



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. The family as an institution has changed significantly across time and place.

How people divide labour and caregiving within and beyond the family unit has really been in flux throughout human history. The current model of fatherhood in many Western nations, including Australia, is a modified version of what we usually call the breadwinner model, where one parent is designated the primary earner and the other the primary carer.

But where did this model of the family come from? And why is it so entrenched? Despite rapid gains in social and gender equality throughout the 20th and into the 21st centuries, this family model has stuck around.

In this episode, "*What gave rise to the breadwinner?*", we discover what we can learn from the history of fatherhood. How did we get to where we are today? And where exactly is that? Is men's biology a constraint on feasible family arrangements, or is it a mechanism for flexibility?

We'll dive into the recipe of complex sociological, cultural, political and economic forces shaping fatherhood and the historical notion of the male breadwinner and consider where policy might fit in.

Our first guest is Dr. Kate Murphy, a historian at Monash University. Kate's research explores over 100 years of Australian fatherhood from the early 20th century to today. She shares insights on the pivotal points in the early 1900s that cemented the traditional father of the family as the breadwinner.

02:13 Kate: Well, it's very interesting because it's a story of change, but it's also a story of the kind of intractability of some features of fatherhood. So, one of our main findings has been that it's very difficult to shift the reality of the breadwinner role for men in families in Australia.

This has been a really powerful model of fatherhood, and that's because from early in the 20th century, the male breadwinner, female homemaker paradigm of the family was kind of cemented by the harvester judgment of 1907, which set a standard for the male minimum wage that it should be enough to support a wife and three children.

And this gets written, of course, into tax and welfare policy and it's a very kind of powerful paradigm of fathering and it really prevails right through until the 70s.

03:16 Dan: So in other words, father's breadwinner role and mother's homemaker role were built into wages themselves. These days, we often think about wages as being a price for labour set by a gender-neutral labour market. But Kate reminds us that assumptions about social roles were once quite explicitly built into wages.

03:38 Kate: That kind of breadwinner role is still really influential in fathers' lives today, even if it's not sort of part of their core identity as fathers in general. They are the ones working full time, earning the primary wage, even where there is change, especially since the 70s in kind of cultural expectations of fatherhood and ideas about what a father's role should entail, those sort of aspects of new fatherhood kind of just added into that primary breadwinner function.

If I could just give a bit of a sketch of the whole period. In the early part of the century, fathers are primarily expected to provide for their family, bearing in mind, of course, that being a father around 1900 or by the First World War would have meant having three or four children as opposed to the two children that's the norm for most families today. So he had a role in the disciplining of children, kind of keeping them under control, often using obviously corporal punishment.

But really the primary parenting functions were fulfilled by the mother. In the early decades of the century, motherhood was thought to be so essential to the future of the nation and that mothering sort of qualities could only be fulfilled by women.

Men were thought to be not really capable of performing the, I guess, the full range of parenting to the point where if a man lost his wife through death or desertion, fathers in 20s

and 30s for instance, would have been strongly encouraged to hand their children over to either an institution or to female relatives.

05:32 Dan: Now, all of this might seem quite shocking today, but it's a good reminder that just as women were formerly excluded from roles in the public sphere, so too were men deemed unfit for certain roles in the home. And this gender norm was built right into the welfare system, as Kate explains.

05:50 Kate: Of course partly that's to do with the fact that breadwinner role, men have to work. There's no benefit for single fathers until the 70s and even then it has to be fought for.

So it's sort of like, well, who's going to look after the children? That division of labour is just so powerful in the Australian setting. During the Depression, of course, a lot of this breadwinner model is difficult to live up to for a lot of men and that causes immense pain and suffering.

And one of the things we found in terms of the intergenerational transmission is that those breadwinning fathers of the post-war period in the lot of them, are so determined to be good providers for their families because of their experience during the depression of fathers who were broken by the inability to fulfil that breadwinning function.

07:00 So the post-war period is, I think we all associate it with domesticity between homemaker mother and the breadwinning father. At the same time, there's new ideas, sort of expert commentary about the fact fathers are being asked to do more during those years.

There's very authoritarian fathers who continue to use their role as breadwinner to kind of assert a position of authority in the family, which is very sort of, it's the old father versus the new father who don't like their wives to work and so on.

But there's also all sorts of fathers who are visibly doing more, they're changing nappies, they're helping out their wives, whatever it is, and they're saying, "All my friends do this too." So it's a very varied experience of fatherhood.

These men and I must say they're mostly professional kind of middle-class men that we have evidence for anyway, saying, "I want to do things differently." I want to, for instance, be present at the birth of my children, I want to be there right from the start.

08:01 And for him to be welcome there is very important. And even in the 70s, there's lots of hospitals that don't allow that or fathers have to fight for that privilege. So that's one of the hallmarks of the new man or the new father that is sort of talked about in the media at this time.

08:26 Vox Pop Dad (C): I've considered myself very fortunate to be a father in the period in history that I have. And I look at and I often think about the challenges that my father faced. You know, there was no such thing as remote working. My father would work in the city until he'd finished his work, and he couldn't come home until that happened.

And consequently, he missed out on a lot of the privilege and joy of fatherhood that I had. So I considered my, and I imagine he probably considered himself more fortunate than my grandfather in that respect as well, who barely knew his children because he worked almost his entire existence.

So that generational aspect of the changing nature of fatherhood is something that really interests me, and I hope that my son will be the beneficiary of that continual phase shift through society as well into his parenthood.

09:24 Vox Pop Dad (F): What I did differently from my dad, I don't know if I've done a lot differently, because he was always around, like, you know, he worked hard, he had his own business for a long time. He, you know, he came home every night kind of thing.

But I'm definitely more involved in their activities, their school stuff, and being a single dad, obviously, you come with that choice anyway.

09:49 Dan: Now Kate's work shows that the new father of the 1970s doesn't develop much over the next couple of decades. There's a change in the 1970s, with more fathers playing an active role, but those that stayed at home as primary carers were the exception and a small minority. There were moves towards more equal parenting, but the changes in Australian parenting roles were pretty small.

In 2017, the [Australian Bureau of Statistics](#) reported that among private-sector workers. About 95% of primary parental leave was taken by mothers. But is this stalled revolution, as sociologists call it, due to nature blocking the path to more equal caring or something else?

10:32 Lee: Humans are really rare mammals in the sense that fathers often cooperate with mothers really intensively to help care for our children. In most mammals, that's just the mother's responsibility. And then among vertebrates, in contrast, it's really common among birds.

And so scholars who are studying these questions about father's biology in other species and in other taxonomic groups like birds, where it was more common.

11:04 Dan: Meet Associate Professor Lee Gettler, who is the director of the Hormones Health and Human Behavior Laboratory at the University of Notre Dame in the United States.

His work draws on evolutionary and other frameworks to understand how human biology is shaped by our evolutionary past and how it responds to the cultural, social, political, and economic context that it's in.

Fatherhood and hormones have been a long-standing research interest for Lee, and human fathers are particularly interesting because, unlike most other mammals, they actually help with the parenting.

11:39 Lee: They had identified these physiological changes that male birds would often undergo when they transitioned to the period when they were cooperating with mothers to raise young and oftentimes that involved things like bringing food to the nest.

But it also involved things like helping to care for, you know, incubate eggs or helping to care for a young in a more direct way. So I was really interested in the ways that human fathers directly interacting with their children might be related with some of these same hormonal pathways in humans.

12:11 Dan: So Lee was interested in the possibility that when it comes to the hormonal effects of fatherhood, human dads might be more like birds who help a lot, than other mammals who tend to be long gone once the offspring arrive. Male birds' hormones change when they are parenting. What about human dads?

12:29 Lee: There's good evidence that hormones like father's testosterone goes down when they transition to parenthood. And if their testosterone is lower, they're more involved with childcare, folks in the United States, scholars in the United States have shown that if an expectant father's testosterone comes down more during pregnancy, they're more involved with infant care after the baby arrives and their partners feel more supported by them.

And we did a [study here locally](#) in the community and found that fathers with lower testosterone on the birthing unit in the days around their baby's birth were more involved with all sorts of kinds of care months later.

13:08 Dan: Why do we see these responses in human fathers? Back to Lee.

13:14 Lee: But these are capacities that we think human fathers have because of the importance of paternal caregiving in the evolutionary past. So it's not the case that fathers are ill-equipped biologically to be able to be involved with that kind of involved, hands-on fatherhood.

They actually have some of their own, some physiological capacities that overlap with what we see in mothers. Like, the oxytocin system can function very flexibly and fluidly in both mothers and fathers in that kind of caregiving.

The point is, we have these very core and evolutionarily ancient and important physiological systems that scholars like me think have been shaped by an evolutionary history of fathers being involved and committed and participating in that kind of hands-on fathering over the course of the history of our species.

14:15 Maybe not all the time. That doesn't have to be the only role that fathers played in all these diverse places that humans have lived for hundreds of thousands of years. And before that, species like *Homo erectus* moved out of Africa 2 million years ago, almost.

So humans and our ancestors have lived in all sorts of diverse places around the world and probably have had variations in family roles and structures just like we have today. But to me, the capacity for fathers to respond and have their biology facilitate that kind of investment suggests it was important evolutionarily.

14:53 One of the things that I always tell people about what I hope they take away from my research is that I hope it helps men kind of better understand their own capacities and bodies and the potential that they have as parents, because I think oftentimes fathers are treated as kind of just along for the ride.

15:15 Vox Pop Dad (D): At the end of the birth, I'm holding this little boy who is a product of my wife growing the last eight months. Instant love, instant admiration and respect for what my wife had just done. A sense of adventure coming on because you've gone from the duet and now you're a little three-piece.

15:44 Vox Pop Dad (B): He's got the firm boundaries of what he can and can't do, but at the same time, he knows that he can be silly around me and he can really be himself. And whatever that is, he can be himself and he's never going to be judged in a negative way. He's going to know that he's supported, know that he's loved, and that I'll always be there for him.

16:05 Vox Pop Dad (D): And then I'm sitting there by myself for the first time holding this little fella. I whisper to him, mate, I have your back for life. You are the most important thing in my life. I'm going to look after you for the rest of my days.

16:22 Dan: Human mothers can't care for children without assistance because, as any parent will tell you, human offspring are so dependent for so long. On the plus side, this long period of dependency gives children plenty of time for their brains to develop and to learn the ropes of our complex social lives so that they can become functioning and productive adults, whatever that means.

But mothers cannot manage it alone. That's why we humans evolved cooperative care, a flexible system that can include grandparents, siblings, and fathers. Somehow, we humans seem to have taken a rather special evolutionary path, one that helped to make us a very versatile and successful species.

17:07 Lee: At some point, I think it's fairly uncontroversial in studies of human evolution to say that human fathers evolved to be different from most other mammalian fathers and have the capacity for rich, costly, long-term cooperation with mothers and investment in children.

And so perhaps what changed in the course of human evolution is these broader kind of social cooperative dynamics that creates an environment in which males who are more predisposed to cooperating with mothers in a variety of ways could then be more reproductively successful.

And you can get increased representation of fathers who are more apt to cooperate and invest in their children.

17:57 Dan: Lee's anthropological research on the biology of fatherhood includes work looking at the different forms that father intakes across different communities and what that tells us about the factors that shape what it means to be a father. This is much more diverse than just breadwinning.

18:15 Lee: So I knew as an anthropologist that there were lots of cultural contexts around the world where fathers were doing a lot more than just provisioning and protecting.

I started with colleagues over the last five years or so, a [study of two subsistence societies](#) in the Republic of the Congo or Congo Brazzaville. And these communities live in a pretty remote part of that country.

They live side by side. They interact with one another. But one of them is a forager group who gets a fair amount of their resources from hunting and gathering and fishing and collecting resources from the forest. And the other one is an agricultural group.

18:51 Dan: Okay. Talking about forager fathers in the Republic of the Congo might seem very far removed from dads in post-industrial Australia, but we've been talking about the persistence of the breadwinner model, and Lee's research shows how these two geographically very close societies nonetheless define what it means to be a father quite differently.

19:10 Lee: And so we were interested in what the roles were for fathers in these communities, particularly how being a good father based on how your kind of local cultural group and community defined that was related to child health and well-being.

In the forager group, there's strong value placed on fathers being involved with hands-on caregiving, and they're involved from the time their infants are young, but they also really value fathers as teachers.

And in the farming community, there's a very strong emphasis on respect and kind of commitment to the family. And so they're very patriarchal. And in those families, fathers spend very little time kind of directly interacting with kids, particularly young kids.

But they're seen as like, very important kind of moral disciplinarians, kind of the moral head of the household. From the perspective of an anthropologist, what I see kind of laced through those two examples is, one, the difference in how cultural systems shape what fathers do the way that they collectively share in values and meaning and an ethos around a role for a caregiver like fathers, but then also so it's shaped by the cultural system in which fathers find themselves, but then also the ecology within which they find themselves.

20:30 Dan: So in other words, Lee's and others work points to the importance of culture, shared ideas, beliefs, values formal and informal norms, practices and habits in shaping fatherhood. For example, family policy is based on a conception of a family centred on a marital couple even though in reality there are many more family forms than just that one.

20:54 Lee: I tend to think about the role of fathers and the way that human families raise children or in human communities maybe would be the way I would put it is that it's cooperative and flexible and cultures around the world, I mean, we're all having the same very costly, demanding children. I have two of them who are six and eight and cultures around the world kind of solve that problem in different ways.

21:26 Dan: Lee suggests that scientific concepts of what fathers are for arose during a specific historical time in countries like Australia and the United States coinciding with the rise of the breadwinner.

This, he thinks, led to fatherhood being defined very narrowly. But this does seem to be changing. Lee talked about child-raising in the two subsistent societies in the Republic of Congo in terms of cooperation within a community. Societies can only survive if someone cares for and raises the next generation.

But here in Australia we can sometimes tend to think of children as a private hobby or expensive form of consumption. The political philosopher Martha Albertson Fineman refers to this idea as the [Porsche preference](#).

If you want to have a Porsche or a child, that's fine, but don't expect the rest of us to pay for it. But as Fineman points out, if we really want to think about it this way, parents aren't the consumers of children, so to speak. They're the producers.

22:30 And actually, market producers enjoy quite a lot from governments by way of subsidies. What's more, Fineman argues, it is the government and the market that are the consumers of parents' products who are our future citizens, consumers, workers, et cetera.

And Fineman says they are not paying a fair price. In fact, they are paying very little. Now, Fineman was writing in an American context, but Australia also stands out to the extent to which it privatizes the costs of raising children, in the sense of putting those costs on the family itself.

And as we return now to the history of fatherhood and families and move towards the present day, we'll see how these pressures on families only increased as women started to move into the labour market, coinciding with the women's movement.

23:27 And our third guest is Carla Pascoe Leahy, lecturer in Family History at the University of Tasmania. We spoke with her in episode one.

23:35 Carla: So that I would argue, by the 21st century, most families in Australia would accept the idea that both mothers and fathers will contribute to both paid work and care work within the family. It's difficult to overstate the importance of the women's liberation movement in this history.

23:58 Dan: The women's liberation movement, sometimes called second wave feminism, started off in the mid-1960s in the USA as a response to other social and civil rights movements emerging at this time.

These include the civil rights movement and the gay liberation movement. And the women's liberation movement soon spread to Australian shores. While so-called first-wave feminism in the mid to late 19th and early 20th century was focused on gaining women's equality in law through political rights like voting and civil rights like marriage reform and property ownership, the second wave was more focused on social rights.

These included equality in the workplace, access to education, freedom from violence. It's within this context in the 1960s and 1970s that Australian feminists pushed for legal and social reform that focused on women's role in society to make sure they had access to the same opportunities as the men.

25:01 A push for more equality for women in the workplace was accompanied by changing social and cultural ideas about the family and parenting roles in particular.

25:10 Carla: But the ways in which second-wave feminism played out within people's lives differed enormously. And we see that in some ways there was a bit of a lag between contesting new ideas and bringing new ideas forward, such as the idea that a woman could be more than mother, but that that really required men to step up and be more involved fathers.

This idea was contested for a long period of time, for decades, really. And there has remained considerable diversity among Australians' views of the roles of mothers and fathers. And so many mothers told me this in interviews, that before having children, their male partner and they desperately wanted to have an equitable division of childcare within their family.

That was their intention, and that's what they both wanted. But they soon realized that through the day-to-day care of a child, if a woman decides to stay home and be with the child as she practices comforting the child when it's upset, dressing the child in those crazily complicated baby clothes, changing the nappy, feeding the child, strapping them into the pram, as she practices all the many, many skills that you must master to look after an infant, she becomes the expert.

26:33 And what that means is that even on weekends, if the partner is at home, often the mother will still do more of the work because she has developed expertise through practice.

26:42 Dan: So mothers quickly became the experts, laying in long-standing patterns. Is there something that policymakers can do to disrupt this diverging of expertise? Back to Carla.

26:55 Carla: And this understanding is precisely what underpins some of the more expansive parental leave policies in Scandinavian countries like Sweden because they understand through research that this is what happens.

And so their government deliberately intervenes in this by first of all, allocating really extensive parental leave of at least 18 months and second of all, stipulating that some of the leave has to be taken by the non-primary carer, usually the father.

In other words, if you want to take all of this very generous parental leave offered, some of it has to be taken by the father. And so the father is forced to learn expertise. The whole family is forced to allocate expertise to the father.

And this has flow-on effects throughout the family's life cycle as the child is growing up, that fathers have more expertise. What we're seeing in Australia is a gradual shift towards understanding that family policy plays a really big role in people's lives and behaviours.

28:15 Dan: Another key example of the importance that family policy has for parents and children's lives is, of course, childcare. Carla reminds us just how recent widespread institutional childcare is.

But of course, many different factors shape people's decision-making. One other important variable here is the broader economic context that has made it harder to maintain living standards on just one salary.

28:41 Carla: In the postwar era in which there was a real contrast between the cultural ideal of a full-time caregiving mother and the reality for many families of the necessity for both parents to work, but what was really challenging in that era was a lack of social supports and paid childcare.

So when I spoke to working-class mothers about their experiences of combining mothering and work, they had to rely upon a range of strategies in an era before widespread institutional childcare, it might be the neighbour up the street helped. It might be that grandparents helped. And there was also different cultural expectations around the capabilities of children.

So children were assumed to be okay to look after themselves to a far greater extent than they would be today. And it remains the case today that many families need to have both parents working. And this is, I suppose, something we haven't really touched on yet.

29:52 But the ways in which the changing economic context also influences the choices of families. So in the postwar era, it was a time of enormous economic prosperity. And male wages were very high and house prices were much lower proportionally than they are today.

So Australian families didn't have to spend as much of their income on simply providing a roof over their heads as they do today. What we've seen with both global and domestic economic changes over the last 75 years is the relative cost of housing has increased dramatically and the relative value of wages has declined dramatically.

And this means that for many Australian families in the 21st century, it's simply not possible to survive on one income. So when we're talking about the influence of policy and we're talking about the influence of cultural shifts, it's really important to also think about the economic context, because that plays an enormous influence on the minute work care choices that occur within Australian families and can frustrate the intentions that families would otherwise have for how they combine work and care.

31:10 Dan: So given these economic constraints since the Second World War, how do Australian parents negotiate these roles within their own families?

31:19 Carla: I would argue that since the 1970s, many Australians have been coming to the view that men and women should ideally share the care of children equally, that it's good for mothers, fathers and children when fathers are heavily involved, and particularly over the last 20 years, most people would see that as common sense.

And yet fathers still do not take long periods of leave, and many of them do not even take up the two weeks that they're entitled to under the government scheme. So why is this the case?

Many people say that it's because of sheer economics that men often earn more. And while parental leave is paid at minimum wage, families just can't afford to suffer the loss of income of having fathers take more time off to care for their children.

32:12 And so we've seen calls in recent weeks for extending the amount of leave offered to the partner as well as the primary carer. At the moment, the federal labour government has made an undertaking that they will extend the government's paid parental leave scheme to 26 weeks over a period of time.

But there's also been discussion amidst that of how can we ensure that this doesn't all just get taken up by mothers and further exacerbate the many problems that this causes, how can we ensure that fathers are taking up some of this leave...

Because we know when we fall into this pattern of mothers taking all of the leave, essentially what happens is that it has long-term career impacts for women because of the time spent out of the workforce.

It means that they earn much less over their lifetime and they retire with less super. So it has really long-term financial and career implications for women.

33:13 Dan: Carla has been explaining some of the dynamics that push parents into gendered roles, perhaps despite their real preferences. But what about same-sex households? How do gender dynamics play out there?

Carla's answer underlines just how important family policies are in shaping parents behaviour, pushing even same-sex couples into a traditional breadwinner and caregiver mold.

33:39 Carla: What I found fascinating in my research is the extent to which women in same-sex relationships end up falling into a breadwinner, caregiver division of labour in the same way that heterosexual relationships tend to.

And I think this is probably one of the most damning indications of the impact of our ineffective family policies upon families. And I think this tells us that parental leave policies, taxation policies, and employer policies all work to frustrate the best intentions of Australians when they commence upon the journey of parenthood.

34:29 It's very revealing to me that almost all 21st-century couples will go into parenthood desiring an equitable division of caregiving, and very, very few succeed in that intention.

34:43 Dan: Our guests in this episode have raised a lot of difficult questions for policymakers.

How do we pay more than lip service to the idea of fathers who aren't just along for the ride? How do we create policies that don't force parents into unwanted divisions of labour? And how do we recognize a greater collective obligation on communities and society to actually support parents?

In this episode, we've heard one concrete policy suggestion that seems to help with all three issues, providing generous earmarked daddy leave that recognizes dad's importance in their children's lives beyond breadwinning.

That helps them develop the skills and confidence they need to be more equal carers. And that increases the financial and time resources provided to those who care for the children.

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.

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