

Parental leave survey highlights the importance of extending paid leave provisions

Results of a recently released survey have shed new light on the use of parental leave in Australia and what families believe would help them most in combining paid employment and parenthood.

The experiences of parents of young children in the lead up to, and following, the birth of a child have been highlighted in *The Parental Leave in Australia Survey* conducted by researchers from the University of Queensland and the University of Sydney as part of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children.

Drawing on data from over 3,500 families, the survey shows a complex pattern of leave-taking among parents. While around one-third of mothers employed prior to the birth of their child accessed some paid maternity leave, only 4% of leave-takers used paid maternity leave only.

The most prevalent arrangements used by mothers were combinations of paid and unpaid leave, typically including 'non-maternity' forms of leave such as paid annual leave.

Fathers who took leave were much more likely than mothers to take paid leave only (over 80% compared with less than 15% of mothers), with the majority taking only 'non-paternity' forms of paid leave such as annual leave.

Around one-third of all respondent families (and over 60% of families in which the mother had been employed prior to the birth and taken leave) identified access to some (or more) paid maternity leave as one of the most important provisions that would have helped them following the birth of their child. In contrast, only 6% of families listed longer unpaid maternity leave as something that would have been beneficial. Similarly, while 24% of families indicated that better access to paid paternity leave would have helped, only 3% thought the same about longer unpaid paternity or parental leave.

Project leader Associate Professor Gillian Whitehouse from UQ's School of Political Science and International Studies said these

figures indicate that simply extending unpaid parental leave is not the most useful strategy for families trying to combine paid employment with parental responsibilities.

‘Our survey shows that very few mothers – less than 10% of leave-takers – would have taken longer unpaid maternity leave if it had been available.’

‘What’s needed most is an extension of paid parental leave. Only a tiny proportion of Australian mothers are able to rely fully on paid maternity leave, and many draw on other forms of paid leave during this period. One of the problems with this is that mothers are using personal entitlements that they may need to access at a later stage.’

The survey also indicated that among mothers who left employment with the birth of their child, around 20% cited lack of paid maternity leave as a reason for leaving work.

Other results highlighted the changes women typically make on return to work after the birth of a child, with around 70% of those in full-time jobs prior to the birth returning to work part-time. While access to part-time work can be important for parents, the survey also showed that those who changed from full-time to part-time were more likely to report that their career opportunities had declined.

The Parental Leave in Australia Survey was designed to address a considerable statistical gap on the use of parental leave in Australia. It is the first Australian survey to collect this kind of information from a specialised sample of parents of young children and within the context of a longitudinal study.

Conducted as part of an Australian Research Council (ARC) funded project, the survey extends the range and quality of information available on parental leave in Australia. Moreover, its location with the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children means that links between issues such as leave taking and child/family wellbeing can be investigated and tracked in the future.

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Further information, including a detailed report on the survey, can be found at www.uq.edu.au/polsis/parental-leave or contact

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