

The rhythm of life in France is in many ways different from that in Australia, but the work/family balance is one of those preoccupations which crosses cultural boundaries.

Family-friendly France?



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The reconciliation of work and family life is as important an issue in France as it is in Australia, and the announcement of another annual increase in the birth rate (for the year 2001) to 1.9 (Australia's was 1.75) has been hailed as showing how successful French strategies on this issue are.

The importance of family-friendly policies in employment is demonstrated by, for example, the high employment rate of women with a child under the age of six years. In 1999 in France, 56 per cent of such mothers worked, and of these about 60 per cent worked full-time. (In Australia in 2000 these figures for women with a child under five years were 45 per cent and 33 per cent respectively.)

Paternity leave

The most publicised of France's recent "family-friendly" initiatives has been the introduction in January 2002 of an extra 11 days paid paternity leave (to be taken within four months of the birth), in addition to the existing three days at the time of the birth. Forty per cent of eligible men are expected to take it. It has been controversial, with employers' organisations expressing concern about the cost of the payment and doubting the need for extra leave when the recently introduced 35-hour week had made more paid annual leave generally available.

Maternity leave

The much longer established maternity leave consists of six weeks paid leave prior to the birth and ten weeks after, with longer for a third or later birth or for multiple births. In order to receive maternity payments, at least eight weeks must be taken, six of which must be taken after the birth (French Government 2002).

Both maternity and paternity leave are paid by the state social insurance system to the same income ceiling of about A\$3,450 per month and are subject to the same eligibility rules under the state social insurance scheme. This usually requires that a mother claiming the payment must have been registered under this insurance scheme for ten months prior to the expected date of birth, and to have worked for certain minimum periods within the last three or six months. There is no requirement for a period of continuous work with the same employer.

The (taxable) payment amounts to 100 per cent of a woman's average daily wage received during her last three months of work up to the ceiling. Some women workers receive extra payments above this ceiling from their employer under the collective agreement covering their workplace or work sector. Possibly up to 58 per cent benefit from extra statutory arrangements of various sorts (not necessarily paid) for maternity leave (Evans 2001).

Subject to notifying her employer and the social security office of the pregnancy, a pregnant employee's contract is treated as suspended during maternity leave, and at its end she has the right to return to her job. The leave counts towards pension entitlements. French employment law provides for the employment of temporary workers to cover anyone on maternity leave. On her return, in some circumstances, a woman has the right to two half-hour periods a day during her child's first year to breastfeed at work.

Parental leave

Maternity and paternity leave entitlements appear brief but, subject to various notice requirements, both parents are also entitled to take three years' parental leave at any time up to a child's third birthday (Fagnani 1999).

A parent taking this leave must have had one year's employment with their current employer at the child's birth. Part-time work may be undertaken instead

of, or in combination with, time off during this period. Parental leave has to be taken in blocks of one year, with the employee specifying whether leave is to be full-time or part-time at each annual renewal, unless alternative arrangements are made with the employer.

On the expiry of leave, an employee must receive their job back or (and this is a potentially significant issue) a similar one at similar pay. There are rights to training on return. Concern has been expressed as to how these rights are working in practice and results of research into this issue should be published soon.

Partners satisfying the above criteria can both theoretically take parental leave. But it is only paid (by way of a flat rate non means tested and non-taxable benefit) where the claimant has two children with at least one under the age of three, and then not adequately to replace an average salary. The monthly payment is approximately A\$875, with lesser payments made to those working part-time. So it is not surprising that of the 485,000 recipients (three quarters of whom were on full-time leave) in 1998, only 1 per cent were men. If both parents work part-time, the maximum combined payment is that made to one non-working parent. In addition, a parent of two children must have worked for two out of the five years before the birth of the second child; those with more children must have worked for two years within the preceding ten years (time registered as unemployed is taken into account). Thus it is easier to become eligible for the parental leave payment than the right to return to work.

Other leave and family friendly working arrangements

While substantial extended leave exists to care for a disabled or seriously ill child, a right to between three to five unpaid days per year carer's leave exists only for sole parents. (Although in the public service 12 paid days exists.) Similarly, there is no legislative provision entitling employees to flexitime or part-time hours for family reasons (other than the parental leave arrangements). However, extra-statutory family-friendly provisions do exist, and a European-wide survey of working conditions published in 1997, describes these as reported by women employees with a child under 15 years of age (Evans 2001).

It reveals that flexitime appears to be substantially less available than in Australia as only 26 per cent reported its availability, whereas Australian data puts the figure at 50 per cent. Forty-seven per cent reported sick child leave, and 51 per cent parental leave, although it is unclear whether these leaves are paid or not. Twelve per cent reported employer provision of child care.

The introduction of the 35 hour week in France should offer opportunities to increase family friendly working practices. However, early indications are that non-professional women have not felt as many benefits as might have been expected. A government survey reported only 40 per cent of such women stating that it had improved their daily lives (compared with 75 per cent of professional women; for men the figures were 57 per cent and 65 per cent respectively). Early research into the implementation of the 35 hour week indicates that, amongst other things, the trade-off for the extra hours off is, for some women employees, an increase in the type of work flexibility which makes their family commitments harder to manage due to a lack of certainty about their working hours.

Child care

The single most startling fact about family life in France is that school begins when a child is three. Although it is not compulsory for children to attend until they turn six, all children are entitled to a place at a pre-elementary school (for three to six year olds) when, or just before, they turn three years of age (35 per cent of two year olds are enrolled) (Le Corre 2000).

School hours are from 8.30 a.m. until 4.30 p.m. every day except Wednesday (at primary school children over six also study Saturday mornings). Child care is often provided (by schools/municipalities) to cover the lunch hours, Wednesdays, and the period between 4.30 and 6/6.30 p.m. so as to assist working parents. Small means tested fees are payable, and sometimes no fees apply. Otherwise family day care provision can be used.

Subsidised vacation care is also often provided (by municipalities and/or employers) at means tested rates. Although this provision is not uniform, Paris provides a useful example. There, the maximum cost of a day's care is usually the equivalent of approximately A\$12 (meal included) – and all children needing such care are eligible to enrol.

The main pressure for extra child care concerns provision for children under three years. Continued government efforts are being made to expand the network of nurseries which are geographically unequally distributed (rural areas come off worst). The same is the case for out of school hours care.

Approximately 200,000 nursery places for under-three year olds existed in 1999. These are largely publicly funded and run (with means tested fees), although private nurseries do exist. A very large number of children are also cared for by the (registered and trained) family day care equivalent, with just under half a million families using such care in 1998. Some families employ nannies at home. Families receive relief on the social insurance contributions they must pay for both types of employees. Tax credits also assist with child care costs and a means-tested benefit is payable to assist less well-off families with family day care costs.

Overall, day care facilities are used by 29 per cent of children aged up to three in France, and 99 per cent of children from age three to the mandatory school age. The respective figures in Australia are 15 per cent and 60 per cent respectively.

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References

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