

# Great work-family disruption: Reimagining the Work-Family interface in Australia

## Translating evidence about supporting working parents into practice

This policy brief summarises the findings from a multi-method body of work collecting data from Australian working parents before, during and since the COVID-19 pandemic. Parents' work, and work-family conflicts, continue to be linked to their wellbeing. We report on job features that can benefit employees and workplaces.

### What is the problem?

- **One in three Australian parents** experience high conflict and stress juggling work and family roles, but the drivers of these conflicts are different by gender (e.g. mothers vs fathers); and by the **resources available at work and home**.<sup>1,2</sup>
- Some **job features are protective**, but some place parents at greater risk of conflicts.<sup>2-5</sup>
- **Work-family conflict has negative consequences** for parents' mental health, for family wellbeing and family relationships, and for children's wellbeing.<sup>2,3,6</sup>
- Importantly, **work-family conflicts undermine productivity at work** and are linked with low job satisfaction, **intention to leave, and job turnover**.<sup>7,8</sup>
- **Until now contemporary evidence** to redress work-family conflict and to inform 'family friendly' work and workplace policy has been lacking.

### Why do we need new evidence about Australian working families now?

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

The peak of the disruption was in 2020-2021 in most of Australia, but the effects on work and care are ongoing. New pressures and expectations in the labour market shape the way that Australian parents and workplaces manage work and care:

- Gender, work and socio-economic inequalities which existed before the pandemic were significantly heightened during the pandemic.<sup>9</sup>
- Women lost work hours or shifts, picked up more unpaid work, and were most at risk in front-line or service work; men worked longer hours, but also engaged more in unpaid work and childcare, narrowing the work-care gap.<sup>9</sup>
- Many parents were forced to work from home, and others continued onsite, creating a major new stratification in the labour force. Both types of jobs presented challenges, but also new ways of working, caring and parenting.
- Parents were particularly vulnerable to stress and burnout (vs other employees), with adverse impacts on their own mental health and for children and young people.<sup>10,11</sup>

In the wake of this disruption, employers need to explore new ways to retain and engage workers, **and a cornerstone is supporting work-life and work-family balance**. We need robust evidence about what supports work participation alongside family wellbeing for Australian parents now. **In 2023, we received national funding from the Australian Research Council to explore this issue.**

## Project Aims

1. To understand the work-care disruption across the short (2020-21) and longer term (2023-24); and the effects on parent/employee and family wellbeing.
2. To identify variations by gender, family- and job-type (work from home (WFH), essential workers) - who was most at risk of greater disruption and poorer wellbeing?
3. To identify critical work supports which may serve to prevent longer-term 'scarring' for families into the future, protecting social and economic participation.

## Who did we talk to?

- We used parent-reported data from a range of Australian studies and data sources, using multiple approaches to address our research aims, including:
- National cohort data from n=2278 mothers who participated the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (2018-2022)<sup>12</sup>
- National panel data from parents in the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) study (2005-2022, n>17, 000 observations)<sup>13</sup>
- Data from Families at Work, our own national study of n=1390 employed Australian parents, recruited in 2016 and followed up in 2020-2021.
- Data from Employees Working at Home Study, our study of n=451 employees collected in 2021/2022; and
- In-depth interviews with 11 mothers and 6 fathers who were hybrid working, or working from home in 2024.

## What did we find?

### A. Parents' work-care disruption was far and wide in 2020:

Parents (Families at Work data) who were most disrupted by the pandemic tended to report a combination of compounding work-care burdens, including:

- New job insecurity
- Major changes at work (e.g. stood down, changes to pay or work schedule)
- Significant increases in care-giving load and
- Increased emotional and practical family support.

While one third of parents reported 'low disruption', 58% reported 'moderate' disruption and 6% were impacted significantly.

For mothers specifically (LSAC data), structural changes to work and care defined those 'most-disrupted' (41%) vs those 'least-disrupted' (59%), including:

- New, or persistent job insecurity
- Changes to work hours, job contract or even job loss
- Increased care-giving demands (e.g. child studying at home, home schooling)
- Financial hardship.



## What did we find?

### B. Some parents were more 'at risk' of disruption than others

Work-care disruption was not equally distributed. Some demographic and job features differentiated those who bore the brunt of this disruption. These were parents (Families at Work data) in lower paid, less secure work ('casual or other' employment contracts, non-managers or non-professionals, worked fewer hours with lower weekly incomes).

In general, mothers had greater disruptions than fathers across two national samples (LSAC, Families at Work). Further, mothers (LSAC data) who went into the pandemic with poorer health; a lower quality partner relationship; lived in metropolitan (versus rural/regional) areas; and had a family member with a disability were more likely to face more disruptions to their usual job structure and to their unpaid family care load.<sup>3</sup>

### C: Parents' work (and work-care disruption) is closely related to their own mental health, and to their families

From before-to-after the pandemic (Families at Work data, 2016-2020):

- Parents' mental health on average deteriorated;
- The risk of serious mental illness increased by 233%.<sup>11</sup>

In the same time period, parents' work-family conflicts:

- Were chronic and persistent for 45% of parents;
- 12% reported newly emerging conflicts; and
- 22% reported some easing of conflicts.<sup>10</sup>

Those facing 'more disruption' had the poorest mental health and wellbeing across an array of indicators, concurrently and over time:

- Psychological distress, concurrently and continuing at 6 months
- Occupational fatigue (concurrently only)
- Time pressure, concurrently and continuing at 6 months
- Our prior work has shown work-family conflict is linked to worse family wellbeing, e.g. poorer child social and emotional functioning, more conflict in couple relationships.<sup>6</sup>



### D: Hybrid work and the 'new normal': Parents are the experts in what they need.

Our interview and survey data found that:

- Hybrid work can continue to help working families 'work'
- Parents are expert in ways to 'stay in touch' at work AND 'switch off' at home
- This protects them, and their work: benefits include increased productivity, better work-family balance, improved well-being, and less stress and burnout.
- For parents, if they work from home (WFH) less than preferred there is increased risk of work-family conflict. However, WFH more than preferred is associated with increased burnout, general stress, somatic stress and cognitive stress.
- Employees and parents value trust and regular connection with their colleagues, and flexible, family-friendly supportive cultures.

## What did we find?

### E: Job quality is important, but what works for whom and when?

We looked at job quality post-COVID & working from home (WFH). Our results showed:

- 'Good quality' jobs are secure, with control/autonomy, fair pay and manageable demands. These protect against work-family conflict, strains and time pressure.
- WFH/hybrid was of overall net benefit to parents 'post-COVID' (2022, HILDA).

Some job quality aspects were more salient for parents WFH/hybrid work (than on site) in assisting to promote work-family balance:

**For all parents WFH:** Job control was linked to lower work-family conflict.

**For mothers WFH:** Job security was particularly important. This may counter the 'invisibility' of remote working.

**For parents in high demand jobs WFH:** High demands jobs heightened work-family conflict & time pressure. Job control over workload and schedules were even more important for parents in a WFH/hybrid work context.

## CONSIDERATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

- Work-family disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic was significant, and the effects were particularly adverse for parents, and are ongoing.
- Two-thirds of parents reported moderate or significant disruption in 2020/2021; with a similar proportion reporting high work-family conflicts.
- Those who entered the pandemic with fewer socio-economic resources (including less secure work) and more caregiving responsibilities had the most disruption. These parents need greater and ongoing care and attention in policy and support.
- Jobs, and work-family conflicts, continue to influence parent/employee mental health. There is a significant impetus for workplaces to support parents.
- Indicators of effective supports, from a range of national data sources include:
  - Availability of some working at home / hybrid work
  - Job security
  - Flexibility
  - Greater autonomy in managing workloads and work intensity
  - Prioritising workplace trust, culture, connection and family-friendly support
- A focus on those in casual, insecure or predominantly WFH jobs may be warranted to protect against poorer outcomes.





## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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