

# Does flexible work 'work' for Aussie parents?

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An Australian study examining the relationship between flexibility and parent health has revealed formal family-friendly workplace provisions alone are not meeting the demands of working mothers and fathers.

The La Trobe University survey of more than 4,000 parents from

different occupations found 86 per cent relied on additional informal 'catch-up' strategies to manage work-family responsibilities on a daily-to-weekly basis.

Lead researcher Dr. Stacey Hokke—from La Trobe's Judith Lumley Centre—said the study offers an Australian-first analysis into informal work practices amongst parents.

"We found these ad hoc self-directed strategies, such as performing family-related tasks at work or leaving early and catching up on work after hours, were common and often utilised alongside formal employer-provided flexible work arrangements," Dr. Hokke said.

"This may be a sign that parents feel comfortable enough in their workplace to accommodate some quick family-related jobs to keep the family running during their workday, or it may indicate that despite best intentions, flexible work arrangements aren't being provided enough, or aren't meeting the actual needs of working parents."

Of the 12 informal strategies studied, the researchers found:

- 62 per cent of parents received or sent family-related phone calls or emails at work
- 59 per cent of parents worked through breaks to leave work on time
- 47 per cent of parents used their break time to attend to [family matters](#) or errands
- 42 per cent of parents performed household-related tasks while at work

While both mothers and fathers used informal strategies, there were some differing patterns by gender.

"We know that mothers often work part-time and fathers are more likely to work long hours. Our research suggests that mothers accommodate family by compressing their workday, missing breaks and working after hours to fit everything in; while fathers have to accommodate family within long workdays by performing family-related tasks at work," Dr. Hokke said.

The researchers also looked at the relationship between work arrangements and parents' mental health. They found formal flexible work arrangements were associated with less occupational fatigue and burnout for both genders, and of particular benefit to fathers.

By comparison, informal 'ad-hoc' strategies were associated with worse mental health outcomes for parents including higher rates of occupational fatigue, psychological distress and burnout, even when combined with some formal workplace flexibility.

"This tells us two things: either parents need access to more formal flexible work arrangements or they're not utilising the arrangements they're entitled to," Dr. Hokke said.

"Our study found one in four parents had not accessed formal flexible work arrangements in the past 12 months. Just under half (44 per cent) had used only 1-2 types of flexible work to manage work and family demands; the remaining third (31 per cent) had used 3 or more arrangements. Mothers accessed more of these formal arrangements than fathers."

The researchers recommend parents review their employee agreements and Fair Work Australia guidelines to gain a better understanding of their entitlements.

"While family-friendly workplaces are becoming more commonplace in

Australia, in the past decade, we haven't seen a significant rise in requests for flexible work or awareness of flexible work rights," Dr. Hokke said.

"Working parents make up around two-fifths of the Australian workforce. They are integral to our working culture.

"Workplaces have a vital role in providing transparent information to [parents](#) about their entitlements, but also ensuring flexibility is a real option for employees. We must encourage employers to maintain open conversations with their employees and celebrate those who value staff wellbeing and encourage work-life balance."

Dr. Hokke said ensuring equitable access to family-friendly workplace arrangements for [fathers](#), along with mothers, will support gender equity by improving women's access to paid work and men's access to caring for their children.

**More information:** Stacey Hokke et al, Does flexible work 'work' in Australia? A survey of employed mothers' and fathers' work, family and health, *Community, Work & Family* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/13668803.2019.1704397](#)

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