



Summary Report: Australia 2026



# State of the World's Fathers

 the  
**fathering** project  
Changing Children's Lives

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# Australian fathers in 2026 are confident, emotionally engaged, and want to be present in their children's lives.

Yet despite this shift in attitudes, structural barriers, financial pressures, and entrenched gender norms continue to limit how much fathers can participate in daily care – with real costs for fathers, mothers, children, and society.

## About This Summary Report

This report draws on findings from a global study led by Equimundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice together with The Fathering Project and partners from 16 participating countries from around the World. Across these countries, survey data was collected from approximately 8,000 parents across 16 countries. The global sample included 5,371 fathers, 2,615 mothers, and 31 non-binary or trans parents aged 18 to 65. The purpose of the Australian component of the study is to document what caregiving looks like in Australian families - and what needs to change. The findings of this summary report (and those of the full report) offer a comprehensive evidence base to guide policy, practice, and public discourse on fathering and caregiving in Australia.

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## Acknowledgement

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## Who Participated in This Study

**The Australian survey** was completed by **533 parents** across Australia in August/September of 2025, comprising 355 men (67%) and 173 women (32%), with a small number of participants identifying outside binary gender categories (n = 5). Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 64 years (mean age 39), with most concentrated in the 25–44 age range, reflecting peak parenting years. Generationally, the sample was predominantly Millennial (56%), followed by Generation X (25%), Generation Z (16%), and a small number of Baby Boomers (3%). Most respondents had one or two children (87%), with the most common child age group being 8–12 years. Seventy percent were raising biological children with their co-parent, while 18% were lone parents. Thirty percent also provided care beyond their children, most commonly to their own parents.

**The qualitative component** comprised **25 photo-elicitation interviews** conducted between November 2025 and February 2026 with 16 men and 9 women, including 12 fathers, 5 mothers, and 4 parent couples. Participants ranged in age from 31 to 60 years (median age 46), with 14 Generation X and 11 Millennial parents. Interviews were conducted online and in-person across Australian states and territories, reflecting diverse employment, relationship, and family structures. Participants were asked to share two photographs ahead of their interview - one representing their biggest worry for their child, and one depicting what gives them hope as a parent - which formed the basis of part of the conversation.

## Background

Awareness of the important role of fathers' involvement in caregiving has increased over recent decades, yet unpaid care remains unequally distributed, with women continuing to undertake most caregiving work (Ewald et al., 2025). Understanding how fathers are navigating these pressures - and what enables or constrains their involvement - has never been more important. Research consistently shows that fathers' engagement in caregiving benefits not only children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, but also mothers' workforce participation, relationship quality, and family wellbeing (Cabrera et al., 2008; Volling & Bornstein, 2025). Yet the conditions that make engaged fatherhood possible - adequate leave, flexible workplaces, affordable childcare, and social permission to care - remain unevenly distributed and poorly understood in the Australian context.

A substantial gender pay gap can limit parents' ability to make genuine choices about who earns and who cares. Currently the gender pay gap in the Australian private sector is 21.1% (WGEA, 2025). Although many fathers aspire to be emotionally engaged caregivers, their involvement is often constrained by long work hours, inflexible employment conditions, limited access to childcare, and persistent gender norms that position men as primary earners and women as primary carers (Ewald et al., 2025; Jordan, 2020; Petts et al., 2018). Evidence shows that supportive policies – such as paid parental leave and flexible work arrangements – are associated with increased paternal caregiving and positive outcomes for mothers, families, and gender equality (Duffy et al., 2020; Ewald et al., 2023, 2024; OECD, 2016), underscoring the importance of policy and workplace conditions in enabling more equitable care.

Among men, 94% agreed or strongly agreed that their partner believes them to be competent in caregiving.



## What We Found

Australian fathers in 2026 are confident, emotionally engaged, and want to be present in their children's lives. Nine in ten parents say it is more normal for men to do care work today than it was in their fathers' generation.

Yet despite this shift in attitudes, structural barriers, financial pressures, and entrenched gender norms continue to limit how much fathers can participate in daily care – with real costs for fathers, mothers, children, and society.

## Fathers' Identity: Confident, Engaged – and Caught

Australian fathers associate fatherhood with **love, responsibility, and care**. Almost all fathers reported high levels of enjoyment and confidence in their caregiving role.

### 97% of fathers

enjoy caring and feel confident as caregivers

### 94% of fathers

say their partner sees them as a competent caregiver

Meaning, confidence, and enjoyment in fathering do not operate in isolation. **Among men, 94% agreed or strongly agreed that their partner believes them to be competent in caregiving.**

Research consistently shows that a father's belief in his own capacity to parent is one of the strongest predictors of how involved he will be (Donithen & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2022; Carbone et al., 2024). Australian fathers in this study have that foundation. The challenge is not motivation. The challenge is the system and other factors around them.

“The most challenging thing about being a dad was probably my sheer lack of skills... I felt quite incompetent there for a while. Like, you know, what do I do or how do I handle the situation when this isn't going well? But, you know, you learn that and you get better at it.”

Interview Participant: Scott, Married Father of 2



### The identity gap

While 97% of fathers feel confident as caregivers, 67% of men identify financial provision as the most important fathering task – and more than a third of men (38%) agree or strongly agree they “never seem to get it right” when doing care or housework at home. Confidence in the broad role coexists with specific domestic self-doubt.

# Norms and the Provider Expectation

Near-universal support for gender equality in principle sits alongside persistent endorsement of traditional arrangements in practice. **Most parents agree that care matters as much as paid work (92%) and that men who share care are good partners (93%).** Yet:

59%

of parents agree a father's sole responsibility is to provide financially for their children

61%

of parents agree a mother's single and main responsibility is to lead daily care

63%

of men agree they do not feel 'man enough' unless they can provide financially

43%

of men and 35% of women agree boys should not be taught to sew, cook, and clean

42%

of parents agree that boys should instead focus on homework rather than housework



"You only have to go to the comments on a social media page to see how many people still hold very traditional views – that fathers are supposed to be providers, disciplinarians, stoic role models."

Interview Participant: Ben,  
Married Father of 2,  
Millennial



## These norms are not fading among younger fathers.

Gen Z fathers were more likely than Gen X fathers to agree that a father’s sole responsibility is to provide financially (72% vs 57%).

Provider expectations may be intensifying among younger men, driven in part by economic pressure and social discourses surrounding threats to masculinity alongside gender equality. Millennial fathers - many of whom are in their peak caregiving and financial pressure years - were the most consistently traditional group across questions relating to caregiving norms.

Caregiving Norms	Fathers		
	Gen Z (18–28)	Millennials (29–44)	Gen X (45–60)
A father’s sole responsibility is to provide financially for his children	72%	61%	57%
A mother’s main and single responsibility is to provide emotional and daily care	61%	63%	54%
Things are better if men do paid work and women do care work	65%	66%	45%
Boys should not be taught to sew, cook and clean	42%	44%	45%
Boys should focus on homework rather than housework	52%	43%	44%
“I’m not man enough unless I can provide for my family”	54%	68%	62%

Note: For items with a “Does Not Apply” response option, percentages are calculated excluding those responses. Orange shading indicates the highest agreement within each row among fathers (Agree + Strongly Agree). “Not man enough” item was asked of men only. Ages represent the age at which the participants were in 2025.

### The precarity link

In this study, it was perceived financial insecurity, rather than income, that predicted stronger endorsement of traditional norms. When families feel economically precarious, they may fall back on the male-breadwinner model – not away from it. Structural economic support is as important as attitudinal change.

Some positive findings: fathers and mothers who held more equitable views about caregiving reported **greater enjoyment of caregiving** and **were more likely to see men’s involvement in care as normal and expected**.

Additionally, the qualitative interviews revealed sites of resistance to traditional norms among fathers, alongside a broader recognition that expectations of fatherhood have undergone positive change.

“I think fathers are a lot more engaged and willing to be a lot more engaged with their children than before... I think women still do way too much of the heavy lifting... we’re not anywhere near where we need to be yet, but I think it’s improved a lot.”

**Interview Participant: Scott,  
Married Father of 2, Generation X**



# Who Does What? The Division of Care

Most parents (76%) report splitting care and housework equally. But this headline figure conceals a significant perception gap:

80% of men

say they split care equally

14% gap

66% of women

say they split care equally

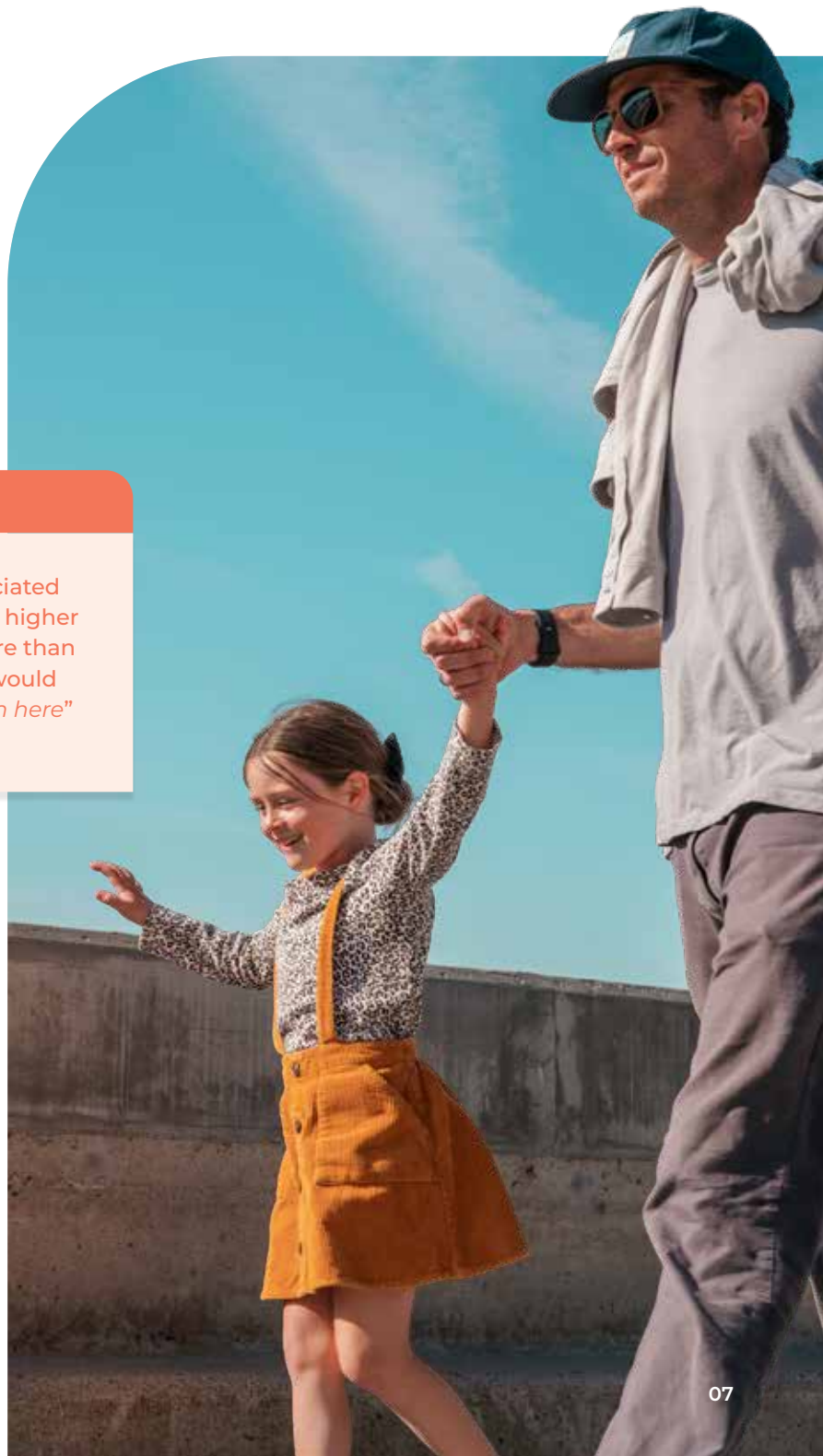
The fairness gap is even larger: **86% of men** perceive the division as fair compared to only **68% of women** – a 17-percentage-point difference. Women consistently experience arrangements described as equal as less fair. In support of this, multiple mothers who participated in interviews described doing the invisible coordination work while fathers focus on more discrete tasks.

## Communication matters

Poor couple communication was associated with lower care valuing and significantly higher psychological distress. Fathers were more than twice as likely as mothers to say they would like extra help but feel it is “*not the norm here*” (16% vs 7%).

“It’s invisible, right? A lot of the work you do is probably invisible. People don’t see you do it all, you don’t talk about it all.”

**Interview Participant: Lauren, Married Mother of 2**



“It is a lot of pressure... it’s very much a male thing to do, to try and grow your career and provide for the family... if you have any impediment to being able to work, then you do feel a bit stressed – everyone’s still relying on you to have an existence. And there is no way out of that, it doesn’t matter how you feel or what you have, you have to get up and do it.”

**Interview Participant: Liam,  
Married Father of 2**

## The Squeeze: Time, Work, and Money

Immediate barriers to fathers’ caregiving are not only related to attitudes; structures involving workplaces, policy and systems are still failing families, resulting in multiple sacrifices from mothers and fathers and preventing fathers from becoming as involved in caregiving as many need and want to be.

### 19% of parents

report they have enough time for their caregiving responsibilities

### 47% of fathers

report struggling to balance their job with care responsibilities

## Burden, Sacrifice and The Care Tax

Caregiving extracts a cumulative cost. Both fathers and mothers reported numerous care-related burdens and sacrifices.

Women were more likely to reduce work hours (68% vs 56%); men were more likely to work overtime (70% vs 53%). Women were also more likely than men to have left their job or stopped work entirely because of caregiving demands (43% vs 34%) – a sacrifice that carries lasting consequences for career continuity, superannuation accumulation, and lifetime earnings that extend well beyond the caregiving years themselves. **These divergent patterns directly reproduce the gender pay gap at the household level.**



## Shared Burden

Similar rates for mothers and fathers.

### Reduced non-essential spending



### Delayed major life purchases



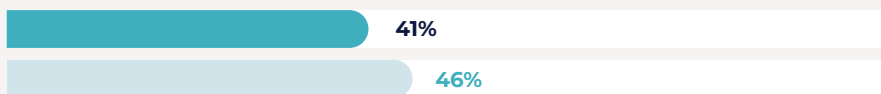
### Taken less time for themselves



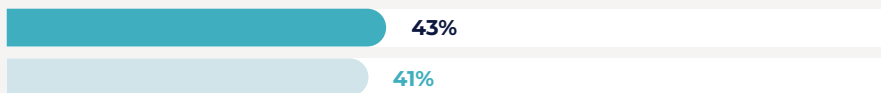
### Tapped into emergency savings



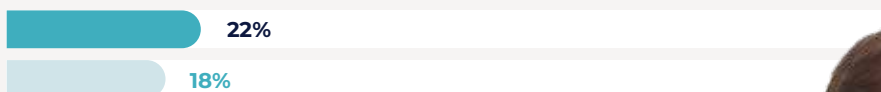
### Delayed or stopped education or training



### Stayed on a precarious job



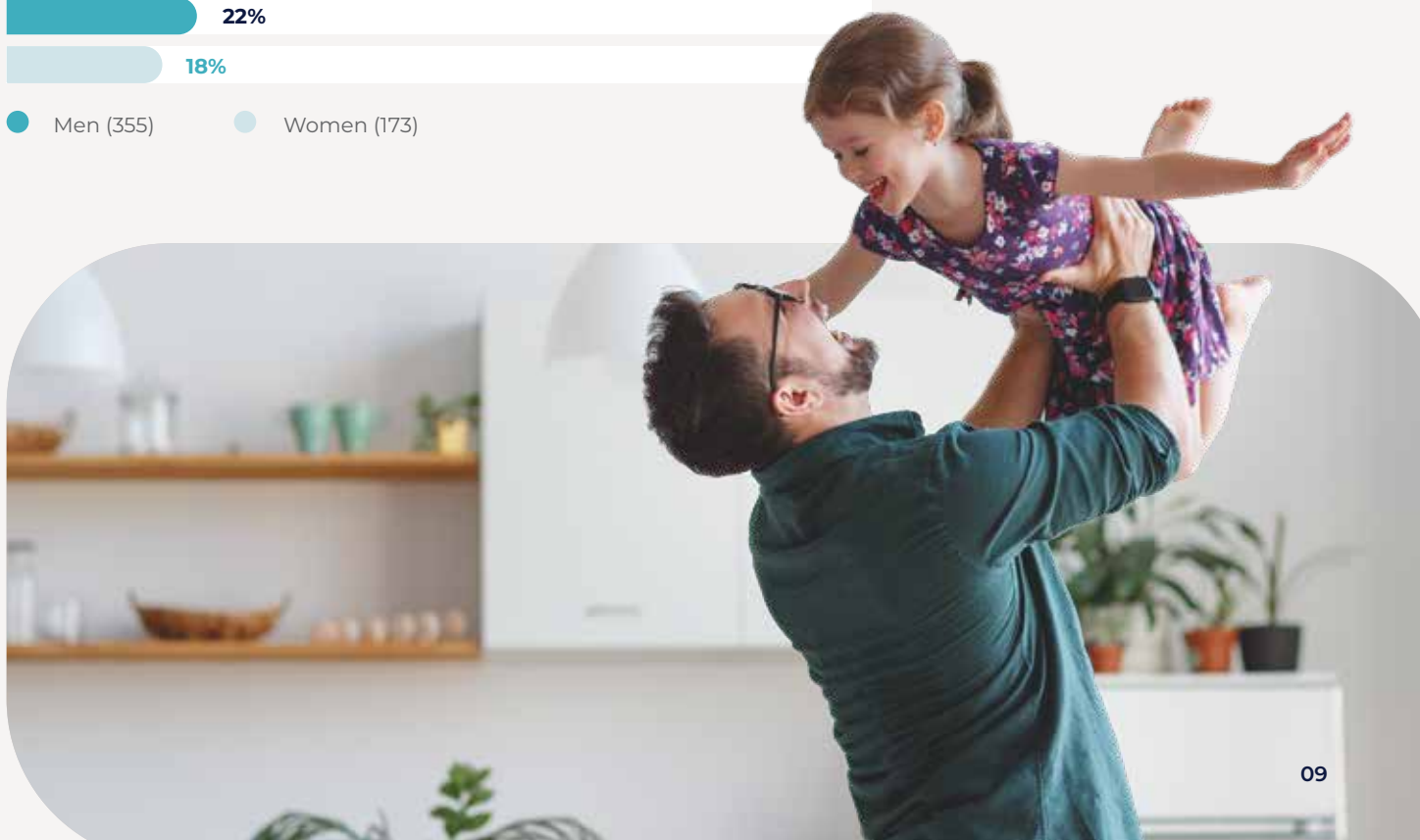
### Migrated to another country to find work



● Men (355)    ● Women (173)

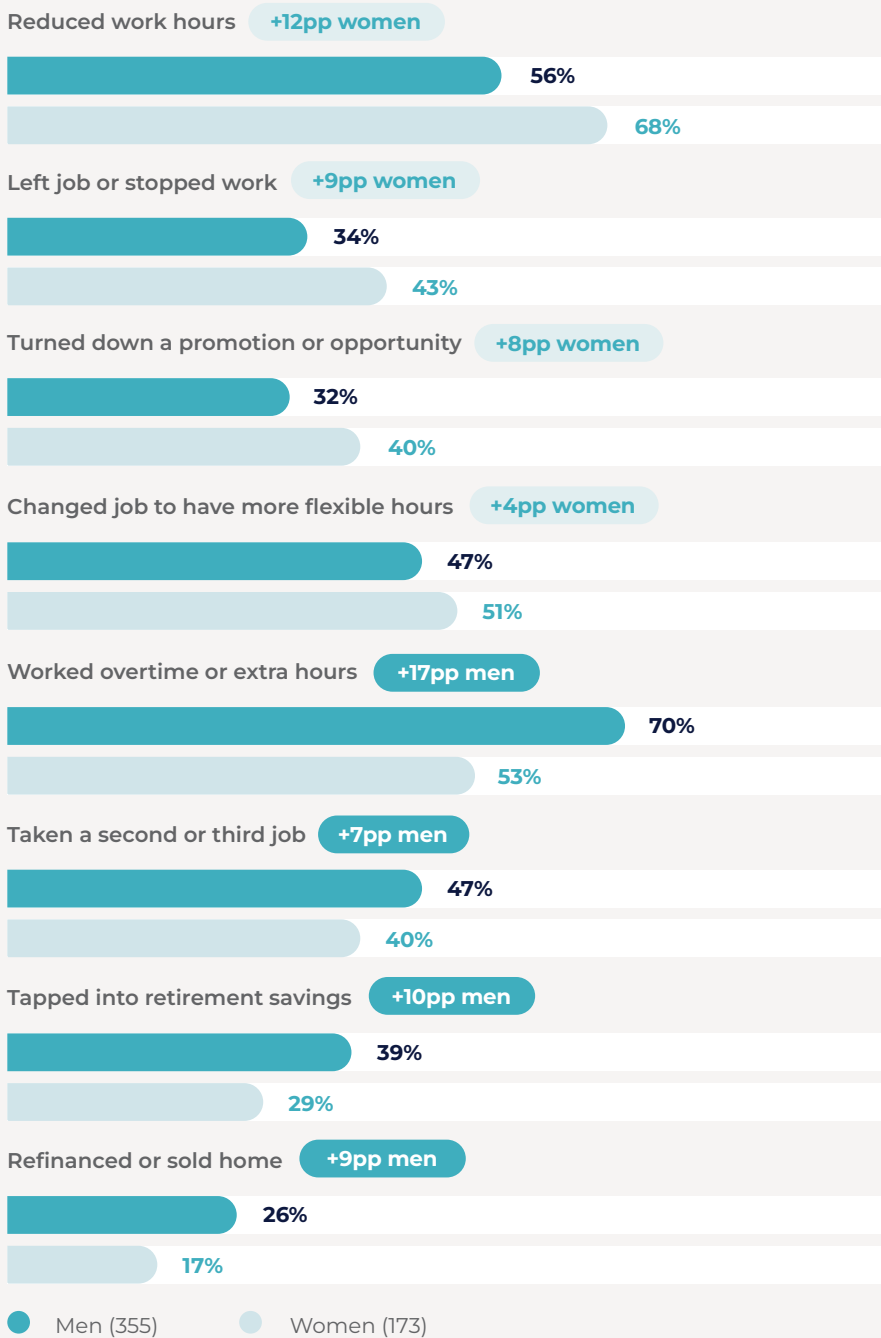
“When I had my first child, I stopped working. I didn’t go back to work until she was nearly 12 months old — so I wasn’t putting money into my super or anything like that, which is a sacrifice. And with my second child, I was only casual, so I didn’t get paid parental leave. My kids always come first — if they need something, they usually get it and I miss out.”

**Interview Participant: Maryanne, Single Mother of 3**



## Gendered Divergence

Where mothers and fathers differ.



“There goes 10 years of your earning career. You’re probably 10 years set back compared to your husband, in your career and your earnings... I took a break from my career while I was raising the kids, predominantly, and because of the area that he works in, he can earn twice as much. So that might change in the future — but at the moment, we don’t earn enough to cover the cost of living.”

Interview Participant: Claudia, Mother of 2



## Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance reported as a prominent caregiving concern among Australian parents, with **more than one in three (35%) ranking it among their top worries** – reflecting a reality in which the boundaries between paid work and family life have become increasingly difficult to sustain. Notably, **91% of all parents agreed or strongly agreed that a four-day work week would allow caregivers to get better work-life balance.** When both partners are working full-time, difficulties involved in balancing work and life are amplified:

“It feels sometimes like the kids have two dads.  
We’re missing a wife or a mother.”

**Interview Participant: Claudia, Full-time Working Mother of 2**

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In some families the financial pressure of caregiving is absorbed by working harder rather than working less. As documented earlier in this report, **men were more likely than women to respond to care demands by working overtime (70% vs 53%)** – a pattern that, while financially pragmatic, comes at a direct cost to the time and presence fathers are able to offer their families:

“I’m working back a lot more... I try and find extra work — helped other people build their carports, cut rust out of their cars, anything that I can fit in without affecting my home life with my child.”

**Interview Participant: Wayne, Single Father of 1**

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“There’s not enough time to have a proper family balance. Everyone’s got to work. Everything’s too expensive. It doesn’t matter how much money you make, it’s still not enough. And you just don’t really get enough time to have a well-balanced family.”

**Interview Participant: Liam, Married Father of 2**

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“I threw myself at work, which I now realised was the wrong thing because at that age, the mother needed the support while I was working away.”

**Interview Participant: John, Single Father of 1**

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## Financial Insecurity

**72% of parents** worry constantly about their family's financial future. Women were considerably more likely to report financial insecurity (40% vs 26%). Among parents not planning more children, **52%** cited financial concerns as highly influential in their decision, 49% cited housing, and 40% cited childcare costs.

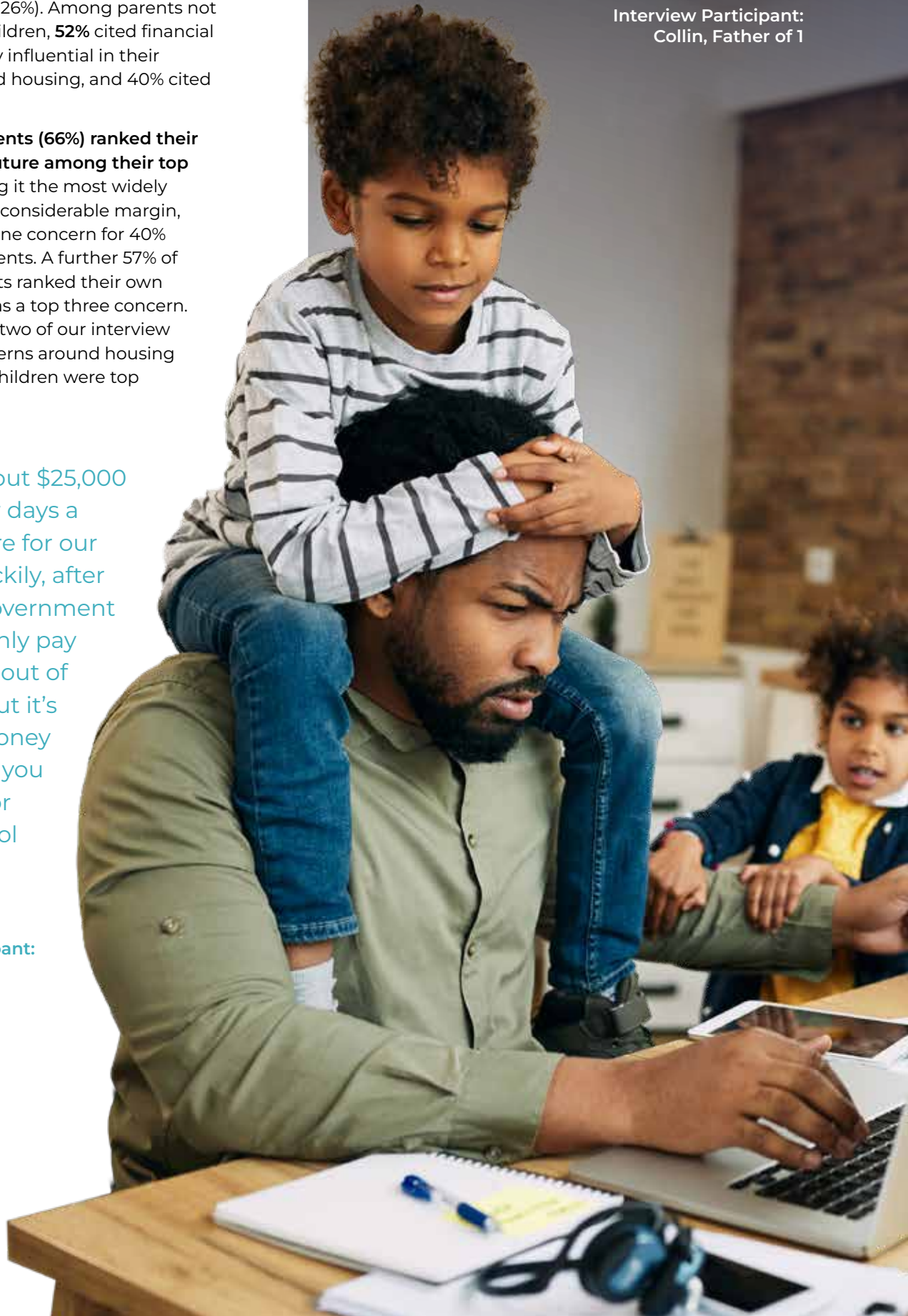
**Two-thirds of parents (66%) ranked their child's financial future among their top concerns** – making it the most widely shared worry by a considerable margin, and the number one concern for 40% of survey respondents. A further 57% of survey respondents ranked their own financial security as a top three concern. As highlighted by two of our interview participants, concerns around housing security for their children were top of mind.

“I think it's about \$25,000 a year for four days a week childcare for our daughter. Luckily, after the federal government subsidy, we only pay \$9,000 a year out of the pocket. But it's a fair bit of money compared to, you know, \$500 for a public-school fee for a year next year.”

**Interview Participant:**  
Jarrod, Father of 1

“Children are very expensive in Australia, and there's this absolute money-eating monster called daycare.”

**Interview Participant:**  
Collin, Father of 1



## Financial Security and Housing



Photo provided by participant.

“This is probably about my fears because, it’s not only about not being able to afford a home so I can have stability for my kids, but more that I can leave a home to my kids, that is more important. Because as you know, with wealth polarising the way it is and with the price of property just being ridiculous, I’m very concerned that our future will be one of a new underclass of people who don’t have property... I want that for my kids, and I want them also just to be able to have that. So that’s probably my biggest concern as a parent, separate from parenting, is just economically how to be able to support them and create stability for them without owning a house because it’s very likely the way it’s going. If I’m able to afford a house on one income, it’s going to be in the country, it won’t be in the city.”

**Sam, Single Father of 2**

It’s the concern for money, really. Like I don’t like the amount of inflation that we’ve had in the last 10 years, it’s phenomenal. Even just on that basic level of like your groceries and everything like that, you go to the shops now and you spend \$100, you leave with four or five bags of food. And I don’t believe people’s wages are in line with the inflation... I work with some pretty intelligent guys in my industry, and they’re always like, the best thing you can do is supply your kids with a house, because by the time your kids are 20, houses are going to be even more expensive, and if you can actually give your kids a house, you’re going to give them the best start to life that you possibly can. Now, 20 years ago, for my parents, it was like, if you can get a university degree, you’ll be set up for life. Now, they’re like, just get your kid a house. Buy him a house.

**Matt, Father of 2**

Photo provided by participant: “It’s just a photo of money.”

## Wellbeing: The Hidden Toll

Despite parents reporting moderate to high life satisfaction overall (average 6.4 out of 10), the gendered pattern of care burden has measurable wellbeing consequences - and fathers are not immune.

33%

of fathers reported suicidal thoughts in the past two weeks (vs 23% mothers)

52%

of fathers drank 5+ drinks in a single sitting in the past fortnight (vs 28% mothers)

17pp

lower relationship satisfaction among mothers vs fathers (27% vs 15% dissatisfied)

### Care and household safety

Elevated male distress, heavy alcohol use, and women's substantially lower relationship satisfaction describe households under pressure. Policies that reduce economic precarity and support fathers' genuine involvement in care are investments in the stability and safety of family life.

“The only thing we have is Men’s Line, and I’ve called that before...it wasn’t overly helpful...[we need] something that’s more geared toward parents... you do get resources online, but sometimes you’re going through something particularly hard, and you just want to speak to somebody.”

**Interview Participant: Sam, single father, on managing the stress of co-parenting**



“It gives me peace as well... I feel very peaceful when I’m with her.”

Leo, single father, on caring for his daughter

## A critical protective factor

Fathers in this sample reported significantly higher levels of distress than mothers. However, fathers who placed a high value on caregiving reported significantly lower distress – a relationship not observed for mothers. Supporting fathers’ caregiving identity is not only an equity intervention – it is a mental health one.

One migrant father, Amir, described navigating significant challenges with his youngest son’s mental health, yet his connection with his children and a range of supports remained a source of steadiness and hope.

### Protective Factors



“After the rain there is sunshine and then there’s a rainbow... even though there’s rain and other things, **things change, things are not always the same.**”

**Amir, Father of 3**

Photo provided by participant.

# The First Years: Parental Leave and Early Support

The first years of a child's life are a critical window. Role arrangements established in the earliest phases tend to persist. Australia has historically been among the least generous OECD countries for parental leave - and that context shapes every finding below.

## 73% of fathers

say they took all the leave they were allowed

## 56% of mothers

say their partner took all available leave

"So that two weeks helped for me to bond. I think probably even longer, maybe four weeks from a dad's perspective would be great."

Interview Participant:  
John, Father of 1



"I became aware of the two weeks paid parental leave, but I didn't know about it beforehand... the first time I had my daughter, there was nothing. I didn't get the parental one. I didn't know."

Interview Participant: Liam, Father of 2

## The Perception Gap

This **17-percentage-point gap** reflects a system where father-specific leave has been minimal. Many fathers may believe they took “everything available” – when what was available was very little or there may have been a lack of awareness of what fathers actually have available to them – a finding that has been revealed in the existing literature (Ewald et al., 2021). Additionally, **only one in five fathers (20%) reported having access to parental leave** to manage care for their child when young. Critically, only 10% of both men and women selected paternity leave as one of the top supports that would make the biggest difference to their caregiving. Despite this, **~90%** of both parents agreed if they did take leave, it helped them bond with their child and become a happier parent.

## The Healthcare System Gap

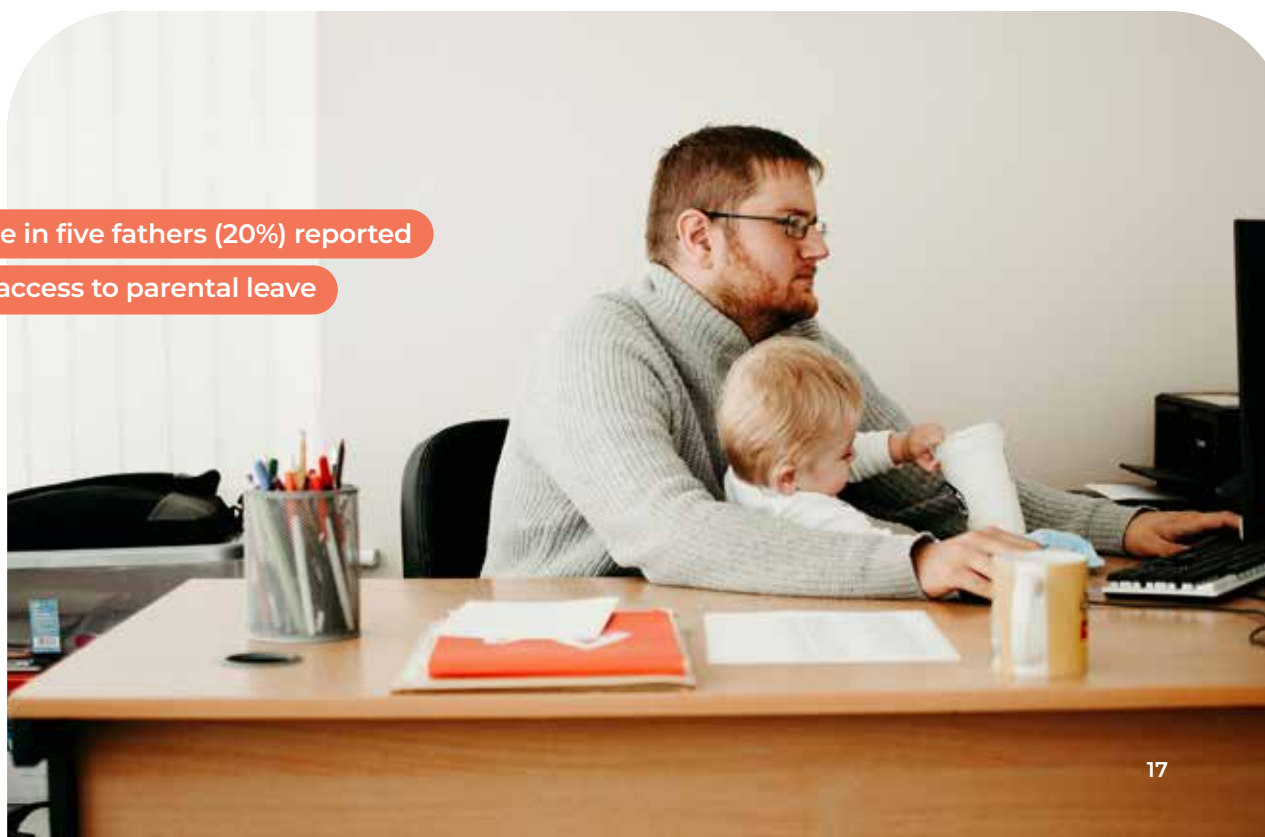
Only **14%** of fathers felt they received all the support they needed as a new parent – despite 82% reporting feeling broadly supported by the healthcare system when they had their first child. **More than a third of fathers (35%) reported that prenatal support from the healthcare system would have made a big difference when they prepared to become a parent** – suggesting that even among those who felt broadly supported, something specific to their role as a father may have been missing. Fathers were in the system; what was likely absent was support designed specifically for them.

“Even things like the maternal health nurse appointments — the weight and all that stuff, which I want to know — I’m interested in that as well, but I don’t have the green book.”

Interview Participant: Sam, single father of 2

Mothers felt significantly more supported by the healthcare system / clinic around them when it came to having their first child than fathers (this includes antenatal and postnatal care).

Only one in five fathers (20%) reported having access to parental leave



# Support, Systems, and the Case for Investment

## The Support Gap

More than half of all fathers have **never been made aware of, nor offered, father-specific** services, despite almost one in four (23%) fathers reporting that they would have liked access to a fathers' group when they were preparing to become a parent.

In fact, **only 3% of fathers named other fathers as their main source of parenting support** – pointing to an almost complete absence of peer-based learning among men.

3%

cite other fathers as a main source of parenting support

47%

are aware of any support services for fathers

14%

received all the support they needed as a new parent

“Peer support... it’s not something that happens as much in the fathering space compared to in mothering, where mothers groups are very much well established from birth. I think setting up fathers groups wouldn’t be a bad thing.”

Interview Participant: Jarrod, father of 1



## The Policy Mandate

Support for care investment is near-universal: **Over 80% of parents** say they would vote for a party that supports care-related policies including flexible working, affordable elder care, subsidised childcare, and equal paid parental leave.

When asked what drove their vote in the last federal election though, among parents who reported they voted, **housing (44%), healthcare (43%), and cost-of-living pressures (35%) topped the list** – a reminder that care policy competes for political attention in a crowded field. Flexible working ranked fourth (30%), and financial compensation for caregiving was selected by 21% of parents, with 18% selecting subsidised childcare. **Fathers were twice as likely as mothers to cite subsidised childcare as a voting issue driving their vote (21% vs 10%)** – suggesting men’s appetite for care investment may be stronger and more politically legible than is commonly assumed.

However, some parents within the qualitative interviews expressed the idea that they had not really encountered care as a visible or accessible area of government action in their own lives:

“It’s not something that you think about – I don’t think how can my government help me in raising my family.

**Interview Participant: Kara, married mother of 2**

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“I haven’t really thought about that [how the government can support parenting]. Nothing comes to mind.”

**Interview Participant: Jason, married father of 2**

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The fact that caregiving remains largely positioned as a private matter and normalised as women’s work may help explain why financial compensation for caregiving and subsidised care do not yet top the list of voting priorities for most parents, and why some struggle to articulate what government support for caregiving might even look like. This represents a clear opportunity for political leaders to make caregiving a visible public priority.

Only 3% of fathers named other fathers as their main source of parenting support.



# Conclusions

Australian fathers in 2026 want to care. What stands in the way is not a failure of will but a failure of systems – workplace cultures that make caregiving costly for men, leave entitlements that are inadequate and poorly communicated, health services that fail to tailor supports specifically to fathers, and economic conditions that push families back toward gendered arrangements even when both partners want something different.

The care tax falls differently on mothers and fathers, but both bear real costs that compound across a lifetime.

Children, who benefit most from the active involvement of fathers, pay a price too. Parents across Australia know this. Over eighty-eight per cent say they would vote for it.

**The system that constrains women also constrains men.**

## Recommendations

The evidence points to four audiences for change.

### For Employers

Work-care conflict is a key barrier to caregiving time. Introduce flexible working and childcare support as organisational norms. Actively normalise fathers taking leave and working flexibly without career penalty. Visibility of men who blend work and care, and leadership modelling, are some of the most effective levers.

### For Government

Extend paid parental leave for fathers with dedicated, non-transferable leave periods at wage replacement rates. Invest in subsidised childcare for financially insecure families. Communicate entitlements clearly to fathers. Reduce economic precarity – it is a strong driver of traditional caregiving arrangements in this data.

### For Health & Community

Develop father-specific peer support pathways from birth. Screen for paternal postnatal depression routinely. The transition to parenthood is the critical intervention window.

### For Researchers & Policymakers

The awareness gap is as much a communication failure as a service gap. Invest in outreach and accessibility – particularly for financially insecure, lone parent, and culturally diverse families. Supporting men's active engagement in caregiving benefits fathers, mothers, children, and society.

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