

Family-friendly work practices key to children's health and organisational performance

Employers are being urged to offer family-friendly conditions to their workforce to create better outcomes for children and improve organisational performance, by one of Australia's foremost early childhood authorities, the Centre for Community Child Health at the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute.

According to the Centre's recently released Policy Brief on work and family life balance, adverse working conditions, such as working unsocial hours and constantly changing shifts, can have a negative affect on family functioning, parental mental health, parenting and child development and behaviour.

"A good work/family balance can contribute to better health, educational and social outcomes for children", explains Professor Frank Oberklaid, Director of the Centre for Community Child Health, "However, when the demands of work and family life clash, the resulting tension can have a negative impact on parental mental health and family life."

There has been a dramatic change in the work patterns of parents in the past two decades. Today, twice as many families (62%) have both parents working and four in ten workers have responsibility for the care of someone else - whether a child, aged relative, or sick dependent. In a recent national survey by the Australian government, 40% of parents said that work left them with insufficient energy to parent as they would like.

"Industry can play a vital role in contributing to better outcomes for children through recognising that a high percentage of their workforce are also parents and by providing a work environment that enables them to fulfil their work and family responsibilities," said Professor Oberklaid.

"Business will equally benefit as research has shown that family-friendly practices can contribute to organisational performance through improved employee morale, productivity and retention," he added.

Factors that contribute to positive work/family balance include job security, fair pay, predictable hours and access to leave. In addition, public policies and industrial arrangements that facilitate parental time at home, flexible working hours and access to high quality early childhood education and care all have the potential for widespread social and economic benefits.

Part time work is one of the major strategies that parents, particularly mothers, use to try to balance work and family. "To be an effective element in Australia's work/family measures, such work needs to be secure, fairly paid, and provide opportunities for training and promotion," added Professor Oberklaid.

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Notes to editor:

The Centre for Community Child Health is at the forefront of Australian research into early childhood development and behaviour and its findings are used to inform public policy, service delivery and professional practice. The Centre is a department of The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, a key research centre of the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute and an academic centre of the University of Melbourne.

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A copy of the Centre's Policy Brief: Work and Family Life Balance, can be accessed online at [http://www.rch.org.au/emplibrary/ccch/PB3 Work-family_balance1.pdf](http://www.rch.org.au/emplibrary/ccch/PB3_Work-family_balance1.pdf)

For further information or to arrange an interview with Professor Frank Oberklaid:

Rachel McConaghy
Centre for Community Child Health
Tel: (03) 9345 4854
Mob: (0421) 762 140
Email: Rachel.mcconaghy@mcri.edu.au