The Lives We Want

conversation series

Brief 2:

Child space vs work place: the business of fatherhood (August 2018)

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Child space vs work place: the business of fatherhood

It's still fairly rare in Australia for men to be 'stay-at-home dads', or even to undertake flexible or part-time working hours to fit in with their parenting commitments. Even where workplaces offer these options, far fewer men than women access flexible work options. According to some commentators, this is a tragedy: a situation "where even incremental change could lead to long-lasting benefits for families, kids, women and even … the men themselves".[1]

In this report, Professor Janeen Baxter explores the benefits and barriers that prevent fathers from accessing flexible work options, and what we could be doing to encourage more men to take up these opportunities.

About our presenter

Professor Janeen Baxter, from the Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Queensland, is Director of the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course. Her research interests lie particularly in the areas of gender, families, households, social disadvantage and the life course.

Janeen is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia and a former member of its Executive Committee. She has held an Australian Research Council Professorial Fellowship and is also a former Chair of the Social, Behavioural and Economic Sciences panel for the ARC College of Experts.

About The Lives We Want Conversation Series

The Lives We Want conversation series provides a twice-yearly opportunity for senior business leaders to engage on social justice issues, providing a channel to voice their concerns, opinions and experiences of social justice issues in the corporate environment. The series is a joint initiative of Anglicare Southern Queensland and the Anglican Church Southern Queensland Social Responsibilities Committee, with sponsorship from Consolidated Properties.

Introduction

What does it mean to be a 'good' parent?

Understandings of what it means to be a 'good' parent are changing.

In the mid-twentieth century fatherhood was defined primarily in economic terms and emphasised men's responsibilities as providers, breadwinners and authority figures.

More recently, greater weight is being placed on men's involvement in day-to-day family matters and their hands-on roles in mentoring and providing physical and emotional care to their children.

These changes in definitions of 'good' fathering have been brought about by a whole range of factors — changes in social attitudes about gender, changes in women's levels of participation in higher education and paid work, changes in legislation about equal opportunity, and changes in the labour market. There's more service sector employment, and fewer manufacturing jobs. This has pushed some men out of the labour force, or into different types of employment with more flexible hours and conditions.

We have also seen changes in the definitions of a 'good mother'. The role has expanded beyond hands-on physical care, emotional attachment, mentoring, educational involvement and guidance. More and more mothers now contribute to the family financially, with part-time or full-time employment to supplement the family income.

These changes have coincided with changes in the 'value' accorded to children.

Fertility rates have declined dramatically since the mid-twentieth century and most families now have, on average, fewer than 2 children.[2] Those children, however, are at home longer than in the past, and often require more, and longer, periods of support from their parents.

So both mothers and fathers are investing more time and resources in a smaller number of children, for a longer period of time. It is not unusual for parents, particularly middle class parents, to invest heavily in extra-curricula enrichment activities such as sport, music lessons, or other out-of-school hours activities, for their children. This is sometimes referred to as 'concerted cultivation'.[3]

Figure 1: Births per woman, 1950-2017 (ABS 2018)

Some things change — and some stay the same…

There has been a great deal of change over the past 50–70 years.

But despite these changes, men still do less than women when it comes to childcare and domestic work. Women still do about 70 per cent of unpaid work and this has not changed much in the last four decades.[4]

The 2018 national 'HILDA' survey[5] shows this continuing inequality very clearly.

- Women spend twice as much time on care work as men.
- Women spend twice as much time as men on housework.
- Most men are employed full-time.
- Many women are employed part-time, although this is trending upward. Women spend about 10 hours less per week in paid work than men.

How do these patterns change when a couple has a baby?

There are significant changes in work and family life when the first baby is born. Women's share of employment hours declines; and their share of care work increases strongly from less than 50 per cent to more than 70 per cent. Women's share of housework, which was already higher than men's share, increases even further.

These figures aren't unexpected, given that most new mothers in Australia take at least some time off work to care full time for their infant.

What is interesting is that this gendered division doesn't change much as the baby grows older. While the arrival of an additional child or children might explain the pattern for a longer period of time, overall the birth of the first baby is a real turning point in the division of labour between male and female partners.[6]

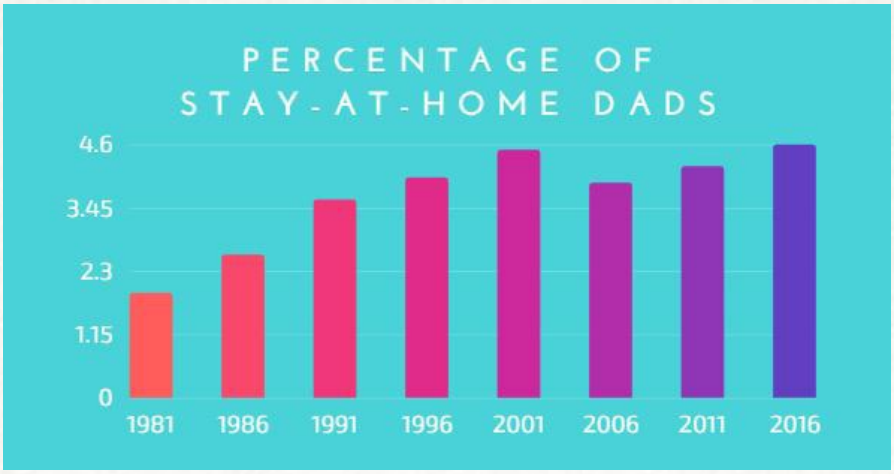
> ***"Even 10 years after the first birth [women's share of employment] only reaches 30 per cent. This increase is matched by a small decrease in women's share of care time, but women still contribute an average of 66 per cent of the couple's care time 10 years later. Moreover, women's share of housework persistently remains on a high level, still amounting to 62 per cent 10 years after the first birth."***
>
> HILDA 2018, p. 86

Stay-at-home dads

Stay-at-home father families are very diverse. They include fathers who are looking for work and those who are not. So they are a mix of men who consciously choose to stay home and parent full time, and those who are in between jobs because of their employment circumstances, or health issues, or because they are taking some time out.

While the percentage of stay-at-home dads has more than doubled since 1981, overall the numbers are small, comprising fewer than 5 percent of couple families in Australia in 2016. In comparison, 28% of couple families have a stay-at-home mum.[7]

Interestingly, mothers still take on much of the caring and household work, even if fathers are at home with children.



Percentage of stay at home fathers 1981–2016 (two-parent families with youngest child aged less than 15 years), Australia. (Source data: Baxter 2018, p. 8.)

In stay-at-home mother families:

- mothers spent 37 hours on each of child care and housework
- fathers spent 13 hours per week on each of child care and housework
- fathers averaged 51 hours per week on paid work.

In stay-at-home father families:

- mothers and fathers spent similar amounts of time on childcare (21 and 19 hours, respectively)
- fathers spent a little more time than mothers on housework (28 compared to 23 hours)
- mothers averaged 35 hours per week on paid work.[8]

Why is the gender imbalance between care, housework and paid work important?

The first reason is simply continued gender inequality. If we are to move beyond what has been called a 'stalled revolution', men need to take up more of the unpaid care work in the home. This will enable women to realise their full potential in paid employment, as well as supporting men to realise their full potential as carers and fathers.

Second, we know that in today's society, becoming a parent is an important driver of the 'time squeeze' experienced by parents, and particularly mothers (who spend more time as carers). These pressures have particular consequences for women's mental health.

The third reason this imbalance is important is that we know that men's involvement in fathering has very positive consequences for children's wellbeing. One example of this comes from some of my own collaborative research.[9] We investigated

whether spending time with fathers improved the cognitive scores on standard tests for 4–8 year olds. Interestingly, we found that the total amount of time with fathers was only associated with fairly small improvements — but the amount of father–child time in focused activities like reading, playing games and doing homework together was associated with moderate-to-large improvements. It didn't matter whether the father had little or high levels of education, and the results were much larger than the corresponding results for women.

Other researchers have also found that the involvement of dads creates positive outcomes for children in relation to their wellbeing, sociability and health; and enhances family functioning overall.

Despite all the evidence for the benefits, in Australia only 1 in 20 fathers take primary parental leave, and fewer than 1 in 3 eligible people take Dad and Partner leave.[10]

So why don't more dads take leave?

Stigma

There is often stigma associated with not fulfilling a traditional breadwinner role. A lot of research suggests that men feel uncomfortable about taking leave even when it is provided, because they believe that it is not supported by their bosses or colleagues.

A recent industry survey suggests that 54 percent of Australian men believe that new fathers don't take the full parental leave they are entitled to because they fear an adverse impact on their finances, while 34 percent are afraid they'll be viewed as less committed to their job. The majority said men in their organisation rarely take (28 percent) or only take some (44 percent) of the parental leave they're entitled to. Yet 80 percent said shared parental leave and child rearing responsibility would help break down unconscious bias and improve gender diversity.[11]

Gender attitudes

Although we have seen movement toward more egalitarian attitudes in Australia about gender roles, the amount of change is less than we might expect. Our research using longitudinal data suggests that both men and women become more traditional in their gender attitudes after becoming a parent — that is, more likely to support arrangements where mothers are the main carers.

This may be because it is very difficult to do things differently, particularly while we continue to see men out-earn women (we still have a gender gap in earnings with women earning about 15 percent less than men). We also don't have enough good quality, affordable, flexible and accessible childcare to support dual earner couples. So it often makes sense financially for women to be the main carers of young children, and their attitudes may change to align with and support their circumstances.

What we don't see however, is this pattern changing as children grow older and move into school. So once the gender traditional patterns are established while children are young, they seem to carry through the remainder of people's lives.

A long work-hours culture

It is exceedingly difficult for families to have both parents engaged in the paid labour market full time, primarily because working full time often means working close to 40 hours each week. (In fact, more than 50 percent of fathers in Australia work more than 45 hours each week.) Examining some workplaces that are leading the way in reducing work hours (introducing four-day work weeks for example) may be one important step towards understanding the implications of shorter work weeks on gender equity within workplaces and within the family.

How can we change this imbalance?

First of all, we have to know what our goals are. Do we want policies that support women to manage both paid and care work? Encourage more men to be stay-at-home dads? Or support couples to be flexible and negotiate the arrangements that work best for them?

Then we need to look at what levers can be pulled to support these goals.

Government legislation

Government legislation is an important first step. In 2011 the Federal Government introduced Paid Parental Leave (usually to the mother) for eighteen weeks at the national minimum rate; and Dad and Partner Pay for two weeks at the national minimum rate. There are also statutory rights to unpaid leave for a further twelve months. Some companies offer additional leave entitlements.[12]

However — entitlement and take up are not the same thing. And we can see from available figures that men's take up of these leave entitlements is nowhere near optimal.

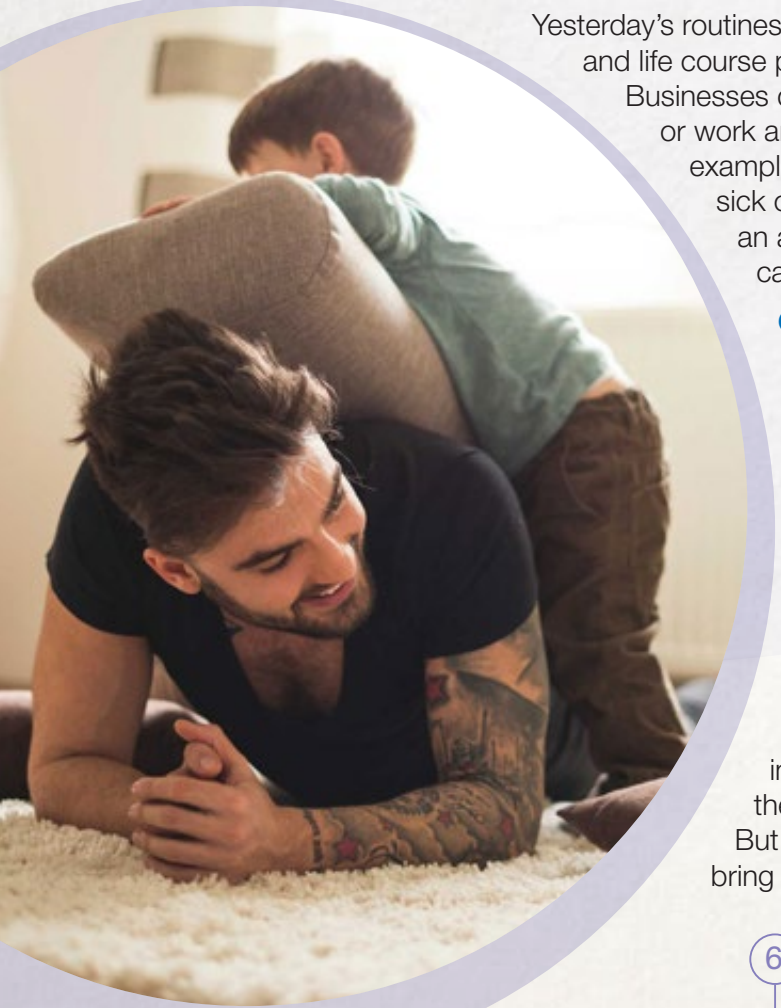
Employers and industry leaders have an important role to play

The percentage of men who take employer-funded parental leave is higher than those who take government-funded paid parental leave. This is likely to be a reflection of the generosity and flexibility of employer-funded parental leave schemes.

But it also suggests that employers and industry leaders have an important role in creating a supportive workplace culture, so that it becomes normal for fathers/partners to take advantage of parental leave and flexible work hours to meet their caring commitments.

As well as government legislation, we also need industry leaders, and large and small businesses, to play a role in financially supporting their employees and creating a culture where it is normal and appropriate for men, as well as women, to take leave to care for children.

Final thoughts



Yesterday's routines and calendars of work time, school, career, retirement and life course pathways do not fit with the realities of lives today.[13] Businesses don't close their doors at 3pm for the school pickup, or work around childcare hours. And we can think of many examples of other kinds of care work (elder care, care of the sick or people with a disability) that assume availability of an adult with flexibility throughout the day to undertake care work.

One size does not fit all.

We need evidence about what programs and policies work, based on Australian data. Australia is not the same as the United Kingdom, United States or New Zealand.

We need to be prepared to drop programs and policies that don't work and design new ones.

We need to recognise that what works for one group, in one location and at one time may not work for all groups, across all contexts and time periods.

We are moving in the right direction. Australia has invested strongly in good quality longitudinal data, and there are moves to use these data in innovative ways. But this is one area where we need to work harder to bring everyone to the table (academics, researchers,

policy experts, politicians, industry, business leaders) to work together more closely and find ways to encourage men to reap the benefits of paternal leave for their children, their families and themselves.

Resources and links

Baxter, Jennifer. 2018. *Stay-at-home fathers in Australia.* (Research Report). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. At: https://aifs.gov.au/publications/stay-home-fathers-australia

Jackson, Gabrielle. 2015. Force men to take paternity leave. It will make the world a better place. *The Guardian* [online]. At: www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/10/want-better-dads-happier-mums-and-healthier-kids-make-men-take-paternity-leave

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2 Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2018. Fertility rates (excerpt). 3301.0 - Births, Australia, 2017. At: www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/3301.0Main%20Features42017?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=3301.0&issue=2017&num=&view=

3 Lareau, Annette. 2003. *Unequal Childhoods*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

4 Baxter, J., and Tai, Tsui-o. 2016. Unpaid Domestic Labor. In Stephen Edgell, Heidi Gottfried and Edward Granter. *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Work and Employment*. Los Angeles: SAGE, pp. 444–466.

5 Wilkins, Roger and Inga Lass. 2018. *The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey: Selected Findings from Waves 1 to 16*. Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research, University of Melbourne, p. 82. At: https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/2874177/HILDA-report_Low-Res_10.10.18.pdf

6 Wilkins, Roger and Inga Lass. 2018. *The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey: Selected Findings from Waves 1 to 16*. Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research, University of Melbourne, p. 86. At: https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/2874177/HILDA-report_Low-Res_10.10.18.pdf

7 Baxter, Jennifer. 2018. *Stay-at-home fathers in Australia*. (Research Report). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

8 Baxter, J. (2017). *Stay-at-home dads* (Fact Sheet). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. At: https://aifs.gov.au/publications/stay-home-dads

9 The research used data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), which is a longitudinal study of over 5,000 children with data collected every two years on their health, developmental outcomes, time use and other outcomes. At: https://growingupinaustralia.gov.au/

10 See Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2017. One in 20 dads take primary parental leave. At: www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/4125.0~Sep%202017~Media%20Release~One%20in%2020%20dads%20take%20primary%20parental%20leave%20(Media%20Release)~11

11 See Chua, A. 2017. New fathers reluctant to take parental leave. At: www.hcamag.com/features/new-fathers-reluctant-to-take-parental-leave-242486.aspx

12 Australia falls a long way short of Greece, the Slovak Republic, the UK and the OECD average in terms of mothers' leave entitlements. Many of these are countries much less prosperous than Australia. The same is true for men's leave entitlements, which are much more generous than Australia in countries like Japan and Korea. These are not countries known for their levels of gender equality. Source: OECD Family Database at www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm

13 In *Encore Adulthood*, Phyliis Moen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) refers to this as 'institutional inertia' – the outdatedness of existing institutions and frameworks fashioned around a mid-twentieth century vision.

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