

Work and family

Families Australia's policy

Vision

All Australian families and individuals find an effective way to reconcile work, family and life priorities

The reconciliation of work and family life directly involves two goals that are important both to individuals and societies: the ability to participate fully in the labour market....and to provide the best for one's own children, giving them the care and nurturing they need. These aspirations need not be mutually exclusive.

Extract from the OECD Report
Babies and Bosses: Reconciling Work and Family Life;
Australia, Denmark and the Netherlands (2002)

Introduction

Families Australia is Australia's national peak, independent, not-for-profit organisation which promotes the interests of families. Families Australia undertakes research and consults families and family and community service organisations on current family-related issues. The outcomes are disseminated to a wide range of stakeholders. This policy statement concerns work and family.

Why a policy on work and family?

- Over the last two decades there have been major changes to the configuration of work and family life in Australia. Most children in Australia now grow up in households with two employed parents. Between 1983 and 2002, the proportion of two-parent families with dependent children in which both parents were employed increased from 40% to 57%.
- Working hours have become longer for many, and work schedules less standardised. Average hours worked by full-time employees have increased since the late 1970s for both women and men. The majority of Australian fathers work full-time, and many work long hours.
- Many workers find themselves in a dual caring role, with their children and their own parents needing substantial support.
- Many grandparents are in the paid or unpaid workforce at the same time as being responsible for the care of children or young people either on a part or full time basis.
- Disincentives to childbearing as a result of real or perceived difficulty in balancing work and family life will continue to impact on Australia's low birth rate and further accentuate the trend toward an ageing population.

- While dual earner families may be the new 'norm', almost one in five of our children is growing up in a 'jobless family': this is strongly correlated with long-term disadvantage.
- Recent research shows that change in the balance between work and family responsibilities is having adverse effects on the quality of life for many Australians.
- In the 2003 Relationships Indicators Survey conducted by Relationships Australia, 89% of respondents 'agreed that relationships are in trouble because finding a work/life balance is so difficult.' Lack of time was identified as the main issue negatively influencing relationships.
- Indications from a range of research are that many parents want more family time, more flexibility in their working arrangements, financial support that assists transitions in and out of work and more information both about their employment entitlements and about parenting. Current research is showing that stress at work does impact significantly on family relationships and family wellbeing.

Families Australia's policies

- Critical to improvements in work-life balance is recognition by governments and employers that the issue of work and family is one of great importance to the wellbeing of the Australian community, including outcomes for children, and the country's economic and social sustainability.
- Policy settings, government services and government information strategies need to reflect the reality that paid employment and family responsibilities are not alternatives but co-exist for most people in different combinations over the life cycle.

Priorities for Action

- National leadership by government, demonstrated through its internal and external policies and practices.
- The health and wellbeing of children needs to be emphasised in future policy development, including the synergies between the health and wellbeing of parents and their children.
- A continuum of supports for working families over the life course of the family, including:
- Workplace policies that make leave, part-time work and other flexible work practices easily accessible to parents, thus supporting parent-child attachment relationships, giving parents more choice and ultimately attracting more parents to the workforce.
- Support and facilities within workplaces for nursing mothers who wish to continue breastfeeding after returning to work.
- Universal access to family friendly work conditions: this would include access to paid maternity/parental leave for a minimum of fourteen weeks, desirably up to twenty-four weeks, following birth and access to unpaid leave for up to a maximum of two years to be used by either parent, right to request part time work on re-entry to work following parental leave by either parent and ongoing parental leave to cover emergency care responsibilities.
- High quality, accessible and affordable early childhood services are vital to improved workforce and work/family outcomes.
- Government, business, unions and the community sector should develop a work and parenting information strategy, to include information about family-friendly work

options and tips on how to minimise 'negative spillover' from work to family relationships.

- Government should commission comprehensive economic modelling of the costs and benefits (financial and non-financial) of a range of family-friendly work practices, in particular, greater flexibility in working hours, salary sacrifice schemes, superannuation draw-downs, and conversion of sick leave to carer's leave on an industry-wide basis.
- Government should develop a community awareness campaign on 'fitting work around families' to run in partnership with business, unions, and the community sector, for example, in conjunction with National Families Week.
- Model guidelines should be established for family-friendly shiftwork arrangements, in partnership with employers and unions involved in negotiating and managing shiftwork and families where at least one parent works shiftwork.
- Information on how best to manage the impact of shiftwork, long hours and unsocial working hours on family relationships should be developed in conjunction with relevant experts and distributed through unions and employers.
- A community based awareness campaign should be organised that responds to research findings about the sharing of household responsibilities.
- A community based awareness campaign should be organised that focuses on the needs and aspirations of working fathers.
- A network should be established of employers who will champion workplace cultural change that enables fathers to spend more time with their children and partners.
- A national project should be undertaken to examine and promote wide dissemination of information about quality, secure, family-friendly flexible employment arrangements (including part-time work and job-share opportunities) building on initiatives to date by public and private sector organisations and industry groups. The project could have a 'transitions to work' emphasis and identify the costs and benefits of options for those returning to the workforce whilst caring for family members, also examining the significance of part-time work for the economy.
- A Families and Work website should be developed that would provide workers, parents and other interested people with access to practical information, resources and research on balancing work and family, including re-entry to the workforce, adjusting work patterns around the needs of dependents, financial issues and support services.
- A Charter for Family-Supportive Workplaces should be developed in consultation with employer, business, government and community sector organisations and other relevant stakeholders including unions.
- Government should give clear focus to continuing policy development on work and family issues by designating a portfolio which would take the lead in relation to these matters at a whole-of-government level and by dedicating appropriate staffing and other resources to these matters.
- A more robust and comprehensive business case should be developed in Australia to highlight the financial and human costs and benefits of better work/family practices.
- The business case should be made at industry level as well as whole-of-economy level. This work should include consideration of the costs of doing nothing and the costs of better practices (including who should pay).
- A clearinghouse for information on practice and research could be helpful across public, private and community sectors.

Families Australia activities in relation to work and family

Families Australia's inaugural conference, 'Globalisation, Families and Work: Meeting the policy challenges of the next two decades', was held in Brisbane on 1-2 April 2004. It attracted extensive and nationwide media coverage and provided a timely opportunity to hear leading international and Australian experts address the important issues confronting families, employers and policy makers in the twenty-first century. Attended by people from all levels of government, the community sector, women's groups, industry and business organisations, trade unions and the research community, the conference drew together many strands of the work and family debate.

Subsequently, Families Australia developed policy statements which have formed the basis for submissions to various inquiries, such as the 2005-07 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's examination of work and family and the 2006-07 House of Representatives House Standing Committee on Family and Human Services Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family.

In May 2006, Families Australia hosted a Work, Family and Wellbeing Forum in Canberra in conjunction with the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at The Australian National University College of Medicine and Health Sciences.

Work and family issues are regularly reported upon in Families Australia publications, including *National Family News* and *Family*. Work and family issues were a focus of discussion at Families Australia's National Family Wellbeing Symposium which was held in Canberra in June 2007.

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