



STATE OF THE WORLD'S FATHERS REPORT AUSTRALIA 2026



Prepared by: Dr Alina Ewald, Dr Cindy Harmon-Jones, Associate Professor Emilee Gilbert,

Dr Sarah Duffy and Dr Jenny Yu



Table of Contents

..... 1

Acknowledgement 3

Executive Summary 3

Introduction and Background..... 8

What The Data Shows17

1. Fathers' Identity18

2. Norms, Roles, and the Provider Expectation24

3. Parent's Worries and Hopes for Their Children34

4. How Care is Divided, Experienced, and Negotiated42

5. The Squeeze: Time, Work, and Financial Pressures on Caregiving.....51

6. Care and Wellbeing 65

7. The First Years: Parental Leave and Early Support.....69

8. Support, Systems, and the Case for Care Investment..... 75

9. Conclusions and Recommendations..... 83

Acknowledgement

We are grateful to The Fathering Project for their dedication to fathering research and their role as the Australian partner organisation for the State of the World's Fathers 2026 global study, to Equimundo for coordinating the international research collaboration and The Caring Masculinity Fund for supporting the research. The authors also wish to thank Lily Lewington for her assistance with some aspects of interview participant recruitment and some of the qualitative interviewing. Most importantly, we thank the 533 survey respondents and 25 interview participants who generously shared their experiences and perspectives on fatherhood and caregiving in Australia, without whom this study would not have been possible.

Executive Summary

This report was developed by the research team from Western Sydney University on behalf of The Fathering Project, the Australian partner for the *State of the World's Fathers* global study by Equimundo – involving 16 participating countries. Across these countries, survey data was collected from approximately 8,000 parents across 16 countries. The global sample included 5,371 fathers, 2,615 mothers, and 31 non-binary or trans parents aged 18 to 65.

This report delivers the findings for the Australian component of the 2026 State of the World's Fathers report. The report adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining a nationally distributed survey (n = 533 parents) with in-depth qualitative photo-elicitation interviews (n = 25 participants). Survey data were collected during August/September 2025, and interview data were collected between November 2025 and February 2026. Most survey respondents were Millennials (56%), followed by Gen X (25%) and Gen Z (16%), with only a small number of Baby Boomer participants (3%). All participants were parents, with most caring for one or two children (87%). Detailed survey and interview participant State of the World's Fathers 3

profiles are outlined in Table 1. And Table 2. The findings from this study offer a comprehensive evidence base to guide policy, practice, and public discourse on fathering and caregiving in Australia.

The data reveals that fathers in Australia in 2026 are confident, emotionally engaged, and wanting to be actively involved in parenting. They associate fatherhood with love and responsibility. Nine in ten survey participants and most interview participants agree that it is a lot more normal for men to engage in care work today than it was in own their father's generation, and it was clear that when men do take leave after the birth of their child, the vast majority bond with their children and have a positive experience. This is the foundation on which policy can build. However, the data also provide a glimpse of many of the factors that are getting in the way of that foundation being fully realised.

Key areas focused on within the report span the division of care work, gendered expectations, parenting experiences and perceptions, work-family balance, parental leave, and support for parents. Taken together, the findings from this report reveal a persistent tension at the heart of Australian family life: fathers express strong confidence and desire to care, yet structural barriers, financial pressures, and entrenched gender norms continue to constrain their participation. These barriers also carry significant implications for gender equality more broadly. Some of the key findings are included below.

Gendered expectations. Fathers express strong confidence and desire to care; with the vast majority reporting they enjoy their caregiving role - yet this sits alongside enduring gendered expectations that normalise men as providers and women as carers. Survey results revealed that many Australian parents continue to endorse some form of traditional caregiving norms, with most men and women agreeing that fathers should focus on providing financially, and a similar proportion agreeing that mothers should lead daily care. Notably, on several key items, traditional expectations did not show signs of fading among younger fathers - Gen Z and Millennial fathers endorsed some traditional

caregiving norms at higher rates than Gen X fathers and others at a similar level - suggesting that at least some traditional norms may be intensifying – or at least being sustained - rather than receding across generations.

Critically, nearly two-thirds (63%) of men in the Australian survey agreed that they do not feel "*man enough*" unless they can provide for their family, underscoring the deep connection between masculine identity and the provider role which has been identified in existing literature surrounding fatherhood (Giazitzoglu, 2025; Hunter et al., 2017; Ewald et al., 2024).

Another important finding from the Australian survey includes that four in ten parents (43% of men, 35% of women) agree that boys should not be taught to sew, cook, and clean, despite most endorsing gender equality in principle.

Fathers remain defined by provision. When asked what three words come to mind when they think of "fatherhood," *love*, *responsibility*, and *care* were the most frequent responses. However, when survey participants were asked what the most important task or role for a father was, financial provision was the most commonly identified by all participants - particularly among men. This highlights an identity gap, where fathers feel confident and emotionally engaged, yet many participants continue to define men's primary contribution in economic terms.

Wellbeing. Overall, parents reported moderate life satisfaction, though a notable minority are struggling. The data also suggest that caregiving may be protective for men's mental health - fathers who placed a higher value on caregiving reported significantly lower psychological distress, a relationship that was not found for women. This is possibly because caregiving is already so embedded in maternal identity.

Care work and the perception gap. While most parents agree that they split care and housework equally, a substantial gender perception gap exists beneath this headline figure. Men are considerably more likely than women to perceive the division as both

equal and fair, suggesting that reported equality does not necessarily translate into shared experiences of fairness. In support of this, multiple mothers who participated in interviews described doing the invisible coordination work and emotional labour, while fathers focus on more discrete tasks.

The cost of care. Parents reported making a range of sacrifices and experiencing burdens associated with parenting – while also acknowledging that caregiving is worth giving up some career opportunities for. Importantly, around three in ten of all participants report providing care beyond their children, most commonly to their own parents, confirming that caregiving in Australian families is often multi-directional. In the interviews, parents caring for ageing relatives alongside children described compounding stress, with crisis calls from hospitals, medication management, and financial oversight layered on top of existing parenting demands.

Work-family balance and the impact of caring. Many parents reported struggling to fulfil their caregiving responsibilities alongside their work. The impact of parenting on employment was substantial: with many parents reducing their work hours or working overtime because of care demands, and nearly half changing jobs to gain flexibility. Beyond employment changes, the financial toll was significant: most parents cut back on non-essential spending, and many drew on emergency savings to manage the cost of caregiving.

Financial insecurity. Financial concerns dominated parents' worries, with children's financial futures, and parents' own financial security ranked as prominent caregiving concerns. Importantly, economic precarity not only increased care-related burden but also predicted stronger endorsement of traditional gender norms, creating a reinforcing cycle in which financial insecurity pushes families back toward the male-breadwinner model.

Parental leave: a perception gap. While nearly three-quarters of fathers reported taking all the parental leave they were entitled to, just over half of mothers confirmed that their

partner took all available leave – while the survey respondents were not connected to each other, that is a substantial perception gap between men and women participants. The interviews provided further nuance, revealing that many fathers had taken short amounts of annual leave or other forms of leave rather than formal parental leave - often equivalent to the two weeks previously available under the Dad and Partner Pay scheme, which was means-tested and paid at minimum wage at the time. Two-thirds of men agreed that they felt it was their responsibility to keep working during the leave period, compared to fewer than half of women. Despite this sense of responsibility, approximately nine in ten parents of both genders reported that parental leave helped them bond with their child and become a happier parent, pointing to the transformative potential of leave when it is taken.

A significant support gap for fathers. Fewer than half of the men in the survey were aware of any parenting support services for fathers, and a similar proportion had ever been offered support. Only around one in seven men said they received all the support they needed when they became a new parent. The most desired forms of support among fathers were workplace support, followed by support from a partner, prenatal healthcare support, and support from extended family. These findings point to a substantial and largely unaddressed support gap: more than half of fathers have never been made aware of, nor offered, father-specific services. In the qualitative interviews, fathers consistently described a lack of visible, accessible support - noting that parenting groups default to mothers, that peer networks for fathers are largely absent, and that many men lack both the information or the established pathways to seek help.

Across all areas of the report, the qualitative interviews enriched and deepened the survey findings, revealing the lived complexity and nuance behind the statistics. Parents described navigating competing expectations, financial anxiety, time scarcity, and a policy landscape in which care rarely features as a visible priority. The findings underscore the need for coordinated action across workplaces, the healthcare system, and government

policy to support fathers' engagement in care and to address the structural conditions that constrain more equitable caregiving in Australian families.

Introduction and Background

The State of the World's Fathers Initiative

The State of the World's Fathers (SOWF) is a global research initiative coordinated by Equimundo, with this report presenting findings from the Australian component. Using National survey and photo-elicitation interview data from Australian parents, the study examines caregiving roles, work-family life, and the social and structural factors shaping fathers' involvement in care. The findings provide evidence to inform public policy, practice, workplace policy and public discussion on supporting more equitable caregiving and family outcomes.

The Importance of Fathering Research

Awareness of the important role of fathers' involvement in caregiving has increased over recent decades, yet unpaid care remains unequally distributed, with women continuing to undertake most caregiving work (Craig & Mullan, 2011; Hook, 2010; Kelly & Nicholas, 2025). A substantial gender pay gap can limit parents' ability to make genuine choices about who earns and who cares. The gender pay gap in the Australian private sector is currently 21.1% (based on average total remuneration) (WGEA, 2025). Although many fathers aspire to be emotionally engaged caregivers, their involvement is often constrained by long work hours, inflexible employment conditions, limited access to childcare, and persistent gender norms that position men as primary earners and women as primary carers (Coltrane, 2004; Ewald et al., 2025; Glauber, 2018; Jordan, 2020; Ridgeway, 2011; Petts et al, 2018). Evidence shows that supportive policies - such as paid parental leave and flexible working arrangements - are associated with increased paternal caregiving and positive outcomes for, mothers, families and gender equality (Duffy et al., 2020; Ewald

et al., 2023,2024; Huerta et al., 2013; OECD, 2017), underscoring the importance of policy and workplace conditions in enabling more equitable care.

Purpose of This Document

This document examines how caregiving is organised and experienced within families, focusing on fathers' roles, experiences, and opportunities to engage in care. It explores the practices and understandings of fatherhood, the negotiation of caregiving and paid work, and the structural and normative factors shaping involvement in care. The report incorporates mothers' perspectives to provide essential context on household negotiations and the policy and system conditions that enable or constrain fathers' caregiving.

Methodology and Sample Characteristics

This study used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, combining a nationally distributed largely quantitative survey with qualitative photo-elicitation interviews. The survey provides broad evidence on caregiving practices, attitudes, time use, perceived barriers and supports among Australian parents, and was used to inform the focus of the interviews. The photo-elicitation interviews offered deep insight into, and visual representations of how caregiving, work-care arrangements, and family dynamics are understood and negotiated in everyday life; and they helped to explain, elaborate on and interpret some of the survey findings.

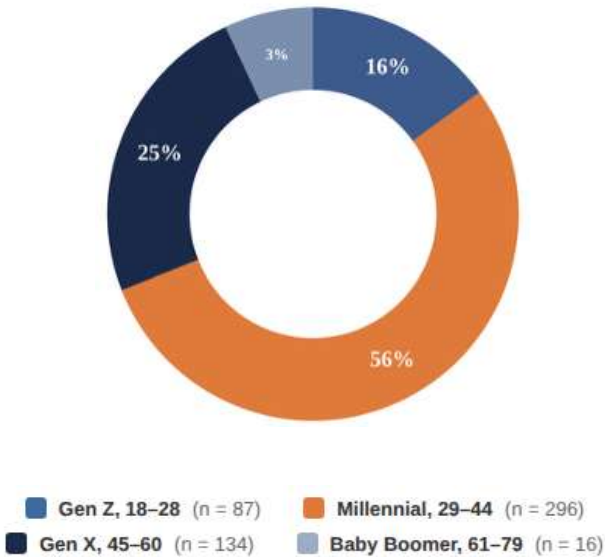
The Survey

The national survey was the dominant method in the SOWF study. Survey data were collected from parents across Australia via an online self-administered questionnaire during August/September 2025, and covered key domains: Demographics, Care and Caregiving Responsibilities, Resourcing and Care Work, Political Leadership and Care Work and Wellbeing and Mental Health. The online format enabled efficient data collection while allowing participants to complete the survey at their convenience.

Who Participated in The Survey?

The survey targeted Australian adults aged 18 years or older who identified as parents and was open to all consenting parents regardless of gender, sexual identity, or family structure. The final sample comprised 533 parents (355 men and 173 women). A very small number of respondents ($n = 5$) identified outside binary male–female categories; due to the small sample size, their data are not presented separately in analyses involving gender. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 64 years ($M = 39.0$). Most respondents were from New South Wales (38%) and Victoria (25%). The sample is concentrated in the 25-44 age range (68%), aligning with peak parenting years. From a generational perspective, most survey respondents were Millennials (1981-1996; 56%), followed by Generation X (1965-1980; 25%), Generation Z (1997–2012; 16%), and a small number of Baby Boomers (1946–1964; 3%) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Generational Profile Survey Respondents



Note: The generational breakup in figure 1. Is based on the age at the time of participating - for all survey respondents (n=533)

All respondents were parents, with most caring for one or two children (87%), and 87% having children living with them at least three to four days per week. Seventy percent were raising biological children with their biological co-parent, while 18% were not partnered. Ages 8-12 years was the most common age group for participants' children (41%), however there was representation across all age groups. Thirty percent of respondents also provided care beyond their children, most commonly to their own parents (64%) or their partner's parents (26%).

A detailed profile of the sample of survey respondents is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Survey Participant Demographics

Demographic Variable	Category	n (%)
Gender	Men	355 (67%)
	Women	173 (32%)
	Other	5 (1%)

Age	18-24 years	22 (4%)
	25-34 years	165 (31%)
	35-44 years	196 (37%)
	45-54 years	111 (21%)
	55-64 years	39 (7%)
State/Territory	New South Wales	204 (38%)
	Victoria	134 (25%)
	Queensland	79 (15%)
	South Australia	51 (10%)
	Western Australia	53 (10%)
	Tasmania	11 (2%)
	Northern Territory	1 (0.2%)
	Australian Capital Territory	0 (0%)
Employment Status	Full-time employed	397 (74%)
	Part-time employed	70 (13%)
	Working multiple jobs	6 (1%)
	Self-employed	9 (2%)
	Unemployed	20 (4%)
	Student	3 (1%)
	Retired	6 (1%)
	Home duties	11 (2%)
	Other	11 (2%)
Relationship Status	Married/De facto	423 (79%)
	In a relationship, not cohabiting	11 (2%)
	Single/Separated/Divorced/Widowed	97 (18%)
	Other	2 (0.4%)
Highest Education Level	High school or below	97 (18%)
	TAFE/Certificate/Diploma	124 (23%)
	Bachelor's degree	217 (41%)
	Postgraduate degree	95 (18%)
Ethnic Background	Australian/Anglo Saxon	377 (71%)

	Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	25 (5%)
	Maori and/or Pacific Islander	2 (0.4%)
	Northwestern European	11 (2%)
	Southern European	9 (2%)
	Eastern European	12 (2%)
	Middle Eastern	9 (2%)
	Southeast Asian	35 (7%)
	Northeast Asian	19 (4%)
	Southern and Central Asian	18 (3%)
	North American	1 (0.2%)
	South and Central American	4 (1%)
	North African	1 (0.2%)
	Sub-Saharan African	2 (0.4%)
	Other	8 (2%)
Household Income Before Taxes	\$0 - \$79,999	115 (22%)
	\$80,000 - \$139,999	291 (55%)
	\$140,000 or more	127 (24%)
Children's Age Range **	0-3 years old	111 (21%)
	4-7 years old	186 (35%)
	8 to 12 years old	220 (41%)
	13 to 18 years old	177 (33%)
	Over 18 years old	53 (10%)
Total Sample		533

**Note: A small number of survey respondents identified as a gender other than man or woman (n=5). Due to the limited number of these responses, they were not included in gender-based analyses in areas of the report. Findings presented by gender therefore reflect responses from men and women only. Child age categories are not mutually exclusive; respondents could report children across multiple age ranges. Percentages therefore do not total 100%.*

What We Asked in the Survey

The survey asked respondents a series of questions about how care and caregiving responsibilities are organised and experienced in their everyday lives. It included items on

how parents feel about their caregiving role, the division of care and housework with their partner, and perceptions of what constitutes the most important tasks for mothers and fathers. The survey also examined gendered norms and provider expectations, generational differences in attitudes toward care, and the financial and career sacrifices parents make because of caregiving demands. Respondents were asked to identify the factors that limit the time they can devote to caregiving - such as balancing work demands, insufficient partner contribution, or lack of external support - and what would make the biggest difference to supporting their caring responsibilities, with respondents selecting their top priorities from a list that included partner support, access to affordable childcare, workplace flexibility, health services, and community or government assistance. Finally, respondents were asked about their experiences of parental leave - including uptake, awareness of entitlements, and barriers to taking leave - as well as their psychological wellbeing, relationship satisfaction, and political priorities in relation to care policy.

Interview Data

Semi-structured interviews using a photo elicitation method were used to elicit a narrative surrounding Australian experiences of parenting with 25 participants. Photos used throughout this report include those images shared by participating parents as part of the photo-elicitation interviews, alongside stock images used within the report for illustrative purposes. We have outlined where participants' own photos have been used within the report to distinguish between these.

Interview Sample Composition

Participants were drawn from across Australian states and territories and reflected diverse employment, relationship, and family contexts. Qualitative photo-elicitation interviews were conducted with 25 participants, made up of 16 men and 9 women; who were 12 fathers, 5 mothers, and 4 parent couples. Some participants also completed the survey (n = 9). Participants ranged in age from 31 to 60 years (median age 46), comprising 14

Generation X and 11 Millennial parents. Across participants, a total of 44 children were reported, and most participants had either 1 (36%) or 2 children (44%). See table 2. For a breakdown of participant demographics.

Table 2. Interview Participant Demographics

Demographic Variable	Category	n (%)
Gender	Men	16 (64%)
	Women	9(36%)
Age	30-34 years	2 (8%)
	35-39 years	5(20%)
	40-44 years	4(16%)
	45-49 years	9(36%)
	50-54 years	2 (8%)
	55-60 years	3(12%)
	State/Territory	New South Wales
Victoria		4(16%)
Queensland		4(16%)
South Australia		1(4%)
Employment Status	Full-time employed	20(80%)
	Part-time employed	4(16%)
	Self-employed	1(4%)
Relationship Status	Married/De facto	19(76%)
	Single/Separated/Divorced/Widowed	6(24%)
Highest Education Level	High school or below	1(4%)
	TAFE/Certificate/Diploma	8(32%)
	Bachelor’s degree	9(36%)
	Masters/Postgraduate degree	7(28%)
Ethnic Background	Australian/Anglo Saxon	16(64%)
	Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	1(4%)
	Southern European	2(8%)

	Southeast Asian	1(4%)
	Southern and Central Asian	3(12%)
	South and Central American	1(4%)
	Caribbean	1(4%)
Household Income Before Taxes	<\$59,999	1(4%)
	\$60,000 - \$99,999	3(12%)
	\$100,00 - \$159,999	7(28%)
	\$200,000 or more	13(52%)
	Prefer not to say	1(4%)
Children's Age Range **	0-3 years old	4(16%)
	4-7 years old	5(20%)
	8 to 12 years old	12(48%)
	13 to 18 years old	19(76%)
	Over 18 years old	4(16%)
Total Sample		25

Note: Child age categories are not mutually exclusive; respondents could report children across multiple age ranges.

Percentages therefore do not total 100%.

Data Collection

Photo-elicitation interviewing is a method of interviewing in which the use of photos accompanies and deepens a participant's narrative (Bates et al., 2017). Rather than relying solely on verbal accounts, participants are invited to share photographs that represent their experiences, with the images serving as prompts that can surface meaning, emotion, and detail that might not emerge through conventional interviewing alone. This approach is particularly well suited to research on caregiving, where the everyday, embodied, and often taken-for-granted nature of care work can be difficult to articulate in abstract terms.

For this study, participants were asked to share two photographs ahead of their one-to-one interview: one representing their biggest worry about their child or the person they care for, and one depicting what gives them hope as a parent or caregiver. These images formed the basis of some of the interview conversation, allowing participants to ground

their reflections in concrete, personally meaningful moments. Interviews were conducted both online and in-person, and all participants were interviewed individually (even for those who were part of a couple). Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the interview participants, and any identifying information has been removed from their quotes.

What We Asked in The Interviews

The semi-structured interviews explored the same thematic areas as the survey: how care work is divided between mothers and fathers in the household; gendered expectations surrounding caregiving and whether these have shifted across generations; how parents perceive their own and their partner's caregiving roles; experiences of work–family balance, financial pressure, and parental wellbeing; parental leave access and uptake; and the forms of support parents receive, want, and believe government and other institutions should provide. The photo-elicitation component asked participants to share two of their own photographs; one representing their biggest worry about their child or person they care for, and a second depicting the thing/s that give them hope as a parent or caregiver.

Together, the combination of survey and interview data provides a comprehensive account of caregiving experiences in Australia – offering key insights into the state of Australia's fathers.

What The Data Shows

The findings from this report are presented below, beginning with the way in which fatherhood and caregiving is identified, defined, and experienced – and how capable men feel in the father role. The report then moves through the gendered norms and provider expectations that continue to shape fathers' roles; how care is divided within households and the perception gaps that emerge between partners; the structural pressures of time, work, and financial insecurity that constrain caregiving involvement; and the wellbeing

Note: Word size reflects the frequency of responses across all respondents to the question “What three words come to mind when you hear fatherhood”.

In the qualitative interviews, fathers and mothers gave these words some context and meaning:

VOICES FROM THE DATA

What fatherhood means — in their own words

Fathers and mothers described what they see as the emotional core of the father role — presence, connection, and the desire to give children what they themselves may not have had.

FATHERS ON WHAT FATHERHOOD MEANS TO THEM

I didn't really have a great childhood growing up... I've always wanted to give her what I wish my father gave to me. Just "present" — staying present in her life and making sure I'm there for her no matter what.
— **Robert** | Father of 1

Just spending that quality time with my daughter and seeing that she's really happy and overjoyed to spend time with me... sharing fun times, whether it be on a playground or walking around a park... that constant learning.
— **Jarrod** | Father of 1

MOTHERS ON THEIR PARTNER'S FATHERING

There's quite a lot of young guys coming up as parents who are making an effort to be more involved because they saw what their dads did or didn't do, and they wanted to be different.
— **Elise** | Mother of 3

I feel like there is more expected of fathers, and I feel like there should be too, because they're the parents as well. They need to experience the whole lot of it rather than just seeing the little bit from the side.
— **Maryanne** | Mother of 3

For some fathers even small everyday acts carry the weight of a deliberate choice - to be the father they did not have. Collin, a father of one who immigrated to Australia, chose his son's toothbrush as the subject of one of his photos for the interview - a deliberately simple object that carries significant weight. Growing up, he explained, he was largely left to raise himself. Becoming a father has meant actively breaking that pattern - being present in the small, daily moments that his own parents rarely provided.



Photo provided by participant



When I was growing up, nobody cared if I brushed my teeth or not, and so a lot of my childhood, I was left to just run wild and figure it out as I was going along. And so, I think that the concern for me is that I always have to be thinking of my son's wellbeing in a way that mine was never thought about. I need to be very present concerning my child's well-being to make sure I know where he is, what he's doing, and to make sure he's brushing his teeth at night.

— Collin | Father of 1

INTENTIONAL FATHERING

Leo, a single father of one, chose a photograph he took of a caged eagle. The image captures something he cannot easily put into words about his own parenting - the tension between protection and freedom, between love and constraint.



Photo provided by participant



One of the most amazing animals that we have in the wildlife is an eagle. When they extend their wings, it's something extraordinary — a two-metre wingspan. That eagle has the potential to travel so many kilometres, to hunt and feed itself, and to do so many wonderful things. But what is happening here is that eagle is in a cage. All that potential, all that beauty, everything that this eagle represents — is in a cage. As I was reflecting on parenting, we sometimes do this, and I'm worried that I'm doing this with my daughter, where I'm trying to protect her as much as possible from the outside world, not only psychologically, but also financially, and offering her a shelter and all that kind of stuff. But I'm worried that in doing that, I'm creating that invisible net that won't let her explore her full potential. That I'm probably building up this net unwillingly, but at the same time thinking that I'm doing the best for her.

— Leo | Father of 1

PROVIDER NORMS, PROTECTION & PARENTAL WORRY

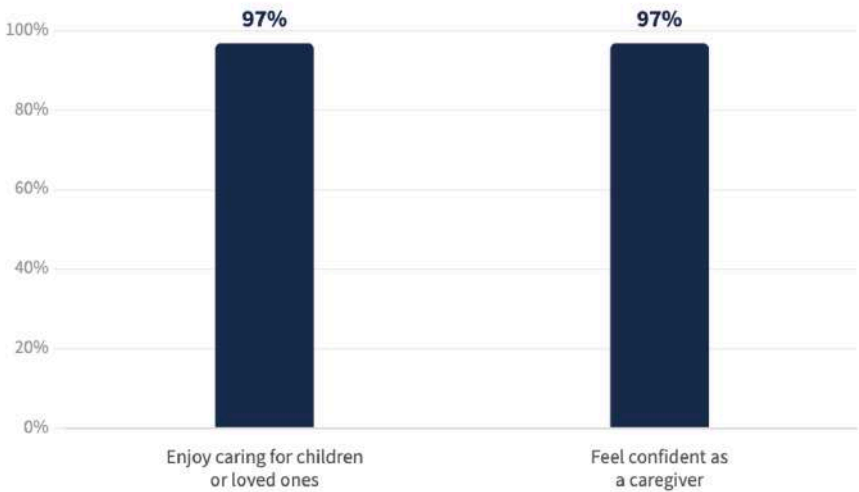
Fathers Confidence in Caregiving

Fathers reported high levels of enjoyment and confidence in their caregiving role, indicating that many fathers feel both capable of and positively oriented toward care.

Almost all fathers in the sample (97%) agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoy caring, and the same percentage felt confident as caregivers. These findings indicate a strong internal foundation for engagement in care among fathers in this sample (see

Figure 3). This is noteworthy given that parenting self-efficacy - a father's belief in his capacity to parent competently and effectively perform parenting tasks - has been identified in the research literature as a critical determinant of high-quality parenting behaviour yet remains understudied for fathers specifically (Donithen & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2022; Jones et al., 2005).

Figure 3. Fathers Caregiving Confidence and Enjoyment



Note: This represents the percentage of fathers who Agree or Strongly Agree with each statement "Most of the time, I feel that caring for children or my loved ones is one of the most enjoyable things in my life" and "I believe I am competent at caring for my child(ren) or caring for my loved ones".. Excludes "Does Not Apply" responses.

When asked what they love most about fatherhood, the responses were strikingly consistent – being present, engaging with their children, being there for the everyday moments, and experiencing the world afresh through their children's eyes. For these fathers, the rewards of caregiving are not incidental to their identity as fathers - they are central to it.



Fathers spoke of the rewards of fathering, the fulfilment of spending time with their children, the satisfaction of overcoming challenges, and the love they feel

“

What I love most about being a father is that it gives me an opportunity to go beyond myself... to give what I have on the inside... to pour that into another person.

— **Collin** | Father of 2

“

The most rewarding thing about being a dad is coming home, seeing your kids, and hanging out with them.

— **Matt** | Father of 2

“

Just getting to spend time with them and know them more. And I think that's the best thing, being supportive and just getting to know them.

— **Mark** | Father of 3

“

I love getting to spend time with my kids because they're at that age where you know everything about them and they know everything about you, and there's no judgment at all... And there's just a lot of love there and it feels like they can be whoever they want and that I'm there to support them on that.

— **Sam** | Father of 2

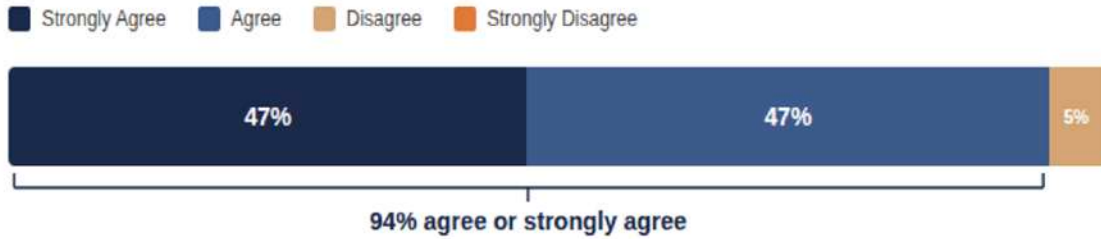
“

It's been surprising and perhaps challenging at times as well. And that challenging isn't always in a bad way... it's just there are problems and stuff that comes up that you have to deal with that you wouldn't deal with if you didn't have children... Everyone says children are hugely rewarding, and that is true. They constantly make you laugh, and they'll say things and show you the world in a way you hadn't perceived.

— **Scott** | Father of 2

Meaning, confidence, and enjoyment in fathering do not operate in isolation. **Among men, 94% agreed or strongly agreed that their partner believes them to be competent in caregiving.** These findings are important because fathers' caregiving identity is shaped not only by personal confidence, but also by how they feel their partner perceives and endorses their fulfilment of the father role (Carbone et al., 2024; Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020).

Figure 4. Perceived Partner Support for Fathers' Caregiving



Note: Data relate to survey question "My partner (or former partner) believes that I am competent at caring for my child(ren) or loved ones – father's responses. Excludes "Does Not Apply" responses.

However, this broadly positive picture is not without nuance. **When asked if they agreed with the notion that they "never seem to get it right" when doing care work or housework at home, more than a third of men (38%) agreed - including 15% who strongly agreed** - suggesting that a substantial proportion of fathers experience a specific sense of domestic inadequacy even alongside high levels of general caregiving confidence. This distinction between broad caregiving confidence and task-level self-doubt is important. While 97% of fathers say they are confident caregivers and 94% believe their partner sees them as such, more than one in three feel that their day-to-day efforts at home fall short. This gap may reflect internalised assumptions about gendered competence in the home, differing standards between partners, or experiences of having their contributions corrected or questioned - dynamics that can quietly erode willingness to take on tasks independently, even when the motivation to care is strong.

In the interviews, fathers described this tension directly - expressing broad confidence in their caregiving role while acknowledging specific areas of domestic uncertainty. Several men noted feeling as though they had a "lack of skills" (Scott) or felt somewhat "incompetent" (Scott) due to the fact that there is no parenting "manual" (Wayne) or "guidebook" (John) on arrival into fatherhood. Others described accepting a secondary role in early caregiving, even when they recognised this dynamic was being unnecessarily reinforced.

VOICES FROM THE DATA

Fathers described a tension between broad caregiving confidence and specific areas of domestic uncertainty, self-doubt, and learning on the job

“

With a young child, as a father, you're pretty useless anyway. Like you can hold the baby, and do whatever, change the baby, but ultimately it just wants milk.

— **Matt** | Father of 2

“

The most challenging thing about being a dad was probably my sheer lack of skills, which is not a terrible thing because skills can be taught and learned, and I've done that a lot. My wife has been a huge resource in that area, but also just observing other parents and learning what works and what doesn't.

— **Scott** | Father of 2

“

No one gives you a manual. I mean, there's experts out there who've never had kids who'll tell you how you should raise them. But you can't stifle a child by going by the rules in a book. You have to work it out with them, because they're a human, they're not a pet that you pat on the head because they're good. They go through all their stuff, and they don't listen to you, and they do silly things and you've got to say the right things to keep them on side.

— **Wayne** | Single father of 1

Source: SOWF 2026 qualitative interviews — Australia. Pseudonyms used.

2. Norms, Roles, and the Provider Expectation

This section sets out what caregiving looks like in Australian families. It examines further whether fathers' growing confidence and desire to care is translating into a shift away from traditional gender norms - or whether the provider expectation continues to define how fathers see their role.

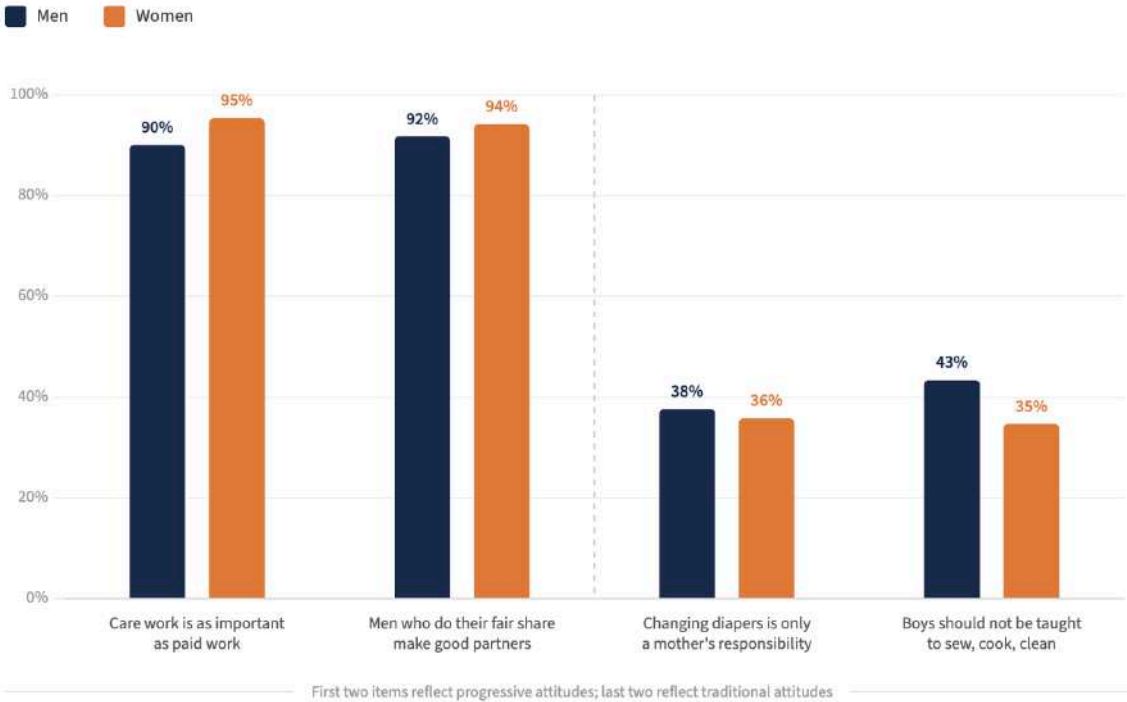
When asked about their attitudes towards care and the role of mothers and fathers, **most survey respondents agreed that caregiving is as important as paid work (92%) and that men who share care and housework are good partners (93%)**. Notably, nine in ten parents agreed that **it is more normal for men to do care work today than it was in their own father's generation** - suggesting broad recognition that fathering norms are shifting.

However, when survey respondents were presented with a series of statements and questions about caregiving roles and asked to indicate their level of agreement – it was evident that some traditional norms persist.

More than a third (**37%**) of survey respondents agree or strongly agree that routine childcare, such as changing nappies, bathing, and feeding children, is solely a mother's responsibility, and **41%** agree or strongly agree that boys should not be taught to sew, cook, and clean, and **42%** agree or strongly agree that boys should instead focus on homework. These findings highlight a gap between parents' broad endorsement of equality and attitudes toward everyday caregiving practices and the normalisation of traditional gender norms.

Notably, **men were more likely than women to hold these views**, with 43% of men versus 35% of women agreeing or strongly agreeing that boys should not be taught to sew, cook, and clean.

Figure 5. Australian Parents' View on Care Work



Note: Percentage of respondents who "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" with each statement by gender.

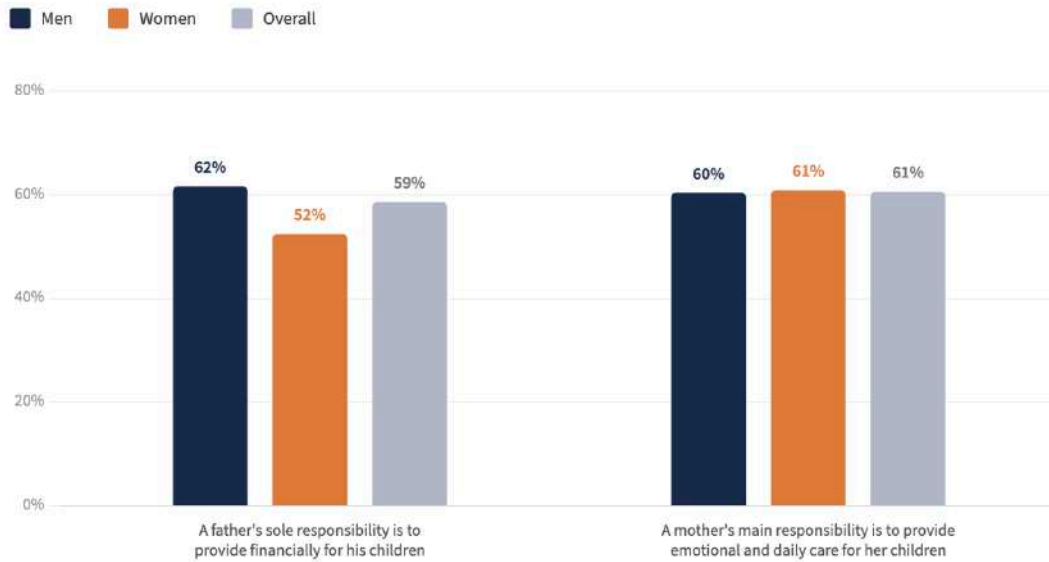
When responses across questions about how parents valued care are considered together, women placed consistently higher value on caregiving than men – a statistically

significant but modest difference – while care values were relatively consistent across age groups in this sample, with some notable differences in relation to specific questions.

The findings suggest a degree of tension in how Australian parents think about care. While there is near-universal recognition that care work matters and that men who contribute make good partners, a substantial minority simultaneously endorsed views that would limit boys' exposure to caregiving skills and position routine childcare as a mother's domain.

Participants were also asked whether *“a father’s sole responsibility is to provide financially for his children”* and whether *“a mother’s main and single responsibility is to provide emotional and daily care (food, hygiene) for her children”*. Results showed that overall, **59% of survey respondents endorsed the view that fathers should provide financially**, while **61% endorsed the view that mothers should lead daily care**. Critically, men more often endorsed the idea that fathers are providers (62% vs 52%), whereas endorsement of mothers as primary carers was similar across both genders (60-61%) (see Figure 6 below). These findings illuminate the persistence of traditional role expectations, particularly around fathers' financial responsibility, even alongside broader support for shared caregiving roles.

Figure 6. Agreement With Traditional Gendered Care Norms



Note: Percentage of respondents who "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" with each statement by gender (excludes "Does Not Apply" responses).

Amidst great change in women's engagement with paid work and increased gender equality over recent decades, there has been a growing cultural expectation that younger generations of fathers will be more progressive in their attitudes toward care and gender roles (Ruspini, 2019). They have been expected to be more likely to share domestic labour, reject breadwinner norms, and embrace caregiving as central to fatherhood. However, the data tell a more complicated story. For reference, Gen Z fathers were born between 1997 and 2012, Millennials between 1981 and 1996, Gen X between 1965 and 1980, and Baby Boomers between 1946 and 1964 (Pew Research Centre, 2019).

Gen Z fathers participating in this survey were significantly more likely to agree that fathers should provide financially (72%), than Millennial (61%) and Gen X (57%) fathers. On the view that things work better when men do paid work and women do care, around two-thirds of both Gen Z and Millennial fathers agreed, compared to fewer than half of Gen X fathers (45%). On other items - such as whether boys should learn domestic skills - differences across age groups were small. **Millennial fathers - many of whom are in their peak caregiving and financial pressure years - were the most consistently traditional**

group across these caregiving norm items, while Gen Z scored highest specifically on the provider expectation question. This suggests that younger fathers are not uniformly more traditional, but that provider and breadwinner expectations specifically may be stronger among younger men, likely reflecting the economic pressures and peak caregiving requirements that are documented within this report.

Table 3. Fathers Agreement with Traditional Caregiving Norms, by Generation

□ Highest value across generations

	Fathers		
	Gen Z (18–28)	Millennials (29–44)	Gen X (45–60)
A father's sole responsibility is to provide financially for his children	72%	61%	57%
A mother's main and single responsibility is to provide emotional and daily care	61%	63%	54%
Things are better if men do paid work and women do care work	65%	66%	45%
Boys should not be taught to sew, cook, and clean	42%	44%	45%
Boys should focus on homework rather than housework	52%	43%	44%
"I'm not man enough unless I can provide for my family"	54%	68%	62%

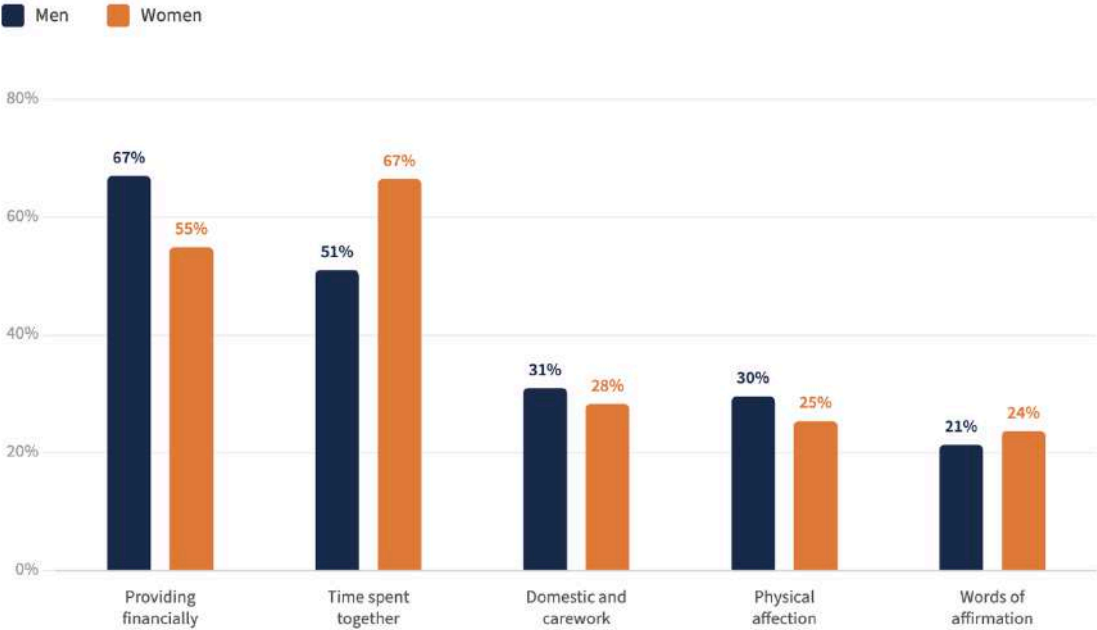
Note: For items with a "Does Not Apply" response option, percentages are calculated excluding those responses. Orange shading indicates the highest agreement within each row among fathers (Agree + Strongly Agree). "Not man enough" item was asked of men only. Ages represent the age at which the participants were in 2025 when survey data was collected.



This gap between valuing care in the abstract and endorsing gendered divisions in practice raises an important question: do progressive attitudes reflect genuine expectations for men's caregiving involvement, or do they coexist with deeper assumptions about who should actually do the work?

Questions related to father and mother specific tasks also reinforced the patterns identified above. **When asked to identify the two most important roles for a father, financial provision was the most frequently selected overall (63%)** - particularly among men (67% vs 55%) (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Perceptions of The Most Important Task for Fathers

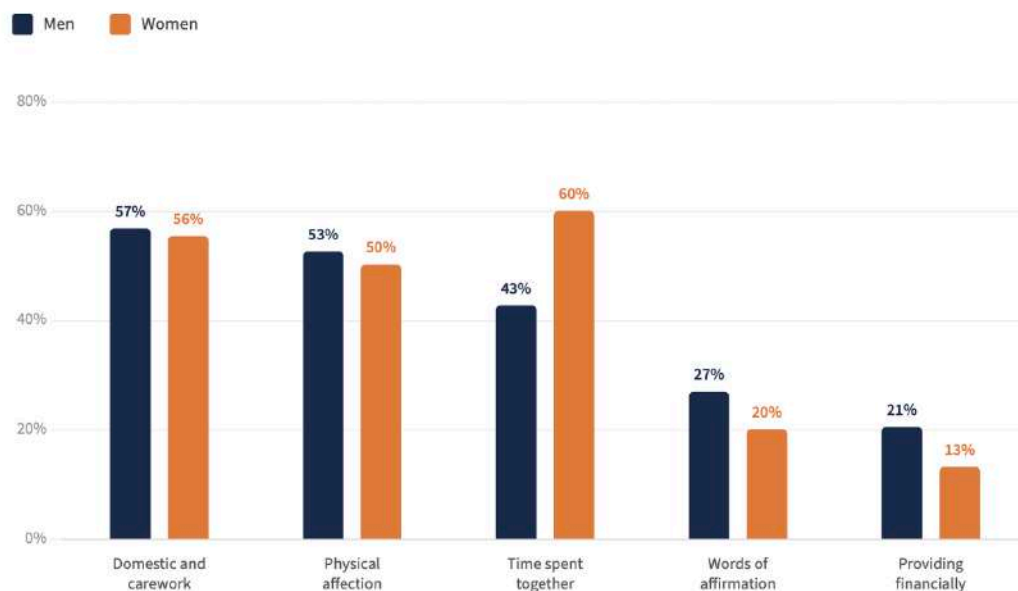


Note: The figure represents the percentage of respondents selecting each “most important” role for a father (select all that apply) by gender. Percentages therefore represent the proportion of respondents selecting each option - totals do not sum to 100%.

In contrast, **mothers most important task or role was most strongly associated with domestic and care work** (56%), followed by physical affection (52%), across both men and women (see Figure 8). This was a pattern reflected within households themselves, where **60% of parents with a partner or former partner agreed or strongly agreed that there are clear expectations in their family that women should take on the primary caregiving role for children and elderly parents.**

Taken together, these findings suggest that while caregiving is increasingly recognised as central to fatherhood, traditional gendered expectations remain evident, with fathers more strongly associated with financial provision and mothers more closely linked to everyday care.

Figure 8. Parents’ Perceptions of The Most Important Task for Mothers



Note: The figure represents the percentage of respondents selecting each “most important” role for a mother (select all that apply) by gender. Percentages therefore represent the proportion of respondents selecting each option - totals do not sum to 100%.

The interviews revealed the nuance within this paradox. Fathers across generations recognised the weight of provider expectations while also acknowledging that fatherhood

is changing - and that traditional norms no longer fully capture how they actually live. As participants described below:

Voices from the data: Traditional norms across generations

Parents from both generations described strikingly similar experiences of traditional caregiving expectations

GENERATION X | born 1965–1980

When you look at your own family, I think there is still that expectation, and I think I have grown up with that mindset as well. So, I don't question it and probably don't even pay too much attention to it. I think there's definitely still that expectation for the father to contribute financially.

— **Leo** | Father of 1

I think a lot of men still expect it of themselves, to be the primary earner.

— **Kara** | Mother of 2

I think society is still very much geared toward the mother being the primary carer... she's the first person who gets permission slips, and she gets all the emails from school... people think that the mother is more important.

— **Sam** | Father of 2

I think fathers are a lot more engaged and willing to be a lot more engaged with their children than before... I think women still do way too much of the heavy lifting... we're not anywhere near where we need to be yet.

— **Scott** | Father of 2

MILLENNIALS | born 1981–1996

For me personally, I think there are certain things a man should do, for example, like, take care of the finances.

— **Robert** | Father of 1

You only have to go to the comments on a social media page to see how many people still hold very traditional views that fathers are supposed to be providers, disciplinarians, stoic role models, that sort of thing.

— **Ben** | Father of 2

It's very much a male thing to do, to try and, I guess, grow your career and provide for the family.

— **Liam** | Father of 2



Stock image

SAME NORMS, DIFFERENT DECADES

While participants expressed the idea that expectations for fathers have shifted, their responses to survey questions and their narratives revealed how traditional caregiving norms continue to shape everyday family life, often in ways that go unquestioned. For example, one interviewed father, Sam captured a common sentiment among fathers, noting: "You do accept it as a dad... you kind of accept that you're not as important for those first couple of years. Like you kind of go, oh yes, the baby needs the mum more than they need you to live... But it does feel that it is kind of silly that it is reinforced." This internalised sense of fathers being secondary caregivers was echoed in some of the mothers' accounts. Kara, a 46-year-old mother of two, who was part of a couple State of The World's Fathers

participating in the study, described a pattern familiar across many households: *"My husband will do that kind of caring if I'm not around... but I would be more the person that does the caring, maybe ninety percent of the time. I think our generation, we definitely just do it in a more traditional way. I don't think there's a particular reason why - I just think we do it that way because it works."* Elise, a 44-year-old part-time working mother of three offered a similar reflection, describing her family as *"a little bit more traditional, from the point of view of that he works five days a week, that's his gig sort of thing, and then I just contribute what I can in between the kids' stuff."*

Some of the fathers' accounts tapped into a tension between caregiving and providing. Ben, a Millennial dad, noted the broader cultural undertow: *"You only have to go to the comments on a social media page to see how many people still hold very traditional views - that fathers are supposed to be providers, disciplinarians, stoic role models."* One millennial mother, Penny, observed that *"the majority of the responsibilities lie with myself in terms of providing care and looking after my children... it's mainly myself that does everything."*

These accounts point to a gap between how fathers feel about caregiving and how caregiving labour is actually distributed - a gap sustained not by individual reluctance but by entrenched norms, workplace structures, and patterns that families fall into because, as Kara put it, *"it works."*

While the interviews did not include any Gen Z participants, the survey open text responses and quantitative data presented in Table 3 show that some younger fathers hold provider expectations even more strongly. The finding that Gen Z fathers hold the most traditional provider norms is consistent with a broader pattern of identified in the literature among younger men (Ipsos & Global Institute for Women's Leadership, 2025). This is not surprising given the context: young men are entering fatherhood at a moment of acute financial precarity, where there is an emphasis within public discourse surrounding succeeding in one's career, while simultaneously being disproportionately

targeted by online movements that frame gender equality as a threat to masculine identity.

The existing literature shows that although generational attitudes have become increasingly progressive over the last 40 years (Scarborough et al., 2018) in more recent years progress on the gender equality front has slowed (World Economic Forum, 2022), with Gen Z men valuing gender equality less than older men (Fang & Kunjuraman, 2025; United Nations, 2020). Similarly, research has also revealed that despite the expectation for more egalitarian attitudes for Millennial men, their work-life practices are influenced and shaped by traditional norms – leaving them caught between change and continuity on the gender equality front (Ruspini, 2019).

The interviews also revealed some of these tensions in normative expectations for men, showing that many fathers recognised and at times adhered to traditional expectations, but they also described moments of resistance, ambiguity, and gradual change. This is consistent with literature on fathering identities, which suggests that fathers often hold multiple, sometimes competing identities - with one typically taking precedence depending on context (Ewald et al., 2024; Humberd et al., 2015).

For some, shifts in caregiving roles were driven by practical necessity - their partner's participation in paid work or the financial pressures of a dual-income economy. For others, they reflected a broader awareness that expectations around fathering are evolving, even if there is still room for change.

Voices from the data: Fathers challenging traditional expectations

Despite evidence of traditional expectations in both generations, fathers from both generations described recognising, questioning, or actively resisting traditional caregiving norms

GENERATION X | born 1965–1980

I think it's implicit that people assume that the dad's doing more of the work and the mum's doing more of the care. I think it's so strange that we've changed so much, but we also haven't.

— Sam | Father of 2

I think it really depends on your economic circumstances and level of education... I know numerous families where the wife is the CEO of some high-powered company and the guy was working at the post office and he's like, I'm going to stay at home with the kids... I think there is much more acceptance of that in society.

— Scott | Father of 2

One hundred percent, things have changed. There's no way fathers just financially provide for their family today... the father role is more, you know, it's all 50/50... the male dominant role versus the female dominant role, I don't believe it exists anymore.

— Tom | Father of 3

My wife can earn as much money as she wants. She can earn five times more than me and I'll look after the kids and do the housework. I do not care.

— Jason | Father of 2

You've got to have both of them taking on pretty much the same role as providers if you have a mortgage, or if you have to pay your rent and your bills... nobody can afford that on one income if they have a family.

— Mark | Father of 2

MILLENNIALS | born 1981–1996

I do believe that fathers have a responsibility to provide. But it's not above and beyond what is expected of both parents, right, in this day and age.

— Collin | Father of 1

I think it's shifted quite a lot. I know a lot of hard working, driven mums, and I think the roles, I wouldn't say they're reversed, they're nowhere near reversed yet, but I think they're becoming a lot more equal. Where it's like, as parents, if you parent together, you're responsible for this, and I'll do this, and then you share the jobs.

— Matt | Father of 2



Stock image

SHIFTING VIEWS, SHARED ACROSS GENERATIONS

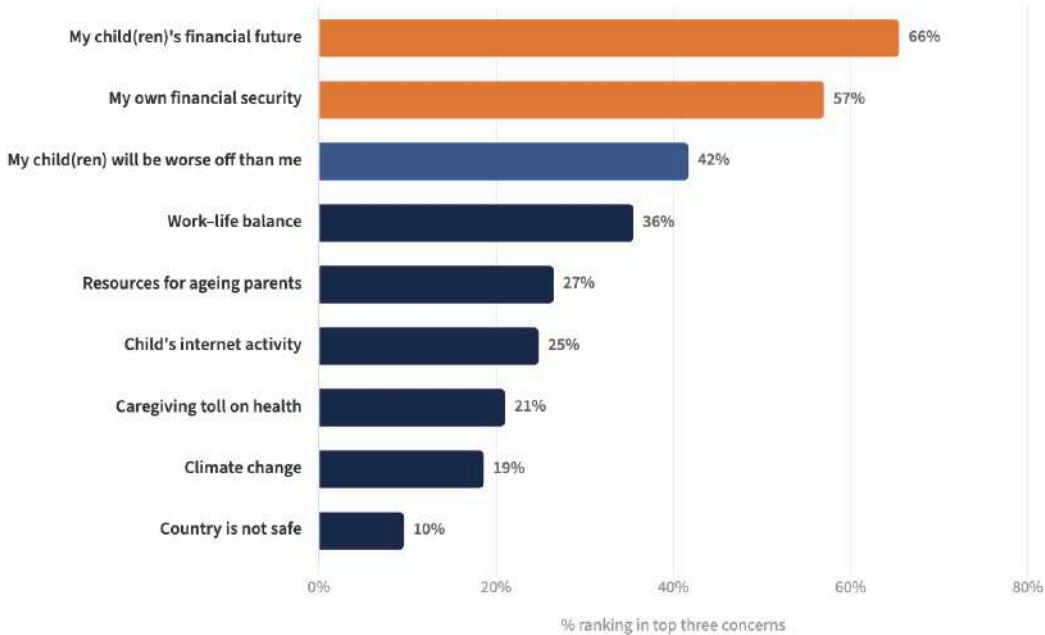
Importantly, **fathers and mothers who held more equitable views about caregiving - believing that care is a shared rather than a gendered responsibility - reported greater enjoyment of caregiving and were more likely to see men's involvement in care as normal and expected.** This reinforces the importance of normalising men's care as both a cultural and policy priority.

3. Parent's Worries and Hopes for Their Children

Beyond the day-to-day realities of care, parents carry a broader set of worries and aspirations for their children's futures. When parents were asked to rank their top concerns about caregiving, financial worries dominated overwhelmingly, suggesting that

anxiety about economic futures - both their children's and their own - sits at the heart of the contemporary parenting experience.

Figure 9. Parents' Top Caregiving Concerns



Financial items highlighted in orange. Items ranked from a list of nine caregiving concerns.

Note: Figure represents the percentage of respondents who ranked each concern in their top 3 (out of 9) from the whole sample (n = 533).

3.1. Financial Anxiety is Parents' Dominant Concern

Two-thirds of parents (66%) ranked their child's financial future among their top three concerns - making it the most widely shared worry by a considerable margin, and the number one concern for 40% of respondents. A further 57% ranked their own financial security as a top three concern. Mothers were slightly more likely than fathers to prioritise children's financial futures (69% vs 64%) and personal financial security (61% vs 56%). When asked what parents' top three worries were in open-text responses, around a quarter of parents spontaneously mentioned financial or economic worries. Examples of these include:

VOICES FROM THE DATA
When asked about their biggest worries for their children, parents consistently returned to financial themes

- “**
Financial worries as they try to enter adulthood responsibilities.
— **Father** | Survey respondent (Millennial)
FINANCIAL SECURITY
- “**
How will they ever be able to buy a house?
— **Father** | Survey respondent (Gen X)
HOUSING AFFORDABILITY
- “**
If I am able to afford extra curricular activities and education.
— **Mother** | Survey respondent (Millennial)
EDUCATION COSTS

Taken together with the economic precarity findings reported in a later section, these results suggest that **financial insecurity is a critical backdrop against which all other caregiving concerns are experienced.**

Beyond immediate financial pressures, **42% of parents worried that their child will be worse off than they are** - a concern about intergenerational decline that was slightly more common among men (43%) than women (39%). Interview participants also highlighted financial security as a prominent concern for their children – especially in relation to their children being able to purchase a home.



“

It's the concern for money, really. Like I don't like the amount of inflation that we've had in the last 10 years, it's phenomenal. Even just on that basic level of like your groceries and everything like that, you go to the shops now and you spend \$100, you leave with four or five bags of food. And I don't believe people's wages are in line with the inflation... I work with some pretty intelligent guys in my industry, and they're always like, the best thing you can do is supply your kids with a house, because by the time your kids are 20, houses are going to be even more expensive, and if you can actually give your kids a house, you're going to give them the best start to life that you possibly can. Now, 20 years ago, for my parents, it was like, if you can get a university degree, you'll be set up for life. Now, they're like, just get your kid a house. Buy him a house.

— Matt | Father of 2

FINANCIAL SECURITY & HOUSING

3.2 Work-life Balance

35% of parents ranked work-life balance among their top concerns in the survey, with similar rates across genders, and **91% of all parents agreed or strongly agreed that a four-day work week would allow caregivers to get better work-life balance**. Open text responses from parents within the survey revealed that *“Trying to balance your work and care for your children is a lot of work”* and that caregiving has been harder in recent years because of time pressures *“due to work”*, as well as the need to meet *“work commitments”* and that this is amplified by financial pressures pushing parents to *“work more”*. These findings point to a reality where parents are navigating both present-day time pressures and longer-term anxieties about what they can offer their children. Interviews revealed a similar pattern with parents often struggling to balance work and family life alongside other responsibilities:



“

So, this is a photo I took in my son's bedroom and it's of some books that he owns, and a clock, and I took it to represent my biggest worries and concerns for the kids... about their future, and that there's not enough time, that there's not enough time to get them ready to be adults and also that time's running out to spend with them while they're kids and enjoy their life. And I feel like I worry that we work so hard, and we do so many chores and things that we don't get to spend enough time enjoying being their parents. So yeah, I guess it's around just there not being enough time to teach them all the things they need or to get them ready. The books I chose to put in there were just about, like, Money Doesn't Grow on Trees because money is a big issue for our family all the time. It's trying to make enough money. And then I took the book out called How to Make a Friend in Six Easy Steps because I worry about my kids and their social capacity because they've got neurodiversity. And then I put in When I'm Feeling Disappointed because I worry sometimes that I might be a disappointment to them and that I'm not doing enough for them in the time where I'm parenting them.

— Claudia | Mother of 2

TIME, FINANCES & PARENTAL SELF-DOUBT

3.3 Engagement with Technology and Social-Media

Approximately one quarter of Australian parents ranked not knowing what their child is doing on the internet among their top three caregiving concerns, and around one in ten respondents spontaneously mentioned technology-related worries in open-text responses.

“ Technology is so heavily involved these days, I feel kids are learning at a slower rate because of technology distractions.

— Father | Survey respondent (Gen Z)

TECHNOLOGY & CHILDREN

However, the qualitative interviews revealed how parents make sense of the recent social media ban and how they are negotiating and managing the ban without established models to follow.

A recurring theme was that parents see themselves as navigating uncharted territory. As one mother put it: *"We didn't have this level of technology when we were growing up, and so, we don't have role models for how to parent around this. So, we're trying to figure it out together"* (Kara, Mother of 2, Gen X). One father framed the challenge more starkly: *"This is the 21st century version of smoking, isn't it? It's a bit like just opening the front door to the pub for the world and saying, there's shiny things in there that are fun, but there's also really scary stuff that will hurt you"* (Scott, Father of 2, Gen X).

A wide spectrum of strategies in managing their children's use of technology became evident. What was striking was how divergent parents' approaches were. At one end, some maintained firm restrictions - one single father permitted essentially no weekday screen time and no social media access (John, Father of 1, Gen X). At the other, one father described deliberately removing all restrictions, reasoning that open access produced better outcomes: *"We took off the restrictions... and we actually found they were more honest with us, more likely to show us what sites they got onto"* (Tom, Father of 3, Gen X). Between these poles, the majority described constant negotiation - setting boundaries, discovering workarounds, and recalibrating. One mother captured this cycle when she discovered her youngest had secretly set up a Snapchat account: *"I don't even know how you did that, but clearly my locking system is not foolproof"* (Elise, Mother of 3, Millennial).

Several parents also identified a tension rarely captured in policy debates: restriction can carry social costs. John described his ten-year-old daughter's predicament - her friends had phones and social media, but she did not: *"I can only do what I can do with my daughter. But if everybody else around us is playing on these games... she will be excluded because she's not playing."*

The ban was often positioned as being welcome but insufficient. Parents' views on Australia's social media ban were complex and varied, with some framing technology as an immediate threat, including one father's account of his son's online gaming addiction becoming severe enough to require hospitalisation (Amir, Father of 2, Gen X). Others saw

platforms as deliberately designed to capture attention, observing that they *"aren't taking much responsibility"* for harmful content, while viewing the ban as a necessary interim measure (John). Even parents who questioned the effectiveness of age-based restrictions recognised that the legislation sends an important signal - though the broader pattern of responses suggested parents welcome government action as a complement to, rather than replacement for, their own efforts.

Yet the interviews also revealed that some opposed elements of the ban, and highlighted practical limitations. Elise noted that since the ban, *"kids are creative"* such that they *"will find ways to get around whatever things you put in place,"* her conclusion: *"It's far better to teach them how to use these things properly than restrict them from it."*

Parents also reflected on their own screen behaviour. One father observed: *"When you're a parent... you are a mirror, and everything you do is mirrored. And the children are incredibly perceptive"* (Scott, Father of 2, Gen X). Some also raised broader concerns - particularly about AI and the pace of technological change: *"There's some really big unknowns... I hope my kids have the skills to be able to critically analyse information that comes to them, because we seem to have less and less control over the information sources that we have"* (Rebecca, Mother of 2, Gen X).



AI-generated image provided by participant

“

There's a mirror, because when you're a parent — and the screen time thing is very relevant to this — you say to your kids 'put down that phone and go do something', but you are a mirror, and everything you do is mirrored. And the children are incredibly perceptive, far more so than you think... You're trying to guide them into the future, but they need to pick the path. You need to light the way... but the mirror is flawed. And they can see that, and they need to work their way around that.

— Scott | Father of 2, Gen X

PARENTING, TECHNOLOGY & THE UNKNOWN

When asked about support, parents did not call for more restrictions. They wanted accessible, practical guidance - delivered in ways that fit already-pressured schedules. One mother observed that school workshops on technology are often scheduled "in the evenings when parents are doing stuff with the kids," and called for "innovative ways to get that information... through workplaces or some kind of partnership between private and public systems" (Rebecca). This echoes the broader finding from this report: parents want support, but the support available often does not match the support they need.

Parents' responses to the ban revealed a spectrum of views on where governmental responsibility ends and parental authority begins. Some were firmly opposed: "It does my

head in a little bit because I feel that it's my job to dictate to my children what they can and can't access" (Elise, Mother of 3, Millennial). Others, while sympathetic to the ban's intent, argued the focus was misdirected - that governments should be regulating platform design rather than restricting children's access (Scott, Father of 2, Gen X). Even among sceptics, however, there was a recognition that in the absence of stronger platform regulation, age-based restrictions represented a tolerable first step. The prevailing view was not pro- or anti-ban, but that legislation alone is insufficient without parallel investment in digital literacy and practical parental support.



“

Technology is changing so rapidly that laws, and rules around it can't keep up. Things have changed so rapidly, which is a big concern for me. I've seen my friends' kids who live on their phone, and I will not let my daughter do that, but then she'll be the minority. And this is another concern of mine, she's so happy with the social media ban because I know myself, my friend down the road, the other parents I know here, we don't allow our kids onto social media. But I know my daughter's got a female friend that she still likes to catch up with, and she's got her own phone. She's only 12, and she's got her own phone. So, you know, I can only do what I can do with my daughter. But if everybody else around us is playing on these games, then she's got to be, it's not missing out, but she will be excluded because she's not playing.

— John | Father of 1

TECHNOLOGY, SOCIAL MEDIA & SOCIAL EXCLUSION

4. How Care is Divided, Experienced, and Negotiated

This section focused on everyday practice within the home - examining how caregiving responsibilities are actually divided within Australian households, how fathers and mothers experience those arrangements differently, and the role that communication

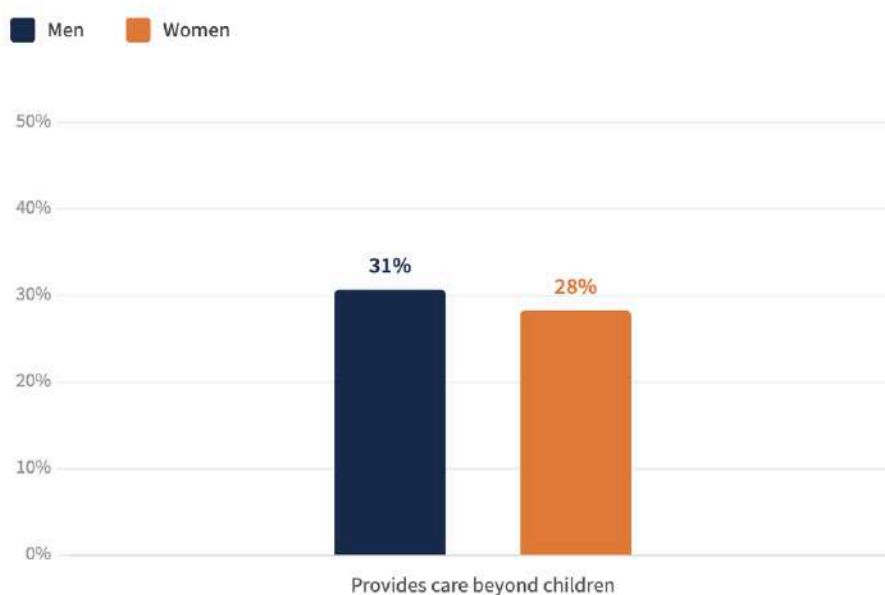
and conflict play in shaping care dynamics. The findings reveal that what looks equal on the surface often feels very different depending on context and which parent you ask.

4.1 Care Beyond Children: The Broader Care Picture

Around a third (30%) of parents reported providing care to people other than their children, including parents and relatives. While 28% of mothers and 31% of fathers reported caregiving responsibilities beyond children, there were no significant differences in the likelihood of caring for others by gender or age, indicating that caregiving responsibilities beyond children were distributed similarly across demographic groups in this sample. Among those parents who care for others outside of their children, 54% do so with equal partner support – however, **14% are doing it entirely alone without a partner’s support or other support.**

This confirms that caregiving in Australian families is often multi-directional rather than limited to childcare alone, adding to the overall care load experienced by both mothers and fathers.

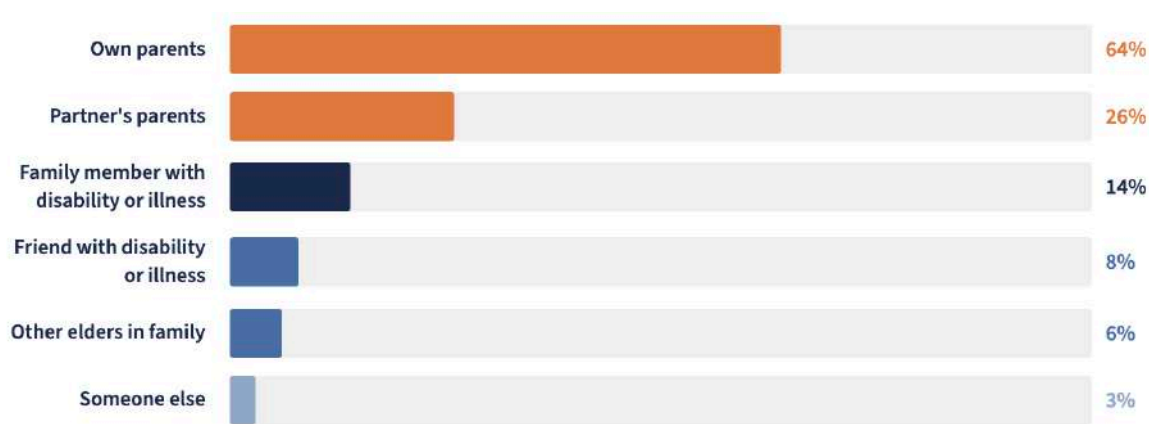
Figure 10. Care Beyond Children by Gender



Note: Figure represents the percentage of parents reporting caregiving responsibilities for people other than their children.

Among those providing care beyond children, the most common recipients are outlined in the figure below:

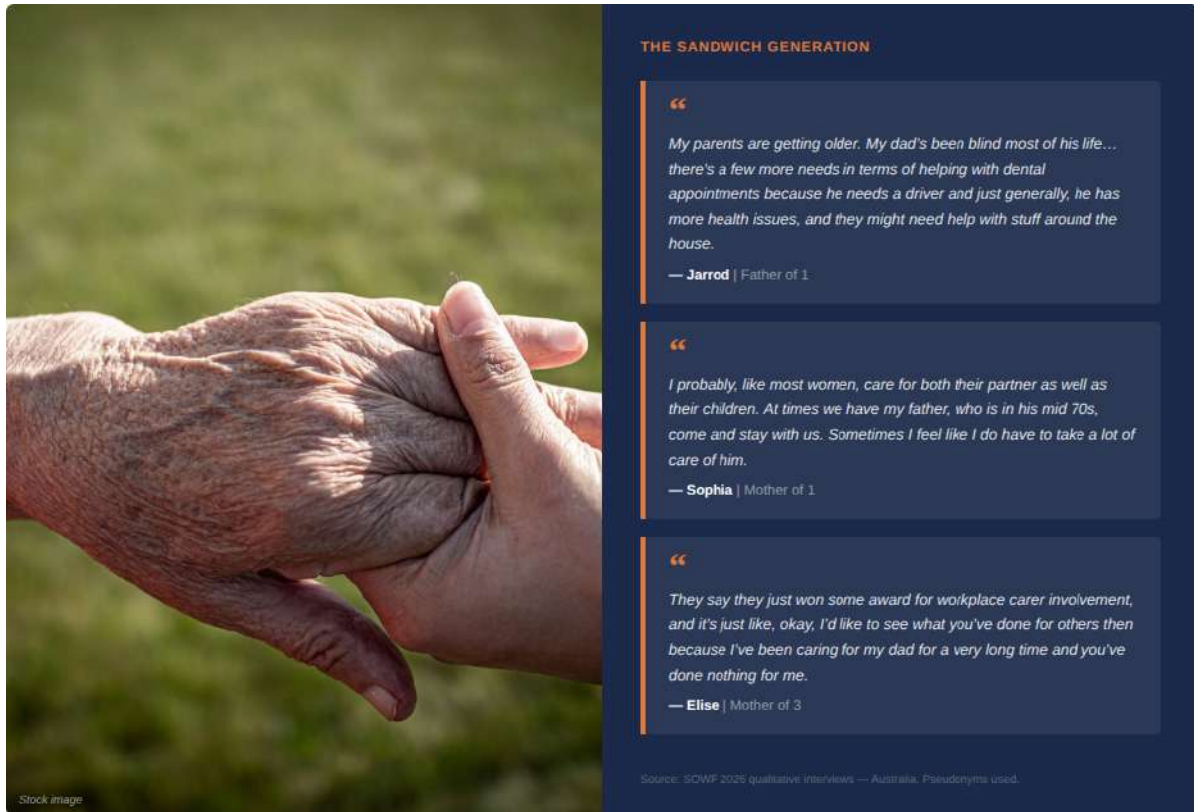
Figure 11. Who Else Are Parents Caring For?



Note: Figure reflects percentage caring for each group. Respondents could select multiple categories. Percentages do not sum to 100%.

These additional roles increase parents' overall care load. We found that fathers who were caring for people other than their children were more likely to report that they worry constantly about their future and their family's financial future than fathers who did not provide care for others (75% vs 65%) - a 10-percentage point gap.

Qualitative accounts highlighted how caregiving spans generations and extended beyond what policy and public discussion typically recognise. As outlined by one father, Scott: *"You hear about a term often referred to with women, the sandwich generation, I was definitely living that. I was trying to look after my family, trying to hold down a job full time and I was getting just random phone calls you know. The ER would ring me and go, your parents showed up in an ambulance, and they don't know why they're here, and it was like, what happened to them? There goes today's productivity. So, you know, I would get quite stressed around that at times, and then that obviously, going to my cobweb analogy, meant that if you pull the strings on this side of your emotional well or whatever, it does drag it in somewhere else. So yeah, it certainly did impact my parenting"*.

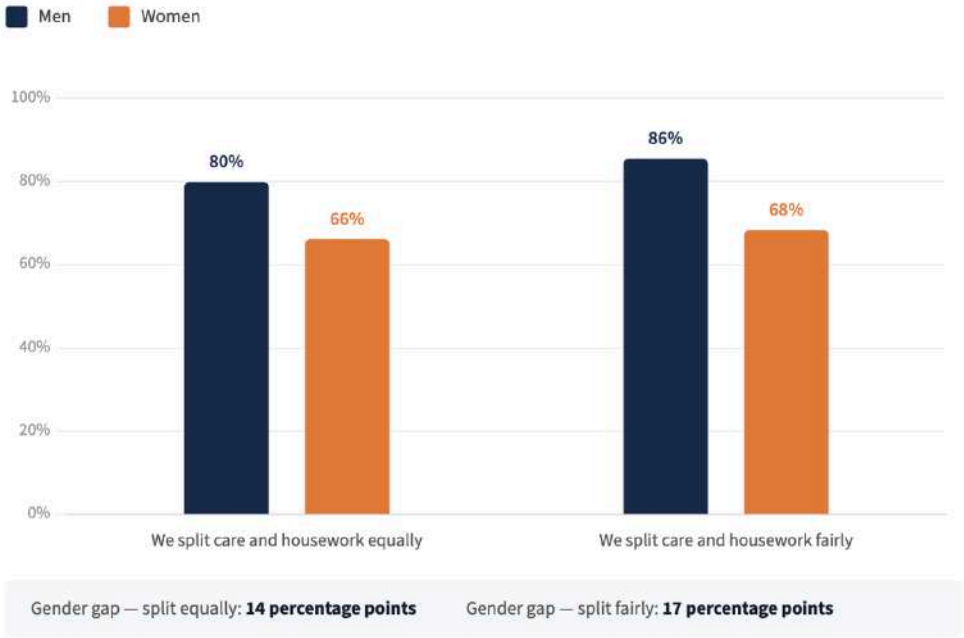


4.2 Who Does What? Division of Care and Housework

For fathers and mothers with current or former partners, 76% report splitting care and housework equally, and 80% report splitting it fairly. However, these aggregate figures mask a substantial gender perception gap. That is, **men are more likely than women to perceive the division as both equal and fair**. Specifically, 80% of men report splitting care equally compared to 66% of women - a 14-percentage-point gap. The fairness gap is even larger: **86% of men perceive the division as fair, compared to only 68% of women** - a 17-percentage-point difference (Figure 12). These findings indicate that reported equality does not necessarily translate into shared perceptions of equality or fairness.

This perception gap suggests that even when Australian couples report nominally "equal" divisions, women experience those arrangements as less fair than men do. This discrepancy may reflect aspects of caregiving not fully captured in survey measures of "equal" division - such as coordination, planning, emotional labour, or responsibility for anticipating needs - which can shape how arrangements are experienced.

Figure 12. Perception of Equal and Fair Division of Care by Gender



Note: Figure represents percentage of partnered respondents who agree or strongly agree. Excludes respondents without a current or former partner.

The findings expose a clear tension: although many parents describe care as equally divided, women are consistently less likely than men to experience those arrangements as fair. This tension between reported equality and experienced fairness is also reflected in the interview data. As outlined by two interview participants who are part of a couple and who were interviewed separately as part of this research:

SAME HOUSEHOLD, DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES

When “equal” doesn’t feel equal

Liam and Claudia are married and were interviewed separately. Their accounts of the same household illustrate the perception gap that emerged across the survey data: what one partner describes as shared, the other experiences as uneven.

HIS ACCOUNT

“

House, work, it's a mix of who does dishes and vacuuming, generally me, cleaning bathrooms and other things, it's a mix. Washing, it's a mix, sometimes more one-sided, depending on who's owning that the most... It's never feeling like it's fair for anyone. I think that's a problem, because at some point someone's doing more of it depending on the situation.

— Liam | Father of 2

HER ACCOUNT

“

My husband helps where he can with all those different chores, but just probably not as many hours on it as I do, and I run a lot of errands. And during the holidays I try to juggle, well, both of us try to juggle, caregiving and work at the same time. I also have some responsibilities to take my kids to and from health appointments that they attend. So yeah, it's a busy life.

— Claudia | Mother of 2

The perception gap in practice: Liam describes a “mix” and acknowledges fairness is elusive. Claudia names the specifics — errands, health appointments, hours — that tip the balance. Both see effort; only one carries the weight of coordination.

Underpinning these dynamics, **a notable majority of women (74%) agreed that they are a better caregiver than their partner, compared to 52% of men.** This perceived competence gap may function as both a cause and consequence of unequal care division: when one partner is widely understood by both parties to be the more capable caregiver, the arrangement that follows tends to reflect and reinforce that assumption. Notably, this finding sits alongside evidence that 94% of fathers report their partner sees them as a competent caregiver, suggesting that the issue is not one of perceived incompetence but of comparative advantage - a framing that can quietly legitimise unequal distributions of labour.

These perception gaps are not merely attitudinal; they have material consequences for how parents restructure their working lives. As we will detail further in a later section, 60% of parents report reducing their work hours due to caregiving, and 48% have changed jobs to gain flexibility. Critically, the type of sacrifice is gendered: women were more likely to reduce work hours (68% vs 56%), while men were more likely to work overtime (70% vs 53%). These divergent responses reinforce the very arrangements that produce the perception gap in the first place.

4.3 Talking About Care: Communication and Conflict in the Household

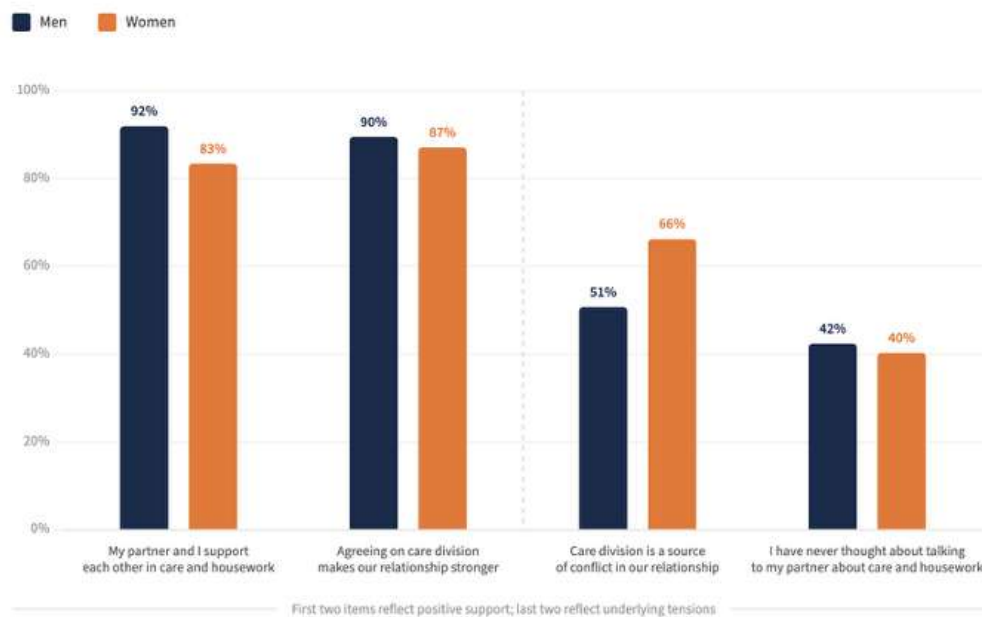
Women report somewhat higher rates of conflict (66% vs. 51%) in relation to care division. The data reveal communication barriers further complicating negotiation: **42% of parents never thought about discussing division with their partner.** Critically, 38% of parents feel unable to talk due to their partner's higher income (men 35%, women 45%), and 38% cite their partner's greater caregiving experience as a barrier (men 39%, women 36%).

Fathers were more than twice as likely as mothers to report that they would like extra help or support to help them manage their caregiving responsibilities - but feel that "it is not the norm here" (16% vs 7%), suggesting that normative expectations - whether from workplaces, communities, or within the household itself - may constrain fathers' willingness to seek a different arrangement, even when they recognise the need for one.

The qualitative interviews illuminated how these dynamics play out in practice. For many, care arrangements were shaped less by open negotiation than by financial pragmatism. As Jarrod (Father of 1) explained: *"It was definitely talked about because at the end of the day it came down to finances - financially we were better off with me working full time and my wife taking the extended maternity carer's leave."* Yet even where arrangements were discussed, much of the ongoing labour remained unacknowledged. As Lauren (Mother of 2) observed: *"It's invisible, right? A lot of the work you do is probably invisible. People don't see you do it all, you don't talk about it all."* This invisibility may help explain

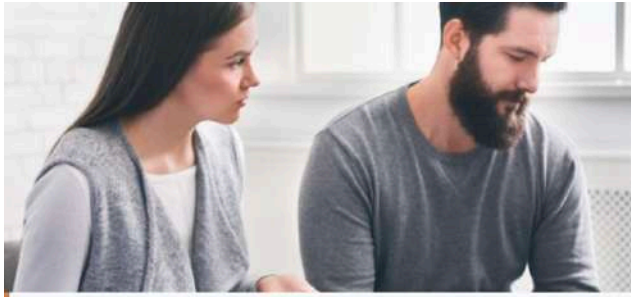
why so many parents reported never having thought about discussing care division with their partner - when the work itself goes unseen, the conversation about sharing it may never arise.

Figure 13. Partner Support and Tensions Around Caregiving by Gender



Note: Figure represents the percentage of partnered respondents who agree or strongly agree with each statement.

Critically, statistical analysis revealed that **participants with poor couple communication placed a significantly lower value on care, and they reported significantly higher levels of distress.** These findings suggest that caregiving arrangements are not only about task allocation, but about negotiation, power, and perceived legitimacy within relationships.



“

The biggest challenge has been the lack of alignment between my ex-partner and myself — overcoming the conflict that we have, to try to align on how we want to raise her. Just aligning on simple things, like how she should behave in certain scenarios, how she should clean things up in the house. I think it would be good to have some support around how you can align with your partner in spite of having all these challenges.

— Leo | Father of 1 COMMUNICATION & CONFLICT

FATHERS & COUPLE COMMUNICATION

1 in 2

fathers say care division is a source of conflict in their relationship

42%

have never thought about discussing care division with their partner

39%

feel unable to raise it because their partner has more caregiving experience

Parents who reported a greater number of caregiving burdens also tended to value caregiving less and reported poorer communication with their partner about care and housework, suggesting that as the weight of caregiving responsibilities increases, the capacity, or opportunity, to discuss and negotiate those responsibilities with a partner may diminish.



”

I think parenting is exhausting and I think it can so easily lead to burnout... It's just too much... it can really drive a wedge between parents. It can be very, very stressful, even when there are shared ideas about what the parenting will be and what the roles will be.

— Oliver | Father of 2

PARENTAL BURNOUT & RELATIONSHIP STRAIN

5. The Squeeze: Time, Work, and Financial Pressures on Caregiving

While many parents report strong caregiving identity and confidence, their ability to participate fully in daily care is also shaped by time constraints, workplace design, and economic pressures. This section examines the structural conditions that influence caregiving participation - including time insufficiency, employment demands, financial strain, and access to support - and reveals how some families experience greater pressures.

5.1 Time Pressure and Work-Care Conflict

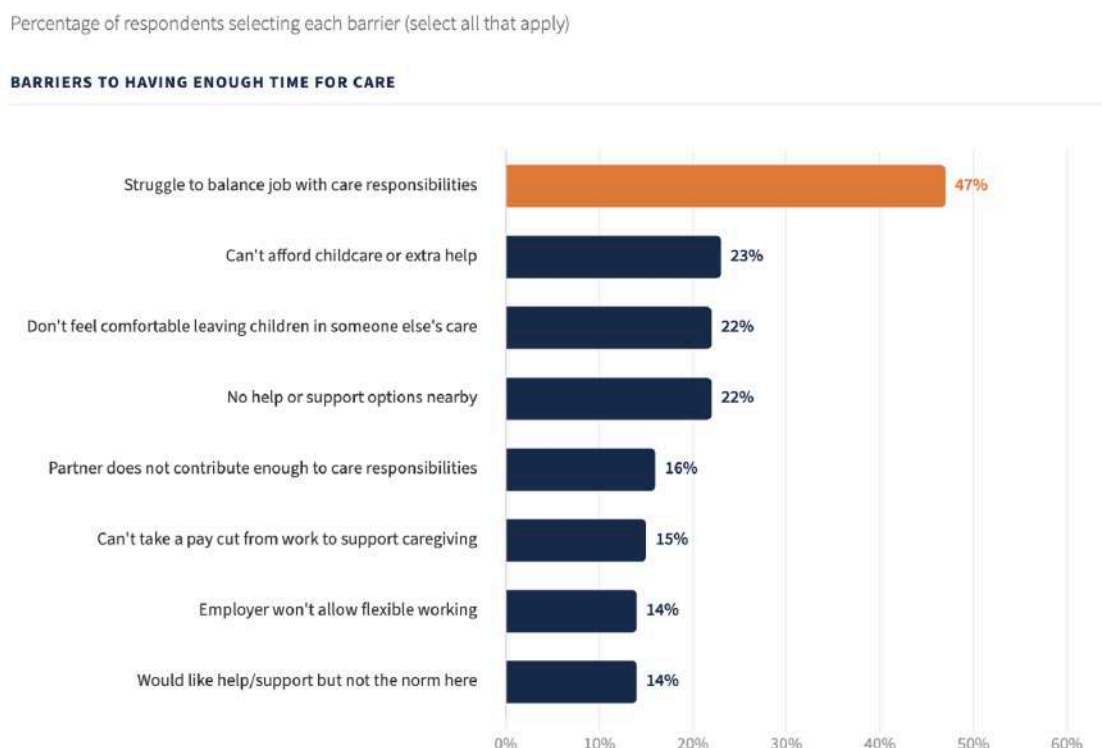
Time emerged as one of the most immediate constraints on caregiving. **Only 19% of parents reported having enough time to care for their family** - meaning that for the vast majority, time scarcity is not an occasional frustration but a persistent feature of daily life. This is particularly important given that time spent with children was identified by both fathers and mothers as a central dimension of parenting. The gap between that aspiration and the reality of time-pressured family life sits at the heart of the challenges explored in this section. **Notably, of those parents who reported they are not planning to have any more children, 37% rated career aspirations and work-life balance as an influential factor in that decision.**

Employment structures often limit how much time parents are able to devote to family responsibilities (Ewald et al., 2025; Gatrell et al., 2022). Long working hours, inflexible scheduling, and the expectation of workplace availability outside contracted hours have been identified as key structural barriers to parental involvement in caregiving, with fathers in particular facing strong normative pressure to demonstrate commitment through time at work rather than time at home (Churchill & Craig, 2022; Ewald et al., 2022; Kaufman, 2018). For those families with both parents working full-time the pressure was amplified. As Claudia, one of the mothers (who worked full-time) who was interviewed

described: "It feels sometimes for us like the kids have two dads. And we're missing a wife or a mother. We joke around sometimes in the morning when we're both getting ready for work... that we need a wife, even though I'm the wife."

Overall, work-care conflict emerged as a common experience, with a substantial proportion of parents indicating that they struggle to balance their job with caregiving responsibilities.

Figure 14. Why Parents Don't Have Enough Time for Caregiving

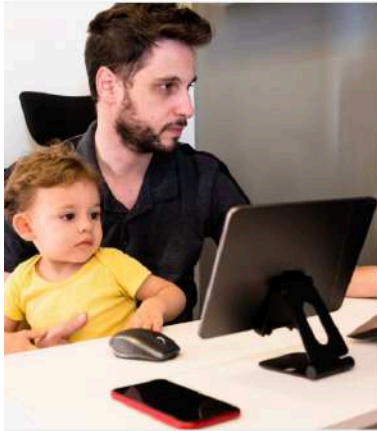


The distribution of time barriers was broadly similar across men and women. Age differences were more pronounced: **parents aged 26–40 reported significantly more reasons for not having enough time for caregiving than those in older age groups**, suggesting that time scarcity may be particularly acute during the peak caregiving years when work and family demands most intensely overlap. These findings position time pressure as a structural constraint shaped by employment intensity and caregiving load during early and mid-parenthood. This was also reflected in the interview data:



Voices from the data: Time pressure and work-care conflict

Fathers described the challenge of balancing employment, family time, and personal life.



Trying to find the balance of having free time, spending time with my friends or family, but also looking out for my little one as well. I think that's a challenge.

— Robert | Father of 1

You have all the work pressure and the work-life balance you've got to manage, as well as trying to manage the relationship with the child.

— Jarrod | Father of 1

I think the problem with this day and age is there's not enough time to have a proper family balance. Everyone's got to work.

— Liam | Father of 2

The finding that **47% of fathers and 46% of mothers agreed that they struggle to balance paid work with care responsibilities** highlights the way in which paid work can interfere with caregiving. A finding that is also reflected in the literature surrounding Australian parents (Ewald et al., 2023; Guo & Wang, 2025; Hokke et al., 2024).



47%

of Australian fathers **struggle to balance their job with care responsibilities**

Beyond general work-care conflict, structural barriers within workplaces were also evident. A notable proportion of parents reported that their employer does not allow flexible working arrangements (14%) or that receiving additional support for caregiving is

“not the norm” (14%). These responses indicate that caregiving limitations are not simply individual time-management issues but are embedded in organisational and cultural expectations and employment norms – a finding which is replicated in the literature (see Ewald et al., 2023; 2024).

When workplace structures do not accommodate caregiving, parents respond by leaving. **Nearly half of all parents (48%) reported changing jobs specifically to gain flexibility for caregiving**, and more than a third **(37%) had left a job entirely because of care demands**.



“

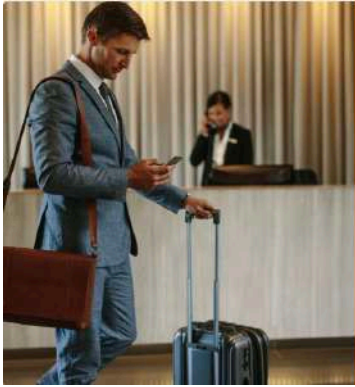
The biggest challenge is balancing work demands and rising costs with access to quality, affordable childcare — flexible support for working parents is urgently needed across Australia.

— **Father** | Survey respondent

WORK-LIFE BALANCE & FLEXIBILITY

Stock image

Six in ten parents (60%) had reduced their work hours. These are not marginal adjustments, they represent substantial career disruptions with lasting consequences for earnings, superannuation, and progression. The specific barriers to adopting flexibility for fathers’ caregiving were articulated by one of the mothers - who was part of a couple interviewed for the research:



Workplaces and workplace policies are still a bit of a barrier for dads. And even though sometimes we have some policies in place, there's unspoken rules or expectations within a workplace, and I think also social norms for dads around being providers, and also that their identities are more tied up in that in terms of masculine norms, which are shaped slowly, and also need changing.

— **Rebecca** | Mother of 2

WORKPLACE NORMS & FATHERHOOD

Source: SOWF 2025 qualitative interviews — Australia. Pseudonyms used.

Many of the fathers' narratives also revealed the relationship between working and masculine ideals – which has been identified within the literature as one of the key barriers to men modifying their work for the purposes of caregiving (Borgkvist et al, 2018; Ewald & Hogg, 2020; Ewald et al., 2024). As described by Liam, even when he was unwell, he felt a pressure to continue working:

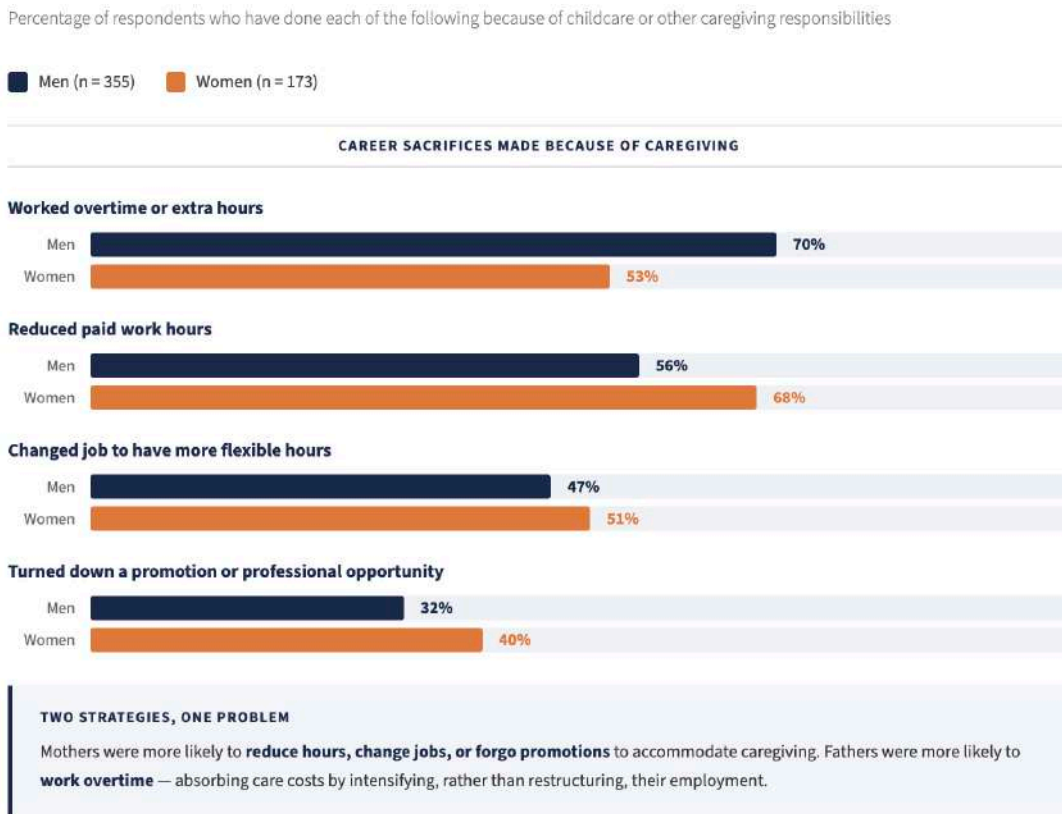


It's very much a male thing to do, to try and grow your career and provide for the family... If you have any impediment to being able to work, you do feel stressed with that sort of dynamic where everyone's still relying on you. There is no way out of that — it doesn't matter how you feel or what you have, you have to get up and do it... You suck it up, you go to work, you take medication to make it work. There's no time to stop, heal, pick yourself up.

— **Liam** | Father of 2 (Millennial)

MEN'S EXPECTATION TO WORK

Figure 15. Career Sacrifices Made for Caregiving Purposes by Gender



The findings suggest that workplace design, including inflexible hours, limited control over scheduling, and expectations around availability and men’s commitment to paid work - shapes the extent to which parents can participate in daily caregiving. For many families, the challenge is not willingness to care, but the structure of paid work itself. Despite the challenges these parents face, **87% of fathers and 88% of mothers still reported that Caregiving is worth giving up some career opportunities for.**

5.2 The Care Tax: How Caregiving Reshapes Working Lives

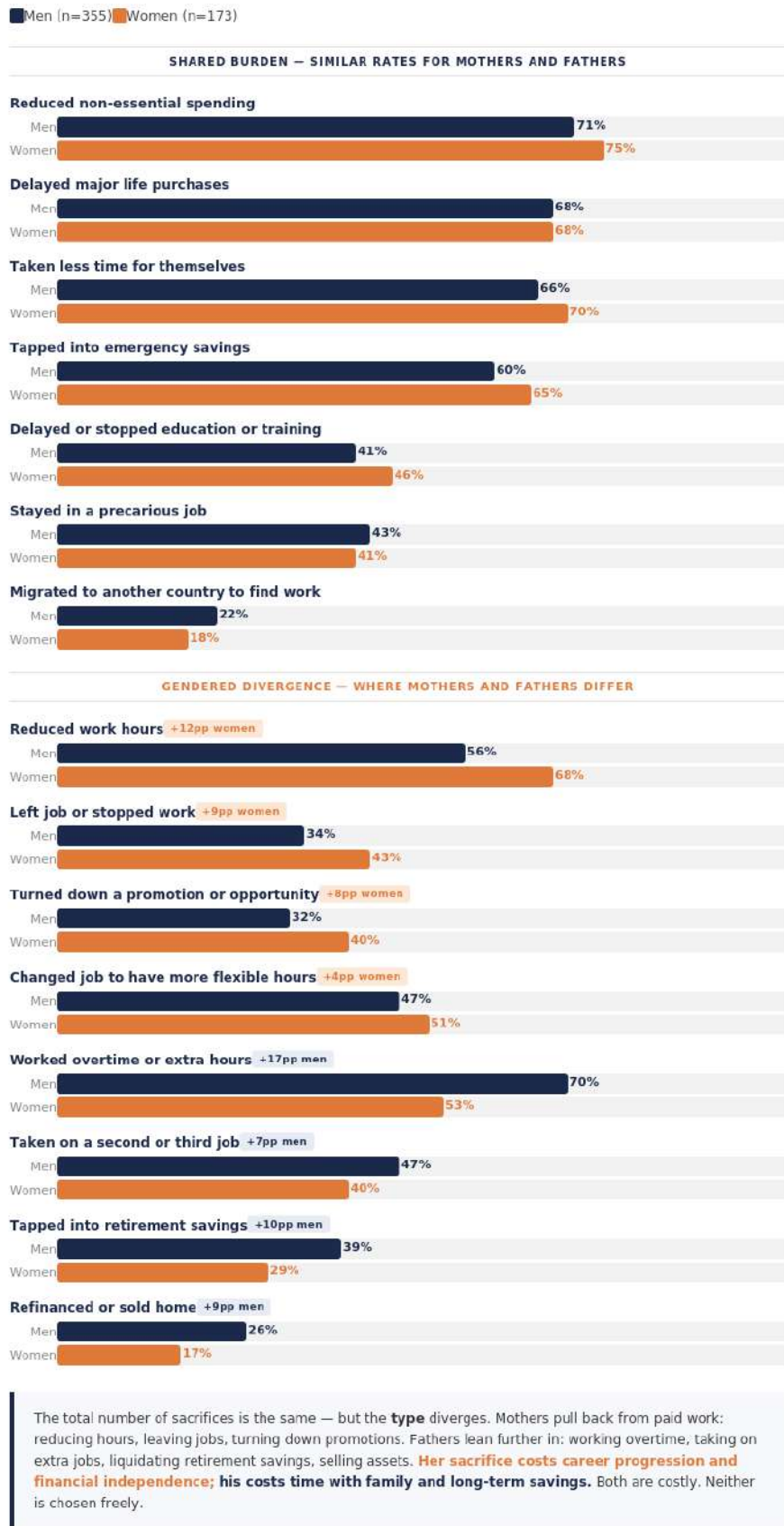
Based on the results of survey questions asking whether parents had made any changes to their work, finances, or personal life because of their caregiving responsibilities; there was evidence of what might be called a "care tax" - the cumulative cost that caregiving extracts from parents' careers, finances, and personal wellbeing.

The sacrifices are widespread. Across the full sample, **72% of parents had reduced non-essential spending, 68% had delayed major life purchases, and 67% reported taking less time for themselves.** More than six in ten (62%) had drawn on emergency savings, and 60% had reduced their work hours. **Nearly half (48%) had changed jobs to gain flexibility, 42% had stayed in a precarious job to meet care demands, and 36% had tapped into retirement savings** - indicating that the care tax is not a single trade-off but a pattern of compounding costs.



Notably, the overall burden count did not differ substantially between men and women; **both mothers and fathers are making substantial sacrifices. However, the nature of those sacrifices diverges along gendered lines.** Women were more likely than men to have reduced their work hours because of caregiving (68% vs 56%) - the classic part-time adjustment that enables more care but comes at the cost of earnings, superannuation, and career progression (see Ewald et al, 2025). Men, by contrast, were more likely to have worked overtime (70% vs 53%) and to have refinanced or sold their home (26% vs 17%) - responses that intensify financial provision rather than increasing direct care.

Figure 16. Sacrifices by Gender



The patterns reveal a gendered logic embedded in the care tax. When care demands increase, women pull back from paid work to absorb the care directly; men lean further into paid work – or - liquidate assets to absorb the cost financially. Both responses are costly, but they operate in opposite directions: her sacrifice makes her more available for care and less financially independent; his makes him more financially indispensable and less available for care. The arrangement becomes self-reinforcing, regardless of whether either partner intended it.

These divergent patterns - women reducing hours and forgoing progression, men intensifying work - are not neutral. They are a direct mechanism through which the gender pay gap is reproduced at the household level, and through which care remains structurally undervalued as a form of labour.

5.3 Financial Insecurity

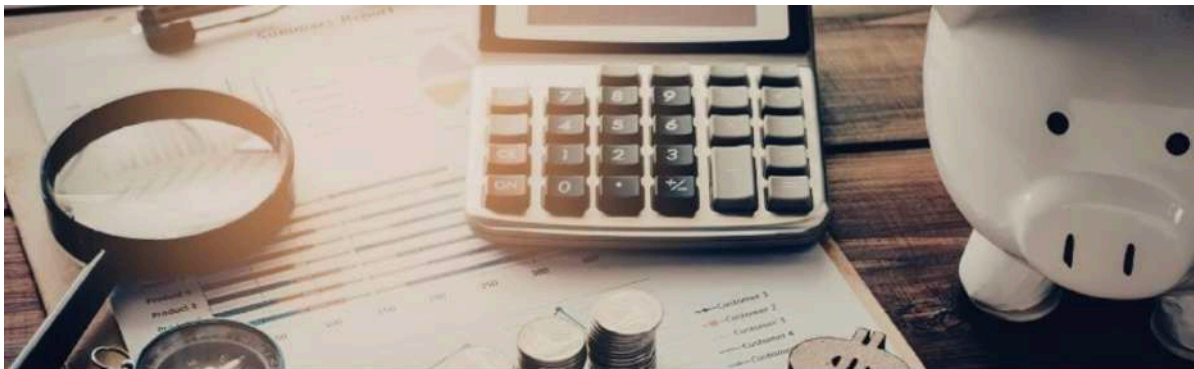
As outlined in an earlier section, parents worries and hopes for their children often centered on financial aspects. However, parents in this study also reported experiencing financial strain linked to caregiving responsibilities. **In fact, 72% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that they worried constantly about their own and their family's financial future.** On this question, there was also a notable gender difference, with 79% of mothers versus 68% of fathers agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement (an 11-percentage point gap).

Financial strain was much more commonly reported among women than men across a number of questions. **Four in ten women (40%) described themselves as either being in financial trouble or being financially insecure, compared to one in four men (26%).** In contrast, men were more likely to report financial stability, security or prosperity (44% vs. 28%), indeed, men were substantially more likely than women to report that their financial conditions are excellent (62% vs 43%); highlighting a notable gender gap in perceived financial status.

“ The cost of living has risen so dramatically that the pressure to work for extra income but also be a carer at home is so much.

— Mother | Survey respondent (Millennial) **FINANCIAL PRESSURE**

A strong majority of parents agreed that their generation faces greater financial insecurity than their fathers' generation, with women more likely than men to agree or strongly agree with this sentiment (83% vs. 76%).



It was always a struggle for a lot of people, I'm sure, but it's more of a struggle now than it's ever been and it's only going to get worse.

— Liam | Father

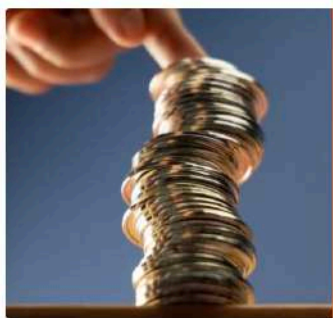
FINANCIAL PRECARIETY

Economic precarity varied by age, parents aged 26–55, those in peak caregiving years - reported significantly higher financial strain compared to the oldest participants (aged 56 and over). This pattern likely reflects the convergence of childcare costs, employment intensity, and family expenses during early and mid-parenthood, creating a period of heightened vulnerability.

The Burden of Care Is Shared: But Driven by Economic Insecurity

The overall weight of burden appears broadly shared across mothers and fathers. However, the issue that predicted the burden was economic precarity itself. Parents who

reported higher levels of financial insecurity also reported significantly greater work and career sacrifices due to caregiving. This relationship was observed across the sample of mothers and fathers. Importantly, the subjective experience of feeling economically insecure, rather than household income alone, predicted caregiving burden, in terms of making more sacrifices to sustain their caregiving responsibilities.



Because of the cost of living crisis and inflation it has made it harder to buy essentials to care for my kids and parents.

— **Father** | Survey respondent (Gen Z)

MULTI-DIRECTIONAL CARE

Source: SOWF 2026 Survey — Australia.

5.4 Precarity and the Reinforcement of Traditional Norms

The same pattern regarding insecurity held for traditional gender norms: it was perceived insecurity, not income, that predicted stronger endorsement of the breadwinner–caregiver model. This distinction matters for policy. The pressures shaping caregiving arrangements are not simply about how much families earn, but about how economically secure they feel - a perception shaped by housing costs, job stability, and the sense that one setback could destabilise the household.

Economic pressure did not only shape practical caregiving burdens - it also shaped attitudes about gender and care. Greater economic precarity was associated with less value being placed on caregiving and with stronger endorsement of traditional caregiving norms, including the view that fathers should prioritise financial provision and mothers should lead daily care. This association remained significant after accounting for household income and was observed among men and women in the sample. This finding suggests a reinforcing dynamic: when families feel financially insecure, they are more likely to revert to traditional gender arrangements as a stabilising strategy. Under

conditions of uncertainty, the male-breadwinner model appears to regain legitimacy - even among parents who otherwise express support for shared caregiving.

“ *Not enough time and cost of living require paid work.*

— **Father** | Survey respondent (Gen Z) **PRECARITY & NORMS**

Nearly two-thirds of men (63%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I don’t think I am man enough unless I can provide for my family” further indicating that provider identity remains deeply tied to masculine self-worth. This belief was more common among financially insecure fathers (76%) than financially stable ones (54%), again, suggesting that economic precarity intensifies an already widespread norm. However, individual context also shapes the way parents either align with or challenge traditional gender norms – with some stating a need for both parents to work:

VOICES FROM THE DATA

Financial pressure and the provider role — in their own words

Parents described how economic strain shapes expectations around who should earn and who should care.

“ *It is a lot of psychological pressure as the male provider. I think it probably does weigh on a lot of men — if they’re not making enough money, the whole family situation can fall apart pretty quickly. There’s no safety net. If they lose their job, their family’s in trouble pretty quickly. I think everyone’s got a different fear in the back of their mind every day. So they make sure they go and do what they’ve got to do to ensure their family continues to run.*

— **Liam** | Father of 2

“ *I think it really depends on your economic circumstances and level of education. It might just be an economic thing — money is difficult now. You need two jobs to run a household.*


— **Scott** | Father of 2

“ *I have an inbuilt fear — a terror of, what do we do if he loses his job, even though I have a permanent job. I don’t know where that comes from. I think it’s very much a cultured sort of belief. I don’t agree with it, but it’s the default and normal.*

— **Sophia** | Mother of 1

“ *Fathers can’t provide for the kids alone — mothers can’t be sitting at home and fathers can’t afford to provide for the family either. So you’ve got to have both of them taking on pretty much the same role as providers.*

— **Mark** | Father of 2



Source: SQWF 2026 qualitative photo-elicitation interviews — Australia. Pseudonyms used. Quotes lightly edited for readability.

Together, the findings indicate that economic insecurity amplifies both the practical and normative costs of caregiving. Financial strain increases work-care sacrifices and simultaneously strengthens traditional role expectations for some, creating a cycle that can constrain fathers' caregiving participation despite expressed interest and identity alignment.

5.5 Lone Parent Families: Amplified Burden

When looking at lone parent families specifically, they face amplified financial and other constraints: 21% report they cannot take a pay cut (vs 14% partnered), 21% say their partner/ex-partner doesn't contribute to caregiving responsibilities (vs 15%), and 43% report they are financially insecure (vs 27% partnered). Lone mothers are the most financially exposed group: 54% are financially insecure or in trouble (vs 36% lone fathers, 35% partnered women, 24% partnered men).

Lone parents were also more likely to have worked overtime (73% vs 62% partnered) and to have stayed in a precarious job to meet care demands (49% vs 40%).

Home ownership is perceived to be out of reach for 66% of lone parents versus 51% of partnered parents, as was highlighted by one of the single fathers interviewed, who claimed that if he were ever able to afford a house it will be outside of the metropolitan area:



“

This is probably about my fears because, it's not only about not being able to afford a home so that I can have stability for my kids, but more that I can leave a home to my kids, that is more important. Because as you know, with wealth polarising the way it is and with the price of property just being ridiculous, I'm very concerned that our future will be one of a new underclass of people who don't have property... I want that for my kids, and I want them also just to be able to have a home. You know, I just want them to be able to have that. So that's probably my biggest concern as a parent, separate from parenting, is just economically how to be able to support them and create stability for them without owning a house because it's very likely the way it's going. If I am able to afford a house on one income, it's going to be in the country, it won't be in the city.

— Sam | Single father of 2

FINANCIAL SECURITY & HOUSING

Lone fathers face distinct vulnerabilities that warrant specific attention. Male lone-parent families are projected to be the fastest-growing family type in Australia, with an anticipated increase of between 40% and 69% by 2046 (ABS, 2024). Yet the support landscape remains largely oriented toward mothers. In our data, more than half of all fathers had never been made aware of any parenting support services, and only 14% reported receiving all the support they needed as a new parent. For lone fathers - who lack the buffering effect of a co-parent - this gap is likely to be even more consequential. Research has outlined that lone fathers lack social support, leaving them at an increased risk of negative physical and mental health outcomes including increased mortality risks (Kong & Kim, 2015; Chiu et al., 2018). As the number of lone-father households grows, the absence of father-inclusive support services represents not only a gap in service provision but a public health concern.



“

From a governmental type of view, I don't know if there is support out there. I've never gone looking for it... But from a parenting perspective, I suppose most of the support I get is from either friends or family.

— John | Single father of 1

THE SUPPORT GAP

6. Care and Wellbeing

Beyond its economic and structural dimensions, caregiving has meaningful implications for parents' psychological wellbeing and relationship dynamics. This section examines how caregiving burden and sacrifices, couple communication, and caregiving values are associated with care and wellbeing within families.

6.1 Parenting and Psychological Distress

Parents who carried a greater number of caregiving burdens and those experiencing poor couple communication reported significantly higher levels of psychological distress; reinforcing the message earlier in the report that the cumulative load of caregiving matters. The finding also highlights the importance of the quality of couple communication.

Men in this sample reported significantly higher levels of distress than women. This could relate to role related stress – as fathers appear caught between an enduring provider identity and growing expectations to be emotionally present and actively involved in care, a tension that has no straightforward resolution.

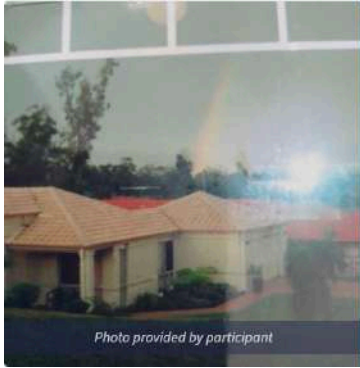
However, the data also revealed an important protective factor that operated differently by gender. **For fathers, placing a high value on caregiving was associated with significantly lower distress, but for mothers, no such effect was observed.** In other

words, fathers who saw caregiving as central to their identity - rather than peripheral to their role as a provider - reported meaningfully lower psychological distress. For mothers, variation in how much they valued caregiving did not have the same buffering effect, possibly because caregiving is already so embedded in maternal identity.

This finding suggests that encouraging men to see caregiving as a core part of who they are may have real mental health benefits - and that programs and policies affirming the value of fathers' caregiving roles may be protecting wellbeing as well as promoting equity. However, given that fathers in this sample reported significantly higher distress than mothers, affirming caregiving identity must be accompanied by genuine support structures - not simply an expansion of expectations without the resources to meet them.

Qualitative interviews offered texture to these findings. For some fathers, caregiving provided genuine psychological grounding - a counterweight to the pressures of daily life. As Leo, a single father, described that even though parenting comes with "*challenges... at the same time I feel very peaceful when I'm with her (daughter)*". Yet this protective effect depends heavily on having adequate support. Sam, also a single father, described the gap he experienced plainly, explaining that when he was struggling to manage with the pressures of co-parenting with his estranged partner, which he described as "*a really scary time*" - he was unable to find adequate support: "*So now the only thing we have is Men's Line, and I've called that before...it wasn't overly helpful...[we need] something that's more geared toward parents...you do get resources online, but sometimes you're going through something particularly hard and you just want to speak to somebody.*"

For one migrant father, Amir, he described navigating significant challenges with his youngest son's mental health, yet his connection with his children and some of the support he received from a range of services remained a source of steadiness and hope.



“

After the rain there is sunshine and then there's a rainbow... even though there's rain and other things, things change, things are not always the same.

— Amir | Father of 3

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

SOWF 2026 Qualitative Interviews – Australia

Together, these voices reflect what the data suggests: that caring deeply about fatherhood can buffer against distress, but only when the infrastructure exists to sustain it.

6.2 The Hidden Toll

Critically, a majority of parents reported experiences associated with psychological strain over the last two weeks. **One in four parents (25%) reported frequently worrying about bad things happening - such as family tragedy, job loss, or illness** - on five or more days in the two weeks prior to the survey, with no meaningful difference between fathers and mothers (24% and 26% respectively). **Nearly one in four parents (24%) reported experiencing physical symptoms of anxiety** - such as a racing heart, breathlessness, or feeling faint - on five or more days in the two weeks prior to the survey, with similar rates among fathers and mothers. A minority of parents - around three in ten - reported experiencing thoughts of suicide in the previous two weeks; this was more common among fathers (33%) than mothers (23%); a concerning finding that warrants attention.

Alcohol use showed a clear gender pattern: more than half of fathers (52%) reported drinking five or more drinks on a single occasion at least once in the fortnight, compared to 28% of mothers, and fathers were more likely to report that alcohol had affected their ability to meet normal responsibilities (38% vs 24%).



*Parenting is **exhausting** and it can so easily lead to **burnout**... it can be overwhelming where you kind of can't maintain your face. It's just too much. So I think you have to be so careful.*

— Oliver | Father of 2

These findings - elevated male distress, heavy alcohol use among more than half of fathers, and women's substantially lower relationship satisfaction - do not sit in isolation. They describe households under pressure: financially strained, time-poor, and organised around gendered arrangements that concentrate burden unevenly. When stress is high, alcohol use is normalised, relationship satisfaction is asymmetric, and care is distributed unequally, the conditions that sustain respectful and safe relationships are harder to maintain. Policies that reduce economic precarity, support fathers' genuine involvement in care from the earliest stages and make shared caregiving practically possible are not only equity interventions - but they are also investments in the stability and quality of family relationships.

Life Satisfaction: A Mixed Picture

Despite these concerns, as highlighted in the figure above, most parents report moderate to high life satisfaction. On a 0–10 life ladder, parents averaged 6.4, with just over half (53%) scoring 7 or above. However, 17% scored 4 or below, suggesting a substantial minority are struggling. Men reported higher life satisfaction than women (6.6 vs 5.9). This finding, alongside the finding that men also reported higher levels of distress, may reflect the way in which the provider role can provide a sense of meaning and satisfaction ("I am fulfilling my purpose") while also generating significant stress.

The largest gender gap in levels of satisfaction was in relationship with partner satisfaction - 85% of fathers were satisfied or very satisfied, compared to 73% of mothers, with mothers

nearly twice as likely to report dissatisfaction (27% vs 15%). Job satisfaction was the lowest-rated domain overall, again with mothers less satisfied than fathers (71% vs 77%).

VOICE FROM THE DATA — WORK & CAREGIVING

*Up until COVID, I was very much **career driven**... as soon as COVID hit, we had a big reflection... I changed my career and got out of the **fast-paced corporate world** and started working in health in the public sector, just to try and do a **full career reset**.*

— Jarrod | Father of 1

SOWF 2025 qualitative interviews — Australia. Pseudonym used.

7. The First Years: Parental Leave and Early Support

The first years of fatherhood are a critical intervention window. Research consistently shows that the role arrangements established in the earliest phases of parenthood tend to persist - when fathers are supported to be present and involved from the outset, they remain more engaged caregivers over time. When they are not, provider-only patterns set in and prove difficult to shift (Cabrera et al., 2008; OECD, 2016).

The data from this study suggest that window is poorly served in Australia - not because fathers were absent from the healthcare system, but because the system was likely not adequately oriented toward them as caregivers in their own right. When asked to reflect on the birth of their child, **82% of fathers agreed they had felt supported by the healthcare system or clinic around them when their first child was born** - a finding that likely reflects the general adequacy of clinical care for their partner and baby rather than support directed at fathers themselves. In support of this, within this study, **women reported feeling significantly more supported by the healthcare system / clinic around them when it came to having their first child** (this includes antenatal and postnatal care).

The gaps in support for fathers become visible when fathers are asked what they actually wanted. **Only 14% felt they received all the support they needed as a new parent.** When

asked what would have made a difference, the most commonly selected response was support from work (41%), **with more than a third (35%) wanting prenatal support from the healthcare system itself** - suggesting that even among those who felt broadly supported, something specific to their role as a father may have been missing. **Almost one in four (23%) would have liked access to a fathers' group.**

Australia, antenatal and postnatal services remain largely designed around mothers - fathers often arrive at parenthood without the practical knowledge, peer networks, or institutional support that might enable more confident caregiving involvement from the start. This context is essential for interpreting the parental leave findings that follow, showing low uptake, limited awareness of entitlements, and rapid return to provider mode are not simply individual choices. They are the predictable outcomes of a system that has never clearly signalled to fathers that their presence and their caregiving matter from the very beginning.

One of the interview participants, Sam, a single father, captured this plainly, describing how the green book - the physical record tracking a child's development through maternal health nurse appointments - is kept with the mother: *"Even things like the maternal health nurse appointments and just knowing the weight and all that stuff, which I want to know - I'm interested in that as well, but I don't have the green book."* His reflection on what that signals was candid: *"You kind of accept that you're not as important for those first couple of years... but it does feel silly that it is reinforced."* Fathers were present in the system; what was largely absent was support designed specifically for them.

Men's Engagement with Parental Leave

While parental leave is one of the most tangible structural supports available to new parents, men only accounted for 17% of all primary carer leave taken in Australia during 2023-2024 (WGEA, 2024) – with the vast majority taken by women. At the centre of this

issue is that parental leave has historically been structured around the assumption that it will be taken by women as primary carers and that men will act as secondary caregivers.

Further compounding this issue is that men have had access to very little father specific leave - initially just two weeks of means tested government-funded "Dad and Partner Pay"- until it was combined with Parental Leave Pay as a single payment for children born or adopted from 1 July 2023, with landmark reforms taking full effect in July 2026, whereby parents will then be able to share up to 26 weeks of paid parental leave (Australian Government, 2025).

Australia has for the large part been criticised for being one of the least generous providers of leave of all OECD countries - and the benefit is paid at the minimum wage, not wage replacement levels which is considered best practice (OECD, 2025). Furthermore, the means-tested 2 weeks for Dad and Partner pay – paid at minimum wage - was also labelled as one of the least generous father specific leave entitlements within the Westernised world.

An Awareness Gap

Many fathers in this sample became parents under a system that offered them minimal formal entitlements, with the assumption that parental leave was designed for mothers - and this context is essential for interpreting the findings below. Thus, even though 81% of men reported being fully informed about their parental leave entitlements, this likely reflects awareness of the well-known Dad and Partner Pay scheme rather than a comprehensive understanding of all available parental leave and other leave entitlements fathers can draw on. Indeed, men's awareness of parental leave entitlements has been outlined in the existing literature as a serious gap (see Ewald et al., 2020).

Qualitative interviews illustrated this awareness gap clearly. Some fathers assumed the two-week Dad and Partner Pay scheme remained the current standard, unaware of recent reforms and other arrangements men can adopt. Jason, reflecting on what fathers

are entitled to, said simply: *"I think two weeks is the dad pay - the government standard for dads."* Liam's experience pointed to a deeper problem: not only was his awareness of entitlements limited, it came too late to make a difference. As he recalled, *"I became aware of the two weeks paid parental leave, but I didn't know about it beforehand... the first time I had my daughter, there was nothing. I didn't get the parental one. I didn't know."* Together, these accounts suggest that for many fathers, the system's expansion has yet to penetrate everyday awareness - with real consequences for how much leave they take.

Across the full sample, 75% of respondents reported taking as much leave as they were allowed. However, a striking perception gap emerged between men and women. While **73% of fathers reported they had taken all available leave**, only **56% of women said their partner had done so** - a 17-percentage-point gap. Additionally, only **one in five fathers (20%) reported having access to parental leave to manage care for their child when young**. This raises an important question about whether fathers fully understand their entitlements and if they do understand them if they feel entitled to make use of them - and it highlights that many fathers did not have access to parental leave. In a policy environment where father-specific leave has been minimal and inconsistently offered, many fathers may believe they took "everything available" when what was available was very little.

1 THE PARENTAL LEAVE PERCEPTION GAP

"Did you / your partner take all the leave you were allowed?"

Comparing fathers' self-reports with mothers' reports about their partners

FATHERS SAY

73%

"I took all my leave"

17pp
GAP


MOTHERS SAY

56%

"My partner took all their leave"

Do fathers know what they're entitled to? In a system where father-specific leave has been minimal and inconsistently offered, many fathers may believe they took "everything available" when what was available was very little.

The qualitative data reinforced this: fathers described improvising rather than accessing formal entitlements. Sophia captured the issue well, recalling that her husband "would have been like, 'what, men can get parental leave?'" Tom similarly noted: "I don't think I even applied for it. I just had so much leave left over in my work and I just took it off."



VOICES FROM THE STUDY

Parental Leave Gap

“
No, I didn't take it [parental leave] full on. I maybe took like a few weeks here and there.
— ROBERT
Father | Daughter, age 3

“
The father can take up to **two weeks**, I think, back then — but unpaid. I asked my boss, can I use a sick day because we're giving birth? So I took one day, a sick day.
— MARK
Father | Son 18, Daughter 16

“
We just recently in the company instituted parental leave for males... **Certainly when I had my daughter, there wasn't anything available.**
— LEO
Father | Daughter, age 9

“
I don't think that parental leave existed for fathers back then. I mean, I think two weeks is the dad pay — the government standard for dads.
— JASON
Father | Son 12, Daughter 15

“
So even today you can get two weeks leave, but **it's out of your sick leave allocation for the partner**, which is pretty bizarre, but I've written plenty of emails to MPs and everyone else and no one seems keen to change it.
— JARROD
Father | Daughter, age 5

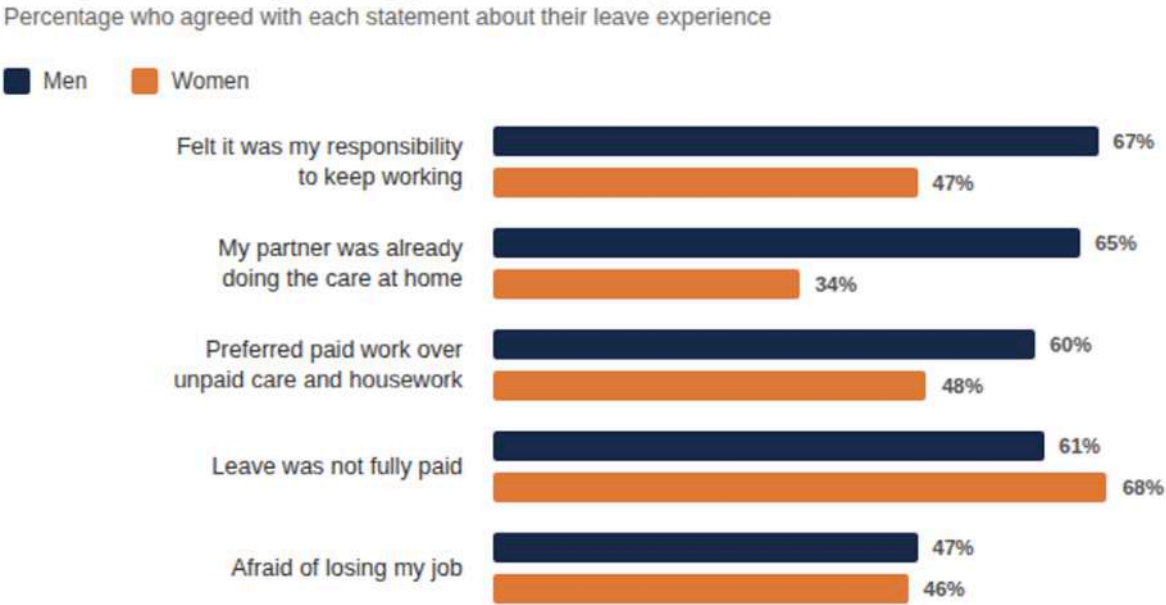
PARENTAL LEAVE — AWARENESS & ACCESS | INTERVIEW QUOTES

State of the World's Fathers 2026 — Australia

Accounts from the interviews illustrated the variety of leave experiences among fathers, and the constraints that shaped them. Many fathers took very little time at all - one mother recalled her husband returning to work after just three days (Lauren). Others had access to leave but did not use it in full: one father described being offered six to eight weeks but taking just over half (Ben). For some, the nature of their employment made the question almost irrelevant - one father working in a casual contract noted that with no fixed employment structure, the birth of his son was simply "*business as usual*" (Ben). Financial adequacy was also a barrier: one mother recalled her partner taking no more than two weeks across both children, in part because the government payment fell well short of what the family needed to cover living costs (Kara).

Clear gender differences also emerged in how parents negotiated and experienced parental leave. When asked what thoughts came to mind when taking parental leave, **men were much more likely to experience feeling it was their responsibility to keep working (67% vs 47%)**. Additionally, when asked about the types of support parents had access to for childcare, **men were more likely to report that their partner was already doing the care at home (65% vs 34%)**.

Figure 17. Thoughts and Feelings During Parental Leave by Gender



Critically, **only 10% of both men and women selected paternity leave as one of the top 5 supports that would make the biggest difference to their caregiving.** Yet the vast majority of both men and women (89% and 91%) agreed that leave helped them bond with their child and become a happier, healthier parent - suggesting that when fathers do take leave, they recognise its value.

"So that two weeks helped for me to bond. I think probably even longer, maybe four weeks from a dad's perspective would be great."

— Interview Participant: John, Father of 1

This gap between the low priority assigned to leave and the high value placed on it in retrospect - suggests that parental leave for men has either not yet registered for many fathers as something realistically available to them or a legitimate choice for their family, or they may be basing their answer off the Dad and Partner two week provision that has been in place over recent years. The implication is not that fathers don't want leave, but that they haven't been given adequate reason to expect it: a communication challenge as much as a policy one, requiring clearer messaging about what fathers are entitled to, and what they - and their families - stand to gain from taking it. Fathers may also be acutely aware of the career consequences of adopting parental leave or may not have access to employer funded leave - meaning leave would be paid above the government provisions.

8. Support, Systems, and the Case for Care Investment

This section examines parents' access to, and desire for, a range of supports to help them in their caregiving roles.

8.1 Where Do Parents Get Support From?

Only 16% of parents said they had received all the support they needed. Notably, women were more likely than men to say they had received all the support they needed (21% vs 14%). While most fathers reported enjoying caring for their children and feeling confident as caregivers, many lack access to formal support in that role. This support gap matters beyond equity - research shows that a significant number of fathers experience depression during the transition to parenthood (Cameron et al., 2016), yet fathers are far less likely than mothers to be screened or referred for support. That only 14% of fathers in this sample felt they received all the support they needed as a new parent is not just a service gap - it is a missed opportunity to protect the mental health of fathers, their partners, and their children.

“ Parenting today feels like a full-time job on top of a full-time job — we need more affordable, accessible support systems like childcare, mental health services, and family leave so we can raise healthy kids without burning out.

— Father | Survey respondent (Gen Z) **SUPPORT & POLICY**

Fewer than half of fathers (47%) were aware of any parenting information, services, or support specifically designed for fathers, and a similar proportion (42%) reported ever having been offered such support. This means that more than half of the fathers in this sample have neither been made aware of nor been offered father-specific services.

THE SUPPORT GAP — FATHERS ONLY

97%

of fathers **enjoy caring** for their children and feel **confident**

47%

are **aware** of any support services for fathers

42%

have ever been **offered** support as a father

When fathers were asked where they mainly access parenting information and support, fathers overwhelmingly relied on informal sources. Partners were the most commonly cited source (29%), followed by family members (24%) and online websites (16%).

VOICE FROM THE DATA — PARTNER SUPPORT

*That would largely be **my wife**... she's the one I'm closest to and is the mother of the children. She's very **considered and very balanced** with her thoughts and it tends to be quite evidence-based, which I appreciate.*

— **Scott** | Father of 2

SOWF 2025 qualitative interviews — Australia. Pseudonym used.

Formal services such as parenting services (9%), child health nurses (7%), and other fathers or father figures (3%) were far less commonly accessed, with the least accessed books (2%) and online videos/webinars/podcasts (less than 1%), and social media was only cited by 7% as being a main source of parenting information and support. That only 3% of fathers named other fathers as their main source of parenting support or information is striking. It points to a significant gap in peer-based learning among men - and aligns with what fathers themselves described in the interviews: an absence of structured spaces to connect with other fathers, share experiences, and navigate the challenges of fatherhood together.

VOICE FROM THE DATA — SUPPORT FOR FATHERS

*Peer support... it's **not something that happens as much in the fathering space** compared to in mothering, where mothers groups are **very much well established from birth**. I think setting up fathering groups wouldn't be a bad thing.*

— **Jarrod** | Father of 1

SOWF 2025 qualitative interviews — Australia. Pseudonym used.

Interview data also revealed that for some fathers, there was a sense that existing parenting supports did not address father specific concerns or their own specific needs.

VOICE FROM THE DATA — AWARENESS OF SUPPORT SERVICES

I haven't used a government service... Lifeline or Parents Advice or something like that. So far, they've been redundant to me.

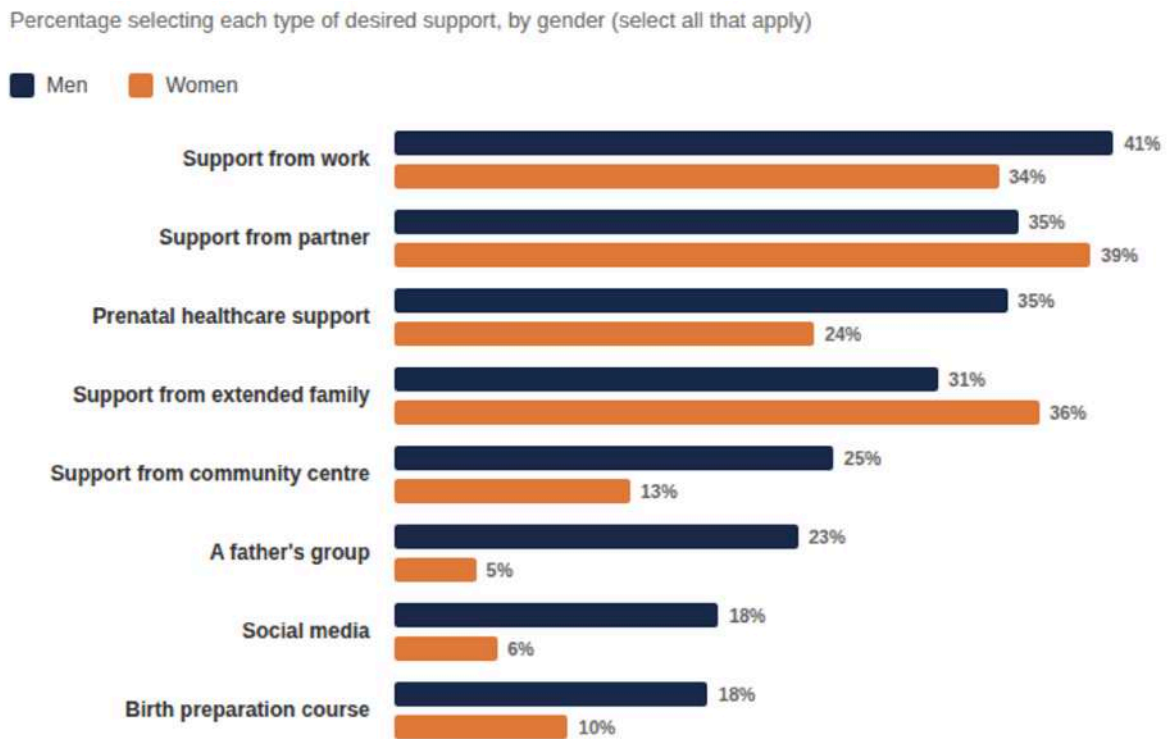
— Jason | Father of 2

SOWF 2025 qualitative interviews — Australia. Pseudonym used.

8.2 “What Would Make the Biggest Difference”

When asked what kinds of support they would have liked as they prepared to become a parent, **the most frequently identified need was support from work (39% overall)**, followed by support from their partner (37%), extended family (33%), and prenatal support from healthcare systems (31%). Around one in five parents wanted support from a community centre (22%). Among fathers specifically, nearly one in four (23%) said they would have liked access to a fathers' group.

Figure 18. Types of Parenting Support Parents Would Have Liked to Have



Most parents reported spending at least some of their income on caregiving (including food for those they care for, medical fees, hygiene related costs such as diapers, and childcare). Nearly half of fathers (47%) and around four in ten mothers (39%) spent up to a quarter of their income on caregiving costs. Around one in four parents spent approximately half their income on caregiving (fathers 23%, mothers 24%), with spending of more than half their income reported by 19% of mothers and 17% of fathers.

The Cost of Childcare

The financial burden of childcare emerged as a recurring theme during the interviews for some parents. For those already in the system, the numbers were confronting. Jarrod, a father of one, broke it down plainly: *"I think it's about \$25,000 a year for four days a week childcare for our daughter. Luckily, after the federal government subsidy, we only pay \$9,000 a year out of pocket."* Even with government support, that figure dwarfs the cost of schooling - a gap that shapes employment decisions, relationship dynamics, and financial stress long before children reach school age. For many families, dual income was not a choice but a necessity. As Collin, a migrant father of one, put it: *"Life is so expensive, Australia is so expensive, Sydney is so very expensive - unless one parent is earning a whole lot of money, it is not reasonable to expect that the father should be the main provider... every single cent that my wife and I earn, we're aware of it, and we share every single responsibility."* He went on to explain that in Australia *"there's this absolute money eating monster called daycare"*.

The cost of childcare is not only a financial pressure - it is a caregiving infrastructure problem. When childcare is unaffordable or unavailable, families default to the arrangement that makes immediate economic sense: the higher earner stays in paid work and the other parent absorbs the care. In most Australian households that means fathers' caregiving involvement is constrained not by unwillingness but by the absence of a practical alternative. Accessible, affordable childcare does not only enable maternal workforce participation - it enables fathers to be present, to share the daily texture of

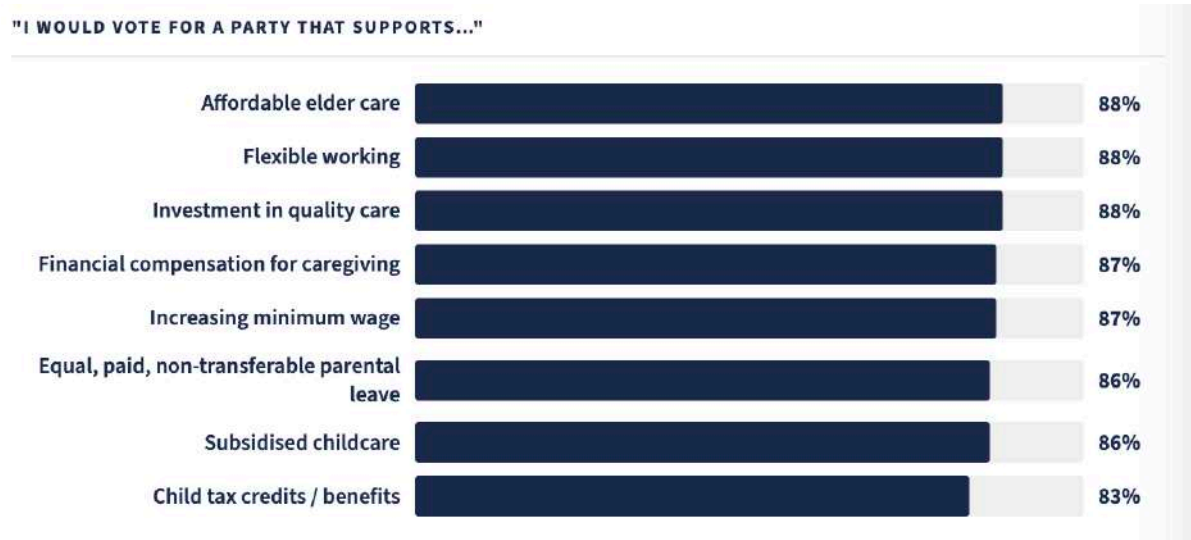
caring, and to build the involvement and confidence that sustained engagement requires. The near-universal support for employer-provided childcare in this sample reflects that understanding:

The arrangements fathers rely on reveal how unevenly the care infrastructure is distributed: nearly half (49%) used formal day-care or kindergarten, but **a third (34%) depended primarily on a stay-at-home partner** - more than three times the rate reported by mothers (9%) - and one in five (19%) relied on grandparents or relatives. For these families, shared caregiving is not constrained by unwillingness but by the absence of any alternative. This aligns with the existing literature and research revealing that few Australian families are configured with stay-at-home fathers (Baxter, 2018).

Employer, Institutional and Government Support

There was overwhelming support for employer-provided childcare support, with nearly nine in ten women (88%) and more than eight in ten men (84%) agreeing that all employees should receive childcare support from their employers (including having daycare in the building). Support for public investment in care was similarly high across genders, with 88% of parents agreeing or strongly agreeing that they would vote for a political party that supports increasing investments in affordable, quality care - including childcare, elder care, and care for people with disabilities.

Figure 19. Political Support Parents Report They Value



We tested whether parents who share care more equally at home, and who communicate more openly about caregiving with their partner, are also more likely to support government policies around care. They were not - support for care-related policies was similar regardless of how care was divided at home. Interestingly, the number of care burdens did not significantly predict support for policies that support caregiving either. This suggests that support for better care policies is broad-based and not limited to parents who have already achieved a more equal arrangement in their own households.

Valuing caregiving more highly was not associated with which political party parents had voted for, and this held regardless of gender or age - suggesting that care-supportive voting is not concentrated among parents with more progressive caregiving attitudes, but cuts across demographic and attitudinal lines.

IF YOU COULD TELL A LOCAL POLITICAL REPRESENTATIVE ONE THING ABOUT THE CHALLENGES YOU FACE AS A PARENT, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

<p>FF</p> <p><i>If I could tell a local political representative one thing about the challenges I face as a parent, it would be the lack of time I have for taking care of my kids and spending time with them due to my job.</i></p> <p>Father Survey respondent POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT</p>	<p>FF</p> <p><i>I will tell him of how I struggle to balance work and also child care.</i></p> <p>Mother Survey respondent POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT</p>	<p>FF</p> <p><i>I'd tell them that affordable childcare and flexible work policies are essential for parents trying to balance careers with raising healthy, happy kids.</i></p> <p>Father Survey respondent POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT</p>
---	--	--

Taken together, these findings point to parents broadly supporting investment in care - however, the qualitative interview findings revealed that many have never encountered care as a visible or accessible area of government action in their own lives. As Kara, a mother of two, put it plainly: *'It's not something that you think about - I don't think how can my government help me in raising my family.'* Kara's comment draws on the way in which care is often rendered a private matter to be managed within the home, a position that delegates responsibility to manage caregiving to parents rather than government, employers, or institutions (Baird et al., 2021). Others were aware that support existed but simply could not access it - Sam noted that local government initiatives *'run a lot of things like events and workshops, but I never find out about them till later.'* The consensus exists; what is missing is the connection between that support and the political and practical landscape in which parents actually live.

When asked what did drive their vote in the last federal election, **among parents who reported they voted, housing (44%), healthcare (43%), and cost-of-living pressures (35%) topped the list** - a reminder that care policy competes for political attention in a crowded field. **Flexible working ranked fourth (30%), and financial compensation for caregiving was selected by 21% of parents, and 18% selected subsidised childcare.** Notably, fathers were more than twice as likely as mothers to cite subsidised childcare as a voting issue (21% vs 10%) – and they were roughly twice as likely to select financial compensation for caregiving (25% vs 12%) suggesting that men's appetite for care investment may be stronger, and more politically legible, than is commonly assumed. This finding could also relate to the deeply embedded moral and normative expectations for mothers to provide caregiving as part of their maternal duty – such that women may not expect to be compensated for such work.

The fact that many women have sacrificed career progression and financial security to provide care within the home - under a neoliberal framing which positions care as a private matter - the burden of care is often rendered invisible, which may also account for

subsidised caring or financial compensation for caregiving not topping the list of reasons people vote one way or the other (Ewald et al., 2025).

The invisibilisation of care as a private and maternal responsibility carries real and measurable costs for women. In Australia, women earn on average 79 cents for every dollar earned by men (WGEA, 2025), they face a superannuation deficit accumulated through years of unpaid care, part-time work, and workforce exits, and confront a lifetime earnings gap estimated at \$2 million compared to men (Wood et al. 2021). **Among parents in the survey who reported not planning more children, financial concerns (e.g., cost of raising children, job security) (52%), housing (49%), and childcare (40%) ranked as the most influential reasons for this** – showing that care infrastructure shapes not only how families function but whether they grow at all.

These are not incidental outcomes - they are the compounded consequences of a system that has long treated care as women's work and women's problems. But the same system that constrains women also constrains men. When governments and workplaces fail to support fathers as caregivers - through inadequate leave, inflexible work cultures, and services that treat them as peripheral - men are locked into provider-focused roles (Ewald et al., 2024) that limit their involvement in their children's lives, at significant cost to their own wellbeing and to the father-child relationships that evidence consistently shows matter for children's development (Cabrera et al., 2008; Carbone et al., 2024; Choi et al., 2022; Malette et al., 2020). The costs of care invisibility are not borne by women alone. They are also paid by fathers who are often not able to be fully present, and by children who may grow up with less of both parents than they needed.

9. Conclusions and Recommendations

This report has documented the caregiving lives of Australian parents across a range of interconnected domains: identity, norms, division of labour, financial pressure, wellbeing, parental leave, and support. The report has focused on fathers' experiences of caregiving

and the social, workplace, and policy contexts that enable or constrain their involvement. Several findings stand out as particularly consequential.

Fathers are engaged, confident, and emotionally invested in their caregiving role - yet the provider expectation persists with remarkable tenacity across generations, and financial insecurity amplifies it. When families feel economically precarious, they retreat toward traditional arrangements, not away from them. The care tax falls differently on mothers and fathers - mothers reduce their workforce participation while fathers intensify theirs - but both bear real costs, and those costs compound over a lifetime. Women's lower lifetime earnings, superannuation deficits, and disproportionate risk of financial hardship in later life are not incidental outcomes; they are the accumulated consequences of a system that has long treated care as women's work and women's problem. At the same time, fathers locked into provider-only roles pay their own price: in wellbeing, in the father-child relationships that evidence shows matter for children's development, and in the caregiving identity that this data shows is genuinely protective of men's mental health.

Parental leave remains underused and undervalued, especially by fathers - not because fathers do not want it, but because the system has never clearly signalled that they are entitled to it, or it has not been made a financially viable option for most families to use it. The support infrastructure for new parents, particularly fathers, is thin, poorly known, and rarely accessed. And the transition to parenthood - the window during which caregiving patterns are established and tend to persist - remains a missed opportunity for systems that are still largely oriented toward mothers.

Despite all of this, parents broadly support government investment in care, and that consensus should be acted upon.

For Employers

Work-care conflict is the single most commonly reported barrier to adequate caregiving time, and workplace support is the form of help fathers most want. Employers should

introduce or expand flexible working arrangements and workplace childcare support - not as benefits but as organisational norms. Critically, workplace culture must actively normalise fathers taking parental leave and working flexibly without career penalty. Flexibility stigma is well documented as a barrier to men's caregiving involvement (Chung et al., 2020); countering it requires modelling from leadership, visibility of men who blend work and care, and programs that position fathers' caregiving as an organisational concern rather than a personal accommodation. Employers who respond to this will improve loyalty, productivity, and talent retention.

For Government

Actively promote paid parental leave entitlements for fathers, with dedicated non-transferable leave periods. Ensure that payment rates are adequate for families to live on - the gap between entitlement and practical affordability is a primary reason fathers do not take leave. Invest in subsidised childcare, particularly for financially insecure families for whom costs represent a disproportionate share of income. Ensure that messaging around parental leave makes fathers feel genuinely entitled to take it and equally encourages mothers to share caregiving - framing this not as a sacrifice of maternal responsibility but as a foundation for more equal, more sustainable family life. Policies that reduce economic precarity will do more to shift care norms than attitudinal campaigns alone: financial insecurity is the single most consistent driver of traditional caregiving arrangements in this data, and addressing the structural conditions that make equality unaffordable is the most direct route to achieving it.

For the Health and Community Sector

It is not enough to include fathers in mother-centred services. Parenting service providers must develop father-specific peer support pathways from birth - fathers' groups, peer networks, and postnatal support for men remain almost entirely absent, yet fathers themselves identified this gap. The transition to parenthood is the critical intervention window: patterns established in the earliest weeks tend to persist, and a system that treats

fathers as attendants rather than participants at that stage forfeits its greatest opportunity to support engaged fatherhood. Screening for paternal postnatal depression should be routine, not exceptional. Infant record and tracking processes should be accessible to both parents. Spaces where fathers can share and learn from other fathers are not a luxury - they are a gap the data shows men want filled.

For Researchers and Policymakers

The awareness gap around care support services is as much a communication failure as a service gap. Many fathers have never been made aware of, let alone offered, father-specific services - despite near-universal confidence in their caregiving role and a clear desire to be more involved. Investment in outreach, accessibility, and targeted communication - particularly for financially insecure, lone parent, and culturally diverse families - is essential. Supporting men's active engagement in caregiving does not only benefit fathers. It benefits mothers, who carry a disproportionate and compounding burden when care remains unequal. It benefits children, whose development is shaped by the quality and consistency of both parents' involvement. And it benefits society, which bears the long-term costs - in health, in productivity, in inequality - when the conditions for equal caregiving are never created.

References

- Australian Government (2025). Services Australia - Dad and Partner Pay.
<https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/dad-and-partner-pay>
- Bates, E. A., McCann, J. J., Kaye, L. K., & Taylor, J. C. (2017). Beyond words: A researcher's guide to using photo elicitation in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 14(4), 459–481. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2017.1359352>
- Baird, M., Hamilton, M., & Constantin, A. (2021). Gender equality and paid parental leave in Australia: A decade of giant leaps or baby steps?. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 63(4), 546–567.
- Baxter, J. (2018). Stay-at-home fathers in Australia. (Research Report). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- Borgkvist, A., Moore, V., Elliott, J., & Crabb, S. (2018). 'I might be a bit of a front runner': An analysis of men's uptake of flexible work arrangements and masculine identity. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 25(6), 703-717.
- Cabrera, N. J., Fagan, J., & Farrie, D. (2008). Explaining the long reach of fathers' prenatal involvement on later paternal engagement with children. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 70(5), 1094–1107.
- Cameron, E. E., Sedov, I. D., & Tomfohr-Madsen, L. M. (2016). Prevalence of paternal depression in pregnancy and the postpartum: an updated meta-analysis. *Journal of affective disorders*, 206, 189-203.
- Carbone, A., Pestell, C., Nevill, T., & Mancini, V. (2024). The indirect effects of fathers' parenting style and parent emotion regulation on the relationship between father self-efficacy and children's mental health difficulties. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 22(1), 11.

- Carlson, D. L., Petts, R. J., & Pepin, J. R. (2021). Flexplace work and partnered fathers' time in house-work and childcare. *Men and Masculinities, 24*(4), 547–570.
- Chung, H. (2020). Gender, flexibility stigma and the perceived negative consequences of flexible working in the UK. *Social indicators research, 151*(2), 521-545.
- Churchill, B., & Craig, L. (2022). Men's and women's changing attitudes towards fatherhood and working fathers in Australia. *Current Sociology, 70*(6), 943-963.
- Choi, J., Kim, H. K., Capaldi, D. M., & Snodgrass, J. J. (2021). Long - term effects of father involvement in childhood on their son's physiological stress regulation system in adulthood. *Developmental psychobiology, 63*(6), e22152.
- Chiu, M., Rahman, F., Vigod, S., Lau, C., Cairney, J., & Kurdyak, P. (2018). Mortality in single fathers compared with single mothers and partnered parents: a population-based cohort study. *The Lancet. Public health, 3*(3), e115–e123
- Donithen, R., & Schoppe-Sullivan, S. (2022). Correlates and predictors of parenting self-efficacy in new fathers. *Journal of Family Psychology, 36*(3), 396.
- Duffy, S., Van Esch, P., & Yousef, M. (2020). Increasing parental leave uptake: A systems social marketing approach. *Australasian Marketing Journal, 28*(2), 110-118.f
- Ewald, A., Gilbert, E., & Huppertz, K. (2020). Fathering and flexible working arrangements: A systematic interdisciplinary review. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 12*(1), 27-40.
- Ewald, A., & Hogg, R. (2022). Invisible boundaries: Barriers to flexible working arrangements for fathers. *Community, Work & Family, 25*(3), 408-424.
- Ewald, A., Gilbert, E., & Huppertz, K. (2023). Knowing your place: The role of occupational status in fathers' flexible working. *Community, Work & Family, 27*(4), 454-471.
- Ewald, A., Gilbert, E., Huppertz, K., & Kurt, P. (2024). Fathering identities and men's engagement with flexible working arrangements. *The Journal of Men's Studies, 32*(3), 530-551.
- Ewald, A., Gilbert, E., Duffy, S., & O'Shea, M. (2025). The re-entry to work after parental leave: Australian workplace supports within a neoliberal framework. *Labour and Industry, 35*(3), 229-256.

- Fang, H., & Kunjuraman, V. (2025). Bridging the divide: How HR policy framing shapes Gen Z attitudes toward workplace gender equality. *Human Resources Management and Services, 7*(3).
- Gatrell, C., Ladge, J. J., & Powell, G. N. (2022). A review of fatherhood and employment: Introducing new perspectives for management research. *Journal of Management Studies, 59*(5), 1198-1226.
- Giazitzoglu, A. (2025). Men at work: How are masculinities constituted and performed in work and employment settings?. *Work, Employment and Society, 39*(1), 248-255.
- Guo, Y., & Wang, S. (2025). Beyond the Individual: Unraveling the Couple-Level Effects of Working Time Mismatch on Work-Life Outcomes Among Working Parents. *Social Indicators Research, 177*(1), 153-177.
- Hokke, S., Mason, S., Crawford, S. B., Cooklin, A. R., Giallo, R., & Bennetts, S. K. (2024). Flexible work patterns and experiences of the work-family interface among Australian parents. *Journal of Industrial Relations, 66*(2), 161-185.
- Humberd, B., Ladge, J., & Harrington, B. (2015). The new dad: Navigating fathering identity within organizational contexts. *Journal of Business Psychology, 30*, 249 – 266.
- Hunter, S. C., Riggs, D. W., & Augoustinos, M. (2017). Hegemonic masculinity versus a caring masculinity: Implications for understanding primary caregiving fathers. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 11*(3), e12307.
- Ipsos & Global Institute for Women's Leadership. (2025). Global attitudes toward gender equality.
- Kong, K. A., & Kim, S. I. (2015). Mental health of single fathers living in an urban community in South Korea. *Comprehensive psychiatry, 56*, 188–197.
- Jones, Tracy L., and Ronald J. Prinz. "Potential roles of parental self-efficacy in parent and child adjustment: A review." *Clinical psychology review 25, no. 3* (2005): 341-363.
- Jordan, A. (2020). Masculinizing care? Gender, ethics of care, and fathers' rights groups. *Men and Masculinities, 23*(1), 20–41.

- Kaufman, G. (2018). Barriers to equality: Why British fathers do not use parental leave. *Community, Work & Family, 21*(3), 310-325.
- Kelly, C., & Nicholas, J. (2025, March 6). Australian men doing no more housework than they were 20 years ago – Still 50% less than women. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/06/australian-men-housework-statistics-domestic-labour-hilda-data>
- Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] (2016). Parental leave: Where are the fathers. Men's Uptake of parental leave is rising but still low. Policy Brief March 2016. <https://www.oecd.org/policy-briefs/parental-leave-where-are-the-fathers.pdf>
- Petts, R. J., Shafer, K. M., & Essig, L. (2018). Does adherence to masculine norms shape fathering behavior? *Journal of Marriage and Family, 80*(3), 704–720.
- Pew Research Centre. (2019). Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>
- Ruspini, E. (2019). Millennial Men, Gender equality and Care: the dawn of a revolution? *Teorija in Praksa, 56*(4), 985-1000.
- Scarborough WJ, Sin R, Risman B (2018) Attitudes and the stalled gender revolution: egalitarianism, traditionalism, and ambivalence from 1977 through 2016. *Gend Soc 33*(2):173–200.
- Schoppe-Sullivan, S. J., & Fagan, J. (2020). The evolution of fathering research in the 21st century: Persistent challenges, new directions. *Journal of marriage and family, 82*(1), 175-197.
- UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). 2020. Human Development Perspectives: Tackling Social Norms - A Game Changer for Gender Inequalities. [Hdr.undp.org](https://hdr.undp.org/content/2020-gender-social-norms-index-gsni). New York, NY: United Nations Development Programme.
<https://hdr.undp.org/content/2020-gender-social-norms-index-gsni>.

- Volling, B. L., & Bornstein, M. H. (2025). Not just father involvement! Contemporary perspectives on fathering and father-child relationships. *Parenting*, 25(4), 353-366.
- WGEA (2024). Parental Leave. <https://www.wgea.gov.au/parental-leave>
- WGEA (2025). "Gender pay gap data", <https://www.wgea.gov.au/pay-and-gender/gender-pay-gap-data>
- Wood, D., K. Griffiths, and T. Crowley. (2021). "Women's Work: The Impact of the COVID Crisis on Australian Women." <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2021-03/apo-nid311282.pdf>.
- World Economic Forum. (2022). "Global Gender Gap Report 2022." World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2022>.