

Impacts of government policy on work and family balance

What do we mean by work and family balance?

Work and family balance relates to the amount of time devoted to one's life at work, relative to the time spent outside work. The goal is not to achieve *equal* amounts of time at home and at work, but the amount that is *right* for a particular individual or family. Getting the perfect balance is rarely achievable but when the two are badly out of kilter, individual and family wellbeing suffer. The challenge of balancing family and work is not limited to parents and carers, but extends to all family members who divide their time between working and spending time together.

- *This information sheet is intended to supplement the Family Impact Statement (FIS) Guidelines. It provides further guidance for determining how the ability of different families to manage their work and family balance may be affected by a particular policy or program. You can use this information sheet to identify some of the key issues that may be relevant to determining the family impact for your policy issue. You can then use the links to a range of additional resources on the FIS page of the PM&C website to assist with more detailed analysis.*

Points to consider

- A lack of work/family balance is a problem faced not only by working mothers or fathers working long hours, but also by people who are unemployed and cannot find paid work; workers who are 'under-employed' and would prefer to work more paid hours; the self-employed and those earning low hourly rates who often also struggle to achieve an appropriate balance; and lone parents who lack the social and financial support of a partner.
- Family friendly working arrangements and leave provisions are unequally spread across occupations and industries.
- Women's increased take-up of paid work has not been matched by men's increased involvement in housework and child care.
- The demand for formal child care is growing, but more children use informal care arrangements.
- As the population ages, caring for older family members is increasingly playing a greater role in work/family decisions.
- Families may also have caring responsibilities for a person with a disability or chronic medical condition.

Researchers recognise that the ability to achieve a satisfactory work/life balance affects health and wellbeing and is, in turn, affected by a range of factors including:

- employment arrangements – particularly in terms of ‘family friendly’ conditions (including for fathers and carers);
- sharing family responsibilities and relative earnings of mothers and fathers;
- incentives for second earners;
- access to, affordability and quality of services and support (both for those in the paid workforce and for those with caring responsibilities not in the paid workforce) – such as child care, transport, respite care, aged care and payments and allowances; and
- locational issues, such as the distance between separated parents.

Some Statistics

- In 2007, 65% of couples with dependent children had both parents in the labour force.
- Employment rates for Australian women with young children are significantly lower than for Australian women in general.
- Australia’s rates of part-time work – around 45% for women and 15% for men – are much higher than OECD averages.
- Less than half of women employed while pregnant return to work before their child’s first birthday; of those who returned to work during this period, 92% did so on a part-time basis.
- Around 35% of children aged 0-4 years old were enrolled in formal child care in 2005, while around 14% of 5-11 year olds were enrolled in formal child care.
- In 2005, 73% of employed mothers and 34% of employed fathers made use of flexible working arrangements to help them care for their children.

Tip: *Policy that has an impact on family functioning (Information Sheet 4) and children’s wellbeing (Information Sheet 2) may also impact on work and life balance*

Policy areas

Proposals impacting on one or more of the factors above often relate to the policy areas of:
Employment * Taxation * Childcare * Disability Services * Family Payments
* Carers * Social Inclusion * Women * Transport *

Employment conditions

Work arrangements that assist employees achieve a good work/life balance include the availability of:

- flexible working hours;
- part-time work;
- job sharing arrangements;
- work from home options;
- paid and/or unpaid leave that can be used to provide care – not only for young children but also other family members;
- employee control over scheduling of work; and
- facilities for breastfeeding mothers.

Sharing responsibilities and relative earnings

Policies designed to impact on societal views about the desirability of fathers being involved in caring for children and the extent to which society supports fathers taking that role affect how families share responsibilities and manage the balance between work and family.

Similarly, the division of labour within the family and the consequent effect on work/family balance is influenced by the extent of inequality of labour market outcomes for men and women (such as the gender wage gap or the negative financial impact of career breaks).

Incentives for second earners

Decisions about workforce participation for second earners are usually based largely on financial incentives. Apart from the amount of earnings (hourly wage rate and number of hours worked), other factors influencing the second earner's workforce participation include:

- the amount of tax payable;
- impact of earnings on receipt of government payments and allowances;
- loss of various concessions (such as the Health Care Card); and
- the costs of work (such as transport costs or child care).

Tip: *Information Sheet 2, which contains information about the financial impacts of policy on family wellbeing, is also relevant to this topic*

Services and support

The key service to assist most parents balance work and family life is practical access to high quality, affordable child care, including outside 'core' hours. However, many other services and supports may impact on a particular family's ability to achieve a satisfactory work and family balance, including access to government benefits, such as Carer Payment or Carer Allowance; services to employers to assist in the implementation of flexible working arrangements; the availability of (where necessary, culturally appropriate) services, including respite or aged care, before and after school care, and holiday care; access to skills or English language training; and the availability of affordable public transport at appropriate times.