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SYDNEY

Next steps for paid parental leave in Australia

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Prepared for the Women's Economic Equality Taskforce
18 November 2022

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This report can be cited as:

Baird, M. & Hill, E. (2022). *Next Steps for Paid Parental Leave in Australia*. A report commissioned by the Women's Economic Equality Taskforce, November 2022, The University of Sydney.

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Introduction

This report provides research evidence to inform the government's proposed changes to the federal government's paid parental leave (PPL) scheme in 2023–2026. Our report is titled *Next Steps* in recognition of the proposed changes:

- From 1 July 2023, 20 weeks in total per couple will be available, with 2 weeks reserved each for the mother and father/partner, and 20 weeks in total for a single parent.
- From 2024, 2 additional weeks per year, up to 2026 when 26 weeks in total will be available.

The research evidence and policy design principles we outline also inform these later changes.

With the extension of paid parental leave by 6 weeks from 20 weeks to 26 weeks, announced by the Labor Government as part of the October 2022-23 Budget, Australia has an opportunity to improve the national system according to 'best practice' and informed by significant international research evidence and some Australian evidence. There is an opportunity to enable women to participate in the labour market more fully, to develop and embed incentives for fathers to share the care of a baby and to provide flexibility to parents in their use of parental leave. This would reflect the best international evidence on parental policy design for gender equality, the division of unpaid household labour and women's economic opportunities and security over the life course. It would also reflect the best practice to ensure the wellbeing of mothers, babies and fathers/partners.

The focus of the report, as requested by the Womens Economic Equality Taskforce, is research evidence on:

- reserved leave for fathers
- flexibility of leave use
- concurrency and sharing of leave taking
- bonus leaves.

A number of other issues directly related to the design of best practice paid parental leave are also highlighted for further consideration.

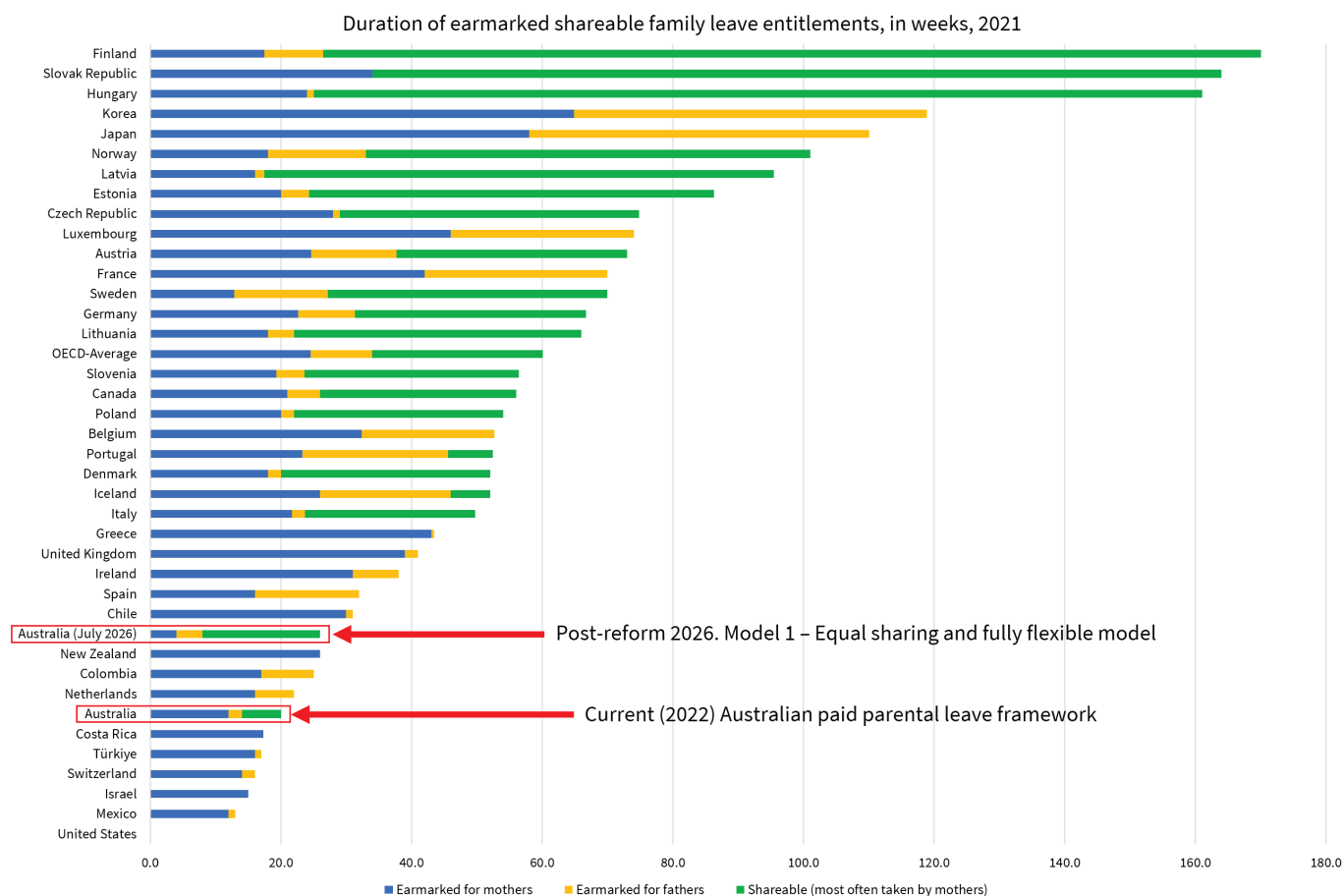
The positive impacts of paid parental leave align with many of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) making the extension of Australia's paid parental leave system a positive contribution to national efforts to support the SDGs relevant to women and children's health and wellbeing (Heymann et al., 2017), particularly SDG 1 on poverty alleviation; SDG 3 on good health and wellbeing; SDG 5 on gender equality; SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth; and SDG 10 on reduced inequalities (see Box A).

Box A. Paid parental leave, child wellbeing, economic inclusion and prosperity

"Early experiences have a profound impact on children's development. They affect learning, health, behaviour and – ultimately – adult social relationships, wellbeing and earnings. Investing in this period is one of the most efficient and effective ways to help eliminate extreme poverty and inequality, boost shared prosperity, and create the human capital needed for economies to diversify and grow." (WHO, 2018, p. 3)

Even with the government's welcome extension of the national system from 20 to 26 weeks, Australia's paid parental leave scheme will remain amongst the least generous schemes internationally (OECD, 2022; see Figure 1).

Figure 1. International comparison of paid parental leave



Source: Adapted from OECD Family Policy Database (2021) Child-related leave, Table PF2.1 Key characteristics of parental leave systems, available at <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>

We note that there is little systematic data on the decisions made by parents in the use of paid parental leave in Australia to guide policy design and recommend investment in both quantitative and qualitative data collection to inform the roll out of the additional 6 weeks of paid parental leave by 2026. This data will support policy design to best meet the care needs, expectations and aspirations of households. Further research would include evaluation of the Australian experience of paid parental leave use, how households combine the national scheme with employer schemes, interactions between the two schemes, and household preferences for shared care of babies and very young children.

Australia’s Paid Parental Leave Act 2010 provided for a thorough academic evaluation of the policy (see Martin et al., 2014) including its impact on mothers’ and babies’ health, mothers’ workforce participation, and fathers’ and employers’ reactions. Ongoing evaluation of a policy of this type is best practice. Internationally, parental leave schemes are under frequent review and modification as they attempt to meet the needs of contemporary families, economies and international conventions (see Box B). Most recently, some members of the European Union (Denmark and Finland) have revised their paid parental leave policies in response to the current EU Directive.

Box B. International Standards

EU Directive on work–life balance: Implementation 2 August 2022.¹ The Directive on work-life balance aims to both increase (i) the participation of women in the labour market and (ii) the take-up of family-related leave and flexible working arrangements. The EU Directive includes:

- Paternity leave: Working fathers are entitled to at least **10 working days of paternity leave around the time of birth of the child**. Paternity leave must be compensated at least at the level of sick pay.
- Parental leave: Each parent is entitled to at least four months of parental leave, of which **two months is paid and non-transferable**. Parents can request to take their leave in a flexible form, either full-time, part-time, or in segments.

International Labour Organization (ILO) Maternity Protection Recommendation, 2000, No. 191.²

- Members should endeavour to extend the period of **maternity leave** referred to in Article 4 of the Convention to **at least 18 weeks**.
- Provision should be made for **an extension** of the maternity leave in the event of **multiple births**.

The Fifty-fourth World Health Assembly, May 2001 Resolution, WHA54.2, on Infant and young child nutrition, paragraph 3(6).³

- exclusive **breastfeeding for six months** as a global public health recommendation.

¹ Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the council of 20 June 2019 on work–life balance for parents and carers. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019L1158&from=EN>

² https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312529

³ World Health Assembly, 54. (2001). Fifty-fourth World Health Assembly, Geneva, 14–22 May 2001: resolutions and decisions. World Health Organization. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/260183>

Australia's paid parental leave scheme in national and international context

Australia has a short history of nationally legislated paid parental leave compared to other high income countries, with the exception of the USA (Baird & Williamson, 2010). In 2010 Australia introduced the Paid Parental Leave Act 2010. This was a breakthrough policy that for the first time provided eligible working parents in Australia with a legislated right to a period of paid parental leave. The 2010 Act stipulated 18 weeks for the primary carer paid at the national minimum wage (NMW). While this was an important policy initiative, the scheme was shorter in length and less generous in income replacement level than many of the paid parental leave systems that have been operating in comparable economies for many years. In 2013 the scheme was expanded to include 2 weeks of reserved leave for fathers, called Dad and Partner Pay (DaPP) also paid at the national minimum wage.

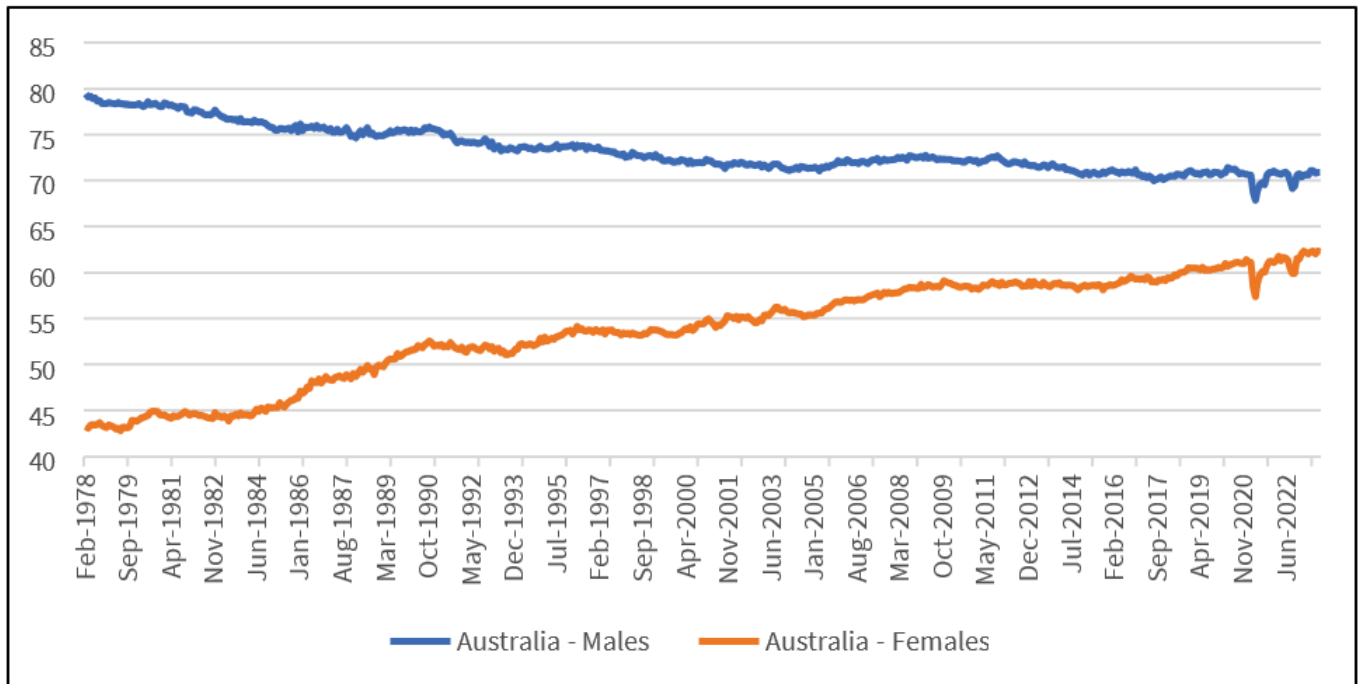
Official evaluations of the paid parental leave scheme have shown it to be beneficial to working parents, especially mothers in low-wage work where the employer did not provide paid parental leave (Martin et al., 2014).

Australian women's participation in paid work has risen rapidly over the past 40 years (see Figure 2), to reach an historically high participation rate of 62.4% in August 2022, with a particularly rapid transformation in the participation of women of childbearing ages (see Figure 3). Nevertheless, women have a lower participation rate than men, work less hours than men and have lower wages than men. These gendered workforce gaps are in large part shaped by women's disproportionate responsibility for unpaid family and community care which many women manage by shifting to part-time employment after childbirth (Baird & Heron, 2020).

Paid parental leave policy is now an expected part of the Australian public policy framework (Baird & Williamson, 2010; Baird, Hamilton & Constantin, 2021) and potentially a key policy support for women's economic opportunities and gender equality. Some large private sector employers now provide generous paid parental leave schemes (Baird et al., 2021, WGEA, 2022a). Increasing interest in this policy area has been growing rapidly, especially in encouraging and enabling fathers to share the care (see for example KPMG, 2021; Parents at Work, 2022; Wood et al., 2021).

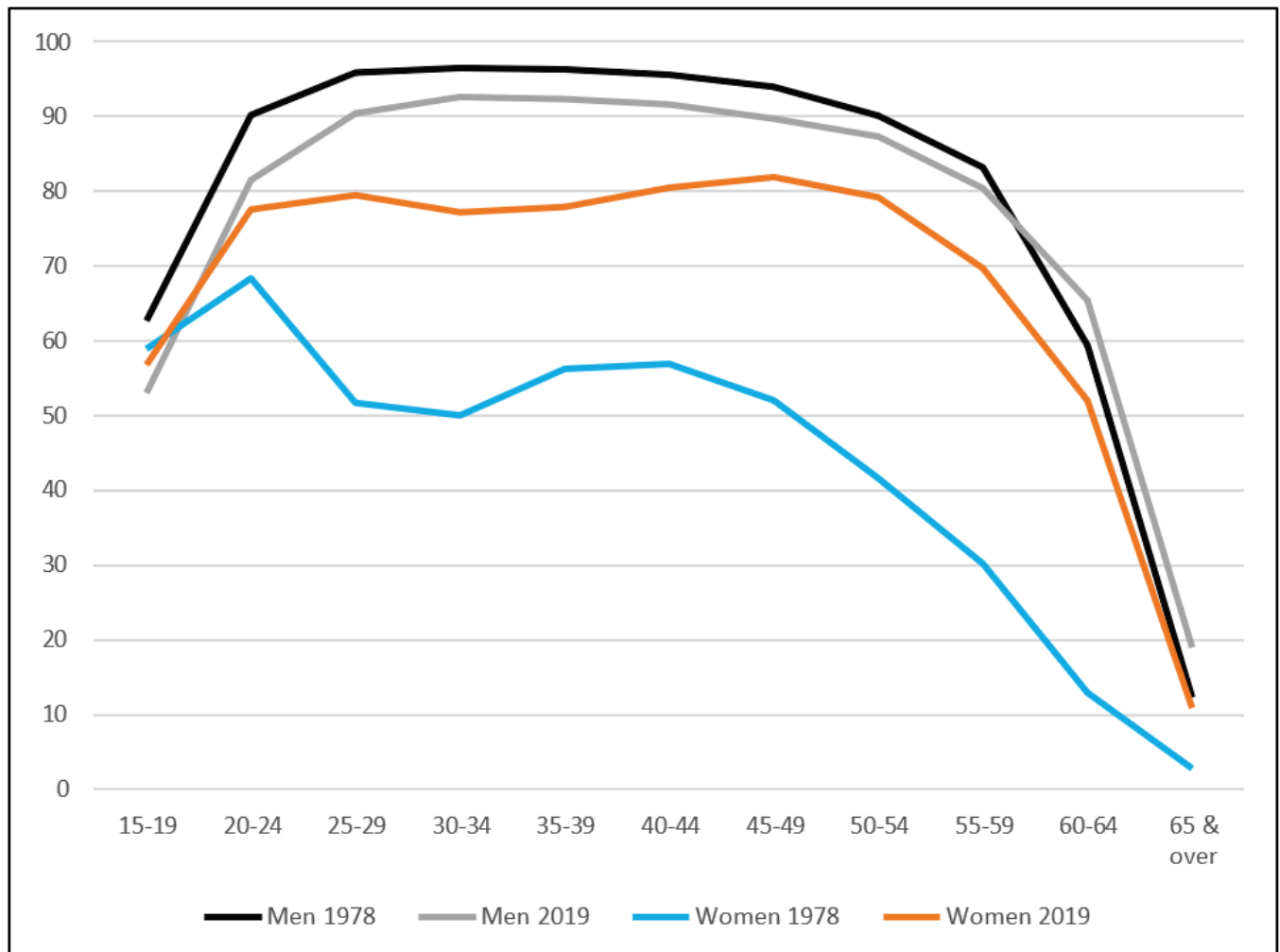
Change in young workers' aspirations around combining work and care is leading to converging gender roles and expectations among young Australian parents, with men who are fathers looking for public policy to support their care aspirations (Hill, Baird et al., 2019, Churchill & Craig, 2022). The male breadwinner model has been hard to shift in Australia, with social and economic trends making the 'One-Plus' or one-and-a-half Breadwinner model the most common family type (Baird & Heron, 2020).

Figure 2. Australia – Labour force participation rates, by sex (Feb 1978 – Sep 2022)



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022, September). Labour Force, Australia. ABS. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia/latest-release>.

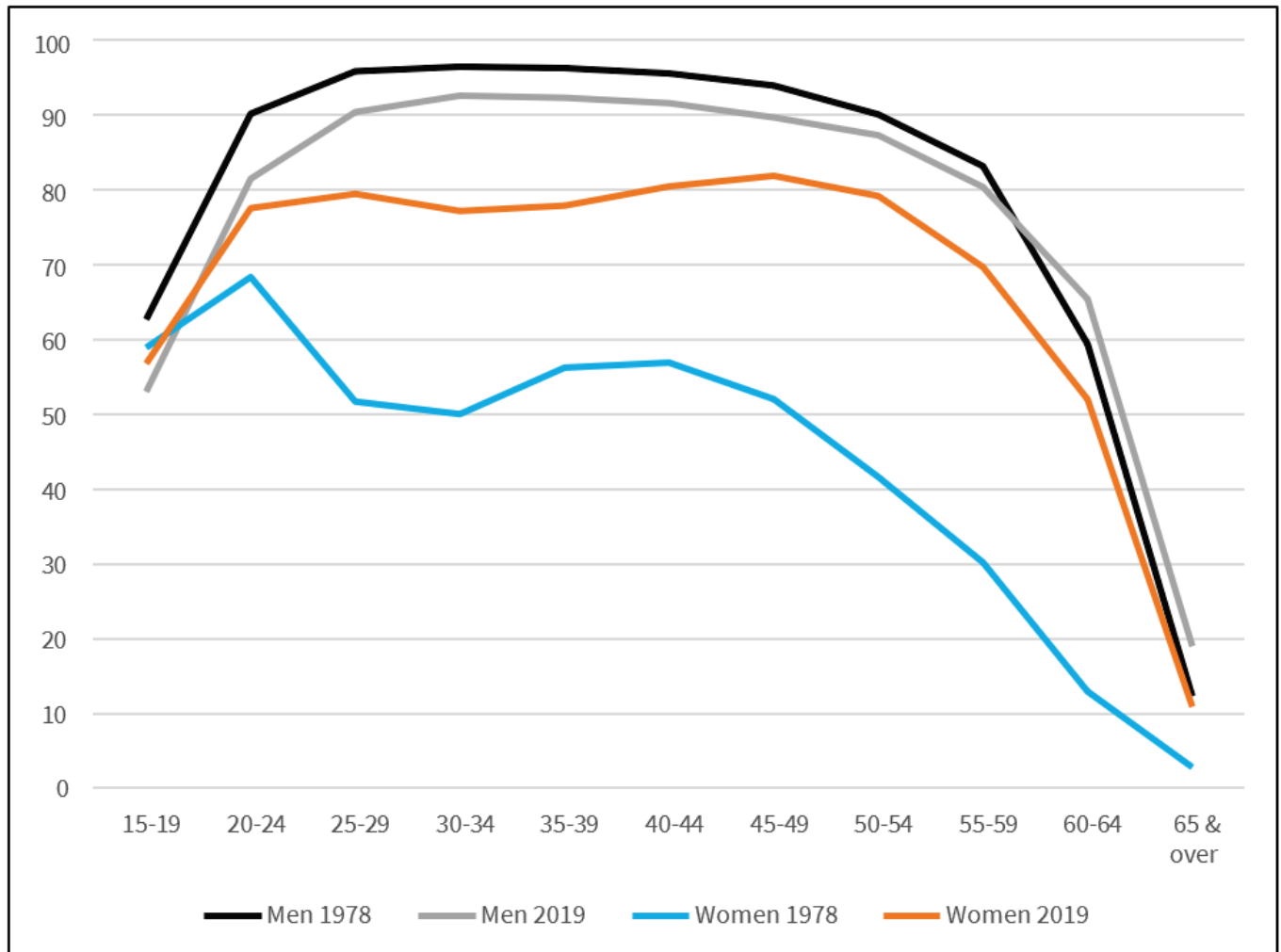
Figure 3. Australia – Labour force participation by sex and age (1978 and 2019)



Source: OECD.Stat (2021). Labour Force Statistics – Labour Force Participation (Labour force statistics by sex and age – indicators).

Figure 4 shows that women’s hours of work, while increasing, remain lower than men’s. WGEA (2022b) also reports that in 2021 “at no age were more than 50% of women working full-time”, with the pattern of women working fewer hours than men clear. Providing a mechanism through more flexible and shared parental leave will enable Australian women to extend and deepen their labour market attachment, thereby increasing their career and promotion opportunities and greater economic security over the life course.

Figure 4. Proportion of actual hours worked (males and females), March 1991 and March 2015 to March 2022



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022). Labour Force, Insights into hours worked, May 2022, Australia, available at <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/insights-hours-worked-may-2022>

Paid Parental Leave Act 2010 – Objectives

The objectives of the Paid Parental Leave Act (2010)⁴ must be read within the particular Australian context. The Act was introduced following a comprehensive analysis of the need for a paid parental leave scheme by the Productivity Commission (2009).

⁴ Act reference: PPL Act Part 1-1 Division 1A Objects of this Act (<https://guides.dss.gov.au/paid-parental-leave-guide/1/2/1/10>)

The objective of Parental Leave Pay is to provide financial support to primary carers (1.1.P.230) (mainly birth mothers) of children, in order to:

- allow those carers to take **time off work to care for the child** in the 2 years following the child's birth or adoption
- enhance the **health** and development of **birth mothers and children**
- encourage **women** to continue **to participate in the workforce**
- **promote equality between men and women**, and the balance between work and family life
- provide those carers with greater **flexibility** to balance work and family life.

It is important to note that these objectives can be in conflict or tension with each other and that the weight given to each may vary as policy develops to reflect changing family and economic trends and needs. Analysis of international trends in parental leave policy design show that the objectives of parental leave policies are shifting from a maternalist to an economic and labour market orientation (Dobrotic & Blum, 2020) especially with regard to encouraging female workforce participation (Baird & O'Brien, 2015).

Use of the current scheme⁵

The design of the 18 week paid parental leave scheme introduced in 2010 focused on the primary carer. Dad and partner pay (DaPP), introduced three years later, was for the father or partner. Table 1 shows the scheme's use matches this intent, with mothers using the parental leave pay and fathers/partners using the Dad and partner pay. For example, in 2018–2019 and 2019–2020, 99.5% of paid parental leave recipients were mothers. In 2013 Dad and partner pay was introduced to provide fathers/partners with a period of 2 weeks paid at the national minimum wage. This is used overwhelmingly by men.

Table 1. Paid parental leave recipients by gender

	Parental leave pay				Dad and partner pay			
	Female	(%)	Male	(%)	Female	(%)	Male	(%)
2011/2012	125026	99.35%	798	0.63%				
2012/2013	131478	99.42%	765	0.58%	92	0.34%	27162	99.66%
2013/2014	145317	99.48%	766	0.52%	289	0.38%	75478	99.62%
2014/2015	159449	99.47%	844	0.53%	289	0.41%	70700	99.59%
2015/2016	169889	99.55%	769	0.45%	343	0.43%	79142	99.57%
2016/2017	170129	99.53%	796	0.47%	374	0.45%	83226	99.55%
2017/2018	158583	99.50%	789	0.50%	372	0.45%	81510	99.55%
2018/2019	177882	99.51%	876	0.49%	465	0.51%	91297	99.49%
2019/2020	170837	99.49%	875	0.51%	467	0.51%	91876	99.49%

Note: Unknowns have been included in the 'Male' category.

Source: EDW Paid Parental Leave scheme Claims Universe, Data Load Version 2, as at 30 June each entitlement year.

⁵ The authors thank staff of the Department of Social Services for providing the data used in this report.

Concurrency of use

Under the current scheme, concurrency or overlap of paid parental leave and Dad and partner pay days is low. For example, Table 2 shows that in 2019–2020, of the almost 172,000 recipients of paid parental leave (of whom 99.5% were mothers), there was an overlap of the full period of Dad and partner pay days (that is taken with the partner) in just 34,354 cases.

Table 2. Paid parental leave recipients who have an overlapping DaPP period for the same child

Period Overlap Indicator	Number of Days	2011/2012	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020
OVERLAP	1		79	236	203	223	252	247	255	243
	2		72	235	185	197	250	200	217	217
	3		85	225	243	211	245	213	199	222
	4		105	244	218	237	192	212	228	225
	5		83	233	208	230	218	186	200	191
	6		100	272	238	276	232	226	252	223
	7		211	565	493	570	579	545	554	559
	8		97	280	248	255	269	223	240	276
	9		89	231	202	211	253	208	225	222
	10		95	274	258	220	222	198	250	233
	11		71	230	208	224	234	206	243	241
	12		58	217	208	260	184	230	220	226
	13		69	227	219	231	249	272	282	304
	14		9738	25871	25380	29366	31892	30306	35672	34354
NO OVERLAP	0	125824	121291	116743	131782	137947	135654	125900	139721	133976
Total		125824	132243	146083	160293	170658	170925	159372	178758	171712

Note: Where entitlement period end dates occurred outside the entitlement year the projected end date has been used. Retrospective changes may have been applied that will not have been captured due to the report date.

Source: EDW Paid Parental Leave scheme, Claims Universe, Data Load Version 2, as at 30 June each entitlement year.

Flexibility of use

The policy was amended in 2020⁶ to allow flexible use of paid leave days. Table 3 shows flexibility of use. Of total cases, 86% have not used leave in a flexible way, 10% used the flexible option and for the remaining 4% the flexible option is still underway. For those who do choose to use the flexible option, they access less of their full 18-week paid parental leave entitlement overall. In 2021–22 this was almost 11 weeks. Under the current scheme, there is also a very low rate of transfer to a secondary claimant.

Table 3. Paid parental leave recipients (under flexible PPS) as at 30 September 2023

PARTICIPATION		2021–22		
PLP choices made for children born on or after 1 July 2020	Consecutive 18 week period (finished)	153,084	85.70%	
	Consecutive 18 week period (still on)	7,423	4.20%	
	Received PLP Period and/or Flexible PPL	Flexible completed	7,967	
		Flexible commenced	2,972	
			6,184	
	Total	Flexible not started		
		PLP opted for flexible PPL	17,123	9.60%
	Grand Total	PLP recipients		178,556
		Average PLP period duration		10.6 weeks
		PLP period – Full transfer		274
		PLP period – Partial transfer		311
	Transfers to secondary claimant	TOTAL transfers PLP period		585
		Flexible commenced/completed		n.p.
		Permission given not started		<5
Total	Taken/available PPL Flexible		522	

Source: Provided by Services Australia, Data Load Version; N/A.

⁶ <https://www.apsc.gov.au/circulars-and-advice/circular-20208-changes-parental-leave-pay-improve-flexibility>

The 2023 Policy Change

The change introduced from 1 July 2023 to combine the 18 weeks plus 2 weeks will provide a total of 20 weeks for a couple (or a single parent). This removes the primary carer assumption designed into the current scheme and will allow opportunity to consider the mix and potential concurrency of leave taking by the parents as well as the flexibility of use.

Deciding how the additional 6 weeks of paid leave can be allocated requires a need to consider the objectives of female labour market participation, gender equality in care and maternal and baby health, as they are balanced against each other, within the limits of 26 weeks. These trade-offs are particularly acute given the relatively small extension of total paid parental leave time from 20 to 26 weeks. The longer the total period of paid leave, the easier it will be to adequately resource and achieve all objectives of the Act.

Changes in parental leave schemes in other countries allow us to observe the impact of specific policy changes on fathers' and mothers' behaviours, providing 'natural experiments' and leading or best practices.

In the following sections we provide research evidence for key design features including reserved leave for fathers/partners in support of shared care; concurrent, shared and flexible use of paid parental leave; bonus and incentives for shared care; and support for maternal and child health.

We then offer three models, or archetypes, that highlight the way in which the competing objectives of Australia's paid parental leave scheme might be accommodated in the next steps for policy. We complete this report with a short section on additional optimum design features from the international evidence that should be considered in this and future iterations of paid parental leave before we offer a final conclusion.

Reserved leave for fathers/partners⁷

Research from comparable economies demonstrates that best practice paid parental leave systems include a reserved and non-transferable ("use-it-or-lose it") portion of paid parental leave for fathers, also sometimes called a father or daddy quota) The evidence is that when paid at, or close to full wage replacement rates, men do increase their contribution to unpaid care in the home and this, over time, changes gender norms around the division of paid and unpaid work (Patnaik, 2019).

The uptake of parental leave by fathers and partners tends to remain low because of barriers relating to the income level at which it is paid, organisational stigma and traditional gender norms (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2019; Baxter, 2019; Coltrane et al., 2013; Kalb, 2018; Patnaik, 2019, as cited in Théboud & Halcomb, 2019). The gender pay gap poses barriers as loss of family income has less impact when women, who on average earn less than men, take parental leave (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2019; Kalb, 2018; Moran & Koslowski, 2019;).

The highest rates of utilisation by fathers are in countries with designated periods for men that provide paid parental leave at high income replacement levels as well as incentives for fathers to take the leave, for example the Nordic countries and the Canadian province of Quebec (Feldman & Gran, 2016; Harvey & Tremblay, 2018; Karu & Tremblay, 2018).

⁷ Some of the material presented below is drawn from a report prepared by Marian Baird, Elizabeth Hill, Lisa Gulesserian and Daniel Dinale for the WGEA Insights Paper 2019 (WGEA, 2019).

In Australia, men have been slow to take up paid parental leave and the Dad and partner pay introduced in 2013, with most recent data showing approximately 92,000 fathers/partners taking Dad and partner pay in 2019–20 compared to 171,000 mothers taking paid parental leave (see Table 1 above). Early research showed that Australian men were less likely than women to have or to request access to parental leave, and they are more likely to be refused or penalised when they do (Chapman, Skinner & Pocock, 2014). However, as Table 4 shows, when fathers/partners do take Dad and partner pay, the vast majority take 6–10 days.

Table 4. Paid parental leave recipients by entitlement days taken

Count of Customers		2011/2	2012/2	2013/2	2014/2	2015/2	2016/2	2017/2	2018/2	2019/2
		012	013	014	015	016	017	018	019	020
Dad and Partner Pay	0 to 5 days		575	1,422	1,407	1,756	1,772	2,060	1,782	1,637
	6 to 10 days		26,679	74,345	69,582	77,729	81,828	79,822	89,980	90,706
	Total		27,254	75,767	70,989	79,485	83,600	81,882	91,762	92,343

Note: Unknowns are included in 0–5 days. Only weekdays (payment days) have been considered.

Source: EDW Paid Parental Leave scheme Claims Universe, Department of Social Services.

The review by Martin et al. (2014) of the government’s paid parental leave scheme showed fathers and partners are more likely to use their annual leave to take time off to care for children. This is likely because it is paid at full wage-replacement, while Dad and partner pay is paid at the minimum wage.

However, more recent research shows that attitudes and aspirations are changing and that Australian men with children are increasingly interested in being active and engaged fathers (Baxter, 2014; Hill, Baird et al., 2019).

The greatest shift in gender behaviours occurs when fathers “father alone” (O’Brien & Wall, 2017) and take full responsibility for caring. Fathers’ involvement in childcare has been linked to improved wellbeing, happiness and commitment to family (Norman et al., 2018). Iceland provides a clear example of how policy change that includes incentives for fathers can change behaviour over the long term (see Box C). Fathers have also been found to benefit through reducing risky behaviours such as smoking and alcohol consumption (Chan et al., 2017). They report learning new skills such as prioritising, role modelling and compassion which they transfer to the workplace (Harvey & Tremblay, 2018).

When fathers take parental leave, **children** enjoy better relationships with them, increased father involvement over their lifetime and stronger school performance (Heymann et al., 2017; Porter, 2015). Children also benefit from higher household incomes as a result of both parents working and increased access to better health services and education experiences.

Mothers benefit when fathers/partners take parental leave around the time of birth as the mothers have more time to recuperate after childbirth, receive more emotional support and experience less stress (Chan et al., 2017; Heymann et al., 2017; Porter, 2015). When fathers/partners take parental leave, they are more likely to participate in ongoing childcare and other unpaid household responsibilities (Norman, Fagan & Elliot, 2017), allowing women with more time to spend on paid employment, facilitating greater economic independence and higher household incomes (Arnarson & Mitra, 2010). Father/partner support also leads to mothers’ smoother transition back to work and fewer experiences of child and flexibility related stigma in the workplace. Overall, father or partner involvement in childcare may provide mothers with a stronger sense of wellbeing, heightened relationship satisfaction and an enhanced ability to balance work and life commitments (Norman et al., 2018).

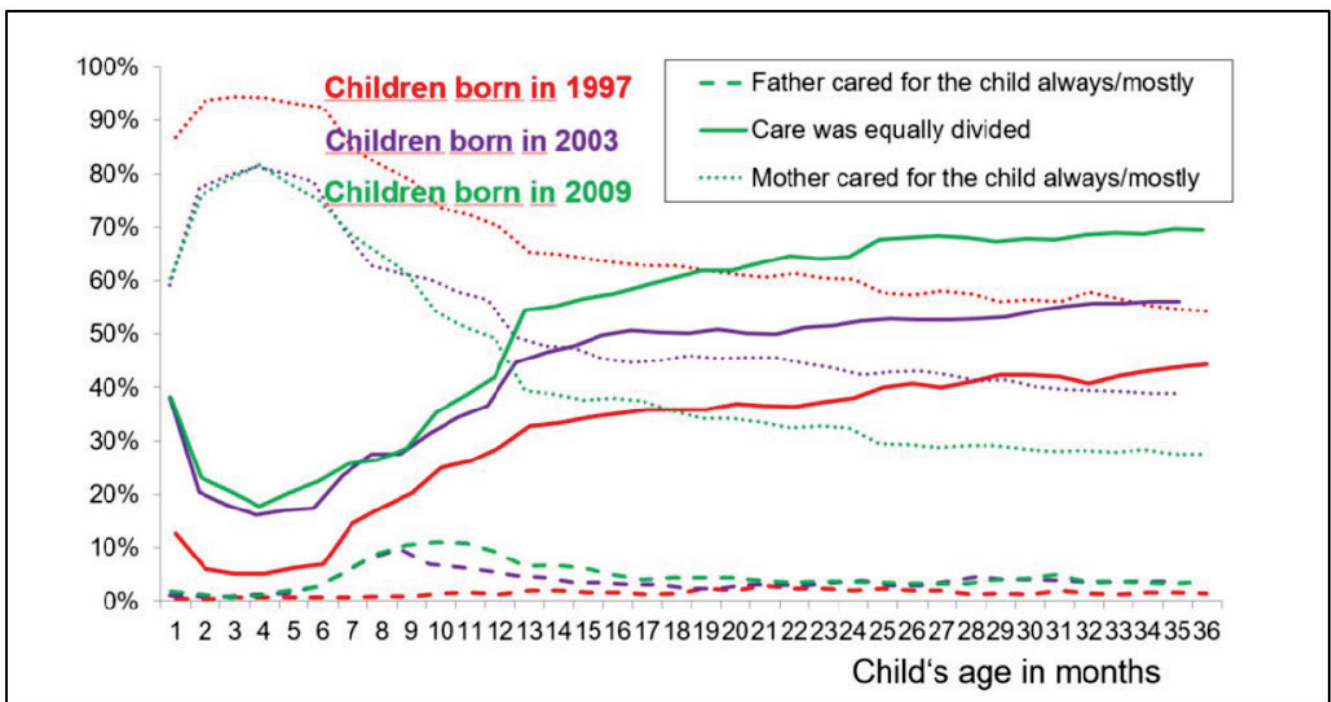
Parental leave can also deliver economy-wide benefits through **enhanced women’s workforce participation**. The 2021–22 NSW Intergenerational Report shows that if the rate of women’s participation in paid work was lifted to equal men’s, the NSW economy would be 8% larger by 2060–61 (NSW Treasury, 2021). This is the equivalent of \$22,000 more annual household income in today’s dollars. Modelling the direct impact of the introduction of a 26-week paid parental leave scheme on women’s labour force participation, the Grattan Institute shows an increase in national GDP of \$900 million a year, and an increase of \$30,000 to the average mother’s lifetime earnings (Wood et al., 2021).

Box C. Policy changes social norms and drives gender equality: The case of Iceland

In 2000 Iceland revised their paid parental leave scheme to give each parent 13 weeks of non-transferable leave (a mother’s and father’s quota), plus an additional 13 weeks for parents to divide as they choose. Note that the leave is paid at 80% of income. This policy shift has changed fathers’ behaviour with a significant increase, since the late 1990s, in the percentage of households that share care equally (see chart below). Policy change has shifted social norms toward a dual earner–dual carer household model. Overall, the policy change has had a number of positive impacts:

- Men have increased their use of parental leave – around 90% of all fathers in Iceland took leave. On average, fathers have used their quota rights (Arnalds et al., 2022).
- Men now play a greater role in the care of their children beyond the paid parental leave period (Arnalds et al., 2013, 2022; Eydal, 2008).
- The gendered roles of both mothers and fathers are being transformed towards a dual earner–dual carer model (Arnalds, Eydal & Gíslason, 2013).
- The gender pay gap has narrowed from 17.5% in 2010 to 12.6% in 2020 (Arnalds et al., 2022).

Iceland: How did cohabiting and married parents divide care during the day?



Source: Arnalds, Eydal & Gíslason (2013).

Households can benefit through a shift in gender norms and through stronger parental relationships (Norman et al., 2018). The availability of paid parental leave for each parent fosters a more equal division of unpaid care and changes in traditional gender norms (Karu & Tremblay, 2018). Additionally, higher household incomes and increased economic security are associated with fathers' use of parental leave. Children who have parents that model gender equality are more likely to carry these new norms forward (Unterhofer & Wrohlich, 2017).

There are challenges for men and partners in the uptake of parental leave, but purposeful policy design can assist in ameliorating them, and in also changing the bargain between mothers and fathers about who takes leave (Brandth & Kvande, 2020, p. 198). Gender norms which assume women do the majority of childcare may dissuade fathers from taking parental leave due to the perception that unpaid work is 'women's work' (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2019; Coltrane et al., 2013). Studies of parental leave suggest that men are more likely to use caregiving leave when there is strong organisational support and encouragement (Patnaik, 2019).

In the **workplace**, equal uptake of parental leave between women and men can also moderate discrimination in the hiring process by reducing employers' reluctance to hire, retain and promote mothers (Porter, 2015) and childless women of childbearing age due to assumptions about their need to take time off for care. Finally, men's use of parental leave contributes to future gender equality with daughters of working mothers more likely to work and to earn higher wages (McGinn et al., 2018).

When fathers and partners take parental leave, organisations report better recruitment, retention and promotion rates, leading to stronger performance and productivity outputs (Porter, 2015). Paid leave benefits send a strong signal of an organisation's commitment to employees, and thus these benefits can help to attract and retain top talent (Rau & Williams, 2017).

Shared, flexible and concurrent use of paid parental leave time

Options to share time and use parental leave flexibly are emerging as key features in the research and in policy design overseas. Schemes overseas vary from hyper-flexibility, such as in portions of 1/8 of a full day in Sweden to one period of several blocks of leave, to the option in Greece to take longer periods of leave with lower benefits or shorter periods with higher benefits.

Research evidence suggests there are benefits and risks of shared leave flexibility. The benefits are that parents are able to choose their leave arrangements to suit their work and family circumstances. Brandth and Kvande's 2020 analysis of the Norwegian scheme shows that men do use the flexibility, but also that such flexibility tends to mean that fathers do not fully commit to care. However, they also argue that flexible use of leave by fathers is preferable to no use of leave by fathers.

In terms of simultaneous or concurrent leave, there is less research evidence. However many schemes allow fathers to take leave at the same time of the mother's specific maternity leave (that is, at birth). Many countries still prescribe an obligatory period of maternity leave for the birth parent. Of the 49 countries studied by Koslowski et al. (2022), 38 have an obligatory period of maternity leave.

A Finnish study (Eurola et al., 2019, p. 5) found that "80% of fathers take simultaneous paternity leave from 2 to 3 weeks while the mother is on maternity leave", with the proportion unchanged over the past two decades. A study of Swiss parents taking leave together concluded that it allowed for greater 'equilibrium' in parenting and in reducing mothers' gatekeeping of decisions about care and its allocation.

In Australia gender norms are particularly sticky as evidenced during the height of the COVID-19 crisis when lockdowns meant many formal care services, schools and workplaces closed shifting education, childcare, elder care and work for many households back into the home. This pandemic-induced escalation in unpaid care and domestic work was not shared equitably. Women, especially mothers with school aged children, absorbed the majority of the new care load on top of a pre-pandemic load (Craig & Churchill, 2021). This widened the gendered gap in unpaid care and domestic work. This recent evidence on the practice of gendered norms in the division of care labour suggests that an overly flexible or 'gender-neutral' approach to policy design may see women continue to take the majority of paid parental leave, leaving existing gender norms around care and paid work unchanged.

Added to this, evidence clearly points to the relationship between payment level while on leave influencing father's use, such that the national minimum wage level payment of the Australian national scheme is likely to impede high take up rates by fathers/partners. Employer top-up to regular income levels while on parental leave would assist in overcoming the income deficit felt by the household and would also signal cultural support from the employer, another important factor influencing fathers' use of parental leave (Haas & Hwang, 2008).

Bonus policies and incentives

To encourage both parents to use their full quota of leave some countries have introduced bonus policies of extra leave (Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan, Portugal), financial bonuses (Austria, Croatia, France, Korea) or parenting training (Romania) (see Appendix 2). While this is mostly directed at incentivising fathers to take their leave, it can incorporate mothers' leave taking as well. The evidence shows fathers respond by taking their designated leave, but the majority of the additional leave is usually taken by mothers.

Given that 26 weeks is still limited and represents a short duration of paid parental leave by international standards, we do not recommend this approach of bonus policies. If one parent does not use their whole reserved portion, then the total leave available is reduced by the amount not taken. The Grattan Institute (Wood et al., 2021) recommends such a model where 2 weeks bonus leave is available to families where both parents use at least 6 weeks of the 24 weeks leave. However, this approach risks shortening the leave available to the birth parent if the father/partner cannot take their full portion of leave. By contrast, KPMG (2021, pp. 12–13) recommends an 'equality supplement' of either 2 or 4 weeks, to be added to the 26 weeks, if both parents use their leave, lengthening the total available to 28 or 30 weeks. Baird et al. (2021) also suggest a bonus period of leave in addition to the 26 weeks, which they call a 'shared care bonus', to be offered to "couples who have shared the original period of leave equally". This bonus differs from the KPMG model by also suggesting that where the whole or most of the 26 weeks was used by one parent, the bonus must be used exclusively by the other parent.

Need for incentives: Fathers are more likely to take parental leave when there is incentive to do so (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2019). Such incentives include father quotas (use-it-or-lose-it policies that reserve some parental leave exclusively for fathers), high wage-replacement rates, and financial bonuses, as evidenced through the experience in Nordic countries and the Canadian province of Quebec, which have the highest rates of uptake globally (Feldman & Gran, 2016; Harvey & Tremblay, 2018; Kalb, 2018; Karu & Tremblay, 2018; Rehel, 2014). Patnaik (2019) in examining the Quebec Parental Insurance Program found that the use of 'daddy quotas' increased fathers' participation by 250%, primarily through higher benefits in tandem with weeks that were explicitly framed as 'daddy-only'. Patnaik (2019) also found that it is possible for policies such as 'daddy quotas' to not only induce short-term changes in behaviour but to have an enduring impact on the gendered division of paid and unpaid care work. Other studies of the Quebec experience demonstrate similar findings, including a positive impact on women's labour force participation, especially in full-time work (Dunatchik & Özcan, 2021; Wray, 2020).

While the Nordic countries have led innovation around incentives for fathers/partners, in particular quotas for fathers, differences within Scandinavia include some lessons for Australia. At the same time as Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden increased their non-transferable quota of parental leave for fathers, Denmark withdrew theirs. This saw only a small change in the average rate of parental leave taken by Danish fathers between 2002 and 2020 (when the policy changed) even as fathers in Iceland, Norway and Sweden continued to climb (Rostgaard & Ejrnæs, 2021, p. 320). Denmark's policy has now been reversed as the Danish government introduced new legislation in line with the EU Directorate on work–life balance, to include a non-transferable allocation of 9 weeks of paid leave for fathers to be taken before the child turns one. This is in addition to 2 weeks of paternity leave at the time of the birth.

Parental leave, maternity and child health

An objective of the Paid Parental Leave Act in Part 1-1 Division 1A Objects of this Act is to “enhance the health and development of birth mothers and children”. This objective aligns with longstanding research evidence on the positive relationship between paid leave for mothers, the health outcomes for women and their children, and establishment and maintenance of breastfeeding (Bütikofer, Riise & Skira, 2021). It is a fundamental objective of multiple International Labour Organization Conventions on maternity leave and World Health Organization recommendations on maternal and child health (WHO, 2003) and is established in various human rights treaties (see Box D). While maternalist arguments for longer period of paid parental leave have been in part overshadowed by more recent arguments around the role of paid parental leave in supporting women’s workforce participation and gender equality, the research evidence on maternal and child health remains robust and should be considered.

Box D. Care at work: Investing in care leave and services for a more gender equal world of work

“Paid maternity leave with adequate maternal and child healthcare is a core element of the health and economic protection of women workers and their children during the pre- and post-natal period and during periods of breastfeeding. It is a precondition to the right to care and be cared for and to achieve gender equality at work. This role is universally acknowledged and firmly established in key universal human rights treaties, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), as well as in international labour standards on maternity protection and social security adopted by ILO constituents – government, employers’ organizations and workers’ organizations – over a century ago, as the first Maternity Protection Convention, 1919 (No. 3), was adopted in 1919. The “provision for child welfare and maternity protection” is also listed among the core aims and purposes of the ILO (Article III of the Declaration of Philadelphia, 1944). The second Maternity Protection Convention (Revised), 1952 (No. 103), was adopted in 1952, and the last and most up-to-date international labour standards on this topic are the Maternity Protection Convention (No. 183) and Recommendation (No. 191), 2000. Other relevant ILO standards are the Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102), and the ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202). The importance of ensuring maternity leave rights is also confirmed by the fact that the vast majority of countries have adopted statutory provisions for paid maternity leave. This entitlement is associated with positive health outcomes for women and their children, as well as with the establishment and maintenance of breastfeeding (Bütikofer, Riise & Skira, 2021, as cited in International Labour Organization, 2022, p. 53).”

The ILO’s Maternity Protection Convention (C191) establishes the right of women to a minimum 18 weeks maternity leave paid at full wage replacement with paid nursing breaks and appropriate nursing facilities upon return to work (article 9). Australia has not ratified the convention. Research also shows that fathers’ participation in parenting is important to maternal and child health, in particular the mother’s decision to breastfeed (Bar-Yam & Darby, 1997; Rempel & Rempel, 2011; Wolfberg et al., 2004). The more a father is involved in parental care for a newborn the more likely it is that a mother will successfully breastfeed (Kotelchuck, 2022; Redshaw & Henderson, 2013).

Breastfeeding is widely accepted as positive for baby health in the first year and beyond. International recommendations are that infants be exclusively breastfed for up to 6 months of age for optimal health, growth and development (WHO, 2003). It is then recommended that solid foods are combined with breastfeeding until the age of 12 months. Extending the duration of breastfeeding was a key aim of the paid parental leave scheme recommended by the Productivity Commission inquiry (Productivity Commission, 2009). In more recent comparative literature we find that the detail of policy design shapes patterns of breastfeeding. For example, a policy focus on parental leave as ‘gender neutral’ that prioritises flexibility could compromise maternal and child health if it were to be used in a way that unduly limited the duration of paid leave taken by new mothers (Bakken, 2022) and where the amount of paid leave taken was short, new mothers may not be able to access adequate paid time to rest and recover from birth or establish breastfeeding (Euromonitor, 2016).

We highlight two pieces of research and analysis on parental leave policy and child health linked to breastfeeding.

1. Recent research by the Norwegian Labor Directorate found that policy changes to increase the paternity leave ‘quota’ by shortening the paid maternity leave ‘quota’ led to an increase in the proportion of new mothers who took *unpaid leave* explicitly to stay at home longer and breastfeed (Bakken, 2022).
2. Baby food industry publications note that parental leave policies have an impact on breastfeeding rates. In response to the parental leave policy debate of 2015–16 the Australia Country report prepared by Euromonitor International (Euromonitor, 2016, p. 5) concluded: “Recent amendments to Australian Government policy are likely to have a significant impact on baby food in the country. For example, changes to Australia’s Paid Parental Leave scheme will have a significant impact on local baby food throughout the forecast period as it will influence whether a mother staying at home to breastfeed her children is a feasible option, as well as whether making homemade baby food is a practical choice. Changing paid parental leave from 18 weeks to six months would increase the ability of Australian mothers to breastfeed, while assisting the return to work would have the opposite impact. The anticipated result of this will be decreased breastfeeding rates and Australian mothers turning to milk formula as a substitute.”

Paid parental leave supports maternal and child health and breastfeeding, in particular the health of disadvantaged children (Broadway et al., 2017). It also supports father–child bonding, fathering identities (Petts et al., 2020) and children’s long-term educational outcomes (Ginja et al., 2020).

Three models for paid parental leave in Australia

Based on research findings here and internationally, tensions and trade-offs, and considering the varied purposes of paid parental leave, we offer three models for consideration based on the following design assumptions:

- Maintain at least the overall amount of paid leave available to mothers/birth parents of 18 weeks minimum.
- Reserve a non-transferable period for parent A and parent B.
- Encourage fathers/second parent to use more parental leave, taking into account all known benefits and limitations of 20 weeks to 26 weeks duration.
- Provide opportunities for women to participate in the labour market.
- Enable parents as much choice about concurrency as possible within the 20–26 weeks range.
- Avoid a bonus element so as not to restrict total accessible weeks of 20–26 weeks, however consider the possibility of a bonus in addition to 26 weeks in future policy.
- Enable as much flexibility of use as possible (of periods of 1 day at a time, or in blocks) within the 20–26 weeks range and the reserved leave boundaries.
- Ensure the total amount is available for single parents.
- Consider additional leave for multiple births.
- Continue the national minimum wage payment, noting that the minimum wage is a known barrier to fathers' uptake.
- Increase the weeks of leave every 2 years.

The headings in the models are used in the following way:

Reserved leave refers to the portion of paid leave that is non-transferable between parents and is forfeited if not taken by the allocated parent.

Shared leave refers to the total amount of paid leave able to be distributed between parent A and parent B in whatever combination they prefer.

Concurrent leave refers to the amount of paid parental leave that parent A and parent B can take at the same time (overlap or concurrently), but not concurrent with employer provided leave/pay.

Each of the models represent an archetype arrangement – a ‘pushed to the limit’ design. This accentuates the impact of the research findings on the design of the scheme. For policy implementation purposes, some adjustment is also suggested.

Model 1 – Equal Sharing and Fully Flexible Care

Year	Reserved portion (non-transferable)		Shared portion	Total	Concurrent allowed
	Parent A (Birth parent)	Parent B			
	Weeks/days	Weeks/days	Weeks/days	Weeks/days	Weeks/days
2023	2/10	2/10	16/80	20/100	10/50
2024	4/20	4/20	14/70	22/110	11/55
2025	4/20	4/20	16/80	24/120	12/60
2026	4/20	4/20	18/90	26/130	13/65

Model 1 emphasises providing a design that enables the most equal and flexible use of leave. Concurrent leave is allocated at the most extreme level to provide maximum choice for parents in how they share their care. In Model 1 the concurrent period allowed is much greater than currently exists and would represent a significant shift in design. However, the evidence to date in the use of the Australian scheme where overlap is now allowed, and internationally, suggests that parents do not choose concurrent leave of long duration.

Model 1 increases the reserved portion of non-transferable leave for parent A and parent B at the same rate in 2024 and does not prescribe when reserved leave can be taken. Reserved leave can be taken concurrently. Remaining leave is shared. The design does not reduce possible time for parent A from the current 18 weeks. A bonus of 2 weeks (or more) could be added where both parents use the full reserved leave portion (acting mostly as an incentive for fathers), bringing the total to 28 (or more) weeks.

Model 2 – Incentivise Father/Partner Care and Women’s Workforce Participation

Year	Reserved portion (non-transferable)		Shared portion	Total	Concurrent allowed
	Parent A (Birth parent)	Parent B			
	Weeks/days	Weeks/days	Weeks/days	Weeks/days	Weeks/days
2023	2/10	2/10	16/70	20/100	2/10
2024	2/10	4/20	16/80	22/110	2/10
2025	2/10	4/20	18/90	24/120	2/10
2026	2/10	4/20	20/100	26/130	2/10

Model 2 emphasises providing reserved leave for fathers and limiting concurrency of leave taking to encourage the couple to make a decision about how to distribute the remainder of the paid leave. Model 2 only increases the reserved portion of non-transferable leave for parent B so that the shared portion ends up greater than Model 1. This design only allows concurrent leave for 2 weeks/10 days to nudge fathers to care alone. It does not reduce possible leave time for parent A from the current 18 weeks and does not prescribe when the use-it-or-lose-it component is to be taken. *Note: total leave time of 20 weeks in 2023 limits the opportunity to maintain total amount of time available for mothers (parent A) AND reserve additional time for parent B care.*

Model 3 – Protect Maternal and Child Health

Year	Reserved portion (non-transferable)		Shared portion	Total	Concurrent allowed
	Parent A (Birth parent)	Parent B			
	Weeks/days	Weeks/days	Weeks/days	Weeks/days	Weeks/days
2023	4/20	2/10	14/70	20/100	4/20
2024	6/30	2/10	14/70	22/110	4/20
2025	6/30	2/10	16/80	24/120	4/20
2026	6/30	2/10	18/90	26/130	4/20

Model 3 emphasises preserving a longer period for mothers in recognition of their health related, breastfeeding and baby bonding needs.

Model 3 provides 4 weeks reserved, non-transferable leave for birth parent A in 2023, while providing 2 weeks reserved leave for parent B. The remainder can be shared. The design allows concurrent leave for 4 weeks to support maternal and child health and wellbeing and does not reduce possible time for parent A from the current 18 weeks. To further support maternal and child health the reserved 4 weeks for birth parent A would be taken at time of birth, and allow for concurrent leave with parent B.

Unfinished business: Additional optimal design features

There are a range of areas that have attracted criticism and comment in the 10 years the current scheme has been in place. We list these to ensure they remain on the agenda for change. To further enhance gender equality, inclusivity and security, Australia's paid parental leave system would:

- Add superannuation to paid parental leave to reduce the superannuation gap between women and men and to reduce women's lifetime earnings gap.
- Increase the payment level to at least two-thirds of average income as recommended by the EU. This will influence the uptake by men.
- Set a target for uptake by fathers/partners – and monitor it over time.
- Ensure that all workers (citizens, residents and visa workers) are eligible for paid parental leave.

To further enhance mother and child health:

- Renew attention on breastfeeding and lactation rights and facilities in workplaces.
- Focus on child health and wellbeing in designing paid parental leave and its connection to the early childhood education and care system.

To ensure the scheme is well understood by the community, invest in policy communication:

- Introduce and set aside funds for a new public communications strategy to inform new parents and parents-to-be of the changes.
- Communicate separately with employers and employer associations.

Consider the important role of employers and the workplace:

- Encourage employers to top-up paid parental leave to income replacement rates for parents.
- Consider tax incentives to support employers.
- Better understand the role of the workplace in accepting fathers' use of paid leave.
- Collect data on, evaluate and monitor the use of stay in touch days by employers.

Conclusion

There are tensions in the purposes of paid parental leave schemes between facilitating health and wellbeing of mothers and babies, enhancing women's workforce participation, and achieving greater gender equality by encouraging fathers to share in the care of young children. This makes trade-offs between these goals implicit in the design of schemes, including in considering the optimum arrangements to extend Australia's scheme by 6 weeks.

We have provided three archetype models that focus either on flexibility and shared care (Model 1), incentivising fathers to participate in care and mothers to participate in the labour force (Model 2) and enhancing time for mothers' and babies' health, bonding and support for breastfeeding (Model 3).

Model 1 provides for shared care and fully flexible arrangements. This model allows mothers to use the majority of the leave if they wish, but also enables and encourages fathers through a reserved portion to share the care role. The model has flexibility by allowing couples to decide how they wish to share their leave and in what units – days or weeks – they prefer and that suit their paid work and family responsibilities over the first 2 years of a child's life. The introduction of a greater shared portion aligns well with schemes internationally. By allowing all non-reserved leave to be taken concurrently if desired by parents, this design would quickly shift the emphasis from a primary carer model currently in place to a full choice in care model. It is recognised that this may be too large a shift in the first year in policy terms so restricting the concurrent time would also be possible. Such a move would be closer to Model 2.

Model 2 incentivises fathers/partners to increase their participation in care and restricts concurrency, thus forcing parents to decide who will take the leave. Having fathers take a longer period of reserved leave may encourage them to take more of the remaining leave, especially as that leave is offered flexibly in days over 2 years. This may enable a combination of fractional work hours for both parents, thus potentially enabling women's greater labour force attachment. It should be noted, however, that while paid parental leave is at the national minimum wage, the barrier for the higher income earner (usually the father given the gender pay gap) to take the majority of the leave continues to exist.

Model 3 attends more to the issue of the care and wellbeing of mothers by reserving a longer period of leave for them. The experience in Australia is that mothers overwhelmingly use the current 18 weeks, and neither Model 1 nor Model 2 would restrict mothers from continuing to use this period should they wish.

Any of the models could be enhanced in 2026 to further incentivise fathers to share care through adding a bonus period of 2 weeks (or longer) of paid leave for parents who use all their reserved portion of leave. This would increase the total possible leave time to 28 weeks, or longer.

As Australian families continue to change their practice and aspirations for how to share paid work and unpaid care for young children, ongoing evaluation and resourcing must also be part of the plan for a more generous paid parental leave system. To support families to manage work and care Australia will need to further extend the national paid parental leave scheme to bridge the current 'care gap' and connect with the early childhood education and care system in a way that supports child wellbeing, education and health and parental workforce participation, especially by mothers.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Bonuses to incentivise fathers to use parental leave

Source: Individual Country Reports in Koslowski, A., Blum, S., Dobrotić, I., Kaufman, G. & Moss, P. (2022). International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2022. Available at: http://www.leavenetwork.org/lp_and_r_reports/

Nation	Bonus type
Germany	Germany extends paid leave by two months if fathers take at least two months of leave . ‘Partnermonths’ (<i>Partnermonate</i>): two bonus months are paid on top of the 12 months if both parents take at least two months of leave or for single parents.
Japan	Japan provides an extra two months of leave if both parents use some of their leave entitlement . The maximum period of well-paid, post-natal leave is 14 months (including two months of bonus leave if parents share the leave period), which is nearly eight months for mothers and six months for fathers. If fathers do not use their leave entitlement, the maximum period of well-paid leave is just under eight months.
Canada	In 2019 Canada introduced five or eight extra weeks of paid leave reserved for fathers/second parents, if parental leave is shared between couples. The number of weeks available depends on whether parents choose the standard option (12 months of leave at 55% of income) or the extended option (18 months of leave at 33% of income). The <i>standard option</i> provides couples with a collective 40 weeks of parental leave (an additional 5 weeks). The <i>extended option</i> provides couples with a collective 69 weeks of parental leave (an additional 8 weeks). ⁸
Portugal	Portugal offers a bonus to families where the father shares part of the initial parental leave (formerly maternity leave). An extra 30 days (‘sharing bonus’) is available if parents share the leave. The leave is then extended to 150 days or 180 days. Initial Parental leave: 120 days at 100 per cent of earnings or 150 days at 80% of earnings, with no upper limit on payments. A sharing bonus is allocated if each parent takes at least 30 consecutive days of leave or two periods of 15 consecutive days once the other parent returns to work: 150 days are paid at 100% of earnings or 180 days at 83% of earnings, with no upper limit on payments. The sharing bonus applies only if both parents work or are eligible for other reasons (e.g., low family income, receiving unemployment benefits). Since it came into effect in May 2009, data on the sharing bonus showed a strong initial increase in uptake in 2009 and 2010 (from 596 fathers who shared Maternity Leave in 2008 to 17,066 fathers sharing Initial Parental Leave in 2010), followed by a slow but steady increase until 2020 when 31,588 fathers took leave.
Austria	In Austria, there is a paid ‘family time’ where fathers receive a ‘family time bonus’ of €700 . If parents share their childcare benefit at a minimum ratio of 40:60, then each parent is entitled to a ‘partnership bonus’ payment of €500 . Thus, together they receive a total of €1,000. Payments are not taxed. In approximately 8% of all births, fathers receive the ‘family time bonus’ during their paternity leave. ⁹
Croatia	Higher payment for additional 2 months if both parents use.

⁸ Source: <https://nelliganlaw.ca/blog/canadas-new-parental-sharing-benefit-how-does-it-work/>

⁹ Lorenz, T. & Wernhart G. (2022). *Evaluierung des neuen Kinderbetreuungsgeldkontos und der Familienzeit. Quantitativer Teilbericht*, from <https://services.phaidra.univie.ac.at/api/object/o:1429695/diss/Content/download>.

Nation	Bonus type
France	Longer period of financial payments if both parents take some leave.
Italy	The maximum total length of leave per family is ten months unless the father takes at least three months of leave; in which case the total length of leave can be extended to 11 months and the father can extend his leave to seven months. During this period, parents receive pension credits so they do not suffer a reduced pension because of taking leave.
Korea	If parents take Parental leave simultaneously or sequentially for a child under 12 months of age (including leave during the pregnancy), then each parent's Parental leave benefit is increased for the first three months from 80% of ordinary earnings to 100%, with escalating ceilings for each additional month on leave.
Romania	If the father has gained a certificate of completion for a childcare course, demonstrating basic care knowledge, the length of the Paternity leave is increased by ten days to a total of 15 days of Paternity leave – the father can benefit from this increase only once. The course and certificate are prepared by the family doctor, in maternity wards, by other health state services, or private consultancies which are recognised by the state. The usual practice is for couples to take these courses together, even if men's participation is increasing, especially in urban areas.