

FATHERS' WORK AND FAMILY CONFLICTS AND THE OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

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OVERVIEW

Fathers' experiences of competing demands in parenting and work domains suggest that increasing work-family conflicts are an issue for many families. Using data from the *Growing Up in Australia* longitudinal study, we explored this conflict and any flow-on effects for children's mental health. We find that parenting and relationship resources deteriorate when fathers' work-family conflict increases or is sustained; this in turn affects children's socio-emotional development and wellbeing.

KEY MESSAGES

- When fathers *moved into high work-family conflict* their mental health, couple relationship quality and parenting capabilities deteriorated. These adversities flowed on to negatively affect their children's mental health.
- When fathers were able to *move out of work-family conflict* mental health improved for themselves and their children.
- Fathers' work-family conflict is an important (and to date largely unrecognised) social determinant of children's mental health, pointing at the need for policies and procedures that focus on reducing fathers' experiences of work-family conflict.

INTRODUCTION

In much of the general discourse exploring *who* is most conflicted when it comes to juggling employment and family demands, and what the implications are, it is implicit that work-family conflict is more pertinent for mothers than it is for fathers (Shockley, Shen, DeNunzio, Arvan, & Knudsen, 2017). This assumption has in part been based on statistics showing drastic changes in how time is distributed for women when they become mothers (i.e. a reduction in work hours and escalation in parenting/household work), compared to the minimal changes that men experience when they

become fathers (see also Figure 1, J. Baxter. *Fathers and Work: A Statistical Overview*, AIFS Fathers at Work symposium, AIFS 2018 Conference; Baxter, Hewitt, & Haynes, 2008). However, a recent meta-analysis of more than 250,000 workers concluded that despite statistics demonstrating an enduring gender division in hours spent working and caring, there are more similarities in mothers' and fathers' experiences of work-family conflict than there are differences (Shockley et al., 2017).

We now know from several studies that work-family conflict is not just a problem for mothers, it is also a problem for fathers (Cooklin et al., 2016). This may be in part due to increased expectations that fathers play a significant role in parenting and child care regardless of the hours they spend in paid work. We also know that fathers' experiences of work-family conflict impact negatively on their mental health – just as these experiences do for mothers (Cooklin et al., 2016).

In tandem with this growing body of evidence describing fathers' experiences of work-family conflict is research showing that fathers' mental health and parenting capability affects their children's socio-emotional development and wellbeing independently of the mothers' contributions (Elam, Chassin, Eisenberg, & Spinrad, 2017; Ramchandani, Stein, Evans, O'Connor, & ALSPAC study team, 2005). Together, these two streams of research have raised the question of 'how are fathers' experiences of work-family conflict impacting on their children's mental health?' The importance of this question has been reflected in recent Australian research reporting that children care about and are affected by their fathers' jobs, with one third saying their fathers work too much (Strazdins, Baxter, & Li, 2017). In the same study, children reported more negative views about their father's job when he worked weekends, was time pressured, had little flexibility in start and finish times and worked long hours.

Highly relevant to questions around fathers' work-family conflict and children's mental health outcomes is our recent program of research (Cooklin et al., 2016; Dinh et al., 2017). In particular, we have explored the questions:

1. Are changes in fathers' work-family conflict reflected in their children's mental health?
2. If so, to what extent does this association occur due to interim changes in the family environment (i.e. changes in fathers' mental health, the quality of their couple relationship, and their parenting capabilities).

METHOD

In our research (Dinh et al., 2017), these questions have been explored using data collected from 2,496 fathers and their children over 10 years in *Growing up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)*. At the start of the LSAC study the children in the K cohort were aged 4-5. They are followed-up every two years and had reached age 12-13 years when we accessed the data. At each time point, fathers provided information on their level of work-family conflict (Marshall & Barnett, 1993), their own psychological distress (Kessler, 2002), the quality of their marriage/couple relationship (a single item), the level of irritability in interactions with their children (Zubrick, Lucas, Westrupp, & Nicholson, 2014), as well as their children's mental health (Goodman et al., 2011). A range of other important factors were included in our statistical modelling to control for their potential influence (i.e. father's age, work hours, physical health, number and age of children, household income and socio-economic status).

RESULTS

The key findings of our research study were that:

- Compared to fathers who had consistently low work-family conflict, when fathers *moved into high work-family conflict* their mental health, couple relationship quality and parenting capabilities deteriorated. These adversities flowed on to negatively affect their children's mental health.
- Similarly, fathers who reported *persistent high work-family conflict* had the worst outcomes for their mental health, couple relationship quality, parenting capabilities and their children's mental health.
- Importantly, when fathers were able to *escape (or move out of) work-family conflict* they recovered better mental health for themselves and their children.

IMPLICATIONS

The dynamic between Australian mothers' and fathers' roles in employment and family care is evolving as expectations change around gender equality in employment contexts as well as opportunities to care for and nurture children. As we observe these changes over time, it is critically important to consider how the family environment and children's wellbeing is affected.

Our research shows that children's family environment and mental health are affected by their fathers' struggles to balance demands at work and at home. However, we also importantly show that work-family conflict is transient in some cases and when it can be escaped (or modified), there are improvements for the whole family. We conclude that fathers' work-family conflict is an important (and to date largely unrecognised) social determinant of children's mental health. We call for further investigation into policies and procedures that focus on reducing fathers' (and mothers') experiences of work-family conflict as the research evidence suggests this will flow on to provide wellbeing benefits to

the whole family.

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