



ABSENT FATHERS

All men want to wear the mantle of the "World's Greatest Dad". But as one of only two nations in the developed world without a paid, parental-leave scheme, how can we?

BY PAMELA WILSON

sick leave and holiday pay to stay at home. Porter stayed off work for another four months to look after both his wife and Oliver.

Eventually, a drained piggybank forced him back into full-time employment. But Porter now has a huge appreciation of his wife as a mother of two, housewife and part-time worker.

Oliver is now three and his sister, Grace, is one and Porter admits he would struggle at home alone with both of them.

Doting Dads

Many blokes these days want to be actively involved in raising their kids. Research by Graham Russell, associate professor in psychology at Sydney's Macquarie University and co-author with Tony White of *First Time Father* (Finch Publishing, \$24.95), has found about 60 per cent of fathers say they would leave a job or not seek promotion on the basis of family/lifestyle issues and that about 25 per cent of men actually do it regularly.

WHEN NEW DAD DEAN PORTER GOT HOME from work most evenings, it was with mixed emotions. His wife, Merrilyn, would be bubbling with excitement over baby Oliver's latest milestone – first smile; first wave; first step. Porter was missing them all. Seeing his son on weekends and a few hours each day wasn't enough. After weighing everything up he decided it was his turn to be a stay-at-home Dad.

"I'd always entertained ideas of staying home with the kids. I believe mothers automatically have that bond and I knew it would be hard to top, but I felt it would be a great opportunity to get closer to Oliver," says Porter, 35, a Sydney lithographic platemaker.

But it wasn't that simple. As of 1996, Australian employees are entitled to 52 weeks' unpaid parental leave, but this cannot be taken concurrently. This meant Porter had to quit his job to become the primary caregiver because Merrilyn, also 35, had already clocked up her 52 weeks. It also meant tougher times financially because as a librarian she earned less than her husband, but the couple were committed to sharing the parenting role.

"I mainly took him to the park. We banned the beach after I got him soaked – in winter," recalls Dean. "I think it has made him more balanced. He calls me Dean so maybe he sees me as a mate more than a Dad now."

The end of Porter's 12-month daddy daycare reign coincided with Merrilyn falling pregnant again. Battling debilitating morning sickness and being hospitalised four times, Merrilyn took

Russell's survey of 1000 fathers (in 1999) revealed that Dads "see being accessible to their children as the most important aspect of their role . . . in terms of the impact they have on their children's wellbeing and adjustment".

In the large *Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey* (conducted by the Federal Department of Family and Community Services in 2001), more than half the dads interviewed felt they were missing out on being a parent. And only one-third were very satisfied with their work-flexibility arrangements.

More men are fronting up to parenting courses and fatherhood support services across the country are overrun with clients.

Parent-effectiveness trainer Larissa Dann reports that a third of her eight-week intensive courses are made up of fathers. Meanwhile, Relationships Australia says of the 80,000 people it coaches in relationships and parenting annually, almost 50 per cent are men.

The problem is many dads who want to be active parents can't be. Drawing on Russell's research again, more than half the respondents saw barriers associated with the workplace (long hours, inflexibility) as being "the most critical factor preventing them from being the kind of father they would like to be".

And the status quo is likely to remain until Australia adopts an acceptance of stay-at-home dads and produces the financial backing to go with it. With the exception of the US, we are the only industrialised nation without a paid, national-parental leave scheme.

And cop this: paid maternity leave was introduced under national social insurance law in Germany way back in the 1880s.

When asked why Australia maintains this status and if it's likely to change, a spokesman for the Minister of Family Services, Senator Kay Patterson, dodges the issue and begins listing policies such as the family-tax benefit, maternity allowance and parenting payment. ➤

TIPS FOR DOTING DADS

BY GRAHAM RUSSELL

The author of *First Time Father* reveals how to be the best parent you can possibly be:

- ▶ Stand up and be counted. Recognise that you, as a dad, are important and affirm that. Fathers who get involved with their children report a heightened sense of wellbeing, as well as fostering a great relationship with their kids.
- ▶ Stronger relationships are formed with children when you spend time alone with them, every day.
- ▶ At work, especially when the kids are young, be assertive and tell your boss you want flexibility. The more that men become assertive about it, the sooner the workplace mind-set will change.
- ▶ Look for ways to restructure your time so you can spend more with your family. Learn how to switch off work and switch on home.
- ▶ Schedule time to look after yourself. "One of the best things you can do for your kids is to look after yourself and reduce risk in your life."



The spokesman insists that this sent "a clear message that the Australian Government considers that families are fundamental to a strong cohesive community and that the best way to support families is to provide them with real choices".

Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS; August 2003) show that only 36 per cent of female employees and 26 per cent of males in the public and private sector are entitled to paid maternity or paternity leave.

(Public-sector employees tend to receive more generous leave entitlements through award and enterprise-agreement negotiations.)

Throughout most OECD countries, paid paternity leave ranges from two to 18 days, but many countries offer longer paid, child-rearing leave, which can be taken by either parent.

Among 29 OECD countries, the average amount of paid leave is 36 weeks; typically 14 to 16 weeks paid maternity leave, supplemented by paid parental leave, which dads can take.

Four countries – Denmark, Italy, Norway and Sweden – have mandated that at least one month of parental leave be a "use it or lose it" option for fathers. So, they literally force their dads to take at least a month off with their kids.

Being paid to parent

Importantly, a parental-leave scheme, when funded by the federal government, sends a clear message that dads are valued as caregivers and not just breadwinners. Naturally, this would have enormous social and self-esteem benefits for men and the men's movement.

"Having something that says this is recognised at a broad social level is important for the well-being of families and children," says Russell.

Dr Peter West, from the University of Western Sydney's research group on men and family, says a national paid scheme would "be a start" in valuing fathers more.

"Fathers don't feel valued and confident and children feel the lack of a confident authority figure," according to West. "We need more men to stand up and say 'I care about this and this is important to me'."

"We are giving men the message that they are important at work and have to work harder and many of them are scared of not being at work for a meeting or whatever."

West says we only need look at the social problems rampant in the football world and the street clashes with police in Sydney earlier this year to see we are paying the social debt of a society that doesn't value fathering enough.

A paid parental-leave scheme could also help ease some of our big economic and social concerns. Consider this:

▶ Job insecurity is largely to blame for Australia's declining birth rate, says the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS; January 2005).

▶ Overwork contributes to family breakdown and Australians work the second-longest hours in the OECD, with a third of full-time employees working hours that would be unlawful in Europe. (*Fifty Families* report, Australian Council of Trade Unions, September 2001.)

▶ Most men still earn more money than women, so it's a huge financial barrier to men taking unpaid parental leave. In February 2002, female earnings were at 85 per cent of male pay packets. (ABS, *Year Book Australia 2003*)

Michael Bittman, senior research fellow at the University of NSW's Policy Research Centre, says most families are now dual-income and that puts a lot of pressure on mums and dads.

"I've done studies on childcare use and it just seems to be a time-shifting device," advises Bittman. "Children go to bed later, get up earlier and parents still spend broadly the same time with their kids. Putting parents under this pressure is directly impacting on the declining birthrate and there is only one policy, paid parental leave, which has been shown to be effective in reducing this pressure."

A federally funded report by the AIFS in January revealed the fertility rate had hit an all-time low – 1.75 babies per woman. It found that while most Australians aged 20 to 39 wanted kids, employment insecurity put them off.

The big concern now is the current birthrate is not high enough to maintain the population

and if it falls any lower, there will be social and economic consequences for Australia.

Knocking down the barriers

Bittman explains that in his small-scale qualitative studies, men consistently say they want more time at home, but overwork and the negative stigma sometimes attached to child-rearing are major barriers.

For example, even when paid paternity or parental leave is available, evidence has consistently shown that the take-up rate by men remains low. It was this low take-up rate that prompted some countries to introduce the "use it or lose it" policy for paid parental leave.

There are many reasons for the poor usage, but one is the negative stigma attached to putting fathering before work.

"There's an internal management culture, so that when people try to access these sorts of things [parental leave] they face hostility," according to Bittman. He also says it's the dads themselves who sometimes put up barriers. Bittman explains that when most blokes are asked, "What is a good father?" they talk about communication and spending time with their kids. "However, the way they behave is as though fulfilling the role of the provider and maintaining a strong career is their primary responsibility and they are reluctant to do anything that jeopardises that."

Last year, the Equal Opportunity Commission of Victoria reported in *The Age* that a man was sacked after leaving work on time to care for his child. The employer believed it was the man's wife's duty to look after the child.

Russell says research he collected in 1984 and again in 1991 showed that fathers with children under 10 were spending more time with their kids now than they were 15 years ago. "There has been a shift and it can be built on, but it still needs to be emphasised through policy. We don't look at our policy and practise through a mind-set that says that dads are important and we have to find ways to enable that."

Currently, paid maternity, paternity or parental leave is at the discretion of employers, but many experts feel this system has limited scope because most small businesses can't make the same offers as large companies.

The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations has identified companies that provide good examples of paid parental leave:

- ▶ IBM Australia: primary caregiver, 12 weeks.
- ▶ ABN Amro: primary caregiver, 12 weeks; secondary caregiver, two weeks.
- ▶ Brimbank City Council (Victoria): primary caregiver, eight weeks; secondary caregiver, one week.
- ▶ VicSuper: primary caregiver, 12 weeks; paternity leave, one week.

The debate for national paid leave begs the question, who pays? In Australia, we don't have a broad acceptance of contributory schemes like other countries that pay for leave from national insurance funds. There are funding options, such as consolidated revenue or employer levies, but many experts feel a redistribution of our current tax funds is the best option.

Doing it for the kids

While Russell doesn't subscribe to the view that "daddy deprivation" is behind problematic youth, he does point out that children do better if they have a close and continuing relationship with both parents. Research shows these children traditionally perform better at school, transition well, get along with peers and are less likely to have problems in adolescence.

"Whether we look at it from a male or female perspective, children do better when there is care, support, quality relationships, supervision and boundaries," according to Russell. "Dads are a key part of that process because children want to know and be loved by their dad. If you are working 60 or 70 hours a week, your capacity to deliver that to your children is potentially reduced."

Russell adds that parenting is tough and no one person was meant to look after children 24 hours a day. He believes a national paid scheme will go some way to promoting a team approach to parenting, which is crucial for the wellbeing of families and children.

Despite the lack of paid leave and the numerous barriers to staying home, many dads are being active parents by using other forms of leave, such as sick days, holidays and long service, observes Russell. Then, of course, there are those who simply quit their jobs.

But, as Bittman points out, it is certainly not in the government's interest for men to "take the bold step of ending their employment".

One also has to wonder, when do those dads who take sick and holiday leave to look after the kids get the chance themselves to stop, revive and survive those demands of work and family?

Porter admits he would struggle to look after two kids full-time and says he even has to "go out to the shed for a break" after watching both children just for a few hours.

"If you look at the guys who just have the kids on the weekends, the forehead lines are there and the eyes are squinting with the stress of it all," he says.

PARENTAL-LEAVE SNAPSHOT

How new parents around the world fare, compared to those in Australia

- 1 Australia and the US:** the only industrialised nations that fail to provide paid parental leave.
- 2 UK:** two weeks' paid paternity leave at a flat rate.
- 3 New Zealand:** 12 weeks' paid parental leave at lower than 100 per cent of wages or a flat rate.
- 4 Norway:** 52 weeks' parental leave at 80 per cent income replacement (or 48 weeks at 100 per cent), including four weeks "use it or lose it" paid paternity leave.
- 5 Sweden:** parental leave, at 80 per cent, until the child is 18 months. Followed by another three months at a flat rate and another three unpaid.
- 6 Canada:** 35 weeks' paid parental leave at 55 per cent of wage.
- 7 Luxembourg:** six months of full-time parental leave, paid at a flat rate (or 12 months part-time or pro rata up to a child's fifth birthday).
- 8 Belgium:** three months of flat-rate parental leave for each parent, plus three days' paternity leave.
- 9 Finland:** 26 weeks of flat-rate parental leave and 18 days of paternity leave.
- 10 Iceland:** three months for each parent, plus one parent can take an extra three months, which is paid at 80 per cent.

(Paid paternity and parental leave excludes maternity leave.)

