

# Fathers at Work: Exploring fathers' experience of work-family balance, workplace policies and wellbeing

## SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

### WHAT DID WE DO?

Between 2019 and 2021 we interviewed 15 fathers across Australia to explore their experiences balancing work, parenting and caring for their families. The fathers we interviewed worked in a range of jobs and industries. Most had 1-2 children with the youngest child of primary school age, and four fathers were single parents.

Fathers were asked to share:

- How they saw their role as a dad
- Experiences balancing work and parenting
- Workplace factors that have supported or hindered them to combine work and family
- Experience using family-friendly workplace supports (flexible work arrangements and parental leave)
- Impacts of work and the work-family juggle on their wellbeing and the wellbeing of their family
- Changes to work arrangements and work supports during the pandemic (if interviewed after Covid-19 onset)
- Advice to the next generation of dads

### WHAT DID WE FIND?

#### Fathers valued having an active role in their children's lives

Priorities and views on work and work-life balance shifted after becoming a father and **time with children became the focus**. They reflected on their own upbringing and strived to be more involved in their children's lives than their own fathers had been. Central to their roles as fathers were **being present and engaged** and being someone that their children **could turn to for advice or support**.

*"Work stopped being my focus...I became a dad, and it wasn't just all about work anymore. It's all about family now."*

*"It's everything from being a good role model to them, to being there when they need a shoulder to cry on, to helping guide them and gently nudge them in the right direction with making life choices and decisions."*

#### Fathers also valued their role as a dad in the workplace

They **supported other fathers (and parents) to meet their work-family goals** by actively supporting, encouraging or modelling the use of family friendly policies.

*"Now that I'm a rosterer, if someone asked me for that day off for any family related reasons, I'm like, 'Yeah, go on, of course,' because I know because I'm a dad too"*



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## Work and care arrangements were an ongoing process

Fathers and their partners (or co-parents) **adjusted work and care arrangements as work and family needs shifted**. These decisions were shaped by:

- Individual preferences
- Financial circumstances; weighing up income versus time at home
- Age of children
- Job conditions (own or partners), such as access to flexible work arrangements

The Covid-19 pandemic led to some changes in the division of work and care, particularly for fathers working from home who were able to take on more childcare and household tasks.

**Fathers who were the primary caregiver expressed feeling different to the norm**, reflecting that in most families the mother takes on this role

*"There's no option for [partner] to work from home...Because I have had that flexibility for a long time, even before I permanently worked from home, I generally did the kid drop-offs, I made sure I was home for the kid pick-ups."*

*"We made the decision for [partner] to quit work when the kids come along...We worked out financially we could do it."*



*"I feel like I'm different to most dads, not all dads, that sort of primary carer of the kids ... I'm the one that picks them up from after school care and make sure I get out of work on time."*



*"I worked in construction, and I was doing a 12-hour day every day, so from 5:00am to 5:00pm...I'd get home at 6:00pm, eat dinner, have a shower and my daughter was tucking me into bed."*  
(previous job)

*"...I need people contact ... I get that at work, and the company I work for is a fun company... I think without that I'd probably go a bit stir crazy"*

*"We also all tend to work overtime ... there's a creep because now you're at home and don't have to travel, you keep working for longer."*

## Work-family balance was a work in progress

**Work-family balance was something fathers continued to work and strive towards**, particularly to adapt to changing work and care needs. Some fathers had even changed jobs or employers to find better conditions and achieve balance.

### Good balance was experienced by fathers who:

- Had access (or their partners had access) to work policies including flexible work arrangements
- Found their job rewarding, i.e., they enjoyed the work and the social connections

### Poor balance was experienced among fathers who

- Had high workloads, long hours and inflexible schedules, along with lengthy commutes, which encroached on family time
- Had difficulty mentally switching off from work during family time, particularly for fathers working from home

### The impact of Covid-19 on fathers' experience of WFB varied.

There was an increase in demands at both work and home (i.e., homeschooling) for some fathers; while others, especially those working from home, found more time for family.

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## Most fathers felt that their workplace was family-friendly

### Workplaces that were supportive of fathers:

- Provided access to flexible work arrangements.
- Took the view that "family comes first"
- Had managers / colleagues who themselves prioritised family

Workplaces that prioritised work above all else were unhelpful to working fathers

*"[Manager] had the philosophy ... your family come first. You've obviously got to do your work but when things get busy, you can stick around and do the extra work, but at the end of the day your family do come first"*

*"The company came first. I was there for the company, not there to provide for my family"  
(previous employer)*

## Fathers were finding ways to work flexibly, although experiences varied

### Fathers who had a positive experience worked in family-friendly workplaces where:

- Requesting / arranging flexible arrangements were straightforward and stress-free
- They had the autonomy to manage their work time and tasks
- The focus was on productivity rather than clock watching and being seen

### Fathers who found it challenging to access and use flexible arrangements worked in workplaces where:

- Flexibility was not widely used / wasn't the 'norm'
- Individual managers held negative views on flex
- There was inconsistent support across teams and levels of seniority
- Colleagues were unsupportive or didn't understand

*"[Management] don't really look at much, and I run my teams the same way. It's a case of being, "This is the work, you've got to get it done. As long as you're getting it done, if you want to pop out for a couple of hours to go do something else, I don't have an issue with it."*

**The pandemic led to better support** from employers for working from home and in general greater awareness of individual needs and preferences regarding flexible work.

*"The blessing that's come out of COVID for me is that the company's worked out that actually, it is okay for me to work a couple of days a week from home."*

*"But the odd one will complain that I'm not available at 4:50 in the afternoon when they want something fixed. Even though it still gets fixed before they come in at 9:00a.m. the next day... There's always one or two that don't get it."*

## Fathers had mixed experiences of workplace support for parental leave

Many **felt invisible in the workplace** when they welcomed a new baby into their family. A new baby is a significant life transition, and this was often not acknowledged both in terms of preparation for the fathers' upcoming leave and in supporting them to return to work.

Many fathers felt that **the length of parental leave was inadequate**. Those who took extended parental leave experienced unhelpful gendered norms and attitudes at work including a lack of support or encouragement to take leave and career penalties.

*"You kind of feel like you just walked away half done."  
(2 weeks' parental leave)*

*"...there was that whole 'Why are you taking leave? You don't need to take leave...you've got a wife,' kind of mentality. Which I really don't like." (3 months' parental leave)*

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## Fathers' views about the influence of work and work arrangements on personal wellbeing were mixed

Some were unsure if work affected their wellbeing; some noted a benefit; while others noted other contributing factors to their mental health such as stressful life events, self-care, exercise and sleep.

**Juggling work and family roles was stressful for some fathers**, and mounting job or personal stressors adversely impacted their mental and physical health.

**Job changes during the pandemic had mixed effects on fathers' wellbeing.** Some struggled with the lack of boundaries between home and work or found WFH to be isolating. Others experienced a relief on work pressures (such as work hours and commute), which gave them more family time.

## There was greater recognition that flexibility benefited parenting and children's wellbeing

Flexibility provided fathers with **more time to spend with their children** which benefited the parent-child relationship and improved family wellbeing. Fathers also felt that their children valued that time with them.

*"I might have a week where the boss needs me in for longer...and the kids definitely notice and complain...I definitely think it makes a positive impact on them."*

*"Only working three days a week and being home more probably helped my mental health...It certainly allowed me to spend some more time with my kids."*

## Parental leave was key for fathers' wellbeing, but often inadequate

The return to work left fathers feeling:

- Exhausted and not able to do their jobs as well as they'd like
- That they were not able to provide the support their partners were needing
- As though they were missing out on time and important early experiences with their new baby

*"I don't think much...I've started riding my bike to work...That [long] bike ride each way has put me in such a positive mood for the rest of the day."*

*"I definitely feel it's improved my wellbeing. Yeah. Even taking the kids out of the equation, yeah, working four days is better for me."*

*"I've been angry...I've had to navigate through a lot of different parenting obstacles. Just normal ad hoc everyday obstacles, juggling work and...domestic chores... It's all micromanaging everything, so that was very stressful to juggle."*



*"Just the exhaustion of having a baby...it's not just the mother who gets exhausted. I was up in the middle of the night doing feeding, to let the wife sleep, then going to work...When I did go back to work, there was no point me being there because I was dysfunctional."*

*"I felt I missed a fair bit of him growing up, especially in that first 12 months. But also not supporting the wife going through the daily routines of being a parent." (3 weeks' parental leave)*



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## Fathers shared their advice for other dads

- Prioritise time with children above work and be involved in their day-to-day as much as possible
- Seek flexibility to find a work arrangement that works for you and your family
- Take care of your own personal wellbeing and happiness

*"I guess the biggest thing is to actually get involved... Push for your work to give you some time out, make some flexibility... Kids grow up, and they only ever do these things once, yeah? Make sure you get to see it, it's pointless working yourself to a grave and never get to enjoy any of it."*

*"Look after yourself. Make sure you are a priority. A lot of the time I think dads and men find it very difficult to talk about their emotions and feelings and I think making sure there is an outlet is really important."*

## Fathers recommended that workplaces:

- Work with employees towards a mutually beneficial flexible work arrangement
- Tailor arrangements to father's individual preferences and needs – there is no one-size-fits all
- Work towards normalising flexible work to meet the goals of involved parenting for modern fathers
- Recognise that there are mutual benefits to flexible working - it fosters employees who work hard and are committed to their organisation
- Provide transparent and accessible information around parental leave entitlements

*"Have some sort of give and take. You know, the compromises work both ways. But if you're willing to make them, it can work both ways. Flexible hours makes a big difference."*

*"Some dads just want to be the breadwinner and that's really it and that's all that matters. Cool. Some dads want to be the pickup dad or the drop-off dad. They [workplaces] need to recognise that there's different types of people and that they parent differently."*

*"Paternity leave should be a thing... And I think that what I'm seeing now is because of my lack of time with my kids, there's probably not as strong a bond there as there could be."*

## Fathers advocated for changes in parental leave policy

- Longer paternity leave (3-6months) to provide fathers an opportunity to better support partners and strengthen bonds with children
- Flexibility in how and when fathers use their leave entitlements

## WHAT'S NEXT?

To date, findings and workplace policy and practice recommendations have been presented at three national family conferences and a podcast. The research is currently under consideration for publication in an academic journal, with further dissemination activities planned. This study has informed subsequent research investigating workplace supports and parents' experiences of working from home in the post-pandemic era.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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