

Transcript - Working Fathers Episode 1 – Where's Dad?



00:00 Dan: Welcome to Working Fathers, a podcast about dads, families and work. We look at the many different roles fathers play in contemporary Australian families and society and how policy can better recognize, value and support.

I'm Dan Halliday. I'm an Associate Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of Melbourne. But more importantly, I'm also the father of four wonderful children, and I'll be your host.

In this episode, "Where's Dad?", our starting point is the large gender gap in time spent directly caring for children in economically developed and relatively gender-egalitarian societies like Australia.

Things aren't what they were 50 years ago. Mothers, particularly of younger children, are more likely to do paid work than they were in the past, but it's still quite rare for men to be the primary carer of their children. Mothers, on average, still do the bulk of the childcare and the domestic labour, while fathers still tend towards the breadwinner role.

01:11 Vox Pop Dad (J): I still think there's an element of that the male needs to be a breadwinner in some way, shape or form, and that's probably a byproduct of the fact that working life caused a little bit for females.

So I think that naturally creates an income gap in certain industries and the fact that there's so much time if you have multiple children, there's so much time in and out of the workforce for the female. So I think there is an expectation, whether it's through society or as an individual, that I've got to share the load by making sure there's food, water, shelter over the hood of the house.

01:47 Vox Pop Dad (M): I think the expectation felt by most men that I know is that it's your responsibility to be the breadwinner, like to at least provide enough for your family to not go

without. Beyond that, anything is a bonus, so to speak. But that sort of feels like the minimum requirement.

I think that's quite ingrained in society and also just in where men feel their responsibility is. And I can't really talk for all men, but that's sort of largely how I feel. I think I'd be very open to flipping that gender role around.

02:23 Dan: Our first guest is an expert in changing gender roles and their evolution over time. Carla Pascoe Leahy is a lecturer in Family History at the University of Tasmania. Her work focuses on the history of childhood, parenthood and family.

She starts the historical timeline in the postwar period and the changes in expectations on fathers. She can find out quite a lot about fathers by talking to mothers.

02:52 Carla: This is one of the reasons that I ask women about the support that they're getting. In general terms, I would say that postwar fathers were not heavily engaged in the day-to-day care of their children, and that was in line with cultural expectations. They may have been involved in reading books or bath time, but often not even that.

They tended to be working full-time and they often only saw their children in the evenings and on weekends. Interestingly, there was no resentment among postwar mothers about these very low levels of active care from fathers because it was a cultural expectation that they shared.

03:41 And indeed, some postwar mothers told them that they didn't mind the division of labour, they felt very respected for their role as a mother and that division of labour was very clear cut. I'd say for Second Wave mothers, this was becoming more contested, and for some progressive couples, they were experimenting with a more equitable division of labour.

But there's only one family I've spoken with where the mother and father equally shared care of the child and worked equal hours at the same time. One of the things that's interesting about oral history is it allows us to think about something as it was at the time and something as it appears in hindsight.

And a lot of these Second Wave mothers said to me, "Oh, we thought we were really radical at the time, and we called it co-parenting." And the dad might get up at night when the baby cried and change the nappy, or they might bathe them in the evening, and we thought they were really involved.

04:49 But when I look back now and see what men are doing today, I think they didn't really do very much at all. And I think for millennial mothers, as I said, they go into parenthood with an expectation that fathers will be heavily involved and equitably involved, and they often find that expectation frustrated.

And I think it's actually quite heartbreaking looking at the situation of many contemporary families that you see so clearly that mothers want more help.

05:20 Vox Pop Dad (D): I want to run the house. I want to cook dinners. I want to play that role for my turn, because I understand that when I'm on shift, I'm not readily available. We are a true tandem partnership, but that didn't just happen. Like, you've got to find the

motivation to get jobs done, and you reap the benefit, knowing that your partner, your spouse, is super-appreciative of it, and then it just becomes second nature.

05:50 Vox Pop Dad (J): Well, if you want to segment it, I'm definitely the cook, and we're fine with that. We split the load, I think, pretty evenly. If we know that something needs to be tidied or if the vacuuming needs to be done or washing needs to be put away, it's whoever can do it at that point in time, I'd definitely say my strong suit isn't the washing. I can't believe how much washing there is, but I think it's about communicating with your partner.

06:16 Dan: A survey report titled "[*From Girls to Men: Social Attitudes to Gender Equality in Australia*](#)" was published by the 50/50 by 2030 Foundation a couple of years ago.

It found that the majority of respondents had egalitarian views about how to divide domestic work and childcare. 85% of respondents thought that domestic work should be shared equally between partners, regardless of their gender.

And only about one in three thought that women are best suited to be the primary carer of children. And just 31% thought that it's important to maintain traditional gender roles so that families function well and children are properly supported.

06:57 So while there's a difference between what people think about gender roles in general and what they prefer for themselves, these survey findings do suggest that fathers' actual roles on the ground are lagging behind social attitudes.

So there is a desire for change within families, and this has actually been around for quite some time. Here's a bit more from Carla, who also tells us about some of the barriers to change.

07:22 Carla: And you see so clearly that fathers want to do more and yet they feel like it's impossible, either because the father has to work amount to earn enough money to support the family, or perhaps because his employer expects him to be available a certain amount.

And this can often cause really serious tensions within relationships, as both new parents are sleep-deprived, learning new skills in a situation of enormous pressure where the stakes are very, very high.

It's sort of the well-being and thriving of their child and both feel stretched to their limits and perhaps often dissatisfied with how things are turning out but don't see how it could be any different.

And this is partly what I've argued in some of my work that where there's been a cultural shift in expectations but practices are lagging behind, there's enormous potential for government policy to come in and fill that gap to help families make their shift from cultural expectation to actual practice in day to day life.

08:32 Dan: More on those policy possibilities a bit later, but first we're going to hear from another researcher who's interested in both the pressures-facing parents and the slowly changing roles of fathers. Here's Leah Ruppner, who is a professor of Sociology at the University of Melbourne and one of the founding directors of the Future of Work lab there.

Leah takes us from the everyday physical activities of caring for children that Carla talked about and introduces the concept of the mental load when it comes to running a family. This also turns out to involve a gendered division of labour.

09:06 Leah: So the literature is pretty clear that the mental load in the family is disproportionately held by mothers. That doesn't mean that fathers don't do some of the mental load, but in part, this is kind of the consequence of women being disproportionately responsible for the temperature or the feelings within the family.

But one of the challenges, I think, is that we don't really know about father's mental loads. We know that women do more of that kind of planning and management work. We know that mothers carry more of the unpaid work at home.

But we also know that fathers are doing more too, and over time they're interested in being more active, engaged caregivers. They're picking up more of the unpaid housework, showing that across generations, men have picked up more housework, kind of the core housework stuff.

09:56 Gen X are doing more than boomers, millennials are doing more than Gen X, and they're picking up more of the child care too. So men today are significantly more interested in being active parents. Because we don't know that much about the mental load, in part because the mental load is invisible, we don't really know how men carry the mental load.

We don't know what kind of things worry fathers. Are they the same types of things that worry mothers? Are they carrying mental loads around their roles as breadwinners?

Are they looking at kind of changing economic fortunes and thinking about how do they provide for the family? Or are they thinking about their children's health and well-being in the same way that mothers are?

10:33 Dan: But are fathers the straight-out winners in the division of labour? Now, as a father, I can admit that it is sometimes nice to be able to go into work where, frankly, things are a bit more peaceful than they are in the house, and other people don't expect me to wipe their backsides and pick up the food that they've thrown all over the floor.

At the same time, admittedly, not all jobs or workplaces are created equal, but that goes for working in the home and looking after the kids as well. As Carla tells us, we often lump together quite a lot of very different types of work when we talk loosely about the work of parenting or caregiving.

11:09 Carla: I think we probably have to distinguish slightly between different kinds of unpaid labour in the home. And I think when we lump together domestic work, like cleaning a house, cooking a meal, washing clothes with the care of children, we miss the emotional profundity that's involved in the care of children.

Now, obviously they're interconnected because caring for children often means making their lunch and washing their clothes and all of this kind of thing.

But I would say most people, mothers and fathers, do not hugely enjoy unpaid domestic labour, but find something really compelling and meaningful in the care of children and forming close relationships with their children.

So I think it's important to distinguish those things because I don't think many of us enjoy cleaning toilets, really. But what research has shown is that many contemporary fathers desire to be more involved in their children's lives.

12:19 And I suspect I haven't seen whether it's been broken down this way, but I suspect that would mean those special moments like being around to comfort a child when they fall over and they need a cuddle.

Or being around to witness the child take their first steps. Or being around to give them advice when something really hard has happened. But it's the nature of caring for children that you can't predict many of those things in advance. You can't necessarily predict when the really powerful moments are going to happen.

12:52 Vox Pop Dad (C): What do I find rewarding? I think the chance to help someone to not make mistakes that you've made historically. The opportunity to see a human develop in the smallest of ways, to see another human being go through a journey of awakening, awareness.

13:19 Vox Pop Dad (M): So to live vicariously through your kids and see them have their first experience of chocolate cake or swimming or trying to ride a bike or climbing a tree or catching a ball for the first time, any of those little things that you've forgotten that they were even a thing to see how pleased with themselves they are for achieving those little milestones, especially when they have to persist to get it, that I find really satisfying and rewarding.

And just sometimes the laughter and little bottoms running across the backyard, in the sunshine, lovely.

13:56 Vox Pop Dad (R): I guess it's just watching the kids grow all the little achievements, watching them grow into little individuals is definitely the best thing about being a dad.

14:12 Carla: And so being there without expectation is an incredibly important part of developing a meaningful relationship as a carer of a child. And it's something that philosopher Sarah Ruddick has looked at really, in really sort of poignant and moving terms.

And she talks about how the day-to-day care of a child whose needs are constantly changing every single day demands from their primary carer a really powerful response that has ethical implications. She argues that it means and she was talking about mothers, but she said that fathers could develop this, too, when they were primary carers of children.

15:02 It demands an ethical engagement with the world in which your own needs come second. It forces a kind of an altruistic position, which I think is transformative, not only for the child who was literally growing before your eyes, but also for the carer.

So part of my work has been trying to shift the way that we think about the care of children, to not just see it as a burden and, like, we've got to negotiate who's looking after the kids today and who's looking after them tomorrow, because neither of us really want to do it, but

to actually focus on the ways in which deep immersion in the lives of children is enriching for their carers. It gives the carer something as well as giving the child something.

15:42 Dan: But although caring for children might be priceless, in our current economic system, it is also treated as if it was worthless. For centuries, advocates for women have observed that our economic system makes women, and especially mothers, economically dependent because it accords little social value or remuneration to the vital work of caring for and raising the next generation.

Here in Australia, in a [1927 Royal Commission on the Child Endowment Scheme](#), a woman called Irene Longman, that's the first woman to stand and be elected to the Queensland State Parliament, told astonished commissioners that women's work as wives and mothers should be recognized as a profession and paid for by the state.

But even today, nearly 100 years later, the cumulative economic impact of unpaid domestic labour is striking. Here is Professor Miranda Stewart, a legal academic who specializes in taxes and welfare at the Melbourne Law School at the University of Melbourne, she explains how the divergence in women's and men's work lives once children arrive, translates into considerable differences in earning power.

16:54 Miranda: The long-term implications are a bit disturbing. So when you look at the [Australian Bureau of Statistics data of hours worked](#) when you have households with pre-children, you could think of people in their 20s more or less or we're mostly having children in our early 30s these days.

There is a bit of a gender pay gap and there's a bit of a working hours gap, but not much, right? Men and women are pretty similar. Once you have children under the age of five, women's hours drop dramatically compared to men's hours, which are stable, but that stays the same even when children are aged between six and 14.

Women's working hours do go up. You can see more women are returning to the labour market, but not the same as men, so they stay low. And then even when children have left home, they still stay low.

So the evidence is that that child-rearing time, I mean, it could be five years, it could be a decade or more, right, depending on how many children you have in the household has this long-term or life course effect on women's connection to the labour market, whereas it does not have that effect from men.

18:11 So only about 8% of fathers of young children are working part-time. More than 60% of mothers with children under five are working part-time or not in the labour force. So it's that long-term life course effect that we're talking about, and that has long-term implications for women's income. There's only so much you can earn if you keep working part-time or not full-time hours over 10, 20, 30, 40 years of your working life.

18:41 Dan: It's worth putting some cold, hard numbers on these implications. Although we talk a lot about the gender pay gap, this pales in comparison to the gender earnings gap particularly considered over a whole working life, and it's mostly a motherhood earnings gap.

According to a [2020 report by the Grattan Institute](#), the estimated difference in lifetime earnings between the typical Australian man and the typical Australian woman without children was \$300,000, but the difference between men and mothers was \$2 million.

This makes some mothers and their children economically vulnerable in the event of a dissolution of the partnership. [ABS Census data released in June 2022](#) reported that four of five of the roughly 1 million people in Australia supporting a dependent on their own are women.

Many of those mothers, including those escaping abusive relationships, are living in poverty. So clearly, part of this serious problem is the lack of value put on the vital work of raising the next generation.

19:47 But if many couples would prefer to share things in a less traditional way, the solution isn't just to reduce the economic costs and risks of being the primary caregiver, but what's getting in the way of change? Here's Leah Ruppanner.

20:02 **Leah:** Part of the reason that I became interested in sociology is because I was inherently interested in the ways in which gender norms or norms get allocated. That even if we have different kinds of attitudes, expectations, images of how we want the world to be or how we want ourselves to be, we live within these social structures and they shift the way that we act in ways that may be conscious or unconscious, intentional or unintentional.

And so I was acutely interested in understanding how does that happen, what's the power of norms? What's the power of institutions? And why is it that even if we may not hold those norms ourselves, that we still act in ways that are consistent with them?

And so that question about unpaid domestic work, I hate doing housework. I'm not good at it. I live in a mess perpetually. So I was acutely interested in how do I get a fair shake, right? What does it look like?

How do you create equality at home? In part because women often get assigned the bulk of the housework just by default. And how do you make sure, what are the kind of the context that you live in or the situations?

What can women do to actually help equalize that relation? Because gender norms can be sticky and they can be pretty significant and consequential. So we can end up enacting our gender norms even if we don't intend to.

21:21 And for many women, that's at the expense of their employment, their leisure time, their health, their well-being, their financial security. So even though we think of housework as being kind of this chore literally, it has big and significant consequences for other aspects of our lives.

And so I wanted to understand how do we create contexts where women can opt in and opt out of the things they want and give men the space to opt-in and out of the things they want. And I think if women step into these roles by default, then that creates its own reinforcement of gender inequality.

But I think what really for me the challenge is I think men are actually wanting to be more equal carers and sharers. They want to be more active fathers. But we haven't created institutional contexts that allow them to step into those roles without fear of significant penalty. So for me, this is never a gender war.

22:17 Dan: Leah is drawing attention here to the fact that the costs for mothers are not just economic ones. Mothers also pay a price when it comes to leisure, work opportunities and well-being.

But if it's not a gender war in the sense that men are deliberately setting out to transfer resources, opportunities and free time from women to themselves and this, to be fair, does sound right, then what is it?

What is standing in the way of the change that both fathers and mothers seem to want? One broad answer is that it just often takes a long time for our laws, policies and institutions to catch up with substantial changes in attitudes. And this may be especially true when it comes to the labour markets.

23:00 Leah: It's not a mommy versus daddy war. It's not parents versus non-parents. I don't see it in that way. I actually think the challenge is we are stuck in institutions that are built in the 1950s and they have not yet adjusted to the modern family, which is a dual-earner, dual-carer, dual-sharer.

And so until we actually can create the space for men to care in the ways they want without fear of penalty at work, then you're going to see this reinforcement of gender roles. But I think there's a lot of movement towards greater equality.

When we think about a working parent, one of the things we need to do is ensure that we're giving them adequate space to step into the care. Good policy is policy that allows anyone who has the desire to step into either care or work to step into that labour without penalty.

If men want to step into caregiving, they should be able to do so without the expectation that they're going to be paid less, their superannuation is going to stall, or that they're going to have difficulty coming back into work and career.

24:05 On the same or the flip side, we shouldn't assume that that's okay for mothers, too. Why is it okay to have a system and policies that create incredible poverty and disadvantage for mothers? One in three have no superannuation, in part because they've stayed home to take care of the children or care for aging parents, et cetera, et cetera.

That is an injustice. How do we equalize care and acknowledge care as critical to being human and valuable labour? To care is to be human, and it keeps our economy running. We have a project, we were looking at what happens when men have a caregiving gap similar to that of women?

Employers don't want to hire them, so that's actually problematic, right? So until women can step into work equal to men, and men and women can step into the home without a fear of economic or social penalty, we won't have equality.

25:09 Dan: Our guests' insights in this episode echo an account of gender justice proposed by the political philosopher Ingrid Robyns. Robyns argues that a gender-just society is one in which men and women have genuinely equal opportunities to be things and do things that enhance their well-being.

This, of course, includes the ability to pursue the various goods of having a job, including but more than the economic resources this provides. But our guests have also reminded us that caring for children also can bring well-being to parents, as well as to the kids themselves and to wider society.

So for a more just society, we need institutions, policies and social norms that don't systematically channel men and women towards gender-conforming choices. And we clearly haven't achieved that yet.

But what's also necessary for gender justice, according to Ingrid Robyns, is that there should be equitable payoffs for both female-typical and male-typical choices. Can we really expect fathers to embrace primary or equal caring when it currently comes at such a cost to earning potential and economic security?

26:20 Probably not. So in short, we need institutions, policies and norms that reduce gender frictions and reduce the costs of care. The episodes to come explore what these might look like.

If you enjoyed this episode and you're keen to support working dads and to influence policy, please share it with others. And if you haven't already, have a listen to other episodes in this series that explore dads, families and work and ask how policy can better recognize, value and support fatherhood. Thank you for listening to the Working Fathers podcast, I'm Dan Halliday.

Many thanks to our guests Miranda Stewart, Carla Pascoe Leahy and Leah Ruppner. This podcast was created by Cordelia Fine and Dan Halliday from the University of Melbourne, Melissa Wheeler from Swinburne University of Technology, and Annabelle Baldwin.

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