

Working families must be supported, for their sake and Australia's^[1]

Author: Ruppanner, Leah

Source: ABC News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 5 Nov 2018

AVAILABILITY

Read online^[2]

EXCERPTS

As any parent can attest, the birth of a child unravels life into chaos. Babies — adorable little creatures — bring a whirlwind of nappies to be changed, bellies to be filled and often baffling demands to be met.

In many households, mothers assume the bulk of this added labour, in part due to gender norms emphasising mother-as-best care.

Yet, as more mothers are entering the labour market and gender norms are shifting, questions about how mothers are faring in these changing conditions are increasingly pressing.

Families are increasingly calling for solutions to the gendered carer problem. Having spent the last three years studying this issue, I propose some policy solutions that can help address it.

The motherhood gap: what happens when the baby comes?

It is important to acknowledge that fathers are increasingly involved in childcare and reporting strong preferences for spending more time with children over work.

However, it is difficult for fathers to be as engaged in fatherhood as they would like. After taking leave to care for children, they often face a "flexibility stigma" that can result in lower earnings and shorter career ladders.

These institutional barriers, taken together with social norms which equate "good" parenting with motherly love, mean mothers often remain the primary caregivers.

Thus, it is no surprise that gender inequality increases when children are present. New Australian mothers report twice as much pressure on their time as new fathers following the birth of their first child.

This pressure only doubles after the birth of the second child, further widening the gap between heterosexual parents.

How Swedish women handle unequal parenting load

Lessons from Canada show that mothers, more than fathers, view their parenting load as unfair and as a consequence are more dissatisfied with their marriages.

Swedish women take gender inequality even more seriously, separating from their partners if the domestic load remains unequal.

In an age where children are expected to be carted from ballet to cello to soccer practice, having multiple children requires superhuman strength.

It is no wonder, then, that the pressure from taking care of children and inequalities in home lives can damage mothers' mental health, well-being and marriages.

To address the gender gap in motherhood and to allow fathers to more easily engage in child-rearing, my research recommends the following policies:

Universally accessible high-quality low-cost childcare

The availability of low cost childcare varies significantly between countries.

Swedish parents pay an average of 17 per cent of their childcare fees, with the government subsidising the rest.

By contrast, the Australian government subsidises just 50 per cent of childcare, leaving the rest to be paid out-of-pocket by parents.

High childcare costs can cripple family budgets and force mothers to reduce work to avoid forking out expensive childcare costs. Research from the US has found that expensive childcare is a major reason why mothers do not start working again.

Public childcare enrolment benefits working mothers through lower family-work conflict, which may allow mothers to remain employed.

As a barrier to mothers' employment, a lack of affordable childcare options can lead to a drain on the economy. When highly educated mothers reduce employment to care for children, the Australian economy is losing out on high skilled labour.

If working-class mothers experience multiple bouts of unemployment, the Australian government may also subsidise these family incomes. Either way, universal, low-cost high quality childcare is an important investment in Australian families, the workforce and the GDP.

The employer link: offering employees flexible work

Employers also play a role in supporting working families through providing flexibility such as movable start and stop times, autonomy in organising their daily work and flex-time to deal with unexpected family or personal demands.

Living in a country where more people have access to such options helps mothers maintain work at times that suits them in more satisfying and higher quality jobs.

Workers at firms that mandate shorter work weeks and fewer hours report better attendance and creativity with equivalent productivity.

Parents in countries with shorter work hours are more likely to report that work and family are in conflict. They also say they would prefer less time at work. In these countries, putting in long hours at the office becomes less important, indicating a shift from a workaholic culture.

Lessons from others countries suggest that we need to discuss whether long work hours and overscheduled kids is good for our long-term health, well-being and collective sanity. If not, reducing work hours and introducing flexible work may offer a solution.

School's out, now what's a parent to do?

For many Australian parents, the incompatibility of work and family schedules comes into sharp relief during the dreaded school holidays. School holidays require parents to dig deep into their powers of persuasion — either taking time off to care for children or working up magical solutions to keep children entertained and safe for 10 hours a day.

School is most beneficial to parents when school days are long and after school care is widely available. But the gaps in school schedules — whether through short school days, limited after school care or long breaks — highlight that work and school need to be better synchronised.

It's in all our interests to ensure school and work schedules are consistent, that parents aren't penalised for leaving work to pick up children, and that children can be cared for during school holidays in ways that are innovative and inexpensive.

As more families are balancing competing work and family demands, innovative policy solutions must be found. Otherwise, the consequences for failing our families are great.

Related link:

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[3]

Tags: mother's labour force participation ^[4]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/18/11/working-families-must-be-supported-their-sake-and-australias>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/18/11/working-families-must-be-supported-their-sake-and-australias> [2]

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-11-07/working-families-work-life-balance-australian-childcare/10472886> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/australia-and-new-zealand> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8142>