



Save the Children
Australia

State of Australia's Fathers

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State of the World's Fathers

This report is inspired by and builds on some of the key findings in the first ever global report on fatherhood, *State of the World's Fathers*, produced by the MenCare campaign and led by Promundo, Sonke, Save the Children, Rutgers and MenEngage. For more information, please visit www.men-care.org



Paul Ronalds meets two young children at Save the Children's Early Childhood Centre in Kununurra, Western Australia. This program supports vital early learning opportunities for young children in remote Australia.
Photo: Robert McKechnie/Save the Children Australia

Foreword

Fatherhood. It's one of the toughest – and best – jobs I've ever had. When my kids were born there wasn't a 'how to' manual, and just when I thought I was getting the hang of it, everything would change and I'd be back to the drawing board. I'm still learning and growing as a father but I know one thing for certain: my kids need me in their lives.

At Save the Children, we believe father figures and strong family units are important to a child's development and protecting them from harm. But families are changing. Some children have two parents living with them, others do not. Men can be involved in children's lives in many ways — often as biological fathers but also as stepfathers, same-sex fathers, brothers, uncles, grandparents and positive role models. Whether through legal or emotional ties, men interact with and care for children in their families and communities.

Our vision is that all children survive, learn and are protected. This means that children need multiple and involved carers that support and nurture them to adulthood. At Save the Children, we want to value, celebrate and expect fathers' positive involvement as caregivers. We also want to work with men and boys as part of the solution, and encourage them to make constructive changes in their lives which will have a positive impact on women and girls, their community, and the world in which they live.

For more than 15 years, Save the Children's flagship report, *State of the World's Mothers*, has reflected on the extreme challenges but also joys experienced by mothers around the world. We are proud to expand our attention to fathers and their role in child development and wellbeing through our first ever *State of Australia's Fathers* report.

Paul Ronalds
Chief Executive Officer
Save the Children Australia

Executive summary

Father and child relationships have profound and wide-ranging impacts on children that last a lifetime. Many men will become fathers at some point in their lives, and almost all have some connection to children. Major changes in both the workplace and households are bringing changes to men's participation as caregivers. Yet, men's involvement has too often been missing from policies, programs and efforts to promote the best interests of children in Australia.

In this report, we review the latest international and Australian research on fathers and present new evidence on what Australian fathers believe to be their role in parenting. The results reveal that many Australian fathers are actively involved in raising their children, yet there are still too many describing themselves as a helper, leaving the day-to-day care of their children to others. We examine the many reasons why and offer practical recommendations to increase fathers' involvement in the care of their children.

Survey results

We surveyed more than 1,000 fathers to investigate the state of Australia's fathers today and conducted in-depth case study interviews. Our survey revealed the following:

On the role of fathers

- **Men recognise the importance of their role as fathers in children's lives.** Almost all men we surveyed agree that having an active father or other male figure is important for healthy child development.
- **Many men want to be more involved in care activities.** One in three fathers expressed a desire to spend more time playing with their children, and one in four to spend more time staying at home when children are sick and helping with homework.
- **Nonetheless, traditional roles and attitudes persist.** Half the men we surveyed with children under 18 describe their role as a helper in the care of their children, rather than a primary caregiver.
- **Men need support and encouragement to become more involved caregivers.** Parenting is a skill, yet almost half the fathers we surveyed had never sought advice on parenting and caring for children.

On childbirth and child health

- **Men nowadays are much more likely to prepare for and attend the birth of a child.** Two-thirds of men with children under 18 attended an ultrasound or other key check-ups, and 85 percent were present in the delivery room.

- **There is room for men's greater involvement in the lead up to birth.** Only around half the men we surveyed with children under 18 attended antenatal classes. A more common task for men was cleaning and preparing the baby room.
- **Men are concerned about the impact of their health on caring for children.** Nearly half the men we surveyed were concerned about their physical health and one-third were concerned about their mental health when caring for their children.

On leave and flexible work

- **Fathers generally take a short amount of leave around the birth or arrival of a child.** Around 40 percent of men with children under 18 took off one week (or less) and 11 percent took no time off at all when their baby was born or adopted.
- **Flexible work arrangements are emerging but remain limited.** One-third of men with children arriving in the last three years undertook work from home. Nonetheless, half of these men said that flexible work arrangements were not available to them.

Research review

Key findings from our review of international and Australian research on fathers are:

- **Involved fathers help children thrive.** Supportive fathers are connected to a range of positive outcomes in children including cognitive and social development, mental and physical health, and gender equitable attitudes.
- **Engaging men early on in prenatal visits, in childbirth and immediately after the birth of a child can bring lasting benefits.** When men are engaged from the start of children's lives, they establish a pattern of greater lifelong participation.
- **Healthcare and other social service providers often fail to include men.** Men are not targeted with the information they need, both for their own health and wellbeing, and for the health and wellbeing of their partners and children.
- **A father's health influences his children's health and well-being.** A fathers' health can influence eating habits and obesity in children and sometimes smoking, alcohol use and drug taking. Similarly, a father's mental health can impact children's health and wellbeing.
- **Men's involvement in caring is increasing but nowhere near that of women.** On average, women perform more hours of domestic work and caring for children than men, even when earning equal or more than men in paid employment.

- **Under the right conditions and with the right incentives, father-specific leave and flexible work arrangements show great promise for increasing fathers' participation in their children's lives.**

Longer periods of paid, father-specific leave have contributed to more fathers taking leave in countries like Germany, Norway and Sweden, and flexible work arrangements can facilitate better work-family balance.

Recommendations

Transforming fatherhood is critical to achieve Save the Children's vision of a world in which children are able to grow and thrive. To some extent, change is already underway. Nonetheless, the time has come to speed up and support the change, starting in three key areas.

1. Child health and development

Service providers can encourage greater involvement of fathers in caregiving. Save the Children recommends:

- **Nationally-led consultation process with men to determine how best services, or initiatives, can systematically support their role in caregiving.** Some services and initiatives for fathers are available, but many men do not know what is out there, or are not accessing them.
- **More maternal and child health professionals should be should be trained to engage with men.** Maternal and child health professionals are often the first point of contact with services for new parents and are an ideal opportunity for greater father engagement.
- **More health and other social services (childcare centres, schools and welfare services) adopt father-inclusive practice.** This can include:
 - Actively engaging with fathers and adapting materials (for example pamphlets and websites) to be father-friendly.
 - Establishing groups and networks to connect fathers together, including through social media.
 - Meeting the specific needs of fathers in caring for children. For example, services to address paternal depression, or supporting a partner with depression.
 - Leveraging the role that fathers can play in promoting healthy child development. For example, targeting childhood obesity by working with fathers and their children.

2. Workplace policies

For many fathers, workplace policies are a major part of the solution that would enable men to play a greater role in caregiving. These policies will also help establish important social norms. Save the Children recommends governments and workplaces:

- **Explore options to expand the paid, non-transferable leave** available to dads and partners to provide more opportunities for fathers to take leave when their children are young.
- **Promote the availability of carer's leave** for employees to look after their children who are sick or injured, or to manage an unexpected household emergency.
- **Promote flexible work arrangements** in line with the Fair Work Ombudsman Best Practice Guide on Work and Family. This could include: adjustable start/finish times to accommodate school pick up and drop off; annual leave available in part days; part-time work; or working from home.

3. Champions for change

Changes in services and workplace policies are an important step forward. However, more is needed to transform deeply held social expectations around caregiving. Save the Children recommends:

- **Nationally-led fathers ambassador campaign, celebrating (and expecting), the role that fathers can play in their children's lives.** Many fathers have limited references of equal care for children from their own upbringing or their peers. Father ambassadors across a range of professions and cultural backgrounds is one way to champion the case for change.

How we define fathers

Fathers are a diverse group. Our report considers 'fathers' to be those who are biological fathers, stepfathers, divorced or separated fathers, fathers in same-sex relationships, and men actively caring for children through foster or kinship care, or as older brothers, grandfathers and other male relatives.



Photo: Save the Children Australia



Conrad and baby Jaxon at Save the Children's parenting support program in Townsville, Queensland.
Photo: David Wardell/Save the Children Australia

1. Introduction

Around the world, there is growing recognition of the transformative role that positively engaged fathers play in protecting and nurturing children. Fathers matter to children not only because they are men, but because children need multiple, involved caregivers. Fathers have historically provided a different kind of care for children than mothers because of social norms that prescribe different roles. Yet, research confirms that men can also nurture and soothe young children, just as women can do things historically deemed as a father's role.

In addition, evidence points to fathers' influence as a separate, important factor in children's successful transition though infancy to adulthood.¹ For example, the rough and tumble play of some fathers, with its unexpected peaks of excitement, has positive developmental implications for children.² Conversely, violent behaviour displayed by some men can have very serious negative effects on children's wellbeing, self-esteem and behaviour. These are issues that are critical to address for all children to thrive.

This report is not about fathers versus mothers. It is not a fathers' rights platform. Nor is it only about heterosexual couples with children. We affirm the need to respect and support families and caregiving in all their diversity — caregiving arrangements that create wellbeing for children, women and men. What is important is that men are present, they show their care in numerous ways and they treat the mothers of their children with respect and equality.

Children tell us they want their fathers in their lives. Children have the right to have access to their fathers, as long as it is safe and in their best interests. As a child rights organisation, Save the Children is deeply motivated to uphold the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention recognises that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of a child, and that governments should support caregivers in this endeavour (Articles 5, 9 and 18).

Men in Australia are spending more time caring for their children today than in the past.³ We are seeing an increase in fathers' child care time across the range of care activities, including hands-on routine care in addition to play, talking, educational and leisure activities.

But there is still a long way to go in understanding the barriers and opportunities to promote a greater role for all fathers as positive agents of change in family wellbeing. At Save the Children, we also want to see boys and young men develop into responsible and caring fathers in the future.

In this report, Save the Children presents new research into fathers' attitudes to caregiving in Australia. During July 2015, we engaged Essential Research to conduct an online survey of 1,027 fathers who had cared for or are caring for children. This was complemented by case study interviews of 28 fathers drawn from participants in our programs, our staff and service provider colleagues. Further background on this research is provided in the Annex.

A full review of fatherhood would cover a myriad of issues. We see this report as a contribution to the conversation about raising children in Australia. In this report we examine:

The role of fathers in child development

We focus further analysis on the role of fathers in child health, as this is often the first point of contact with service providers for fathers.

Fathers and work in the home

We delve further into workplace policies around leave and flexible work arrangements as one area to promote greater involvement of fathers in caregiving.

This report is a first effort to engage in the role of fathers in Australia from the perspective of children. Issues not covered in detail, but discussed further in the *State of the World's Fathers*⁴ report, include:

- Divorce or separation and father's involvement with children.
- Fathers' roles in sexual and reproductive health.
- Fatherhood amongst gay and transgender fathers.
- Fatherhood and violence.

Other areas for deeper engagement include: the role of fathers in shared decision making about child wellbeing, including education and successful youth transitions, and the influences of culture, diversity and socio-economic status on fatherhood. Our aim is to build on this work in future years.

Fatherhood beyond the nuclear family

Children can thrive in all types of families. 'Fathers' include biological and adoptive fathers; fathers who are resident and non-resident; foster fathers; heterosexual, gay and transgender fathers; and married, cohabitating, separated, divorced and widowed fathers. Social fathers abound: stepfathers, mothers' boyfriends, foster fathers, legal guardians, brothers, uncles, grandfathers and other important relatives and friends who play significant fathering roles in children's lives. Having a 'good dad' whether biological or not, can be a powerful, positive force in children's lives.

“Being a father is a massive responsibility – it doesn't come with a manual. Basically you put yourself second to everything that they need in life. From their point, you're their beacon.”

- Bill*, 50, with children aged nine, 16 and 23

“My dad is funny, loving and helpful.”

- Romy*, seven

“I spent most of my youth in jail, until at 27 my partner fell pregnant and I have stayed out of jail ever since. My kids don't know my whole story, but they do know it's possible to turn your life around. They say ‘dad, I love you to the moon and back’, I tell them, ‘I love you to eternity and back.’ One son says, ‘I love you more.’”

- Duncan*, 44, with children aged 10, 13, 14, 17 and 18

“I have a superhero in my life, I call him dad.”

- Jane*, 16



Seventy percent of fathers spend more quality time with their children than their father did with them.
Photo: Melissa Wells

2. Fathers and child development

We know men who are more involved as fathers and caregivers can improve the lives of children, the lives of women and their own lives.⁵ Involved fathers are good for children: evidence shows that when men are engaged from the start of children's lives — whether by participating in prenatal care and education, being present during childbirth or taking leave from work when a child is born — they establish a pattern of greater lifelong participation. Fathers' ongoing positive involvement in the lives of their sons and daughters — listening to them and involving them in decision-making — enhances children's physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development and can contribute to their happiness.⁶ Fathers' involvement has been linked to higher cognitive development and school achievement, better mental health for boys and girls and higher self-esteem.⁷

There is a strong case around child protection for more involved and nurturing fathers as well. Involved fatherhood can help protect children from violence, abuse and neglect. When daughters and sons see their fathers in respectful, non-violent, equitable relationships with their mothers and other women, they internalise the idea that men and women are equal and pass this on to their own children.⁸ The bottom line is that men must be good partners as well as good fathers.

Men recognise the importance of their role as fathers

Our survey found 90 percent of men agree that having an active father or other male figure is important for healthy child development.

- While around 80 percent of fathers said they are responsible for earning money to meet their children's financial needs, around 80 percent also said they are responsible for caring for their child.
- 70 percent report spending more quality time with their children than their father did with them.

But they need support and encouragement to become more involved caregivers.

Parenting is a skill, yet many fathers have never sought advice on caring for children:

- 45 percent of the fathers we surveyed had never sought advice on parenting and caring for children.
- Encouragingly, we are seeing a shift in attitudes, with only 29 percent of fathers with children under 18 never seeking advice compared with 57 percent of fathers with children over 18.
- For fathers with children under 18 seeking advice, the main source of advice was their partner, followed by friends, their mother then their father. To a lesser extent, parenting books, relatives and online sources were also consulted as the main source of advice. Only one in five accessed a fathers' group.

These survey results together with our case study interviews (see text box: Men on parenting advice), indicate that a consultative process with men would be worthwhile to determine what type of advice and services they would use.



Men on parenting advice

“Everybody needs parenting advice. It’s not necessarily something that is wanted, especially when times are toughest, but guidance and support is critical. I became a father before any of my friends or siblings, so I felt very isolated when I had my first son. It took a massive toll on my relationship with my wife. Men need to feel like it’s ‘normal’ to hang out at playgroups and parenting support groups.”

- Max*, 32, with children aged one, three, four and 11

“It’s very hard to have men’s programs — some men think they already know everything. But we make so many assumptions in parenthood, without proper understanding. Materials we can use as men like ‘raising strong boys’, practical things that you can learn and groups for men are the key. The messages my father and friends gave me before I got married would not be helpful now — they are no longer applicable. Back then there were differences in gender roles — if I was to apply this advice now, my wife would be very upset with me.”

- Geoff*, 45, with boys aged six and 11

“They have prenatal classes leading up to birth, but after that there’s nothing really that happens. I sort of made it up as I went along, even now as I am a grandfather looking after my grandkids. It’s important that people know where to go. Nobody wants to be told parenting 101 but people need to know where to access the information.”

- Josh*, 60, with children aged 15, 17, 32, 36 and 37

2.1 Maternal and newborn health

Engaging men early on in prenatal visits, in childbirth, and immediately after the birth of a child can bring lasting benefits. The involvement of fathers before, during and after the birth of a child has been shown to have positive effects on maternal health behaviours and fathers' longer-term support and involvement in the lives of their children. Men's early involvement provides opportunities to engage them in the care of their partner and child and providing physical and emotional support during and after pregnancy. Early involvement also promotes father-child attachment and bonding. Emerging research shows that men's bodies respond with comparable hormonal shifts to women in response to physical contact with children, and that men are just as 'wired for care' as women.⁹

Generation change: Men's increasing involvement in childbirth

Our survey found that men nowadays are much more likely to prepare for and attend the birth of a child:

- Two-thirds of men with children under 18 attended an ultrasound or other key check-ups, compared to only 42 percent of men with children over 18.
- 85 percent of men with children under 18 were present in the delivery room at the birth of their last child compared to 60 percent of men with children over 18.

But, there is room for greater involvement.

- Only 48 percent of the men we surveyed with children under 18 attended antenatal classes. More common tasks included cleaning and preparing the baby room (58 percent), and buying or sourcing baby equipment (53 percent).
- Fathers' leave after childbirth tended to be short. Almost half of men with children under 18 only took off one week or less and 11 percent took no time off at all. (See Section 3.2 for a further discussion on leave).

The Engaging Fathers Evidence Review¹⁰ found the months before and after childbirth provide an ideal opportunity for father engagement because this is a time when the majority of fathers attend a range of services with their partner.¹¹ Antenatal education is important for fathers too because targeted interventions can influence the beliefs and behaviours of fathers during the postnatal period¹² and fathers who attend antenatal services with their partner are more likely to engage in childcare during the postnatal period.¹³

With regard to childbirth itself, a major change has occurred over one or two generations: fathers are now expected to be present for the birth of their child. Does it matter whether men are present for the birth of their children?

When considering medical impacts (for example, duration of labour, use of pain-relieving drugs), the evidence on this varies considerably.¹⁴ But it may be that we are asking the wrong question.

Having men present at birth is, for many men, the beginning of a desire to be an involved and equal partner, and it is desired by many women. The question should be: Do women and men want men present? And if so, how can we support these preferences?

Experiencing the birth of a child together can be a very positive experience. The presence of a male partner can improve the wellbeing of the mother and support for the newborn. However, it is not the only aspect of involving men in maternal, newborn and child health. In general, men's involvement during and after the pregnancy appears to have greater benefits than their specific involvement during delivery.¹⁵ Being involved from the start can be an important factor for fathers' future involvement in a child's life. It also offers the space for men to learn and practice skills around caregiving.

Childbirth and mental health

Pre and postnatal depression is a significant health and wellbeing issue for mothers, fathers and children. In 2010, an estimated 111,000 Australian mothers with infants were diagnosed with depression.¹⁶ This represented one in five mothers of children under two years old. For mothers, change in diet, sleep and activity levels associated with anxiety and depression can result in under nourishment and increased susceptibility to illness. Inadequate treatment can also lead to long-term mental health issues.

Similarly, maternal depression can impact on child caregiving and nutrition, parent infant bonding and overall child wellbeing. Several studies indicate that men's involvement during pregnancy is associated with reduced likelihood of developing postnatal depression.¹⁷ In addition, involved fatherhood can act to mitigate the effects of maternal depression on children as multiple caregivers contribute to a child's wellbeing and development.

For some fathers, much greater support is needed. International studies indicate maternal depression is the strongest predictor of paternal depression,¹⁸ therefore special attention needs to be devoted to families in which both parents may be depressed. Emerging research has documented postnatal depression among fathers and its negative impacts on children and their families.¹⁹ Estimates of paternal depression in Australia vary. Beyond Blue, an organisation aimed at improving mental health, suggests that five percent of fathers, or one in twenty, develop postnatal depression in the year after having a baby.

In Australia, fathers are not systematically screened for depression and anxiety, and there are limited pathways to professional help. Nonetheless, promising practice is

Men are concerned about the impact of their health on caring for children

Nearly half the men we surveyed with children under 18 were concerned about their physical health and one-third were concerned about their mental health when caring for their children.

emerging. For example, the SMS4dads project, led by the University of Newcastle under the Paternal Perinatal Depression Initiative, will test the design and delivery of self monitoring and detection of depression/anxiety among new fathers through free text messages and screening at early parenting centres.²⁰

2.2 Child health

Fathers can play an integral role in infant and child health. Fathers, as well as mothers, require the information necessary to support healthy decisions regarding their child's health, including immunisation, infant and young child feeding, and care for childhood illnesses. Fathers' presence has been shown to be helpful in encouraging and supporting mothers to breastfeed.²¹ A study in Perth found that practical and emotional support from fathers supported successful breastfeeding, increasing the mother's confidence and enabling her to maintain an adequate milk supply.²²

A father's health and fitness can have positive influence on his children's weight, activity levels and health more broadly.²³

Research on participants in the *Healthy Dads Healthy Kids* program in the Hunter Valley New South Wales, indicates that children's intake of nutrient-poor foods can be related to their fathers' intake.²⁴ An analysis of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children data also found that four-year-olds whose fathers were overweight or obese (but whose mothers were in the normal weight range) were up to 15 times more likely to be overweight or obese four years later.²⁵ Similarly, a fathers' mental health can affect his ability to care for his children. When a man's mental health is poor, his behaviour can be confusing or frightening to his children. These dads need support and guidance to help them to be positively involved.²⁶

There is also an increasing focus on the role of fathers in preventing smoking uptake, under-age drinking and illicit drug use by children. Some research, specific to fathers, indicates that a fathers' influence on alcohol and illicit drug use in children and adolescents may be distinct and stronger than that of mothers.²⁷ On the other hand, other studies focus on the role of parents collectively. What does emerge as a recurring theme is that consistent parental role-modelling, attitudes and rules regarding drug and alcohol are important protective factors.²⁸

Healthcare and other social service providers often fail to include men. This means that men are not targeted with the health information they need; both for their own health and for the health of their partners and children. In Australia, health, education and welfare services are devising strategies to recruit and involve fathers, alongside mothers and other family members, to support their infants and children. Nonetheless, barriers to father-inclusive practice have remained unsatisfactorily stable over the last two decades.²⁹



Men's involvement during and after pregnancy appears to have greater benefits than their specific involvement during delivery.
Photo: Robert McKechnie

Engaging fathers – what works?

Several Australian guidelines on father-inclusive practice set out strategies for health services, and also welfare and education services.³⁰ To better engage fathers, these guidelines suggest:

- Active recruitment of fathers.
- Adapting promotion materials and program content to be father-friendly.
- Ensuring support of father inclusion through policy development and staff training.
- An action research model of evaluation to refine practice.

Other strategies include:

- Targeting family transitions, such as the birth of a first child or the first day of school.
- Working with couples to address the needs of fathers. Mothers often play a critical role in promoting (or inhibiting) father involvement.
- Focus on specific knowledge or activities such as understanding child development. This has been shown to increase engagement with fathers.³¹

2.3 Men's health and wellbeing

Being an involved father is good for men themselves. Research has shown that greater engagement in caregiving and fatherhood brings benefits to men's health, including reduced risk-taking and improved physical, mental and sexual health.³² Given men are often less likely to be engaging in preventative healthcare compared to women, involved fatherhood is also one pathway to men caring for their own health. For example, men under 65 are far less likely to be attending GP check-ups compared to women.³³ Attendance at health services with children is one way for men to engage more with the health system.

Men who are involved in meaningful ways with their children report this relationship to be one of their most important sources of wellbeing and happiness.³⁴ Indeed, the research shows positive outcomes all around when fathers engage in the home – they have happier partners, closer intimate relationships with their partners, happier children and happier lives themselves.³⁵

2.4 Recommendations

Involved fathers are good for children, and service providers are one way to support greater involvement. Save the Children recommends:

- **Nationally-led consultation process with men to determine how best services or initiatives can systematically support their role in caregiving.** Some services and initiatives for fathers are available, but many men do not know what is out there or are not accessing them.

- **More maternal and child health professionals should be trained to engage with men.** Maternal and child health professionals are often the first point of contact with services for new parents and are an ideal opportunity for greater father engagement.
- **More health and other social services (childcare centres, schools and welfare services) adopt father-inclusive practice.** This can include:
 - Actively engaging with fathers and adapting materials (for example pamphlets and websites) to be father-friendly.
 - Establishing groups and networks to connect fathers together, including through social media.
 - Meeting the specific needs of fathers in caring for children. For example, services to address paternal depression or supporting a partner with depression.
 - Leveraging the role that fathers can play in promoting healthy child development. For example, targeting childhood obesity by working with fathers and their children.

Children matter – providing love and care

Alex* is a single, 56-year-old gay foster father to nine-year-old twin boys. Alex has been the boys' respite carer for six years. The boys currently live with their grandparents with plans for a transition to living with Alex when they move to secondary school. The boys have experienced significant trauma, their mother is deceased and biological father has no contact. Alex says that being gay has posed no barriers and the Catholic foster agency has been accepting and fair. Alex believes the key is to be sure about your own personal commitment and reasons for wanting to become a carer. As once the attachment is made with the children it can be a long-term commitment. "The boys describe me as their dad and others have said they see me as the centre of their world. We love doing things together like playing soccer, going to the skate park, camping and bushwalking," Alex says.

Alex recognises that being a father is a big commitment and very challenging at times, particularly when trying to get the children's needs met by the child protection system. However, he says, "I am committed to do whatever I can to get the best life outcomes for these boys. I'm in for the long haul whatever that journey may be."





It's playtime at Save the Children's playscheme in Armadale, Perth.
Photo: Robert McKechnie/Save the Children Australia

3. Fathers and work in the home

While workplaces around the world have been transformed by women's growing participation in the formal labour force, for the most part those changes are not reflected in the division of labour at home. In this section, we review the trends in who does the care work in Australia and identify ways that policies, programs and individuals can promote men and boys' greater involvement in care work.

3.1 Caring and household work

The care of a child involves a wide range of activities and support for a child to survive and thrive. Caregivers are responsible for upholding children's rights and meeting a child's physical, emotional, intellectual and social needs so they are able to reach their full potential. Caring for children is a major component of unpaid care work which also includes domestic work (for example, meal preparation, cleaning, washing), and care of other people (for example, elderly and people with a disability).

Traditional attitudes and roles persist

More than half the men we surveyed with children under 18 believe that men should take control in relationships and be the head of the household, while 47 percent describe their role as a 'helper' in the care of their children.

The majority of fathers with partners thought most tasks in relation to the care of their children were divided equally:

- Nonetheless, around one third of men reported it was usually/always their partner undertaking daily care of children, staying at home when a child is sick, collecting children from childcare and preparing food for children.
- The top areas where fathers were more likely to state it was usually/always them undertaking care-related activities were: driving or taking the child to leisure activities; helping children with homework; and playing with children.

Fathers today may be more involved with their daughters and sons than their own fathers were, but there is no country in the world where they share the unpaid care work equally with women.

Therefore, the potential benefits are enormous. When fathers take on their share of unpaid care work, it can alter the nature of relationships between men and women, freeing women from some part of their double burden while offering fathers exposure to the joy and satisfaction (as well as stresses) of caring for their children. Taking on roles as caregivers also offers men the opportunity to provide their sons and daughters with positive role models, improved health and development and greater hopes for the future.

Father's involvement with routine childcare activities

Our survey revealed most fathers nowadays are involved in some activities with their children:

- Half the fathers with children under 18 say they usually or always attend activities such as school and sporting events, medical appointments and vaccinations.
- Around one-third report sometimes attending these activities.
- One-fifth report not attending these activities often or at all.

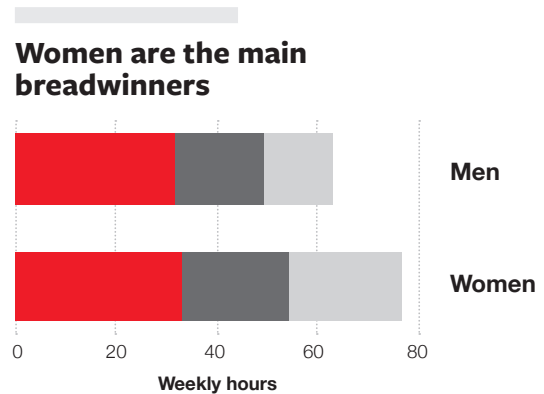
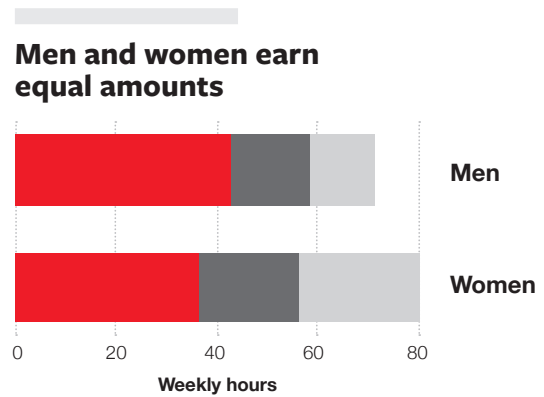
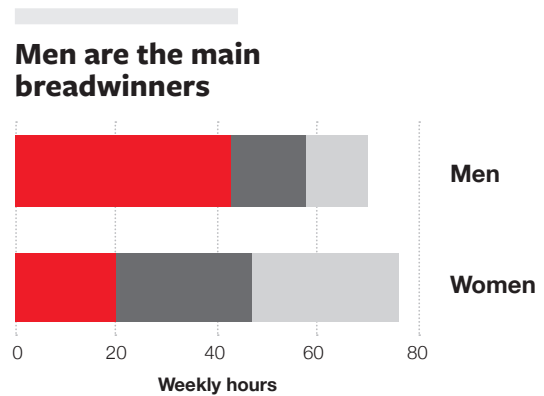
Many fathers want to be more involved in care activities, but some do not:

- One in three fathers with children under 18 expressed a desire to spend more time playing with their children. One in four fathers also wish to spend more time staying at home when children are sick and helping with homework, and one in five more time collecting children from school or childcare, driving children to activities and preparing food for children.
- One in five fathers with children under 18 wish to spend less time staying at home when children are sick, and collecting children from school or childcare.

Child care can be a joy but is also sometimes hard work, reducing leisure time for both fathers and mothers. In Australia we have a long way to go towards a more equal division of unpaid housework and care of children. Figure 1 shows that across a range of household earnings types, women put in more total hours of paid and unpaid work. Even in households where women are the primary breadwinner, they perform significantly more housework and child care compared their male partners.

Figure 1: Weekly hours of paid work, housework and childcare (if a parent) in couple households.

■ Paid work ■ Housework ■ Child care

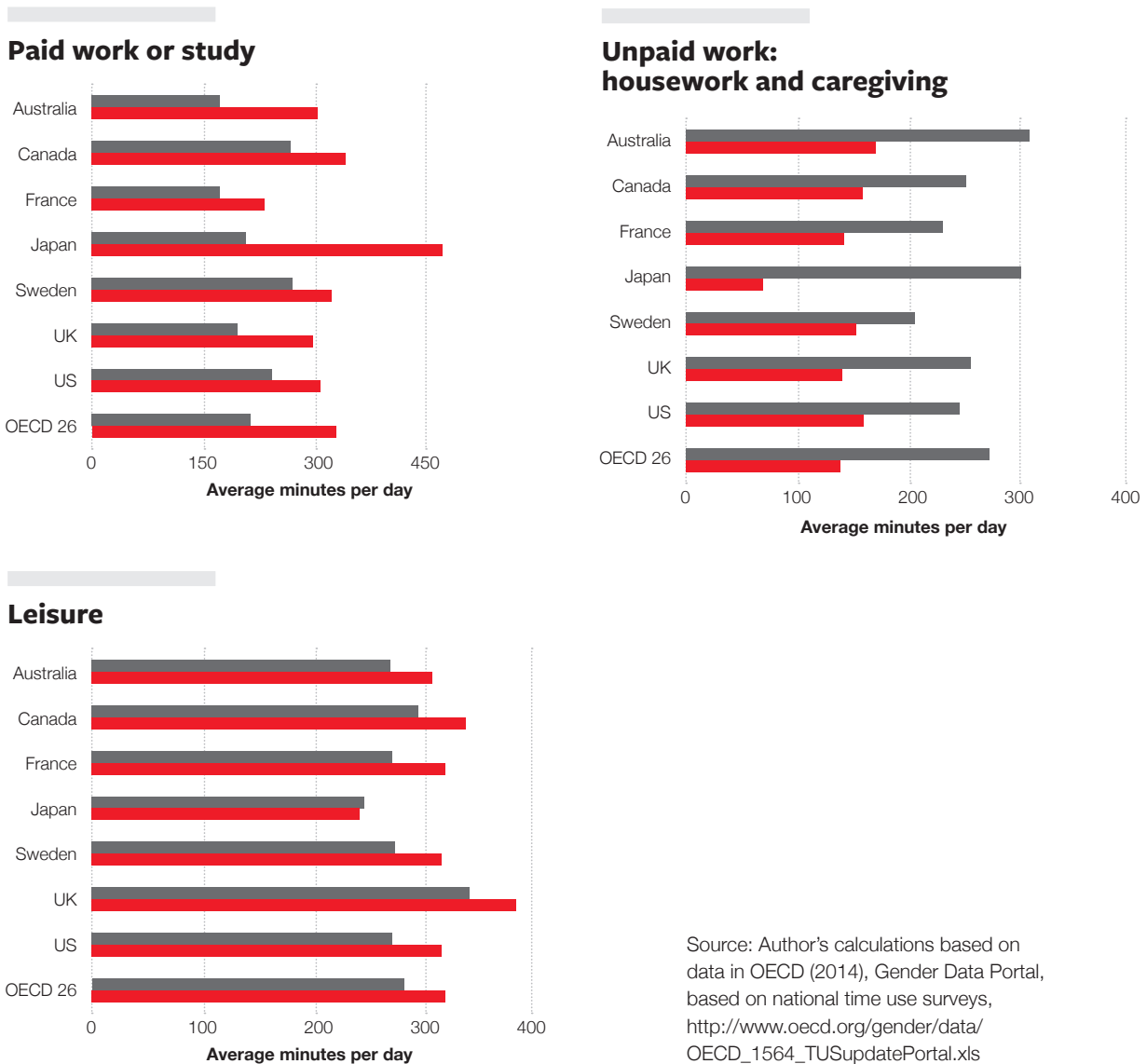


Source: Author's calculations based on data in Wilkins, R (Ed) (2014) *Statistical Report on Waves 1-11 of Household, Income and Labour Dynamics Survey in Australia*, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economics and Social Research, University of Melbourne.


Data from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) show that while men tend to spend more time than women on average in paid work or study, women spend much more time in unpaid housework and caregiving (see Figure 2). Nonetheless, in virtually every OECD country (including Australia) men are able to fit in valuable extra minutes of leisure each day.³⁶ That is, after paid work and some care work, more men tend to find time for leisure activities such as sports, visiting friends or watching TV, while women tend to be still engaged in household and care work.

The division of care work matters for women and the economy. We need men to do their share of care work because it empowers and frees up women to work outside the home, with economic benefits to families, and life satisfaction and equality for women. It also matters for children. Having a father or father-figure who is more involved in the home has many benefits for children. Boys in particular benefit from having a positive role model in their caring fathers. Indeed, this 'intergenerational transmission of care' can be a powerful contributor to the transformation of gender relations and ending inequality, opening a wider range of future possibilities for both boys and girls.

Figure 2: Average minutes spent per day in different activities in OECD countries (men and women aged 15-64)



Source: Author's calculations based on data in OECD (2014), Gender Data Portal, based on national time use surveys, http://www.oecd.org/gender/data/OECD_1564_TUSupdatePortal.xls



What being a father means to me

“I have always been as hands-on as possible. I have always gotten up in the night, changed nappies, taken kids to doctor’s appointments and so on. I now work part-time but I have also spent time as a stay-at-home dad. My role as a father involves every aspect of my life: personally, socially and professionally. I believe being a father encompasses roles of caregiver, teacher, mentor, provider and role model.

With young children I have no social life, so all of my time at home is with them. I also know that when I have been at home with the kids all the time, I am not always the best father. Balance is very important but very difficult to achieve. I love taking my kids outside. Sometimes this is going to the park or the beach, or simply outside on the property. We live on 30 acres of bush so my kids love to walk to the creek or feed the chooks or help me dig in the garden.”

- David*, 32, with children aged one, three, four, 11

What influences men's involvement in caring for children?

Various factors support men's involvement in care work. Having been taught to care for children, having witnessed their father taking care of their siblings, and their own current attitudes about gender equality are all associated with men's greater involvement in caregiving of young children. Men who are engaged in caregiving often credit their fathers and other men who were their role models. Conditions of employment and policies that allow men to take leave to care for children are also important (see section 3.2).

Australian fathers have limited references from their own childhood for shared caregiving

Our survey revealed that across all age groups:

- Only one in five men reported their own parents shared care equally.
- 70 percent of men were cared for mostly or only by their mother/stepmother or other female relative.
- Only half were taught or expected to undertake household tasks such as preparing food, washing clothes or caring for younger siblings.

These findings were consistent across two generations of fathers.

More commonly, men reported being taught or expected to clean the house (60 percent of men with children over 18, rising to 70 percent of men with children under 18).

3.2 Workplace policies for fathers

Workplace policies are a key area where governments and employers can incentivise greater work-family balance for both fathers and mothers. This section reviews the importance of fathers taking parental leave, particularly in the early years, to set up a pattern of more involved caregiving. It also considers the role of other workplace policies such as carer's leave and flexible work arrangements.

Parental leave

Dads and partners have an important role to play following the birth of a child, particularly in the early weeks. Being able to spend time away from work and bond with a new baby, as well as providing emotional and physical support for mothers, are just some of the reasons why partners may take leave.

Early bonding and support from fathers sets up a pattern of behaviour that continues into childhood. A review of data in four Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, including Australia, found that fathers taking leave of two weeks or more were more likely to carry out childcare related activities when children were young.³⁹ Furthermore, leave for fathers also appears to lead to improved maternal health, including mental health, and reduced parenting stress.⁴⁰

In Australia, leave and pay entitlements open to fathers include:

1) Unpaid parental leave: Up to 12 months unpaid leave following the birth or adoption of a child, for a parent in the primary carer role. The unpaid leave can be extended to a total of two years (between two working parents) if the employer agrees.

2) Paid parental leave: Under the Federal Government Paid Parental Leave (PPL) scheme, a parent in the primary carer role may be entitled to 18 weeks paid at the minimum wage. Individual employers may also offer additional paid parental leave.

3) Dad and Partner Pay: Also under the Federal Government PPL scheme, dads (or the mother's partner) are exclusively entitled to two weeks' pay at minimum wages for leave taken in the first year of the birth or adoption of a child.

In practice, longer periods of parental leave are mainly used by mothers. The following sections explain the entitlements and patterns of leave taking in more detail.

Under the National Employment Standards (which apply to most employees in Australia), all employees are entitled to 12 months unpaid parental leave following the birth or adoption of a child for an unbroken period during which they take a 'primary carer' role. Fathers may also take up to eight weeks of this leave concurrently with their partner, and this leave may be taken in separate periods (usually periods of two weeks or more), at any time during the 12 months. The parental leave period can be extended to a total of two years between two working parents (if the employer agrees).

The Federal Government's Paid Parental Leave scheme operates to set the minimum standards for paid parental leave. Eligible parents (usually mothers as primary carers)⁴¹ are entitled to be paid the minimum wage for up to 18 weeks following the birth or adoption of a child. Any unused portion of the parental leave pay can be transferred to another primary carer (usually the father or partner).

Most workers accessing government paid parental leave are mothers. Over two and a half years from 2011 to 2013, it was estimated that only one father for every 500 mothers accessed the scheme.⁴² In part, this likely reflects mothers meeting the breastfeeding needs of newborns. Beyond the first few months of a child's life, it may also reflect traditional roles of caregiving in Australia as evidenced by our survey. The gender pay gap⁴³ also influences this division of labour – for some families, more household income is generated by men in formal employment and women caring for children.

At present, government-funded paid parental leave is complemented by employer-funded parental leave for many employees. A 2012 employer survey found that 28 percent of organisations had employer paid maternity leave and 22 percent paternity-leave entitlements, with provision varying considerably by sector (public or private), organisation size and industry.⁴⁴

In June 2015, the government proposed legislative changes to remove access to government paid parental leave for working parents entitled to additional employer-funded parental leave.⁴⁵ Save the Children strongly objects to any dilution of the paid parental leave scheme. The current scheme is an affordable model based on co contribution from government, employers and individuals. It meets the twin objectives of enhancing child and maternal wellbeing and supporting parental work force participation.

Dad and Partner Pay

Dad and Partner Pay was introduced in 2013 to encourage men and partners to take time off to bond with their newborn or recently adopted child. It enables a working father (or the mother's partner) to receive up to two weeks' pay at the minimum wage within the first year of a child's birth or adoption. This payment must be taken while on unpaid leave and is non transferrable.

A survey conducted as part of the Paid Parental Leave evaluation,⁴⁶ indicates that around one third of eligible fathers chose to take Dad and Partner Pay in 2013. Few fathers were aware of the provision that allowed employers to top-up to fathers' normal earnings, and virtually no fathers had been paid top ups. The survey also showed that around one quarter of working fathers had not heard of Dad and Partner Pay. This suggests that more can be done to promote the benefits of leave after the arrival of a child.

Overall, while the evaluation found only a small average increase in fathers' involvement, several groups benefited substantially. They include fathers previously with no access to paid leave (casuals, contractors and self-employed), and fathers who had exhausted other paid leave and had high family support demands. Furthermore, the availability of Dad and Partner Pay appears to have made some fathers more willing to be assertive about taking leave following a birth, and some employers more inclined to see such leave as legitimate and a normal aspect of the leave taken by employees.⁴⁷

How does Australia compare?

Among Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, paid father-specific leave is a more recent development than leave for mothers. Paid father-specific leave entitlements include paternity leave, 'father quotas' or periods of parental leave that can be used only by the father and cannot be transferred to the mother, and any weeks of sharable leave that must be taken by the father in order for the family to qualify for 'bonus' weeks of parental leave. By 2014, the majority of OECD countries offered at least one week of paid leave reserved for the father, and the OECD average length of paid father-specific leave was around 10 weeks (see figure 4 overleaf). At two weeks of Dad and Partner Pay, Australia is well below the OECD average but ahead of countries such as the United States, Canada and New Zealand which have no paid leave reserved for fathers.





“My daddy is great because he is kind to me. He doesn’t betray me. He protects me and loves me.”

- Amelie, seven

WE FIXE \$40 pp
Guacamole and chips
Empanadas
Chick pea salad
Double feta
Garlic fries
Garden chinchona or
Chocolate cake
(1 dessert per 2 people)

Generation change: father's leave

Most men nowadays do take some leave after the birth or arrival of their child:

- Our survey found only 11 percent of men with children under 18 took no time off work compared to 30 percent of men with children over 18.

Time off work is increasing, but generally remains short:

- Around 60 percent of fathers with children under 18 took leave of up to two weeks. 22 percent took off three weeks or more, of which only two percent took off more than three months.
- By contrast, half of fathers with children over 18 took leave of one week or less. And, only 16 percent took off more than one week.

Figure 3: Time off at the birth or arrival of last child



The case for father-specific leave

Under the right conditions and with the right incentives, father-specific leave shows great promise for increasing fathers' participation in their children's lives. In practice, if leave is not specifically designated for fathers or is not adequately funded, few fathers actually take it. It is the longer parental leave, with paid, non-transferable days for fathers, that seems to be key to encouraging larger numbers of fathers to take leave, and to nudging households towards greater equity between men and women with regard to unpaid care work.

Father-specific leave policies appear to be encouraging fathers to take more leave. *The Economist*⁴⁸ reports that Sweden grants a bonus to parents who share leave more equally and that Swedish dads now account for more than a fifth of all parental leave taken, compared with almost none when shared leave was introduced. Germany introduced a similar system and saw the share of fathers taking time off rise from three percent in 2006 to 32 percent in 2013. In Norway, which has ring-fenced leave for dads, seven out of 10 now take more than five weeks off.

Father-specific leave will not, by itself, transform deeply rooted household dynamics with regard to caregiving, or change the way societies view the importance of caregiving. The OECD notes that leave policies need to be combined with active promotion of the policy to change mentalities. For example the Ikumen Project in Japan is designed to reduce social barriers associated with men taking parental leave, since such leave is seldom used, despite generous entitlements.⁴⁹

Nonetheless, Save the Children sees dedicated leave for fathers as one important step towards shared parenting, alongside other measures to promote a greater role for men in caregiving as outlined in Section 2.

Figure 4: Weeks of paid leave reserved for fathers in OECD countries 2014



Source: OECD Family Database, PF2.5.C. Length of paid leave reserved for fathers. Not all OECD countries shown here.

Carer's leave

Carer's leave forms part of the suite of workplace policies designed to help employees dealing with family and caring responsibilities. Under the national employment standards, employees are entitled to 10 days of paid personal/carer's leave for each year of service. Paid personal/carer's leave may be taken:

- (a) Where the employee is not fit for work because of a personal illness or injury affecting the employee; or
- (b) To provide care or support to a member of the employee's immediate family, or a member of the employee's household who requires care or support because of a personal injury, illness or unexpected emergency affecting the member.

Under certain circumstances, an employee may also be entitled to two days of unpaid carer's leave for each occasion a family member requires care.

Flexible work arrangements

Flexible work arrangements are another mechanism to facilitate increased involvement in caregiving. Flexible arrangements may include part-time work or variable work hours, working from home, shift work, job share or other flexible work arrangements.

Under the national minimum employment standards, employees with child care responsibilities (amongst others) have the right to request flexible work arrangements, if they have completed 12 months of continuous employment with the employer prior to the request.⁵⁰ An employer is not required to accept the request. However, reasons for refusal must be discussed with the employee and reflect reasonable business grounds.⁵¹

While social norms around the role of fathers and their level of involvement with caring for their children are changing, in many families, managing work and child care often still depends on fathers working full-time while mothers work part-time.⁵² Yet, many men do not conform to the ideal 'full time' worker model and instead have a range of priorities and aspirations, for example, to be active and engaged fathers.⁵³ Research shows that workplace flexibility can be a key driver of employment decisions and job performance for both women and men, including young men, male managers, men approaching retirement and especially younger fathers.⁵⁴ On the other hand, some men (as well as women) see flexible work arrangements as a limit to their career progression.

Flexible work arrangements, long considered the domain of working mothers, can foster a greater role for male caregiving. Yet, most workers remain unaware of the right to request flexible work arrangements.⁵⁵ Moreover, those most likely to make a request are mothers of pre-schoolers. In 2014, only 15 percent of Australian fathers of pre-schoolers made a request, compared with 41 percent of mothers.⁵⁶

Use of carer's leave by fathers

Our survey found carer's leave is only used by some fathers for their children:

- 41 percent of men with children under 18 reported sometimes or often using carer's leave to look after a sick or injured child.
- 17 percent report using it once or twice.
- 42 percent had never used carer's leave to look after their children.

The Fair Work Ombudsman has issued a Best Practice Guide on family friendly workplace practices. Strategies can include: annual leave available in full or part days; working additional hours to make up for time taken off; enabling children to access the workplace (where safe) or providing a carer's room; job-share; part-time work arrangements; and working from home. The guide recommends documenting family-friendly policies and training managers on their application.

What do children want?

Research led by Dr Sharon Bessell on children's views of community in Australia sheds some light on the pivotal role of families.⁵⁷ Over three years, researchers met with 108 children aged between eight and 12 years old when first consulted. Most children said their family was the most important part of their community — and the most important part of their lives. Almost all children said having a loving caring family is important. Most of the children said it was very important to have time with their parents and more than half the children said that they did not have enough time.

What stops children having enough time with parents?
Children said there are two main reasons:

1. Lots of parents are really busy. Some children said their parents (especially dads) worked very long hours in their jobs. Some children said their parents (especially mums) were really busy not only working in their jobs but also cooking, cleaning and looking after little brothers and sisters. All of that didn't leave much time.
2. Some children said their parents like to socialise with other adults rather than spending time with their children. Some children said their parents like to go to clubs or pubs, and prefer not to have their children with them.

Many children wanted their parents to spend more time with them, just to listen to them and to talk with them.

Flexible work arrangements are emerging but remain limited

Our survey reveals:

- Two-thirds of men with children under 18 report flexible work arrangements were not available to them following the birth or arrival of their last child. This includes work from home arrangements, compressed work week, part-time work and flexi-time.
- Professionals and managers have more access to flexible work arrangements. For example, professionals/managers were more likely to access work from home arrangements (25 percent) compared to fathers in other occupations, including technicians and trades workers and administrators (14 percent).
- Encouragingly we are seeing a shift in attitudes and availability of flexible work arrangements. For men whose child arrived in the last three years: one-third undertook work from home arrangements (this compares to just 15 percent of those whose child arrived between three and 10 years ago); and the portion reporting that flexible work arrangements were not available had reduced from around 65 percent to around 50 percent.
- Of concern is that some men report being pressured not to use flexible work arrangements by their employer. Five percent of men with children born in the last three years report being pressured not to pursue work from home arrangements, rising to 14 percent for part-time work.

Some men leave work early to pick up children or take time off for school duty but many do not.

- Only half of men surveyed with children under 18 reported they sometimes or often leave work early to pick up a child from childcare, kinder or school. 38 percent reported they sometimes or often take time off work to do kinder or school duty.
- Personal financial situations appear to play a role in taking time off work with half of the fathers surveyed with children under 18 describing their situation as 'poor' saying they had never taken time off work for kinder/school duty, compared to only one-third of those who described their financial situation as 'good'.

3.3 Recommendations

For many fathers, workplace policies are a major part of the solution that would enable men to play a greater role in caregiving. These policies will also help establish important social norms. Save the Children recommends governments and workplaces:

- **Explore options to expand the paid, non-transferable leave** available to dads and partners to provide more opportunities for fathers to take leave when their children are young.
- **Promote the availability of carer's leave** for employees to look after their children who are sick or injured, or to manage an unexpected household emergency.
- **Promote flexible work arrangements** in line with the Fair Work Ombudsman Best Practice Guide on Work and Family. This could include: adjustable start/finish times to accommodate school pick up and drop off; annual leave available in part days; part-time work; or working from home.

Finally, changes in services and workplace policies are an important step forward. However, more is needed to transform deeply held social expectations around caregiving. Save the Children recommends:

- **Nationally-led fathers ambassador campaign celebrating (and expecting) the role fathers can play in their children's lives.** Many fathers have limited references of equal care for children from their own upbringing or their peers. Father ambassadors across a range of professions and cultural backgrounds is one way to champion the case for change.



4. Conclusion

Virtually all men have a close connection to children in their lives. Many men will become fathers, while others care for and nurture children in their community. Our first ever *State of Australia's Fathers* report provides evidence on the benefits and need for greater fatherly involvement in the lives of children. Save the Children's work is underpinned by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that children have the right to be raised by their parents where possible, and that families have the responsibility to ensure children's rights are protected.

There is much that men can do to model engaged caregiving and fatherhood and to talk to other men about the joys, pleasures and challenges of fatherhood. There is much they can do to build the sense that men belong in a child health clinic, a school, a kitchen and a playground.

The transformation of caregiving and fatherhood begins within individual families, which must be supported by concerted social and institutional initiatives, and changes in policy and workplace settings.

Our research identifies a clear role for policies and programs to help men build their parenting skills, undertake the full range of work that involved caregiving requires and make themselves available in the lives of their children.

The potential payoffs are great. Engaging men in caring for children enhances the wellbeing of children, contributes to gender equality and improves the health of men themselves. Studies have shown when men and women share child care work and decision-making, women report better relationships and wellbeing. Sensitive, supportive and substantial father involvement in the lives of children is connected to a range of positive outcomes including children's cognitive and social development, mental and physical health, and in developing gender equitable attitudes. Positive, involved fatherhood gives fathers and their children great joy and brings deep meaning to their lives.

As this report shows, to some extent, change is already happening. The time has now come to speed up and support the change. Transforming fatherhood is critical in order to achieve Save the Children's vision of a world in which children are able to grow and thrive. Save the Children aims to mobilise and support this opportunity for change. We will work to promote a child's rights to live in stable and safe families in all their forms, with close connections to their fathers and men in caregiving roles.

Annex: Our research on men’s attitudes to caregiving in Australia

To inform our findings in *State of Australia’s Fathers*, we conducted two complementary pieces of research:

1. National survey: Men Who Care
2. Case study interviews with men in a caregiving role

National Survey: Men Who Care

Save the Children engaged Essential Research to conduct a national survey of male attitudes towards caregiving in Australia. During July 2015, an online survey was completed by 1,027 respondents who had cared for or are caring for children. To investigate how attitudes and practices may have changed over time, respondents spanned several age groups – 29 percent were aged 18-45 years old, 44 percent aged 44-64 years and 28 percent over 65. The majority of respondents were biological fathers (81 percent), but also included step-fathers (10 percent), guardians (seven percent), adoptive fathers (four percent) and those related to a child in a significant caregiving role such as brothers, uncles or grandfathers (13 percent).⁵⁸

The majority of respondents were married (73 percent), followed by single males (17 percent), men in de facto or partnered relationships (eight percent) and widowers (two percent). Of those in the workforce, the majority were full-time employed (67 percent), followed by part-time employed (11 percent), casuals (nine percent) and self-employed (13 percent). The respondents were working as: professionals and managers (55 percent), technicians, trades, machinery workers or labourers (23 percent), sales, clerical and community workers (15 percent) and other occupations (six percent).

Topics covered in the survey included:

- Contact with children
- Seeking advice
- Birth of last child
- Parental leave and work flexibility
- Involvement in caring for children
- Own childhood.

Case study interviews

From July-August 2015, Save the Children conducted 28 interviews with men in a caregiving role. They included participants in our programs, our staff and members of service providers we work with. We asked open-ended questions with a view to encouraging fathers to share what is important to them. Discussion points included:

- What does being a father mean to you?
- Are you satisfied with the type of father you are?
- Do you feel you spend enough time with your children?
- What do you enjoy doing with your children?
- Do men need support to be fathers?
- How would your children describe you as a father?

“Being a father is a blessing and a responsibility. I love going to the park with my kids, going on a ‘bear hunt’ (bushwalk) and storytelling.”

- Michael*, 38, with two children

“My dad is nice because he helps me when I’m feeling upset. He cares for me and loves me a lot.”

- Avery*, five

“Being a father means everything to me. I’ve been blessed to watch my kids grow up. It taught me to become a leader in my home, to discover my skills as a person and dad.”

- John*, 40, with five children

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- *Names changed to protect identities

Save the Children Australia acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures, and to elders past and present.

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