

In Australia, moms are the default parents ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

The second article in a Slate occasional series, *child care over there* ^[3] that asked parents from around the world to describe their child care experiences.

EXCERPTS

Name: Karen Beilharz

Age: 36

Country: Australia

Occupation: I write, edit, and self-publish, mostly comics.

Partner's occupation: Freelance Web developer

Children: Two girls, ages 4 years and 6 months.

Hi, Karen. What are your work hours?

I work whenever I get a chance (which is usually when my children are asleep). My husband works mostly normal business hours, but occasionally evenings and on the weekend, too.

Who takes care of your kids while you work?

Our 4-year-old is in child care two days a week, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Her session can go from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. but we usually drop her off around 9-9:30 a.m. Where we live-in Sydney's Inner West-it's very hard to get a permanent, daylong day care spot. When I was attending antenatal classes for my first child at the local hospital, one of the women in charge of the classes said that the town planners of Sydney assumed that everyone would move out farther west to buy a house; they never thought that couples would choose to live closer to the city and start their families here. As a result, the Inner West is exploding with families with young children, to the point where educators are warning that there may not be enough places in local schools in a couple of years. And of course it means that child care can be hard to find, with many people placing their children on multiple waiting lists.

The center where we send our daughter does multiple types of care: long day care, occasional care, and preschool. Last year I made good use of their occasional care service, which meant booking spots two weeks in advance every single week. The nice thing about occasional care is that I didn't have to book an all-day session if I didn't want one; I could opt for just morning or just afternoon. (I liked the 11:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. slot because it meant I could do something with my daughter in the morning, drop her at care where she would have lunch and a sleep, and then I could go home and have a little rest or do work in the afternoon. This is before the baby came along, of course!)

With booking occasional care, it's first come, first served, but I would sort of rort the system by using an email scheduler, which meant I always got the slots I wanted. At the beginning of this year, I asked the center if my daughter could go permanently on those two days, and they said yes. I don't think she's technically classified as long day care (I think they call it permanent occasional care, which doesn't make sense), but it pretty much is. Because she's over 3, she participates in the preschool program with all the other children in her room.

How much does it cost?

It's \$85 a day, but we get \$20.83 back from the government through Australia's Childcare Benefit scheme. (The Childcare Benefit scheme is different from the Childcare Rebate, which you can get if you are working, studying, or training.) The amount you can get back through Childcare Benefit varies from family to family, and is affected by things like how many hours of child care you use, the age of your child, and your household income.

What happens when your older daughter is sick?

I usually have to go and pick her up, and then she is usually not allowed back for 24 hours, which means that if she is sent home sick on a Wednesday, she can't go Thursday, and I don't have any toddler-free time but instead must look after them both, usually without help.

Do you live near family that can help you take care of your children?

Fortunately, I do! My mother and her partner are 25 minutes away, and my in-laws are 45 minutes away. We usually see them every week: My in-laws come to help me on Tuesday afternoons, and we go to my mother's place on Friday afternoons. Both sets of grandparents are also happy to take our 4-year-old overnight every now and then.

Are mothers expected to be the "default parent," which is to say the person who misses work when the kid is sick or who deals with school events and other organizational parenting tasks?

In our household, unfortunately, that is the case: My husband suffers from clinical depression, and while the domestic labor is more or less apportioned to our mutual satisfaction, I still wind up handling most of the kid stuff.

I think in general, most mothers are expected to pick up more of the child care, mostly because of circumstance: Breast-feeding is promoted very well in this country, which means that the majority of women will try to breast-feed initially (even if they do not end up continuing). That means that mothers usually end up being the primary caregiver of their newborns. They will take paid parental leave, which they can get for up to 18 weeks (at \$641.05 per week), but their partners are often only entitled to two weeks. The effect is that mothers end up being the ones who know what's going on with their children, so they book the medical appointments (and have their children listed on their Medicare cards), arrange play dates, arrange child care, and so on, even after returning to work.

Institutions like child care often reinforce this by defaulting to the mother as the contact person or the person who is supposed to know what's happening. My husband found this out one morning when he dressed our then-2-year-old and took her to child care: A staff worker pointed out their regulations require shoulders and upper arms to be covered during summer because of the harsh Australian sun (i.e., she had to wear a T-shirt under her sundress), and then told him to tell me, the mum, to make sure that Miss 2 was dressed appropriately next time. That staff worker just assumed that it I had made the mistake, not him!

How long was your maternity leave? And did your husband get paternity leave?

I quit my job when I first became pregnant. (I regret that now.) My husband is freelance, so for both our daughters, he worked from home a lot in the first month or so and tailored his hours to suit our family.

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Read online at [Slate](#) ^[2]

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[4]

Tags: work/life balance ^[5]

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