



POLICY BRIEF

Translating early childhood research evidence to inform policy and practice

Work and family life balance

Balancing paid work and family responsibilities is a major issue for employers, governments and families across the western world (OECD, 2002). In light of rapid changes in the roles and responsibilities of men and women, and in the organisation and distribution of paid work, it is vital that the impact that the balance between work and family has on family life, child development and wellbeing is understood.

Why is this issue important?

Recent years has seen dramatic changes in the work patterns of parents. Just over two decades ago, a majority of Australian couples with young children fitted the male breadwinner pattern of father in the workforce, mother at home. Today, only 31% conform to this model. Twice as many families (62%) have both parents at work, and 57% of sole parents with children are employed (Pocock, 2003).

The working lives of parents have also become more diversified. There has been a large shift away from full-time and towards part-time work, a rise in the proportion of workers who are employed as casuals, and in those working long hours (Edgar, 2005; Richardson, 2005; Watson et al, 2003).

For parents who work (which means most parents), achieving a balance between work and family commitments is highly desirable for all family members. A good work/family balance can contribute to better health, educational and social outcomes for children, increase the opportunities available for women in the workforce, and help men to spend more time with their families (Gornick & Meyers, 2003). It is also linked to higher levels of satisfaction with parental relationships (Headey et al, 2006).

Juggling paid work and caring responsibilities is a major source of stress and tension for families (Tucci et al, 2004, 2005). The caring

responsibilities of Australian workers have altered significantly: four in ten workers now have responsibility for the care of someone else – whether a child, aged relative, or sick dependent (Pocock, 2005). In a national survey (FaCS, 2002), 52% of parents said that work meant they missed out on some rewarding aspects of parenthood; 43% said they worried about their children while they were at work; and 40% said that work left them with insufficient energy to parent as they would like. One-third of fathers and a quarter of mothers report that the demands of their job make family time less enjoyable and more pressured (de Vaus, 2004).

Declining fertility in most western societies is also influencing public debate about work/family balance. For many workers, the jobs that provide an adequate income deny parents enough time or predictability to provide necessary care for their children. As a result, 'many adults are avoiding the responsibilities of parenthood because the labour market will not give them the chance to have both sufficient income and sufficient time to be a good parent' (Richardson & Prior, 2005a). Research shows that countries that do not support working mothers are those that have increasingly low birth rates. In comparison, the highest birth-rate countries in Europe are those with generous conditions for parental leave, part-time work options, flexi-time, regulated working hours and extensive systems of high quality, publicly funded child care (McDonald, 2000; Castles, 2003).

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What does the research tell us?

Effects of parental employment on families and children

Parental employment can be a positive force in the lives of families and children. It can contribute to the mental health and well-being of parents (Boots, 2004; Hoffman & Youngblade, 1999; Smolensky & Gootman, 2003), which in turn results in more effective parenting and better cognitive and emotional outcomes for children (Hoffman & Youngblade, 1999). Employment and work are also important because they provide income for family necessities and resources (Hoffman & Youngblade, 1999; Smolensky & Gootman, 2003; Zubrick et al, 2005). Access to a variety of developmental resources, such as family time and social capital, in addition to an adequate income, also have positive effects on children's development (Zubrick et al, 2005).

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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 (Hoffman & Youngblade, 1999; Smolensky & Gootman, 2003).

- Long work hours and inflexible work schedules have a negative effect on parental attitudes and stress levels, which are then reflected in problematic child behaviour (Smolensky & Gootman, 2003). Despite this, over two thirds of fathers in full-time jobs work long hours – up to 60 or more per week (Gray et al, 2004; Weston et al, 2004).
- Working unsocial hours or having constantly shifting schedules can also have adverse effects on family functioning, parental mental health, parenting, and child behaviour (Han, 2005; Strazdins et al, 2006). These conditions prevent parents from building and maintaining balanced routines for their children, which affects children's emotional and social development, particularly in the early years

of life. The younger the child, the more detrimental are the effects of parents working non-standard or unsocial hours, particularly when it is the mothers who are involved (Han, 2005).

- The nature of the work itself is also an important factor. Work that is repetitive and unstimulating and that leaves little room for initiative has negative flow-on effects for parenting (Smolensky & Gootman, 2003; Zubrick et al, 2005). This turns out to be more important than the actual hours worked (Barnett, 1998).
- Families and children also suffer when parents have limited choice of employment and if the pay is so low that it fails to lift families out of poverty (Zubrick et al, 2005).

Whether parental employment has a positive or detrimental effect on family life and children's development, depends on the interaction between a number of factors. Other factors besides those already noted include, 'mother's lifestyle preferences' for either work-centred, home-centred or a combination of both (Hakim, 2003; Hand & Hughes, 2004), and the family-friendliness of work conditions (Smolensky & Gootman, 2003).

Family-friendly work conditions

One of the major factors contributing to achieving a positive work/family balance is the availability of family-friendly work conditions. These include flexible start and finish times (to facilitate access to child care), the ability to take time off for appointments, reasonable working hours, the provision of work-based child care, and the availability of maternity, paternity and parental leave. Many workplaces have scarcely altered in recognition of the fact that many of their workers have major domestic as well as work duties (Richardson & Prior, 2005b). As a result, family-friendly benefits are not universally available, and those that are tend to be concentrated in the public sector and amongst better paid, 'high value' employees (Gray & Tudball, 2002). From a business perspective, this is short-sighted, as the provision of family-friendly conditions contributes to organisational performance and quality of working life (Summers & Hyman, 2005).

Family leave

Family leave arrangements that increase parents' time at home when children are young – particularly in the first year of life – are associated with a number of benefits for children (Tanaka, 2005). Family leave also has the potential to reduce workplace inequalities between men and women and to ameliorate the wage penalties associated with motherhood (Fagan, 2003). However, men's take-up of family leave is well below women's in all countries. Employer resistance, and men's perception of employer resistance, are factors that reduce take-up. Conversely, generous paternity leave entitlements encourage men to take leave, as do 'use or lose' schemes which give rights and benefits to fathers that cannot be transferred to female partners (Leira, 1999).

Children under the age of 12 months are particularly affected by maternal employment: for newborns, outcomes are better when mothers are able to take longer periods of leave (Smolensky & Gootman, 2003). This is partly because maternity leave allows mothers to breastfeed for longer. Breastfeeding is strongly recommended for at least the first six months of a baby's life (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2005). However, the lack of guaranteed paid maternity leave means that many mothers have to return to work well before this time is up.

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Among developed countries, only the US and Australia have not legislated for minimum paid maternity leave across the workforce (O'Neill, 2004). Access to maternity leave in Australia is therefore variable, although it has increased in recent years. Approximately 39% of women have access to paid maternity leave of some sort, up from 28% in 1997, the average amount of paid leave available being 7 weeks (O'Neill, 2004). However, these figures are inclusive of public sector employees who are entitled by legislation to paid maternity leave; duration of this leave varies across states (O'Neill, 2004). Access to maternity leave varies according to employment status: about half of all full-time employees and a fifth of part-time employees are eligible for paid

maternity leave, but virtually no casual employees are. Access also varies according to the sector or industry. The highest coverage of paid maternity leave occurs among government employees, and among managers and administrators, while the lowest is among agricultural, service industry staff and sales staff (O'Neill, 2004).

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Access to child care

Achieving a positive work/family balance is partly dependent upon parents having access to affordable and high quality child care. In Australia, almost half of all children below school age now use some form of non-parental care on a regular basis (Qu & Wise, 2004), often combining formal and informal care. Access to care is particularly problematic for parents working non-standard hours and work schedules. However, many others are also struggling to find suitable child care, with the available options often being limited. For instance, big business has been slow to provide employer-based or at least employer-subsidised child care (Edgar, 2005). Whether such arrangements are beneficial or otherwise for children and families depends upon a number of factors, the most important of which is the quality of care (CCCH, 2006; Clarke-Stewart & Allhusen, 2005; Melhuish, 2003). Other factors include the age of the child, the continuity of staff, and the number of settings used (Bowes et al, 2003).

Basic employment entitlements

One of the foundations of a successful work/family balance is adequate employment with basic leave entitlements, predictable hours and pay (Pocock, 2005). For many Australians, such conditions are not available. Just under 20% of children live in families in which no adult has paid work (de Vaus, 2004). Two-thirds of Australia's two million part-time workers lack any access to paid leave - including annual leave (Pocock, 2003).

Increasing numbers of employees work unpredictable hours, making it difficult to anticipate their income and budget for family necessities.

What are the implications of the research?

- Helping parents reduce tension between their jobs and family life can benefit children, families, employers and society. Good work/family balance assists women to realise their full potential as workers and enables men to develop the close relationships they seek with their children. Children benefit from time with their parents, and from living in economically secure households. Such conditions also enable employers to deploy staff in effective ways, thus enhancing employee morale and productivity.
- Factors that contribute to positive work/family balance include basic conditions of employment such as job security, fair pay, predictable hours and access to leave. In addition, public policies and industrial arrangements that facilitate parental time at home (including paid leave when children are very young), flexible working time arrangements which give employees some control over starting and finishing times, and high quality early childhood education and care all have the potential for widespread social and economic benefits.
- More families are using formal and informal child care services, but there is growing concern in the community about the cost of services, limited choices available, and about quality and standards.

Considerations for policy and programs

- Paid leave is one of the most effective means of enabling parents to combine work and family life. A priority should be to enable young children to be cared for by their parents without an economic penalty for choosing this option particularly in the first year of life. Therefore, paid maternity and parental leave must be made universally available – as it is in many other countries. There is also a need for other forms of leave in order to enable parents to care for sick children, to attend special school and sporting events, and to attend to unexpected emergencies.
- High quality, affordable child care is a crucial social support for families. Good quality education and care services have direct benefits for children and are not simply an adjunct to parental workforce participation. Greater diversity of child care options (eg. community based, workplace based, and school based) should be provided.
- 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 to provide opportunities for training and promotion. Currently, many part-time jobs are insecure and lack basic entitlements such as annual leave, carers leave and paid maternity leave.
- A concerted effort is needed within organisations to ensure that the benefits of family-friendly employment conditions are made available to all employees who need them, regardless of their gender, occupational status or training. Since the evidence suggests that those with the lowest levels of education and job security are least likely to have access to these benefits, careful attention will need to be given to these employees.
- Further research is required to understand more fully which parental work arrangements are most beneficial for children. The impact of any changes in industrial relations on family functioning and child development - such as the recent Workplace Relations Amendment (Work Choices) Bill 2005 - should also be monitored closely.

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A multi-disciplinary team from the Centre for Community Child Health produce these Policy Briefs.

An advisory group of national and international experts in children's policy and service delivery provides advice and peer review.

References

A full list of references and further reading used in the development of this Policy Brief is available from www.rch.org.au/ccch/pub

Next Policy Brief

Policy Brief No 4 will address Universal versus Specialist Community Services. This will be released in August 2006.

The Centre for Community Child Health is at the forefront of research into early childhood development and behaviour. The Centre is committed to translating research to inform public policy, service delivery and practice.

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