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Paid parental leave for future families: The voices of Australian parents

Marian Baird and Elizabeth Hill

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Dr Marian Baird AO FASSA is Professor of Gender and Employment Relations, a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, Director of the Women, Work and Policy Research Group at the University of Sydney Business School and co-convenor of the Body@Work Project. Marian is an internationally recognised scholar on women and work over the life course. Her work has a particular focus on the interaction of government and workplace policies on women's labour market attachment and women's economic empowerment. Marian is Chief Investigator at the Centre of Excellence in Population Ageing Research where she examines how workplaces can better accommodate older workers and their care commitments. Marian's research contributed to the development of Australia's first paid parental leave scheme, and she continues to engage with government, industry and unions to promote and develop equitable and productive workplaces.

Dr Elizabeth Hill is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Economy at the University of Sydney. She is Deputy Director of the Gender Equality in Working Life (GEWL) Research Initiative, co-convenor of the Australian Work and Family Policy Roundtable and co-convenor of the Body@Work Project. As a leading researcher on the future of women, work and care in Australia and the Asian region, she has collaborated on research into gender equality, work and care with leading national and international institutions, including the International Labour Organization and UN Women. Elizabeth's research focuses on how economic institutions shape women's paid work, unpaid care and the care workforce, especially as they change in response to the rapidly evolving dynamics of the global political economy. Elizabeth has served as a non-executive director on a number of non-profit boards and is an experienced media commentator and advisor to government, unions and business.

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Introduction

This report focuses on parents' experiences using Australia's paid parental leave (PPL) scheme and their aspirations for the future of the national scheme, with an emphasis on the role of fathers. It provides research evidence to inform the Women's Economic Equality Taskforce about the government's proposed changes to the paid parental leave scheme in 2023–2026. This is the companion research report to our earlier report *Next Steps for Paid Parental Leave in Australia* (Baird & Hill, 2022).

This research was commissioned in response to proposed changes to the scheme:

- From 1 July 2023, 20 weeks in total per couple will be available, with 2 weeks reserved each for the mother and father/partner, and 20 weeks in total for a single parent.
- From 2024, 2 additional weeks per year, up to 2026 when 26 weeks in total will be available.

Recent research evidence shows that young Australian women's and men's expectations about patterns of work and care are converging. Young women expect to work in much the same way as men – for the duration of their adult life – while young fathers expect and aspire to participate in the care of their young children.¹ However, many report that current work-care policy architecture does not support equal work and care between young couples,² and that men who seek flexible work or paid leave to care are starting to face workplace penalties much like those experienced by women.³

The redesign of Australia's paid parental leave goes part way to addressing these changing social and gender norms to make our workplaces and leave policies fit for purpose and provide a platform for enhanced economic productivity and a sustainable workforce. There is, however, a clear understanding that a 26-week scheme is unable to adequately meet the needs and expectations of parents. Nor does it provide adequate time to achieve the five objectives of the Paid Parental Leave Act 2010:

- allow carers to take time off work to care for the child in the 2 years following the child's birth or adoption
- enhance the health and development of birth mothers and children
- encourage women to continue to participate in the workforce
- promote equality between men and women, and the balance between work and family life
- provide carers with greater flexibility to balance work and family life.

Furthermore, even with the extension of the national system to 26 weeks by 2026, Australia will remain well below the average period of paid leave available to parents in other OECD economies. See the *Next Steps* report and Appendices 2 and 3.

¹ Hill, E., Baird, M., Vromen, A., Cooper, R., Meers, Z. & Probyn, E. (2019). Young women and men: Imagined futures of work and family formation in Australia. *Journal of Sociology*, 55(4), 778–798.

² Hill, E., Cooper, R., Vromen, A., Foley, M. & Seetahul, S. (2023). Gender dynamics in the post-pandemic future of work. High level data release for International Women's Day 2023. Research Note 1, Australian Women's Working Futures Project. The University of Sydney.

³ Ruppner, L., Churchill, B., Bissell, D., Ghin, P., Hydellund, C., Ainsworth, S., Blackhman, A., Borland, J., Cheong, M., Evans, M., Frermann, L., King, T. & Vetere, F. (2023). *2023 State of the Future of Work*. Work Futures Hallmark Research Initiative, The University of Melbourne.

Aims of the research with parents

We conducted research with parents to:

- inform the next tranche of paid parental leave legislative changes
- understand how Australian families make decisions about parental leave, in particular, use of the national paid parental leave scheme
- understand fathers' views on using paid parental leave in the past (i.e the Dad and partner pay scheme) and the future
- understand what families want from a paid parental leave scheme and why
- test family views on how the 1 July 2023 changes in the design of paid parental leave and how the additional 6 weeks of paid parental leave to be rolled out by July 2026 would be best allocated, especially the amount of reserved leave for fathers.

This report provides information on what Australian parents (fathers, mothers, same sex and single parents) say about the current paid parental leave scheme and what they would like in a future scheme. It reports on their lived experiences and understandings of paid parental leave. The research informs our recommendations which provide a guide to the ongoing development of a paid parental leave system that meets the needs of Australian parents and supports greater gender equality in work and care.

As noted in our first report, *Next Steps*, there is little recent systematic data on the decisions made by parents in the use of paid parental leave in Australia to guide policy design. This report provides evidence from a small study of 10 Australian families with young children. It is the first research project to ask parents about their recent experience using the national paid parental leave system and to ask about the future design. The study puts fathers (where present) at the centre of the data collection and analysis to inform the design of the additional 6 weeks of paid parental leave to be rolled out by 2026. A full description of the method is provided in Appendix 1.

Further research is required to evaluate the Australian experience of paid parental leave use, how households combine the national scheme with employer schemes, interactions between the two schemes, and household preferences for shared care of babies and very young children. In particular, research on the use of reserved non-transferable leave by fathers is needed, and whether or not it is taken concurrently with the mother or solely by the father. As noted in our *Next Steps* report, the international evidence shows that it is fathers' solo use of parental leave that drives change in father care behaviours and delivers greater gender equality between parents in the care for young children and paid work.

Employers' views are not included in this report but research with employers on their response to the policy redesign and issues this may pose to business and employee relations is critical for paid parental leave to support the future of work. A large-scale survey addressing these issues supplemented with qualitative research would be ideal.

Results of the research with parents

Our key findings are summarized below. Quotes are included from the parents using pseudonyms from Table 2 in Appendix 1.

1. There is poor general knowledge of the current scheme and the changes

There was a relatively **low level of knowledge about the 1 July 2023 changes** to paid parental leave or the subsequent roll out of an additional 6 week by 2026. **However, general knowledge of the current scheme was good, although patchy on some aspects.** Couples share and socialise information and their experiences with the paid parental system with their family and friendship groups. This is particularly important for new parents who are navigating the parental leave system for the first time. Parents who expected to have more children were strategic in their use of the paid parental leave scheme and aware of the work test requirements, strategising to make sure they complied with the rules and were eligible for a future round of paid parental leave.

There was **some confusion about details of the scheme and application process**, which some parents found overwhelming. A few parents said the paid parental leave facts sheets provided by Centrelink and the government were not always clear and did not provide straightforward answers. Family and friends provided valuable help on how to access the system.

I remember when I was doing the whole application and applying for it before [my son] was born. I remember it was just so much information and questions... So that's when obviously I had to reach out to family members that had done it before. (Isabella, middle income, CALD)

I remember asking my friend, then I had no idea about the 2 weeks [Dad and Partner Pay]. Because I've never been around any parents until now... I had no idea there was some sort of 2 weeks from the government. (Andy, middle income, CALD)

I know with the government leave you have to be working in a position for 12 months before the baby's born... So, I'm mindful of that too. If I do want to use that... and I want to have a baby within the next year or so, I'd need to get onto some employment pretty quick. (Emily, high income)

Overall, **there is very strong support and gratitude for the paid parental leave scheme**, particularly among first-time parents who were not aware of the scheme prior to having their first child.

It's been an amazing experience. I didn't even know we got money before we had a kid. I've felt really blessed by it. (Lily, low income)

It's helpful and take[s] that stress off ... Just being able to enjoy your child and not be like, "Oh, we've got to worry about money as well." (Lucy, middle income)

It's really [an] awesome benefit. It's 18 weeks from the government ... You've had a baby, "here's some financial help." And it does really help ... it pretty much enabled us to ... have that time when the kids were young ... and not even worry too much about the finance side of things. Because you knew there was always a little bit of something coming in. (Alexia, middle income)

It's definitely good. I'm not going to have any more babies, but if I was going to, I'd make sure that I was working for the year so you can get it because it definitely helps. (Samantha, single mother, low income)

2. Social norms and employer support for fathers' use of paid parental leave are important

Fathers' likelihood of using parental leave is linked to prevailing social norms, employer support and workplace culture. Additionally, all **fathers prioritised the health and wellbeing of the mother and baby**, and this influenced their thinking about reserved and concurrent periods of paid parental leave.

(i) Social norms

While parents felt it was becoming more socially acceptable for fathers to stay at home and care for their children, there were **still 'unspoken' social and cultural norms that mothers should be doing the bulk of the caring work**. Important practical issues such as the time required for the birth mother to recover and establish breastfeeding, and the need for economic security where the father's income was higher than the mother's were also cited as important drivers around the use of paid parental leave.

When reflecting on why mothers would take most of the leave, parents felt it was still the cultural norm in Australia that mothers, not fathers, would want to do the bulk of caregiving for a baby.

To me, I would probably give it all to my missus. Honestly, in my head, I'm thinking mum always needs to be there. It's just how I see things. Mum needs to be there. So if I'm getting 2 weeks, I think great. If I'm getting no weeks, I'll be like, oh man, I want something. But if you were to give me a choice whether we go halves or not, I wouldn't be upset to be like, "No, you can have it all. It's okay". (Andy, middle income, CALD)

It's still less acceptable [for men to take parental leave] ... it's the unspoken stuff. (Peter, middle income)

To me, it makes more sense having Amelia at home with the babies, (a) breastfeeding, (b) [she's] a bit more nurturing than me, and personally, I think she's got a bit more patience than me in terms of parenting. So I think it's the personality type also that played a role. (Kabir, high income, CALD)

(ii) Employer attitudes

Parents felt that it was more difficult for fathers to take parental leave than mothers and that father's ability to do so hinged on having a 'good boss' who was family oriented. **Fathers with supportive employers reported that it was easy to take leave**, work flexibly or remotely, and stay home with their family.

My employer supported me being with my family when, on paper, I belonged in Adelaide... I requested that I be allowed to work remotely from Newcastle, and they said yes. So, I do believe my employer supported me in sort of nurturing, or to the best possible way, [supporting] my family. (Kabir, high income, CALD)

I think it's really important to point out that his experience with his role, he had a very good boss who was very family oriented and supportive and understanding. And I wouldn't say that's necessarily the norm. So, I think he just struck gold with that boss. (Amelia, high income, CALD)

Fathers without supportive employers recalled negative and stressful experiences when taking parental leave, for example in cases where their partner went into labour earlier than expected and employers questioned their need to take immediate leave.

When [Alexia] was pregnant with ... our second child, she'd come early. And I remember calling my employer and said, "Hey, mate. [Alexia's] waters had broken." And the straw that broke the camel's back in that working relationship was not like, "Oh, congratulations" or anything. It was like, "But she's early." I was working for 10 years. And that's the response you have. So ever since that, I was out of there. I looked for another job in a similar position. (David, middle income)

3. The shift to 26 weeks of paid parental leave is welcome, but the preference is for 52 weeks

Parents were enthusiastic about the extension of the current scheme to 26 weeks by 2026. Nevertheless, they felt that **26 weeks paid leave is not long enough for parents to care for young children in the way they preferred**. Fathers want greater opportunity to provide care and support to their partners, and to do care themselves. However, families expect that even with the extended 26 weeks they will allocate most of the unreserved paid leave time to mothers.

Parents agreed that **52 weeks of paid parental leave would be ideal**. A full year of paid parental leave was seen as optimum and fits with dominant family preferences about when parents feel comfortable to put young children into formal early childhood education and care. Parents want to be the sole carers of their infants and organise their work to support this. Parents did not like the idea of children going into early childhood education and care when they are very young (under 1 year old), as this does not allow for hands-on parenting in the early months and years of a child's life. Most mothers in the study had patched together various forms of paid parental leave and other forms of paid and unpaid leave to make up 12 months of leave with their most recent baby. This was easier for mothers with employer provided parental leave schemes and those in more secure jobs.

I think a year off for everyone would be fantastic, for all kids to not have to go to childcare under a year ... I think to be able to make it for a whole year would be the dream. (Nora, single mother, middle income)

A year would be great. Two, even better. The sky's the limit if you're asking what I would [want], but I also know that that just would never happen. But a year, I think, would be so beneficial to so many families and children. Mums who are going through the whole process of learning about this new role and who they are and looking after a little person, it's full on, so to throw in having to go back to work, and taking a child to childcare, and dropping them off and leaving them. (Amelia, high income, CALD)

The dream is like 12 months. (Grace, same sex couple, female)

If I had my way I'd be like, "Pay me for a year." ...and in the scheme of your child's life, it's a very important time. (Emily, high income)

A year will be amazing. ... So if we lived in a fantasy world, yeah, a year would be amazing. (Isabella, middle income, CALD)

4. Parents were engaged by the new flexible design principles of the 2023 changes, but it must be 'genuine' flexibility

Parents were generally **enthusiastic about the new flexible design of paid parental leave that will allow the time to be used in either weekly blocks, or units of one day**. However, they were unsure how it would work, suggesting this needs to be administered in a way that supports 'genuine' flexibility. Parents liked the way this new design feature will support diversity of family type and work situations.

Mothers saw opportunities to use the flexibility options provided in the new scheme when transitioning back to work, allowing them to stay connected to the workforce.

I think just having the choice is really important. Yeah. I think it just hasn't been on the table before, so I still think I would have taken the first year off at least with the first child, but I don't think in the future I will want to do that. I think getting a bit of time with the child is really important, but maybe a year is a bit long, so being able to share that would be great. (Sarah, middle income)

I think in the initial days and weeks, I think you need that full-time off. But maybe towards the end when you're transitioning back to work it might be a bit easier to do a 4-day week instead of 5. That has been beneficial. But yeah, having a baby and being the birthing parent, I think you need a good, solid chunk of time. (Grace, same sex couple)

[The flexibility] would definitely help just so that when one say goes back to work, you are not really stressing about, "Oh, I need to work that extra day or so, because you don't have the flexibility. But obviously with that flexibility, if I could save about 3 days and then use one day as one of the flexible days or things like that, it'll be great because then that helps out financially and also allows me to be at home with an extra day there with my son or my future child or whatever the case is. (Isabella, middle income, CALD)

That is amazing. That's saying that you could just go to work, say, 4 days and get paid just a little bit less just on one day [...] I think that's pretty good. I'm impressed that they've made it a lot more flexible and that they've obviously increased the time. So all steps in the right direction. (Amelia, high income, CALD)

Parents appreciated the way the new system challenges the idea that only mothers require time off or flexibility at the birth of a child and encourages fathers to take on a more equal caring role. **Fathers also saw opportunities for increased care and their ability to access paid parental leave while limiting the impact on household income.**

That would work out. Yeah, let's say if 4 days, I got paid normal wages, whatever my work pays, and then the one day was government minimum wages, yeah, that would work out. (Kabir, high income, CALD)

I think it [the flexibility] would be helpful, particularly with [Peter's] work, which can be a bit more seasonal, [...] particularly as a sole trader, as self-employed. (Sarah, middle income)

Recognition by parents that not all families have the same needs or preferences and that in some cases the birthing parent would not be the primary carer meant **the flexible design was appreciated and would help to support diverse caring arrangements.**

[S]ome birthing parents are gearing to go back to work as soon as they can. It works both ways. Sometimes the primary caregiver isn't the person who gave birth, and the birthing parent is ready to go back to work as soon as possible. So, I guess it just depends on the situation. (Amy, same sex couple)

There is obviously plenty of couples that [...] either don't or can't breastfeed, and so then [...] they're obviously way more flexible ... [and] the dad [can] do more of the parenting role. But obviously for the parents who [...] or the moms who breastfeed [...] [they] don't have that flexibility. But if the scenario allows you to be flexible, then that's probably a good thing. (Jack, low income)

Breastfeeding was cited as the main barrier to more flexible use of paid parental leave with some parents not expecting they would be in a position to exchange full-time care by one parent (understood to be the mother) in the first 26 weeks for more father care or flexible care options (e.g., 1 day a week) later in the baby's life.

The fact that [Lucy] was breastfeeding ... Hopefully she can do it with the next kid too. But it probably makes a decision for us. If she's breastfeeding, she can't work. (Jack, low income)

What if, for example, I shared say half of it with [Andy] and then, I don't know, the other half I have to go back to work. Is [Andy] going to breastfeed my child? What if I'm breastfeeding? (Isabella, middle income, CALD)

Parent interest in the opportunities presented by the new flexible scheme were contingent on how flexible use was administered. Parents **want to be able to change the allocation of paid parental leave over time and between parents in real time, as required, and in response to changing work, health and family needs** that may emerge over the first 2 years of the child's life.

Parents appreciated the new flexibility as they were generally wary of a blanket or one-size-fits-all policy that does not account for the unique circumstances of different parents and households. **In particular, parents did not want their leave arrangements to be 'locked in' when their needs could change after the baby arrives.** It was widely agreed that 'different families have different needs' and that parents should be able to adjust and redistribute parental leave over the 2-year period. Parents want to be able to 'shuffle' paid parental leave around to allow a more efficient and equal distribution of work and care and accommodate individual and household preferences.

I would say being able to dictate what suits us is massively beneficial ... You know, we've sometimes talked about whether she's the birthing parent or I am, maybe the other one wants to be the primary caregiver. So maybe even if [Grace] gives birth, I might be the stay-at-home parent. We just don't know what each situation is going to make for us. So, I think this kind of more flexible arrangement is really beneficial and I think it's going to be great for a lot of families. (Amy, same sex couple)

I think for our situation, the best scheme would be flexibility on when you started the paid parental leave. Flexibility on who can take it and when and being able to shuffle around ... I think our situation particularly, I don't think the forced block of leave for the male is as relevant ... But that's how it would work for us. (Sarah, middle income)

... it'd be useful to move it around once we've started to not have it locked in, like I mentioned before because we work with a small number of clients, but if we happen to get three or four extra ones and suddenly my workload went up, I can either turn that work down or I could chat to [Sarah] and say, "Do you want to take more leave? Take some of my leave back, that 18 weeks because I can do all this extra work." And we can discuss it. So yeah. It would suck if we were locked in ... Because you also don't know what it's like to be a parent. That's the other thing, you just have no idea what your kid's going to be like. What you're going to want to do or who's going to want to have leave. (Peter, middle income)

That's (flexibility) really good because it might be the situation where it's reversed and the mum needs to return back to work, she's got a high-profile job and the dad can stay home caring more. I think it's really good. Different families have different needs. (Max, high income)

5. Parents tend to prioritise extension of time on paid parental leave over a higher payment

Parents prefer a longer period of paid parental leave rather than a higher income payment and the national minimum wage level of payment is generally perceived as fair.⁴ It is **widely agreed by parents that time with family, especially with a newborn, is the ‘number one’ priority** and that bonding with a child early in their life is more important than a higher payment.

Time off is number one. Money comes and goes. But that time, if I’m not home and I don’t see my son, say if I miss out [on] like him walking or something, oh man, I’ll be devastated. All the moments you lose, you never get it back. (Andy, middle income, CALD)

I would prefer the time with the child than the money....[It] was good to be able to have the time with him when he was still newborn. (Samantha, single mother, low income)

However, **some parents in both low and high income brackets expressed concern over ‘money coming into the bank’ and ensuring bills and payments could be met** in the context of rising inflation, interest rates and cost of living. This was a particular concern for families with more than two children, and where the father earned the higher income. Payment at the minimum wage was cited by two families as limiting the amount of paid parental leave time they could use and who could use it.

Because I work for myself and [Lily is] casual at the moment ... The leave entitlement isn’t the biggest thing for us. It’s the actual ... Just the money amount. At the end of the day, for us, it’s just money coming into the bank. (Jack, low income)

It makes more sense for [David] to return to work to keep bringing in that higher wage than for me to say, “Oh, you take 16 weeks off paid parental leave.” Financially, we wouldn’t have been able to do that. (Alexia, middle income)

A clear message from the majority of families was that **they plan their finances and consider the tax implications of their working patterns very carefully to allow for family care in the first 12 months.**

Obviously, the money, it does make a difference in the end because you need to support the family, you need to remain fed and you need to remain roofed and clothed and all of those things. But as long as you’re prepared enough leading up to it, you can get by on a couple of weeks of lesser pay. In order to have that time and that experience with the family. And as I keep saying, as a first-time parent, you can’t get that back. (Amy, same sex couple)

In terms of payment, when referencing the paid parental leave payments, many families referred to the money as coming from Centrelink (the government agency that delivers social security payments), that is, they regarded it as a generous welfare payment and did not directly associate it with their employment.

⁴ As at July 2022 the national minimum wage per year was AUD\$42,255. According to data provided to the Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce by the Department of Social Services 29.4% of mothers and 14% of dads/partners are on or below the national minimum wage. Source: EDW Paid Parental Leave Scheme Claims Universe, Data Load Version 2, as at 30 June each entitlement year.

6. Reserved leave for fathers

The Dad and Partner Pay (DaPP) provision (in the current, pre 1 July 2023 scheme) provides 2 weeks of reserved, non-transferable leave for fathers/partners. Uptake has been low relative to use of the paid parental leave by mothers. According to data provided to the Women's Economic Equality Taskforce, in 2019/2020 there were 171,712 recipients of paid parental leave compared to 92,343 recipients of Dad and Partner Pay.⁵ In overall terms, it is estimated that approximately 27%–30% of fathers/partners use the 2 weeks of Dad and Partner Pay.⁶ This suggests that another incentive is needed to increase uptake by fathers/partners. But **what this incentive should be is less clear as there are tensions between duration, payment, equality between mothers' and fathers' access, and whether it can be used at the same time as mothers (concurrently), or whether it must be used separately to support sole father care.**

Parents were universal in their view that **4 weeks of paid parental leave reserved for fathers was 'about right' and sends a clear and positive message about the role of fathers, and an important 'signal' to employers** about fathers' role in the care of babies. They agreed a government initiative like this would help to normalise fathers staying home to care for their children while also challenging the idea that only mothers need to bond with a newborn. These views were based on the assumption that fathers were on parental leave concurrently with mothers, not caring for newborns alone.

The whole world's changing, and dads want to be there with their kids. And I think even for those fathers who don't think that they want to, I've seen it so many times, when the baby's actually here, they completely change, and they want to. [this would support] enabling the dad and making it a bit more normal as well. I think if [David] wanted to take 4 weeks off, [his employer] would be saying, "Why do you want to take that long off?" Whereas I think if it's a government initiative, it almost normalises it a little bit as well. This is an entitlement that dads are taking now. We see that fathers should be with their newborn kids and stuff. And I just see that as a really good thing. (Alexia, middle income)

I like the idea of [Andy] having more of a role than what my parents did, in terms of dad was the one that worked, mum stayed at home. I like the idea of both the male and female playing a role in the actual parenting. Even if it might be lopsided to [Andy] working more, I still think it's really valuable for him to have input and a relationship with [our daughter]. Also for me, to maintain work. (Lily, low income)

However, **concern was expressed about a time penalty for families where the father genuinely could not take 4 weeks of leave (in a block), thus cutting the total paid parental leave time available to the family**, and effectively the mother. In these and other cases where personal, health or work commitments prevent fathers from taking the leave, parents felt the leave should be transferable to the mother.

It's a bit unfair... if you have complications during the birth and stuff, you could be in hospital or the baby could be sick or there's some things that could happen and then you just don't get around to it, and if you do and then they're like, "No, sorry, you don't get it now," that would be a bit unfair. (Samantha, single mother, low income)

⁵ Source: EDW Paid Parental Leave scheme Claims Universe, Data Load Version 2, as at 30 June each entitlement year.

⁶ Exact numbers are difficult to obtain: using number of births in a year and assuming matching numbers for fathers/partners, the calculations is as follows: 294,369/92,343 = 31%. Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2020). *Births, Australia*. ABS. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/births-australia/2020>.

If you're offering it to everybody and their work commitments [mean they] can't take it, it should be still available. It should be looked at more [as] a family and not an individual, in my eyes. Really, if they were willing to pay [Max] to stay home for 2 weeks, why can't they just give that money to us as a family? ... You're a family, you should just be giving them money and it should just be at your discretion how you use it. (Emily, high income)

Parents did not like the language of 'use-it-or-lose-it'. They saw this as punitive and felt there could be backlash against fathers using the leave if framed this way. The preference was for the language of 'reserved leave'. This could be supplemented with 'non-transferable leave' or a 'father's quota', both terms widely used overseas.

I don't like the terminology [use-it-or-lose-it]. It's almost threatening. (Amy, same sex couple)

I think as a household, it would be great to be able to choose when and who takes it. I can see calling it 'use-it-or-lose-it' maybe is not the best idea. I think there would be backlash... I think people would see it as an entitlement that they're due to receive and if they lose it then the government's then taking something away from them that they're entitled to receive. So, I think that wouldn't land so well. Just something as simple as changing the name of it. ... in a more positive light that this is leave for your male partner to take. (Sarah, middle income)

7. There is parental consensus that 4 weeks of concurrent leave at the birth of a baby is the optimum

Parents were confused about the difference between 'reserved leave' and 'concurrent leave'. In the main, parents focused on fathers taking reserved leave around the birth *and at the same time* as the mother, that is, concurrently. Parents thought 4 weeks was optimum.

Four weeks of concurrent leave after the birth of a baby is seen as important by parents for a range of reasons including to recover from caesarian section births; to support breastfeeding; to support mothers' recovery; to care for older children; to undertake domestic work; to emphasise a team approach to care; and to provide general support for mothers. Some also identified this time as good for the marriage.

Only 2 weeks concurrent leave at the birth of a baby was seen as too little, especially for families without family support close by or where health complications arise and the mother and baby are in hospital for the first 2 weeks.

Four weeks is a pretty good stint for the husband to have off and just to help out. And I think it's probably healthy for the marriage too... Especially for the first kid, it just feels like [2 weeks is] very early to be able to have to go back to work. And I felt sorry for a lot of my mates who had to go back to work [at] that stage. I think 4 weeks would be really good. (Jack, low income)

Parents agreed that it was 'not possible' or realistic for one parent to both care for a newborn and manage household and domestic chores, especially with more than one child at home. Parents said a concurrent leave period of 4 weeks would help couples to 'enjoy the highs and lows together' and support joint ownership of care.

I would've had heaps of time off. I would've loved to have had maybe a month off or something like that. That would be awesome because they're so little and delicate at that age, it's just a good time to be around, and it sucks to miss it. (David, middle income)

Two weeks, it goes very quickly, in my opinion. I think you feel like you're just starting to relax and have that time together and then it's all over. Whereas, if it was about 3 weeks or 4 weeks, I think the dad would be able to spend some really good quality time with that child as well. (Alexia, middle income)

The tasks around a newborn cannot be done by one parent. Or at least in our case, it wasn't possible like breastfeeding, cooking, cleaning, laundry. (Kabir, high income, CALD)

I think for me the most benefit was seeing all the stuff that [Sarah] has to do. Particularly the stuff that I'm not able to do, which is all the breastfeeding and even getting up at nighttime and all that. I guess the only thing is breastfeeding, but that's a big burden at the start. And if I wasn't home, I just wouldn't notice that as much. (Peter, middle income)

Parents recognised the long term benefits for fathers who were involved in the care of babies, reporting that the more involved fathers were in the early weeks of a child's life, the more confidence they gained in taking on an equal share of the parenting duties. When fathers did not do this, they ended up doing more 'fringe' parenting.

That initial confidence I think too, I remember talking about that, if they (dads) miss those early stages and how things are done, by the time they have their leave, their partner just knows what needs doing and does it all the time by default. And I think that just chips away at the confidence and then they don't perhaps get involved because they don't want to do it wrong. (Sarah, middle income)

Four weeks of concurrent leave after the birth would provide the time for fathers to engage meaningfully in care and to appreciate the caring work of their partners, especially when mothers were establishing breastfeeding in the early weeks of a child's life.

8. Parents want access to concurrent leave beyond the first 4 weeks of a baby's life

Parents see a **benefit in being able to take concurrent leave (leave at the same time) after the initial 4 weeks of a baby's birth** – particularly when they have a second child – and liked the idea of choosing when they took concurrent leave, beyond the 4 weeks reserved concurrent period.

Parents say that overlapping leave at the same time helps to establish couples as a 'team' where they are supporting each other and taking joint ownership of the care. Fathers said time together beyond the first 4 weeks was important to understand and appreciate the daily caring tasks and stresses faced by new mothers over the 18 week leave period and for male partners to take ownership of these responsibilities. This is reported to be beneficial to the couple's relationship and family life.

[T]he number of weeks of leave is quite big. 18 weeks is quite a lot. I think more of it could be together because of that. And particularly from the male perspective, I think it's good for men to understand all those things I was just saying about what their partner did and my friends who've had leave at the same time... Learning that stuff they just never thought of or never realised and appreciating their partner more, which is a really positive thing. (Peter, middle income)

Some parents also thought **concurrent leave should be extended in cases where a baby requires neonatal medical attention and the first weeks of a child's life** are spent in hospital, rather than at home. Other couples noted that in the unique context of COVID-19 lockdowns, having a longer concurrent leave period was beneficial because friends and family were unable to visit and offer support. Lack of local family support is a particular issue for many families with parents living overseas.

There should be something where dads can extend it if their child is in neonatal intensive care or if the mother is unwell, there should be something there for that. Because I do really feel sad for the parents who never get to have their bubble at home where they've got a new baby and they're all settling in. It's a really, really important time. And if those first 2 weeks are spent in hospital or longer [in] the hospital, that's a really sad thing to miss. (Emily, high income)

It's really hard, I feel like our experience is a bit skewed because it was during the middle of lockdown, pandemic, full-blown COVID. No one could come in, no one could go out. So, both being at home, like we worked in jobs that still were ongoing during the pandemic. Our workplace didn't stop. We were essential workers. So, work didn't stop. So being able to be at home [together] was a blessing, it was great for us. (Amy, same sex couple)

9. Reserved leave for sole-father care was identified as valuable by some

While parents did not consider the preferred 4 weeks of reserved leave as sole carer time for fathers (instead prioritising concurrent leave at the birth of a baby) **some parents did say it was important that fathers engage in sole parenting** and childcare without assistance from their partners to build confidence and support an equal distribution of care work.

Yeah. It's interesting, time together I think is extremely valuable, but also time being the sole parent is something I've got feedback from a couple of friends and notice myself ... is that being the sole parent makes you realise absolutely everything that a baby does. And even our situation is a bit different because we've been mostly around together the whole time since he was born. And working from home, so you've got someone. But if you weren't, I think that's a really good experience, but particularly for a man to do some sole parenting. (Peter, middle income)

10. Parents like to have the option of accessing paid parental leave in the weeks prior to birth

Access to **paid parental leave prior to the birth of a baby was seen by many as helping to support mothers prepare.**

Access to paid parental leave prior to birth was especially valued by those with older children, single mothers, those in physically demanding workplaces (such as nursing and teaching) and those with specific pre-natal health issues.

Parents wanted to access paid parental leave prior to birth in order to 'get the house sorted' and prepare for the baby to arrive, while also having an opportunity to rest and mentally prepare for a first or second child. Others said accessing paid parental leave in the 4 weeks prior to birth could offer support to parents who are planning for a natural rather than caesarian birth, as labour and delivery can be unpredictable. In the context of COVID-19, some mothers said it would have been beneficial to access paid parental leave in the weeks prior to birth in order to limit exposure to the virus and ensure their partners could be present at the birth.

If it's a natural birth or something, it could happen anytime. So, it definitely would be good if [paid parental leave] was to even start ... I don't know, say 4 weeks prior to the due date, because you just don't know. It's a very unpredictable thing. (Isabella, middle income, CALD)

I was going to get my whole house sorted. And just the physical trying to lug [my son] to his daycare drop off, get to my work, find a park, get to the office ... then the reverse... it's not like when you get home, I'm relaxing. ...They're long days. We'd be out of the house by 7 am and we're not home until after 6 pm. (Nora, single mother, middle income)

I think being able to access it sooner would be really nice because there's a lot to prepare for and to learn before you have the baby. And if you're working right up until the point of giving birth then you don't get that time to mentally prepare yourself. (Sarah, middle income)

11. Single mothers see the paid parental leave scheme as very helpful but would prefer 52 weeks

Single mothers viewed the minimum wage rate of paid parental leave as fair. They **responded positively to the new flexible design** and see this as a good way to support a more gradual transition back to the workplace.

I get where they come from doing it at minimum wage and I think that's ... fair, and I don't think it should be indexed on anyone's income ... I don't think anyone, because they own more, they should then get more when they're off. So, I think doing it on minimum wage is a fair way to do it. But I'm never going to complain if they want to give us more. (Nora, single mother, middle income)

Access to early childhood education and care is the most important determinant of return-to-work for single mothers who expressed concern about limited options and waitlists for daycare. For example, one mother returned to work earlier than planned when a daycare spot became available, as she was worried the spot would be filled.

I was going to take the 12 months off, that was my original plan, but then once I got offered the spot at daycare, I didn't really want to pass it up because if I didn't take it, I probably wouldn't have got one. (Samantha, single mother, low income)

Single mothers worried about 'plugging the gaps' before and after childcare to accommodate their work hours and discussed the importance of flexible schedules and support from family and friends to coordinate drop offs and pickups. This was a particular concern for single mothers with shift work schedules that do not align with the opening and closing hours of early childhood education and care centres.

I did a little bit of shift work after [having my son], but it's a 7 am start or a night duty. So, you're always finding someone else to plug the gaps before and after childcare. So, I don't want a role where I have to ask them every single time I go to work, "Can you do drop off or can you do pickup?" One or the other's fine, but not every week. (Nora, single mother, middle income)

Topline findings and recommendations

This section summarises the main findings. We use them in conjunction with our findings from the best practice literature review in our *Next Steps* report to provide recommendations about the future design of Australia's paid parental leave scheme.

There are five main recommendations which refer to key elements of the scheme:

1. Total length
2. Flexible design
3. Reserved leave for fathers
4. Concurrent leave
5. Sole father leave

We note that among parents there was confusion and conflation of the notions of 'reserved leave' and 'concurrent leave'. The concurrent leave element of the scheme is not well understood. The understandings of 'reserved leave' and 'concurrent leave' were further complicated by the flexibility of leave use which, once fully comprehended by parents, is highly desirable, but may impact on their use of reserved and concurrent leave periods.

1. Total length of paid parental leave

This study of Australian parents shows that the health and wellbeing of the mother and baby is prioritised by fathers. Where the length of the paid parental leave is 26 weeks (with periods of reserved leave for the mother and father/partner), all couples thought they would give the majority of the available remaining leave to the mother. This was the case even where fathers were excited by the prospect of long periods of reserved leave and options for flexible use. Ultimately, fathers would not take this time away from mothers. Some mothers in the study were also unwilling to give up some of their paid parental leave.

If the length of paid parental leave was extended, fathers and mothers saw increasing opportunities for fathers to genuinely share the care of young children through longer periods of reserved leave and use of flexible options. However, parents' understanding of the terms 'concurrent' and 'reserved' leave were not clear, as discussed below.

Parents were unclear about the design of the changes to reach 26 weeks of leave by 2026 and did not fully understand the roll out of the additional weeks on an annual basis. Clear communication of this is needed. A simple one step extension to 26 weeks in 2024 would be most desirable in terms of clarity for parents and their ability to plan.

All parents, in couples or single, thought that 52 weeks was the optimum time for one parent to be at home with a young child supported by paid parental leave.

We recommend:

- immediate roll out of paid parental leave to 26 weeks in 2024 with a budget pathway to extend to 52 weeks of paid parental leave in 2026.

2. Flexible design

The new flexible design was of great interest to parents who saw a range of possibilities, particularly around the use of a single day of paid parental leave at a time. In the interviews, parents took time to absorb the possibilities of this flexibility. Middle and high income families also saw the desirability of the more flexible, non-block paid parental leave as a way of managing work and household income with payment at minimum wage level. That is, they could see fathers taking a day or two at a time each week, without disrupting work or household income unduly. The flexible design could therefore support the expanded use of sole father care.

We recommend:

- clear communication to parents of the flexibility options
- administrative support that facilitates genuine flexibility that can be changed in response to evolving family and work needs.

3. Reserved leave for fathers/partners

Reserved leave for fathers/partners has the potential to change social norms and expectations about who cares and who works.

Parents appreciate the capacity of reserved leave periods to send important signals to families and to employers about the role of fathers as carers. Workplaces will need to become better attuned to men as carers to support the successful uptake of reserved leave by fathers. Without this important shift, extended periods of reserved leave for fathers could have adverse effects on families, reducing the total paid time to care. Additional research on employer attitudes and preparedness for increased use of paid parental leave by fathers is essential to support policy aims for shared care.

We recommend:

- 4 weeks of reserved leave for fathers/partners starting in 2024, and extended significantly (up to 12 weeks) in a 52-week scheme.

4. Concurrent paid parental leave

Concurrency of leave adds a further dimension to the parental leave scheme and is not well understood. Instead, parents use the language of 'being at home at the same time', and parents have strong aspirations for concurrent leave at the birth of a new baby. Parents would also like to have the option to take concurrent leave later in the parental leave period, when it suits their family and work circumstances.

The difference between concurrent leave and non-concurrent (sole parent) leave is not well understood by parents and must therefore be clearly communicated.

We recommend:

- from 2024, 4 weeks of concurrent leave able to be taken by parent A and parent B around the time of the birth of the baby.
- consider extending the total period for concurrent leave available to parents and when it can be taken to up to 8 weeks in a 52-week scheme.

5. Sole care for fathers/partners

While parents were focused on caring together in the very early weeks of a baby's life, some parents did value the opportunity for fathers to care alone later in the parental leave period.

If the intention of the new paid parental leave design is to shift fathers' caring behaviours, research evidence shows that sole parenting is essential. However, parents recognise this would take from the total paid parental leave period available to the mother and had some concerns about the impact on total paid leave available to a family where an employer or workplace made it difficult for fathers to take the full portion of reserved leave.

We recommend:

- prioritising a commitment to sole father care as a matter of policy improvement. This could be as long as 8 weeks in a 52-week scheme. A 26-week scheme does not allow enough time to quarantine a reserved period of leave for father's solo care.

Research with Australian parents demonstrates that the national paid parental leave system is appreciated and the changes in design and length are welcome. There is, however, a clear understanding that a 26-week scheme is unable to adequately meet the five objectives of the Paid Parental Leave Act 2010 or reflect international standards (see Appendices 2 and 3).

Based on the key research findings and recommendations above, and to encourage a shift in fathers' care and promote gender equality, we recommend the following model of paid parental leave (see Table 1).

The main changes are as follows:

- Move directly to 26 weeks of leave in 2024
- Move to 52 weeks of leave in 2026
- Move to a reserved period of leave for fathers of 4 weeks in 2024 as part of a 26-week scheme, and 12 weeks in 2026, as part of a 52-week scheme
- Introduce a period of sole father care (non-concurrent and non-transferable) leave of 8 weeks, as part of a 52-week scheme.

Table 1. Recommended design for an accelerated timetable and extended scheme

Year of Introduction	Total Paid Parental Leave*	Reserved Leave Parent A	Reserved Leave Parent B	Family Leave (allocated according to parent preferences)	Sole Father Leave (as part of reserved leave parent B)	Total Concurrent Leave
2023	20 weeks	2 weeks	2 weeks	16 weeks	0 weeks	2 weeks
2024	26 weeks	4 weeks	4 weeks	18 weeks	0 weeks	4 weeks
2026	52 weeks	12 weeks	12 weeks	28 weeks	8 weeks	8 weeks

*All paid parental leave paid at national minimum wage.

*Paid parental leave to be taken within the first 2 years of a child's life.

Appendix 1. Research method

Ten families, comprising eight couples (with one single sex couple) and two single parents, were recruited according to the sampling framework outlined in Table 2.⁷ While the sample is undeniably small, the size is not unusual for research of this nature. Timing and funds did not allow a larger sample. The emphasis is on depth and richness of replies and reaching a 'saturation point' in responses. This was achieved with the two single parents and eight couples (16 parents), making a total of 18 parents who were interviewed.

Comparisons with research undertaken in other countries reveal similar methodology and findings to those presented here. For instance, Beglaubter's study (2017, p. 476) of 33 Canadian heterosexual couples found "[S]trong cultural support for mothers'—but not fathers'—time with baby tipped the scales toward maternal care giving, even when couples wanted to share parental leave".⁸ A study by Cannito (2020, p. 832) of 33 Italian fathers' use of paid parental leave found "men's choice to take parental leave is the result of a process of negotiation that involves the way gender is performed, and in which men, too, are active subjects of social change".⁹ On the other hand, men who do not take parental leave talk about a 'natural' choice linked to the fact that their partners want to be there with the child. In a study of 22 parents (13 mothers and 9 fathers) in the UK, Kaufman (2018) found the explanation for fathers' low take up of additional parental leave to be due to financial costs, gendered expectations, perceived workplace resistance and policy restrictions.¹⁰ Similarly, Cluley and Hecht (2020) interviewed 29 couples from Canada and the United States about work–family decision-making¹¹ and Romero-Balsas, Muntanyola-Saura and Rogero-García (2013, p. 678) interviewed 30 Spanish fathers and found that "paternity leave is mostly considered a right, but not a duty, and the decision whether or not to use it is viewed as an individual choice".¹²

An external social research firm was sub-contracted to recruit and undertake the interviews, with direct and explicit guidance on recruitment criteria and design of the interview protocol from the report authors Marian Baird and Elizabeth Hill. Baird and Hill closely monitored each stage of the research and attended all interviews.

Recruitment was targeted via the father's income in the first instance (except for the female same sex couple). Department of Social Services data was used to determine the income categories and to ensure that low, medium and high income households were represented in the sample. The intention was to also include families from metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas, from professional and non-professional occupations and from CALD backgrounds. All participants had a child in the last 18 months (except the female couple whose child was 2 years old), and both parents were working prior to the birth of the child. Four families included parents with a CALD background. One parent was of First Nations background.

⁷ The authors wish to acknowledge the generosity and care for family demonstrated by the parents interviewed for this project.

⁸ Beglaubter, J. (2017). Balancing the scales: Negotiating fathers' parental leave use. *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie*, 54(4), 476–496.

⁹ Cannito, M. (2020). The influence of partners on fathers' decision-making about parental leave in Italy: Rethinking maternal gatekeeping. *Current Sociology*, 68(6), 832–849.

¹⁰ Kaufman, G. (2018). Barriers to equality: why British fathers do not use parental leave. *Community, Work & Family*, 21(3), 310–325.

¹¹ Cluley, H. & Hecht, T. D. (2020). Micro work-family decision-making of dual-income couples with young children: What does a couple like us do in a situation like this? *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 93(1), 45–72.

¹² Romero-Balsas, P., Muntanyola-Saura, D. & Rogero-García, J. (2013). Decision-making factors within paternity and parental leaves: Why Spanish fathers take time off from work. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 20(6), 678–691.

Each family completed a short pre-interview survey that covered essential background information, including age, employment type and status (full-time, part-time, casual), hours worked per week, income, housing status, number of children, age of youngest child, types of leave taken at birth of last child and weeks taken (paid parental leave, dad and partner pay, annual leave, unpaid leave, employer provided paid parental leave).

The parents of each family were interviewed online and together, with fathers asked to respond to interview questions and prompts first. Positioning men as the ‘lead’ interviewee was intentional, designed to set the overall tone of the interview and to ensure that the attitudes and experiences of fathers were properly captured. Our previous research shows that mothers are always keen to speak about their parental leave experience. Given the government’s priority to enhance fathers’ role in the care of young children, this project was designed to centre the voices of fathers while also including mothers. This research technique was effective with all fathers being active participants in the interviews.

Each in-depth interview was held via Zoom and ran for 90 minutes according to a set interview protocol designed by Marian Baird and Elizabeth Hill. Interviews were conducted between Tuesday 31 January and Wednesday 15 February 2023. All interviewees received a \$180 eGift voucher.

The interview protocol covered:

1. A description of how fathers and mothers decided on care and work arrangements in the months after the birth of the new child
2. Fathers’ and mothers’ experiences of using the national paid parental leave scheme
3. What fathers and mother think an ideal paid parental leave system should look like
4. Fathers’ and mothers’ views on the 1 July 2023 changes to paid parental leave
5. Fathers’ and mothers’ views on how the additional 6 weeks of paid parental leave in 2026 could be allocated. Three scenario prompts were used to guide this discussion.

Table 2. Sampling framework

Family type	Father/Partner personal Income
Total = 10 families	
2 x fathers in couples One CALD	Higher income >\$100,000 pa gross
3 x fathers in couples Two CALD	Medium income \$40,000–\$100,000 pa gross
2 x fathers in couples One CALD	Lower income <\$40,000 pa gross
1 x single sex couple Female	Any income level
1 x single mother	Mid/high income level >\$40,000 pa gross (mother)
1 x single mother	Low income level <\$40,000 pa gross (mother)

Note: we were unable to recruit a male same sex couple so replaced them with an additional medium income father (CALD).

Anonymised names	Interview details
Sarah and Peter	Interview 1: Middle income
Samantha	Interview 2: Single mother, low income
Isabella and Andy	Interview 3: Middle income, CALD
Amelia and Kabir	Interview 4: High income, CALD
Lily and Jack	Interview 5: Low income
Lucy and George	Interview 6: Middle income
Nora	Interview 7: Single mother, middle income
Emily and Max	Interview 8: High income
Alexia and David	Interview 9: Middle income
Amy and Grace	Interview 10: Same sex couple, female

Appendix 2. Paid Parental Leave Act 2010 – Objectives

It is within the particularly Australian context that the objectives of the Parental Leave Act (2010)⁴ must be read, noting that the Act was introduced following a comprehensive analysis of the need for a paid parental leave scheme by the Productivity Commission (2009).

The objective of Parental Leave Pay is to provide financial support to primary carers (1.1.P.230) (mainly birth mothers) of children, in order to:

- allow those carers to take **time off work to care for the child** in the 2 years following the child's birth or adoption;
- enhance the **health** and development of **birth mothers and children**;
- encourage **women** to continue **to participate in the workforce**;
- **promote equality between men and women**, and the balance between work and family life, and;
- provide those carers with greater **flexibility** to balance work and family life.

Appendix 3. International Standards

EU Directive on work–life balance: Implementation 2 August 2022.1 The Directive on work–life balance aims to both increase (i) the participation of women in the labour market and (ii) the take-up of family-related leave and flexible working arrangements. The EU Directive includes:

- Paternity leave: Working fathers are entitled to at least **10 working days of paternity leave around the time of birth of the child**. Paternity leave must be compensated at least at the level of sick pay;
- Parental leave: Each parent is entitled to at least four months of parental leave, of which **two months is paid and non-transferable**. Parents can request to take their leave in a flexible form, either full-time, part-time, or in segments;

International Labour Organization (ILO) Maternity Protection Recommendation, 2000, No. 191.2

- Members should endeavour to extend the period of **maternity leave** referred to in Article 4 of the Convention to **at least 18 weeks**.
- Provision should be made for **an extension** of the maternity leave in the event of **multiple births**.

The Fifty-fourth World Health Assembly, May 2001 Resolution, WHA54.2, on Infant and young child nutrition, paragraph 3(6).3

- exclusive **breastfeeding for six months** as a global public health recommendation.