

P A R E N T S W O R K C O L L E C T I V E



Submission to Federal Government's Early Years Strategy

21 April 2023

SUMMARY

There is an enormous push in Australia towards more accessible childcare (or 'early education and care'), in the belief that it is in the best interests of children, women, families and the Australian economy for children under five to be in institutional care and for women to perform more paid work.

This premise appears to be very widely accepted in Australia but is highly problematic for the following reasons:

- a. there is an extensive body of evidence that attending childcare for long periods of time is not beneficial for small children, particularly those under the age of three;
- b. parents are already overworked and overwhelmed, and performing ever-more paid work adds to the existing significant pressures on modern families;
- c. there are more effective means by which to improve equality for women, including policy that (a) values the unpaid care work performed predominantly by women, and (b) encourages men to take on more unpaid care work; and
- d. many Australian families would prefer to care for their own young children.

In developing its Early Years Strategy, the Federal Government needs to ask the difficult questions about what truly is best for families, babies and children. The Federal Government must consider true family-friendly policies – not just more childcare options – to promote and support societal wellbeing.

At Parents Work Collective, we believe that the wellbeing of children (and indeed individual, familial, societal and economic wellbeing) is best served by policy that supports parents to have the choice to care for their own children. This includes greater flexibility of paid work for parents and an enforced limit on performing excessive paid working hours.

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POLICY LEVERS

To achieve the best outcomes for children, the Federal Government should:

1. institute a universal parenting payment which would subsidise either parental or institutional models of care for children under three years of age;
2. increase the period of paid parental leave to at least 12 months (to be used flexibly) with an additional 3 month 'use it or lose it' component for both parents;
3. bolster legislation to facilitate greater workplace flexibility and limit excessive paid work hours;
4. increase the minimum statutory entitlement to unpaid parental leave to a period of 24 months (of 12 months of parental leave and the right to request a further 12 months);
5. immediately implement the Senate Select Work and Care Committee's recommendations to pay superannuation during Paid Parental Leave and award carer credits to parents performing unpaid care contributions thereafter;
6. reform the current work test for parents wishing to access Commonwealth Paid Parental Leave such that it does not require parents to return to paid work in between children;
7. abolish Child Care Subsidies within the Commonwealth Paid Parental Leave Period;
8. formulate a public health directive that ensures parents are aware of both the benefits and risks of using institutional childcare for children under the age of 3 years – this directive must include recommendations for the amount of childcare (hours per week) that is considered developmentally appropriate at each age from birth to five years to ensure parents are able to make an informed decision about their use of institutional childcare in their child's earliest years;
9. improve the ACECQA's National Quality Standard for carer ratios for babies and toddlers under 2 years old from 4:1 to 3:1, as recommended by the NSW Governments Cross-sectoral Taskforce in 2006;
10. prioritise funding and staffing for 3 and 4 year old preschool, an age group where the benefits of early learning are most concentrated, well-established and largely indisputable. All 3 and 4 years olds must be given priority access to suitable preschool facilities within a certain distance from home before positions for younger toddlers and babies are made available based on staff availability;
11. ensure the proposed year of full-time 4 year old preschool is not compulsory beyond 15 hours per week, as this is considered the optimal 'dosage' for school readiness and child development. Families can elect to use this service beyond the recommended optimal preschool hours if they wish or as a result of financial hardship;
12. expand the In Home Care scheme to include all children who cannot access daycare or who have an illness or disability that renders childcare inappropriate and parent care preferable;
13. improve current maternal and child health care services as well as access to parents groups and community playgroups, so as to increase support for parents who care for their children full-time; and
14. ensure any tax or broader family policy results in equal treatment of dual income families and single income families where one labour unit equivalent is engaged in unpaid care and labour.

Together with State-based pre-school/kindergarten programs for 3 and 4 year old children, these initiatives would give Australian children the best possible start in life.



PARENTS WORK COLLECTIVE

Parents Work Collective is a national, not-for-profit, nonpartisan organisation that advocates for policy that gives parents the choice to care for their own children and recognises the modern reality of combining parenting and working.

There are three key issues that underpin the work of Parents Work Collective, all of which stem from care work – both paid and unpaid, and performed largely by women – being significantly undervalued in Australian society:

1. The system underpinning working and parenting is no longer fit for purpose. Combining working and caring responsibilities is difficult and unenjoyable. Parents are overworked and overwhelmed.[1]
2. The increasing push to rely on external childcare means that very young children are separated from their primary caregivers for long periods of time at an early age. There is a substantial body of empirical evidence that suggests this is not in the best interests of children.[4]-[11]
3. Progress on achieving women's equality has stalled and is creating flow-on problems throughout Australian society.

We believe that:

1. better support for parents to care for their own children, particularly in the early years of their children's lives, will improve the wellbeing of children and families and ultimately benefit society and the economy at large;
2. improving early learning models starts with acknowledging the value of unseen and unpaid labour and recognising the critical role of parents in their children's lives; and
3. gender equality is best achieved through both parents equally engaging in caregiving roles rather than equally disengaging, which is what the current workforce participation model of gender equality encourages.

Although very recently established, Parents Work Collective has already amassed a following of hundreds of like-minded parents. We believe these voices represent a significant proportion of Australian parents. These voices are not currently represented in the conversations about families' needs, childcare and women's equality.

[1] Pocock, Barbara & Williams, Philippa & Skinner, Natalie, 2012, Time bomb: work, rest and play in Australia today, Sydney, NSW.



PROBLEMS WITH THE DOMINANT RHETORIC

There is much research that attending childcare for long periods of time is not beneficial for very small children

There is often discussion among policymakers and in the mainstream media to the effect that the first five years of a child's life are critical to his or her development, and that quality early learning and education in these years is key to improving developmental outcomes and to setting children up for success when they reach school (and indeed for their whole lives).[2] We agree. However, we are concerned about the lack of consideration given to improving a child's access to their parents during this period of developmental vulnerability. Facilitating both parents to increase paid work hours during this critical stage seems directly at odds with claims of supporting early child development.

We are also concerned that politicians and advocates are misappropriating evidence of the benefits of preschool to include babies and small children. There is urgent need for clarity in this conversation. In particular, we are concerned about the lack of distinction between the evidence based needs of babies and toddlers (aged up to three) on the one hand and pre-school children (three to five years) on the other.

Most advocates appear to be calling, not just for more quality preschool or kindergarten programs for three and four year old children, but for more access to long daycare for babies and small children under the guise of early learning benefits associated with preschool. All of this appears to fall under the banners of 'early learning and education' or 'early childhood education and care' and is said to greatly benefit small children. It is quite clearly conflating research to suit an agenda that seeks to increase parents' paid work hours.

There is considerable research in support of the position that the best learning and developmental opportunities for small children, particularly up to the age of three, come from spending time with a loving parent. Long periods of time in institutional childcare, no matter the quality of that childcare, cannot meet the developmental needs of babies and small children in the same way.[3]

[2] See, for example,

https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/024994/toc_pdf/FinalReport.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf;

<https://thrivebyfive.org.au/>; <https://cpd.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/CPD-Starting-Better-Report.pdf>.

[3] Anne Manne, *Motherhood*, 2008, Allen and Unwin.



There are many credible experts who argue that long periods of time in institutional childcare is not in the best interests of small children, including Dr Peter Cook (child and adult psychiatrist, and author of 'Mothering Matters'),[4] Steve Biddulph AM (psychologist and internationally-renowned parent educator, author of 'The Secret of Happy Children', 'Raising Boys' and 'Raising Girls')[5], Penelope Leach OBE (world-renowned child psychologist and author of 'Baby and Child'), Allan Schore (psychologist and researcher)[6], Jay Belsky (psychologist and internationally-recognised child development expert)[7] and Robin Barker (author of parenting book 'Baby Love', retired midwife and child and family health nurse).[8]

Experts in attachment theory such as Gordon Neufeld PhD (clinical psychologist and author of 'Hold Onto Your Kids') discuss the benefits of close physical and emotional attachment with parental figures, particularly in the early years of children's lives.[9] Dr Neufeld is clear that it is not the content of what small children learn, but the relationships with their primary caregivers, that lead to better outcomes. There is well-regarded research that universal childcare programs may not benefit most children.[10] There is evidence that small children remain in a state of high stress during periods of separation from their parents at childcare.[11] Penelope Leach conducted a large survey of infant mental health professionals in 1997, most of whom believed that it is best for infants to be cared for mostly by their mothers.[12]

The overarching position of this extensive and varied body of work, if it were to be summarised, is that children have better developmental outcomes if they are cared for predominantly by a willing and able parent in their early years rather than spending significant amounts of time in externally provided childcare. Psychologists and parenting experts such as Steve Biddulph advocate for delaying introducing children to paid care until they are three.[13]

[4] Dr Cook's roles included whose roles included consultant in child psychiatry with the New South Wales Department of Health at the Queenscliff Health Centre in Sydney, and adviser on child mental health to the Regional Director of the Northern Metropolitan Health Region). See generally https://www.naturalchild.org/articles/peter_cook/.

[5] See generally https://www.stevebiddulph.com/Site_1/Home.html and file:///C:/Users/36808/Downloads/http___www.aphref.aph.gov.au_house_committee_fhs_workandfamily_subs_sub217.pdf

[6] See generally <https://www.allanschore.com/>.

[7] See, eg, Belsky J. Developmental Risks (Still) Associated with Early Child Care. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* (2001), 42, 845-860.

[8] <https://www.robinbarker.net.au/the-incompatibility-of-childcare-for-the-under-threes>

[9] See generally <https://neufeldinstitute.org/>.

[10] <https://ifstudies.org/blog/measuring-the-long-term-effects-of-early-extensive-day-care>

[11] M Simms, Children's cortisol levels and quality of care provision, 2006.

[12] Leach P. (1997). Infant care from infants' viewpoint: the views of some professionals. *Early Dev. Parenting* 1997; 6: 47-58.

[13] file:///C:/Users/36808/Downloads/http___www.aphref.aph.gov.au_house_committee_fhs_workandfamily_subs_sub217.pdf



We've also heard from members of the Parents Work Committee who are early education workers that their lived professional experience aligns with the evidence base:

"I believe I'm a fabulous kindergarten teacher who genuinely loves children and excels in the industry – one of many superstars working around. I never compare to mum and dads in the eyes of a child – they need you! At such a young age, you're their world. They miss you and are literally crying and screaming for you randomly throughout the day and we must turn deaf ears to it..."

"I'm casual relief staff, the whole NQS rating system puts extra stress on educators for brief amounts of time while tested. It can't reflect actual levels of care. I have seen centres rated 'exceeding NQS' who are understaffed and unable to provide adequate care for children, such as a small child I witnessed one day who was crying so much they had vomited all over the floor. Shocking stuff. This is from the perspective of a concerned educator."

We urge the Federal Government to critically analyse claims that childcare for babies and small children is beneficial to their development and to have regard for the substantial body of research and expert opinion. We urge the Federal Government to draw a distinction between kindergarten or pre-school programs for three and four year old children (the benefits of which are supported by research) and long daycare for babies and toddlers. We cannot continue to extrapolate preschool benefits to daycare for infants and toddlers.

Of course, there are a very small number of babies and toddlers whose parents are unable to provide quality care for them (for example, parents affected by drug and alcohol disorders). These babies and toddlers should be given access to the best possible care through the usual processes under the auspices of child protection services. It is possible that this might include attending good quality childcare. However, these babies and toddlers are by far the minority and should not be used to argue for early childcare as a healthy norm for most young children.

In addition, rather than promoting institutional childcare as a solution for meeting the developmental needs of small children whose parents experience challenges in providing the normal quality of parenting, the government could invest in additional parenting supports, more community playgroups and better quality maternal and child health services, in order to upskill and empower parents to have the best possible relationship with their children.

[14]

[14] This was recommended in a report commissioned by the Victorian Government: Susan Pascoe AM and Professor Deborah Brennan, *Lifting our Game: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions* (2017), pp. 8 and 13, see <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/research/LiftingOurGame.PDF>



Parents are overworked and overwhelmed, and performing more paid work adds to the existing pressures on modern families

The current legislative and policy structures relevant to combining working and parenting is underpinned by the historic arrangement in which a male partner worked outside the home full-time and his female partner worked in the home full-time, including caring for their children. This model has changed significantly over recent decades. The typical arrangement in most cases now is that both parents work outside the home (albeit one person often does so part-time).

According to the Australian Institute of Family Studies, “One of the most significant social trends of the 20th century has been the move of mothers into paid work, with widespread repercussions for family life, workplaces and community supports for families.”^[15]

According to ABS statistics, in 2021 the vast majority (69.9%) of couple families with children had both parents working.^[16] In 1974, in contrast, the ABS statistics reveal that only 23% of couple families with children had both parents working.^[17] Dual income families are now by far the norm.

While women have moved into paid work in huge numbers, men remain doing as much or more paid work as ever^[18] and the amount of unpaid care and household work remains the same. Further, evidence to the Senate Select Committee into Work and Care revealed that “...as women's labour participation rate continues to rise, women are also working longer hours in paid employment while continuing to fulfil unpaid caring responsibilities.”^[19] As a result, parents' time and energy is objectively more heavily burdened than in the past.

Further, a culture of long working hours has developed in Australia over recent decades. The Senate Select Committee reported that:

“40 per cent of the Australian labour market 'routinely' works more than 38 hours, with around one fifth working more than 50 hours—most of them men.”^[20]

The Senate Select Committee further reported that:

“Long working hours have negative consequences for a worker's health, safety, and work-life balance.”^[21]

[15] https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/fs2010conf_0.pdf

[16] <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-status-families/latest-release>

[17] [https://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/0/702184B2031B4056CA2585AB001B8E35/\\$File/62240_1974_11.pdf](https://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/0/702184B2031B4056CA2585AB001B8E35/$File/62240_1974_11.pdf)

[18] J Baxter, Australian Institute of Family Studies, ‘Fathers and work: a statistical overview’ (Father's and mother's time use up to and after the birth of first child) (2018).

[19] Senate Select Committee into Work and Care, Final Report, 9 March 2023, page 16 [2.41].

[20] Senate Select Committee into Work and Care, Final Report, 9 March 2023, page 118, [6.36].

[21] Senate Select Committee into Work and Care, Final Report, 9 March 2023, page 17 [2.42 – 2.43].



Along with and related to the increase of women in the paid workforce and the increase in working hours, the relative costs of housing and living have risen significantly, such that in most cases it has become economically imperative for both parents to participate in paid work, simply to cover their basic costs. Added to this, many modern families have little familial or community support.

There is less time available to parents for rest or recreation than ever before. Parents are overworked and overwhelmed.

The solution to this overwork and overwhelm is not policy which encourages parents (particularly women) to perform more paid work. To the contrary, policy that encourages men to perform less paid work and more unpaid care and domestic work is critical to families' and ultimately to societal wellbeing. We believe it will have long-term beneficial impacts on the Australian economy, through an increase in mental and physical health and wellbeing for children and parents alike. Policies to this effect also close the gender pay gap and prove to be a better equaliser in gender equality issues more broadly.



Valuing and supporting unpaid care work is a more effective means by which to simultaneously improve equality for women and improve quality of care for children

The current dominant thinking with respect to gender equality relies on a model of 'sameness equality' which seeks to assimilate women into the working patterns of men in order to achieve equal paid workforce participation and hence, gender equality.[22] Sameness equality is problematic because it requires both parents to equally disengage from caregiving roles which necessarily devalues that role as work that is to be avoided in favour of paid work.

Rather than actually valuing and acknowledging care work or changing the conditions that make it oppressive, government policy and advocacy groups simply encourage women to avoid it. Equality that is conditional upon following a typically male work and life cycle fuels widespread devaluation of care in society and has had a devastating effect on aged, disability and childcare industries. The very industry that we rely upon to achieve equal paid workforce participation, childcare, is simultaneously undermined by the fact that care work still isn't considered real 'work' or prioritised in government policy.

Sameness equality also appears to have a hierarchical effect among women – if equality with men is based upon a woman's presence in the workplace, then women in the workplace achieve a higher status than women in unpaid caregiving roles. Using men as the measure fuels hyper-individualism and over-functioning specifically among women. It also favours a small group of elite, often wealthy, well educated women who are better resourced to leverage this brand of equality to their own advantage, while failing to truly empower women from diverse backgrounds.

[22] Mary Becker, *Patriarchy and Inequality: Towards a substantive feminism* (1999).



We advocate for a government-led move away from 'sameness equality' policy frameworks, towards policy that values the inherently different contributions of each gender, including unpaid care work. We advocate for policy that affords families time with infants and very young children while also facilitating men and women to engage more equally in unpaid care work. This will only be possible if unpaid care work is valued appropriately and elevated in status through better financial support, policy frameworks that support the choice to care and gender equality discussions that include both childcare and parent care models. The single biggest lever we can pull in empowering all women is simply valuing the paid and unpaid work they already contribute.

Policy that provides unpaid caregivers (partnered or unpartnered) with an allowance, tax concessions and social support is a basic dignity that has been overlooked to the detriment of our youngest and most vulnerable members of society. Policies that would support unpaid care contributions, such as income splitting for tax purposes,[23] are discounted due to concerns that if caregiving roles are better supported more people may choose to engage in that role. Support cannot be withheld simply because it may enable or encourage more parents to exercise the basic human right to care for their children, or because unpaid care is a role undertaken disproportionately by women. Rather than reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes, support for unpaid care reduces the disadvantage that makes certain gender stereotypes harmful. Women must be enabled and supported to perform certain gendered contributions, such as birth and breastfeeding, to counteract the professional and financial penalty that arises in undertaking these gendered contributions.

The long term economic savings of parental care in the earliest years are well documented and must also be considered.[24] Parental care facilitates practices with proven health benefits, such as breastfeeding,[25] that extend well beyond the first year of a child's life. Parental care results in much lower rates of infectious disease than in group care,[26] it can be deduced that less time spent unwell increases quality of life for children and parents alike. Parental care can improve cognitive and emotional development by increasing the face to face interactions with a primary caregiver throughout the day and creating a less stressful environment than in group care situations.[27]

We advocate for equal policy and tax treatment of both single and dual income families, without which families raising young children cannot have genuine choice and are instead presented with government sanctioned choice architecture which presumes to know what is best for all families.

[23] New Zealand Government, <https://www.taxpolicy.ird.govt.nz/publications/2008/2008-dd-income-splitting/chapter-1#:~:text=Income%20splitting%2C%20in%20its%20simplest,tax%20savings%20for%20many%20families,> 2008.

[24] Dr Peter Cook, *Mothering Matters* (2011) Freedom Publishing.

[25] Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, <https://www.health.gov.au/topics/pregnancy-birth-and-baby/breastfeeding-infant-nutrition>, 16th August 2022.

[26] JP Collins, *Infections Associated with Group Childcare*, 2008.

[27] M Simms, *Children's cortisol levels and quality of care provision*, 2006.



Many Australian families would prefer to care for their own children while they are young

There is a large body of research that has examined the care preferences of families with young children, with most families preferring parental care in the earliest years.[28]

Mothers, in particular, express diverse preferences in how they balance work and care, with most preferring to devote a significant amount of time to caring for babies and young children.[29] ABS statistics released in November 2022 reveal that for women for whom childcare was a barrier to performing paid work, the biggest reason it was a barrier was because they preferred to care for their children themselves.[30]

It is not acceptable for a government to override this obvious preference diversity and engineer the choices of women to suit its own agenda of maximising paid workforce participation, by exclusively supporting options to outsource care work.

Policy must reflect this diversity of preference by striking a balance between policy that supports paid employment as well as social and family policy to support unpaid work contributions. This would create an environment that supports genuine choice in how families raise young children. Rather than reinforcing gender stereotypes, as is commonly cited, equitable social policy simply values the contributions of paid or unpaid care work.

Breastfeeding is a major reason many women choose to engage in caregiving roles for extended period, with the World Health Organisation recommending breastfeeding for 2 years and beyond due to considerable health benefits and protective factors against chronic disease.

Due to birthing and breastfeeding hormones it is likely that both mother and baby will experience some form of separation anxiety. It can be acute and episodic or chronic and long term. This anxiety could be avoided with better support measures for unpaid care contributions which allow mothers to remain with their baby until separation anxiety typically reduces after 3 years of age.

[28] Australian Institute of Family Studies, Parent-only care in Australia, 2016.

[29] Catherine Hakim, Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century: Preference Theory, 2000, Oxford University Press.

[30] Australian Bureau of Statistics, Barriers and Incentives to Labour Force Participation, Australia, (November 2022).



Parents Work Collective has been contacted by dozens of parents with similar messages about a clear preference for caring for their own children and, as such, not wanting to put their children in childcare. They express a strong desire for more choice in this matter.

The following is a quote from one woman typical of what we are hearing from many parents:

"I begin my return to work in the next couple of months. I thought I would take 12 months' maternity leave then feel fine about putting my baby into day-care and returning part-time. I don't. I feel sick about the day care drop offs and the thought of having to leave my child crying for me with strangers sickens me to my stomach and goes against all my instincts. Unfortunately we didn't think we would feel like this when we planned to have a baby, next time we will be setting ourselves up differently so that we don't have to leave our kids with strangers and they can be cared for by us, their parents."

Another parent expressed her concerns as follows:

"...just stumbled across your page [and] have tears rolling down my cheeks reading your posts. They absolutely hit the nail on the head. I have felt like a crazy person amongst peers questioning the weird circle of government money going into childcare rather than easing the burden on families so they can actually raise their own kids! This page has articulated it all so well."



HOW CAN WE PROMOTE THE BEST OUTCOMES FOR AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN?

As outlined at page 2 above, we believe there are a number of policy levers which could be used to greatly improve outcomes for children (numbered 1 - 14). Below, we provide further detail as to the proposed policy levers 1 - 3. We would be pleased to discuss any of the policy levers in more detail if that would be of assistance.

Universal parenting payment

For the reasons outlined above, it is our strong position that the Federal Government ought to expand the current Child Care Subsidy system to include payments to parents who choose to care for their own babies and children under three years of age. These payments should also be able to be used flexibly by parents for other private caring arrangements they may choose, including care by grandparents or nannies.

At present, many families cannot afford to take time out of the paid workforce to care for their own children. Expanding the Child Care Subsidy to include parental and other care models would afford thousands of Australian families' choice in this matter, rather than policy that exclusively endorses institutional models of care.

This is an option available in many Nordic countries, including Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Finland.

The formal child-care system in Australia is beyond capacity. There is a shortage of childcare positions and high staff turnover. According to the latest data from Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, more than 1 in 7 long day care services in Australia hold a staffing waiver which allows them to operate even though they cannot meet the legal minimum staffing requirements^[31].

While more early learning and care staff are trained, while better pay is negotiated and while centre standards are improved, it is imperative that families have the choice to utilise informal care arrangements rather than accept sub-standard care arrangements due to financial stress.

Subsidising parental care arrangements is also the quickest and most effective way to ease the pressure on early learning centres which will in turn improve the quality of care those centres are able to provide. It is the most equitable way of supporting families in a variety of situations, including geographically isolated families that may not be able to access a centre at all in rural areas, families where disability or mental illness means day care is not appropriate or families who work variable or non-standard work hours, mostly essential workers.

^[31] Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, NQF Annual Performance Report Summary (2022).



Expanding the Child Care Subsidy would also help recognise the many benefits of parental care in the early years and support parents in this choice while acknowledging the critical unpaid care work carried out by parents around the country every day. This unpaid labour forms our nation's largest industry and has immeasurable benefits for our society

Genuine choice for families and valuation of care work cannot happen without a Child Care Subsidy that legitimises parental care and allows families to choose the best model of care for their family situation. Without this, government continues to endorse only profit based group care and exploit parents' unpaid care-work while also expecting them to maintain jobs in the paid workforce.

Expanded parental leave

The 26 weeks of government-funded parental leave at minimum wage for parents in Australia, which will be in place by 2026, is inadequate. We reiterate the recommendation made by the Senate Select Committee into Work and Care in its final report dated 9 March 2023 to increase paid parental leave to 52 weeks.

It is critical that parents are supported to spend time with their babies for at least the first year of that baby's life. For the reasons outlined above, it is beneficial to a child's development and would have positive impacts on parental well-being and mental health.

In the event that paid parental leave is increased to 52 weeks, we urge the government to include a 'use it or lose it' component for fathers, of between two to three months. Research has shown that parental leave for fathers leads to more involvement with their children and an increased take up of other domestic labour.[32] This is a policy lever that would have a measurable impact on the amount of unpaid work performed by men, which helps to achieve equality for women.

The parental leave for fathers should certainly be available to be taken after the first 12 months of the baby's life and ideally from 2 years onwards. This is to allow mothers the choice to spend at least the first 2 years with their baby – a critical period for breastfeeding and attachment.

In addition, we urge the Australian government to allow parents who have not returned to paid work between children to access paid parental leave. The 'work test' in the current regime which requires parents to have returned to paid work for 10 of the previous 13 months is not backed by policy. All parents and babies deserve the opportunity to spend time together regardless of their personal circumstances with respect to paid work.

[32] See, eg, the Australian Institute: Nordic Policy Centre, Briefing note presented at The Australia Institute Nordic Policy Centre Roundtable on Paid Parental Leave (26 August 2019) <https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Briefing-Note-Parental-Leave-in-Iceland-WEB.pdf>; Annabelle Crabbe, Quarterly Essay 75, Men at Work: Australia's Parenthood Trap (2019).



More workplace flexibility and a limit on excessive paid working hours

The best way to further progress women's equality is to shift the focus from women returning to paid work onto men performing more unpaid work. As outlined above, due to excessive working hours, at present men are effectively locked out of caring work while women are locked out of paid work.

The Senate Select Committee reported that (footnotes removed):

"Gender equality is...regressed, as expectations that people work longer cannot be met by those with caring obligations, most commonly women. The expectation of longer working hours places women at a significant disadvantage in terms of earnings and promotion and can contribute to occupational segregation as working carers avoid long-hour occupations. This especially affects women's and carers' share of leadership, managerial and more senior jobs, with long term impacts on the gendered culture of such critical occupations."^[33]

As such, there is a need for significant cultural change with respect to the number of paid working hours performed, as well as increased take up of part-time work by fathers and partners.

We urge the Commonwealth government to implement the recommendations of the Senate Select Committee on Work and Care with respect to:

- a. imposing a positive duty on employers to accommodate flexibility requests;^[34]
- b. trialling a four day working week;^[35]
- c. implementing an enforceable right to disconnect (including supporting the Fair Work Amendment (Right to Disconnect) Bill 2023);^[36] and
- d. reviewing the operation of section 62 of the Fair Work Act 2009 which deals with maximum weekly hours as well as the standard weekly working hours, with a view to reducing standard weekly hours of work.^[37]

[33] Senate Select Committee into Work and Care, Final Report, 9 March 2023, page 17 [2.42 – 2.43].

[34] Senate Select Committee into Work and Care, Interim Report, October 2022, Recommendation 3.

[35] Senate Select Committee into Work and Care, Final Report, 9 March 2023, Recommendation 28.

[36] Senate Select Committee into Work and Care, Final Report, 9 March 2023, Recommendation 23.

[37] Senate Select Committee into Work and Care, Final Report, 9 March 2023, Recommendations 22 and 27.

P A R E N T S W O R K C O L L E C T I V E



We would be pleased to discuss this submission in more detail if that would be of assistance.

21 April 2023

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