

To: House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services

Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family

I am a 32 year old mother of two children, aged 3 years old and 19 months old. I work part time (three days per week) for a Parliamentary department in Canberra. My husband works for a federal government department. We are both at middle-management level and have a combined income of over \$110,000 p.a.

We are more fortunate than many other Australian parents. As federal government employees we both have access to paid maternity and paternity leave, sick leave, permanent employment and a relatively understanding work environment when it comes to the need for family care when children are sick. We earn a high income compared to many other Australians. Yet despite these advantages, work and family balance is still a challenge to us as a family. The major issues are:

Access to childcare

When I was returning to work after each baby, access to childcare was a problem. We were on the waiting list for many childcare centres and eventually were offered a place. I found having an impending date of return to work with no childcare yet in place an extremely stressful situation. I understand that the situation is not as dire in Canberra as in other places, however most parents I know have placed their unborn babies on childcare waiting lists, often to no avail. Many of my friends with children who have been out of the workforce for two or three years now find themselves in the difficult position of wishing to return to work, but not having any childcare in place. They cannot afford childcare until they have a job. The result of this cycle is that many mothers stay out of the workforce longer than they would wish, meaning they lose skills and their place on the career ladder, which was so hard-fought for in the early years of their career.

Cost of childcare

The cost of childcare is placing a heavy financial burden on our family. The charge at our privately-run childcare centre is now \$63 per child, per day, with no discounts for families with more than one child. For my two children I use 10 days of childcare per fortnight, meaning that more than half of my after-tax income is paid to the childcare centre. I qualify for the lowest rate of Childcare Benefit and am eagerly awaiting the government's 30 per cent rebate on childcare to be paid in 2006, hoping that it will not be income tested or have a cap on payment.

The severe cost of childcare comes on top of the other financial burdens facing all families – mortgage repayments, private health insurance, petrol costs, out-of-pocket medical expenses, and everyday living expenses. In our family, it is barely viable for me to work, given the financial and emotional stresses involved, and I earn over \$40,000 per year part-time. Why would a mother in a lower-paid job bother to return to work? Yet most women wish to work at least part-time, for their own sense of worth, a break from the constant work of child-rearing, and to contribute to the family's finances.

My husband and I have reflected that these years in our family life, while our children are below school age, are likely to be the most financially and emotionally taxing of our lives. I find it little wonder than many relationships fail under these circumstances, creating greater hardships for all parties involved, particularly the children.

Childcare is a work-related expense for the vast majority of parents, and thus should be tax-deductible for working parents. The government must also examine income-splitting to allow a lower tax threshold for families who choose to have one parent at home full-time. This could have a flow-on effect of easing pressure on childcare, as families may choose to have one parent spend more of their childrens' pre-school years at home.

Flexible work arrangements

As Parliamentary/ government employees, my husband and I enjoy benefits such as carer's leave, and a relatively flexible work environment, not available to many other employees. When I returned to work after my first baby, I worked part-time for three days per week. While my supervisor was very supportive, I essentially found myself working a full-time job in three days per week, and being paid accordingly. This caused me stress which manifested in my family life and I also undertook unpaid work in evenings and weekends to keep up.

After my second round of maternity leave I again returned to work three days per week but now job-share with another part-time employee, who also works three days per week. While this arrangement is costing our department one extra day salary per week, I believe the benefits to the department and us as employees are many.

I believe that the availability of part-time and job-share work results in the following advantages and disadvantages for organisations:

Advantages

- retaining the skills of valued staff who wish to increase their outside work commitments (family, study, sport, etc);

- facilitating more rapid return to work after maternity leave for those who wish to do so;
- the organisation demonstrates loyalty to staff over the long term, which may result in lower staff turnover and reduction of other problems such as absenteeism;
- the organisation may save money on salaries for part-time employees, and on recruitment and training of new staff; and
- encourages innovation and utilisation of new technologies such as remote computer access from home, where needed.

Disadvantages

- increased management and coordination load;
- re-defining a job and any changes in responsibility as a result of change from full-time to part-time status;
- salaries may increase slightly if two people work more than the equivalent of one full-time staff member;
- the need for good communication within the work team to ensure deadlines are met; and
- experience shows that many part-time workers are actually working a full-time load.

The challenge for organisations is to find a way for part-time workers at all levels to be able to work effectively: to make a valuable contribution to their workplaces, without feeling pressure to achieve a full-time workload in their part-time hours. It is difficult to encourage organisations, particularly small and medium-sized firms in the private sector, to experiment with part-time and job-share arrangements. The government could investigate the use of an incentive payment to companies willing to employ two people on a job-share basis, similar to the payments made to companies who take on a person with a disability.

While I do not want to speak on my husband's behalf, I believe there also needs to be a broader culture change in supporting fathers to play an active role in their family life. This means that men should not be expected to work to 7pm each night, time off when a new baby arrives should be offered in addition to recreation leave, and men must feel that they can pull their weight within the family – staying at home to care for sick children, attending school meetings, etc – without a detrimental affect to their career. A cultural shift will also require:

- managers to focus on outputs and to think of jobs in terms of roles, performance and tasks rather than time spent at the workplace;
- organisations to develop a policy or practical strategies for the management of part-time staff;

- training for the best practice management of part-time staff, aimed at assisting managers to gain an understanding of the organisation's policies on part-time arrangements and their responsibilities;
- organisations to document their flexible work agreements, setting out duration of agreements, parties to the agreement; any technical support (eg, remote network access), and review arrangements.

Thank you for considering my submission.

Regards

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