



Balancing Work and Family

House of Representatives, 8th April 2005

Dear Committee members,

Below are some comments on the inquiry about balancing work and family.

A job that has a "care" element attached seems to have been devalued by society today. As it is difficult to attach a monetary value to the role of carers including mothers, then society dismisses the roles as "cost driven", and as such seen as a burden rather than a benefit.

- The financial, career and social disincentives to starting families.

Financial.

1. Family incomes

A pressing problem in the Sydney area (and probably other cities) is affordable quality day care within reasonable limits of work or home. With most families now requiring 2 incomes to live in the Sydney basin, the managing of one of the salaries dedicated to the mortgage and/or car loans and the 2nd salary being used for the running costs of the house paying up to A\$600 per week for childcare requires serious juggling.

2. 1 income short.

The lack of paid maternity/paternity leave (except for government and some corporate businesses), is still affecting the greater majority of women. Some women can afford to make a choice of employer however the vast majority cannot. A standard minimum across the board, for a standard time period, would certainly assist a lot of families.

3. The primary breadwinner

A change in today's society is that there are a lot of women who are now the primary breadwinner for the partnership. This places additional burden on them when considering the timing of the family and managing the return to work, apart from the health issues of returning early the financial issues do place an extra burden on this small but growing band of women.

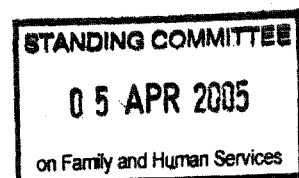
Career

4. The job changes

Most women (unless they are the primary bread winner), would like to return to work on a suitable part time arrangement. This in most instances is not an option for women, especially if they don't want to forfeit their years of succeeding to a certain level within the organisation.

5. The job disappears

There are still a number of unfortunate cases where employers are under the assumption that if a new mother takes more than 6 months off for their child that "they won't want to return to work". And then proceed to make the position redundant or redo the job so that it encompasses changes that would not allow the mother to return on a part time basis. The sad fact of this situation is that new mothers have enough to contend with so they accept what has happened simply because they are in no position to take on the conduct of the employer.



Social Disincentives

6. I've chosen not to have children so why should I pay for yours

It's amazing how often this comment is stated. Families are almost seen as a disease because of the costs involved (by society), in raising children. As a nation if the same focus was on early childhood, as is currently provided to the sporting achievements of the country, we would as a nation reap the benefits.

7. Economics is number one.

The sole driver by governments and corporates are economic results. No emphasis is placed on quality of life for non economic factors. If there were more accepted, wider ranging benchmarks in society, from that would flow issues such as the attitude to children/families. If the country want's well balanced rounded adults the emphasis has to be on children. This is a long term approach.

8. Paternity and other terrifying issues.

With the current trend in the press of current stories (although a tiny sample of parents) towards DNA sampling for determining the biological parent of the child a whole new dimension has been opened especially for men. To get a man to accept to wanting/raising a child is difficult, this maybe in part due to the slow transition from teenage years to adult hood. Teenage years seem to now extend to late 20's. However another issue maybe the horror stories that the press constantly berate the public with, such as DNA testing, limited or no access to children, false allegations by one parent against the other, the extreme cases of fathers killing their children for reasons known only to the immediate family, the costs involved in raising children and then discovering the children are not yours or having government organisations accuse you under an assumption that the the children are abused and you are guilty until you prove your own innocence. A lot of work needs to be done with young men, and men who are parents, for society in general to have a better understanding of why they shy away from the responsibilities involved.

- Making it easier for parents who so wish to return to the paid workforce

9. Paid maternity/paternity leave

Again clearly the starting point is where the employee understands the employer thinks it is quite normal to have children and from that understands it is quite normal to support people in going through the raising of the child. Two issues seem to stand out: 1. How will their employer react and 2. Will they lose their job. It has to change. As a society if we accept maternity pay as standard we are accepting the concept that as a nation we want people to have children.

It is a worry that we along with the other market driven society – the US, don't have paid maternity leave.

10. Transition time

As mentioned earlier most women would prefer to return to work, at least initially on a part time basis. Women are very dedicated employees and it is just as important for them to have a job as a man. It gives them their own identity, their own money, their own friends, and an outlet from the family circle. More should be done by employers to talk to the person about returning to work – negotiation should be seen as a positive issue. Working mothers are here to stay, as a society we are better to face that reality and deal with it accordingly.

- The impact of Taxation and other matters

Taxation

11. Childcare, deductible or free

The Australian tax system does not lend itself to flexibility for families and the smooth transition between work/home choices such as deductible childcare, or paid maternity leave. Or the more advanced thinking that all children should have access to government run childcare until they are ready to go to school. As a civilized society we should be ready to accept that if parents are to work they need childcare – not all families are fortunate to have relatives to take care of the children or earn enough (a minimum of A\$60k in Sydney), to pay for quality childcare. It should be deductible for families.

12. Income tax

The income tax system does not lend itself to a family in today's environment. The tax system has as we know been stuck together with elastoplast to make pieces work a bit better. The 'short termism' associated with successive governments is not answering the longer term questions of ageing population and what needs to be done to assist families. The cash handouts per child are ridiculous. A complete overhaul is needed to have the services in place rather than send cheques in the post. Whilst the coalition is in favour of the individual and choice that should not be to the exclusion of not providing basic services & support for families.

13. Tax breaks for the stay at home parent

A further possibility is to pay a parent – through the tax system, to stay at home with their child until they are of school going age. The payment would have to be an amount that made it a genuine choice for the parent to stay at home.

14. Tax breaks for businesses

Businesses operate on the bottom line. It has to be financially worthwhile for businesses to participate in family issues (although with the expected labour shortages over the next 20 years they may be forced to look at alternatives to retaining staff). For business providing childcare or before/after school care services, the amounts should be deductible for the business.

Other matters

15. General comments

A macro question would be can Australia sustain an increase in its population (with water and land issues of the continent) and if live births rise, will immigration be reduced so that the current population is not increased overall.

The Government needs to take a longer term view of parenting (as well as many other issues currently pressing for change), and promote the fact that parenting does have a value to the economy which is not measured purely on an economic basis.

Regards,

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