



Fathering in Australia among couple families with young children

Research highlights

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There has been growing recognition of the importance of fathers to families in recent years. Societal trends, such as rising levels of employment among mothers of young children and recognition of the importance of the father–child relationship, have given more prominence to the contribution that fathers make to family life. Governments are increasingly interested in creating conditions that can foster fathers' involvement in families; for example, through promoting more flexible working arrangements or by ensuring that children maintain contact with fathers following family breakdown. This growing interest in the role of fathers has been mirrored in the scientific community, with a burgeoning of interest in research on fathers. However, there has been a limited amount of research on fathers in Australia, with the result that there remains much to be learned about the ways in which Australian fathers contribute to families and feel about themselves as fathers.

New information about fathering in Australia has recently been published, in a report titled *Fathering in Australia Among Couple Families*

With Young Children (Baxter & Smart, 2010). The report aimed to increase understanding of the many ways in which fathers in couple families who are parents of young children contribute to family life. The aspects examined were fathers' time investment with children, their supportiveness as partners, their financial contribution, their parenting behaviours and styles, and their perceptions of their own adequacy as fathers. The impact of fathers on children's wellbeing was also examined. This article presents an edited version of the executive summary from the report, with the addition of selected research highlights to illustrate some of the key findings.

The report made use of data from *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (LSAC), a large-scale, nationally representative study of children and families that is following the experiences and wellbeing of two cohorts of children and their families, from infancy to the threshold of adulthood. The children in the LSAC were, at the first wave of the study in 2004, aged

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0–1 years (the B cohort) and 4–5 years (the K cohort). The data from Wave 1 were used, along with those at Wave 2, when these same children were aged 2–3 years and 6–7 years respectively, and at Wave 3, when they were aged 4–5 years and 8–9 years. The availability of data at these different ages of the children allowed analyses of how fathering may change as children grow through these early years.

LSAC is unusual in that it obtains the perspectives of mothers and fathers, and collects information on a very broad range of influences on child and family wellbeing. It is thus particularly appropriate for the investigation of fathering in the Australian context.

Fathers' time with children

The analyses began by considering the time fathers spend with their children as one facet of fathering, and making use of a number of measures of fathers' time with children. These were: the amount of shared time spent together, whether fathers regularly cared for their child, the play-type activities that children and fathers shared, and fathers' involvement in different personal care, social or educational activities with children.

Analyses of these data showed that children spent several hours per day with their fathers, although much of this time was when mothers were also present. This is shown in Table 1.

These data revealed that children were involved in a range of activities during shared father–child time. Fathers were not just present for playtime; for example, they were present

during father's personal care activities (bathing, grooming) and while they were travelling.

A substantial number of fathers reported having daily involvement in their child's personal care activities, although not surprisingly, mothers had much higher rates of daily involvement. The gap between mothers' and fathers' involvement narrowed for most activities as children aged and mothers' involvement also declined, no doubt reflecting changes in children's needs (Table 2).

While joint time together is one way of looking at fathers' involvement with children, in the analyses of how fathering was associated with child wellbeing, this measure of fathering was not significantly related to outcomes, unlike other measures of fathering (discussed below). This suggests that the sheer amount of time spent in the child's company exerts less influence on children's outcomes than other aspects of fathering. It is likely that the quality of the time that fathers and children spend together is more central, and this is where other measures of fathering are particularly useful.

Co-parenting and couples' sharing of unpaid work

The nature of the co-parental relationship is crucial in explaining how or whether parents' time with children may be beneficial (or otherwise). A positive co-parental relationship may model and foster communication and relationship skills in children—skills that children can emulate in their own relationships.

Table 1 Children's time spent with parents while awake, by cohort and age of child

	B cohort			K cohort		
	0–1 year	2–3 years	4–5 years	4–5 years	6–7 years	8–9 years
	Minutes per day					
Father–child time total	260	275	281	272	247	260
Father-only child time	38	57	57	59	57	55
Mother–child time total	517	510	486	470	377	389
Mother-only child time	294	291	263	258	187	183
Total parent–child time	554	567	544	530	434	443
With other adults	38	110	174	156	255	251
Alone or with other children only	22	49	49	75	96	105
Awake total	626	738	779	775	804	818
Number of children	2,787	2,527	2,197	2,144	2,151	1,903

Note: Total of parent–child time, time with other adults and time alone or with other children does not quite add to the total time awake, as total awake time includes a small amount (less than 20 minutes per day) of missing "who with" data, which has not been shown.

Source: LSAC, children's time use diaries, Waves 1–3

Table 2 Parents' involvement in personal care activities in the past month, by age of child and frequency of fathers' and mothers' involvement

Activity	Age of child	Fathers' frequency of involvement				Total	Mothers' daily involvement
		Once a day or more	Few times a week	Few times a month	Rarely or not at all		%
							%
Assist child with eating	2–3 years	31.1	41.9	11.7	15.4	100.0	55.1
Change child's nappies or help use toilet	2–3 years	40.9	44.7	7.4	6.9	100.0	88.8
Get child ready for bed or put child to bed	2–3 years	27.6	55.9	10.7	5.8	100.0	79.2
	4–5 years	30.9	52.2	10.7	6.2	100.0	72.0
	6–7 years	28.2	50.7	11.6	9.5	100.0	62.2
Give child a bath or shower	2–3 years	18.8	55.7	15.6	10.0	100.0	64.4
	4–5 years	17.0	51.4	18.1	13.5	100.0	61.2
	6–7 years	11.4	44.2	18.0	26.2	100.0	40.4
Help child get dressed/ready for day	2–3 years	29.4	54.7	11.5	4.5	100.0	89.7
	4–5 years	13.7	31.2	17.8	37.3	100.0	47.2
	6–7 years	17.5	29.6	17.7	35.2	100.0	48.2
Help/supervise child brushing teeth	2–3 years	21.1	46.5	14.9	17.4	100.0	69.8
	4–5 years	20.3	46.2	15.1	18.4	100.0	59.0
	6–7 years	13.1	36.0	15.3	35.7	100.0	32.7
	8–9 years	12.4	33.7	17.3	36.6	100.0	22.7

Note: For fathers, sample sizes were 3,090 at 2–3 years, 2,732 at 4–5 years, 2,904 at 6–7 years and 2,645 at 8–9 years. For mothers, sample sizes were 3,198 at 2–3 years, 3,829 at 4–5 years, 3,015 at 6–7 years and 3,551 at 8–9 years. Numbers varied slightly on specific items due to small amounts of item non-response.

Source: LSAC, fathers' and mothers' self-complete questionnaires, both cohorts, Waves 2 and 3

This report by Baxter and Smart (2010) included analyses of the amounts of time that each parent spent on child care or other domestic work, and mothers' and fathers' perceptions of whether each parent did their fair share, as well as the degree to which partners supported or understood each other as parents, or disagreed about child rearing issues.

These analyses showed highly gendered patterns in the time distribution of parents of young children, with fathers spending more time than mothers in paid employment, and less time in child care and domestic work. When time spent in paid work and unpaid work was totalled, mothers and fathers undertook similar amounts of work in a usual week (Table 3).

Mothers and fathers had different perceptions of the degree to which the sharing of child care and other domestic work was fair. Overall, mothers were more likely than fathers to think they did more than their share of either type of unpaid work, with fathers more likely to think that they did their fair share, or less than their fair share. For example, among parents of children aged 0–1 year old, 20% of fathers thought they did less or much less than their fair

share of the child care, 69% thought they did their fair share, and 11% thought they did more or much more than their fair share. Mothers, on the other hand, most often thought they did more or much more than their fair share (62%), with 37% saying they did their fair share and less than one per cent saying they did less than their fair share. Similar patterns were observed for parents of older children, although in these families mothers were somewhat less likely to report that they did more than their fair share, with the proportion reporting they did their fair share being higher than for mothers of younger children.

Within couples, there was a fair amount of consistency in perceptions of the fairness of the division of child care. For example, Table 4 shows that when fathers said they did less than their fair share, 73% of mothers felt that they (the mothers) did more than their fair share. However, when fathers thought they did their fair share, mothers were fairly equally split between also saying that they themselves did their fair share or more than their fair share.

Perceptions about fairness were related to the actual sharing of unpaid work in the home.

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Fathers who said they did their fair share had actually undertaken a greater share of the total hours of child care completed by either parent, compared to fathers who said they did less than their fair share. Mothers' perceptions of fairness were also related to this amount of child care undertaken by fathers (Table 4).

An important aspect of parenting is being a resource and support to the other parent, and this is an indicator of the quality of the co-parental relationship. Fathers and mothers were very positive about the resources and support provided by mothers to fathers (Table 5). Fathers and mothers were not so positive about the resources or support provided by fathers to mothers. The finding that the majority of fathers felt well supported by their partners is important, as one of the enablers of fathers'

involvement with children is the perceived support they receive from their partners.

One indication of the negative aspects of co-parenting is the extent of disagreement between parents over child rearing issues. These analyses showed that most parents reported low levels of disagreement about child rearing issues. Only just over one-quarter of parents reported sometimes or more often having such disagreements.

The quality of the co-parental relationship was significantly related to children's outcomes, with mothers' and fathers' reports of providing support to each other being related to children's socio-emotional outcomes. Further, when fathers reported that there were more disagreements about child rearing, children's

Table 3 Estimated hours per day of maternal and paternal child care, and domestic and paid work, by cohort and age of child

Mean hours per day	B cohort		K cohort	
	2–3 years	4–5 years	6–7 years	8–9 years
Fathers				
Total unpaid	3.7	3.5	3.2	3.0
Child care	2.4	2.1	1.9	1.7
Domestic work	1.3	1.3	1.4	1.3
Total paid employment	6.0	6.1	6.0	6.1
Total paid and unpaid	9.8	9.5	9.3	9.1
Sample size	3,039	2,675	2,842	2,587
Mothers				
Total unpaid	9.3	8.7	7.5	7.4
Child care	5.4	5.0	3.7	3.9
Domestic work	3.8	3.6	3.8	3.5
Total paid employment	1.7	1.9	2.1	2.6
Total paid and unpaid	10.9	10.6	9.7	10.0
Sample size	2,932	3,825	2,784	3,547
Couple-level estimates				
Child care				
Total couple-level child care (hours per day)	7.9	7.2	5.6	5.5
Mean fathers' child care (% of fathers + mothers)	32.4	30.8	34.7	32.1
Domestic work				
Total couple-level domestic work (hours per day)	5.1	4.9	5.3	4.7
Mean fathers' domestic work (% of fathers + mothers)	27.4	28.3	27.9	29.2
Sample size	2,771	2,651	2,605	2,547

Notes: These figures have been derived from weekly data by dividing by seven. The apparently low estimates for paid work are because most people do not work over seven days. Assumes child care, domestic work and paid work are all mutually exclusive. This may be a less valid assumption for child care and domestic work, as supervisory child care work may be done while doing domestic tasks. Couple-level estimates are based on families in which both mother and father returned self-complete questionnaires.

Source: LSAC, fathers' and mothers' self-complete questionnaires, Waves 2 and 3

socio-emotional outcomes and learning outcomes were poorer.

Parenting practices and styles

The report examined the parenting practices and styles of fathers (and mothers) by looking at six core dimensions: warmth, hostile parenting, angry parenting, inductive reasoning, consistency and over-protection. These measures offer some insights into the quality of the time fathers spend with children (see Table 6).

Mothers and fathers generally displayed high levels of warmth, inductive reasoning and consistency, low levels of hostility and anger, and moderate levels of over-protection. Thus, generally, LSAC fathers (and mothers) seemed to be parenting well. There were, however, consistent differences between fathers and mothers in their parenting styles. Over all aspects of parenting, fathers differed significantly from mothers, exhibiting, on average, less warmth, less inductive reasoning, less consistency and less over-protection.

		Distribution: Agreement between mother and father (%)				Sample size
Fathers' reports of child care fairness	Mothers' reports of child care fairness	Do less than fair share	Do fair share	Do more than fair share	Total	
Do less than fair share		0.4	26.2	73.4	100.0	4,240
Do fair share		0.7	49.7	49.6	100.0	12,086
Do more than fair share		3.7	47.0	49.3	100.0	1,514
Total		0.9	43.8	55.3	100.0	17,840
		Fathers' child care time (mean %)				
Do less than fair share		31.7	27.3	23.2	24.3***	2,668
Do fair share		52.9	36.7	31.1	34.2***	6,965
Do more than fair share		73.1	43.8	37.6	42.4***	668
Total		55.6	35.8	28.6	32.2***	10,301
Significance		***	***	***	***	

Note: Cohorts have been combined, including Waves 1–3 in calculations of the distribution, and Waves 2–3 in calculations of child care time (since these data were not collected at Wave 1). If there were non-responses at any wave, data at responding waves were retained. Includes only families in which both mother and father completed the self-complete questionnaire. Asterisks indicate significance of difference across the reports of fairness of sharing, across mothers' reports (as indicated in total column) and across fathers' reports (final row); *** $p < .001$.

Source: LSAC, fathers' and mothers' self-complete questionnaires, Waves 1–3

	Fathers' reports of partner as a support	Fathers' reports of self as a support to partner	Mothers' reports of partner as a support	Mothers' reports of self as a support to partner
	%		%	
Rarely or never	0.8	2.2	2.5	1.0
Sometimes	3.5	18.5	11.8	3.2
Often	19.6	42.4	33.5	24.5
Always	76.1	36.8	52.2	71.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Sample size	12,236	12,216	13,800	13,789

Note: Data are from Waves 1 and 3 only, since these data were not collected at Wave 2.

Source: LSAC Waves 1 and 3, B and K cohorts

Mothers and fathers generally displayed high levels of warmth, inductive reasoning and consistency, low levels of hostility and anger, and moderate levels of over-protection.

The majority of fathers worked full-time hours and were the main income earners in many families, making fathers' employment an important aspect of fathering.

The analyses of fathering and child wellbeing showed that greater paternal warmth was associated with more positive learning and socio-emotional outcomes among children, as was maternal warmth. Hence, the benefits of high-quality parenting by fathers were discernable. (The analyses did not explore associations between other parenting styles and child outcomes.)

Variation in fathering

There was considerable variation among LSAC fathers in the degree to which they undertook the various fathering roles. Not only were there differences across fathers at any one point in time, there were differences across time, as children, contexts and parents changed.

In the report, extensive use was made of data on family and child characteristics to examine how fathering varied across different families, recognising that fathering occurs within families, and within the context of relationships between mothers and fathers and children. This included the examination of how fathering changed as children grew, using cross-sectional as well as longitudinal perspectives.

A general point to make is that none of the explanatory variables used were associated with each and every measure of fathering. There were, however, some very consistent associations, which are summarised next.

The majority of fathers worked full-time hours and were the main income earners in many families, making *fathers' employment* an important aspect of fathering. However, time spent in employment puts constraints on time available for spending with the family. This was evident in these analyses, as the number of work hours was a significant factor in explaining the variation in how much time fathers spent with children, and fathers' involvement in particular activities with their child. Also, in the analyses of co-parenting, fathers working longer hours undertook less unpaid work in the home and were rated lower on a number of the co-parenting measures compared to fathers working more standard hours. In keeping with this finding, the report showed that fathers who were not in employment or who worked part-time hours had relatively high levels of involvement with their children, and also in undertaking child care and domestic work. Hours of work, however, were not so important in explaining variation in fathers' parenting styles.

The associations between fathers' employment and fathering were also apparent when examining the degree to which employment was perceived to spill over into family life. Some negative spillover was observed, although positive spillover from work to family was also found (Table 7). For example, almost two-thirds of fathers agreed or strongly agreed that, because of work responsibilities, they had

Table 6 Levels of maternal and paternal parenting, mean scores, by cohort and age of child

Parenting dimension	B cohort			K cohort		
	0–1 years	2–3 years	4–5 years	4–5 years	6–7 years	8–9 years
Fathers						
Warmth	4.2	4.3	4.2	4.1	4.1	4.0
Hostility (score out of 10)	1.8	3.2	3.0	n. a.	3.3†	3.0
Anger	n. a.	n. a.	2.2†	2.3	2.1	2.2†
Inductive reasoning	n. a.	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	3.9
Consistency	n. a.	n. a.	4.1	4.0	4.1	4.1
Over-protection	n. a.	3.5	3.4	n. a.	3.4	3.4
Mothers						
Warmth	4.6	4.6	4.5	4.4	4.4	4.3
Hostility (score out of 10)	1.9	3.4	3.4	n. a.	3.3†	3.3
Anger	n. a.	n. a.	2.1†	2.2	2.2	2.1†
Inductive reasoning	n. a.	4.2	4.2	4.3	4.2	4.1
Consistency	n. a.	n. a.	4.2	4.1	4.2	4.2
Over-protection	n. a.	3.7	3.6	n. a.	3.5	3.5

Note: n. a. = not applicable (not collected this wave). Scales on each measure ranged from 1 to 5, except hostility, which ranged from 1 to 10. A higher score indicates higher levels of the parenting behaviour. All mother–father differences are significant at the 1% level, except those labelled †, which did not reach significance at $p < .05$. Significance is based on paired t -tests, comparing mothers and fathers on each parenting dimension, with separate tests conducted for each cohort/wave.

Source: LSAC, fathers' and mothers' self-complete questionnaires, all cohorts/waves

missed out on home or family activities that they would have liked to have taken part in. Fathers' responses to the other items indicate that a minority of fathers found that work had a negative impact upon their parenting, family life or children. More generally, the time factor was evident in the degree to which fathers reported being rushed or pressed for time (46% always or often and 39% sometimes).

For many fathers, the spillover from work was seen to be less intrusive on family. More than half the fathers disagreed (or strongly disagreed) with the statement that their family time was less enjoyable and more pressured because of work responsibilities; nearly three-quarters agreed that working helped them to better appreciate the time they spent with their children. Just over half agreed that their work had a positive effect on their children and almost half agreed that their working made them a better parent.

Some 62% of fathers disagreed or strongly disagreed that their family responsibilities had meant they had turned down work activities they would have preferred to take on.

Analyses of the LSAC data also showed connections between fathering and *mothers'*

employment, especially when mothers worked full-time hours. Fathers' greater involvement in these families was apparent in the amount of fathers' time spent with children and also in the extent of co-parenting. When mothers worked longer hours, fathers were more involved in some of the personal care activities, spent more time with their child or doing child care tasks, and were seen as more of a support to mothers in raising their children.

Turning to a different contextual set of variables, the analyses also considered the family context, including the quality of the parental relationship and the nature of the relationship between parents (whether married or cohabiting), and between father and children (whether biological or step-father).

The analyses revealed that *marital (or relationship) quality* was a consistent and powerful factor in explaining variation in fathering. Using fathers' reports of the happiness of their relationships with their partners, positive associations were evident in the analyses of fathers' time with children, co-parenting, and more positive parenting styles.

With regard to differences according to married versus cohabiting fathers, and biological versus

Table 7 Fathers' work–family spillover and time pressures, employed fathers

Work–family spillover measures	Agreement	%	Sample size
Because of my work responsibilities I have missed out on home or family activities that I would have liked to have taken part in	Agree/ strongly agree	63.7	16,787
	Neither	15.3	
	Disagree/ strongly disagree	21.0	
Because of my work responsibilities my family time is less enjoyable and more pressured	Agree/strongly agree	23.0	16,754
	Neither	23.3	
	Disagree/strongly disagree	53.7	
Working helps me to better appreciate the time that I spend with my children	Agree/strongly agree	72.1	16,758
	Neither	18.9	
	Disagree/strongly disagree	9.0	
My working has a positive effect on my children	Agree/strongly agree	54.6	16,765
	Neither	33.3	
	Disagree/strongly disagree	12.1	
The fact that I work makes me a better parent	Agree/strongly agree	47.6	16,766
	Neither	35.9	
	Disagree/strongly disagree	16.6	
Because of my family responsibilities, I have had to turn down work activities or opportunities that I would prefer to take on	Agree/ strongly agree	16.4	16,773
	Neither	20.9	
	Disagree/ strongly disagree	62.7	
How often feel rushed or pressed for time	Always/often	46.3	17,175
	Sometimes	38.8	
	Rarely/never	14.9	

Source: LSAC, fathers' self-complete questionnaires, Waves 1–3, B and K cohorts

A minority of fathers found that work had a negative impact upon their parenting, family life or children.



step-fathers, differences were not consistent and tended to be small.

Another indicator of family relationships, whether fathers have *children living elsewhere*, was significantly related to fathering, with these fathers appearing to be less involved with resident children than other fathers. For example, compared to fathers who did not have other children living elsewhere, fathers with children living apart from them spent less time doing child care tasks and were rated by mothers and fathers as being less of a resource or support in child rearing. Further, looking at their parenting styles, fathers with children living elsewhere tended to show lower warmth, less inductive reasoning and less consistency.

Fathering quite often differed according to *family size*; for example, fathers less frequently talked with the LSAC child or shared an evening meal when they were in larger families. Some variations, however, were related not only to family size but also to birth order, as fathers appeared to be less involved when children had a larger number of older siblings, but were more involved when there were more younger siblings.

In terms of parental characteristics, we explored how fathering varied by fathers' and mothers' educational attainment, and by fathers' mental health, age and ethnicity (whether they mainly spoke a language other than English, and whether Indigenous).

These analyses showed that more *highly educated fathers* spent more time reading and talking with their children and helping them with homework. Similarly, more highly

educated fathers were more likely to be involved in various personal care tasks, although they did not differ on the amount of time spent with their children. Higher paternal education was also associated with some aspects of parenting, with these fathers showing, on average, less hostility and less over-protection, and more inductive reasoning and consistency. There were, however, no differences in warm or angry parenting according to fathers' educational attainment.

Throughout the analyses, fathers' *mental health* was very often significantly correlated with their fathering. For example, fathers who reported better mental health were more likely to talk with their child about the day and to share an evening meal with children. On the other hand, mental health was not related to the amount of time fathers spent with children, or in fathers' involvement in personal care activities. Fathers' mental health was also strongly related to children's socio-emotional outcomes. In addition, better mental health was associated with a stronger co-parental relationship and more positive parenting practices. These findings point to the salience of fathers' mental wellbeing for their fathering.

Variation in fathering according to other characteristics, such as ethnicity and age, were less consistent, and often such differences were not significant. Similarly, differences in fathering by mothers' education were generally not significant.

Finally, variation in fathering was explored by children's characteristics, including their age, gender, temperament and health status.

There was considerable evidence that fathers' involvement varied as children grew in terms of the amount of time spent with children and the types of activities undertaken. Looking at involvement in particular activities such as talking with their child about the day and sharing an evening meal with them, fathers were most involved at the older ages (6–7 and 8–9 years). In the analyses of the amount of time children spent with their father, the total time appeared to peak when children were of preschool age and then decline once they were of school age. In the report, this was explored further by making use of the longitudinal nature of the data to consider how fathering changed across the three waves.

In the analyses of co-parenting, there were certainly differences in the amount of time parents spent on unpaid household tasks according to the age of LSAC children; however, no differences were apparent on the degree of support parents gave their partners in child rearing. Clearly, differing elements of fathering come to the fore or become less central as children grow. The analyses of parenting styles showed very little change (difference) in the parenting styles of either mothers or fathers at differing child ages. The exception was hostility, which was much lower at 0–1 years than at later years. There was also some evidence that parenting warmth declined slightly as children moved through childhood.

The fathering of girls as opposed to boys differed in some respects. For example, there were some differences in the activities fathers undertook with boys versus girls, with fathers spending more time with boys and more likely to be involved in their personal care activities. In terms of parenting styles, less warmth, over-protection, more hostile or angry parenting and more consistency and was found among fathers of boys. Differences, however, were not always apparent, suggesting that the child's gender is more relevant to certain aspects of fathering.

This report found several associations between fathering and child temperament, especially in

relation to parenting styles. For example, less positive/more negative parenting behaviours were evident among fathers of children with a more reactive temperament style (i.e., children who were more volatile and feisty). Also, among these children, fathers less often ate an evening meal with them, or talked to them about their day. These findings add to the sparse literature on connections between children's temperament style and fathers' parenting.

The analyses rarely found differences in fathering according to child's health status.

In all the analyses in the report, despite finding that a range of variables was important in explaining variation in fathering, there was nevertheless considerable *unexplained variation* in the data. That is, the characteristics included in the analyses did not capture fully the determinants of father involvement, fathers' parenting styles and co-parenting. No doubt, some of this unexplained variation relates to different levels of motivation of fathers, with some being very committed to being highly involved with their children, and others less so, as well as fathers' personality or family experiences while growing up.

Some other findings regarding fathering

The report showed that in Australia, when children are young, fathers rarely withdraw from the labour market to take over caring responsibilities for children. In fact, the breadwinner or provider role appears to be central to many fathers' lives in Australia. A very gendered picture emerged, with fathers spending much more time, on average, in paid work than in unpaid work, compared to mothers (see Table 3). The breadwinner model was also evident in that fathers contributed more than two-thirds of the parental income in these families (Table 8).

On many measures of fathering, fathers who were more involved on one dimension (e.g.,

Fathers who reported better mental health were more likely to talk with their child about the day and to share an evening meal with children. Fathers' mental health was also strongly related to children's socio-emotional outcomes.

Table 8 Fathers' income as a percentage of total parental income, by cohort and age of child

	B cohort			K cohort		
	0–1 year	2–3 years	4–5 years	4–5 years	6–7 years	8–9 years
Fathers' income as % of parental income	72.5	70.3	69.9	68.4	68.4	67.7
Sample size	3,774	3,858	3,598	3,424	3,531	3,328

Note: Income is the total from all sources, so includes government benefits and allowances, if applicable. Child-related government payments are usually attributed to mothers. Results are calculated for respondents who provided income information for both mother and father.

Source: LSAC, primary carer interview, Waves 1–3, B and K cohorts



time spent doing child care tasks) were also involved on another dimension (e.g., having higher parental warmth). For example, fathers' warmth and inductive reasoning were associated with fathers spending time with their children, with fathers who showed fewer of these parenting behaviours also found to spend less time with their children. Also, when fathers showed less warmth, inductive reasoning or consistency, or greater hostility or anger in interactions with their LSAC child, they tended to be seen by mothers as being less of a resource or support in child rearing. Thus, there seemed to be considerable overlap in the elements of fathering examined, reinforcing that fathering is a "package". Of course, individual fathers will exhibit unique trends, perhaps being highly involved on one aspect of fathering but less involved on another. Nevertheless, the differing elements of fathering are correlated, as would be expected.

On various measures, there was evidence that fathers who had higher levels of involvement at the beginning of the study remained more involved as children grew. Levels of co-parenting appeared to be relatively consistent across waves, as the correlations found were positive and moderate. Also, parenting practices and styles were positively correlated across waves; that is, fathers who exhibited more positive parenting styles continued to do so as children grew. These findings suggest that helping fathers get off to a good start when children are born will pay dividends later on, as patterns established early persist to a certain degree.

In Australia, the behaviour of fathers is clearly different to mothers when measured in a number of ways, but especially in terms of what each parent does with their children. Mothers spend more time with children at all ages, but especially at the ages before school commencement. They are therefore also more often involved with children's personal care, social and educational activities. The parenting styles of mothers and fathers also differ. Despite these underlying differences, there is, within couples, correspondence between mothers' and fathers' involvement, such that children with fathers who are more involved (or have more positive parenting practices) tend to have more involved mothers (or mothers with more positive parenting practices). The similarity of parenting behaviours of mothers and fathers within couples has implications for children, given parents' involvement is associated with children's outcomes. Some children may experience a compounding of negative parenting, while others may be doubly enriched through the positive parenting behaviours of both parents.

The great majority of fathers (as well as mothers) saw themselves as average or better than average parents (see Table 9). Only a very small percentage rated themselves as "not very good" or "has some trouble" at being a parent. Within couples, mothers' and fathers' self-efficacy were correlated, such that when mothers rated themselves as being better parents, fathers tended to also do so.

Relatively high proportions of fathers of very young children, compared to older children,

rated themselves as being a very good parent. For example, of fathers of 0–1 year old children, 36% gave themselves this rating, compared to 24% of fathers of 8–9 year olds. The percentage of fathers reporting themselves as being average parents increased over the cohorts/waves.

Across the waves, there was considerable stability of perceptions of self-efficacy—those who were more positive about their parenting ability at Wave 1 were likely to also be more positive at Waves 2 and 3.

Fathers’ parenting self-efficacy was related to their involvement with their children and family, although this appears to be unrelated to the “provider” role. A higher rating of fathers’ parenting self-efficacy was also positively associated with children’s socio-emotional and learning outcomes. These links remained after the effect of mothers’ parenting self-efficacy was included.

Implications for policy, program development and service delivery

A critical aspect of analyses such as these is identifying ways in which the findings could be used to develop or enhance policies, programs and services for fathers. Ultimately, we would hope that such improvements would not only help fathers, but also help the families in which these experiences of fathering are most keenly felt.

Fathers’ parenting can be influenced by the supports they have available to them. This includes support from their partner as well as support from other family members, friends, colleagues and the wider community. At particular times, fathers as well as mothers may benefit from the support of professionals, or through participation in educational programs.

Table 9 Mothers’ and fathers’ parenting self-efficacy, by cohort and age of child

	B cohort			K cohort		
	0–1 year	2–3 years	4–5 years	4–5 years	6–7 years	8–9 years
	%			%		
Father						
Not very good at being a parent	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.5
A person who has some trouble being a parent	1.7	1.1	2.1	2.7	1.8	2.8
An average parent	22.2	21.9	27.6	30.2	28.6	30.8
A better than average parent	39.6	42.2	44.3	41.5	41.7	41.6
A very good parent	36.4	34.7	25.8	25.3	27.7	24.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Sample size	3,613	3,111	2,710	3,318	2,930	2,596
Mother						
Not very good at being a parent	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.1	0.3
A person who has some trouble being a parent	1.7	0.8	2.4	2.3	0.9	2.8
An average parent	25.2	24.3	33.3	32.3	27.1	34.5
A better than average parent	32.1	38.8	37.9	33.0	35.3	35.9
A very good parent	40.8	36.1	26.3	32.1	36.6	26.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Sample size	4,576	3,973	3,367	4,208	3,644	3,122
Parenting self-efficacy (mean score)						
Fathers	4.10	4.11	3.94	3.88	3.95	3.85
Mothers	4.11	4.10	3.87	3.96	4.09	3.86
Correlation mother–father	0.21***	0.24***	0.27***	0.24***	0.24***	0.28***

Note: The mean parenting self-efficacy score is the mean, from 1 to 5, of the ratings parents gave themselves on this one item—1 equating to the lowest rating (not very good at being a parent) and 5 the highest rating (a very good parent). The correlation was calculated on paired mother–father data; that is, when the self-complete was returned for both mother and father in a family. *** $p < .001$. Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding.

Source: LSAC, self-complete questionnaires, Waves 1–3, B and K cohorts

The great majority of fathers (as well as mothers) saw themselves as average or better than average parents.



LSAC fathers are unlikely to be at the extreme end of the spectrum in terms of disengagement, neglect or harm, and of course such fathers and their families are the ones who are likely to benefit the most from outside support. However, even within the spectrum of fathering observed in this report, the results suggest several ways in which programs or services might offer opportunities for fathers to increase their involvement in families. These include addressing parenting skills and self-efficacy, and addressing parents' approaches to co-parenting. Attention to specific problems such as relationship difficulties and mental health issues is also important.

Programs and services for fathers need to be developed such that they do engage fathers, and the inclusion of fathers needs to be considered across a range of services previously considered the domain of mothers, including health services (both during pregnancy and after the birth) and children's health care.

As employment consumes a significant amount of time for many fathers, a key issue is whether workplace policies might be developed or improved to better address the needs of fathers. Workplace policies that might be beneficial to fathers include those that allow fathers to better share with mothers the responsibilities of caring for children. Such policies may address working hours, provision of leave for particular circumstances, and access to other family-friendly work arrangements. For fathers, a particular issue is the take-up of such measures, since mothers are much more likely to make use of these policies than fathers.

Family law is another policy context in which the role of fathers is receiving considerable attention. Policies relating to child support and the sharing of care are particularly relevant to fathers with more complex family arrangements, and potentially applicable to fathers in more unstable relationships.

Conclusion

The report, *Fathering in Australia Among Couple Families With Young Children*, confirmed that Australian fathers play a vital role in their families. This role is sometimes different, but complementary to, the role of mothers. The analyses showed that fathers made a major contribution to the family income, were supportive of their partners, participated in unpaid work within the home (albeit at lower levels than mothers), spent time with their children (although again, at lower levels than mothers), and were generally parenting well and felt they were doing a good job in their fathering role. Many of these qualities were linked.

The report also sought to explore the characteristics or circumstances that facilitated or hindered fathers' involvement. As summarised here, fathers' working arrangements, their mental health and the quality of relationships between partners appeared to be particularly salient influences on different indicators of fathering. Associations between measures of fathering (co-parenting and parental warmth) and children's socio-emotional and learning outcomes were found, even after taking into account the contribution of mothers. The report concluded that fathering "matters" for children and families and there are tangible benefits to be gained from fostering fathers' involvement in their families.

References

Baxter, J. A., & Smart, D. (2010). *Fathering in Australia among couple families with young children* (FaHCSIA Occasional Paper No. 37). Canberra: Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

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