

Jonathan: You're listening to ABC radio. I'm Jonathan [inaudible 00:00:02]. Thanks so much for your company this afternoon wherever you're joining us around Australia. We really do appreciate it. Hopefully you're enjoying a safe and relaxing end to your weekend as Monday slowly looms towards us and with it there's another major event looming or it might have already arrived depending on which state you're living in. It's a period of major transition for thousands of families, thousands of households have been thrown into flux this week and with it comes three words, which are enough to send shivers down the spines of kids and parents alike. Back to school.

Jonathan: Those three words take me straight being a 16 year old growing up in Launceston where my father would make fun of me for having to go back to school because he'd been working all summer. I think it was his way of getting a little bit back as February slowly lurched towards us.

Jonathan: Now while the focus is usually on the kids, it's also a big deal for parents as well, especially for first timers sending their young ones to preschool or kindie. For many families, up until this moment, the welfare of those kids has been entirely the responsibility of moms, dads, and other carers, but according to recent research and despite some progress in the past few years, the vast majority of that caring responsibility for little kids, for young children, seems to be falling on mothers.

Jonathan: Parents At Work launched the national working family survey last year and some 6,000 parents responded. It found that there are still barriers to paid parental leave for men and women tend to shoulder more of the burden of household labor. Emma Walsh is the founder and CEO of Parents At Work and she joined me a little earlier. So Emma, what is the legal requirement for employers to offer male employees parental leave?

Emma Walsh: It's a good question because there isn't actually a legal requirement for employers to pay their own paid parental leave. There is the government paid parental leave scheme obviously, and that's the 18 weeks minimum wage statutory requirement that is administered by employers. Now the rights that are available for men and women differ. The paid parental leave scheme from the government is set up primarily to support the mothers, and in particular, often it has been referred to as birth mothers too and it's to recognize that women who are giving birth to children need time off to recover and breastfeed and so on. If that eligible mother should choose to want to transfer some of that 18 week leave, she may do so to a partner, but it is her decision and her role to transfer that leave. There isn't an independent right for a male partner to apply for directly paid parental leave. There is a dad and partner pay provision, but that's separate from the government's paid parental leave scheme.

Jonathan: What proportion of fathers or male partners do take parental leave?

Emma Walsh: Yes, look, at the moment that exact statistic is hard to put a finger on because there is a government scheme, as I said, that's available with dad and partner pay. We know that that's two weeks statutory minimum wage and that we know roughly that's accessed by roughly a third of new fathers. There is, as I said, the ability to transfer the leave, but the numbers and data collected from that, is not known widely and not known to me, but

roughly when we add up the employer leave as well, that those employers that do pay parental leave and make that accessible to both men and women, we know roughly it's somewhere around 5% of fathers taking paid parental leave.

Jonathan: That's not a huge... That ratio is actually pretty shocking. Why do more dads not take parental leave? Is it because of what you've been speaking about, the systemic problem with how we think about parental leave? Is it also maybe a problem with attitude as well about fathers taking extended periods of leave? Does it point in one direction or another in terms of the overriding reason for that figure?

Emma Walsh: Yeah, it's a good question. The two primary reasons are access and financial. Access talks about how available are we making paid parental leave for fathers? How easy is it for them to take? Are they eligible? We know that whilst employers might be progressive and have a paid parental leave scheme, we certainly know that for some employers, that's not readily made available to male employees. It should be said that only around less than 50% of Australian employers offer any paid parental leave benefit. So that means the majority of Australians are relying on the government's 18 weeks paid parental leave. As I said, that's not easily accessible to men unless being transferred to them. Access is a problem and not having any significant length of time in their own right to apply for it means that fathers often aren't able to take the leave they wish.

Emma Walsh: The other is financial because, as we know, it's paid at a minimum wage. In many households, fathers continue to be the primary breadwinners. We know this because there continues to be a gender pay gap. Whilst there are more women earning and obviously increase of women also in many cases starting to own as much or more than their partners. The majority of it is that men are still playing the breadwinner role and they can't afford to take the leave at a minimum wage.

Jonathan: Because there's the effect on fathers, but surely there's also a huge effect on mothers as well that intrinsically it means that if dads for whatever reason aren't taking that parental leave, then whether mothers like it or not, they are now seen as the primary caregiver and that's the why the system sort of shoehorns them into that role?

Emma Walsh: That's correct. I think that's the difficult bit that is hard to crack. If we want to live in a society where we agree that both parents are responsible for raising children, then we need to make sure that the systems that we set up when children come into the world equally make available leave benefits for parents to be able to get off to a shared care start. That's more commonplace in other countries. Australia really lags the world globally on its parental leave approach and progress. Most other OECD nations have a better shared parental leave scheme in place that allows couples to be able to choose a part of the benefit, how they are able to use that together. That's not available here. Australia doesn't have a shared paid parental leave scheme.

Jonathan: Are attitudes changing at least amongst fathers in terms of taking parental leave or has there been at least a little bit of a shift in attitude over the last generation?

Emma Walsh: Yeah, that's a good question and I think one really worth understanding and asking because, yes, men want to take leave. Dads want to be able to take time off with their children. I think certainly I've been asked that question, do you men really want to be off with newborns and so on? Resoundingly the answer is yes they do. Most men, when in The National Working Family survey report we did last year, of the 6,000 people that contributed to it, the vast majority said that they wanted to take time off. They didn't get as much time off as they wanted. The majority reason was often financial and access as I said. All the statistics say that fathers want to be taking the time off and they're not satisfied with the amount of time that they're currently given.

Jonathan: So as you mentioned, I think a lot of new parents would find the system, as it stands at the moment, to be reasonably unsatisfactory despite some of the gains that have been made. What are some of the next steps you would like to see towards that goal of parental leave equality? What are some of the practical and realistic steps that we might see in the next five to 10 years?

Emma Walsh: Yeah, look, I think there's a big role for workplaces for employers to play here because part of it is making sure that they do have some parental leave policy in place. Now, recognizing for some businesses, having a paid leave benefit is tricky and difficult, but that doesn't mean necessarily you can't have at least an approach in terms of if someone in your business is pregnant and they're taking a break, what will be your approach to working with them during that time? What leave will you be able to extend to them and making sure that, very clearly, when we talk about this, we talk about it to male employees as we do female employees. Part of it is making sure that we're having really an inclusive conversation when we know the people in our workplace are having children.

Emma Walsh: It's really common when a mother announces she's having a baby to get into that in a workplace around, "Great. Okay. So what are your plans when you... When are you planning to go off? How long? When might you be back?" We don't typically have those conversations with men. It's generally congratulations and that's it. We need to be having the same conversations with men, making it really clear that they have the opportunity to take some leave and that, we as workplaces, would like to support them with that. It means that those employers that do have a paid parental leave scheme in place, that they check their policy wording and language because the more we continue to use terms like primary and secondary carer and we provide a different benefit for a primary versus secondary carer, then it's always going to make couples have to decide who does the main caring load and it really doesn't encourage this equality piece around sharing that and being equal in that partnership.

Emma Walsh: Typically, obviously as you said, women then get labeled the primary carer because they're taking the majority of time off and men the secondary carer. That suggests that men have a secondary interest in actually raising their children and a secondary ability and benefit to do so and we really need to shift that kind of language.

Jonathan: Hopefully a change in language and also a change in attitude as well. Emma Walsh, founder and CEO of Parents At Work, thank you so much for joining us this afternoon.

This transcript was exported on Feb 05, 2020 - view latest version [here](#).

Emma Walsh: Thank you.

Jonathan: That was my chat as I mentioned with Emma Walsh, founder and CEO of Parents At Work. They conducted that massive survey of 6,000 parents across Australia last year.