Transcript - Working Fathers Episode 5 – What's Next?

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 titled "*What's Next?",* we look at the future of fatherhood. And this is our last episode of the series. And so far, one thing all of our interviewees seem to agree on is that for many families, current arrangements aren't working as well as they could.

Policies, practices and norms need to continue to evolve to meet the needs of working dads and their families and move us towards more equal opportunities to share care, more flexible work, greater family well-being, supported by a productive economy.

01:09 Unfortunately, one challenge we can anticipate is future pressures on families from a growing number of environmental disasters such as fires, floods and pandemics. When thinking about change, what better place to start than the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on families?

For many families, the pandemic created a large external shock on their internal dynamics, particularly with the closure of childcare and schools. However, it also offered an insight into just how flexible work actually can be.

Here's Leah Ruppanner, professor of Sociology and a founding director of the Future of Work Lab at the University of Melbourne. You can hear more from Leah in our first episode. In this episode, she tells us about the impact of COVID on Australian fathers.

01:55 **Leah**: We collected a range of surveys at the start of the pandemic in May, in June 2020 we collected another survey of the same parents, in 2021 and then again in 2022. So getting that whole time across the pandemic in Australia and in the US.

And what we found was Australian men stepped into more of the housework and the childcare and the unpaid work. They carried it for a longer period of time. And their health and well-being suffered as a consequence.

So for the first time, perhaps for many, they experienced the challenges of work and family that women have long endured, balancing things simultaneously. In part, that was because of the incredibly long lockdowns, we think, in Victoria, where really for two years, many of us were in our homes together without any reprieve.

02:46 And what we found was Australian fathers stepped in. So I think that's actually kind of a marker that if given the opportunity to have the space to care, to have the space to do more housework, to have the space to do more childcare, to have the space to do more homeschooling, Australian fathers are interested in doing that labour.

The challenge isn't necessarily the men. The challenge is once you go back to work and you get told that you need to be a completely devoted worker, that you need to be there for long hours, that you need to bring in all of the money and that in the absence of your incredible contribution at work, you're going to be punished.

03:30 Then we won't see equality between parents for a while. So I think once given the opportunity to step in and be the equal carers and the equal shares under the pandemic, we saw Australian fathers did that.

That suggests to me that there's institutional limitations that don't allow them to do that. And I think that's the issue of work, work needs to change.

03:48 **Dan**: For people who worked at home during pandemic lockdowns, which was a lot of us, life became a bit preindustrial. The strict boundary had gone between the workplace and the home. And that's the very boundary that helped give rise to the traditional breadwinner-homemaker model that we talked about in episode two.

And what this meant was that all the domestic work that actually enables the wage work to take place became more visible to everyone.

04:14 **Leah**: And we also saw during the pandemic that people's work and life were totally integrated. You had no boundaries and no separation between work and life. So there's this kind of movement away from work-life balance which is very difficult to get because things are spiking and peaking and troughing.

There was this kind of total work-life overlap which is very difficult for people to do during the pandemic when you couldn't get any kind of divisions, but also expects you to be at an office perhaps all day long.

And what people were saying as the new way to work, it was work-life alignment, that they wanted their organisations to acknowledge that they had a life outside of work, their whole life wasn't work and they didn't have to hide their family lives.

Right? For the first time ever, kids were coming into Zoom meetings and people were able to say like I'm going to go for a walk during the day. I'm not going to be 100% on. I think in terms of trends for the future of work, I think the good thing was that I think this is actually a positive movement because this idea that we have to have completely boundaried lives is really challenging to do because life is messy and work is messy.

05:15 **Dan**: Once again, the blurred boundaries of home and work during the pandemic made more apparent what we normally take for granted, that some workers can go to workplaces and earn wages because other people are home at least much of the time, taking care of the family and the chores.

And the more inflexible workplaces are both in terms of when the work is done and where it is done, the harder it is for a second adult in the family to work when there are still dependent children at home.

That's why flexible work is one of the pieces of the puzzle when it comes to breaking down the breadwinner model. But many jobs require individuals to be physically on the floor. Leah expands the notion of flexibility.

06:00 **Leah**: So we think about flexible work as just being working from home. But there's a range of ways in which we work flexibly. We might have some control over the date when we start and stop. Some control over the pace, the tempo, the distribution of work.

And there are other ways to kind of have conversations about new ways of working that don't just sit or centre on "Can you work from home or not?", that's one kind of arrow or one resource or one pillar.

And I think being able to think about flexible work and remote work in a broader, more comprehensive, more creative, more inclusive sense will allow us to say how do we make sure everyone reaps some of the benefits of greater work-life alignment including those who cannot necessarily work in an office in a professional setting.

And that has pretty significant implications by class. And so how do we make sure that it's not just educated, rich professional workers who are getting the boons of new ways of working and how do we make sure we equalise that across all types of occupations?

And right now there's this conversation about a talent war, right? It's actually a real and legitimate risk because I think people are reevaluating what they like and they value in their lives.

07:19 **Vox Pop Dad (R)**: There's lots of ways you can sort of cut the work-life balance. Work is important and career is important, but for me family is more important. You only get one shot at this and your kids only grow up once. Wouldn't want to be focused purely on work and then regret that later in life thinking, crap, I didn't spend enough time with my kids growing up because you can't get that time back.

07:43 **Vox Pop Dad (A)**: When we had him, I think if we weren't in lockdown, then we were soon afterwards. And so then you sort of had no help, which was really quite nice because, you know, we were all stuck together whether we liked it or not. And I had a whole lot of time off work which normally I wouldn't get.

08:12 **Dan**: Now the COVID pandemic isn't the only emergency that Australian families have had to deal with. We can't really talk about what's next for working fathers without talking about our changing climate.

Carla Pascoe Leahy is a lecturer in family history at the University of Tasmania. We'd heard from her during our first two episodes. In her research on the history of childhood, parenthood and families, she's also become interested in how climate change is impacting on families.

08:39 **Carla**: We know that we are entering an era in which climate crisis means that we're going to see escalating disasters and we've only just had a hint of them so far. We're going to see disasters increasing in intensity and ferocity and frequency and I believe disasters are going to continue to be one of the most profound influences on family life in the 21st century.

If everything that climate science tells us is correct, then it's urgently important that we invest in giving families the utmost supports that they need to see them through these times. Because just as we need to think carefully about how we build houses and where we build them and how we respond to disaster in terms of relief and recovery, we also need to ask ourselves what does it mean to be living through an era of recurrent crisis where crisis is the new normal?

09:40 I think it means that families are going to need more supports than they've ever needed before and I think it's going to be the strength of our family bonds and our community bonds and networks that's going to see people through quite difficult times.

So my overarching message would be, it's never been more important to invest in family supports, and they need to be tailored to the changing times in which we live.

10:10 **Dan**: Carla also thinks that family well-being should be more front and centre when it comes to family policy.

10:15 **Carla**: I've argued in some of my work that we should look beyond simply thinking about productivity when we're evaluating policy to also consider well-being, and I think that's a much more persuasive argument.

There is ample research from the Australian Institute of Family Studies and others that fathers, mothers and children benefit in terms of their well-being when fathers can spend more time with their children. And I think that's a really valuable policy objective that we should be promoting.

At the moment, we are seeing a slow rise in discussions among government policymakers and academics in the idea of using well-being as an indicator both for justifying policies and for evaluating their effectiveness.

So there's hints of this at the moment, and there's a recent, very persuasive paper by the London School of Economics about how can we use well-being in really rigorous ways to evaluate policy. But I would say this is still a minority position, and it's quite rare to see well-being discussed in the same terms as productivity. It's certainly rarely discussed in the context of family policy.

11:33 **Dan**: So why does well-being get so little attention even when it comes to family policy? Three decades ago, the Nobel Prize-winning economist and philosopher Amartya Sen argued that policymakers should stop thinking of economic growth as the primary objective of development.

Instead, Sen argued, the end goal should be the expansion of people's real freedoms to be things and do things that they have reason to value. In other words, things that enhance their well-being. Income and gross domestic product are certainly important means to that end, but they're not the end in itself.

12:10 Nonetheless, we still remain very focused on these statistics as the measure of how we're doing. Here's Carla's speculation as to why family policy still seems to focus so strongly on productivity.

12:21 **Carla**: I've spent a lot of time thinking about this and trying to work out why it is. In some ways, it's not surprising that governments might not talk about well-being. It seems a bit fuzzy, a bit wishy-washy. It's not as solid and concrete as talking about things like employment figures and how much people are getting paid and how much super they have.

These are really easy to measure. Well-being is much more difficult to measure. But I wonder why we don't talk about these things more in the media. And I've thought about this a lot, and I think it's partly that the kinds of emotions, the kinds of love and affection that parents feel for their children are so profound that they almost defy language.

13:09 That's the first challenge. Secondly, many of us feel uncomfortable, as though we're being corny or sentimental or it's somehow embarrassing to admit how strongly we care about our children. I think you could say that a lot of my work on this motherhood research has been about insisting that we need to bring the profound relationships that parents and children have with one another into the public sphere.

We need to talk about it explicitly. And we need to value it as something that's really important, something to be supported in any way we can.

13:37 **Vox Pop Dad (B)**: It's so many different emotions. It was absolute elation. I'm generally a pretty calm person, but I was just crying, I was excited, I was terrified. Like, I felt an enormous amount of pressure and responsibility and to wrap all those together and this huge amount of excitement, to wrap all those emotions together is crazy. Like, there's no words for how you feel, because it's just... It's wild. It's an absolutely crazy feeling to have.

14:32 **Vox Pop Dad (C)**: Yes. A whole range of emotions. I know what the weather was on the day. It's probably one of the most vivid memories in my entire life. And it was a mixture of terror and elation and self-doubt and nervousness and probably the most happy I've ever been.

14:59 **Vox Pop Dad (J)**: It was surreal until they came out, and when they came out, it was just this flood of emotion that I didn't even know was sitting in there and grateful. I think it was probably a big part of it, that one, they were healthy. But I was actually in awe of my wife, what she went through, not only during the birth, but conception and then carrying the baby.

Because that burden, and probably wrong word, but the burden for her to put everything she knew prior to then into the baby and nurture it to that point of delivery is, I think that hit home. I was in awe of her, but also in awe of the fact that we humans can create this human being, I burst out in tears.

15:48 **Dan**: We asked Carla to tell us a bit more about the importance of these relationships, including between fathers and their children.

15:55 **Carla**: In terms of the well-being impact on children, there's been some really beautiful research done by the Australian Institute of Family Studies where they asked children what they wanted, and many, many children said that they wanted more time with their parents.

But particularly with their fathers, they want time that's not rushed. When children and fathers can spend more time together, it deepens their relationship. It creates a sense of trust. And it means that as children get older, when they have difficult and challenging things happen in their lives, they know that they can turn to their fathers as well as their mothers for support.

16:39 I think it influences children in really fundamental and profound ways, but in ways that are difficult to put into words. Perhaps it's easier to think about it in terms of the contrast. Many people that I've interviewed when I've asked them about how they themselves were raised and how this influenced their own behaviour, as parents have told me of their deep sadness and regret that they couldn't spend more time with their fathers, that their fathers were not heavily involved in their lives.

And I think sometimes it's almost in the lack of a relationship that we see the potential for what a more fulsome and involved relationship can look like and what it can do for both parties.

17:27 **Dan**: We asked Carla to summarise what she sees as the benefits of fathers being equal carers of their children.

17:34 **Carla**: I think there's many ways that society benefits when fathers are more involved in the care of children. Mothers benefit because they are able to return to work faster, they are able to earn more across their lifetimes and they are able to retire with economic security.

Fathers benefit because they are able to have a more involved role in their children's lives, which means that they not only have increased expertise in the raising of children, but they have closer emotional bonds which will persist across the life course.

And finally, children benefit when they have close and involved relationships with their fathers. Boys grow up with a model of involved fatherhood that they then emulate as adults and girls grow up with heightened expectations of their partners and how they will be involved in the raising of children.

18:31 I think at the moment, discussion of father's involvement in raising children in the policy arena has remained only at the level of economic productivity. We evaluate family policies on the basis of maternal workforce participation and this is tracked carefully across time.

But while productivity is an important indicator of family policy success, my work is trying to argue that we should be looking at much more than that. And in essence, I think we should be including family well-being when we consider both the purpose of family policies but also evaluate its effectiveness.

And family well-being means thinking not just about what mothers desire, but also what fathers desire and profoundly what children desire because we still often don't bother to ask children what they want when we're thinking about policy.

19:35 **Dan**: The interests of the actual children often do seem to get lost or overlooked in these discussions, particularly when the focus is on productivity. Our next guest is also interested in the effects of fathers on children.

Here is Associate Professor Lee Gettler, director of the Hormones, Health and Human Behavior Laboratory at the University of Notre Dame in the USA. We heard from Lee in episode two where he discussed his work on the biology and evolution of fatherhood.

20:02 **Lee**: We know there's a lot of benefits for children, so maybe I can talk about that first. This has been most thoroughly researched in places like the United States. And children who grow up with warm, attentive, sensitive, involved dads develop on kind of more emotionally healthy trajectories.

They have more positive and kind of healthier functioning friendships and other social relationships when they're children and moving into adolescence, they have less behavioural problems and behavioural issues in school.

Some of this is hard to untangle from socioeconomic status. But there probably are also benefits for them in terms of their cognitive development and perhaps things like creativity and kind of innovation because we see that there are effects on the complexity of the way that they play.

20:57 And we know that play is so important to kids, but playing in a more complex way may be kind of an indicator of healthy cognitive development. So in terms of play, there's long been this emphasis on father's kind of rough and tumble play as something that fathers specialise in.

21:14 **Dan**: So when dad or anyone else becomes the tickle monster, it isn't just fun, it's actually helping kids develop.

21:21 **Lee**: And I think that as fathers, many fathers have become more involved with a wider array of care behaviours. There's less of this specialising in rough and tumble play, but mothers play with kids more than dads and were also doing rough and tumble play. So this component of fathering maybe even got overemphasised, in my opinion.

On the other hand, we know that that kind of challenging play, I would call it, can be really good for kids because it helps them develop things like self-regulation and helps them identify boundaries and may help them manage things like risk-taking, may help them manage things like anxiety.

There are benefits to challenging play and fathers can be one of the people who are playing that role.

22:10 **Vox Pop Dad (C)**: I think I bring a sense of adventure for them and a sense of confidence and boldness that I think they would appreciate and they find enjoyable in their lives. I think they know that I'm fiercely loyal to them as well, and I think that probably gives them a sense of comfort and confidence.

22:32 **Vox Pop Dad (B)**: Hopefully he knows that if he wants to do something that's fun or exciting or he wants to run around that he can just come and ask me. He knows that he's going to get the discipline from me and he's safe and secure.

22:50 **Dan**: Our guests have talked about the interests of children, which often get overlooked. But something else that doesn't get talked about so much are the work-life challenges facing fathers, particularly as expectations on them as fathers increase. But jobs don't necessarily get any more accommodating when this happens. Back to Lee.

23:08 **Lee**: I think we know that men probably suffer from postpartum depression at much higher rates than have been recorded because of underreporting. And it not being an issue that's focused on. I think the demands and conflicts that have been placed on fathers, where a lot of the potential roles and expectations for fathers in settings like the US and Australia have expanded, but we haven't really taken away the expectation that they need to be working hard and providing resources and being the breadwinner.

We've just kind of expanded the breadth of what is expected of them. And a lot of the ways that we've expanded that can have really positive effects on children and it also can be really beneficial to families, in fathers being more substantive co-parents in supporting their partners in doing those roles in the family.

But it also means that fathers are under incredible strain at times. And I know that mothers are as well. Of course, it doesn't have to be one or the other, right? But I think it's important in terms of thinking there are a lot of ways that fatherhood is very beneficial and has positive effects on men.

24:28 But it also can be something that really can be very, very challenging and sometimes men feel very underprepared for both the intensity of the demands that come with it.

24:39 **Dan**: Lee thinks these pressures are something that policymakers need to be aware of and that for men, their own personal "what's next" of becoming a father might be more of a transformation than they're expecting.

24:51 **Lee**: So I think it's an important policy area that we be aware of the fact that new fathers can be under tremendous strain in part because of the expectations we're placing on them. A meaningful percentage of them are probably at risk for postpartum depression and they're not typically being treated or counselled or having that addressed for them, which then has negative ramifications for them and their families of course.

For fathers, providing paid parenting leave and encouraging, finding ways to encourage dads to take it if it's available to them, I think is really important. On the positive side, I describe parenting for me when, say, my students ask about it, is that it was impossible for me to anticipate how transcendent the highs would be and how challenging the lows would be.

25:46 But I think that we have good qualitative research that's been done on the way that men experience fatherhood, where a lot of those positive, like the positives of those, the transcendent highs are very high in ways that fathers haven't anticipated.

And they're gaining joy and new emotional meaning from all these small interactions that accumulate as your baby develops into a toddler and you're watching them go through all these milestones that babies go through in terms of sitting up and crawling and walking and talking.

26:27 And I think for many men, that really is a transformative emotional experience. I think in addition to that, there are socially pluses and minuses. It sometimes closes some doors socially, like men's friendship networks as they transition to these very demanding times.

Oftentimes we see things like fathers being more involved with attending church services or being part of community organisations, being part of the school, their children's school communities. And so it can often facilitate things like civic engagement, which we know can have a lot of positive effects. We might think of it as like social capital, but those social support networks can be very beneficial for parents and their families.

27:21 **Dan**: Lee's discussion of fathers integrated in wider communities raises another important policy issue, that's relationships beyond parents and children. In particular, relationships with grandparents.

The Families in Australia survey report by the Australian Institute of Family Studies published in July 2022 found that two in five grandparents with a grandchild under the age of 13 were providing some childcare.

This percentage was even higher, 63% if the youngest child was under 10. Now, many grandparents said that there are a number of reasons for providing childcare, but the most common reason was to enable the child's parents to work or study. Carla has found in her research that intergenerational care can be particularly important for migrant families.

28:14 **Carla**: Obviously, it depends on the cultural background that different families have. One of the broad overarching trends I noticed was the importance of intergenerational care within many migrant families.

And this is backed up by other research that's been done over the last 20 years into the work and care patterns of recently arrived migrants, where it's been found that often intergenerational care has been available.

And there has been a preference for using intergenerational care, such as grandparental care of children, wherever possible, and in preference to institutional care where it's available.

29:01 **Dan**: However, and this is obvious, intergenerational care is only even an option if you've actually got access to the grandparents, and that access is changing. Carla explains.

29:10 **Carla**: Well, I think one of the key things for us to bear in mind when we think about grandparental care of children is that at a societal level, there have been profound demographic shifts in when people have children across their lifetimes and the maternal window, if you like, of childbearing.

So, post-war mothers were generally having their first child in their late teens or early twenties and they usually had larger families on average which meant that the years in which a woman was actively caring for young children were longer.

The second-wave mothers that I interviewed often had their children in their mid-20s on average and family sizes were shrinking so their maternal window was shrinking. Today, the average age of a first child is over 30 now and it's more and more common for women to be having children in their 30s or even their early 40s and on average we have less than two children per family.

30:31 So women are having children both later in life and the period in which they're actively caring for preschool-aged children has also shortened. At the same time, grandmothers are tending to be working for longer periods in their life.

So essentially what happened when a woman had her children in the post-war era, her own mother was often still relatively young, but may still have been working, if she was working. What we see today is that as women are having their children older, their own mothers attending to be older and this creates a sort of complicated dynamic in terms of grandparental care.

31:19 **Dan**: In the Families in Australia survey report that I mentioned earlier on, 97% of the grandparents surveyed said that they enjoyed providing care for their grandchildren. At the same time 44% also did say that they found it tiring.

31:36 **Carla**: Sometimes grandmothers of today don't necessarily have the energy levels that they might have liked to have to care for very young children who are utterly exhausting to care for. But their daughters are also more likely to be working and more likely to appreciate the help of grandparental care.

And so we see these tensions emerging where some grandmothers are very keen to be involved in actively caring for their grandchildren. But others, I've heard views expressed like, oh, they just want me so they don't have to pay for child care or I don't want to be used by my children.

32:18 So some grandmothers who feel more cynical about these relationships and the impacts on their time. But in general terms, statistically, parents today are relying upon regular grandparental care at much higher levels than they have in the past.

32:36 **Dan**: But as Carla explained, demographic shifts with respect to the timing of work and family mean that grandparents may be less available in the future to help with the childcare. That's going to make it more important than ever that dads can do care work too. We asked Leah Ruppanner how policymakers can help include men in the care economy.

32:54 **Leah**: When we think about working parents, one of the things we need to do is ensure that we're giving them adequate space to step into the care. Part of this is a policy question. Prue Gilbert, the CEO and founder of Grace Papers has an excellent post, kind of underscoring some of the issues with the new paid parental leave scheme. The movement towards ensuring that men can take paid parental leave is critical.

That's a good policy movement. It's a good policy outcome. It's heading in the right direction, so we should applaud that. But it's not enough. And as Prue points out, some of the issues around that is that you need to ensure that the resourcing for that time is on par to being in employment.

33:36 So she's talking about how do you make sure that that time out for paid parental leave includes superannuation, that it's not a gap. And that's particularly important for women who have, one in three Australian women have no superannuation. Huge number.

It's not a small problem. And in part that's because they take these gaps out for caregiving. So if you're going to give them wage replacement, you better make sure you're giving them superannuation too.

We need to make sure, as Prue points out, it's paid at the replacement wage, that it's not a lesser amount, that it's accessible to both parents, that actually men and women have equal incentive to take.

And finally, as Prue points out, that it's not means tested. Grattan Institute did a great report about the cost of childcare being so high to add that additional fourth or fifth day, that for many families it doesn't make financial sense.

34:27 You actually are at a deficit. That's not good policy. And until we can have childcare that actually is fully funded and doesn't absorb an entire salary, those are incredible disincentives for people to work and incredible disincentives for people to care sometimes or step in.

The other thing I wanted to say about the care economy is also to value men's care. So we need a care economy that's inclusive of men as well. Not only of men stepping into the care roles at home, but men also stepping into paid care roles.

And so that's like another critical piece. I think it's important to understand that this is not a gender war, that actually men and women are within a system that hasn't been working for them for a long period of time.

Men want to be equal carers. Fathers want to be equal shares. Fathers want to step in into their children's lives in roles and ways that are on par to mothers. And how do we create social systems that allow that, that's our work to do.

35:35 **Dan**: Well, there's a lot for policymakers and managers to think about, isn't there? Changing climate, changing demographics, changing expectations for fathers, and flexibility. And one thing we've seen through these episodes is that when change happens, it emerges from pretty complex interactions between all of these factors.

And we've heard a lot of useful things from the experts around these things. But remember, no one knows everything and everyone knows something, and that includes fathers. Thanks for listening.

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, Leah Ruppanner, Carla Pascoe Leahy and Lee Gettler. This podcast was created by Cordelia Fine and Dan Halliday from the Universe University of Melbourne, Melissa Wheeler from Swinburne University of Technology, and Annabelle Baldwin.

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