

ABC NEWS

Concerns inflexible working hours for men could be damaging women's careers

By Alina Eacott

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PHOTO: More fathers would become the primary caregivers if there was more flexible work options for men. (Supplied: Victoria MacKirby)

There are calls for more workplaces to allow men flexible working hours and paid parental leave, as many fathers look to "share the care" of their children.

South Australia's Commissioner for Equal Opportunity Niki Vincent said having to take on the lion's share of parenting was often a big barrier to women returning to work.

"More and more young men, and older men, are wanting to have access to flexible work and unfortunately organisations aren't quite keeping up with the pace," Dr Vincent said.

"A lot of workplaces think it's acceptable for women to work flexibly, but they have a problem with men, so even though they might have policies in place that are not just about women, there's a stigma associated with men working flexibly."

The call comes on National Equal Pay Day, which this year falls on August 31 to highlight the extra two months after the end of the financial year women need to work to achieve equal pay.

The national pay gap sits at 14.6 per cent, which translates to men earning on average an extra \$244.80 per week.

Dr Vincent said if men are able to take on more of the primary caregiving, that will have a flow on effect on the pay gap.

"Women who are able to work are able to move up into leadership roles etc, so that's going to make a big impact for men and for women," she said.

"If men share the care with women, women are liberated in many ways to work to their fullest capacity"

The only dad at playgroup



PHOTO: Rick Breumelhof took four months off work to care for his daughter Georgia when his wife Stephanie returned to full-time work. (Supplied: Breumelhof family)

Rick Breumelhof works as a manager at Deloitte, and was able to take four months of paid parental leave when his daughter Georgia was almost one-year-old, and his wife Stephanie returned to full-time teaching.

Deloitte is one of 17 companies in South Australia that have joined the Chiefs for Gender Equity, a group from a range of industries that have committed to advancing gender equity.

"Most people were very surprised that; a. I was going to take the time off, b. that my employer actually gave me the time off, and c. that it was paid time off," Mr Breumelhof said.

"Most of my friends didn't take time off, or maybe took a week off, and if they did most of it was unpaid.

"I think (more men) would ... it's just most employers don't give the men the opportunity to do so."

He said it was clear it is still uncommon for fathers to be the primary caregiver.

"Everywhere I went I was the only dad. Playgroup, swimming lessons, everywhere it was just me and then mums," he said.

"I think a lot of pressure is put on the mother often as being the primary carer, and I think it is nice to be able to share that responsibility between the dad and the mother.

"Having that four months really gave me the time to really bond with [Georgia].

"I would definitely recommend for anyone to do it if they're able to do so, I don't regret it one bit"

People think you're 'having the day off'

Sydney father of three Graham Eacott was able to take four months paid paternity leave while working for the WA Government in Perth.

"They had a pretty comprehensive maternity leave policy," Mr Eacott said.

"When I asked the HR person how it related to paternity leave she actually had to go look it up as no one had applied for paternity leave through her before."

Mr Eacott then worked three days a week, while his wife Sharon worked full-time.

"I wanted to be part of the girls' lives when they were little, and to play an active role in their day to day lives as they grew up," he said.

"After I took paternity leave, I would get asked by other soon-to-be fathers how it all worked and what their options were.

"I think lots of people were keen to apply, and some did, but financial restraints made it unfeasible for most."

Mr Eacott said a stigma definitely remained around fathers working part-time.

"There is an assumption that you are 'having the day off' when people first meet you looking after small kids, not many people want to assume that you are the primary carer," he said.

Now a stay at home dad in Sydney, he said he was a fairly rare breed.

"There are not too many dads doing the same thing," Mr Eacott said.

"Now that my oldest has started school it is much easier to meet other parents, and the great thing is that they are all in exactly the same situations that you are.



PHOTO: Graham Eacott says as a stay-at-home dad, he's a rare breed. (Supplied: Graham Eacott)

"If you've decided to take the step to have kids, why wouldn't you want to spend more time with them if given the choice?"

'Parenting is a shared role'

Victoria MacKirdy has five children, and was offered a new job when her youngest, Levi, was eight months old.

"I was actually on maternity leave when the opportunity for me to go into a general manager role at Alexandrina Council came up and the position was full-time, and they don't come around very often, so I needed to take it while it was there," Mrs MacKirdy said.

Mrs MacKirdy's husband Hamish works as a physio, and cut down to part-time hours so she could take the job.

"Hamish has got his own practice so he was able to adjust his working hours, but he knew the importance, he wanted to take on that parenting role," she said.

"Knowing that Hamish was going to be home with our little boy Levi made me feel much more comfortable and I could really give 100 per cent to myself and my role knowing that he was with his dad."

She said more workplaces needed to allow men to work part-time.

"I just think it's key to the success of any organisation," she said.

"Parenting is a shared role ... and I think there's just as many men out there nowadays who want to be able to provide support to their partners"

Graham Eacott is the brother of ABC journalist Alina Eacott

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PHOTO: When a rare job opportunity came up, Victoria MacKirdy couldn't say no. (Supplied: Victoria MacKirdy)