NATIONAL WORKING FAMILIES REPORT 2019
About this Report
The 2019 National Working Families Report is a not-for-profit initiative undertaken by Parents At Work with the support of Karitane and the Advancing Parental Leave Equality Network (APLEN).

Report Authors
This report is prepared by Parents At Work and Dr Linda Peach, Diversity & Research Consulting in response to the National Working Families Survey developed and conducted by Parents At Work, Karitane and APLEN.

Contributors:
With special thanks to Dr Amanda Cooklin (La Trobe University) and Dr Liana Leach (The Australian National University) for contributing their research expertise to the design of the survey questionnaire and information pertaining to relevant research papers and reports. Dr Cooklin and Dr Leach contributed as paid consultants with additional in-kind support on the survey project.

Supporters:
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Participating Survey Partners
Principal Survey Partner: Karitane

APLEN Sponsoring Survey Partners
Baker McKenzie, Deloitte, HSBC, IKEA, KPMG and QBE.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
“Bonded attachment is critical for a child’s brain development, their ability to form relationships and is proven to have improved education outcomes as well as reducing the risk of mental illness later in life.”

Grainne O’Loughlin
We are delighted to share the results from the 2019 National Working Families Survey. Karitane was proud to be a principal partner of this important work. Why? At Karitane we see a high number of working parents preparing to transition back to work or those who have already returned. Research evidence tells us that parents have the greatest influence on their children’s development and wellbeing so it matters that adequate support is readily available to ensure parents are equipped to be the best parent they can be.

The first 2,000 days (0-5 years) shapes a child’s future and during this time children develop many of the skills and abilities that help them grow into healthy, resilient adults. Bonded attachment is critical for a child’s brain development, their ability to form relationships and is proven to have improved education outcomes as well as reducing the risk of mental illness later in life. Raising thriving, healthy children is all important and building young brains takes work.

Parents experiencing mental health issues, stress and anxiety can have an impact on their children’s wellbeing and development and we know that 1 in 5 mums and up to 1 in 10 dads experience a perinatal mood disorder. We also know that in today’s communities many families see both parents working. It’s critical then to consider how organisations can best shift with the change in the social paradigm of supporting the juggle of parenting and families.

Parents taking stress home from work impacts not only on their own wellbeing but also the wellbeing of their children and their relationships. With the report showing that half of all parents returning to work after parental leave report significant fatigue; a third are worried and anxious; and one in five report feeling depressed, employers need to take notice and support parents and families in this critical time.

The significant findings of this survey demonstrate why it is now more important than ever to create better policies to support parents, to help children to learn and grow from the earliest day onward.

Grainne O’Loughlin
CEO
Karitane
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Competing pressures of work and caring responsibilities impact the wellbeing of Australian working families.

Work-life balance pressures not only present a significant challenge for individuals and the families they care for, they have implications for employers and the wider community in which we all live and work.

In July 2019, Parents At Work launched the inaugural National Working Families Survey with the support of parenting health care provider, Karitane, and not-for-profit employer group APLEN (Advancing Parental Leave Equality Network).

Parents and carers across Australia were asked about the impact of managing work and caring responsibilities to better understand their future work needs.

More than 6,000 parents and carers from around Australia completed the survey.

This summary report reveals the key findings and considers how workplaces can provide men and women equal opportunities to fulfil their work and family responsibilities.

The results clearly reveal that parents and carers across Australia are finding it difficult to balance their work and family commitments and report their personal wellbeing and family relationships suffer as a result.

Increasingly, employees want to work for organisations that recognise and support their outside of work responsibilities. And the study firmly confirms this.

Parents and carers reported that their job helped them feel personally fulfilled, but they want additional measures to help them better manage work, family and care demands. It suggests that current workplace flexible work policies, parental leave and caring support is falling short.

While many organisations have flexible work and parental leave policies in place to support parents and carers, the effective implementation and embedding of those policies vary.

Workplace culture, job expectations/workload and the (personal) work-life attitudes of managers remain key to implementing flexible work and other caring policies.

The study found nearly half of all respondents said that a worker’s commitment to their job was questioned if they used family friendly work arrangements.

Employers must be willing to confront and tackle stigma, discrimination and gender bias associated with caring for children and working part-time or flexibly. This means investing in and creating a workplace environment that is inclusive and respectful of the fact employees have both work and family commitments.

When employees are adequately supported to meet these dual commitments their ability to thrive increases – this is good for families, business and society.

As women continue to be expected to take on the lion’s share of caring responsibilities, the future of women’s wellbeing, career advancement and financial security remains at risk if we fail to invest in creating family friendly workplaces.

Equally, workplaces must make it more accessible and acceptable for men to lean in to caring by normalising men taking time to raise
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“The future of work must respond to the changing nature of modern family life and increasing caring demands to ensure families, the community and economy can thrive.”

Emma Walsh

children or to care for others in their family. The primary earner ‘breadwinner’ versus primary carer ‘caregiver’ stereotypes persist and are limiting.

Australia underperforms on work-life balance indicators and compared to the majority of other OECD countries, our paid parental leave progress has stalled.

UNICEF is calling on all nations and organisations to invest in family friendly policies and is urging government and business to take more action.

The future of work must respond to the changing nature of modern family life and increasing caring demands to ensure families, the community and economy can thrive.

Emma Walsh
CEO and Founder
Parents At Work
KEY FINDINGS

FINDING 1
Australians report feeling fatigued, stressed, anxious and depressed as a result of trying to balance work and family commitments and report that personal wellbeing and family relationships suffer as a result.

FINDING 2
Women continue to shoulder the majority of household labour.

FINDING 3
There are barriers to men’s access to paid parental leave and flexible work options, as well as social attitudes that make it challenging for men to ask for and take these support mechanisms.

FINDING 4
Returning to work after a period of parental leave is a challenging and difficult time, particularly if jobs and employment conditions have changed without consultation during leave.

FINDING 5
Difficulties with balancing work and family roles, gender imbalance in accessing paid parental leave, and lack of access to work flexibility are primary motivators for parents and carers to leave their employer.

FINDING 6
Work has positive benefits for parents and carers and most reported their jobs are satisfying and fulfilling.

FINDING 7
There is a perceived lack of support from managers for a substantial number of parents and carers. This differs by gender – women feel unsupported in returning to work and having access to the same opportunities as colleagues who have not been on parental leave; men experience fewer issues but can receive negative comments from managers about their involvement in family responsibilities.

FINDING 8
The persistent belief that ‘flexible work is for women’ is a primary barrier to men’s access to flexible work and this attitude forces women to take on the bulk of family care work.

FINDING 9
Flexibility stigma persists for both men and women. Employee’s commitment to their job is questioned if they use flexible work arrangements.

FINDING 10
Work hours for men and women vary significantly until children reach the teenage years, with men continuing to do more work hours than women.
INTRODUCTION

This report details findings arising from the 2019 National Working Families Survey and provides recommendations to enable employers to meet the current and future needs of employees managing work and caring responsibilities.

These recommendations come at a critical point for employers and industry groups, community and government agencies, as the results clearly reveal that parents and carers across Australia are finding it difficult to balance work and family commitments and report their personal wellbeing and family relationships suffer as a result.

Achieving work-life balance satisfaction is problematic for both women and men, particularly when additional caring responsibilities clash with job responsibilities, hours of work and career advancement opportunities.

**Barriers to accessing flexible work, sufficient paid parental leave and caring support persist.** Gender bias towards caring responsibilities continues to be a significant factor in preventing men and women from evenly sharing caring responsibilities and this adds to the stress these parents and carers experience when trying to manage work and caring commitments.

The results indicate that workplaces need to do more to support employees caring for families, particularly taking steps that enable men to take a more equal share of caring and household labour and by mainstreaming and embedding access to flexible work and parental leave.

Improving the way work and caring responsibilities are combined and shared can positively impact the quality of work-life for thousands of Australians and contribute to the wider health and wellbeing of our society and economy; increasing productivity and reducing stress, absenteeism and gender inequality.

“It’s important to note that these pressures aren’t just impacting employees. They have a tangible and negative impact on employers.”

Emma Walsh
BACKGROUND: WORK AND FAMILY IN AUSTRALIA

The struggle to combine work and family responsibilities

A substantial number of employed parents (at least one in three mothers and fathers) find it practically and psychologically difficult to successfully combine work and family-care commitments – an experience known as work family-conflict.

The nature of how families combine work and caring responsibilities is changing with women’s increased workplace participation rates as well as a greater emphasis on men’s involvement in sharing parenting and caring responsibilities. This poses difficulties for many men in the context of traditional expectations of their roles at work.

One way that women deal with conflict between work and family commitments is to reduce their working hours or to leave the workforce altogether. Men, on the other hand, rarely make substantial adjustments to their working lives to accommodate family commitments, although it is not necessarily through lack of desire to make those changes.

The gendered approach to work and caring persists

While it is now the norm for both parents to be in paid employment in most family households, the labour market and caring/home responsibilities in Australia continue to be highly gendered.

In 2017, Australian mothers who were also the primary earners of a household spent 24.1 hours on housework and 19.3 hours on child care compared to their male counterpart who spent 15.3 hours on housework and 10.9 hours on child care per week.

The inequality in household and parenting labour in Australia is partly due to the way workplaces are structured and managed, but also due to an entrenched ‘male bread-winner’ culture.

When parents use flexible working arrangements for child care, men can face a flexibility stigma which has been seen to result in lower earnings and shorter career ladders. This kind of backlash against men who use flexible work to manage their parenting responsibilities limits progress towards equality for both women and men.

This cultural divide underpins the many difficulties all parents and carers face in managing work and family responsibilities effectively while trying to avoid negative consequences and stereotypes in the workplace.

There is inequitable access to paid parental leave that can assist families to balance work and family roles – and substantial gaps between policy and practice. Legislation requires the government to fund parental leave at the minimum wage – 18 weeks for primary carers and 2 weeks for secondary carers ("Dad and Partner Pay"). The primary carer is assumed to be a woman and the secondary carer a man. For many people, Australia’s minimum wage is insufficient to cover the basic cost of living. Employers can and do provide additional paid parental leave to employees, however less than 50% of private sector organisations with over 100 employees offer any additional paid parental leave provisions.

Impact of work family conflict on wellbeing

Being unable to find an effective balance between work and family leads to elevated levels of stress. Parenting couples who experience constant high levels of work-family conflict are 50% more likely to separate than those facing less work-family conflict.

In addition, there is new emerging research indicating that the impact of work-family
BACKGROUND: WORK AND FAMILY IN AUSTRALIA

Conflict is inter-generational – with children also experiencing a reduction in their mental health and wellbeing when their parents cannot effectively juggle work and family responsibilities.7

The 2019 National Working Families Report provides an insight to the pressures and concerns that Australian parents and carers are facing combining job and family responsibilities in the modern work environment.

Prior research has highlighted some of these issues, but no recent work has taken a large-scale look specifically at how Australian working parents and carers are faring when combining work and caring responsibilities - nine years since the introduction of legislated national parental leave scheme and the right to request flexible work.

THE SURVEY

The survey was developed in consultation with key partners and with advice from academic researchers. It was designed to address the following key research themes:

1. Overall, how are parents and carers feeling about their work and family juggle?
2. What are the key challenges and priorities for parents and carers?
3. Are our current workplace policies and practices sufficient for supporting families at work?

PARTICIPANTS

In addressing these questions, the survey asked working parents and carers about how they are managing their work and family commitments; the impact it has when balancing work and family becomes a challenge; and what employers are doing and could do to better support them. Participants were also asked about their access to and use of flexible work arrangements and paid parental leave.

A total of 6289 Australian parents and carers responded to the survey, from NSW (56%), Victoria (22%) and Queensland (11%). The remainder were spread across each of the other states and territories.

80% of participants identified as women, compared to 19% men and 1% non-binary.

The majority of participants (89%) had children under 18 years of age and 60% of those had two children.

Most participants were in a dual-earner household (80%) and 56% were in full-time employment.

More women than men were in part-time employment (37% compared to 7.5% respectively), reflecting the persistently gendered division of labour in Australia, particularly among those with caring and parenting responsibilities.

Participants were from a diverse range of industries and occupations:

- 18 Australian industry categories were represented in the survey.
- The most common industries represented were Professional, Scientific and Technical Services (27%); Health care and Social Assistance (12%); Education and Training (8%), and Information and Technology (6%).
- Over a third were managers (35%); almost half were professionals (46%); and a number were clerical or service workers (9%).
- Over half of participants were employed full-time (56%); over a third were part-time employed (38%) and the remainder were casual or employed on a different basis. 90% worked for an employer; 7% self-employed; 3% employed on another basis.
KEY INSIGHTS
KEY INSIGHTS

PARENTS AND CARERS ARE STRESSED AND STRUGGLING

Balancing family and work commitments is proving difficult for the majority of parents and carers in the workforce and this is having a negative impact on wellbeing.

**Most parents and carers (70%) said it was difficult to find a balance between work and family commitments** and more than half (56%) have missed out on family activities because of work. More concerning is that 51% of the women and 34% of the men said they experienced a substantial amount of stress when juggling their work and family roles.

One of the most striking results from the survey is that 62% of respondents said they struggled to look after their own physical and mental health. Both women (66%) and men (60%) reported this as the primary challenge they face in balancing work and family commitments, highlighting serious consequences for parents and carers when the challenges of balancing work and family becomes too great.

We know that parents experiencing mental health issues, stress and anxiety can also have an impact on their children’s wellbeing and development. Secondary challenges included ‘household chores and caring work’ (50%) and ‘managing expectations at home’ (38%).

These persistent difficulties present risks for organisations, with 28% of parents and carers indicating they had thought about, or actively intended, leaving their jobs because they struggled to balance work and family.

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**62%** of parents and carers say that their most challenging issue is looking after their personal physical & mental wellbeing.

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- **2/3** of working parents reported feeling too emotionally or physically drained when they got home from work to contribute to their family.
- **1/2** of women and a 1/3 of men who were parenting or caring said they were under ‘a lot’ of stress or ‘a great deal’ of stress.
- **1/2** had missed out on family activities in the past month, due to time they had to spend at work.

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**Employer Impact**

1 in 4 working parents and carers say they have considered – or actively intend – leaving their job in the next 12 months due to difficulties combining their job with caring responsibilities.
These issues are exacerbated by workplaces that offer limited or patchy support for employees with family and caring responsibilities. Many parents and carers need to leave their places of work at times that fit with their family and caring commitments, but 56% of respondents said it was difficult to leave work on time; 72% said it was hard to leave work at short notice when necessary; 47% found it challenging to find time to attend a school concert or event in their jobs; and 46% found it problematic to take time off work for sick children or family members.

Parents and carers running their own businesses were slightly more satisfied with the balance they are able to strike between work and family – 40% said they were generally satisfied with this, and 40% said they were generally dissatisfied. Nearly half (44%) had missed out on family activities due to work commitments. Almost one half of the small business owners (45%) had left a previous job because they had difficulty combining work with family.

**What are the most challenging issues facing families?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Looking after my own physical and mental health</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household chores and caring work</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing expectations at home</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing expectations at work</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of sleep</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of affordable childcare</td>
<td>20%</td>
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The 2019 National Working Families Report
KEY INSIGHTS

NEW PARENTS FACE FATIGUE, EXHAUSTION, ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

In keeping with the research already reviewed, parents’ wellbeing was significantly impacted on returning to work after a period of parental leave. Of those parents who had taken parental leave, half of those (52%) reported significant levels of fatigue and this was similar for both mothers and fathers. More mothers than fathers reported feeling worried and anxious (34% and 23% respectively), and slightly more fathers than mothers reported feeling depressed and sad (24% and 19% respectively).

The three primary challenges identified by parents combining work and caring for an infant were:

1. Fatigue and exhaustion
2. Adjusting to the demands of infant care while working (breastfeeding, caring for sick children, child care arrangements)
3. Managing the expectations of employers and colleagues

Emotional wellbeing on return to work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fatigued</th>
<th>Worried &amp; Anxious</th>
<th>Depressed &amp; Sad</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Kids were constantly sick and made me sick too. I needed a lot more time off in the first year back, as I had no family support and they couldn’t go to child care when they were sick.”

“It’s not about flexibility but workload. Workload is rarely adjusted for part-time work.”

“Managing employers & child care expectations, combined with the separation anxiety of the first few months was tricky.”

“Having to constantly explain, no, I cannot stay after-hours for whatever event or work do... because I have children...”

“Not having anyone to help with your own workflow was difficult when you have to stay home with sick children.”
Working outside the home has positive benefits for many parents and carers and most respondents agreed that working in a job helped them to feel fulfilled (82%). Just over half agreed that it helped them to be a better parent, while just under half (44%) said that work helped them to be a better partner in their relationship. However, one third reported that the combination of work and family responsibilities contributed to stress and tension in the relationship with their partners and with their children.

The challenges parents and carers reported seem to be primarily about managing their responsibilities in both work and family domains. Work is generally a positive experience but combining it with family life can lead to tensions at home. The transition to parenthood was the point at which most respondents felt stress and tension, particularly after returning to work from a period of parental leave.

Parents returning from parental leave and combining their job with caring for a new child in the family reported using a variety of working arrangements to help them manage. Flexible work was used by 42% of mothers and fathers, while part-time work was used by more than four times the number of mothers (56%) than fathers (12%). About one third of parents felt they received interest and support from their managers, while colleagues were seen to extend support more to mothers (72%) than to fathers (31%).

Changes to job or employer when returning to work after a period of paid parental leave was more common for women than men. During parental leave, 19% of mothers and 12% of fathers kept in touch with their employers. This result suggests employers need to be more proactive at keeping in touch with employees who are on parental leave.
The majority of fathers (96%) returned to the same employer and only 6% reported any change to their jobs. In comparison, 54% of mothers returned to the same job (same employer, no changes); 28% of mothers returned to the same employer but experienced changes to their jobs; 18% left their employer altogether. Of the 45.5% of mothers who experienced change to employer or job (i.e those not in the 54.5% who had no change at all): 20% were changes requested by the mother in the form of reduced hours; 26% were changes imposed by the employer.

As one mother reported, “...lots of changes took place while I was away and there was no clear communication or consultation with staff who were on leave as the changes were considered/put in place.”

The negative consequences for taking paid parental leave were more prominent for women than men with 34% of mothers and 11% of fathers reporting having missed out on an opportunity for promotion, and 55% of mothers (21% of fathers) missing out on training or development opportunities. It’s important to note that these figures may be influenced by the length of time taken away from the workplace, particularly as women are more likely to take longer parental leave than men.

The unsupportive nature of some workplaces for parents was apparent in 23% of mothers and 13% of fathers who reported receiving negative comments from managers and supervisors.

“Promotion was stopped due to flexible hours. I was a high performer but I lost my reputation and profile at work and felt invisible which caused mental health issues.”

“There are assumptions that working mothers don’t want travel or promotions.”

Missed out on promotion due to parental leave

<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>34%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>11%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

- Orange bar: Female
- Blue bar: Male
The availability and accessibility of paid parental leave is a crucial issue for Australian parents, with 87% of women and 79% of men reporting that it plays an important role in their decisions to stay at or leave a job. About half of the respondents had taken paid parental leave at their current employer (50% of the men and 53% of the women). There are clear gender differences in the length of parental leave taken by mothers compared to fathers. Most fathers (57%) and one third of mothers said the parental leave was too short. The primary reason for not accessing paid parental leave was financial – 19% of mothers and 15% of fathers reported that they needed to return to work because their families needed their income. About a quarter of the men and 8% of the women who did not use paid parental leave said they were ineligible under their current workplace policies.
FLEXIBLE WORK: NEW POLICIES, SAME ATTITUDES

The results of this survey indicate that while employers generally make flexible work arrangements available to employees, there is still a strong prejudice against men using flexible work to help care for their families, and a persistent belief that it is more appropriate for women to use flexible work than men.

The difficulties that parents and carers reported in balancing work and family commitments exist even though most respondents (88%) accessed some form of flexible working arrangement, with 52% able to flex their working hours and 50% able to flex their work location.

Negative attitudes towards men accessing flexible work arrangements were apparent in responses from 64% of respondents who agreed that “it is more acceptable for women to use family friendly work options than men”, and 57% who agreed that “employers are less likely to support men to take time off to care for family than women”.

27% men reported they did not think they would be allowed to use flexible work, or their supervisor would be reluctant to accommodate a request, compared to 21% women. More men (22%) than women (12%) were concerned that using flexible work arrangements might have a negative impact on their career and reputation at work.

Just over one fifth of respondents had made a request for flexible work in the past 12 months which had been refused. Primary reasons given for refusal were a general lack of support from managers and leaders; manager’s concerns about ‘setting a precedent’; the lack of a policy or procedures in their workplace; and employees feeling scared to ask.

The perception that employees’ commitment to their job is questioned if they use family friendly working arrangements was reported by just under half of the respondents, while more than a quarter of the respondents felt that leaders did not actively encourage and champion work-family balance.

KEY INSIGHTS

88% accessed some form of flexible working arrangement

1 in 5 had the flexibility request denied

64% said it is more acceptable for women to use family friendly work options than men
### KEY INSIGHTS

**Why haven’t you used flexible work arrangements?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
<th>Male (%)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t think I would be allowed/my supervisor would be reluctant</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worried about effect on my career and my reputation at work</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worried about effect on colleagues workload</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financially, I cannot afford to use flexible work</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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“I was told that to work from home, the boss would have to allow others to do the same and didn’t want to set a precedent.”

“It was not completely refused, but I got a lot of pushback from directors in the company.”

“I need to be seen at work. People who work from home are the first to be made redundant.”

“My manager said that parent friendly hours are too hard to manage and it doesn’t suit the business.”

“I was told that this was not possible as my role requires a full-time presence in the office.”

“I didn’t follow-up as I didn’t want to rock the boat; I was told my whole contract would need to be renewed.”
Negative consequences of accessing flexible work arrangements were also reported – 37% of parents and carers reported that they missed out on training and development opportunities due to their use of flexible work. More women (40%) reported this than men (20%). Missing out on opportunities for promotion due to flexible work was also reported by one third of respondents and again was more prevalent for women (35%) than men (14%).

These results on flexible work suggest that employers have work to do to improve the perceptions and attitudes held towards employees who access flexible working arrangements, particularly men.

**Missed out on promotion due to flexible work**

![Bar chart showing missed out on promotion due to flexible work by gender]

**REDUCING WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT: WHAT WORKING FAMILIES NEED**

Respondents were asked to choose (from 13 options) which workplace strategies would help them manage work, family and care demands. In order of priority, participants rated the following 10 options as most helpful, with similar priorities noted across all genders:

1. Having more control over when or where I work (44%)
2. Access to childcare at work and / or childcare rebates from my employer (38%)
3. Family friendly champions and leaders at my workplace (36%)
4. Reducing job pressure and workload (29%)
5. Family friendly specific training for managers (27%)
6. Personal health and wellbeing programs at my work (22%)
7. More flexible options for paid parental leave provision (21%)
8. Option to job share (15%)
9. Specific mentoring or coaching to help me negotiate flexible work (16%)
10. Capping work hours per week (16%)

**How can we better support working parents and carers?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Having more control over when or where I work</td>
<td>44%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Access to childcare at work or childcare rebates from my employer</td>
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<td>Family-friendly champions and leaders at my workplace</td>
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<td>Reducing job pressure and workload</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>More flexible options for paid parental leave provision</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Percentage of respondents preferring each strategy]
SUMMARY
RECOMMENDATIONS
The 2019 National Working Families Report

Employers are integral to alleviating the pressures of work-family conflict impacting employees and their families. Improving work-life balance for both men and women has flow on benefits for employers with improved attraction of prospective employees; increased job satisfaction; and improved employee engagement and retention.

The survey results demonstrate a number of actions employers can take to support working families to balance their work and caring commitments effectively.

**FOCUS AREAS**

**Recommended areas of focus for workplaces:**

1. Invest in employee mental health and wellbeing
   - Create an aligned work, family and wellbeing strategy
   - Support employees to invest in their own physical and mental health

2. Make flexible work arrangements a cultural norm
   - Embed flexible work by removing cultural barriers
   - Create career advancement pathways for employees who work flexibly
   - Manage excessive workloads for part-time and flexible working employees

3. Equalise parental leave and promote sharing the care
   - Introduce gender equal, flexible access to paid parental leave – removing stereotypes around caring responsibilities, and promoting the benefits of taking leave to men

4. Provide child care and other adult care support services
   - Help facilitate access to affordable child care and other adult care services to enable workforce participation

5. Make returning to work a positive experience
   - Education, tools and support to help employees adjust and sustain work and family balance is critical

6. Support managers to promote team wellbeing & work life-integration
   - Support managers to role model, promote family friendly workplace practices and be accountable for overall team wellbeing outcomes
1. INVEST IN EMPLOYEE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Working parents and carers face particular challenges when it comes to managing their own physical and mental health. Evaluating existing and new opportunities to support employees’ self-care is one way employers can assist. Possible opportunities include the introduction of ‘wellbeing leave’ or ‘family leave’ to complement existing personal leave provisions. Vulnerable employees are most at risk. Offering ‘family respite care’ support is particularly vital for those facing a serious family health crisis, severe financial hardship or experiencing family violence. Mainstreaming access to flexible work arrangements for all is at the core.

**RECOMMENDATIONS INTO PRACTICE**

**ACTIONS TO CONSIDER ARE:**

➤ Devise and implement a wellbeing strategy linking the caring needs of employees and the importance of work-life balance with physical and mental health.

➤ Ensure workplace family policies are fully inclusive of all employees regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, cultural background, length of service or family type.

➤ Measure employees’ level of work life balance satisfaction. Seek feedback from employees on what is needed to reduce work-family conflict and embed family friendly workplace practices.

➤ Promote education, wellbeing and caring support programs to foster a culture of healthy work-life balance within the organisation.

➤ Create open and safe communication channels for employees to discuss job stress or outside of work challenges, excessive workloads.

“I was exhausted and [had] pressure to do well at work but family balance meant that self-care wasn’t a priority. I see this a lot as people struggle to get through this phase, particularly in the first 6 months returning.”

“Feeling guilty ALL the time that I was not doing enough for my child/at home and that I needed to do more to demonstrate my value at work.”

“Always feeling like I’m late, rushing, never doing a good enough job at home or work - constantly worrying and feeling guilty about everything. Financial pressure is also very difficult to manage.”
2. MAKE FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS A CULTURAL NORM

Survey participants responded “having more control over where and when I work” as the most important factor in balancing work and caring commitments. Women find it more culturally acceptable than men to take advantage of flexible work options.

Accommodating adjustments in work patterns to meet caring commitments is critical for all employees.

Enabling more men to work flexibly and access leave to undertake caring responsibilities is key to helping families juggle work-family responsibilities. Having a policy in place is insufficient, as the organisational culture needs to normalise and support flexible working as an option for all employees.

**ACTIONS TO CONSIDER ARE:**

➤ Senior leaders must role model flexible working, sharing their experience across the organisation.

➤ Review policy and procedures and promote these to ensure all employees are given the best opportunity to access the flexible work needed to achieve immediate work and family commitments and wider career and life goals.

➤ Set success measures for increasing flexibility by gender, aiming to reduce the career penalty and stigma associated with both men and women undertaking caring responsibilities.

➤ Facilitate the opportunity to re-evaluate job design to access improved flexible work options.

“Although flexible working is encouraged in principle, there are no strategies to support this. For example, redistribution of workload, tasks or prioritising activities.”

“I wanted to change my start time one day a week to arrive 10 minutes later than usual to drop off my son at preschool, but I was told it was not fair on other colleagues.”

“Regular work from home days were not appealing to my direct manager and so were actively discouraged despite being in contravention of our flexible work policy.”
3. EQUALISE PARENTAL LEAVE AND PROMOTE SHARING THE CARE

Employers can play a part in closing the gender gap in the workplace and in the home by introducing family workplace policies that are gender neutral, flexible and equally accessible. This means introducing some form of paid parental leave to support both men and women to take leave. Shared parental leave policies can help to break the cycle and foster a more equal division of unpaid care and paid work and improve the work-life balance outcomes of families, reducing ‘breadwinner’ vs ‘homemaker’ stereotypes.8

By equalising parental leave provisions, employers can reduce the negative career penalties, wellbeing and family outcomes that impact employees with caring responsibilities - including couple, single and blended families, heterosexual and same sex families.

**ACTIONS TO CONSIDER ARE:**

➤ Introduce parental leave, caring and flexible work policies that are gender neutral, providing access to all employees with caring responsibilities.

➤ Offer equal duration of parental leave for both parents, with flexibility in how the duration of parental leave is taken over a minimum 24 month period.

➤ Provide financial and career support during parental leave to reduce the financial burden of taking time out of the workforce and address the ‘career-penalty’ to ensure parents and carers are able to have the time needed with their family before returning to work.

➤ Make it equally acceptable for employees to take time out and work flexibly to care for any relatives in need of carer support through the use of carer’s leave.

“My career aspirations were perceived to be a less important matter as I became a ‘mum’. This affected my remuneration, reward and recognition.”

“As a male carer my requests were not considered genuine although similar requests from female workers were approved.”

“My husband was not allowed to work 4 days so has taken redundancy to start in one month. He felt guilty [and like a] bad parent. And that [he] couldn’t be the person he wanted to be.”
4. PROVIDE CHILD CARE AND OTHER ADULT CARE SUPPORT SERVICES

Finding quality and affordable child care is a primary issue for many Australian parents and carers and is particularly important to enable women (who take on the highest proportion of unpaid caring) to engage more fully in paid employment. Survey participants reflected this issue when they selected access to employer provided or subsidised child care as the second most important thing that would help them manage work-life conflict.

Investing in child care provisions and wider caring support benefits employers. Research indicates that the return on investment can be sizable – reducing employee turnover, improving absenteeism and enhancing employee engagement.

Families regularly struggle to support family members who are ill and require support to meet these additional caring challenges. This includes parents who are unable to send their children to child care due to illness and or a disability, or those looking after elderly and sick relatives.

**RECOMMENDATIONS INTO PRACTICE**

**ACTIONS TO CONSIDER ARE:**

➤ Provide access to carers or family leave for all forms of care, such as childcare, eldercare, disability, family member illness or medical treatment.

➤ Enable flexible work patterns for short periods to resolve caring challenges.

➤ Employer contribution towards child care and other caring support services, for example: providing areas in the workplace that are child friendly; offering subsidies; salary sacrificing for care; back up or emergency care; respite support; and vacation care programs.

“I needed to work an additional day for a conference and requested I be paid for this as I was paying for additional child care. I was told that this was unavailable as others do not receive this and it would be unfair but I could take a day in lieu (I have 4 owing to me already).”

“I applied for carer’s leave, it was refused as my organisation did not perceive my mother as someone who qualifies for my care.”

“I pay more for child care than I earn. It is a difficult choice – to continue my career so my family is financially better off in the long run, or stop working so my family is financially better off now.”
5. MAKE RETURNING TO WORK A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE

Returning to work after parental leave or extended carer’s leave can be challenging. Women and men often find themselves faced with a workplace and a job that has changed in their absence. In addition, they are likely to be adjusting to new home and travel routines. Education, tools and manager support to help employees adjust and sustain work and family balance is critical.

**RECOMMENDATIONS INTO PRACTICE**

**ACTIONS TO CONSIDER ARE:**

➤ Allow for a ‘transition’ period to re-onboard and make necessary adjustments to ease an employee’s return – particularly when changing roles or moving to part-time work.

➤ Put measures in place to ensure work and family needs are addressed and seek employee feedback on the return to work experience. For example, measuring engagement and setting targets for the retention of employees who not only return from leave, but remain with the business 12 months and 24 months later will further support this.

➤ Offer an appropriate space for breastfeeding mothers to feed their baby, express and store milk.

➤ Provide return to work support services, connect employees to parenting and caring service providers.

➤ Share stories; raise awareness on importance of parents and carers being supported to take time out to care for others by sharing stories of others and how it’s benefited them.

“Trying to continue to breastfeed and having to find the time to express milk for my baby at work was challenging. I felt under pressure all the time for my child, to manage payments on my home and the stress of challenges at work. When I left work on time while others stayed back I felt I was seen as letting the team down but I needed to get home in time to feed my son – it seemed I was made to choose what was important.”

“The difficulty I’ve encountered in returning to work is the demand to be a full-time contributor at work, which for me is often much more than an average working week, and then to be a superhero partner at home too. I absolutely want to be both these things, but feel the strain of these two worlds sometimes pulling me in opposite directions. I haven't figured this out yet, and it adds to a sense of helplessness and exhaustion.”
6. SUPPORT MANAGERS TO PROMOTE TEAM WELLBEING AND WORK-LIFE INTEGRATION

Managers play a pivotal role in the success of team performance, wellbeing, engagement, morale and job design. Managers remain one of the biggest barriers to mainstreaming flexible work, accommodating part time work and providing support to employees with caring responsibilities. Managers need to ‘walk the talk’, make flexible work a reality and team wellbeing a priority.

Managers require support and training to embed workplace practices that promote a healthy work-life integration.

Informed managers help to create a more consistent and inclusive approach which leads to a more successful transition for everyone. Above everything, it is important that managers lead by example in their decision making, communication and practice of the organisation’s approach to family friendly workplace practices.

**RECOMMENDATIONS INTO PRACTICE**

**ACTIONS TO CONSIDER ARE:**

➤ Managers need to be equipped with the tools, resources and skills required to effectively support and manage employees whilst transitioning to and from parental leave or extended carer’s leave.

➤ Managers should be skilled in creating flexible resourcing options within their team, or know where they can access support to assist in creating this.

➤ Put processes in place to review and measure how requests for flexible work are managed to ensure they’re not blocked at the management level and that rejections don’t conflict with organisational policies.

➤ Invite feedback from managers on challenges and concerns they have around resourcing, team impact, job design, etc. to ensure they are adequately supported to embed family friendly work practices within teams. This includes addressing any negative team bias towards team members working flexibly to care for family and ensuring workloads are realistic, in particular, for those working part time.

“No one else in my team had children therefore it was seen to be unfair to let me work from home.”

“My daughter was sick quite a bit when she started daycare. My manager was very aggressive towards me for taking carer’s leave.”

“My manager believed that it did not set a good example to my team if I worked from home a day a week.”
“Employers must be willing to confront and tackle stigma, discrimination and gender bias associated with caring for children and working part-time or flexibly.”

Emma Walsh
REFERENCES

1. Strazdins, O’Brien, Lucas, Rodgers (2013), Combining work and family: Rewards or risks for children’s mental health?


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