

FACT SHEET 3

Striking the balance in the family

- Choices about reconciling paid work and family/carer responsibilities take place within the family.
- Encouraging men to be involved in sharing care right from the beginning of children's lives is an important part of supporting shared care and moving towards equality.
- Care needs to be considered as a community responsibility, rather than simply that of individual households.

Changing family structures

- Australian families are more diverse, complex and changeable than ever before.
- Men who are heavily involved in caring and other unpaid responsibilities are well placed to lead social change.
- Incorporating contemporary social attitudes towards sharing paid work and care within a framework that supports 'shared work – valued care' is a key part of supporting families to make decisions that best meet their needs and preferences.

Translating values into reality

- While Australians believe that both domestic and caring work should be equally shared by men and women, the reality is an unequal division of labour.
- There is little incentive for greater numbers of men to take up unpaid family work while it remains undervalued.
- Research indicates that Australian men and women believe that housework and parenting should be shared, not divided by gender.
- Incorporating men's perspectives and supporting men to develop capabilities in the area of unpaid work, particularly in terms of caring for children, is an important part of developing an integrated approach to paid work and care.
- While there is no one-size-fits-all solution for families, introducing the discussion and addressing any issues early in relationship formation and at critical transition points, such as the birth of children, is an important step for making sure assumptions and expectations are well aligned.

Sharing care

- Those families that have managed to realise their goal of sharing both paid work and unpaid care have been very positive about their experience.
- Men want to take on a greater role in caring for their children but find it difficult to obtain flexible paid work.

- While women's responsibility for the bulk of caring tasks represents a cost to women in terms of time, energy and missed opportunities outside the home, for men it represents a loss of opportunities to enjoy family time and to bond with their children.
- The cumulative effect of greater numbers of men engaging in unpaid work is likely to change traditional stereotypes about care work over time.

Distributing household tasks fairly

- The way that men and women divide up household tasks can have a long term impact on their roles as parents and paid workers.
- Time use statistics show that women tend to do more of the daily household tasks that cannot be put off such as food preparation and clean up, while men tend to do more of the less frequent tasks, such as lawn mowing.
- As long as women retain ultimate responsibility for the house and care arrangements, and while they perform the daily and necessary household tasks, such as cooking and cleaning, their capacity to undertake paid work or to have a healthy paid work and family/care balance with sufficient rest and leisure will be compromised.
- A true partnership approach to parenting and other care responsibilities must aim for maximising choice and opportunity for both women and men, whether this is the choice to care, the choice to participate in paid work or combinations of both.

Caring for people beyond the home

- Demographic changes such as birth rates below replacement rates will mean that many more people will not have family members living with them as they age.
- Providing support and care for people outside of one's home is likely to become a larger part of what we consider to be family and carer responsibilities.
- Unlike parenting responsibilities, elder care responsibilities can be much more sporadic and unpredictable, and may fall to one family member regardless of choice or preference.
- Caring for family members with an illness or disability will also vary according to the type of illness or disability.

Education and cultural change

- Integrating 'household' skill development into the high-school curriculum may also help to change gender inequality in the home. Skills such as basic cooking, cleaning, washing and home maintenance tasks could facilitate a greater sharing of unpaid work.
- Targeting men as carers through specific educational and support programs is crucial as a way of shifting cultural barriers to men's involvement with family/carer responsibilities.
- Increasing numbers of men sharing care and providing full residential care of their children after separation means that mainstream parenting services must respond more to men's needs as primary carers.
- As elder care responsibilities increase at the same time as women and men are increasing the length of their working lives, there will be a pressing need to negotiate arrangements for sharing other forms of care between men and women.