

# Fathers' views on family life and paid work



***Do working fathers think they have enough time to spend with their children? KELLY HAND and VIRGINIA LEWIS talk with Australian fathers about their work and family responsibilities.***

fathers are now less likely to see their primary role as breadwinners and are more focused on their role in providing emotional support to their children. However, despite this shift in focus, 68 per cent of the men in their sample said they did not spend enough time with their children, and believed “overwhelmingly . . . that the major barrier to their being involved as parents were the commitments they have to paid work” (p. 41).

## ***Talking to Fathers study***

In 2001, the Australian Institute of Family Studies conducted research commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services entitled *Family and Work: The Family's Perspective*. This comprised interviews with 47 Melbourne families about work and family life. In-depth, one-on-one interviews took place with 69 parents and their children aged eight years and over.

The initial aim of the research was to explore the diverse ways that children experience family life, with particular emphasis on their perceptions of the impact of parent's employment choices – or imperatives – on their lives. Children were asked, among other things, what they knew about their parents' work, and about their perceptions of the impact of parental employment decisions on the family's life. Parents were asked about many issues including their employment decisions and how they were influenced by family responsibilities, and about the amount and nature of the time they spent with their children (Lewis, Tudball and Hand 2001a).

As a part of this larger project, the Talking to Fathers study, reported here, explores the responses of 27 fathers from a variety of family types, occupations and income levels.

More than 80 per cent of the fathers were in couple families. However, there were also a very small number of fathers who were lone parents, stepfathers and non-resident fathers. As a consequence, while recognising the importance of considering fathers from diverse family types, this article mainly reflects the experience of fathers in couple families.

The men interviewed were aged from their early thirties to late fifties, the average age being in the mid forties. Their

**T**he impact of work on the lives of Australian children and their families has been a topic of continuing interest to researchers, policy makers, the media, and families themselves. Much discussion has ensued about the impact of women's increasing participation in the workforce on children. However, until recently there has been little regard for the impact of fathers' work on their families, and how men seek to manage this negotiation of work and family priorities in their lives.

Australian research conducted over the past few years has indicated that being an “involved parent” is increasingly important to Australian fathers (Lupton and Barclay 1997; Russell et al. 1999). A random telephone survey of 1000 Australian fathers conducted by Russell et al. (1999) found that many fathers see being accessible to their children as “the most important aspect of their role . . . in terms of the impact they have on their children's wellbeing and adjustment” (p. 40). This research suggests that

children ranged in age from less than 12 months to over 18 years. Most children, however, were school age.

Father's occupations included professionals such as social workers, teachers, social scientists, nurses and accountants, tradespeople and apprentices, carpenters and cooks; labourers; and machinists and drivers. Approximately half of the sample were engaged in professional occupations and had tertiary qualifications. Of these, almost half had post-graduate degrees of some kind. Only 10 per cent of the fathers had not completed Year 12.

Hours in paid work ranged from part-time to full-time work. About 70 per cent were full-time employees working around 40 hours a week. However, 10 per cent of fathers worked in excess of 60 hours a week. A number of fathers worked from home in their own businesses, and a very small number were not in paid work at the time the interviews took place.

This article focuses on fathers' responses about whether they felt that they spent enough time with their children, the way they like to spend time with their children, and how they seek to balance work and family responsibilities.

### **Spending time with their children**

Like many of the fathers in Russell's (1999) study, all of the fathers in our Talking to Fathers study asserted the importance of spending time with their children – for both the benefit of the child as well as for their own pleasure.

*"What I wanted was to experiment with being around my kids as much as I possibly could. I wanted to be there for everything significant that happened in their lives. I didn't want to miss any level of development or any part of their lives. I wanted to develop a really close relationship ... I really believed it was important and I pursued it." – Father of four, runs a home-based business.*

Time spent with children has often been conceptualised as a dichotomy between quality and quantity. Many fathers in this study also used these terms.

*"I would think that they're pretty small [quantities] of time in the scheme of things. My feeling is the practical issues dominate. Getting their lunch boxes out, getting them to put their dirty clothes away and those sort of things. There's not a lot of good quality time during the working week." – Father of two, works four days per week.*

For the most part, like the mothers interviewed, fathers reported the need for a combination of quantity and quality.

*"It's a bit of both really. I mean you can spend a lot of time with your kids but if you are not interacting with them, then you are not really spending any time with them." – Father of two, works full-time.*

In a previous *Family Matters* article (Lewis, Tudball and Hand 2001), it was suggested that for parents and children alike, having time just "to hang out" was as important as doing special activities that require planning and time being put aside.

The responses of the fathers support this idea. For some, just "being there" was the best kind of time, sharing with their children the day-to-day routines of their lives and finding out about what had happened for them that day. For others, sharing their child's favourite activities such as sport, or just playtime, was a part of their time together.

*"It's talking, it's being in the pool, you're discussing things. Sometimes it's minor conversations ... talking about the stars and alien existence. What is happening at school or [child's] soccer club." – Father of two, works full-time.*

*"Usually the things that we do are play a lot of sports. We do martial arts – [child] enjoys that. And playing cricket, sometimes chess, a few other things. And read a few books ... videos, just depends on what days they are." – Father of one child, own home-based business and casual work outside of home.*

*"Doing the things that [child] wants to do. I will sometimes just sit down and wait until he starts doing something and then just join in with him." – Father of two, works full-time.*

Many fathers saw the demands of their paid work as having a significant effect on the time they had available to spend with their children. Some would have liked to be more involved in their children's lives. Sometimes this was expressed as simply being due to the fact of having to go to work. This did not necessarily mean that they experienced any particular difficulties with work itself; many found paid work enjoyable and fulfilling. It was more a case of restricting the time available to them to spend with their children.

A father who had returned to study, and enjoyed the increased flexibility this gave him to get to know his children, remembered how he had felt about the time spent at work when the children were younger.

*"As I said to [partner] once before, I wished we had been able to do this [work part-time] when the kids were young so that I felt as though I got to know ... I'd come home of the night-time and they'd tell me all the wonderful things they'd done ... and I really felt as though I was missing out, and I wanted to enjoy my family." – Father of two, currently employed three days per week.*

In another interview, the father of two young children who had expressed a desire to be the primary carer in the family also felt that work time interfered with the time he could spend with his youngest child.

*"One of the biggest things I hate when I come home from work is not being with [youngest child] the whole time that I could be." – Father of two, works full-time.*

However, even those with younger children reflected on the fact that there are factors other than paid work that impact on the time they'd like to spend with their children, including schooling and their children's own interests and need to enjoy relationships with their peers.

*"Oh I don't know that any time is enough time. But see the thing is ... I suppose you could pull them out of school and spend every waking hour with them, but that's not of benefit to them or benefit to us. I think they need to have time away from us at the same time ... [Child] needs to be able to build a network of friends, a network of outside interests." – Father of two, runs a home based business.*

Some fathers reflected on the differences between both their own and their children's need for time together. Many of the fathers expected that as their children became older, they would need to spend time with people other than their family – such as their friends. This seems to be acknowledged as a part of their children growing up and seeking some independence from their parents. When asked if he had enough time with his children, one father expressed a need to spend more time with them now, before they reached an age being with parents might seem less attractive to them!

*"They're growing up so quickly especially now they're 11 and 12, so there's only two more years where they're going to want to even interact with their Dad. I think they'll be looking outwards ... that's a part of growing up." – Father of two, works at home.*

Sometimes, for fathers with older children, having enough time with their children was seen not as a result of the difficulty brought about by their own work commitments but rather their children's preferences about how they spend their time.

*"No, I don't suppose you ever have enough time with children. But they don't necessarily want more time with you." – Father of five (four adult and one school age), works full-time.*

### **Barriers to spending time with children**

For a proportion of the fathers interviewed, however, there were particular aspects about their paid work that they felt impacted on their ability to spend time with their children. For some, the demands of establishing and maintaining their career was a significant factor. When asked whether his or his partner's working hours had changed since having children, one father reported:

*"Yeah, the work hours have got much longer. That's career development, not children." – Father of two, works full-time.*

*For some fathers, balancing the needs of work and family life meant giving up work entirely, or significantly reducing their hours, to become their children's primary care giver while their partner worked full-time.*

For others, the need to work longer hours for financial reasons was also an issue. When asked if he felt he spent enough time with his children this parent replied:

*"Well, not really. I think I could spend more time with them. Quite often when I do work overtime, it's a bit hard to try and fit everything in and do everything and spend time with them. I try to spend what time I do have with them. It would be nice to spend more time though." – Father of two, works full-time.*

Others talked about feeling that their workplaces and/or working conditions did not support them taking time out for their families. One father of mainly adult children reported a shift towards family-friendliness in his own industry over recent years. However, the cultural shift in this organisation seemed to have its limits.

*"There seems to be a fairly general view that going home early is something that's difficult for everyone to cope with. People notice if you go home early." – Father of five (four adult), works full-time.*

Fathers who experienced an explicit lack of support in their workplaces for their family commitments reported that they felt they were expected to make a choice between work and family.

*"You've got organisations which are run by people who have essentially made that decision – and in some cases made it in a very obvious fashion – of people who have been given the choice of career advancement or retaining their family." – Father of two, works full-time.*

As well as limiting the time they have to be physically present with their children, the stresses of such workplaces are also seen to affect their ability to be a "good parent".

*"Well I would say when I do work, and work a lot, it does make me more tired, yes. And there would be sort of repercussions on [children] when you are not as easygoing and have a tendency to flare up a bit more." – Father of two, works full-time.*

### **Finding time**

As illustrated above, many fathers found that balancing the needs of paid work and family life was sometimes difficult. However, while not achievable for some, many had made changes to the way they managed both their working and family lives in order to overcome some of the barriers to spending time with their children.

These responses reflect research by Becker and Moen (1999) which identified three different strategies used by dual-earner couples (the majority of family types for the men in the Talking to Fathers study) to reduce and restructure commitment to paid work. These included "placing limits" – that is, limiting the degree to which work encroaches into family time; "having a one-job, one-career marriage" – where one partner is the primary breadwinner and the other has a job that is seen as less of a commitment; and "trading off" – when couples take turns to focus on family or career.

For some fathers, balancing the needs of work and family life meant giving up work entirely or significantly reducing their hours, to become their children's primary

care giver while their partner worked full-time. However, as noted by Becker and Moen (1999), strategies such as leaving the paid work force are generally used by women rather than men and – as was also the case for many of the mothers interviewed, this kind of flexibility was not always possible or desirable for fathers. Many thoroughly enjoyed their paid work and did not wish to stop working. For some, stepping out of the paid workforce was not an option due to financial constraints. Some felt they had no choice, feeling compelled to fulfil the traditional male breadwinner role.

*"I know [my wife] has changed jobs and careers and that's fine, but she does it with not a lot of consultation. She seems to be able to do that. Whereas if I wanted to change, and up and do something else, it's a family thing – so it's very much still a "breadwinner" role – although [my wife] would probably deny that." – Father, works full-time.*

One father who had previously been the "at-home" parent had found that even with his partner's support there was less acceptance of his decision from others outside the family.

*"People would say, what do you do? I would say, I look after the kids. Yes, but what do you do? Stuff you. That's work. I think the common perception is that work has to be paid ... removed from family life. Caring for little kids is quite demanding." – Father, works full-time, was not engaged in paid work when children were young.*

In other families, couples had consciously decided to share the workload, taking turns to have time away from paid work or both reducing their hours to share the load.

*"Part of the agreement that [my wife] and I came to a few years ago, was that I would take a step back in having these stressful jobs, and she'd start working, so instead of one of us earning one big income and the other not working, it's better just to share the load." – Father, recently unemployed.*

Some fathers moulded their hours in paid work around their families so that they would have more time at home

during the week. Those who could, made use of flexibility in their working hours in order to fit in with their partner's hours, sharing the responsibility for care of their children before and after school.

*"Yes. I virtually pick the hours I want to work and the days I want to work." – Father of three, works full-time.*

Those who had been shift workers told of the strains that working evenings and weekends put on their family lives, and of the positive impact that moving away from shift work had had on their families. One father noted the delight of one of his children when told of such a change.



*"I announced there was no more night shift for me and he raised his hand in the air and said, 'Yes!' like that, in a show of triumph, because he used to say, 'why couldn't you be at home on weekends like other Daddies?'" – Father, works full-time.*

Workplace flexibility and family-friendly policies were also used in other ways by some of the fathers interviewed. These include having flexible finishing and starting times, and being able to work from home. Such policies allow parents to take time from paid work to care for sick children, be involved in school activities, or spend time with them during school holidays. One father noted that his work environment allowed him to leave for family reasons if required.

*"I have no doubt if I was in the middle of something and there was an urgent need to leave, I could do so. And I guess I wouldn't be asking as such if it was an absolutely pressing need . . . I would be informing my manager, I'm leaving now." – Father, works full-time.*

Fathers valued workplace flexibility not only for family emergencies but also to be able to take part in their children's day-to-day lives. For example, one father made use of the flexibility in his working hours to assist at his child's kindergarten and school.

*"I used to go up to the kindergarten and do the fruit and put out the milk. I think they probably thought I was a paedophile to start with, but they got used to me after a while. Then the people who got used to me at the kindergarten used to think, Oh, he's okay because he used to work at the kindergarten, so he can come up and do school lunches." – Father, works full-time.*

It seems therefore that the men as well as women in this sample were making very deliberate decisions about whether and how to work. Many talked about choosing jobs for the flexibility they had, or wanting more flexibility in their current employment. Most of the fathers who participated in this research enjoyed their paid work and were committed to their careers. However, many resented the fact that their employers expected them to *choose* between work and family, and that responding to their parenting responsibilities brought into question their commitment to work, which they felt inhibited their ability to advance their careers.

This dilemma was voiced by both the men and women interviewed for this research. As one father put it:

*"Yes, you've certainly got to manage the political situation. You have to make sure that people know how much effort you're putting in." – Father of five (four adult), works full-time.*

### Conclusions

There are most likely no great surprises in the stories the fathers told in this study. Like many parents, they greatly value the time they spend with their children and are often frustrated by the difficulties they face in making time for this in their lives. And yet there is a continued failure to include fathers in the public discourse about work and family. What is most striking, perhaps, is the similarity in the desires of fathers and mothers to participate fully in their children's lives while pursuing work for both financial and personal gain (Lewis et al. 2001b).

Like Russell's (1999) research, the Talking to Fathers study revealed the strong motivation among the fathers interviewed to be involved in their children's lives – an involvement that many of them found difficult with their current workloads and work conditions and/or cultures. Nevertheless, fathers continue to negotiate and contemplate their strategies. It is up to the rest of the community – whether researchers, policy makers, or family members ourselves – to continue to support them in this.

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