

# The Standing Committee on Family & Human Services

## Inquiry into Balancing Work & Family

To: The Secretary of the Committee

SUBMISSION NO. 72

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From: Ms Jane Barrow

[REDACTED]

I wish to provide a submission to the Inquiry into Balancing Work & Family.

I am a mother of two children aged 8 and 10, and speak with the experience of someone who has reasonably successfully balanced work and family life so far. Over the last 10 years I have had to deal with many issues and I hope that you will find my submission constructive.

I worked full time until my first child arrived. I then took maternity leave and returned to work part time after 9 months. I had 10 months of maternity leave after my second child was born and again returned to work part time. I returned to full time work when my youngest child was 2 years old. I have also experienced family breakdown, which raises even more issues with balancing work and family.

I am fortunate enough to have an employer who was willing to be very flexible, and this has had a significantly positive effect on my ability to manage the issues, however, there are many people who are not in such a fortunate position.

I would be happy to provide any further information.

### **1. the financial, career and social disincentives to starting families;**

The most obvious financial disincentive to starting a family is the loss of one income, for a period of time. However, a complete break from work for the mother is necessary following the birth of a child for up to 12 months. It depends on the how the child is developing, and the ability of the parents to cope with the various demands of the children (eg feeding, sleeping) as to when the mother is physically able to return to work. This is why it is necessary to mandate a period of maternity leave for mothers to guarantee that their jobs are still there when they are physically able to return to them.

However, once they are able to return it is still very difficult to manage if both parents work full time before the children are school age. This is not only because of the cost of childcare, but because of the needs and demands of the child, and the fact that most parents want to be able to see their preschool children more than just on weekends, and the 20 minutes after they get home from work before the child falls asleep.

However, having a complete break from the workforce until your child is school age, creates a significant barrier to re-entry into the workforce as technology and work practices change so quickly.

If we want to encourage parents to return to the workforce after they have started a family, they need to be encouraged to stay in the workforce, even minimally part time, during their children's pre-school years in order to eliminate the significant barrier which is created by a lengthy break from the workforce.

There is a lot of concern that using childcare is effectively paying other people to raise your children. However, there are degrees, and my view is that a moderate amount of time in child care per week is not going to be detrimental to the children, and in fact may very well be beneficial to the child's development. Surely all parents have their children minded by a relative or friend at some time anyway, this is part of the process of teaching children independence from the parents prior to attending school.

However, it cannot be guaranteed that parents have access to relatives to assist with childcare due to the fact that they may well not live nearby, or they may well be working themselves. People are now being encouraged to work past the age of 65, which reduces the availability of grandparents to assist with childcare.

If both parents are able to achieve flexible work arrangements then this reduces the burden on the childcare system and/or the relatives.

It is more or less accepted that women want to be able to work part time and have flexible work arrangements after they have children, even though this is by no means guaranteed. But, it is still NOT generally considered acceptable for men to do so. This needs to change.

Workplace culture needs to encourage both parents to take an active role with their young families by providing opportunities for flexible working arrangements, without this affecting a parents career development opportunities.

## **2. making it easier for parents who so wish to return to the paid workforce; and**

The cost of childcare is a particularly significant barrier to a low income earning parent, when their partner is more highly paid. These parents can find that the hourly rate that they pay for childcare is more than their hourly pay rate, because childcare benefit is assessed on the family income. This obviously discourages these parents from working at all while their children are preschool age, and perpetuates that barrier to re-entry that occurs because they will have had a significant break from the workforce until their child goes to school.

While the cost of childcare has been mentioned as a significant barrier to returning to the workforce, that is not the case with a low income earning family, who in reality pay very little.

It has been suggested that childcare is made tax deductible. Another alternative is to assess childcare benefit against one income only, not the total family income.

While I have discussed the need for flexibility in work arrangements, there is also a need for flexibility in childcare arrangements. In my experience there has been very little flexibility, so you end up having to pay for more hours of care than you need in order to get the flexibility, which obviously increases the cost even more. For example, I had to pay for care every Friday to keep the place available when in fact I only worked every second Friday. This was a significant cost as I received very little Child Care benefit.

Managing the first year at kindergarten is also extremely difficult as the child attends kinder for a few hours in the day then needs to be transported to childcare or vice versa. Most parents find this is just too hard to manage while working, and also that they may well have to pay childcare costs while the child is

at kindergarten to keep their place available. Some parent's do not send their children to kindergarten for this reason.

There is also virtually no childcare available for parents who work outside normal business hours. This is a big issue for sole parents.

When childcare places are scarce there is also an issue with who gets priority. I have found that parents who wanted full time care had preference over those who only wanted part time care. This should not be the case.

I have also seen parents using childcare for respite care, not work related care. This may be acceptable in some circumstances and for short periods, but I have seen some abuse of the system where parents who do not work (and were not looking for work) and therefore receive their childcare for virtually nothing, put their children in care every day. Preference should be given to those who need childcare because they work, while they are looking for work, studying or can demonstrate a real need for respite care.

### **3. the impact of taxation and other matters on families in the choices they make in balancing work and family life.**

Encouraging both parents to return to work after starting a family also puts them both in a much better position to cope with the financial effects of a family breakdown, which is a significant issue.

If both parents are undertaking some form of paid work then they are in a much better position to support both themselves and their children, without becoming a burden on the taxpayer.

The impact of family tax benefit needs to be reviewed in the circumstances of a family breakdown. The parent who receives a large amount of child support, may still be eligible to receive a significant amount of family tax benefit, while the parent who pays the child support, who may still have significant care of the children, may not. This can act as a significant disincentive on payee parents to return to work even part time.

Once children reach school age, there is again the issue of flexibility. Schools do not cater for parents who both work. For example:

- Start times of 8:50
- No before school care
- Parent/ teacher appointments scheduled for during the school hours ie. before 3pm
- Student free days
- After school activities that require parents to transport the children
- The length of the school holidays compared to annual leave entitlements

Parents who work are generally also unable to share transport arrangements for children with those parents who don't work because, firstly, they don't have social contact with them to arrange such things, and secondly, they are usually unable to return any favours.

Schools could be encouraged to arrange networking opportunities for parents who work to enable some of these issues to be resolved.