

Supporting men as fathers in the workplace

A Scorecard closer look

September 2025

This document has been developed to capture findings from recent research on the factors that influence men's uptake of paid parental leave. Focusing on studies relevant to paid parental leave in Australia, it can help employers better understand how to encourage and support more men to take paid parental leave.

This paper relates to Gender Equality Target 17 – increase the uptake of primary parental leave by the under-represented gender.

Introduction

Parental leave for all new parents, including fathers, should be considered a right – not just a privilege. When fathers take parental leave, the whole family benefits: fathers are more engaged with children, they have higher quality relationships with their partners, and both partners experience improved mental health. More fathers taking parental leave is also good for the economy, boosting GDP as mothers increase their workforce participation.

While there has been progress over the last few decades in making paid parental leave available to men, significant gaps still exist between paid parental leave coverage for women and for men.¹ The proportion of countries offering paid leave for fathers increased fourfold between 1995 and 2022 (from 13% to 56%). However, there is currently no global minimum International Labour Organization (ILO) standard existing for the duration of paternity leave.^a The minimum standard for maternity leave^b duration, captured in the Maternity Convention Protection (183), is 14 weeks,² with 18 weeks recommended

^a Note that "paternity leave" is used by the ILO to refer to leave provided specifically for fathers.

^b The ILO uses "maternity leave" to refer to leave provided specifically for mothers.

in the corresponding Maternity Convention Recommendation (191).³ Globally, leave provisions for men that are well paid – which are best for encouraging men to take parental leave – are far from the norm⁴ and, where paid parental leave for fathers is offered, the gap between its availability and its uptake persists.⁵

Social norms and the gendered division of labour

The gap between men's access to parental leave and their action (in taking it up) can be explained in part by entrenched gendered norms that often manifest as women taking on the majority of domestic (unpaid) labour and men taking on the majority of paid work. These norms explain roughly one third of the gender pay gap.⁶ The "inherently gendered issues" of unpaid care and work contribute to inequalities in the labour market and an increased likelihood of women working in insecure employment (such as casual and contract work) and in part-time roles.⁷ Specifically, women in couples with children account for 62% of the couple's total time spent caring, 59% of the total time spent on housework, and only 36% of the total time spent in paid work.⁸

Parenthood has a significant impact on how labour is divided: "The birth of the first child is ... a turning point in couples' division of labour towards a highly gendered, long-term pattern."⁹ (Prior to the birth of a couple's first child, the division of paid and unpaid work and care is relatively gender equal, with women accounting for 47% of the total time spent in employment and 54% of time spent on housework.)¹⁰ While some couples (who are middle-class, with both earning and having a gender-equal ideological orientation) intend to maintain a gender-equal division of labour following the arrival of the first child, the "combined influence of the social policy context and the normative gender culture" they live in saw a "significant share" of these couples experiencing a division of labour, following the child's arrival, more in line with traditional gender norms than gender-equal.¹¹

Investigating the gendered and unequal division of care for children, one study compared the leave use of mothers of biological children and mothers of adoptive children and found no significant difference. The authors concluded that, contrary to a widespread assumption, it is not physiological factors that underpin women's longer leave-taking, nor financial concerns, but "persistent norms of mothers as caregivers/homemakers and fathers as breadwinners".¹²

We can see the influence of gendered norms in the proportions of primary carer's^c parental leave taken by women and men. While there has been an increase of 12 percentage points in the proportion of primary carer parental leave taken by men in the private sector over the last seven years (from 5% in 2016–17),¹³ men are still only accounting for 17% of this leave taken. The figure is slightly lower in the Commonwealth public sector, with men accounting for only 11% of primary carer leave taken.

The legislative environment in Australia

In Australia, the introduction of the *Paid Parental Leave Act 2010* (Cth) saw primary carers – who historically have overwhelmingly been women – provided with 18 weeks of leave paid at the national minimum wage. In 2013, the Act was amended to introduce Dad and Partner Pay (DaPP): two weeks of leave reserved for fathers, again paid at the minimum wage.

c A primary carer is the person who most meets the child's needs, including feeding, dressing, bathing, and otherwise supervising the child. A secondary carer is generally the current partner of the primary carer, the other legal parent of the child, or the current partner of the other legal parent of the child.



Recent legislative changes to paid parental leave offerings both in the private sector and in the Commonwealth public sector reflect growing awareness of the role a more gender-equal division of caring responsibilities plays in achieving gender equality more broadly. In the private sector, the Paid Parental Leave Amendment (More Support for Working Families) Bill 2023, passed by the Senate in early 2024, amended the *Paid Parental Leave Act 2010* to provide families with 26 weeks of paid parental leave (with single parents able to access the whole entitlement) by mid-2026.¹⁴ DaPP is no longer available; instead, two weeks of leave are reserved for fathers (with this period to increase to four weeks in 2026).

In the Commonwealth public sector, a review of the *Maternity Leave (Commonwealth Employees) Act 1973* (Cth) by the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) in 2023 resulted in 26 recommendations to government. These recommendations addressed, among other issues, leave length, flexibility of use of leave, and superannuation payment during leave.

The Government is currently considering its response to the recommendations, but Commonwealth public sector employees employed under the *Public Service Act 1999* (Cth) are able to access updated parental leave offerings that have been incorporated as common conditions in APS enterprise agreements beginning in 2024. Under these conditions, employees will be able to access 18 weeks paid leave for both primary and secondary carers by 2027.¹⁵

Updated parental leave offerings in the Commonwealth public sector provide a significant addition to the amount of leave available for secondary carers, with men accounting for 89% of this leave taken in 2023. While the average length of universally available and primary carer leave provided was 19.2 weeks, for secondary carers it was only 5.7 weeks.

The Australian workplace environment

While these legislative changes are promising and reflect some of what we know about how to encourage men to take up paid parental leave, the Paid Parental Leave scheme makes up only one of three “domains” of Australia’s “hybrid” parental leave framework. The other two domains are individual employers’ policies and enterprise bargaining.¹⁶

The number of employers offering paid parental leave has markedly increased in recent years. In 2023–24, more than two thirds of private sector employers (68%) reporting to WGEA indicated that they offer this leave, up from fewer than half (49%) in 2018–19.

While men are slowly accounting for a greater percentage of primary carer parental leave taken in the private sector, “simply making gender-neutral leave available to men is insufficient to substantially increase gender equality in leave-taking.”¹⁷ Employers have a role to play in encouraging the cultural change required to support men to take on additional caring responsibilities.

Factors affecting men’s take-up of paid parental leave, then, include those at the policy, employer and community levels. Parental leave policies “can either crystallise or challenge gender inequalities”.¹⁸ Attitudes towards men taking paid parental leave that are grounded in gendered norms about caring responsibilities – with these norms prescribing caring roles to women and “breadwinning” roles to men – can function as a significant barrier to men taking up this leave. We can see this in the low proportion of men taking paid parental



leave in 2023–24. Attitudes reflective of a shift in norms towards a more gender-equal distribution of care and paid work, on the other hand, can enable men's increased uptake of leave. Below we explore the benefits of more men taking paid parental leave, and the barriers to and enablers of men's take-up of this leave captured in recent literature.

Benefits of men taking paid parental leave

The benefits of men taking paid parental leave are well established.

More men taking paid parental leave results in fathers being more engaged with their children and experiencing a higher quality of relationship with their partner.¹⁹ Men who take paid parental leave face a lower risk of depression and stress and experience an improvement in mental health. Their partners' mental health also improves as fathers become available to support them.²⁰

Men who take longer periods of leave when a child is born are more likely to still be involved in childcare when their children are 2 and 3 years old, and to provide solo care on weekends.²¹ Indeed, one article has referred to men's parental leave as a "golden opportunity" to increase fathers' childcare involvement over the long term.²²

Supporting men to take paid parental leave could lead to a "double benefit" for employers: not only will employers be able to attract and retain talented men by normalising working fatherhood, this normalisation will remove some of the penalties faced by working mothers.²³ Together, this could lead to a reduction in these employers' gender pay gaps.²⁴ Further, the estimated boost to GDP that could occur as a result of mothers participating in the workforce at increased levels – due to more men taking paid parental leave – is \$900 million a year.²⁵ Women will experience increased economic security as parental leave becomes gender equal.²⁶

Recognition of the benefits of more men taking more parental leave could explain the increase in the proportion of private sector employers reporting that they have set targets to increase the number of men taking parental leave. In 2023–24 the proportion of employers setting this specific target (as a proportion of employers setting targets overall) was 25%, up 6 percentage points from 2021–22 (when employers could first report the targets they have set to WGEA). However, in the public sector, only 7% of employers who reported setting targets had a specific target in place to increase the number of men taking parental leave in 2023.

Barriers to men taking paid parental leave

Attitudes towards men taking paid parental leave that are grounded in gendered norms about caring responsibilities can function as a significant barrier to men taking up this leave. Unsupportive managers, low levels of wage replacement and negative effects on career progression are further barriers, as is "the invisibility of fathers' caring responsibilities in the workplace".²⁷ Further, workplace policies can be a limiting factor: more than half (51%) of men who took parental leave reported that their employer's policy did not render them eligible for the length of leave they would have liked to take.²⁸ Men who would like to increase their caring responsibilities feel "trapped" by barriers to changing the way they work, with these barriers being both real and perceived.²⁹



Attitudes, influenced by gender ideologies, can underlie a lack of support for men taking leave

Attitudes that question the legitimacy of men taking paid parental leave can translate to a lack of support for this kind of leave-taking in the workplace and in the broader community.

One study examined international attitudes towards men taking paid parental leave and confirmed that these attitudes are influenced by an interplay of components of gender ideologies, including the division of paid and unpaid labour and which member of a couple participates in the workforce. Women are more likely to support generous parental leave schemes than men. Further, those who support dual-earning expectations (i.e., that both members of a couple will participate in the workforce) were also more likely to support these schemes than those whose attitudes support the gendered “separate spheres” model of parenting, where men provide, and women care. National contexts also play a role, and researchers have found a positive association between existing paid parental leave schemes and support for more generous schemes, and between a context of “female empowerment” and support for government-funded paid parental leave.³⁰

“Pluralistic ignorance” has also been cited as a barrier to men taking parental leave, in terms of men attributing a lower level of support for them taking leave from their colleagues than is actually the case. A UK study tested whether how colleagues’ levels of support for men taking parental leave influence leave taking. It found a positive effect on participants’ intentions to take a certain period of parental leave after they found out that most men were supportive of other men taking parental leave.³¹

Participants in another UK study indicated that the attitudes of their employers and co-workers affected their experience of paid parental leave. They were more likely to have a positive experience when they felt as though their leave-taking was supported.³² Australian survey respondents illustrate the corollary of this: in 2024, 22% of women and 12% of men who took parental leave reported that taking this leave was met with negative comments from managers.³³

When it comes to caring, gender norms are hard to shift

Across the literature surveyed, there is an acknowledgement that “gender norms in relation to who works and who cares remain surprisingly sticky”.³⁴ A common perception is that workplace cultures – and the policies and practices that these are built on – function to disadvantage all genders by supporting men as primary earners and women as primary caregivers.³⁵ Findings from a systematic review further support the idea that the workplace functions as a “reinforcer” of community social norms,³⁶ including gendered norms. Gendered norms pertinent to men’s take-up of parental leave include notions of “what it means to be a man, a father, and a good employee”,³⁷ and underlie current patterns of gendered inequality in domestic responsibilities.³⁸ These norms are both reflected in and stem from workplace environments, and influence men’s behaviour.

For example, there is a tension for fathers between adhering to the ideal worker norm – with an “ideal worker” being someone who is always available and can work additional hours – and taking on caring responsibilities.³⁹ The lingering influence of expectations that women take on the majority of caring responsibilities, combined with anxiety fathers might have about how taking parental leave could potentially negatively affect their career progression and work relationships, function as barriers to men taking up this leave.⁴⁰



Low take-up rates of Dad and Partner Pay shed light on additional barriers to men taking paid parental leave

Take-up rates of the now-defunct DaPP scheme provide a helpful illustration of further barriers to men taking up paid parental leave. DaPP provided two weeks of paid parental leave for fathers, but could only be accessed if fathers took unpaid leave from their employer. The scheme ended when the Paid Parental Leave Amendment (More Support for Working Families) Bill 2023 passed in early 2024, with the reforms to the *Paid Parental Leave Act 2010* taking effect from 1 July 2024.

In 2021, 39.9% of fathers accessed DaPP after their child's birth.⁴¹ Take-up was highest for those employed by a medium-sized business (46%), and higher for those who had jobs in the private sector (41% employed by a small business and 39% by a large business)^d than in state or local government (30%) or the federal government (25%).⁴²

Take-up was lowest among lowest-income and highest-income fathers. This suggests that the wage replacement rate for high-income fathers was too low, while low-income fathers might not have been in employment at the time of their child's birth, or did not meet the work test.^e Certain population groups were less likely to use DaPP, including those who needed assistance with core activities, compared to those who did not; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers compared to non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers; and fathers with poor English language proficiency. Employer type and occupation had a stronger effect on differences in DaPP take-up than the industry that the father worked in, suggesting that take-up is more likely to depend on individual circumstances (job and family) than on trends at the industry level.⁴³

DaPP was introduced in response to a Productivity Commission finding that providing leave that wasn't earmarked for non-birth partners meant they were less likely to access it.⁴⁴ However, an evaluation of the scheme found that, while it did increase the average length of leave fathers took, there was no increase in the number of fathers taking leave.⁴⁵ This low level of take-up was due to it being paid at the minimum wage, having to be taken in a single block of ten days, posing a high administrative burden to those seeking to take it, and the continuing stigma faced by fathers who want to take paid parental leave.⁴⁶

The low-take up rate of DaPP could also reflect a perception among fathers in Australia that parental leave is not a right but a "privilege".⁴⁷ Cultural resistance to fathers taking on a "primary" caregiving role sits alongside a number of other barriers to the gender-equal take-up of paid parental leave, including "primary" and "secondary" carer labels, use restrictions, and negative career (and financial) consequences for fathers who take extended leave. Employers' parental leave offerings align closely to the entitlements outlined in Australia's Paid Parental Leave Act, when – in theory – they could be more generous.⁴⁸

Most employers in the private sector who offer paid parental leave offer it with a distinction between primary and secondary carers (73% of employers offering leave). In 2023–24, the average length of leave available for secondary carers is 2.9 weeks – only slightly higher than the 2 weeks currently set aside for fathers in the Australian Government's Paid Parental Leave scheme.

d The authors use Australian Taxation Office definitions of business size: small businesses have less than \$10 million annual turnover, medium businesses between \$10 million and \$250 million, and large businesses more than \$250 million.

e To meet the work test, dads and partners must have carried out 330 hours of paid work over at least 10 of the 13 months prior to the birth, with no breaks in employment longer than 12 weeks.



Enablers of men taking paid parental leave

Policy design can encourage men to take up paid parental leave

Policy design elements that enable more men to take up paid parental leave include higher levels of wage replacement,⁴⁹ leave earmarked for fathers⁵⁰ (that is, leave is provided to individuals, rather than families, and is non-transferable⁵¹), an opt-in by design approach⁵² and, relatedly, putting an obligation on men to take the leave.⁵³ “Opt-in by design” means that the leave entitlement automatically applies, and the father has to opt out if they do not wish to take the leave.

Encouragingly, most Australian private sector employers who offer paid parental leave pay this leave at the employee’s full salary: 85% of those who offer universally available and primary carer’s parental leave, and 93% of those who offer secondary carer’s leave. Similarly, in the Commonwealth public sector, almost all employers pay parental leave at an employee’s full salary.

Currently, the Australian Government’s Paid Parental Leave scheme earmarks two weeks’ leave for each parent. This will increase to four weeks on 1 July 2026, with the 18 remaining weeks to be divided as the couple sees fit.⁵⁴

Providing the same entitlement to both parents can also encourage men to take paid parental leave. For example, by offering a standard entitlement and removing “primary” and “secondary” carer labels, two of the Big 4 consulting firms saw an increase in the proportion of men taking this leave. The proportion of men taking parental leave at Deloitte increased from 20 to 40 per cent, and the proportion at PwC increased to more than 45 per cent.⁵⁵

The “worker-carer”, rather than the “ideal worker”, is a more helpful norm

One Australian researcher suggests positioning the “worker-carer”, rather than the “ideal worker”, as the Australian workplace norm,⁵⁶ echoing an assertion that when women and men are seen to have equally legitimate claims to accessing parental leave, notions of what makes a good worker and a good parent will begin to merge.⁵⁷

That is, paid parental leave policies designed to support uptake by fathers need to be supplemented by a normative shift, in workplaces and in wider communities, to encourage fathers to take this leave.⁵⁸ While there is a strong positive association between access to and take-up of paid parental leave for fathers, cultural change – including in terms of attitudes towards men taking on caring responsibilities – is a necessary complement.⁵⁹ For example, one study notes that in Norway, “fathers’ leave-taking is supported by social norms of good fatherhood” that fathers seem to have internalised in the 25 years since the introduction of non-transferable leave for fathers. Based on interviews with Norwegian fathers, the study finds that “fatherhood has also been incorporated into their practices as employees”.⁶⁰

Positive influences on men’s decisions to take paid parental leave include other coworkers taking leave and employer support for employees’ responsibilities outside of work, as well as a “family-friendly” work environment.⁶¹ And enhancing pre-existing leave schemes will help encourage future fathers to take leave. While “current gender norms in Australia box in men’s choices” – i.e., men taking parental leave goes against employer and social expectations – higher uptake of a more generous scheme will help to encourage and enable future fathers to take leave.⁶²



“Embedded support for flexible work practices to enable employees to combine work and family responsibilities” is the first of six National Work + Family Standards outlined by Family Friendly Workplaces.⁶³ And flexible working arrangements are widely available to employees in Australia. 87% of private sector employers and almost all (98%) Commonwealth public sector employers have a policy or strategy in place for flexible working arrangements. However, few employers are specifically focusing on increasing the number of men who take up these arrangements: 20% of private sector employers and only 7% of public sector employers who set targets have targets in place to increase men’s use of flexible working arrangements.

Finally, fundamental to shifting attitudes is employer recognition of “the complexity of fatherhood”.⁶⁴ Employers also need to recognise the ideal worker norm, in order to mitigate its effect – and to counter it with organisational values and working practices that recognise fathers as carers and normalise and support active fatherhood.⁶⁵

Employer support provides the basis for a workplace culture that acknowledges and supports men as carers

Employers are well positioned to deconstruct the “gendered discourse around work” and acknowledge that their employees are people with lives and responsibilities outside of their work.⁶⁶ They are “critical players in changing behaviours and perceptions on the value of care activities,” and behaviours of colleagues and managers (including indications of support for leave-taking as well as taking leave themselves) can establish a culture that normalises parental leave-taking by both women and men.⁶⁷

Men are more likely to take some paid parental leave if they know they are supported to do so. One study found that perceptions of support by the workplace culture are also a key determinant of men taking leave,⁶⁸ and another shows that men are more likely to take leave earmarked for them if their co-workers take this leave, with the effect particularly pronounced if a manager has taken it.⁶⁹ Fathers whose co-workers take parental leave are also more likely to take a longer period of parental leave.⁷⁰

Men who are managers account for a higher proportion of primary carer’s leave taken than men who are non-managers in both the private and public sectors. In the private sector, 20% of primary carer’s leave taken by managers is taken by men, compared to 16% of primary carer’s leave taken by non-managers. The difference is smaller in the public sector, where men account for 12% of leave taken by managers, compared to 11% of leave taken by non-managers.

In addition to encouraging men to take paid parental leave (including by managers role-modelling this leave), workplaces must provide support to counter “societal expectations placed on men to fulfil traditional masculine norms – which do not legitimise a role for men in caregiving”.⁷¹ One way to do this is to see fatherhood as an opportunity to work towards more gender-equal personal relationships, which has a positive effect on gender equality more broadly.⁷² The Australian Government’s *Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality* suggests that workplaces can promote flexible working arrangements (including part-time hours) and parental leave to encourage a more gender-equitable distribution of caring responsibilities, including for employees in positions of leadership, to prevent the take-up of these arrangements becoming a barrier to career progression.⁷³



Beyond making more parental leave available for fathers, and encouraging them to take this leave, workplaces can also provide support for men through policies that support employees with caring responsibilities.

As with policies and strategies to support flexible working arrangements, policies and strategies to support employers with family or caring responsibilities are common among Australian employers. 4 in 5 (80%) employers in the private sector, and almost 9 in 10 (87%) in the public sector, have a relevant policy or strategy in place. The most common inclusions in these policies and strategies are access to counselling and external support for carers (81% of employers with a policy in the private sector and 85% in the public sector), keep-in-touch programs for those on parental leave or extended carers' leave (51% of private sector and 52% of public sector employers), and referral services to support employees with family and/or caring responsibilities (47% of private sector and 52% of public sector employers). Only 5% of private sector and 3% of public sector employers with a policy provide parenting workshops for fathers.

Recommended actions for employers

- 1 Increase the number of weeks of paid parental leave available to men
- 2 Ensure that comprehensive employer-funded parental leave schemes include superannuation payments
- 3 Earmark leave for men and make parental leave policies opt-in by design
- 4 Encourage men in management positions to role-model (as applicable) and support the taking of parental leave. This should form part of broader support for a culture of gender-attuned leadership.
- 5 Normalise fatherhood in the workplace by encouraging and supporting men's use of flexible working arrangements for caring and family responsibilities
- 6 Monitor the rate of men's take-up of parental leave, across all occupations and manager and non-manager categories and set a target to increase the take up of parental leave by men.

Conclusion

Sustained cultural change led by employers is required to address barriers to men taking up paid parental leave and shift a perception among fathers in Australia that parental leave is considered a right, not just a privilege. This change should support the design of paid parental leave schemes to provide high levels of wage replacement, leave earmarked for fathers or the provision of the same length of leave for all parents, and an opt-in by design mechanism.

The *Working for Women* strategy has outlined that the Government's future efforts to support a more equitable gender division of caring responsibilities will include evaluating the rate of men's take-up of paid parental leave and partnering with employers to expand and increase uptake of employer paid parental leave schemes.⁷⁴ WGEA data will monitor changes in primary carer's leave taken by men and supports provided by employers to support their employees' caring responsibilities.



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- 3 [Recommendation R191 - Maternity Protection Recommendation, 2000 \(No. 191\)](#)
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- 6 [She's Price\(d\)less - 2022 update report - Diversity Council Australia](#)
- 7 [She's Price\(d\)less - 2022 update report - Diversity Council Australia](#)
- 8 Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research. (2024). *The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey: Selected findings from waves 1 to 22*. <https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/hilda/publications/hilda-statistical-reports>
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- 14 [New laws expand Paid Parental Leave – more support for working families with biggest expansion since 2011 | Prime Minister of Australia](#)
- 15 [APS bargaining | Australian Public Service Commission](#)
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