



‘More Time’ With Dad

AUSTRALIAN MEN’S USE AND
EXPERIENCES OF PARENTAL LEAVE



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Acknowledgements

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Building on a 20-year legacy of investment in men's physical and mental health, The Movember Institute of Men's Health launched in 2023 and has ambitious goals to enhance quality of life for millions of men worldwide. Uniting global experts in the field of men's health, the Institute will accelerate research and translate it into tangible, real-world outcomes.



The Importance of Being There

Lachlan Gillespie

My wife and I had our twin daughters during the COVID-19 pandemic. Looking back now, I could never have understood just how much that forced time at home would grow to mean to our family unit – me, their Dad, being there every day, every night in the early moments of their lives.

Our family unit has chosen to be around our extended family now, which means I travel a huge amount for work. Whilst I need to leave my family constantly, I can absolutely see the value in those early days, where I created a bond that was so strong it has flowed through now, five years on. An early bond that has now become a forever connection.

During the lockdown, my wife was still able to go into work. We would wave goodbye to mummy at the door in the morning and there we were. Two baby girls and their daddy, ready for the day's adventure. Being able to take them out for a walk, feed them, put them down for their first nap, to then see their smiling faces when they woke in their cots – it was all priceless. Thinking back to this time brings tears to my eyes.

These were weeks and weeks of beautiful moments during very unusual times. But I also can't imagine what that would have been like if COVID hadn't happened. Those smiles I would have missed. That deep baby and dad connection that is so different to the connection with the mother. So important, it's a different energy. A crucial energy and it lives in their little hearts and minds every day because it was built early and often in those first months of their lives.

The other massive part of this family time together was the support I was able to give to my wife. After a twin pregnancy and birth, she was quite quickly in a very fragile spot mentally. The load it took on her was something I didn't understand in the beginning. But what I could provide was being there, being there to hold her hand.

It's said often how important the village is, and I believe the best way to support the mother in this early time is for the husband/dad to be there to support her. There will always be another work day but you don't get these early moments of support and connection with your partner and children back. Paid parental leave is one critical source of support that ensures dads can be there when it matters most.

Lachlan Gillespie is an Australian children's entertainer, singer, musician, and actor. He is a member of The Wiggles and wears the purple skivvy.

Give Dads the Time to Become Dads

Seb Costello, The Parenthood

The day before my wife's due date, my phone rang. My manager was injured and in hospital.

I had spent months training him to run my small business so I could take the first month off when our baby arrived. Instead, I spent those days fielding calls and lodging an insurance claim.

I had always wanted to be a dad. When Ellie was pregnant, I was determined to be there for her and our baby. I sought advice, read the books and planned carefully.

Still, the plan fell apart.

The circumstances differ: an unswappable shift, an indispensable business, a household that cannot afford the income drop. But the pattern is familiar. When real life intervenes, fathers' time with their babies is often the first thing surrendered.

That is why paid parental leave must be protected, properly paid and long enough to give dads a genuine chance to care.

My daughter Mabel was born in 2017. At the time, the government provided dads and partners with two weeks of leave at minimum wage. I took it and I was grateful.

Walking out of hospital, one thought hit me: I am responsible for this little person forever. I am a father now. What do I do?

The only way to learn was to begin.

I changed nappies, woke through the night, learned Mabel's cries and supported my wife as she recovered. It was beautiful, relentless and sometimes deeply monotonous. Work was predictable. A baby was the opposite.

Learning to care takes time: to notice, practise, get it wrong and try again. Time for a baby to learn that Dad is also a source of safety, comfort and love.

That early time matters far beyond the newborn weeks.

The way care begins is often the way it continues. The patterns established in the earliest months can shape who becomes the default parent, whose work is treated as more important and who carries the practical and emotional load for years.

When dads want to show up, their partners want them to show up and children benefit when they do. So why are we still making it so difficult?

At The Parenthood, I speak to fathers who wanted more time but could not make the finances work; whose workplaces made leave feel professionally risky; who took as much leave as they could afford, rather than as much as their families needed.

This report shows how widespread these experiences are.

More than half of the dads surveyed said the leave they took was not enough. Almost three in ten took none. More than half worried that additional time would damage their careers. Many cobbled together annual leave, carer's leave, long-service leave and unpaid leave just to be present.

That patchwork creates stress for families already exhausted, financially stretched and learning to care.

Australia now provides 26 weeks of government-funded paid parental leave at minimum wage, with four weeks reserved for a partner on a use-it-or-lose-it basis. This is progress.

But four weeks is not enough to lay the foundations for a lifetime of caring.

Every parent knows trying to settle a distressed baby: pacing, trying everything, willing them to sleep. Eventually, you slow your breathing, lean in and understand what they need.

You cannot rush that moment. It comes through being there, again and again, until your baby knows you and you know them.

Those moments build confidence, attachment and shared responsibility. They help fathers become caregivers rather than helpers, and partners become a team.

Paid parental leave is not simply time away from work. It says fathers matter. Their relationships with their babies matter. Their partners' recovery, wellbeing and careers matter.

Good policy turns wanting to be there into being able to be there.

We should give every dad the time and space to become the father he wants to be, not a visitor in his child's early life, but a present, confident and equal caregiver from the beginning.

Seb Costello is a Dadvocate with The Parenthood, which advocates for Australia to be the best place in the world to be a parent. He is a former small-business owner and a stay-at-home dad of two.





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Executive Summary

Australian fathers want to be there: for the birth, for their partner's recovery, and for the earliest weeks that many describe as the most important of their lives. Paid parental leave can be one policy mechanism to help make that happen. Yet our system too often makes being there a risk to finances or career progression, and it is fathers in the least secure work who are shut out most completely.

This report unpacks these issues in depth. It draws on a nationally representative survey of 1,216 Australian men with at least one child aged 0-10 years, four focus groups with metropolitan and regional fathers across permanent, casual, contract and self-employed work, and 26 interviews with 30 stakeholders. It is among the first Australian studies to examine men's use and experience of parental leave through the lens of their own health, rather than workforce participation or gender equity alone.

WHERE AUSTRALIA STANDS

Australia ranks 34th of 38 OECD countries for dedicated, well-paid leave reserved for fathers. Government-funded leave is paid at the national minimum wage; around half the average full-time wage for an Australian father. Employer-paid leave can close this gap. Yet employer offerings vary widely across industries and are especially rare in smaller firms. Access to employer-paid leave is greatest among men already in secure, higher-paid work and lowest among men with less secure employment – who are also those more likely to experience poor health.

HOW FATHERS PIECE PARENTAL LEAVE TOGETHER

Seven in ten surveyed fathers (71%) took some form of parental leave after the birth of their first child; 29% took none. Among those who took leave, half (50%) relied on employer-paid leave alone, 18% combined employer and government leave, and 16% used the government scheme alone. Most leave was brief: 41% of those on employer-paid leave took two weeks or less, and 56% of those on government-paid leave took exactly the two-week entitlement.

83%

of fathers who took leave said it allowed them to bond with their child, and 70% said it benefited their mental health.

71%

of surveyed fathers took some form of parental leave after the birth of their first child, while 29% took none.

56%

of surveyed fathers felt that the amount of leave they took was not enough.

WHAT FATHERS GAINED, AND WANTED MORE OF

Fathers who took leave reported wide-ranging benefits: 70% said it was very or completely true that leave benefited their mental health, and 83% said it allowed them to bond with their child. Focus group participants described its value less in financial terms than in what it made possible: bonding, supporting their partner's recovery, and adjusting to a new role. Fathers described the time with their child in the early weeks as "priceless" – yet 56% of survey participants felt the leave they took was not enough.

BARRIERS TO PARENTAL LEAVE ACCESS AND UPTAKE

Among fathers who took no leave at all, only 18% cited a lack of need; 36% described a financial barrier and 37% pointed to unsupportive or inaccessible workplaces. Among those who did take leave, 52% agreed that taking more leave would have put their career progression at risk. Fathers described a culture that quietly penalises leave-taking, a "brown mark against your name", and financial pressure compounded by provider expectations, in which being at work was understood as being a good father.

Self-employed men, small business owners, casual and gig workers, and those in fly-in fly-out roles described the current government scheme as simply unusable rather than merely unaffordable. Awareness was a further barrier to uptake, with knowledge of the scheme thin, often out of date, held mainly by mothers, and reaching fathers late if at all.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

Off the back of these findings, we know that Australian fathers want to spend more time at home with their newest family member. Working with the Government, Movember wants to support the establishment of a cross-departmental working group, across Social Services, Health, Treasury and others, to better understand the barriers fathers face in taking parental leave, and how we can work across Government and industry to help Australian dads be with their young families when it matters most.

Fathers offered a clear blueprint for reform: pay closer to real income; dedicated, additional time that both parents can use together; a design that fits self-employment and small business; and delivery that lifts the paperwork off new parents. Movember stands ready to work with the Government to make it happen.

52%

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of fathers who took no leave pointed to unsupportive or inaccessible workplaces, and 36% cited a financial barrier.

34th

is Australia's rank out of 38 OECD countries for dedicated, well-paid leave reserved for fathers.

The Policy Ask

Movember calls on the Government to support the establishment of a cross-departmental working group spanning Social Services, Health, Employment and Workplace Relations, Finance and Treasury to better understand the barriers fathers face in taking parental leave.

As part of this, the working group should establish a time-bound review of the next phase of Paid Parental Leave. This would be the first review to assess the scheme from the perspective of fathers and men's health. Its mandate should include:



Fund dedicated research on the health, mental health and bonding impacts of paternity and partner leave, and the cost when fathers are not supported to take it.



Develop a roadmap to move payment from the flat minimum wage towards wage replacement.



Set a phased pathway to extend and protect the non-transferable reserved quota beyond four weeks.



Examine workplace culture and career-risk barriers, including the uneven distribution of employer top-ups.



Engage fathers in the lowest-uptake sectors (tradies, self-employed, small business owners, gig and casual workers).



Report against the National Men's Health Strategy 2020–2030 and gender equality objectives within a defined timeframe.



Strengthen monitoring and public reporting of second-parent uptake, disaggregated by parent, sector, income and firm size.

Background

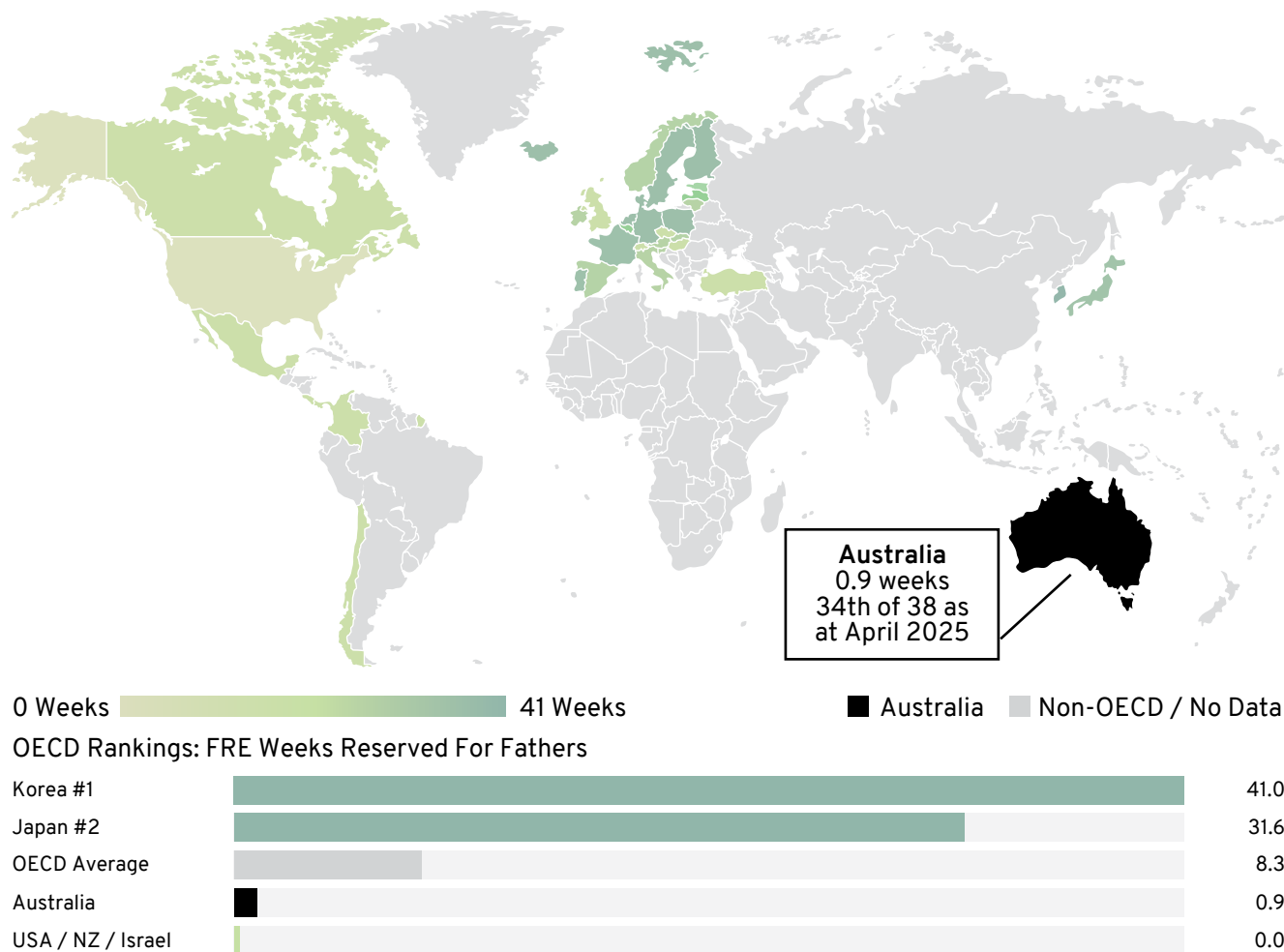
For many men, becoming a father reshapes identity, relationships, and their sense of what matters. The transition to parenthood is among the most significant in men's lives; it is a period in which newfound meaning and considerable pressure coexist¹. Internationally, around one in ten fathers experience depression across the perinatal period².

In Australia, around one in four fathers rate their physical or mental health as poor or fair in the first year of their child's life, and one in five become more isolated or lonely after becoming a father¹. Protecting the mental health of new fathers is an often overlooked but critical lever that can aid in supporting the wellbeing of entire families.

While many fathers today report valuing parenthood more than career success¹, the pressure on fathers to conform strictly to traditional provider-only models of fatherhood remains. Modern fathers seem to be responding to the demands of two roles at once; roles which in prior generations were often mutually exclusive. The old templates – dad as breadwinner, mum as sole caregiver – no longer match how mums and dads say they want to live. Yet no clear alternative has replaced them. Dads want to be more present; mums want genuine co-parenting. Yet our cultural wiring, workplace norms, and policy settings still assume a traditional division of labour within families. The result is a transition in which relationship strain, financial stress and social isolation can compound at precisely the moment health and wellbeing are most critical for new parents. It is also a moment that policy can shape directly, structuring the conditions in which new parents can thrive.

Paid parental leave is a key policy lever associated with the functioning and wellbeing of new parents. Australia's Paid Parental Leave scheme has been expanding in stages since 2023, and from 1 July 2026 families share a single pool of 26 weeks (130 days) of government-funded leave, of which four weeks are reserved for the father or non-birthing parent on a use-it-or-lose-it basis³. Even so, Australia sits near the bottom of the OECD in terms of dedicated parental leave for fathers (see Figure 1). According to the full-rate-equivalent (FRE) measure, which combines the length of leave reserved for fathers with how well it is paid, Australia ranks 34th of 38 member countries⁴. Government leave is also paid at the national minimum wage, which amounts to around half of the average full-time wage for an average Australian father^{3,5}. For many fathers, taking parental leave in the absence of employer-paid leave means absorbing a substantial drop in income, alongside navigating concerns for their standing or progression at work⁶.

Figure 1. Australia ranks 34th of 38 OECD countries for fathers' parental leave entitlements as measured in full-rate-equivalent weeks, as at April 2025.



Source: OECD Family Database, Table PF2.1.B (updated May 2026; entitlements as at April 2025 – the most recent measurement point, and therefore the current official ranking). Full-rate-equivalent (FRE) weeks express leave reserved for fathers as the number of weeks it would run if paid at 100% of average earnings. Australia's reserved entitlement rose to 20 days on 1 July 2026, lifting its FRE entitlement to approximately 1.8 weeks at the same payment rate. Rankings are not adjusted for post-April 2025 reforms in any country as they are not yet published by the OECD.

The architecture of parental leave policy is also critical to consider, because access to leave is not distributed equally to all fathers. Employer-funded leave, which closes much of the income gap, is unevenly distributed: among larger private-sector employers it is offered by 88% in education and training but by only 43% in transport, 47% in manufacturing, 48% in construction and

49% in agriculture, forestry and fishing, and smaller employers are far less likely to offer it than large ones⁷. Left to employer discretion, longer and better-paid leave flows to fathers who often already hold the most secure and best-remunerated work, and by extension, experience a greater share of protective factors for mental health in early parenthood.

The pattern is compounded by geography. Men in rural and remote Australia carry a higher health burden than men in the major cities – higher rates of premature death, and suicide rates that rise with remoteness and sit well above metropolitan rates^{8,9}. Many work in the same industries, and under the same casual or self-employed arrangements, that fall outside employer schemes and can make the scheme's work test harder to meet⁷. Need, in other words, is often highest where access is lowest.

What fathers stand to gain from parental leave is increasingly well documented. Fathers who take leave report better mental health than those who do not, and longer periods of leave are associated with greater benefit. These gains are clearest where the payment replaces enough income for leave to be affordable, and may be reduced where fathers fear that taking leave will damage their standing at work^{6,10}. Men's use of parental leave (especially longer periods of leave) is also associated with greater father involvement in caregiving and stronger father-child engagement that persists across the early years^{11,12,13}. Fathers' use of parental leave also correlates with higher relationship satisfaction between parents and, in several studies, a reduced likelihood of family breakdown¹³.

The benefits are not confined to fathers. Evidence from Sweden suggests a reform that gave fathers the flexibility to be at home in the weeks after birth reduced mothers' physical postpartum complications and improved their mental health¹⁴. Australia's introduction of Dad and Partner Pay in 2013 was associated with a reduction in mothers' postpartum depressive symptoms¹⁵. Extending and better remunerating fathers' reserved leave is not a trade-off against mothers. The four reserved weeks sit within a single 26-week family pool; the question is how parents are supported to share it³. Expanding the availability and remuneration of parental leave is about giving families more choice in how they manage the first year. It is about providing sufficient breathing room to have autonomy over the early years of parenthood; where time off work to embrace parenthood shouldn't come with guaranteed financial strain.

“Policy is increasingly recognising the important role of fathers as caregivers, but recognition alone is not enough. We need to strengthen workplace policies and cultures, so fathers are supported to take up parental leave and participate as equal carers. Without these supports, shared parenting is difficult to achieve in practice; supporting mothers also requires actively supporting fathers.”

– Stakeholder from children's health sector

Australian research on fathers' leave has concentrated on uptake rates, and associations with workforce and gender-equity outcomes, rather than on fathers' own health or their lived experience of taking – or missing – leave. The evidence base is especially thin regarding the experiences of men in industries where access to parental leave is already most restricted⁶. This report aims to address this gap, and centre the voices and experiences of these fathers. Drawing on a national survey and in-depth focus groups with Australian fathers of a child under 10, and interviews with key stakeholders across industry, service provision and Government, its objectives are to examine fathers' use of parental leave; their experiences of leave; and the barriers to taking leave among men in under-served industries.

Who Did We Hear From?

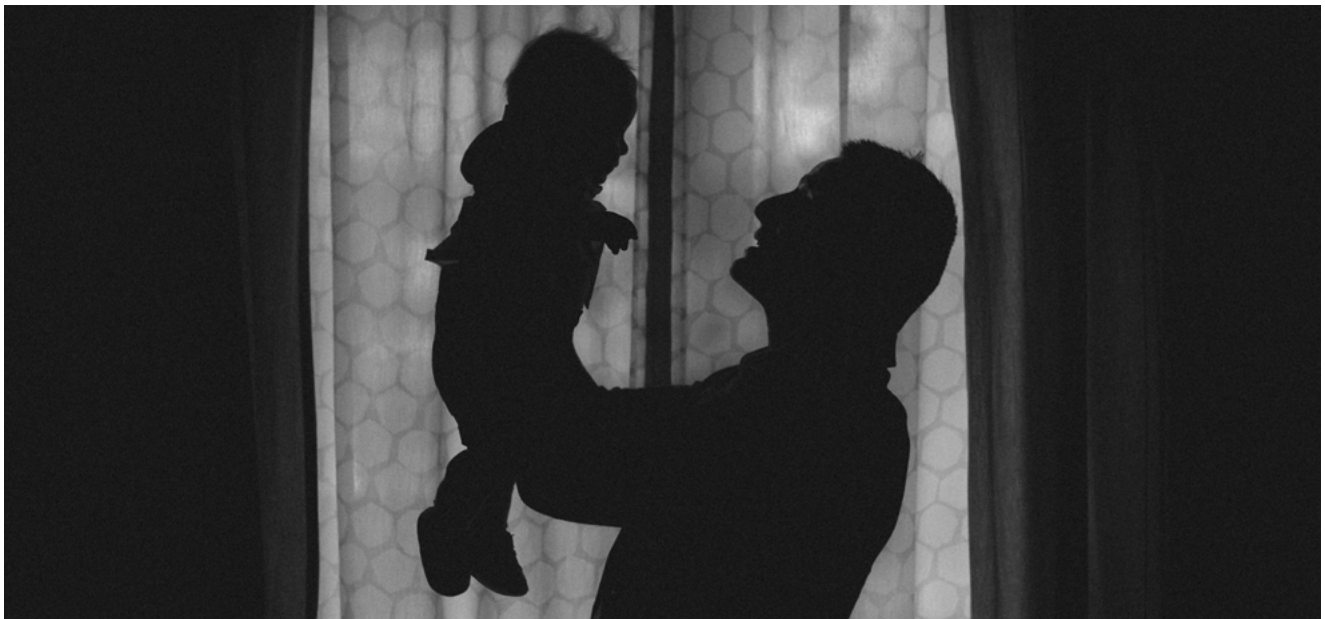
NATIONAL SURVEY

In February 2026, Movember commissioned a national survey of Australian fathers with at least one child aged 0-10 years. We surveyed 1,216 fathers in total – a sample representative of the national population by region. Fathers were 37 years old on average; 34% had one child, 47% had two, and 19% had three or more children. The majority (93%) spoke English as the main language at home, 14% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and 22% identified as currently living with a physical or mental health condition.

FOCUS GROUPS

In July 2026, Redbridge conducted four online focus groups (90 minutes each, via Zoom) with expecting fathers, men trying to have a child, and fathers of young children. The groups were split across location and employment type: Group 1 (metro, permanent employees), Group 2 (metro, casual/contract and self-employed), Group 3 (regional, casual/contract and self-employed) and Group 4 (regional, permanent employees), spanning the capital cities and regional centres of five states.

Discussion covered fathers' priorities and worries when preparing for a baby; the barriers to being the fathers they want to be; their awareness and experience of Paid Parental Leave, both employer schemes and the government's Parental Leave Pay; their reactions to the scheme's parameters as at 1 July 2026; and their own designs for a scheme that would work for them.



STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIONS

We also drew on data collected from interviews with key stakeholders from multiple sectors. We heard from Federal and State Government ministers and staff, representatives from the perinatal health, fatherhood and men's health sectors, alongside peak and professional bodies. In total, Dr Karen Wynter (Senior Research Fellow, Deakin Lifespan Institute) conducted 26 interviews with 30 stakeholders across these sectors. Their insights informed the development of our findings and several quotes from stakeholders are included throughout the report.



What Did We Find?

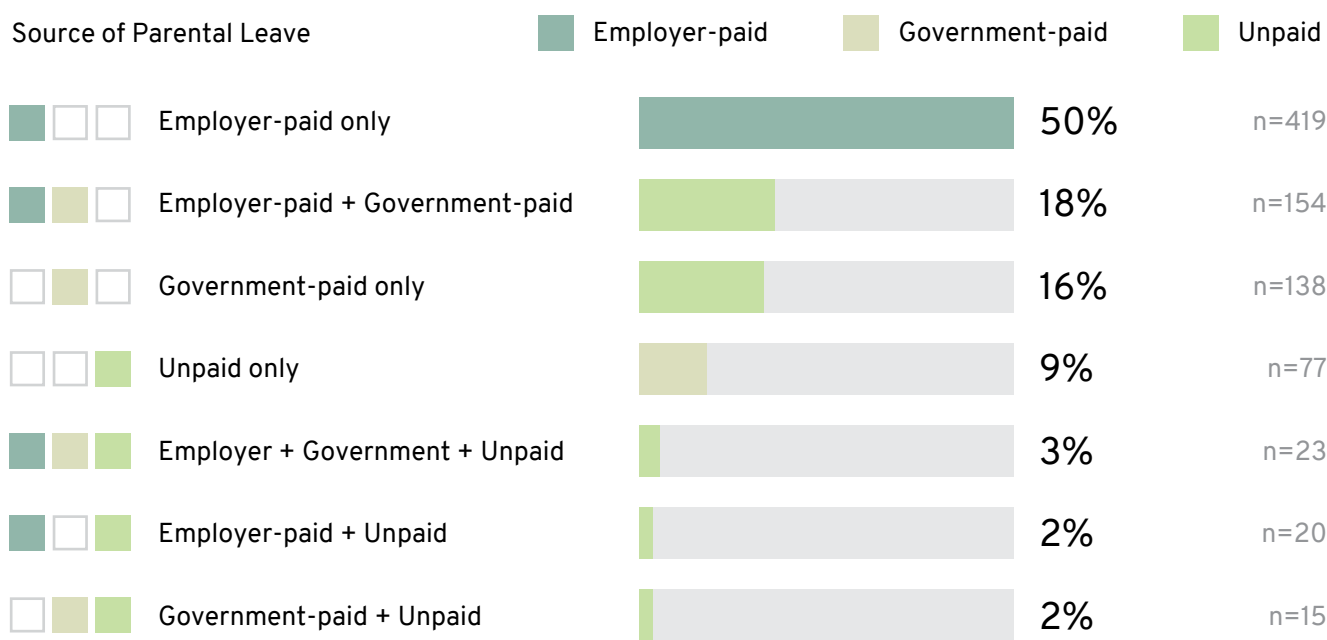
HOW DID FATHERS PIECE TOGETHER PARENTAL LEAVE?

We surveyed a nationally representative sample (by region) of 1,216 Australian men with at least one child aged 0-10 years. **Among the 1,193 men who responded to questions about parental leave, 71% took some form of parental leave, and 29% took no leave at all.** Findings pertaining to men’s use of parental leave are derived from the subsample of n=846 men who reported taking some form of leave after the birth of their first child. The different combinations of leave taken by fathers are presented in Figure 2 below.

Half of the men we surveyed (50%) only took employer-paid leave. This may be because men reserved their government entitlements for their partner; or if their first child was born after the introduction of ‘use it or lose it’ leave for fathers, perhaps the minimum wage payment was simply not enough to offset the cost of living as a new parent.

The second largest group (18%) combined employer-paid and government-paid leave, suggesting some fathers do stack entitlements where both are available. However, a further 16% accessed government-paid leave only. This group may warrant particular attention, as they are likely to be in workplaces without a formal employer-paid parental leave policy, making the government scheme their sole source of paid leave and their exposure to career-risk pressures (documented below) potentially different from those with employer support.

Figure 2. Sources of parental leave among Australian men.



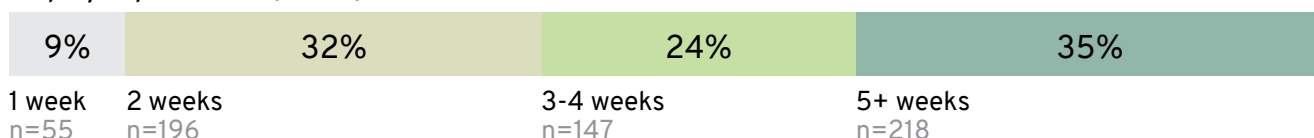
HOW MUCH PARENTAL LEAVE DID FATHERS TAKE?

Employer-paid leave showed the widest spread across the four duration bands: **41% of men who took employer-paid leave did so for two weeks or less**, while 35% took five weeks or more. Government-paid leave duration clusters heavily around two weeks, which is the standard entitlement available to fathers and partners since the introduction of Dad and Partner Pay. Over half (56%) of men who took government-paid leave used exactly two weeks, and a smaller share (15%) took five weeks or more, likely by drawing on the shared Parental Leave Pay pool (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Proportions of men taking different durations of parental leave^a.

Employer-paid Leave (n=616)



Government-paid Leave (n=277)



Unpaid Leave (n=135)



^a Each row's denominator is men who selected each leave type and reported a duration for it, since duration was only ever asked conditional on having taken that type. Percentages are calculated among fathers who reported taking each specific leave type. The employer-paid, government-paid, and unpaid rows therefore have different bases and are not designed to sum to 100% across a single respondent. Employer-paid and unpaid leave duration are reported as collected, with no exclusions. Government-paid leave duration (raw n=330) was restricted to n=277 after excluding: (i) six respondents reporting durations exceeding 24 weeks as data entry errors (the maximum government-funded parental leave pool available to any family during the survey period); and (ii) 47 respondents whose first (eldest) child appeared, based on reported child age, to have been born before the introduction of Dad and Partner Pay on 1 January 2013, for whom no government-paid parental leave scheme existed at the relevant birth.

HOW DID FATHERS EXPERIENCE PARENTAL LEAVE?

Men's access to sufficient parental leave may not simply reflect a personal perk, but instead a key mechanism for adjusting to the transition to parenthood, bonding with their child, and supporting their partner (see Figure 4). In this vein, the men we surveyed overwhelmingly identified with experiencing benefits of parental leave.

“I spent the first two weeks of their life with them, all day, all night. It was beautiful. Words can't describe it. It's super important, and I'm so grateful I got to do that.”

– 44-year-old father from NSW

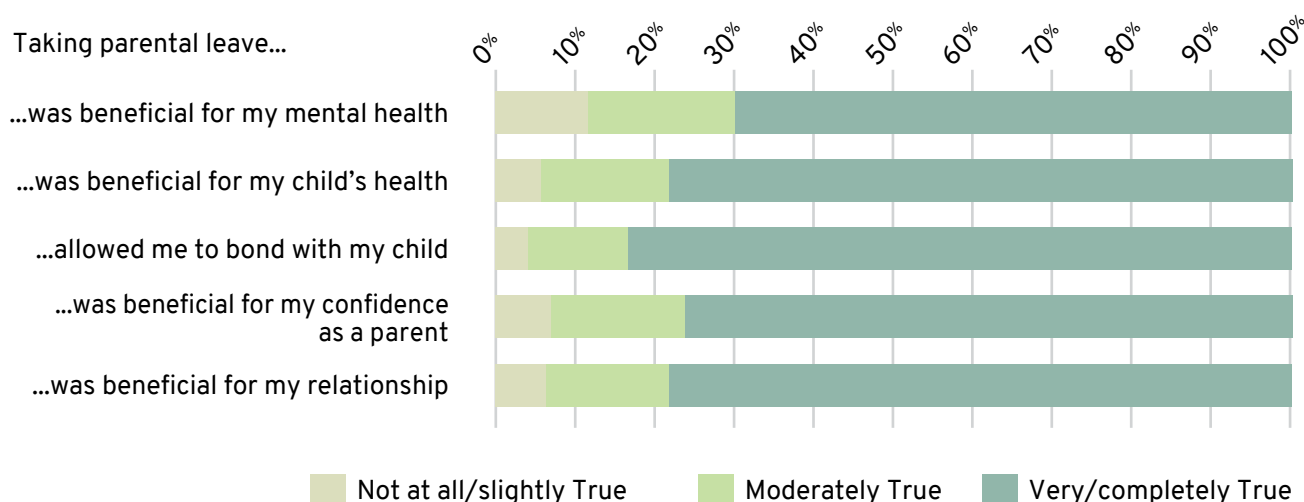
In particular, 70% of surveyed men said it was 'very/completely true' that taking parental leave was beneficial for their mental health.

Our previous findings among these same men highlighted that one in four rated their mental health in the first 12 months of parenthood as only 'poor' or 'fair'. Wider research also suggests one in ten men will experience depression in the perinatal period². More support for men to access parental leave (especially leave that doesn't necessitate a financial hit) could therefore represent a policy mechanism to ease some of the pressure and concomitant mental health strain of early parenthood.

“[Paid parental leave] is priceless... It gave us less stress. It gave us stability, which was one of the things I looked for at the beginning... I look after her, she looks after him. That's how it went. It's priceless. And I really hope it keeps expanding, evolving, because it does need to.”

– 31-year-old father from NSW

Figure 4. Men's identification with the benefits of taking parental leave.



We also found that 83% of surveyed men said it was ‘very/completely true’ that taking parental leave allowed them to bond with their child.

The months after birth are a formative window for the father-child relationship, and in fathers the neural and hormonal systems underpinning caregiving are known to adapt in response to hands-on care. That is, the brain networks that drive caregiving in dads actually strengthen with direct caregiving experience¹⁶.

“The first few weeks after bringing your child home is a tremendous period of adjustment, and there’s learning that goes into that time, and it’s not just for mum, like society seems to think... Having that two weeks allowed me to mentally get in the game of being a father.”

– 33-year-old father from QLD

Time at home is what makes fathers’ learning possible, and early involvement tends to endure: fathers who are more engaged in the first year remain more involved as their children grow^{11,12,17,18}, and children whose fathers took two or more weeks of leave report closer relationships with them years later¹⁹. Supporting wider access to and durations of parental leave may therefore be a key policy mechanism in support of the emotionally involved model of fatherhood that modern dads increasingly aspire to.

“If paternity leave [is] something that enables real participation, with flexible uptake without career penalties, that will then influence long-term mental health outcomes for both fathers and their infants.”

– Stakeholder from perinatal mental health sector

These themes were echoed strongly in our focus groups, where fathers described the value of leave less in financial terms than in what it made possible: bonding with their child, supporting their partner’s recovery, and adjusting to a new role. Many were explicit that the early weeks are not solely the mother’s domain, and that the presence of both parents matters for the whole family’s wellbeing. Others directly rejected the assumption that one parent at home is sufficient, framing shared presence in the earliest weeks as a foundation for both parents’ mental health.

“This concept of one parent taking leave at a time doesn’t work... When mum’s staying up at night, she needs some sleep, and she needs help during the day. Having both parents, at least for the first few months, is really important. You can’t just have a baby and have one person take care while the other person goes to work.”

– 42-year-old father from TAS

FATHERS WANTED MORE TIME

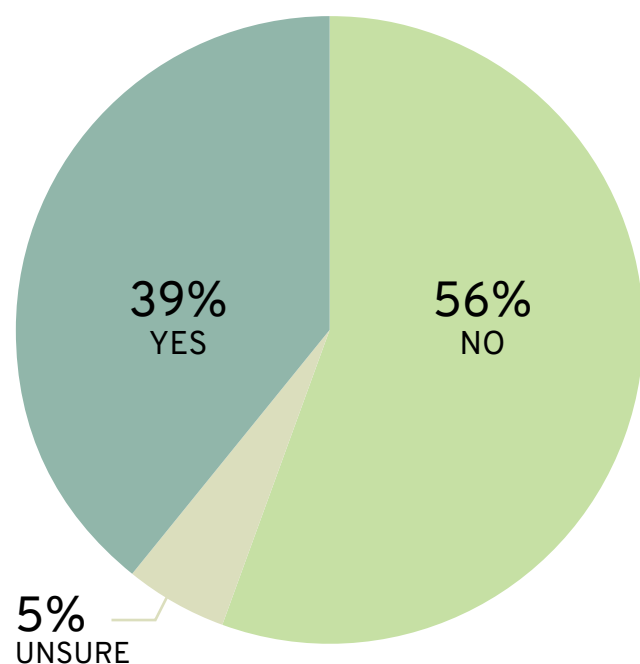
Men who took parental leave reported experiencing wide-ranging benefits across their mental health, relationships and parenting. Yet we also found that the majority of men who took employer-paid leave took four weeks or less (65%), and over half of those who took government leave took the full standard entitlement of two weeks. **When asked whether the amount of parental leave they took felt like enough, 56% of men said no.**

It may have been that just as fathers felt they were fully embracing their new role as a dad, financial pressures or simply running out of leave meant their time was cut short and they had to return to work.

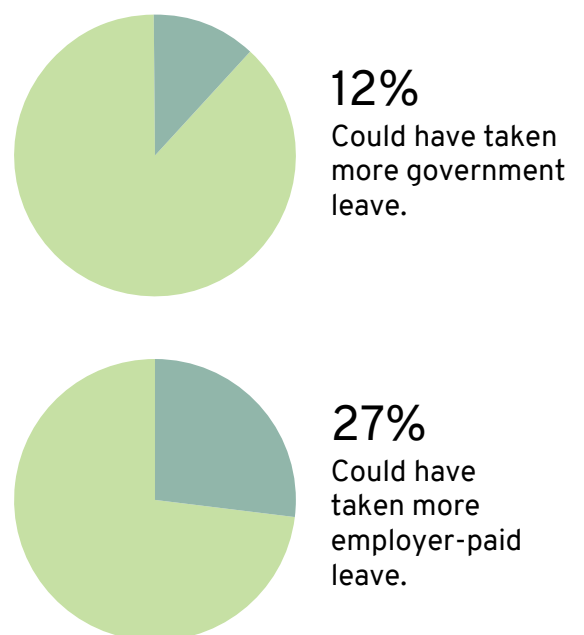
We also asked men whether they felt they had the option to take more leave to address this shortfall. Among men who said the amount of parental leave they took didn't feel like enough, 27% said they could have taken more employer-paid leave, and only 12% could have taken more government leave (see Figure 5). These findings suggest that men may be taking as much leave as they are able – yet a range of complex barriers exist that may be preventing wider (or longer) uptake. We unpack some of these barriers next.

Figure 5. Most Australian men did not feel their parental leave was enough.

Did the amount of parental leave you took feel like enough?



Could you have taken more if you wanted to?



A close-up photograph of a man with light brown, wavy hair, smiling warmly while holding a newborn baby. The man is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt. The baby, who has light hair and is looking slightly to the side, is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and dark blue pants. The background is dark and out of focus.

“A lot of people tend to think the paternal side only need one or two weeks; they don’t really have to do much. But it’s like, no: my main goal is to make sure that my partner and my child are in the best health and are taken care of, and that takes consistency. That takes time.”

– 31-year-old father from VIC

BARRIERS TO MEN'S PARENTAL LEAVE USE IN AUSTRALIA

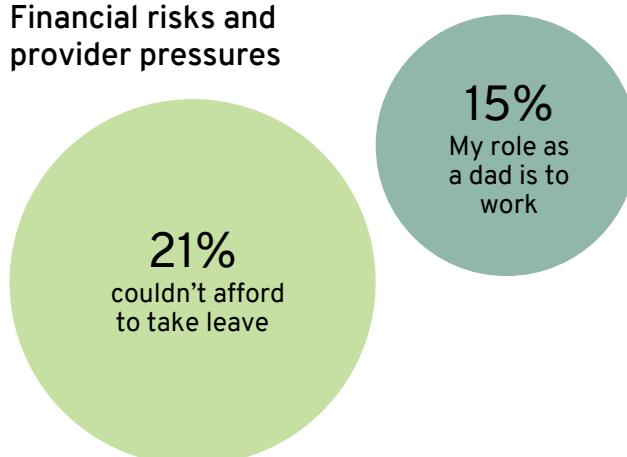
“I didn’t take any parental leave because I felt a strong responsibility to stay fully committed to my work at that time, and I worried stepping away might affect my team or projects. In hindsight, I realise that taking even a short leave could have helped me bond more deeply and balance family and work better.”

– 35-year-old father from NSW

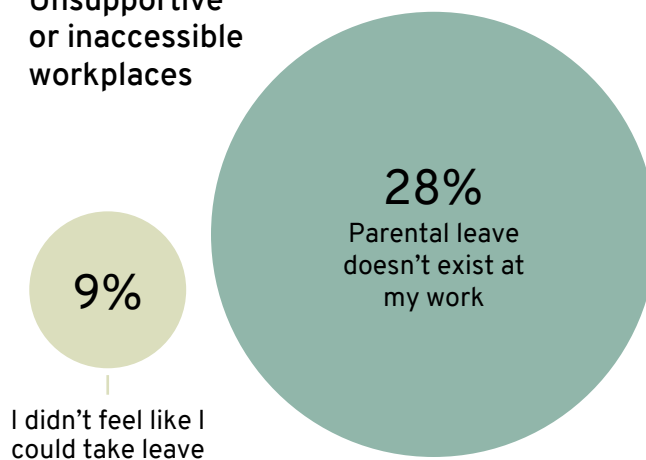
Among the men we surveyed who reported taking no parental leave at all (n=347), we asked them to describe in their own words the main reasons why. We coded these qualitative responses, and identified the following key themes, summarised in Figure 6. Importantly, only 18% of men suggested they didn’t take parental leave because of a lack of need – perhaps due to existing flexibility at work or familial support. This suggests that most men who did not take any parental leave did so not by choice, but because financial pressure or workplace restrictions precluded it.

Figure 6. Summary themes in qualitative responses among men who took no parental leave.*

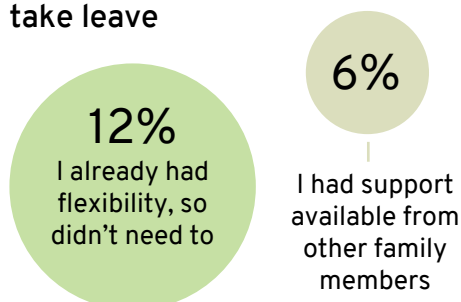
Financial risks and provider pressures



Unsupportive or inaccessible workplaces



No need to take leave



*9% of responses here were coded as 'not applicable/other' as they could not be grouped into a meaningful theme.

Financial risks and provider pressures

Overall, 36% of participants who didn't take any parental leave cited a financial barrier to doing so.

Most fathers were explicit in noting they simply “couldn't afford to” take time off; others noted that due to a lack of paid leave from their employer, they used up annual or personal leave, and “once it was gone, [they] had to go back to work to put food on the table”.

“I need to put in the work all the time. Taking a break is simply not an option. We're two parents and we both work. If one of us stops for any significant amount of time, we start struggling to pay the bills.”

— 32-year-old father from VIC

We also found that financial barriers to taking leave connected with masculine norms of provider-only fatherhood. In early parenthood, many fathers struggle to find their role. The men we surveyed also identified that taking leave might conflict with a sense that a father's role is exclusively to provide.

“I still had to provide for their needs. In my mind, being at work was being a good father.”

— 21-year-old father from SA

Australia's reserved weeks are paid at a flat rate tied to the National Minimum Wage, which equates to approximately 49% of full-time adult average weekly ordinary time earnings⁵. This represents a substantial pay cut for most households. Where a partner is also on lower income or leave at the same time, household income can fall on two fronts simultaneously, at precisely the moment when the cost of living, mortgage repayments and rental pressures are typically at their most acute.

“They'd still tax [leave payments]. So, your \$1,000 is actually about \$700 in your account... I don't know many people that can cover the bills with \$700. That wouldn't even pay the mortgage. I don't know about anyone else, but I'd be going backwards.”

— 31-year-old father from VIC

Participants in our focus groups described the financial prerequisite to parenthood more broadly. Before parental leave enters the picture, participants noted that having children is now a choice that must be financially engineered more than ever, with housing insecurity delaying families by years, dual incomes treated as a survival requirement, and childcare consuming much of a second wage. Against that backdrop, any reduction in income that may accompany parental leave is felt as a threat rather than an inconvenience.

“We saved up enough to have a kid, savings to get us through the first two years. We're 18 months in, we're completely out of savings. We've got nothing left. We're going paycheque to paycheque at the moment.”

— 28-year-old father from SA

Unsupportive or inaccessible workplaces

Access to meaningful parental leave often came down to a lottery based on employer. Participants in our focus groups spanned a wide range of employment sectors. We heard from one father entitled to six months parental leave at full pay at a large consultancy, and another who took four days at a 20-person firm. These gaps in access seem wide enough to reshape both career and family decisions. Some fathers chose careers such as teaching to guarantee themselves more parental leave. Others stayed in jobs they might otherwise have left, and for some the decision to have additional children hinged entirely on employer leave entitlements.

“My last job, I got a week. That was it. That was what they offered, and only if you’d been at the company more than five years. Otherwise, you get your government two weeks and bad luck.”

– 31-year-old father from VIC

In 37% of our survey responses from men who took no leave, we identified a barrier pertaining to a lack of employer support for parental leave, and concerns among men that taking more leave would have risked their career progression. Many fathers were explicit in noting that their workplace simply didn’t have a policy allowance for paid parental leave for fathers: “my work doesn’t have parental leave for fathers”; “males don’t get it”; “it was not in the company policy”. One father reasoned that the lack of employer-paid parental leave in many workplaces may stem from cultural norms prohibiting men’s engagement with care, with the assumption being that many men would treat parental leave like a holiday.’

“Because society and workplaces feel there is no need for a man to take such leave, simply because they think the man won’t do much during that time.”

– 36-year-old father from VIC

Workplace barriers to taking leave also included concerns about jeopardising career progression. Over half of the men who took parental leave (52%) agreed that taking more leave would have put their career progression at risk. Many fathers reported feeling they couldn’t or shouldn’t ask to take parental leave, because they may risk the perception that they lack commitment to their work. One father suggested “dads are expected to work 24/7”, while another was “made to believe [he] wasn’t able to take any time off work”. Others simply noted insurmountable demands at work that categorically precluded any time off: “It was in the middle of a crucial project at work and I had to be there.”

“This is where that intersect between systemic and policy changes heads into the need for societal change as well. So even with policies in place, with the existing stigma around men taking time off work, having extended parental leave and whatever, a lot of men, even if it’s offered to them, don’t take it.”

– Stakeholder from perinatal mental health sector

Participants in our focus groups also described quiet yet concrete stigmatisation of men using parental leave in workplaces. Fathers in many cases described workplace cultures that quietly penalised leave-taking, from the sense of a mark against one's name to the anxiety of disclosing a pregnancy during probation.

“It’s almost as if you feel like you get a brown mark against your name when you take a lot of leave... As a male, and the provider, the more you’re away from work, you feel like you need to provide. It’s a really weird, fine balance, because you want to be there to support, but you have to also be there for your work.”

— 38-year-old father from VIC

37%

cited lack of employer support or concerns about career progression

52%

agreed that taking more leave would have put their career progression at risk.



Structural exclusion: The fathers our system doesn't cater to

Many men we surveyed also identified that the nature of their work or industry created unique barriers to taking parental leave. For example, many participants reported that as small business owners, self-employed workers, or fly-in fly-out employees, taking parental leave simply didn't feel possible.

Our focus group participants expanded on these structural barriers to leave-taking. Two of the four groups were made up of casual, contract and self-employed men, including small business owners, sole traders and skilled tradespeople. Many of these fathers described the current parental leave scheme as something they simply cannot use.

“The fact that you can't work at the same time, if you're self-employed, and as a farmer, I can't just shut the farm down for four weeks. I have to keep feeding the cows. I have to keep working. So that doesn't seem fair.”

— 36-year-old father from VIC

The clearest barrier was the no-work rule. Parental Leave Pay requires that a claimant perform no more than an hour of work on a day they claim. In practice, this is a condition that assumes a standard employer and a role that can be handed over. For men who are self-employed or who carry a business, that assumption does not hold. For these men, the sense was not that they were choosing to forgo leave, but that they were being penalised for the unavoidable realities of their work.

“If I was working for an employer, I'd probably be getting 100 per cent of my pay for a certain period of time, so why should it be any different just because I'm self-employed and I'm actually doing the right thing as well? I don't think I should be getting punished by the government.”

— 30-year-old father from VIC

Many of these barriers were compounded for men working in small businesses. Owners of small firms described operations that could not absorb the absence of either an employee or the owner, and running costs that continued irrespective of whether any work was being done. Similar barriers applied to men working in trades and construction, where fixed site hours and project commitments simply left no room for fathers to step away. For many fathers, the application process itself represented a barrier to uptake, where some experienced unexplained claim rejections while lacking the time or capacity to follow up with the government. Proposed fixes here were to administer parental leave payments through employers and payroll, or through the tax system, in the way other forms of leave are handled.

“I was self-employed... When I stop working, it doesn’t mean the bills stop coming in for the business too. There’s operating costs for the business... The money that I got from the government didn’t really cut the mustard. We were chipping into savings, which luckily we had because we planned the baby, but it’s not always that fortunate for other people.”

— 33-year-old father from TAS

Taken together, these accounts describe a group of fathers who feel structurally prohibited from accessing parental leave, and who are often the same men with the least access to employer-paid leave to fall back on. For a number of these fathers, the combined effect of the flat rate, the conditions and the application process was that they abandoned the scheme entirely.

“They’re not considering self-employment and small businesses. There’s no consideration of those people.”

— 43-year-old father from VIC





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Awareness as a barrier

A further barrier to men's use of parental leave pertains to awareness: many fathers simply do not know what they are entitled to. Across the focus groups, fathers were aware that a government scheme exists, but many lacked detailed knowledge of its content. Few participants were aware of the reserved weeks before they were explained, and several still perceived now-dated entitlements as current. A consistent gendered pattern emerged, in which mothers tended to hold the household's knowledge of the scheme and fathers engaged only late, if at all, typically once a pregnancy was confirmed.

“Probably a lot of mothers do know a lot about parental leave schemes, because they feel more affected by it... We do less research about it until we see the two little marks and we go, ‘Oh, what does my policy say? I better go and check that.’”

– 38-year-old father from QLD

The absence of a clear juncture for awareness-raising among fathers (or fathers-to-be) seemed to compound the problem. Participants noted that information was rarely pushed to them through the health system, and in one account an employer's own human resources team misread the rules and wrongly denied fathers' claims. Awareness, in other words, is not only thin but arrives late, leaving fathers to discover their options only once the pressures of a new baby are already upon them.

“It's not like when we went and saw the midwives that they let us know, it's something we had to chase up. So while the help's there, a lot of people overlook it and probably don't even claim leave that they're eligible for... A bit more awareness would be good, awareness from the government. Everyone should be able to access the support that they deserve.”

– 33-year-old father from TAS

The Path Forward: Policy Recommendations

Australia has spent three years steadily improving its Paid Parental Leave scheme. The staged expansion concluded on 1 July 2026, when the scheme reached 26 weeks with four weeks for the second parent on a “use it or lose it” basis. This is a real achievement worth celebrating, while also considering what comes next.

The most useful step the Government can take in future reforms to parental leave is to examine the scheme through a lens no previous review has applied. Every major review to date, including the research that shaped the staged expansion of our scheme, has approached paternity and partner leave primarily through the lens of women’s economic participation and maternal health. This is critical – but we must also consider parental leave through the lens of fatherhood. This is not a zero-sum trade-off against mothers. The evidence suggests greater involvement by fathers in the early weeks is associated with maternal recovery, reduced postnatal depression and improved outcomes for children^{6,14,15}. A lens of fatherhood completes the picture rather than competing with it – allowing families greater flexibility to devise the balance of leave that works best for them in the critical early months of parenthood.

“Leave that exists on paper and leave a family can actually afford to take are two different things. Dedicated, usable leave for fathers isn’t a concession to mothers – it’s what gives every family a genuine choice in the first year. It protects maternal recovery, builds the early bond between fathers and their babies, and makes it possible for parents to share the load rather than one carrying it alone. Caregiving was never meant to rest on one set of shoulders; dedicated leave for fathers is where shared care begins.”

– Georgie Dent, CEO at The Parenthood

Our focus group participants also highlighted a clear design brief for a more accessible scheme. Fathers across all four groups converged on the same priorities: pay closer to real income; the freedom to shape how leave is taken; dedicated, additional time for fathers; both parents at home together in the earliest weeks; eligibility and a no-work rule that fit the realities of self-employment and small business; the ability to combine government and employer leave; and delivery through employers or the tax system rather than a separate claims process. The fathers we spoke to were adamant that expanding paid parental leave is not a budgetary burden to be minimised, but rather a critical investment in better child development, better mental health in both parents, and more stable families.

A close-up photograph of a man with a beard and a baby. The man is on the left, looking towards the baby on the right. They are in a close embrace, with the baby's hand near the man's face. The scene is lit with strong, warm light from the right, creating prominent, parallel striped shadows across the man's face, the baby's face, and the baby's arm. The man is wearing a dark blue shirt, and the baby is wearing a brown and white striped shirt.

“It’s about giving both parents the opportunity to bond with the child, support each other, and adjust to parenthood... Parental leave should become more flexible, much better paid, and more strongly supported by employers, so that dads feel comfortable taking the leave they’re entitled to without worrying about finances or career progression.”

– 40-year-old father from VIC

Our Call to Action

Our findings highlight the desire among Australian dads to spend more time at home with their newest family member when it matters most. Movember wants to work with the Australian Government to make that happen.

Movember wants to support the Australian Government and the Australian Parliament to establish a cross-departmental working group, spanning Social Services, Health, Employment and Workplace relations, Finance, Treasury and others, to better understand the barriers fathers face in taking parental leave. Together, across government and industry, we can help Aussie dads be there for their young families.

Alongside and in support of the cross-departmental working group, Movember will work directly with Members of Parliament to establish a non-aligned, cross-party Dads Caucus. A first for the Australian Parliament, the Caucus will allow Members to come together and share their own lived experiences of fatherhood, as well as the lived experiences of their fathers, husbands, partners and sons. In partnership with the working group, the Dads Caucus will also help bring the working group's findings to life. Members will share the stories of dads from across their own electorates, including both their challenges and their successes. This ensures the lived experience of fathers across the country helps to colour and inform the working group's recommendations.

Movember also wants to work with the Government to lead a review of the next phase of Paid Parental Leave. This would be the first review to assess the scheme from the perspective of fathers and men's health. In doing so, we would look to:

MAKE IT REACH THE FATHERS WITH LEAST ACCESS

- Redesign eligibility, the work test and the no-work rule around the realities of self-employment, contracting, casual, gig and small business work. Engage meaningfully with fathers in these lowest-uptake sectors, including tradespeople, sole traders and small business owners, so a reformed scheme no longer excludes the men who currently have the least access.
- Allow government-funded leave to be combined with employer-paid leave, so families in a position to stack the two can approach closer to full income during the early weeks.
- Reduce the administrative burden by delivering payment through employers and payroll, or through the ATO and the tax system. Allow claims to be lodged before the birth, so families are not left navigating a separate and complex claims process at the most demanding moment of a child's arrival.

MAKE IT USABLE FOR FAMILIES

- Build genuine flexibility into the scheme so families can shape how leave is used. This includes front-loading it, compressing the entitlement into fewer weeks at a higher rate, or taking it part-time across a longer window of up to two years. Make this flexibility a visible feature of the scheme, not fine print.
- Enable both parents to be at home together in the earliest weeks, rather than a strictly one-at-a-time sequence. Fathers' presence supports maternal recovery and protects the mental health of both parents.

SUPPORT THE SCHEME TO SUCCEED

- Examine workplace culture and career-risk barriers. This includes employer practices, awareness, and the uneven distribution of top-ups that leave fathers in smaller firms and lower-paying sectors most exposed to the flat rate. It also includes the thin and late awareness fathers describe of both the scheme and their existing unpaid-leave entitlement.
- Fund dedicated research to assess the health, mental health and father-child bonding impacts of paternity and partner leave. This research should also measure the cost to men, families and the health system when fathers are not supported to take it.
- Report against existing commitments, including the National Men's Health Strategy 2020-2030 and the Government's gender equality objectives, within a defined timeframe.
- Strengthen monitoring and public reporting of second-parent uptake, disaggregated by parent, sector, income and firm size, so the reserved-quota policy can be held to account.

MAKE LEAVE AFFORDABLE AND PROTECTED

- Develop a roadmap to move the payment from the flat national minimum wage towards wage replacement. The test should be whether the reserved weeks are affordable enough for fathers to actually use, rather than forfeit.
- Set a phased pathway to extend and protect the non-transferable reserved quota for the second parent beyond four weeks. The evidence shows that dedicated, non-transferable leave drives the largest gains in fathers' uptake^{13,20}.



Conclusion

Our findings suggest that Australian men want to be present in the earliest weeks of their children's lives. The fathers who took parental leave overwhelmingly described it as good for their mental health and for bonding with their child. For most of them, it was also too short.

Fathers are not turning leave down. Most of those who went without it did so because they could not afford it, could not access it through their work, or feared what taking it would cost their career. The first year is a rare and time-limited window in which men are present and motivated to be involved in parenting. Our policy-makers have a clear opportunity to design a parental leave system that fathers across every industry, income and contract type can actually benefit from. Because time with a new child should not be a privilege reserved for those who can afford it. Movember wants to work with Government to make that a reality.



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