

Fathers: They need more support ^[1]

Editorial

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EXCERPTS

Twenty-first century parenting can be a pressure cooker. For Australian women and men, juggling work and family is a daily difficulty. We frequently debate whether women can have it all. On [Australian] Father's Day it is worth remembering that expectations for modern dads are also high.

Gone is the time when bringing home a regular pay packet was the measure of success, and dads could put their feet up at the end of a working day. With mothers in the workforce, fathers need to be more involved in the care of their brood. As parenting has intensified, they, like their partners, are spending weekends driving children to extracurricular activities or evenings at the dinner table helping with homework.

At the same time, working hours for many men are long. Although the number of people working more than 50 hours a week across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is small, Australia is an exception: 21 per cent of Australian men work very long hours.

Today, dads may be parenting blended families or sharing the care of children after a separation or divorce, they may be gay and navigating a family model unrecognised until relatively recently.

And whereasthe research finds women still do far more housework and childrearing than men, Australian dads compare favourably internationally. Their long hours in paid employment combined with their domestic duties means they work harder than Danish, French or Italian fathers and are equal to American dads. Danish dads spend eight hours a day on paid and domestic work while Australian dads spend 10 to 11. Aussie dads spend 172 minutes each day on cooking, cleaning or caring, more than men in many other OECD countries, but fewer than Australian women who devote 311 minutes each day on average to domestic work.

Our workplaces, welfare policies, and inadequate childcare encourage this gender imbalance by making the male main breadwinner, part-time working mother the most practical and financially sustainable model for raising a family in Australia, despite evidence showing many men are dissatisfied with the current arrangements and would like to share caregiving more equally.

Just how little our workplaces value fatherhood was highlighted in a recent Sex Discrimination Commissioner's report, which found 27 per cent of fathers and partners surveyed who took advantage of our new federal paid parental leave scheme, experienced discrimination when applying for it, taking it or on return to work. Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick was alarmed to discover a perception among men that taking paternity leave would mark them out as not serious players.

It is in the community's interest for dads to be involved in their children's lives, from the very start and beyond. Kids with active dads are more confident, healthier and get better grades. But we can't expect men - or women - to do it all without more support. On Father's Day it is time to praise Aussie dads for how far they have come, but also to recognise that if they are to do more domestically they need more help. Father's Day gifts that would make a difference include: reducing the gender pay gap, more affordable, more available childcare, flexible working hours for both sexes and a workplace culture that values parenting. In the meantime, let dad sleep in this morning. He deserves it.

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[3]

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