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How mothers and fathers share child care in Australia

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Australian Institute of Family Studies

Research paper | June 2024



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Cover image: © gettyimages/vitapix

ISBN (online): 978-1-76016-327-3
ISBN (PDF): 978-1-76016-328-0

Edited by Katharine Day
Typeset by Rachel Evans

2404_sharing childcare report post review

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Acknowledgements

The Families in Australia Surveys drew on responses from people from across Australia during 2020 and 2021. AIFS appreciates the time the respondents took to provide such useful information about their lives, describing their experiences of individual and family life during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Overview

This report looks at how couples share looking after children, planning and coordinating children's activities, and helping children with remote learning. Data were collected in the AIFS Families in Australia Surveys, online surveys conducted at 4 time points in 2020 and 2021. While collected to provide insights on families' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, the research is relevant over a broader time period. Due to the nature of the data collection, these data are not representative of the Australian population. Around 85% of respondents reflected in the analysis for this report were female with a male partner.

The focus of analysis is on the gendered nature of child care. The mixed method research draws on respondents' assessments of who, of partnered mothers and fathers, does all or more of the child care, analysing these data by a range of family characteristics. It also draws on comments collected in the survey from all partnered parents to help explain these patterns.

The findings highlight the gendered nature of child care activities. Mothers do more of the child care in the home than fathers, although just over 1 in 3 couple families share the child care equally. It is rare for fathers alone to be the ones to always or usually look after the children (around 1 in 20 fathers). Even when both work full time hours, child care activities are very gendered, although fathers' share increases when mothers work full time.

The gendered nature of child care was even greater for the 'the mental load' of parenting, captured in this study with reports on planning and coordinating children's activities. More than three-quarters of respondents reported the mental load was always or usually done by the mother.

Mothers doing more child care activities in opposite-sex couple families was often linked to their being home more, whether as stay-at-home parents or working part-time hours. This came through in the survey data analysis and parents' comments. The parent at home tends to take on, or be expected to take on, more of the child care (and housework). This may be a negotiated sharing of roles. In some families, working from home also signals availability to do more of the child care and housework. This was especially noted as more of an issue for mothers than for fathers working from home.

Various factors mattered in explaining how caring is shared within couples, including ongoing effects of beliefs that caring for children is more a role for mothers than for fathers. More traditional gender role attitudes are apparent in some couple families, such that mothers have difficulties involving fathers in what is seen to be the mother's role. Long work hours, inflexible jobs and lack of access to family-related leave are also factors commonly said to affect fathers' capacity to help with the child care.

During COVID-related working from home and remote schooling there were both challenges and opportunities. While mothers more often made work adjustments to manage remote schooling than did fathers, there was more father involvement in the tasks of helping children with remote schooling compared to the other kinds of child care.

In summary, decisions about parents' sharing child care are made within the family, and mothers and fathers will have their own preferences for how they want to share the various child care roles. In the first instance, parents and parents-to-be may find that talking as a couple about how they would like to share the caring roles alongside work responsibilities would be a useful approach. Workplace characteristics, access to leave and, more broadly, the social norms and expectations of parental roles also contribute to parents' opportunities to facilitate more sharing of child care. Continuing the discussions about better ways of supporting working parents is important in an era of increased maternal employment, as more and more families will be seeking ways to better manage their work and care responsibilities.

1. Introduction

1.1 Report aims and objectives

This report explores the sharing of child care within couple families, providing insights from the AIFS Families in Australia Surveys, conducted during 2020 and 2021. It primarily focuses on a set of questions about who usually looks after the children, who usually plans and coordinates child-related activities (the ‘mental load’) and, within the context of the COVID-19 restrictions, who helped children with their remote learning. Along with rich qualitative data that provides further insights on the sharing of child care in these families, this report aims to answer the following research questions:

- How diverse are the ways parents share child care? In what families is there evidence of more equitable division of this parenting task?
- Is the mental load of parenting distributed across both parents, or does planning child-related activities follow the same gendered pattern as that of looking after children?
- Did sharing of child care change during COVID-19?
- How did parents manage children’s remote learning along with their own work activities?
- What reasons do parents give for having different patterns of sharing of child care?

While this report draws on data collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, the data indicate that parents’ responses reflect their ‘usual’ or ongoing experiences and so are relevant in the broader context of understanding gendered patterns of child care in Australian families. We focus here on the sharing of child care, a task that must be managed in some way by couple parents, particularly while children are young. As a ‘task’, it contains activities that have much positive meaning to parents – who likely enjoy spending time with their children – although providing care to children still has an element of work inasmuch as there are activities that must be done and must be fit around other paid and unpaid work.

This research focuses on couple families, so does not explore how caring of children is shared among separated parents. Much of the statistical analysis focuses on the gendered patterns of care, so is limited to families with a co-resident mother and father. Analysis of the qualitative data included all couple families with children.

There was a marked bias in the Families in Australia Survey data, with most respondents being female. While fewer in number, fathers’ responses were generally not contradictory to mothers’ and, at times, strongly affirmed mothers’ responses (although couple-level data were not collected, so partners’ responses could not be compared). More information about the Families in Australia Surveys is provided in section 2.

The rest of section 1 provides a background to the material covered in this report. The data and methods are described in section 2, and the results in the sections that follow. The report concludes with a summary and implications in section 7, with technical details about the sample and the analysis provided in the [Appendix](#).

1.2 Paid work as context

Parenthood usually brings about shifts in how couples arrange their paid work. It is often the father who remains in full-time work while the mother reduces work hours, although there is considerable diversity of paid work arrangements across families. Differences according to the ages of children are especially apparent, with the amount of mothers’ time allocated to paid work tending to increase with the age of the youngest child. Fathers’ employment patterns do not tend to vary by the child’s age. Detailed analysis of these patterns, and trends over recent decades, is provided in Baxter (2023).

Gendered employment patterns have implications for the sharing of child care in the home. Indeed, in some families the employment patterns may have been established to enable a gendered distribution of unpaid care in the home. The parents’ employment patterns, as reported in the Families in Australia Surveys, provide important contextual information for analysing parents’ shared child care patterns in this report.

1.3 Sharing child care and gender roles

In Australia, as in many other countries, there are still very gendered time-use patterns in the division of household work and caring. In the case of parents and child care, these tasks fall more often to mothers (Baxter,

2015a; Baxter, Campbell, & Lee, 2023; Craig & Mullan, 2011; Craig et al., 2010). While the research shows that fathers have spent more time on child care in recent years compared to decades past, the arrangements remain far from equal. In fact, Baxter, Campbell, and Lee (2023) found that the impact of parenthood on fathers' time in unpaid care work has remained unchanged over a period of 20 years, remaining substantially below that of mothers' care time.

A view that child care and parenting tasks are more women's roles, rather than men's, is still engrained in society, despite there having been considerable increases in mothers' employment. As such, many couples entering parenthood adopt 'traditional' roles early on, with mothers taking a longer period of leave than fathers, and then being more likely than fathers to take up part-time work to better manage children's care.

Although there is widespread support for mothers being employed when children are young, and for household roles to be shared, the actual division of paid and unpaid work remains unequal in Australia, as in many other countries (Baxter, 2015b; van Egmond et al., 2010). Gendered attitudes to parents' roles play out in the way child care is shared. These attitudes can also influence what happens in the workplace, with access to family-friendly work practices not accessible to all fathers due to different entitlements or the attitudes of colleagues and managers.

1.4 The mental load

Parenting goes beyond the direct tasks of looking after children, and increasingly there is awareness of the mental load associated with parenting. This typically relates to the additional organisational and planning work associated with family and household needs, including making sure key appointments and activities are organised and coordinated. Dean and colleagues (2022) conceptualised the mental load as a different component of child care, that includes these organisational activities as well as the emotional labour associated with them.

That the mental load associated with child care (or other household tasks) is conceptually and experientially different was also apparent in the Families in Australia Survey. In open-text comments in 2020, respondents indicated they wanted to be asked about the mental load separately (see subsection 3.2), and so questions were developed for the surveys conducted in 2021. AIFS' approach was to focus on the organising and planning, so we did not explicitly capture the emotional element identified in the work of Dean and colleagues (2022).

As with time spent on housework and child care, the mental load is typically undertaken by mothers in the case of opposite-sex couple families with children. This will be explored in this report.

1.5 COVID-19 and sharing child care

The Families in Australia Surveys were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and reflect a time in which many parents experienced disruptions and changes to their work arrangements and to children's schooling.¹ In considering the sharing of child care and the mental load in this context, the pandemic may have created opportunities for more equal sharing of child care; for example, if fathers were working from home and more accessible. However, it may have reinforced or accentuated gendered arrangements if mothers were working from home.

There is evidence from Australia that shows that both mothers and fathers spent more time on child care in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (Baxter, Campbell, & Lee, 2023; Craig & Churchill, 2021a; Johnston et al., 2020). For example, Craig and Churchill (2021b), using data collected in May 2020, found that men's time on active care of children had increased to 3.75 hours per day, up from 1.66 hours before COVID-19, and women's had increased to 4.18 hours from 2.83 hours. Baxter, Campbell, and Lee (2023), using data collected later in 2020, found that the increase in unpaid care time was greater for those living in Melbourne, where COVID-related restrictions were more severe. The increase in care time for those in Melbourne was greater for mothers than fathers.

To what extent the changes were lasting is not apparent from the above-mentioned studies, given the data used were collected in 2020 and impacts of the pandemic were ongoing through 2021 and beyond. This research considers to what extent changes were apparent across the 4 surveys conducted in 2020 and 2021. It also draws on the qualitative data to provide insights on the experiences of sharing child care during the COVID-19 restrictions.

One specific element of parenting that was new with the COVID-19 lockdowns was the need for parents to support or help children through periods of remote learning. This was especially relevant in those Australian states and

¹ See, for example, Looking back, looking forward | Australian Institute of Family Studies (aifs.gov.au), and other Families in Australia Survey publications.

territories that experienced more stringent lockdowns. For a detailed exploration of this, using the Families in Australia Surveys, see *Child Wellbeing During the COVID Pandemic* by Baxter and Evans-Whipp (2022).

In this report, we explore the gendered nature of providing help to children, and examine whether parents changed their work arrangements to help with children's remote schooling or other care needs.

2. Data and methods

2.1 Families in Australia Surveys

This report uses data from the Families in Australia Surveys. These cross-sectional surveys were undertaken by AIFS at 4 time periods in 2020 and 2021: May–June 2020; November–December 2020; May–June 2021; and November–December 2021. These surveys were conducted by AIFS with the aim of capturing families' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

All Australians aged 18 and over were eligible to participate in these surveys. The surveys were conducted online and took around 20 minutes to complete. A convenience sampling approach was used, which means the survey reached a broad range of Australians through promotion of the survey on social media platforms, traditional media outlets and contact through mailing lists. Participants of previous surveys were invited to participate if they had provided their contact details for this purpose.

With this recruitment approach and online method, the Families in Australia Surveys are not representative of the Australian population. A key bias in these data, and a limitation of this research, is that the majority of respondents were female. Compared to the Australian population, the sample over-represents tertiary educated people and under-represents younger adults. Given the data collection and recruitment approaches, the survey is not likely to represent the experiences of some demographic groups, such as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and non-English speaking backgrounds. The sample characteristics are summarised in the [Appendix, Table 1](#).

2.2 Questions about sharing child care

Three survey questions about the sharing of child care, that were asked of couple respondents with children under 18 years, provide insights on how child care is shared. These were:

- 'Who in your household currently looks after the child/children?' This was asked in all 4 surveys and, in addition, in the first survey, respondents were asked who typically looked after children before COVID-19, giving a total of 5 time points to examine. This question is used to capture sharing child care.
- 'Who in your household plans and coordinates activities relating to your child/children?' This was introduced in survey 3 (May–June 2021) and also asked in survey 4 (November–December 2021). This question is used to capture the sharing the mental load.
- 'Who helped your [child/children] with their remote learning?' This was only asked in survey 4, in November–December 2021, of parents with at least one child having spent some time remote learning.

Response options for each were 'Always me', 'Usually me', 'Me and my spouse/partner about equally', 'Usually my spouse/partner', 'Always my spouse/partner', and 'Another person(s)' or 'No-one (they look after themselves)'. This information, together with information on gender of the respondent and gender of the partner, was used to create variables for opposite-sex couples that indicated whether the task was always done by the mother, usually done by the mother, equally shared, or always or usually done by the father. There were insufficient numbers in this final group to separate into 'usually' versus 'always'. For the analysis of couples' sharing child care, those who answered that someone else looked after children or children looked after themselves were excluded.

In the first survey, 2,184 participants answered the questions about sharing child care. Total sample sizes were lower in subsequent surveys, with the lowest number answering these questions being 1,276 in the third survey. Altogether, pooling data across the surveys, there were 6,660 responses about sharing child care. The numbers were slightly lower for those answering about sharing the mental load (in surveys 3 and 4, with a total over these 2 surveys of 2,655) and sharing remote learning help. In particular, the latter only applied to those with at least one child who had spent time remote learning in 2021 (936 responses).

An open-text question in each survey sought comments about the sharing of child care and other household tasks. Key themes in parents' responses were identified, focusing on those that described the patterns of care, the mental load, remote learning or relevant employment issues. Some earlier analysis from the November–December 2020 survey explored responses that were about sharing housework (Baxter, 2021). Here we focus on comments that were related to child care, although there is some crossover with the housework themes. The key themes are used to structure the results sections of the report with a selection of quotes used for illustration.

Another question was added to the November–December 2021 Families in Australia Survey to better understand what work adjustments parents had made to enable them to support or care for children during the pandemic. Parents were asked if they or their partner made any adjustments to their working arrangements in the previous 6 months to manage remote learning or for other child care reasons. The survey had indicators for having taken leave, reduced work hours, stopped working and changed when or where work is done. These responses are explored in section 6.

2.3 Other family characteristics

Age of youngest child and parental employment are key family characteristics for looking at the sharing of child care in the home, so these variables are examined in this report. Other variables typically related to parental employment and/or sharing child care are used in the analysis. [Table 1](#) in the [Appendix](#) summarises these variables for each of the 4 Families in Australia Surveys, focusing on those that answered questions about sharing child care. Two key points to note about the sample are:

- Most respondents were females with a male partner, although around 10% were males with a female partner (691 cases in the data pooled from the 4 surveys). Very small numbers were same-sex couples (3% of the sample, 207 cases in the data pooled across the 4 surveys).
- The approaches taken to promote specific surveys resulted in more parents of young children responding to the November–December surveys, especially the second survey conducted in November–December 2020. This makes it problematic to compare findings across the surveys without adjusting for this variability. See [Table 1](#).

Findings have not been weighted to adjust for the bias in characteristics of the sample relative to the characteristics of all Australian parents or families. Care needs to be taken in comparing across the different surveys, as changing sample composition has an impact on the distribution of responses about sharing child care. The multivariate analysis takes account of some of the changing compositions by controlling for age of youngest child and parental employment but it is unlikely to have accounted for all the sample differences.

2.4 Methods

The analysis of survey responses includes descriptive overviews of the responses and multivariate analysis. The multivariate analysis results are presented in the results sections of the report as predicted values, which adjust for some variables that are commonly related to the unpaid and paid work activities of parents. Variables included in the multivariate models were:

- parental employment categories
- age of youngest child
- age group of respondent
- gender of respondent
- survey period
- whether respondent had a bachelor's degree or higher.

There were significant associations between these variables and the outcomes, although results varied across the different outcome measures. The full model results are presented in the Appendix, along with an explanation of the modelling approach and the sample characteristics.

Within the pooled sample, all surveys combined, there were 1,773 comments to draw on for analysis of parents' comments about sharing the unpaid work in the household. Around 200 comments were excluded as they did not make any reference to child care. These included those simply answering 'no' to the question that sought a comment and those who referred to topics not directly related to child care – including those referring to

teenage children taking on household tasks or referring to who did the cleaning and cooking. Given the volume of data, individual responses were not coded or classified. Key issues that emerged were:

- how tasks were shared generally – who did what
- satisfaction/dissatisfaction with roles in the home
- work characteristics of themselves and/or their partner and how they were associated with different patterns of care
- how sharing had changed with COVID-19 and/or working from home
- managing remote schooling and/or children when child care services were closed.

These are further explored in the results sections of the report.

3. Overview of sharing child care

3.1 Looking after children

The data combined from all 4 surveys, plus the retrospective reports of before COVID-19, tell us about the overall patterns of looking after children. With all data pooled, among opposite-sex couple families with children under 18 years:

- 12% reported that looking after children was always done by the mother
- 42% reported it was usually done by the mother
- 36% reported it was equally shared
- 5% reported it was usually or always done by the father
- 5% reported that someone else usually looked after the children, or the children looked after themselves.

The highly gendered patterns are consistent with findings for Australia reported elsewhere. These responses are explored further below, describing how they varied by parental employment and other characteristics, and how they were related to COVID-19 restrictions.

3.2 The mental load

In the qualitative data, a number of respondents noted that parenting is much more than 'looking after' children. It was common for reference to be made to the 'mental' or 'organisational' tasks of being a parent, and that this aspect of parenting can be quite draining. The following comments are from the November–December 2020 survey, before the surveys introduced a question about sharing the mental load.

It is not only the completing of tasks but the mental load associated with them and the planning around family life (organising birthdays, social activities, etc.). As mother I do all the planning for child's health, nutrition, education and development needs. Sometimes this feels like a [part-time] job in and of itself.

Mother working full time, youngest aged 13–17 years, father working part time, November–December 2020

As my husband works away he cannot contribute while he is not home but while he is home he contributes. The mental load of managing the household is the most exhausting, while [this] generally falls on my shoulders. Even small things like permissions slips for school, managing our diaries, grocery shopping, etc.

Mother not working, youngest aged 0–2 years, father working full time, November–December 2020

In the 2 surveys conducted in 2021, questions were introduced asking who did the planning and coordinating of children's activities. This is reported here as the 'mental load'.

As with looking after children, the responses were highly gendered. These findings indicate an even stronger gendered pattern of care for the mental load, especially in terms of the proportion saying this was 'always' done by the mother. With responses for the 2 surveys combined:

- 34% reported the mental load was always done by the mother
- 44% reported it was usually done by the mother
- 19% reported it was equally shared
- 3% reported it was usually or always done by the father.

3.3 Helping children with remote learning

The November–December 2021 survey included a module of questions about children’s remote learning. To extend the above 2 questions about child care, parents were asked about who usually helped children with the remote learning. This was only asked of those with a remote learning child. Overall:

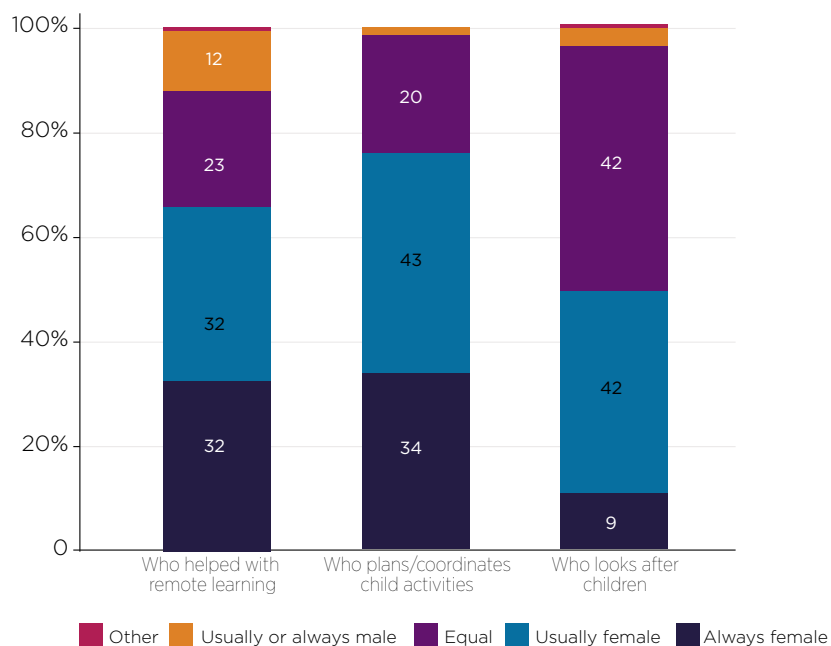
- 32% reported that helping with remote learning was always done by the mother
- 32% reported it was usually done by the mother
- 23% reported it was equally shared
- 12% reported it was usually or always done by the father.

3.4 Comparing the three measures

Figure 1 compares all 3 measures for the same group of respondents – those that answered the question about remote schooling in the fourth survey. These analyses confirm that the mental load remains the least-often shared task, with 77% of those answering all 3 questions in the November–December 2021 survey reporting the mother always or usually did these activities. For the same sample, 64% reported the mother always or usually helped with remote schooling, and 52% reported the mother always or usually looked after the children.

Figure 1: The mental load is the most gendered of child-related activities

Who looks after children, plans and coordinates children’s activities and helped with remote learning, parents with a remote learning child, November–December 2021



Note: These calculations are all based on the same sample, respondents with a remote learning child who answered these questions in November–December 2021.

Source: Families in Australia Surveys, November–December 2021

3.5 Summary

This introduction has shown the gendered nature of child care, overall, using 3 different measures of child care. These measures are now explored further. Section 4 presents how sharing child care and sharing the mental load vary with differences in parental employment and ages of children, and section 5 examines the reports on what parents said about sharing child care. Section 6 reports on how the sharing of child care changed across 2020 and 2021, exploring what parents said about the impacts of COVID-19, and presents the findings related to helping with children’s remote learning.

4. How different families share child care

4.1 Introduction

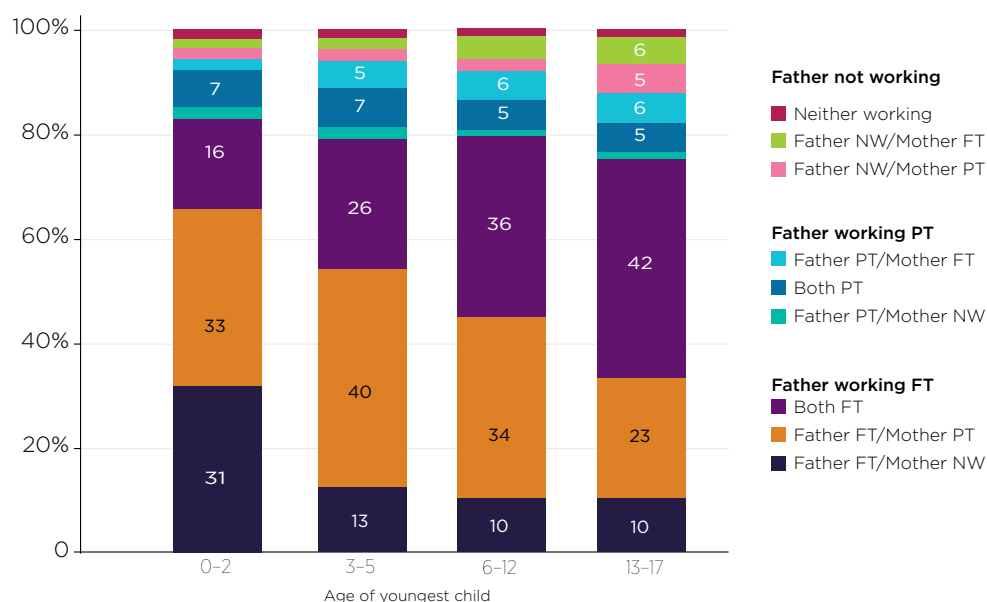
This chapter considers how sharing child care varies according to different characteristics, focusing on parents' work arrangements and age of youngest child in opposite-sex couple families. For background, subsection 4.2 provides an overview of parents' employment patterns by age of youngest child. Subsection 4.3 then examines who looks after the children, by age of youngest child and parental employment. Subsection 4.4 is similar but looking at the mental load – that is, who does the planning and organising of child care activities. The findings in this chapter draw on multivariate analysis of the survey data (see [Appendix](#)) and a summary of some of the findings not previously covered is in subsection 4.5.

4.2 Overview of employment patterns

Consistent with findings from other Australian data sources, in the Families in Australia Surveys parental work arrangements were highly gendered and closely tied to the age of the youngest child in the family (Figure 2). These patterns reflect that mothers often change their work arrangements to better manage their caring responsibilities when children are young, and they re-engage or increase work hours as children grow. Fathers' work arrangements typically do not change through this life stage. At each age of youngest child, among couple families, the 3 main groups are those in which fathers work full time, while mothers are either not working, working part time or working full time. As the youngest child grows older, the proportions shift in line with mothers' work hours increasing.

Figure 2: In couples, fathers working full time is most common, with mothers' work hours increasing with age of youngest child

Couple employment patterns, respondents with children aged under 18 years, by age of youngest child (years)



Note: Excludes same-sex couples. FT = full time; PT = part time; NW = not working.

Source: Families in Australia Surveys, May–June 2020, November–December 2020, May–June 2021 and November–December 2021

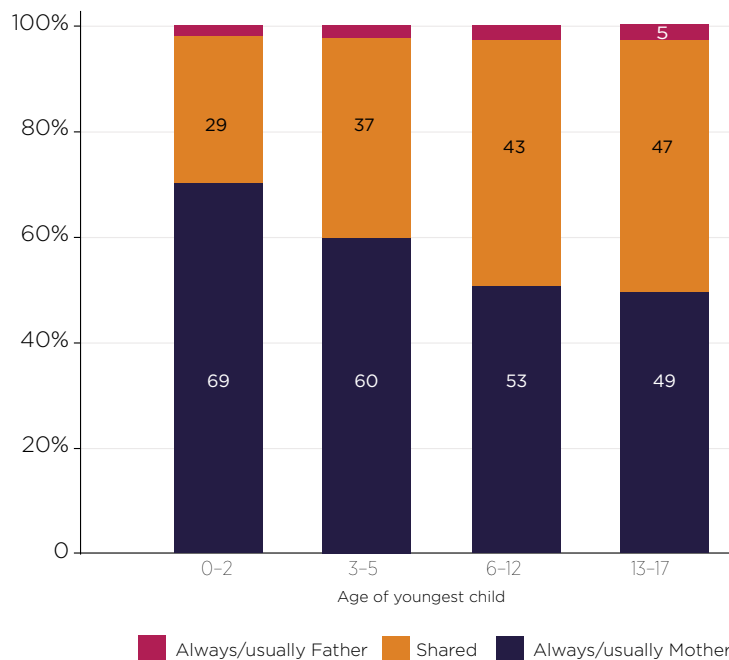
4.3 Who looks after the child care?

The patterns of sharing child care vary both by age of youngest child (Figure 3) and by family employment arrangements (Figure 4), and these characteristics each had significant associations with the reports of who looks after the children when included in multivariate analysis (see the [Appendix, Table 2](#)).

By age of youngest child, the main difference as children grow was the increase in the sharing of child care, rather than this being always or usually the mother. Sharing the child care tasks increased from 29% of couples when the youngest child was aged 0–2 years up to 47% sharing the child care tasks when the youngest was 13–17 years. For the oldest category of age of youngest child (children aged 13–17 years), in half of the families, the mother usually or always looked after the children. In only 5% of these families (and excluding those where children looked after themselves) were children always or usually cared for by fathers.

Figure 3: The older the children, the more sharing of child care tasks

Who looks after the children by age of youngest child



Notes: These are predicted values from multivariate analysis, with all variables set to the overall mean except for the age of youngest child variable. Excludes those who said children were cared for by someone else or looked after themselves and excludes same-sex couples. Model details are given in the [Appendix, Table 2](#).

Source: Families in Australia Surveys, May–June 2020, November–December 2020, May–June 2021, November–December 2021

Similarly, as mothers' work hours increased from no hours to part-time hours to full-time hours, it was more likely that child care responsibilities were shared, and less likely these tasks were always or usually done by the mother.

For families in which fathers were not working full-time hours (e.g. when mothers worked full time and fathers part time), the balance shifts, with child care more often done by the father when he works fewer hours than the mother (see Figure 4). This is most apparent when mothers worked full time and fathers were not working, although even in these families, 1 in 4 reported that mothers always or usually did the child care tasks. Some of this is explained by specific family circumstances, which we return to when examining the qualitative data.

Figure 4: There is more father involvement in child care when mothers work full time and fathers do not
Who looks after the children by mothers' and fathers' employment



Notes: These are predicted values from multivariate analysis, with all variables set to the overall mean except for the parental employment variable. FT = full time; PT = part time; NW = not working. Model details are given in the [Appendix, Table 2](#).

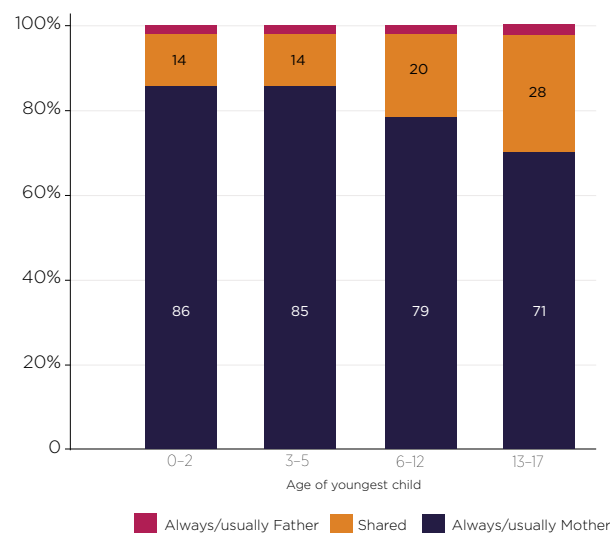
Source: Families in Australia Surveys, May–June 2020, November–December 2020, May–June 2021, November–December 2021

4.4 Who does the planning and organising?

As seen previously, there are highly gendered patterns in the sharing of the mental load of child care, as captured by a question asking who does the planning and organising of children's activities. Figure 5 shows that this is especially so for families with youngest children aged 0–2 years or 3–5 years. At older ages, the proportion sharing this activity between both parents increases but remains largely with mothers.

Figure 5: Sharing the mental load becomes more likely when children are school-aged but it remains most common for this to be usually or always done by mothers

Who does the mental load, by age of youngest child (years)

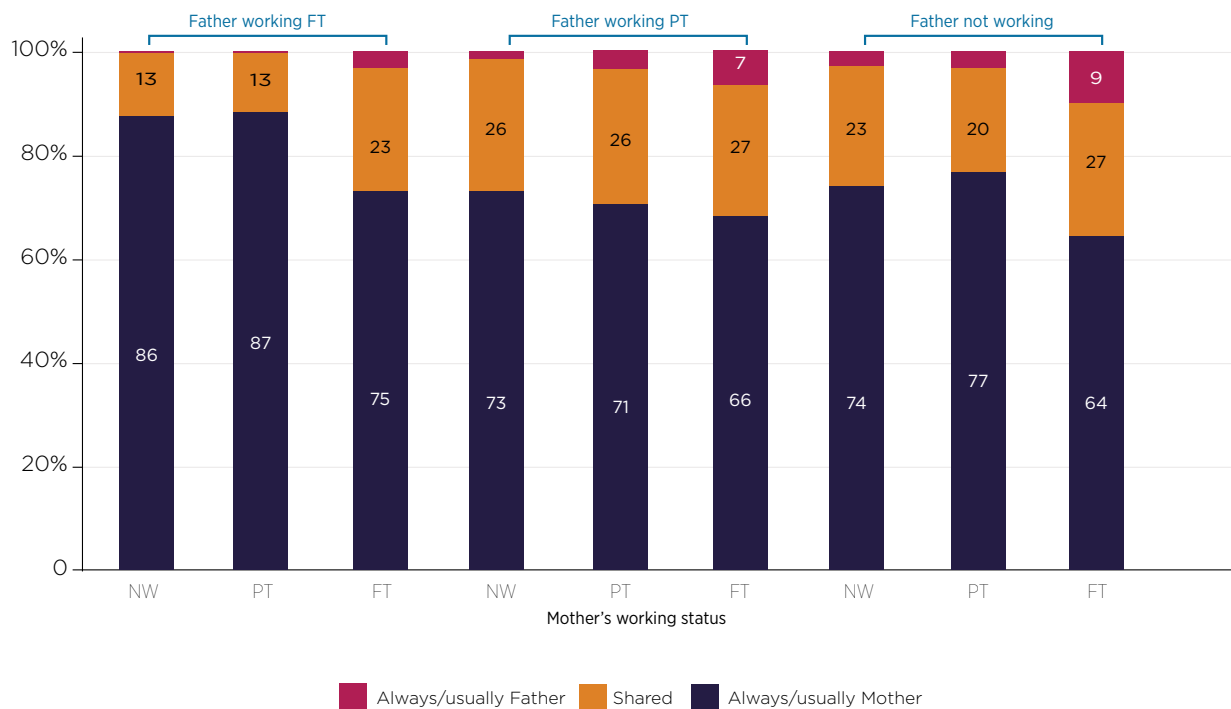


Note: These are predicted values from multivariate analysis, with all variables set to the overall mean except for the survey period variable. FT = full time; PT = part time; NW = not working. Model details are given in the [Appendix, Table 2](#).

Source: Families in Australia Surveys, May–June 2021, November–December 2021

As with other child care tasks, there is some association with parental employment but it is weaker for mental load than for sharing child care tasks. For example, among families with a full-time working father, the distribution is the same for mothers working part time and mothers who are not in paid work, with mothers always or usually doing the mental load tasks in 86%–87% of families (Figure 6). Among the families with fathers working full time, there is a shift towards more sharing when mothers also work full time. In all the scenarios, two-thirds or more indicated the mother did more of the mental load. It was quite rare for fathers to be the ones who always or usually did the planning and coordinating of children's activities but the proportion was somewhat higher when mothers worked full time and fathers worked part time or were not in paid work.

Figure 6: Mothers do the majority of planning/organising children's tasks, even when their work hours are greater
Who does the mental load related to children, by mothers' and fathers' employment



Notes: These are predicted values from multivariate analysis, with all variables set to the overall mean except for the survey period variable. FT = full time; PT = part time; NW = not working. Model details are given in the [Appendix, Table 3](#).

Source: Families in Australia Surveys, May–June 2021, November–December 2021

4.5 Other multivariate findings

The focus of section 4 has been on work arrangements and age of youngest child. Some other findings from the multivariate analysis are noted below, with details in the Appendix.

- Fathers were more likely than mothers to report there was equal sharing of child care and to say that fathers always or usually did the child care, rather than the child care being done always or usually by the mother. The same was true for sharing of the mental load and helping with remote learning. This finding to some extent reflects that fathers who have opted in to the survey are likely to be ones more engaged in issues related to the family, potentially representing those fathers with more involvement in child care. There were far more mothers responding than fathers, despite attempts to engage fathers, and it might be expected that those fathers with minimal involvement in children's care activities were less inclined to participate in a survey about families.
- Mothers and fathers with a bachelor's degree or higher, rather than lower level of educational attainment, were more likely to report equal sharing and more likely to report fathers doing more of the care. They were also more likely to report equal sharing for remote learning but not for the mental load.
- There was little variation according to age of parent. While some differences were statistically significant, they had little overall impact as the effect sizes were very small.

4.6 Summary

The analysis presented above is consistent with previous research finding that the sharing of child care varies according to both the age of the youngest child and parents' work arrangements. The multivariate analysis confirmed this also. A peak time of mothers' involvement in these activities is clearly when children are youngest, which changes as children grow older. This is also apparent as mothers increase their work hours, with a greater tendency for child care tasks to be shared when children grow and/or mothers' work hours increase. There is, however, considerable variation across families, with fathers taking the primary child care role in a small proportion of families and, at the other extreme, mothers maintaining the primary child care role even when they work longer hours than fathers. The inclusion of the 'mental load' in these analyses was a useful contribution to this study of sharing child care, showing even more gendered patterns compared to the 'looking after' aspect of child care.

5. Sharing child care patterns explained

5.1 Introduction

This section explores parents' comments about how the child care tasks in their homes are shared. Key themes arising from parents' comments about sharing child care were identified, and these have been organised here to highlight the main issues raised by parents. Subsection 5.2 focuses on comments related to the 'looking after' aspect of child care, with comments about the mental load summarised in subsection 5.3. Quotes have been used throughout to illustrate the main issues.

5.2 Who looks after children

Who is at home – one parent at home

A common explanation for the way child care tasks were shared was that arrangements reflected who was at home to do these tasks. Given the very gendered employment arrangements, this meant that mothers typically commented that they did more of the child care as they were home and therefore more available. In the case of families in which one parent was not working, the parent at work was seen to be fulfilling a different, important family role of bringing in the income. That is, against them (typically the father) having a 'breadwinner' role, it was seen to be 'fair' that the person (typically the mother) at home would take on more of the child care.

I have to do it all, because I don't work. That's the bargain, isn't it? It is much easier to go to work.

Mother not working, youngest child aged 3-5 years, father full-time work, November-December 2021

Adding on to some of these comments were remarks about fathers (who worked full time) taking on some of the housework or child care around their work hours.

I am not working. I do the bulk of child care and household tasks and my husband helps when he is home. It works well for us.

Mother not working, youngest child aged 0-2 years, father works full time, November-December 2020

Sometimes a conscious decision had been made about who would be at home to provide this child care, such as with those who referred to having opted in to the stay-at-home mother role. This included mothers of children of varied ages who had remained out of employment. However, a specific and common scenario was that of mothers who were on leave following the birth of their child. This was described as a time-limited period in which it was appropriate for the parent on leave to be doing most of the child care.

I do most child care as my baby is newborn and I am on maternity leave.

Mother not working, youngest child aged 0-2 years, father full time, November-December 2020

We return to this below, in relation to what happens over time, as children grow and parents may look for role changes. Several mothers on leave following the birth of a child commented about what they expected for the future.

Being on maternity leave gives husband an excuse for him to do less. I'm sure it will continue this way when I go back to work even though my work hours are longer.

Mother not working, youngest child aged 0–2 years, father full time, November–December 2020

Sometimes, the decision for one parent to be at home is not a conscious one. One parent's job loss can contribute to a change in the sharing of tasks.

It is amazing how different it is once your husband loses his job and has to provide the day-to-day care for kids, school drop-off, daily laundry, cleaning, cooking, etc. Juggling that while part-time was incredibly stressful for my mental health. Now that I am full time at work, I don't resent the cleaning, caring, cooking work I do at home as much, as it is somewhat more equal. I still carry I higher mental load for remembering appointments, etc. but the daily load has decreased significantly.

Mother working full time, youngest child aged 0–2 years, father part time, May–June 2021

Work arrangements in dual-employed families

In the case of couples who both worked some hours, many comments suggested an assessment of relative availability had been made, such that the parent with more availability would take on more of the child care role. With the data collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, working at home was a common work characteristic, and this was relevant in this assessment of relative availability. We return to this more in section 6.

Aside from working at home, the assessment was most often made in terms of working fewer hours. As with the stay-at-home mother (or potentially father) situation, some parents had reduced work hours to give them more time to look after or be with their children.

I choose to work less hours because I want to be there for our children and have an organised household.

Mother working part time, youngest child aged 3–5 years, father full time, November–December 2021

This was more common for mothers than fathers, although some families had other arrangements. For example:

My husband and I both went part time (work 4 days a week), we each have a non-work day so we share breadwinning and caregiving responsibilities.

Mother working part time, youngest child aged 3–5 years, father full time. May–June 2021²

Another important factor was that of workplace flexibility, with comments indicating this was more often a constraint for fathers than for mothers.

My partner is limited in his capacity to undertake parenting and household tasks by an inequity in working conditions and his inability to access the flexible working arrangements and expectations I enjoy.

Mother working full time, youngest child aged 3–5 years, father working full time, November–December 2021

I have found that employers are more likely to support flexible, part-time hours with a mother/female than they are the father/male. It has been easier for me to negotiate my working arrangements than my husband. This has been challenging as I am the higher income earner and [it] would be more beneficial for me to work longer hours and for him to be able to have more time at home.

Mother working part time, youngest child aged 0–2 years, father full time, November–December 2020.

For others, the relative availability was about whose job was more 'important', whose job brought in the main income or whose job was more stressful.

I am the primary carer of our child, I work part time so [the child] doesn't have to be at day care full time and I can enjoy spending time with her. I carry the mental load of the house, e.g. planning meals, planning and arranging medical appointments and making sure the house runs smoothly. My husband does help with the chores and looking after our daughter but the lion's share is my work, and I sometimes feel like he feels his work is more important than mine and that impacts on who ends up taking leave when our daughter is sick or appointments need to be attended to.

Mother working part time, youngest child aged 0–2 years, father full time, November–December 2020

² According to the respondent, the father worked 35 hours or more, so was classified as full-time hours, even though she indicated he worked part time.

Gender role attitudes

Beyond these work-related factors, some mothers experienced that their partner had expectations, or gender role attitudes, about who would do more of the child care, with this thought to be more of a mother's task.

Husband has a very traditional view of gender roles, which I don't like but have found hard to encourage him to change.

Mother working part time, youngest child aged 0-2 years, father full time, November-December 2021

My husband raised in a patriarchal family, where women/wives/moms do all the domestic jobs, including any school activities. Whereas, men/husbands/dads are responsible for finance issues.

Mother not working, youngest child aged 0-2 years, father full time, November-December 2021

Negotiating work and sharing care

While discussion of work characteristics was common, parents were often aware that that they had to work at finding the balance in sharing child care that met their families' needs.

We share tasks and care work as evenly as possible. This, in itself, requires work and a commitment to vocalising your concerns if you think the other isn't pulling their weight. And, equally, a commitment to listening and not immediately being defensive when the other raises these concerns. But it's worth it and we would not have it any other way. It is also incredibly important to us that our child sees this equity in our household as the norm.

Mother working part time, youngest child aged 0-2 years, father not working, November-December 2021

Our goal is to share as much as possible and be there for the children equally.

Father not working, youngest child aged 0-2 years, mother full time, November-December 2021

As I work part time and my partner works full time it is understandable that I am responsible for more of these tasks; however, I would prefer to have more balance in our work hours and to share these responsibilities more – my partner isn't able to do this at this time due to work commitments but is exploring options to do this.

Mother working part time, youngest child aged 0-2 years, father full time work, November-December 2020

The following comment highlights that renegotiation of how tasks are shared can be required as circumstances change, particularly with a change in mothers' work hours at the conclusion of parental leave.

[Sharing child care] is becoming more fairly divided, and change is positive. I do resent the fact that care for the kids and management of home tasks is not automatically equally shared and that I have to broach the topic with my best diplomacy in order to prompt change. When I took maternity leave, the balance of chores was upended and I felt that was fair as I was home all the time. But now I work close to the same hours plus I have additional responsibilities with our children. That said, I feel things are becoming more fair and certain tasks are becoming regarded as house tasks, rather than my own responsibility.

Mother working part time, youngest child aged 3-5 years, father full time, November-December 2021

This issue, that roles were going to need re-evaluation following mothers' return to work, was one that was prominent among new mothers' responses. Some mothers anticipated a return to equal sharing, while others appeared anxious about having to 'do it all', expecting that they would have to continue to do the bulk of the work at home.

The division of the work is due to being on parental leave and my partner working full time. However, this will need to change once I return to work.

Mother not working, youngest child aged 0-2 years, father full time, November-December 2021

I am on parental leave and my husband is working; however, he is at home so should contribute more to household tasks. I have no doubt that when I return to work the division of household labour won't change and that worries me.

Mother not working, youngest child aged 0-2 years, father full time, November-December 2020

Some families had found ways of sharing child care that were somewhat 'non-traditional'. This, for example, included families in which fathers were not working and the mother was employed full time or part time.

We probably have what is a somewhat unusual household gender wise and it's good. I work full time, and my partner is home parenting full time. He does pretty much all of the cooking, parenting, shopping and gardening, and we share the household chores like washing and other cleaning. Our kids think it is normal for women to go to work and men to stay home and be full-time carers/parents.

Mother working full time, youngest child aged 6–12 years, father not working, November–December 2020

My wife earns the money. I look after the children and the house. We're like a 1950s family in reverse. It works!

Father not working, youngest child aged 3–5 years, mother full time, November–December 2020

Co-parenting and other family considerations

While remarks by parents were mostly about those tasks that required a physical presence, several talked about the mental load, which is explored below. Beyond this, there was some recognition of the partnership approach to parenting. While there might be an imbalance in actual care time, parents acknowledged the role of being a supportive partner, including noting the contributions of fathers when they work long hours and/or are unavailable to help with day-to-day care work. It was also a relevant point for those where one of the couple had a disability or long-term health condition, which sometimes altered the options for families managing the care of children.

Husband has spinal injuries (on disability pension) so can't do much physically but he is a great emotional support and very engaged with the kids.

Mother not working, youngest child aged 3–5 years, father not working, November–December 2020

Some families faced a bit more complexity in their arrangements. In blended families, some mothers expressed some reluctance to expect their partner (who is not the child's natural parent) to take on a share of the child care. For example:

I live with my partner, but my 12 year old is not his child. So I would never expect my partner to take responsibility for my child, even if living in the same house.

Mother working full time, youngest child aged 6–12 years, father full time, November–December 2021

5.3 Sharing the mental load

As seen in subsection 3.2, there was more imbalance in couples' sharing of the mental load than in other aspects of sharing child care. There were numerous comments about this in each of the 4 surveys. These tasks were seen to be different to and on top of the 'looking after' aspects of child care.

It is not only the completing of tasks but the mental load associated with them and the planning around family life (organising birthdays, social activities, etc.). As mother I do all the planning for child's health, nutrition, education and development needs. Sometimes this feels like a part-time job in and of itself.

Mother working part time, youngest child aged 0–2 years, father full time, November–December 2020

Partner is active hands-on parent who contributes to child care and household tasks. However, mental load and other factors still make this an unequal division of labour.

Mother part-time work, youngest child aged 6–12 years, father full time, November–December 2020

Aside from this mental load, the couple may otherwise have quite equal sharing of child care and household tasks.

In many ways my partner and I equally share (or divide up) household tasks and responsibilities. I am taking on more of the cooking and cleaning and laundry currently as I am on maternity leave and have capacity to do so. However, the majority of child care and the associated 'mental load' (e.g. organising day care, appointments, new clothes, etc.) falls to me even when my partner is not working. With 2 small children at home and even more limited informal support from outside our household due to the pandemic, this can make parenting start to feel pretty relentless.

Mother not working, youngest child aged 0–2 years, father full time, November–December 2020

One father respondent was aware of the imbalance within his relationship, even though he had rated the sharing of child care tasks as 'equal':

I feel I should be doing more of the organisational planning work.

Father working part time, youngest child aged 3–5 years, mother full time, May–June 2021

The mental load of child care was often expressed as part of the overall mental load of running the household.

The mental load and burden of care – housework and child care ultimately falls on me, the Mum, even though I have the higher work-related responsibilities and earning capacity. I still find myself managing the household even though we've worked really hard to establish a more even sharing of the load. It makes me feel resentful, impacts our relationship and ultimately my emotional and mental wellbeing as it's such a huge load with 2 young children and a professional job.

Mother working part time, youngest child aged 0–2 years, father part time, November–December 2020

As noted in the introduction, the Families in Australia Survey question asked about 'organising and planning' and didn't directly ask about managing the emotional wellbeing of the household – this also being something that could come under the 'mental load' concept. This was identified by some respondents as another part of what is often done by mothers.

I carry the 'mental load'. My partner and I are fairly equal in household tasks such as cooking and cleaning and washing, etc. However, I do ALL the arrangements for our child's child care, extracurricular activities, school responsibilities, passport renewals, time with friends, medical and specialist appointments, clothes shopping, birthday arrangements, Xmas presents, etc., etc., etc., and this requires constant planning and attendance, which leads to me neglecting these things for myself. My partner finds time for a full-time job, music career, a sailing hobby and working on motorbikes. I have no time for hobbies at all, let alone exercise or even a haircut and I only work part time. I am also the one who notices when our child needs attention or 'time' and my needs are secondary to hers at this time. My partner easily switches off from us to tend to his own need and interests. There's only room for one parent to operate like that, and that's not usually the mother ...

Mother working part time, youngest child aged 6–12 years, father full time, November–December 2020

5.4 Summary

These qualitative data, while sourced from only one survey question, highlighted a number of issues that are relevant to mothers' and fathers' explanations for and feelings about the sharing of child care in their couple relationship. There is clearly a huge variation across families in how the sharing of tasks is managed, and how parents feel about it. Such variation relates to parents' own attitudes and motivations, to the family characteristics and, very importantly, to parents' work characteristics.

The age of children comes into this especially as parents of newborns and young children often have one parent at home on leave or with reduced work hours explicitly to care for children. However, over time and as children grow, parents are faced with negotiating roles in the home as well as negotiating the return to work. This can be a challenge for some families, where roles have become entrenched. It is perhaps especially an issue for the mental load, which is invisible in some ways to the parent who does not carry this load (most often the father).

Workforce issues were key in many of the parents' responses about sharing care. Some referred to parents' decisions to opt in to particular kinds of jobs that fit around children's care (most often mothers). However, more referred to the challenges of jobs that don't have flexibility, or about long hours that make it difficult to fit around children's care (most often fathers). There is still much to be done in the workplace to ensure fathers are able to access flexible working arrangements, and that they are not seen to be only the domain of mothers.

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions brought new challenges and opportunities for managing work and child care and sharing child care between parents. This is the focus of section 6.

6. Sharing care and remote learning and COVID-19

6.1 Introduction

One of the questions examined in this research is what changed in the sharing of child care with the COVID-19 pandemic. The associated restrictions changed family life, as many people were working from home, some had longer work hours and some had their work hours reduced or lost their jobs altogether. Children's own arrangements changed, and remote learning was introduced in some Australian states, leaving families often working from home as well as supporting children's remote learning (Baxter & Evans-Whipp, 2022).

This section explores how looking after children changed over the 4 data collections. The qualitative responses that referred to COVID-19 impacts on sharing child care are also summarised. In addition, this section presents analysis of which parent(s) helped children with remote learning, and reports on survey questions that captured information on whether work changes were made to help manage children's remote schooling or other child care needs.

6.2 Changes in sharing child care

Figure 7 shows that across all 4 survey periods in 2020 and 2021, mothers did more looking after children than fathers. To explore changes, this analysis compares the 'always or usually mothers' to 'shared' and 'always or usually fathers'.

Predicted values from the multivariate analysis are presented in Figure 7, to take account of some of the changing composition of the 4 samples. However, the sample in November–December 2020 was highly skewed toward younger families due to the data collection campaign that aimed to capture new parents. While the age of youngest child was taken into account in the analysis, the very different result at this time is likely due to a relatively high number of new mothers completing this survey. Other comparisons across surveys are indicative only, as the multivariate analysis will not have accounted for all changes across different data collections and samples.

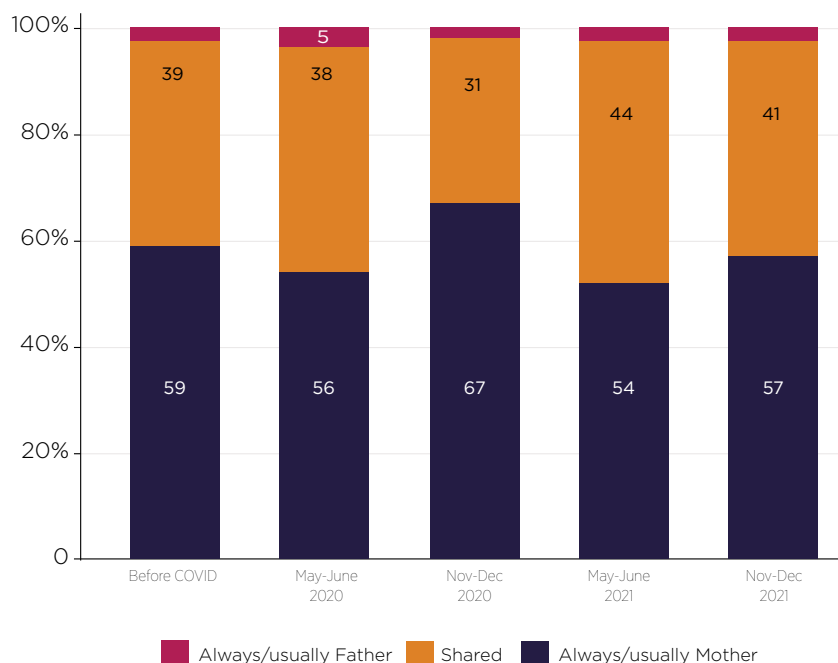
To see most clearly the initial impact of COVID-19, the responses collected in May–June 2020 can be compared to the 'before COVID' result that was captured in the first survey. According to this comparison, there was a slight (albeit statistically significant) increase in the proportion of couples in which looking after the children was always or usually done by the father. However, the percentage remained low at 5% in May–June 2020. The percentages for fathers always or usually looking after children were lower in the 2021 surveys, suggesting that there was no sustained shift toward fathers in couple families taking on a more substantial role in caring for children.

Over all the survey periods, it was most common for respondents to report that mothers always or usually looked after the children. For example, this was the case for 59% of families before COVID-19 and 56% at May–June 2020. As noted above, the November–December 2020 result was affected by the high number of families with young children in the sample, so is not comparable to other surveys. The later surveys, in 2021, show continuing high proportions of mothers doing most of the care, although there was a slight decline in the proportion reporting care was always or usually done by the mother due to a slight increase in the proportion reporting care was shared.

Comparing 'before COVID' to May–June 2020, the proportion reporting that care was shared hardly changed, from 39% to 38%. In the 2021 surveys, this percentage was higher, at 44% and 41%. In the multivariate analysis, these changes were statistically significant, indicating there was somewhat more sharing of child care in 2021 compared to the 'before COVID' responses in the May–June 2020 survey. We note that COVID-19 impacts were still being experienced in 2021, so the changes in 2021 are not indicative of post-COVID-19 trends and may instead reflect the continuation of more flexible work approaches that facilitated more sharing in some families. The section below discusses these COVID-specific issues.

Figure 7: Mothers do more looking after children than fathers, although sharing child care was also common at all time periods

Who looks after the children in couple families, by survey period, predicted values



Notes: These are predicted values from multivariate analysis, with all variables set to the overall mean except for the survey period variable. Model details are given in the [Appendix, Table 3](#). The 'Before COVID' responses were collected in the May-June 2020 survey.

Source: Families in Australia Surveys, May-June 2020, November-December 2020, May-June 2021, November-December 2021

6.3 Sharing child care during COVID-19

Respondents were not asked directly about the impacts of COVID-19 on the sharing of child care but, not surprisingly, when invited to comment on the sharing of household and care tasks in their households, impacts of COVID-19 had made a difference in some families.

A key factor noted was the impact of working from home. There seemed to be mixed effects of this on sharing child care. For some mothers, having their partner working from home increased the partner's awareness of the tasks at home, including child care, leading to more equitable sharing.

COVID-19 actually allowed my husband to see how busy I am in my job. He took on much more of the household and child care tasks after that.

Mother working part time, youngest child aged 0-2 years, father full time, November-December 2020

Since COVID-19 my husband has been working from home and had increased the amount cooking, household chores and caring of children that he does because I work in health care and need to come into work.

Mother part time, youngest child aged 6-12 years, father full time, November-December 2020

It also meant a reduction in time spent commuting, which provided opportunities for more family time and, therefore, more shared involvement in household tasks.

My husband used to commute 2 hours each way to work ... It's great we have breakfast and dinner together as a family and my son spends more time with his father. He helps with the groceries and gets those jobs he never had time for before. We are happier as a couple and less stressed.

Mother full time, youngest child aged 6-12 years, father full time, May-June 2020

In other families, though, mothers found that gendered roles were exacerbated when they worked from home, even if they had a partner who had also worked from home during the restrictions.

Prior to COVID-19 the child care and household tasks were more evenly shared between us. COVID-19 has placed myself at home with most of the responsibility for these things.

Mother working part time, youngest child aged 0–2 years, father full time, November–December 2020

My partner used to do more equitable share – since COVID-19 work from home, the boundaries between work and home have disappeared and he's working all the time.

Mother working part time, youngest child aged 3–5 years, father full time, November–December 2020

Another factor mentioned was the degree of workplace flexibility during the COVID-19 restriction period and beyond, including flexibility in how working from home or self-employment was managed. Some reported that they or their partner worked in the kinds of jobs that offered no flexibility, even demanding more work outside the home, and this contributed to the way child care and other tasks were shared. The parent with more flexibility was usually but not always the mother.

... It is made more difficult with COVID-19 as his workplace is not at all flexible, whereas mine was very understanding. I was able to have kids in the background of my meetings, change deadlines due to remote learning, whereas his office didn't let them do that – and he didn't push for it either.

Mother working part time, youngest child aged 0–2 years, father full time, November–December 2021

COVID-19 disrupted families' usual approaches to managing work and care, which for some created opportunities to talk about their respective roles, with the aim of finding ways to balance caring responsibilities within new working arrangements.

Household tasks have always been divided fairly equally so things haven't changed there. COVID-19 has made some changes to our patterns of work and child care and it has resulted in my husband increasing his care of the children at times when I am working (in particular, he does school and child care drop-off, which he didn't do before, and he does school pick-up one afternoon per week). Previously I had most of the care of children when they were at home so this has been a change. COVID-19 has prompted us to reassess, discuss and have a more equal approach to child care arrangements.

Mother working part time, youngest child aged 3–5 years, father part time, November–December 2020

Some couples had experienced change in the sharing of the mental load with the increase in working from home together during COVID-19 restrictions.

Mental load to organise everyone's day and make decisions about what we do falls to me but my husband is taking on more of that as he sees that is unequal in our current situation where we are both working at home all week.

Mother working full time, youngest child aged 0–2 years, father full time, May–June 2020

Looking ahead, beyond COVID-19, some were anticipating how the sharing of child care would change once restrictions were lifted. Some anticipated a return to pre-pandemic arrangements, either in a positive way (being more balanced) or negative way (mothers resuming majority care).

Husband has higher salary and so we chose for him to remain full time while I went part time, plus my workplace is more flexible than his. This is not my ideal situation – I would prefer equal work in both paid and unpaid domains – but circumstances dictated it. However, COVID-19 restrictions forced more flexibility (for him) and him taking on more of the household/parenting load – a silver lining – and we will endeavour to continue this going forward.

Mother working part time, youngest child aged 0–2 years, father full time, November–December 2020

Before COVID-19 lockdowns, my partner regularly worked away from home (interstate and international) so I took on all of the child care and household tasks. This has shifted somewhat due to lockdowns but I imagine that we will return to our previous imbalance as Australia comes to 'live with COVID'; but this time I will also be working part time, which will make it more difficult and possibly less satisfying.

Mother working full time, youngest child aged 6–12 years, father part time, November–December 2021

As well as employment factors affecting care arrangements, some parents had added stressors related to mental health and anxiety, which flowed through to the way couples managed child care and other work in the home. These issues were particularly prevalent in the context of COVID-19.

Mental health impacts during COVID-19 meant that the majority share of household and child care responsibilities were my responsibility. My husband could not do it.

Mother working part time, youngest child aged 6–12 years, father full time, November–December 2021

Due to my mental health issues and workload, my husband has been working longer hours than myself but taking on more of the care and home activities than he would otherwise have. I'm conscious of not having been a big support to him and our son through some of the year, and this knowledge has also exacerbated my anxiety disorder, as he has a far more senior role in his organisation than I have in mine, and has had to also battle high stress levels due to COVID-19 as part of his work.

Mother working full time, youngest child aged 6–12 years, father full time, November–December 2020

6.4 Sharing help with remote learning

A significant factor for many employed parents during COVID-19 was how they supported children's remote learning.

While the presence of a partner created some flexibility for parents, helping children with remote learning followed gendered patterns. Figure 8 shows that across all age groups of children, mothers helped more with remote schooling. There was more sharing once children were at school age, particularly with those aged 13–17 years. As noted in subsection 3.4, helping with remote schooling was the least gendered of the measures explored, with fathers doing more or most of the remote schooling help in around 10% of families.

Figure 8: Sharing the help with remote schooling was most likely for older school-aged children

Who did the remote schooling, by age of youngest child (years)



Note: These are predicted values from multivariate analysis, with all variables set to the overall mean except for the age of youngest child variable. Model details are given in the [Appendix, Table 4](#).

Source: Families in Australia Survey, November–December 2021

The sharing of remote schooling help was also related to parental work arrangements. Figure 9 shows fathers did more remote schooling when they worked less paid hours than mothers (measured by full-time/part-time status). When fathers worked full time but mothers were not in paid work or were working part time, very few fathers did most of the remote schooling. There was an increase in the percentage reporting this was shared when

comparing mothers working part time to those not working. When both parents worked full time, there was more sharing as well as more families saying fathers always or usually did the remote schooling help.

Figure 9: Fathers helped with remote schooling more when they worked fewer hours than mothers

Who did the remote schooling, by mothers' and fathers' employment



Note: These are predicted values from multivariate analysis, with all variables set to the overall mean except for the parental employment variable. FT = full time; PT = part time; NW = not working. Model details are given in the [Appendix, Table 4](#).

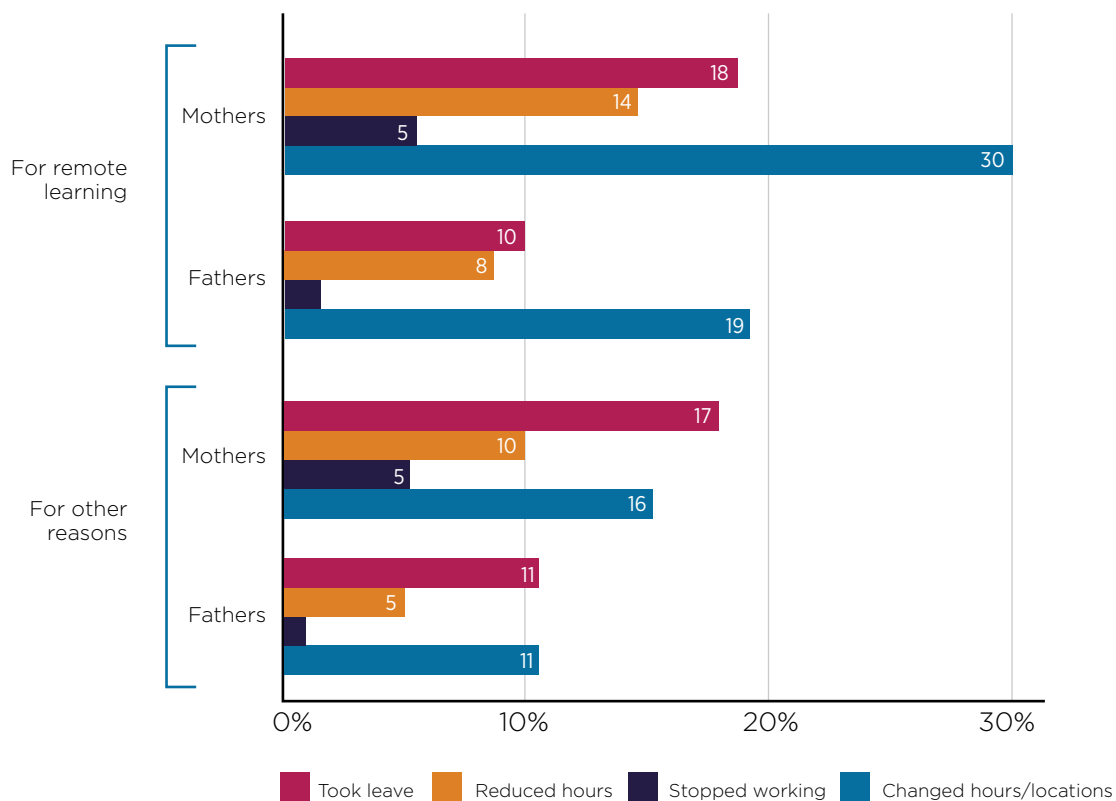
Source: Families in Australia Survey, November–December 2021

Respondents of the November–December 2021 Families in Australia Survey were asked about adjustments to work arrangements they or their partner made to help with child care. Specifically, parents were asked about changes made in the previous 6 months to manage children's remote learning or for other child care reasons. As shown in Figure 10:

- Mothers were more likely to have made changes to their work than were fathers.
- The most common change was changing hours or location of work – and particularly so to manage children's remote learning.
- It was uncommon for parents to have stopped work to address these child care needs but reducing work hours was a strategy used by some. Again, this was more often mothers than fathers.

Figure 10: Mothers more often made work changes than fathers to support remote learning, with changing hours or location the most common for both

Employment actions taken in the past 6 months, by mothers and fathers who were employed at some time in the past year



Note: Percentages were calculated over mothers and fathers who had worked in the previous year who had at least one child having experienced a period of remote learning.

Source: Families in Australia Survey, November–December 2021

As mentioned previously in this report, workplace flexibility was an issue and respondents felt this was more accessible to mothers than fathers. Changing hours or locations was sometimes just part of the way things worked.

I am working different hours (starting early, working late) to accommodate schooling from home during the day. So my partner is picking up meal preparation and other household cleaning as I have no other time in my day after work and schooling at home.

Mother working full time, youngest child aged 6–12 years, father full time, May–June 2020

Access to leave varied across different workplaces also and, for some, parents found that fathers had more difficulties than mothers accessing this leave.

My partner received no flexibility from his employer, whilst I was allowed to use one day per week of carer's leave to assist with home schooling. I also hold a job that allowed more flexible hours of work. This meant that I was primarily responsible for the schooling and care of our children during business hours.

Mother working full time, youngest child aged 6–12 years, father full time, November–December 2021

As found in the overall statistics on sharing the remote schooling help, some families had found ways to balance this.

My partner and I used to share drop-offs and pick-ups of our youngest son to and from [out of school hours] care as we both worked from our employer's office. Now I work from the office 4 days/week. My husband works from home full time and supports our children with home schooling most days.

Mother working full time, youngest child aged 6–12 years, father full time, May–June 2020

While others managed in ways that would have been difficult to sustain long term.

Almost impossible to do my job as I would like due to home schooling and lack of support from partner. Frustrating and stressful.

Mother working part time, youngest child aged 0–2 years, father not working, May–June 2020

This has massively impacted on me working from home and having the children home. They need support in their learning and because I am the parent at home this has predominately fallen to me. My partner has started work later some days to help the kids with their school work and we are sometimes doing catch-up on the weekends with either school work or our own work.

Mother working full time, youngest child aged 6–12 years, father full time, May–June 2020

6.5 Summary

There were many impacts of COVID-19 on families, and 2 significant issues emerged from parents' responses about the sharing of child care. One related to the impact of working from home and the other related to children's remote schooling.

Working from home created opportunities as well as challenges. One of the positive impacts of working from home was that there could be more time for family and household tasks with the reduction in commuting time. More flexibility, in terms of when and where parents worked could also enable more sharing of child care. There was also the potential for each parent's work in the home to become more visible to the other, improving awareness and helping to form the basis of discussions or changes in behaviour.

While some parents experienced these positive impacts, for others, working from home became a signal for being available to do more of the child care (and/or housework). This may have worked successfully in some families, where both parents were able to find an equitable sharing of tasks, relative to employment obligations. However, other families experienced this in a gendered way, particularly when workplace flexibility was more available to mothers than fathers. In situations where mothers worked part time and fathers full time, even if both were working from home, some mothers found that their part-time work was seen to be less important and more easily done concurrently with caring for children.

Children's remote learning was a particular challenge for families to manage. Where parents were working from home and working full-time hours, this posed challenges and, indeed, some made changes to their work to better manage this. There was again a gendered pattern to the provision of support, being more often done by mothers or shared between mothers and fathers. However, compared to other kinds of child care tasks, this one saw a greater involvement of fathers.

7. Summary and implications

This report has explored sharing child care within opposite-sex couple families using the 4 Families in Australia Surveys conducted in 2020 and 2021. This section returns to the aims of the report with findings brought together under each of the questions set out in the introduction. A final subsection reflects on the implications for families.

7.1 The diversity of ways parents share care

An aim of this work was to find out how diverse the arrangements of parents are when it comes to sharing child care between partnered parents. We also sought to find out which families had a more equitable sharing of children's care. While, overall, research indicates a gendered distribution of care activities was to be expected (Baxter, 2015a; Baxter, Campbell, & Lee, 2023; Craig & Mullan, 2010; Craig & Mullan, 2011; Craig et al., 2010), we also know that families are diverse, and some families have found ways that involve more equal sharing of care or having fathers provide more of the care (e.g. as in the case of stay-at-home father families, Baxter, 2018; Doucet & Merla, 2007; Kramer, Kelly, & McCulloch, 2013). This report has delved into ways parents share child care using multivariate analysis of survey responses, as well as exploring the qualitative data collected in the surveys.

Throughout the report the gendered patterns of sharing child care were clear in looking after children, the organising and planning and helping with remote schooling. That is, the mother's role in taking on these activities

was often greater than that of the father's. However, there was also diversity, and while mothers take on a greater role in most families, there was a sizeable proportion of parents who shared the child care roles.

While it was also much less likely that fathers were the main ones always or usually doing these child-related activities in couple families, again, acknowledging the diversity is important. There are families that have adjusted their ways of working such that fathers have taken on more of the caring role than mothers (consistent with the literature on stay-at-home fathers, cited above). AIFS research using population-level data on parental employment patterns shows the stay-at-home father scenario reflects about 4% of couple families with children (Baxter, 2023).

The classifications used to describe the sharing of child care activities simplify the varied ways that families manage roles within the home. It may have been easy for some parents to align how they shared tasks with one category where there was a clear division of roles. Where there was more ambiguity, there may be more variation in parents' decision to classify the care as 'usually' done by themselves or their partner or 'me and my spouse/partner about equally'. It is likely, for example, that reporting the care was shared reflects spending similar hours on child care tasks for some parents. For others, the response of 'about equally' might also take account of paid work hours.

One common explanation for why care roles were 'usually' done by one parent, with the other parent occasionally providing some help, was that the father had significant work commitments but who would do what he could outside those work hours. From other research, we know that mothers and fathers often do different kinds of child care tasks, and that when fathers are looking after children, mothers are very often also present (Craig, 2006). Findings from this report are consistent with this.

According to parents' descriptions, equal sharing often came from parents actively working towards this as a goal, and sometimes both parents having to make work adjustments to enable this. More equal division of parenting tasks was found in all sorts of families. The multivariate analysis as well as the comments by parents showed variation by parents' work arrangements as well as age of youngest child, with sharing of child care activities more likely as children grew older and more likely when parents' work hours were more evenly aligned.

Comments by parents revealed some of the other variations were related to differences in gender norms about parenting and challenges in accessing family-friendly work arrangements, discussed further below.

It is worth noting that the gendered arrangements in caring for children were common, and clearly inequitable if assessed based on how many hours each spent in these activities. However, parents themselves often expressed such arrangements as fair, as the assessment was relative to other contributions made to the family. With fathers often the main 'breadwinner' and working longer hours in paid work, for many families this was an arrangement that worked for them at the time. This is consistent with research that explores parents' sense of fairness in child care and other household work (e.g. Koster et al., 2022), which shows that the distribution does not have to be equal to be perceived as fair. We note that such assessments of fairness may shift with time, particularly if mothers want to spend more time in paid work and yet find it difficult to alter the sharing of child care and housework.

7.2 Sharing the mental load of parenting

Following the prompting by survey respondents in 2020, we added new questions for 2021 to ask about the mental load of parenting. In each of the surveys, respondents noted that managing tasks associated with child raising was separate to more 'traditional' measures of looking after children. A point about these tasks is that they are often invisible. The measure used here focuses on the planning and organising, rather than the emotional element of the mental load (see Dean et al., 2022).

Compared to the sharing of looking after children, the mental load was even more gendered. While there was more sharing of the mental load with increased age of youngest child and more balanced work arrangements, the impact of both these characteristics on the degree of sharing was weaker than what it was for looking after children. For example, sharing of the mental load was the same in families with mothers who were not working and those with mothers working part time when fathers worked full-time hours. In survey responses, there was significant frustration and dissatisfaction with the lack of sharing of the mental load tasks. Frustration came from the time and energy this set of tasks required, as well as an inability to shift the sharing of these tasks.

These findings are consistent with research on mothers' time use, work-family strain and multi-tasking. Mothers' typically feel more rushed than fathers, and this relates to their multi-tasking while doing child care, housework, paid work or leisure (Craig & Brown, 2017; Offer, 2014). Taking care of the mental load of parenting is part of this. Dean and colleagues (2022) refer to the 'boundarylessness' of mental labour. This means it permeates all

times and activities. This is unlike the notion of the 'second shift' (Hochschild, 1989) – the unpaid tasks done by mothers outside of paid work hours.

7.3 COVID-19 and the sharing of child care

One of the research questions asked if the sharing of child care changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the analysis found that in May–June 2020, compared to 'before COVID', fathers were more involved in sharing the child care tasks. However, this remained a small minority of fathers that were reported to always or usually do the child care activities. This higher proportion was not sustained, as in the 2021 surveys it returned to its lower levels.

There was some increase in the proportion reporting that child care tasks were shared in 2021 compared to 2020. Of course, this is still within the span of time in which parents were affected by COVID-19 restrictions (and remote schooling), and along with cautions about the differing samples in each of the Families in Australia Surveys, it is unwise to use these data to suggest there has been a significant change in caring patterns.

The qualitative data revealed very mixed experiences of COVID-19 and sharing child care. On the positive side, there were families reporting that increased flexibility of work hours (including location) and even enforced working from home offered more opportunities to share the child care. Some found being at home together increased awareness of the other's roles and activities, and that led to improvements in the sharing of tasks. Of course, this was not always the case, and others had more negative experiences in which the tasks at home remained gendered – so remained the mother's responsibility – even when work arrangements changed.

7.4 Children's remote learning

Parents with one or more child in remote learning for a time found they had to juggle their own work with the potential supervision of students' learning. As reported in Baxter and Evans-Whipp (2022), experiences of this were varied, depending on the needs of the children and the support provided by schools and teachers. Where parents were needed, as with the other measures explored, mothers more often helped with remote schooling than fathers. It was the least gendered of the measures, with more fathers being responsible for this and more sharing of this task between parents.

The Families in Australia Survey asked parents if they had changed their work to manage remote schooling or other child care needs. Mothers had more often made changes, especially to where and when they worked. Mothers were also more likely to have taken leave and adjusted their work hours. Very few reported they stopped working.

7.5 Parents' reasons for child care roles

As reported throughout this research there are varied reasons for the gendered nature of sharing the child care tasks. Parental work patterns and age of youngest child are key factors in describing how and why care is shared.

Among 'stay at home' mothers, there was a view that they should do more of the child care if they had chosen to take on this role. A specific case was that of mothers on parental leave. A number of these mothers explained their patterns of care quite clearly, reflecting that they would do more while on leave, given the father was at work full time. Broader research findings show the strong gendered patterns at this life stage. It is at the transition to first parenthood that gendered roles first appear in many couples. With new parenthood, mothers, but not fathers, reduce time in paid work and increase time on unpaid housework and caring (Baxter, Campbell, & Lee, 2023). It was overwhelmingly mothers who reported being on parental leave and therefore doing more child care in this study. There was, however, a sense of concern from some of these mothers who were unsure about how (or if) roles would change when they went back to work.

Consistent with the concerns of new parents, mothers who had returned to work sometimes reported challenges. Some had been the primary carer since the child's birth and had continued to be primarily responsible for child care even when work hours had changed. Others, though, had found balance through working with their partner to arrange work and home tasks to suit them both. Some found 'non-traditional' arrangements worked for them.

A key issue reported by many was that of workforce constraints and fathers' role as breadwinner. Long work hours, inflexible work and lack of access to family-related leave were issues noted by many referring to the barriers to the father being more involved in child care.

Another factor experienced in some families was prevailing attitudes about the roles of mothers and fathers. Some mothers found that their partner was not likely to take on caring tasks, given an attitude of such work being mothers' work, while the fathers' role is that of breadwinner.

7.6 Implications of this research

Decisions about parents' sharing child care are made within the family, so mothers and fathers will work out these roles. Many parents will go into new parenthood with expectations of how the care will be shared in their family. As seen in these findings, this will mostly reflect quite gendered patterns. Mothers and fathers may benefit from having opportunities to discuss their roles as parents, and the ways they will balance work and care in the months and years after becoming parents. New parents' classes are one way this might happen. In this research, the parents who shared roles equally often mentioned having actively worked towards this, changing work to make it happen. This typically involved having discussions and agreeing on expected roles and how work and care would be balanced.

This research showed that frustrations exist in families where partners' views about roles in the home are not aligned, and/or when workplaces are not providing opportunities for fathers to be involved. These situations cause stress on mothers' capacity to work, or work longer hours, and put strains on relationships.

The first transition to parenthood is a key one for couples, being the point at which gendered roles typically start (Baxter, Campbell, & Lee, 2023). Fathers taking leave and contributing to the day-to-day care activities early on can set up patterns that contribute beyond the leave period, helping parents to find a balance that continues as children grow older. Families' use of the government-funded Parental Leave Pay (PLP) is one important opportunity for fathers to be involved in child care after the birth. Whether using PLP or employer-provided leave, having workplace policies and a culture that actively supports fathers to take leave is also important. In many workplaces, there are barriers to fathers' access to and take-up of leave and flexible work practices and this then affects roles within the home.

The gendered nature of sharing child care has implications for mothers' employment. While we have seen there are many examples of mothers having intentionally withdrawn from or reduced hours in paid work to better manage caring responsibilities, this is not always the mothers' preferred choice. With mothers' employment more and more likely, parents will need to find ways of sharing roles within the home to support this. The quotes provided throughout this report highlight families that have found some balance through altering work arrangements or through more actively considering how child care roles can be shared. This includes sharing of the mental load. Having an approach which involves considering and looking for solutions appears to be an important step toward fathers taking on more of the child care.

As noted at the outset of this summary, decisions about the sharing of child care are ones made at the family level. However, the important contexts of workplace arrangements, access to leave and, more broadly, the social norms and expectations of parents and the roles they fulfil are important ones. Real changes are needed in some contexts, particularly in those workplaces that offer little flexibility to fathers. Continuing discussion of the challenges for parents managing their work and care responsibilities is an important direction to help surface the different ways families might find the balance that works for both parents.

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Appendix A: Data and detailed results

Sample characteristics

Table 1: Sample characteristics – couple respondents completing relevant questions

Respondent characteristics	Survey 1 (%)	Survey 2 (%)	Survey 3 (%)	Survey 4 (%)	Pooled (%)
Gender & relationship					
Female with male partner	84.8	87.3	84.7	87.2	85.3
Male with female partner	11.1	9.7	11.8	9.1	10.4
Same sex couple (female or male)	3.3	2.2	3.5	3.6	3.1
Other couples including not specified	0.8	0.8	1.7	1.8	1.2
Age of youngest child aged <18					
0 to 2 years	25.1	44.9	28.9	32.2	32.5
3 to 5 years	19.6	19.2	19.3	20.9	19.8
6 to 12 years	37.4	25.2	33.1	31.6	32.2
13 to 17 years	18.0	10.7	18.7	15.3	15.7
Age group of respondent					
18–34	16.2	34.7	19.0	23.1	23.0
35–44	48.9	45.2	46.9	48.0	47.5
45–54	30.3	18.1	29.7	24.6	25.7
55+	4.5	2.0	4.2	4.4	3.8
Highest education					
Bachelor degree or higher	75.4	71.8	75.7	72.2	73.8
Less than bachelor degree	24.6	28.2	24.3	27.8	26.2
All (sharing child care)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Sample number (N)					
<i>N sharing child care</i>	2,184	1,672	1,276	1,528	6,660
<i>N mental load</i>	N.A.	N.A.	1,211	1,444	2,655
<i>N remote learning</i>	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	936	936
<i>N provided a comment</i>	783	480	242	268	1,773

Notes: Percentages are calculated over the total answering the sharing child care question. Small numbers had missing values to these variables and they are omitted from calculations.

Multivariate analysis

Multivariate analysis was used to explore how responses to sharing child care questions varied with a range of respondent characteristics. The responses to each of the questions were first grouped into categories of 'always or usually the mother', 'shared' and 'always or usually the father'. Those who reported children looked after themselves or someone else looks after the children were excluded.

To analyse these categorical variables, multinomial logistic regression analysis was used. This method, and the model design, provides findings that highlight which characteristics were more often associated with the respondent saying the tasks were shared rather than being always or usually done by the mother. Similarly, the results show how such characteristics were associated with tasks being always or usually done by the father, rather than being done by the mother. The analysis can also be used for the comparison of sharing child care versus fathers doing the care but we have focused on the other two comparisons, given that the most common response was for mothers to provide the child care.

The models include family employment details and age of youngest child. Respondent details are gender, age group and education level. There is also an indicator for survey period, with looking after children having a time point for before COVID-19 as well as the survey period.

The results are presented as relative risk ratios. The risk ratio is the likelihood of one response (e.g. sharing child care), compared to the risk of the reference response (e.g. mother doing the child care), and the relative risk ratio indicates how this risk ratio varies across the characteristics included in the model. For a binary variable like gender of respondent, the relative risk ratio in the first column, 'Shared' below, shows how the likelihood of saying care is shared, rather than done by the mother, compares male respondents versus those who are female.³ Where the variable has more categories, the reference group is indicated in the table.

A relative risk ratio of greater than one indicates that this characteristic (e.g. being a male respondent) is associated with a greater likelihood of saying the child care was shared, rather than being done by the mother. Where the relative risk ratio is less than one, it indicates that this characteristic was associated with being more likely to choose the comparison response.

Table 2: Results of multivariate analysis of who looks after the children

Variable		Shared (vs Always or usually the mother)	Always or usually the father (vs Always or usually the mother)
		Relative risk ratio	Relative risk ratio
Couple work hours (Ref = Father FTW, mother NW)	Father FTW Mother PTW	2.8***	4.3***
	Both FTW	7.6***	17.2***
	Father PTW Mother FTW	2.4***	3.3
	Father PTW Mother PTW	10.4***	20.9***
	Father PTW Mother NW	12.9***	148.4***
	Father NW Mother FTW	8.3***	92.8***
	Father NW Mother PTW	8.7***	227.0***
	Neither working	7.3***	14.6***
Age of youngest child (years) (Ref = 0-2)	3-5	1.1	1.5*
	6-12	1.3**	2.2***
	13-17	1.4**	2.4***
Gender of respondent	Male	2.6***	7.4***
Age of respondent (Ref = Less than 35 years)	35-44	1.0	0.9
	45-54	0.9	0.7
	55 or more	0.7	0.5*
Respondent highest education	Bachelor degree or higher	1.2**	1.3*
Survey reference period (Ref = before COVID-19)	May-June 2020	1.0	1.7***
	Nov-Dec 2020	0.9	1.0
	May-June 2021	1.3***	1.0
	Nov-Dec 2021	1.4***	1.0
Constant		0.1***	0.0***

Notes: Fit using multinomial logistic regression. $N = 7,959$ (pooled data from 4 waves). Excludes those who reported children looked after themselves or someone else looks after the children. FTW = full time work; PTW = part-time work; NW = not working. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Source: Families in Australia Surveys, May-June 2020, Nov-Dec 2020, May-June 2021 and Nov-Dec 2021

³ We excluded the small number of respondents who were not male or female respondents.

Table 3: Results of multivariate analysis of who organises the activities for children

Variable		Shared (vs Always or usually the mother)	Always or usually the father (vs Always or usually the mother)
		Relative risk ratio	Relative risk ratio
Couple work hours	Father FTW Mother PTW	0.9	1.1
Ref = Father FTW, mother NW	Both FTW	1.6**	4.0*
	Father PTW Mother FTW	1.6	1.2
	Father PTW Mother PTW	1.9**	5.5*
	Father PTW Mother NW	2.2**	18.1***
	Father NW Mother FTW	1.3	3.5
	Father NW Mother PTW	2.2**	22.0***
	Neither working	1.9*	4.9
Age of youngest child (years)	3-5	0.9	1.2
(Ref = 0-2)	6-12	1.4*	3.0*
	13-17	2.2***	2.9
Gender of respondent	Male	5.1***	21.6***
Age of respondent	35-44	1.1	0.3**
(Ref = Less than 35 years)	45-54	1.1	0.4
	55 or more	0.6	0.4
Respondent highest education	Bachelor degree or higher	1.1	1.0
Survey reference period	Nov-Dec 2021	1.0	1.0
(Ref = May-June 2021)	Nov-Dec 2020		
Constant		0.1***	0.0***

Notes: This was fit using multinomial logistic regression. *N* = 2,623 from 2 surveys. Excludes those who reported no-one or someone else organised children's activities. FTW = full-time work; PTW = part-time work; NW = not working. **p* < .05; ***p* < .01; ****p* < .001

Source: Families in Australia Surveys, May-June 2021 and Nov-Dec 2021

Table 4: Results of multivariate analysis of who helped with remote learning

Variable		Shared (vs Always or usually the mother)	Always or usually the father (vs Always or usually the mother)
		Relative risk ratio	Relative risk ratio
Couple work hours (Ref = Father FTW, mother NW)	Father FTW Mother PTW	2.2*	1.4
	Both FTW	3.9***	4.7***
	Father PTW Mother FTW	14.7***	2.1
	Father PTW Mother PTW	9.4***	5.2**
	Father PTW Mother NW	8.5***	15.5***
	Father NW Mother FTW	3.9	10.5**
	Father NW Mother PTW	2.5	12.1***
	Neither working	3.4*	2.2
Age of youngest child (years) (Ref = 0-2)	3-5	0.8	0.5
	6-12	1.0	0.8
	13-17	1.3	0.7
Gender of respondent	Male	4.0***	9.7***
Age of respondent (Ref = Less than 35 years)	35-44	1.2	1.0
	45-54	1.7	0.8
	55 or more	0.9	1.0
Respondent highest education	Bachelor degree or higher	1.7*	1.3
Constant		0.1***	0.1***

Notes: Fit using multinomial logistic regression. $N = 851$ from one survey, families with a remote learning child. Excludes those who reported no-one or someone else helped with the remote learning. FTW = full-time work; PTW = part-time work; NW = not working. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Source: Families in Australia Survey, Nov-Dec 2021