productivity.

So the benefits are clear but most Australian businesses are yet to fully implement best practice parental leave. The progressive few that are driving the change provide an example of what best practice leave for fathers and mothers looks like. These businesses are providing equal leave entitlements to primary and secondary carers, and building an awareness and confidence around the policies so that fathers know what is available to them and feel safe to take their leave. Parental leave should be flexible in its nature, for both mothers and fathers, and be adequate in length for each parent.

Lastly, parental leave for fathers should be actively encouraged and incentivised. Companies need to actively develop an organisational culture that encourages men to take leave. This means that company leaders need to identify challenges or stigmas in their own organisations that may be preventing fathers taking leave, and work collaboratively as a business to fix them. Importantly, fathers in leadership positions should themselves take leave, leading by example and removing any bias within the workplace.

Encouraging, facilitating and supporting fathers to take parental leave and share caring responsibilities is imperative. Families need to feel supported by their employers, and by actively promoting men and women as equal carers through shared parental leave, we have the opportunity to narrow the gender gap, boost workplace productivity and champion Australian parents in both their family and work goals.

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