This article is adapted from a presentation given at the AIFS 2018 Conference: Fathers at Work symposium.

OVERVIEW

Fathers’ experiences of competing demands in parenting and work domains suggest that increasing work-family conflicts are an issue for many families. Using data from the Growing Up in Australia longitudinal study, we explored this conflict and any flow-on effects for children’s mental health. We find that parenting and relationship resources deteriorate when fathers’ work-family conflict increases or is sustained; this in turn affects children’s socio-emotional development and wellbeing.

KEY MESSAGES

• When fathers moved into high work-family conflict their mental health, couple relationship quality and parenting capabilities deteriorated. These adversities flowed on to negatively affect their children’s mental health.

• When fathers were able to move out of work-family conflict mental health improved for themselves and their children.

• Fathers’ work-family conflict is an important (and to date largely unrecognised) social determinant of children’s mental health, pointing at the need for policies and procedures that focus on reducing fathers’ experiences of work-family conflict.

INTRODUCTION

In much of the general discourse exploring who is most conflicted when it comes to juggling employment and family demands, and what the implications are, it is implicit that work-family conflict is more pertinent for mothers than it is for fathers (Shockley, Shen, DeNunzio, Arvan, & Knudsen, 2017). This assumption has in part been based on statistics showing drastic changes in how time is distributed for women when they become mothers (i.e. a reduction in work hours and escalation in parenting/household work), compared to the minimal changes that men experience when they
Importantly, when fathers were able to escape (or modify) experiences of work–family conflict as the research evidence suggests this will flow on to provide wellbeing benefits to health. We call for further investigation into policies and procedures that focus on reducing fathers’ (and mothers’) work–family conflict is an important (and to date largely unrecognised) social determinant of children’s mental health, number and age of children, household income and socio-economic status). Highly relevant to questions around fathers’ work–family conflict and children’s mental health outcomes is our recent program of research (Cooklin et al., 2016; Dinh et al., 2017). In particular, we have explored the questions:

1. Are changes in fathers’ work–family conflict reflected in their children’s mental health?
2. If so, to what extent does this association occur due to interim changes in the family environment (i.e. changes in fathers’ mental health, the quality of their couple relationship, and their parenting capabilities).

RESULTS

The key findings of our research study were that:

- Compared to fathers who had consistently low work–family conflict, when fathers moved into high work–family conflict their mental health, couple relationship quality and parenting capabilities deteriorated. These adversities flowed on to negatively affect their children’s mental health.
- Similarly, fathers who reported persistent high work–family conflict had the worst outcomes for their mental health, couple relationship quality, parenting capabilities and their children’s mental health.
- Importantly, when fathers were able to escape (or move out of) work–family conflict they recovered better mental health for themselves and their children.

IMPLICATIONS

The dynamic between Australian mothers’ and fathers’ roles in employment and family care is evolving as expectations change around gender equality in employment contexts as well as opportunities to care for and nurture children. As we observe these changes over time, it is critically important to consider how the family environment and children’s wellbeing is affected. Our research shows that children’s family environment and mental health are affected by their fathers’ struggles to balance demands at work and at home. However, we also importantly show that work–family conflict is transient in some cases and when it can be escaped (or modified), there are improvements for the whole family. We conclude that fathers’ work–family conflict is an important (and to date largely unrecognised) social determinant of children’s mental health. We call for further investigation into policies and procedures that focus on reducing fathers’ (and mothers’) experiences of work–family conflict as the research evidence suggests this will flow on to provide wellbeing benefits to...
the whole family.

REFERENCES


Liana Leach is a Senior Research Fellow at the Research School of Population Health, Australian National University. This article is based on the presentation ‘The impact of change and stability in fathers’ work-family conflict on Children’s mental health’ given at the AIFS 2018 Conference. For further details see: Dinh, H., Cooklin, A., Leach, L. S., Westrupp, E., Nicholson, J., & Strazdins, L. (2017). Parents’ transitions into and out of work-family conflict and children’s mental health: Longitudinal influence via family functioning. *Social Science & Medicine, 194*, 42–50.