

# THE WORK OF FATHERING: BALANCING JOBS AND KIDS

A REPORT ON A FAMILIES AUSTRALIA  
'BUILDING STRONGER AUSTRALIAN FAMILIES' POLICY FORUM  
AT THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES, CANBERRA  
1 NOVEMBER 2017

*What do they need to thrive?*  
**Building Stronger Australian Families**

AN INITIATIVE OF  
**Families Australia**

## About Families Australia

Families Australia is a national, peak, not-for-profit organisation that strives to improve the wellbeing of Australian families, especially those who experience the greatest vulnerability and marginalisation. Families Australia does this by providing policy advice to, and working with, the Australian Government and Parliament on behalf of more than 800 member organisations around Australia.

Since 2007, Families Australia has coordinated the National Coalition on Child Safety and Wellbeing, a consortium of around 200 major non-government community service organisations and prominent researchers from across Australia who work closely with the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments to implement the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020.

## Acknowledgements

Families Australia acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures, and to elders past, present and future.

Families Australia wishes to record its appreciation to the Commonwealth Government Department of Social Services, Professor Lyndall Strazdins, Dr Graeme Russell, and Mr Murray Kimber for their assistance in planning, hosting and delivering the forum. Families Australia also wishes to thank all forum participants.

## Abbreviations

BCAP	Building Capacity in Australian Parents
BSAF	Building Stronger Australian Families
DEX	data exchange
DSS	Commonwealth Department of Social Services
LSAC	Longitudinal Study of Australian Children
PPL	Paid Parental Leave

## Contact

Dr Brian Babington, CEO (Phone: 0417 550 149)

Email: [brian.babington@familiesaustralia.org.au](mailto:brian.babington@familiesaustralia.org.au)

Families Australia, Suite 2, Level 4, 24 Brisbane Avenue, Barton ACT, 2600 (Phone: 02 6273 4885)

© Families Australia 2017

## Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	4
<b>Main presentations</b> .....	5
<b>Discussion</b> .....	6

# THE WORK OF FATHERING: BALANCING KIDS AND JOBS

## Introduction

This report sets out the main themes from a forum held at the Department of Social Services (DSS) in Canberra on 1 November 2017. The forum was the fifth in a series convened by Families Australia since 2015 as part of its Building Stronger Australian Families (BSAF) policy forum series<sup>i</sup>.

Families Australia began the BSAF policy forum series in 2015 as part of its mission to represent the interests of families and children, especially those experiencing the greatest vulnerability and marginalisation. The BSAF forums aim to assist both DSS and Families Australia to explore contemporary challenges facing families in Australia and to help chart new ways of responding to them.

All policy forums are chaired by Families Australia and are web hosted for non-ACT based DSS officials. Proceedings are video-recorded and posted on the Families Australia website. Families Australia works closely with DSS to ensure invitations to attend the forums are extended to representatives of other Commonwealth agencies, the ACT Government, non-government organisations and the research sector.

The initial 2015 forum was led by Professor Alan Hayes AM, Distinguished Professor in Family Studies, Director, Family Action Centre, Faculty of Health and Medicine, University of Newcastle and Dr Lyndall Strazdins, Clinical Psychologist and (now) Professor at the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, Research School of Population Health, the Australian National University. The forum focussed on broad trends of Australian families and the connections between work and family. The 2016/17 and the 2017/18 BSAF forum series commenced with an initial presentation on 7 November 2016 by Ms Allyson Essex, Principal Advisor, Behavioural Economic Team of Australia within the Commonwealth Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. The third Forum was held on 24 March 2017 and provided participants with the opportunity to explore research undertaken by Professor Lyndall Strazdins and colleagues entitled 'Hour-glass ceilings: Work-hour gendered health inequities'<sup>ii</sup>. The fourth BSAF forum, on 5 June 2017, led by Dr Liana Leach from the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University's College of Medicine, Biology and the Environment explored issues relating to the transition to parenthood and their potential to impact on family formation, work and mental wellbeing.

The fifth BSAF forum – the subject of this report – was led by Professor Lyndall Strazdins and Dr Graeme Russell. Professor Strazdins explored the topic of fathering and work through her recent paper, 'Long Hours and Longing'<sup>iii</sup>, which discussed how the hours, schedules, intensity, and flexibility of fathers' jobs are associated with children's views about fathers' work and time.

Dr Graeme Russell works as an independent researcher, and as a consultant to organisations on gender equality, diversity, inclusion and flexibility. He was previously Associate Professor in Psychology at Macquarie University, where he began his research into fatherhood late in the 1970s. Dr Russell discussed learnings from his career as a researcher and consultant on fathers and work and continued the lively discussion on the role of fathers with interest shown from community and Government on issues facing parents, especially young fathers.

Mr Murray Kimber, Branch Manager of the Priority Investment Taskforce in DSS, provided an overview of DSS programs to support families and children, including fathers, in the context of current and future policy settings.

The speakers then participated in a panel discussion. Approximately 80 participants from government, service provision, community, and academia attended the forum.

## **Main presentations**

Dr Brian Babington, CEO of Families Australia, welcomed participants, including officials from DSS, the Commonwealth Departments of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Health as well as representatives of the ACT Government, non-government and research sectors. Participants were briefed on Families Australia's role in providing policy advice to, and working with, the Australian Government and Parliament, and the aim of the BSAF series.

Professor Strazdins drew on her recent work, 'Long Hours and Longings', which indicated that Australian fathers tended to work longer hours than their childless work counterparts. Professor Strazdins described how children were discerning about their father's work, often recognising work as an important part of family life and the lives of their parents.

Professor Strazdins' conclusion was that time and money were basic resources for family life and fathering was interlinked with both. Fathers earned money through attachment to the labour market and they engaged with their children through time. Fathers also gained a gendered privilege from better wages and career progression, but did this by acceding to work expectations at a cost to family time. Work directly encroached into children's experiences of being fathered and, from a child's viewpoint, there were limits to what were acceptable work levels.

Dr Russell drew on his 45 years' experience of the 'work of fathering' from a policy, research, practice and personal experience, beginning with the assumption that there were many benefits associated with men actively engaging in both work and fathering. Fathers and mothers, relationships, children, gender equality, the economy and community wellbeing all benefited from men engaged in work and fathering.

Dr Russell highlighted how obvious these benefits were but also how work and fathering issues had remained largely invisible or absent in many domains, including the workplace, government policy and research. Work and fatherhood issues/dilemmas continued to be discovered or rediscovered in public and policy debates, without being addressed and resolved. This lack of resolution was at least in part due to assumptions about fathering, gender and labour, the needs of children, and the view of an ideal worker being a male without caring responsibilities. Dr Russell argued that the lack of an integrated framework to help guide approaches led to the lack of a resolution of work and fatherhood issues. These arguments were drawn from the research evidence base as well as Dr Russell's personal experiences in developing and observing the implementation of policy and practices, including the Workplace Gender Equality Act (2012), parental and paternity leave policies, and workplace policies and practices.

Dr Russell concluded by proposing an integrated framework and guiding principles that could be applicable to government policies, service delivery, private and public sector work organisations and fathers themselves. This could include a specific focus on work and fathering with work redesign to facilitate flexibility and visible fathering. Fathering should become more visible in the workplace through inclusion in organisational values and principles, measures and indicators. It would also require a different approach to parental and paternity leave with policies that encouraged and provided opportunities for fathers to fully engage in family life, caregiving and developing close relationships with their children.

Mr Murray Kimber followed Dr Russell's presentation with an overview of DSS initiatives aimed at supporting fathers. The initiatives included Try Test Learn, the Paid Parental Leave Scheme and Dad and Partner Pay. Mr Kimber highlighted the Family Functioning Framework that was under development to identify what families did to support children's outcomes, and what outcomes were needed for children and the wider population. He also spoke on what created and influenced the behaviours of families to support better outcomes and the role of government and other institutions in supporting families to function well.

Mr Kimber concluded with a focus on the future of work in an environment where new technology was changing the face of work, a growing need for a range of care services, increased need for adaptability and flexibility, and the continued disadvantage of low skilled workers. He encouraged participants to explore how DSS could help Australians improve their resilience and flexibility when responding to a range of social and economic challenges to wellbeing and workforce participation and, consequently, be better able to respond to the needs of the future.

A video recording of the full presentations with references will be available on the Families Australia website in the near future.

## Discussion

Following the presentations a discussion took place, led by panel members – Professor Strazdins, Dr Russell and Mr Kimber.

Key issues raised in general discussion were as follows.

- Major factors that stimulate change in the workplace include: a focus on diversity and human resources rather than management processes, policies and strategies that help new parents stay connected with work while caring for their infants, more frequent conversations about the potential detriment to wellbeing caused by long hours with senior managers, demonstrating and sharing the benefits of evaluation of programs, and supporting grass root changes.
- While workplaces have tended towards binary ways of viewing work and care, views and stereotypes were changing in relation to parenting and work; there was a need to move away from the view that work by definition prevents care or that a fulltime job negated care giving.
- Technology can contribute to confusion and knowing where and when work should finish. There needed to be more clarity of what constituted reasonable work hours.
- Evidence showed that inflexible work hours leads to reduced health and wellbeing. Flexibility leads to higher levels of wellbeing and benefits both the workplace and home.
- Leadership and staff needed to work on assumptions about what contributes to reasonable work.
- The continuing use of gendered terms for parenting was raised with a query on how children viewed their mother's work. Discussion highlighted that there were similarities between children's views of mothers' work and fathers work, especially where the mothers worked long hours.
- Work was underway through the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children and the First 1000 days of a child's life which included examining the role of parents and the capabilities they might need to support fathers in building parenting skills. The project will also address community attitudes, and build competency and understanding. A focus on the transition to parenthood that actively involved fathers was seen as important.
- The broader place of the economy in caring and parenting roles was discussed with an initial focus on the value of parental leave paid at minimal wage, the symbolic value of time at home

raising children should be seen as valuable similar to the way workforce participation is viewed, as the mother often earns less, there is a need to think about society as a team and family and care as being intrinsically valuable, and not just an economic resource. This led to a discussion about current attitudes of men and women to gender as being almost equal and that the challenge would now be to equalise opportunities for women.

- The role of public policy in fathering and parenting was seen as important and could make a real difference in developing and reflecting the changes that the community wanted. Workplace relations, enterprise bargaining etc. were seen as strategies that could play a key role in creating enduring change. The NGO sector was also viewed as an important contributor to policy development.
- The forum discussion was viewed as an important contribution to policy and programs being developed and implemented that supported new/impending fathers in the context of family violence.

In closing, the work of parenting, both fathering and mothering, was identified as an important issue for ongoing policy development and community discourse. To that end, the DSS work on the Family Functioning Framework with a focus on points of transition will be important.

---

<sup>i</sup> Further information about Families Australia's '*Building Stronger Australian Families*' forums is available at <<http://familiesaustralia.org.au/policies-submissions/current-policy-areas/building-stronger-australian-families/>>.

<sup>ii</sup> Dinh H, Strazdins L, Welsh J. *Hour-glass ceilings: Work-hour thresholds, gendered health inequities*. Social Science & Medicine 176 (2017) 42-51.

<sup>iii</sup> Strazdins L, Baxter, JA, Li J. *Long Hours and Longings: Australian Children's Views of Fathers' Work and Time*. Journal of Marriage and Family (2017).