

Work, life and family balance

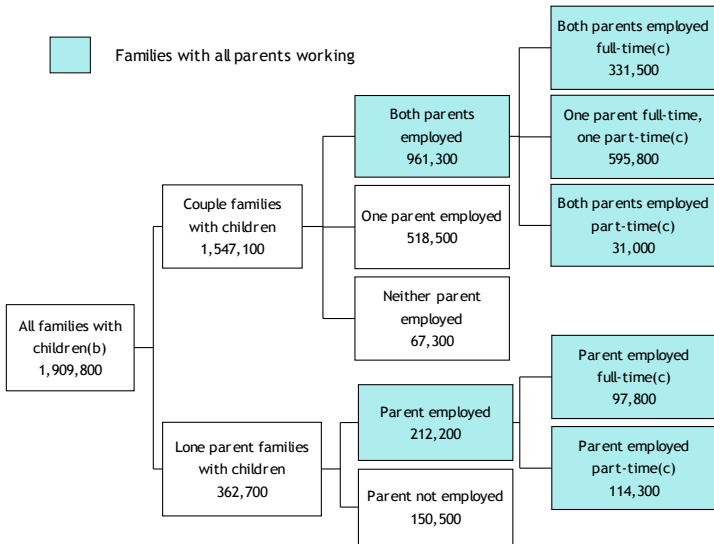
Parents who are working can face challenges in balancing their work and child-rearing responsibilities, particularly while their children are young. Achieving this balance is important for the wellbeing of parents and their children.¹

The participation of parents in paid work is important for both the Australian economy (in terms of having enough workers into the future given Australia's ageing population) and a parent's individual wellbeing. Parents' participation in employment can also affect their feelings of social inclusion, provide opportunities for social interaction outside the family and help them to maintain attachment to the workforce. Parents' participation in paid work may depend upon their access to certain working conditions such as part-time work, as well as access to formal and informal child care.

Working parents

According to the Survey of Employment Arrangements, Retirement and Superannuation, in 2007 there were 1.5 million couple families with children and about 360,000 lone parent families with children (see the *data sources and definitions box* for details on these families).

Labour force status of parents with children aged under 15 years(a) – 2007



- (a) In households containing one family only (see *data sources and definitions box* for details).
- (b) Around 80% of these families contain children aged under 15 only and no older children.
- (c) Excludes people whose part-time/full-time status could not be determined.

Source: ABS 2007 Survey of Employment Arrangements, Retirement and Superannuation

Data sources and definitions

The information in this article comes from the 2007 Survey of Employment Arrangements, Retirement and Superannuation.

For the purposes of this article *children* refers to all people who are younger than 15 years and are living in a family.

Families include:

- *Couple families with children*, comprising two people living together as a couple, with at least one child aged under 15 years usually living in the same household.
- *Lone parent families*, in which one parent usually lives with at least one child (aged under 15 years).

In examining working arrangements of families, this article focuses on households which contain one family only. Households which contain multiple families (such as grandparents, parents and children) or other unrelated people have been excluded from the analysis so that the working arrangements used to balance work and family life, particularly child rearing, can be understood in the context of this particular set of family circumstances. Other analyses may focus on the use of extended or multiple families living in the same household, or raising children with care provided by more than one household.

Contributing family workers and owner-managers are excluded when examining parents' working arrangements, paid leave and access to flexible working conditions, and time pressures on parents, but included elsewhere in the analysis.

Employed full-time refers to people who usually work 35 hours or more a week (in all jobs) and others who, although usually working less than 35 hours a week, worked 35 hours or more during the week of the survey.

Employed part-time refers to people who usually work less than 35 hours a week (in all jobs) and who either did so during the week of the survey, or were not at work during that week.

The most common arrangement for couple families with children was for both parents to work (62% of couple families). Often, where both parents were working, one worked full-time and the other part-time. This was the case in around three-fifths of couple families where both parents worked, and in almost all these cases, it was the mother who was working part-time (95%). For those couple families with young children (i.e. the youngest child was aged under five years) it was more common for only one parent to work full-time, with mothers less likely to be in paid work.

In 2007, lone parent families were most likely to be lone mother families (93%). Around 60% of all lone parents were working. Similar proportions were working full-time and part-time. Lone parents were more likely to be working full-time if their youngest child was of school age (5–14 years) than if their child was younger (47% compared with 40%). For many lone parent families there is also a non-resident parent, who could be working and contributing financially to the family, and who may also provide help in caring for the child.

Parents' working arrangements

In 2007, in about half of all couple families with both parents working, one or both parents worked variable hours or were on call. Working at night was also a feature of working life for many parents. In nearly 60% of couple families, one or both parents usually worked some hours between 7pm and 7am.

Putting in extra hours at work (paid or unpaid) was the usual practice for one parent in 41% of cases, and both parents in 17% of cases, among couples with children. Working extra hours was especially common in families where both parents were employed full-time. One or both parents usually worked extra hours in 70% of these families, however relatively few were doing this to increase their income (12% of those who were paid for their extra hours). People were mainly working extra hours to get the work done and meet deadlines.

At least one parent usually worked some hours from home in 63% of couple families where both parents were working. Some parents worked from home to balance work and caring responsibilities, while for others it was a way to catch up on work or meet deadlines.

Working arrangements such as shift work and weekend work are often a condition of work in specific occupations such as nursing and retail. Working a combination of weekdays and weekends (although not necessarily every day of the week) was a common working arrangement for many families. In 2007, just over half of all couple families where both parents were working had this arrangement for one (41%) or both (15%) parents. One-third of working lone parents usually worked a combination of weekdays and weekends.

Paid leave and access to flexible working conditions

Working arrangements such as part-time work, flexible hours and paid carers leave may help parents juggle paid work and family responsibilities.

Types of paid leave and job flexibility

In the 2007 Survey of Employment Arrangements, Retirement and Superannuation, questions about paid leave entitlements were only asked of employees (excluding owner managers of incorporated enterprises). These questions were not asked of owner managers because people who work in their own business are generally thought to have more control over their working arrangements, so questions about access to paid leave may be less relevant for this group of people.

The term *access to leave* refers to whether or not the parent is entitled to the specified leave. A parent may or may not be able to make use of these entitlements.

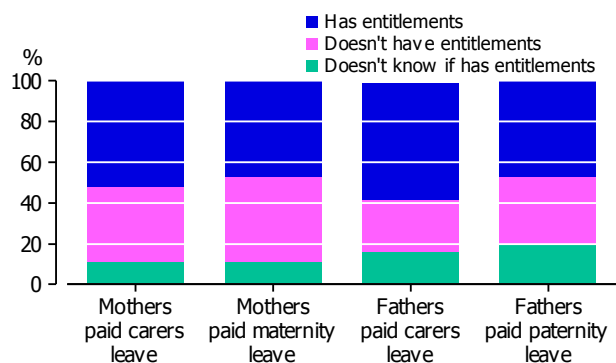
For the purposes of this article, information on paid leave relates to the parent's main job and the analysis about leave entitlements is restricted to:

- working couple families, that is where both parents were working as employees in their main job (571,900 or 60% of all couple families with children and both parents working); and
- lone parent families where the parent was an employee in their main job (184,700 or 87% of working lone parent families).

In 2007, both parents were entitled to paid holiday and sick leave in two-thirds of working couple families, with very few families in a situation where neither parent was entitled to such leave. Compared with couple families, lone parent families were slightly less likely to have access to paid holiday (62%) and sick leave (61%). However, some parents who do not have paid holiday or sick leave entitlements may be compensated for this in the form of higher pay rates.

While most people are entitled to paid holiday and sick leave, fewer people have access to leave which is specifically aimed at helping parents balance work and family life, such as carers leave. While most people knew whether they were entitled to paid holiday and sick leave, in quite a few cases, people did not know

Parents in couple families(a), access to paid carers and maternity/paternity leave – 2007



(a) Where both parents were working as employees (excluding owner-managers and contributing family workers).

Source: ABS 2007 Survey of Employment Arrangements, Retirement and Superannuation

whether or not they had access to paid carers leave or maternity/paternity leave. For example, 9% of mothers in working couple families didn't know whether they had access to paid carers leave.

In 2007, both parents in just over one-third of working couple families had access to paid carers leave, while in 12% of cases neither parent had access. Where only one parent had access to paid carers leave, fathers were more likely to have access than mothers, reflecting the fact that fathers were more likely than mothers to be working full-time and less likely to be casuals.

Both parents had access to paid maternity/paternity leave in just over one-quarter of working couple families (26%). In cases where just one parent in the couple had access to paid maternity/paternity leave, mothers and fathers were almost equally entitled (just over one-fifth of mothers and fathers).

In lone parent families, 42% of working parents had access to paid carers leave while 44% did not. The remaining 14% didn't know whether they had access. Similarly, 37% of lone parents had paid maternity/paternity leave entitlements, while almost half (48%) did not.

Working arrangements used by parents to provide care(a) – 2007

	Mothers %	Fathers %
<i>Had time off work to provide care(b)</i>		
Unpaid leave	35.6	23.1
Paid holiday leave	22.7	25.8
Paid carer's leave	18.2	24.2
Flexible working hours	14.8	17.7
Informal arrangements	13.9	*9.9
Other paid leave	*11.5	*11.7
Total ('000)	107.6	67.8
<i>Did not have time off work to provide care(c)</i>		
Flexible working hours	53.9	54.2
Took children into work	23.4	14.1
Working from home	22.3	*14.0
Total ('000)	76.7	81.4

* estimate has a relative standard error of 25% to 50% and should be used with caution

- (a) Parents of a child/children under 15 years, who provided care to someone in the household in the week prior to the survey.
 (b) Estimates do not add to 100% as people could have used one or more arrangements.
 (c) Estimates do not add to 100% as only selected arrangements are shown.

Source: ABS 2007 Survey of Employment Arrangements, Retirement and Superannuation

Working arrangements and care

The 2007 Survey of Employment Arrangements, Retirement and Superannuation (SEARS) asked people whether they had taken time off work to provide care to someone in their household in the week before the survey. They were asked about the working arrangements used to provide care, but the module did not clarify who they provided this care to. For example, if a parent who provided care to both their own child(ren), and to someone else in their household, said that they used working arrangements to care, it is not clear for which caring role the working arrangements were used.

For more information see [Employment Arrangements, Retirement and Superannuation, April to July 2007](#) (ABS cat. no. 6361.0) and [User Guide: Employment Arrangements, Retirement and Superannuation, Australia, April to July 2007](#) (ABS cat. no. 6361.0.55.002).

In addition to paid leave entitlements, flexible working arrangements can also be important for parents. In 2007, either one or both parents in almost all working couple families were able to choose when they took holiday leave (96%). In many couple families, one or both parents were able to work extra time in exchange for time off (71%), or had a say in their start and finish times at work (72%).

When compared with couple families, lone parent families were slightly less likely to have a say in when they could take holidays (82%). They were much less likely to have a say in their start and finish times (45%) or to be able to work extra hours in exchange for time off (48%).

...use of work arrangements to provide care

In 2007, 14% of the 2.4 million parents who worked as employees had used some form of working arrangement to provide care to someone in their household in the week prior to the survey (16% of mothers and 12% of fathers). Parents did not necessarily have to take time off work to care. Around 55% of fathers who provided care did not take time off work, compared with 42% of mothers. Parents who did not take time off work to provide care used working arrangements such as flexible working hours and working from home to meet their caring and work responsibilities. For those parents who did take time off work to provide care, unpaid leave (31%) was the most common working arrangement used.

Child care arrangements

Many families with young children use some type of child care arrangement to make it easier for parents to work or do other things. Parents may also use child care to give children the chance to interact with other children and adults. Whether parents choose to use child

Impact on work: caring for children

Caring for children is reported as a barrier to looking for work by some women. The 2008 Survey of Persons not in the Labour Force estimated that there were 479,100 women who wanted to work but were not actively looking for work, and were available to start work within four weeks if suitable child care arrangements were available. Of these, 134,600 women said caring for children was the main reason they were not actively looking for work. Typically these women:

- were aged 25–44 years (82%)
- had a husband or partner (78%)
- had a youngest child aged 0–2 years (58%).

Some of these women prefer to look after their own children while others are unable to find suitable child care. For over half (55%) of these women the main 'caring for children' reasons for not looking for work were related to barriers associated with finding suitable child care (for example, there was no child care nearby, no child care available at all, it was too expensive, or the quality of the child care was unsuitable). For the remainder, the reasons were either related to 'personal choice' (e.g. they prefer to look after their children) – 40% – or were unknown (other child care reasons) – 5%.

care may depend to some extent on their perception of the quality, affordability and accessibility of formal child care services, availability of informal sources of care such as grandparents, and their personal preferences.

In 2007, most couple families who had young children (aged four years and under) used some form of child care where both parents were working (83%). Almost all employed lone parents with a young child used some form of child care.

The most commonly used sources of child care for working couple families with young children were a child's grandparent(s) (43% of families used grandparents for at least some of the care) and long day-care centres (38%), followed by family day-care centres (12%). Employed lone parents with young children who used child care commonly used long day-care centres (57%). About 40% used the child's grandparent(s) to provide at least some of the care.

Use of child care by working families, in the week prior to the survey – 2007

Used child care in the week prior to the survey	Couple families: both parents employed			Lone parent families: parent employed		
	Youngest child aged under 5 years %	Youngest child aged 5-14 years %	Total %	Youngest child aged under 5 years %	Youngest child aged 5-14 years %	Total %
Used child care						
Used formal child care only	26.7	7.7	15.6	22.6	*6.8	9.9
Used informal child care only	28.4	28.3	28.3	21.8	41.1	37.4
Used formal and informal child care	27.7	5.9	15.0	51.6	10.8	18.7
Total used child care	82.8	41.9	59.0	96.1	58.8	66.0
Did not use child care	17.2	58.1	41.0	4.0	41.2	34.0
Total families	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Type of child care used(a)						
Long day-care centre	38.3	n.p.	n.p.	57.4	n.p.	n.p.
Family day-care	12.0	*0.8	5.5	14.8	*2.1	4.6
Before and/or after school care	9.6	10.9	10.4	11.4	13.2	12.8
Child's grandparent(s)	42.7	17.8	28.2	39.7	22.6	25.9
Child's other parent not living in household	*1.4	*1.5	1.5	21.5	15.3	16.5
Child's brother/sister	*1.3	5.7	3.9	4.4	8.9	8.1
Other(b)	22.3	14.7	17.9	33.1	19.1	21.8
	'000	'000	'000	'000	'000	'000
Total families(c)	391.0	544.1	935.1	38.9	161.8	200.7

* estimate has a relative standard error of 25% to 50% and should be used with caution

** estimate has a relative standard error of greater than 50% and is considered too unreliable for general use

n.p. not published

(a) Proportions do not add to 100% as people can use more than one sort of child care.

(b) Includes school holiday care program, occasional care centre, other relatives, friends/neighbours and paid carer.

(c) Excludes a small number of families for whom information on child care arrangements was not collected.

Source: ABS 2007 Survey of Employment Arrangements, Retirement and Superannuation

The use of child care was less common in families with school-aged children (aged 5–14 years). About 42% of working couple families with school aged children used child care, with most of these using informal care. The main sources of child care for couple families with school-aged children were grandparents (18%), and before/after school care (11%).

Lone parents with school-aged children were more likely than couple families (with children the same age) to use child care, with 59% of employed lone parents using some form of care – most commonly informal child care only. Close to one-quarter (23%) of employed lone parents with school-aged children used a grandparent of the child to provide some of the care. Others used a child's non-resident parent (15%), before/after school care (13%) or a sibling of the child (9%) for child care purposes.

How do parents spend their time?

The way that parents spend their time depends largely on their personal and family circumstances and preferences. It's affected by whether they're a lone parent or partnered, working, and the age of their youngest child, as well as by whether they are a mother or father.

The following analysis is based on the 2006 Time Use Survey and compares a broader range of families than the previous analysis.

...spending time with children

Parents who weren't in paid work spent more time on child care activities than parents who were employed. Parents also spent more time caring for their children, and less time in paid work, in the years before their children started school.

Lone parents who weren't employed spent around 25 hours a week on child care activities in 2006. When the youngest child was aged under five, lone parents who were not in paid work spent around 34 hours a week on child care, compared with around 19 hours a week when the child was aged 5–14. Lone parents working part-time spent 16 hours a week on child care – this was substantially more when the youngest child was aged under five (30 hours a week), than if the youngest child was aged 5–14 (around 12 hours a week). The average time spent on child care fell to 10 hours a week for those lone parents who were working full-time.

In couple families, on average, mothers spent more time on child care activities than fathers. In couple families where both parents worked, mothers spent on average, around 19 hours a week caring for their children, while fathers spent around half that time (8 hours). When both parents were employed full-time, mothers spent 17 hours and fathers spent 8 hours caring

Measuring time spent on activities

The ABS 2006 Time Use Survey collected information on the time people spent on a range of activities. People who participated were asked to keep a diary record of their activities (including the nature, duration and timing) over two days.

Data from the Time Use Survey can be based on either the *participant average* or the *all person average*. The analysis in this article is based on the *all person average*. This is the total time for an activity divided by the total relevant population such as parents (or a sub-group of that population). It can be used to compare groups and assess time use patterns over a longer period, such as a week.

Any activity that respondents described as their 'main activity' at a given time was recorded as a *primary activity*. If it was 'something else they were doing at the same time', it was recorded as a *secondary activity*. All data in this article refers to a person's *primary activity*.

A substantial amount of time spent on child care activities is recorded as a secondary activity. That is, parents may be looking after their children (secondary activity), while preparing the family meal or cleaning the house (primary activity). When taking secondary activities into account, the time a parent spends on child care increases, but the overall trends do not change. For example, in couple families in which both parents were employed, fathers spent an average of 28 hours a week on child care (compared with 8 hours as a primary activity), while mothers spent over 57 hours a week (compared with 19 hours).

For more information, see [How Australians Use Their Time](#) (ABS cat. no. 4153.0).

for their children. In families where one parent – usually the mother – was working part-time and the other full-time, mothers spent 19 hours caring for their children and fathers spent 8 hours.

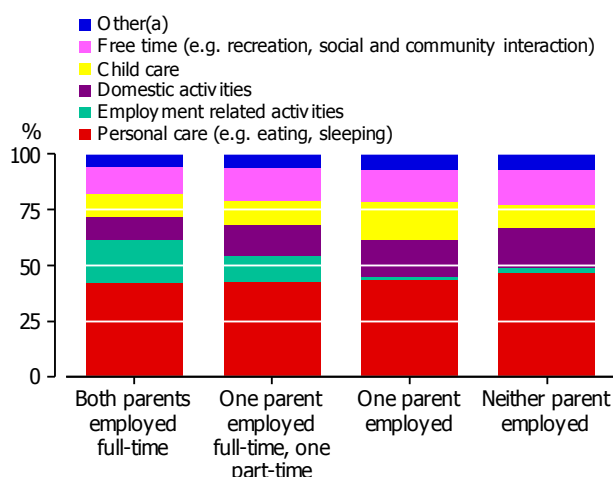
Where both parents were working, mothers spent much more time on child care when their youngest child was under five (27 hours a week), than if they were aged 5–14 (11 hours).

Although on average mothers are likely to spend more time on child care activities, they spend much less time in paid work than fathers. In couple families where both parents were employed, fathers spent around twice as many hours per week (50 hours) as mothers (24) on employment related activities. For fathers, time spent in paid work was not affected by the age of youngest child in the family, whereas mothers spent more hours in paid work when their youngest child was aged over five (28 hours) than if their youngest child was under five (19).

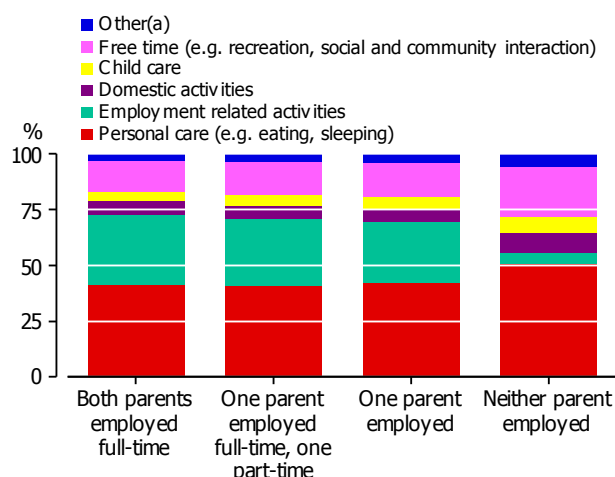
In those couple families where only one parent (usually the father) was in paid work, mothers spent on average 28 hours a week on child care, while fathers spent around 9 hours a week.

Time spent on primary activities, parents in couple families – 2006

MOTHERS



FATHERS



(a) Includes activities such as purchasing goods and services, education and voluntary work and care.

Source: ABS 2006 Time Use Survey

...free time

There was no significant difference between the hours that mothers spent on free time overall, compared with fathers. In couple families where at least one parent was employed, mothers and fathers spent around 24 hours a week on their free time. In those couple families where no parent was employed, parents spent about 32 hours a week on free time. Lone parents spent around 27 hours a week on free time.

Time pressures on parents

The need to balance work, family and other activities and commitments can result in increased time pressure and stress for parents. This may have negative consequences for their mental and physical health, which can then affect their relationships with others.

In 2007, in 82% of couple families with children under 15 where both parents were employed, one or both parents always or often felt rushed or pressed for time. Partners in couple families where there were no children under 15 and both people were working were less likely to feel rushed or pressed for time (one or both partners always or often felt rushed or pressed for time in 67% of cases). In employed lone parent families with a child aged under 15, around two-thirds of parents always or often felt rushed or pressed for time, while just over half (53%) of all lone parents without dependent children (aged under 15) felt rushed.

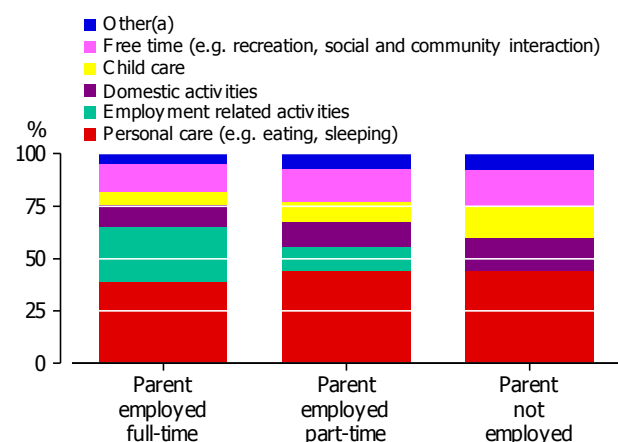
Mothers in couple families tended to feel rushed or pressed for time more often than fathers, regardless of their, or their partners, employment status.

...why parents feel pressed for time

Trying to achieve a balance between work and family is one of the main reasons parents who are working feel rushed or pressed for time. In 2007, in couple families where both parents were working, around half (49%) of fathers and two-thirds of mothers (67%) who felt rushed said this was a result of trying to balance work and family responsibilities. In couple families where one parent, often the father, was employed, 44% of fathers and 12% of mothers gave this reason for always/often feeling rushed or pressed for time.

The need to balance work and family is not the only reason parents feel rushed or pressed for time. In those couple families where neither parent worked, one or both parents felt rushed in 66% of cases, with the demands of family being cited by 65% of mothers and 34% of

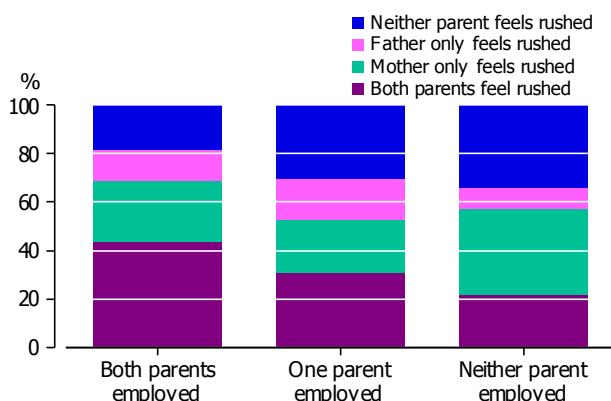
Time spent on primary activities, lone parents – 2006



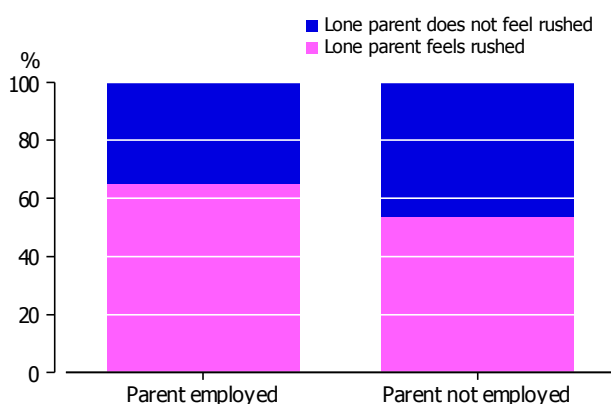
(a) Includes activities such as purchasing goods and services, education and voluntary work and care.

Source: ABS 2006 Time Use Survey

Whether parents always or often feel rushed or pressed for time, couple families – 2007



Whether lone parents always or often feel rushed or pressed for time – 2007



Source: ABS 2007 Survey of Employment Arrangements, Retirement and Superannuation

fathers in these families as the main reason. For mothers in these families, another commonly cited reason for feeling rushed was too much to do/too many demands on them (14%).

As with couple families, the reasons lone parents always or often felt rushed or pressed for time varied according to whether or not they were working. Most lone parents who were working and felt rushed, were rushed as a result of trying to balance work and family responsibilities (73%). For those lone parents who were not in paid work, 55% cited the demands of family as the main reason they felt rushed or pressed for time, while around 22% said that having too much to do/too many demands placed on them was the reason.

Having children is not the only reason people may feel rushed or pressed for time. Many people who did not have children under 15 felt rushed or pressed for time as a result of the pressures of work and study, or having too much to do/too many demands.

Whether or not people feel rushed or pressed for time not only relates to the activities they, or their family, partake in, but also the services that are available to people to help them

manage their time (such as appropriate public transport services or facilities available in their locality).

Looking ahead

Finding ways to balance work and family life is often challenging. In 2007, many women did not have access to paid maternity leave. This will change in 2011, with the introduction of a means-tested parental leave system. Other recent changes may also have an impact on how many parents have access to flexible work arrangements in future. For example, the *Fair Work Act*, which took effect in July 2009, gives parents and other people caring for young children the right to make formal requests for flexible work arrangements. The Act allows employers to refuse such requests only on reasonable business grounds.

Endnotes

- 1 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Striking the Balance: Women, men, work and family*, Discussion paper 2005, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney, NSW.