

# DAD AND PARTNERS IN SMALL BUSINESS

## SURVEY REPORT

The challenges dads and partners face as working parents are many. Not only are they struggling with the working and home juggle, but often they're playing the role of support person, supporting their partner through what can be a very challenging time.



1 in 5 mums and  
1 in 10 dads suffer  
from perinatal  
anxiety and/or  
depression.

The Cost of PNDA in Australia, 2019

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# THE RESEARCH

## KEY THEMES AND LEARNINGS

One in five mums and one in 10 dads suffer from perinatal anxiety or depression. Sadly, 74 per cent of parents don't seek help until they reach crisis point.

The purpose of this research is to understand how dads and partners<sup>1</sup> in small business manage the transition to working parent, and the challenges they experience during this time.

Key themes that emerged from the research were challenges dads and partners experienced in juggling work while supporting their partner; struggling with sleep deprivation and other challenges unique to the newborn phase; a desire (coupled with regret) for more time with baby in the first year; and—perhaps unsurprisingly—a need for more support and mental health awareness, both for themselves and for the partners.

In the following pages we will explore these themes, delving into the verbatim commentary, and further demonstrating the need for essential resources for working dads and partners.

<sup>1</sup>Partner = partner of the birth parent or partner of an adoptive parent.

## THE RESPONDENTS

The survey had 176 respondents.

- Thirty-three per cent had a partner who was pregnant.
- Fifty-five per cent had a partner who had given birth in the last four years.
- Four per cent had been approved for adoption and were awaiting to meet their child.
- Four per cent had adopted a child in the last four years.
- Twenty-nine per cent of the respondents were a small business owner/operator.
- Seventy-one per cent of the respondents were staff members in small business.

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I'm just stressed over two massive things now, the business was stressful enough before my wife got pregnant, now I'm terrified all the time.

# THE LEAVE PERIOD

## BARRIERS PREVENTING EMPLOYEES FROM TAKING MORE LEAVE

Of those parents who were expecting a baby, 64 per cent would like to take more leave in their baby's first year than they're planning to take.

Of those parents who had a child recently 77 per cent of respondents indicated they wish they had taken more leave.

Eighty per cent of existing dads and partners indicated they couldn't afford to take more time off than they did due to finances, 74 per cent said they didn't want to let their co-workers down and 83 per cent felt pressured by their workplace to take as little time as possible.

Alarming, 63 per cent were afraid of losing their job if they asked to take more leave.

*"I wish I had stood my ground and taken the leave. You cannot get this time back. They are only little for such a short amount of time."*

### Leave as a small business owner

Anecdotal comments indicate that many expectant small business owners do not take an extended period of leave because they don't believe their business can manage without them.

This highlights the need for better handover practices and support mechanisms to allow small business owners to take the time they need.

*"I run basically everything and my staff wouldn't know what to do."*

*"There are not enough staff to manage the business for longer without me."*

# 83%

of dads and partners felt pressured by their workplace to take as little time as possible.

Staff Member

### Knowing the benefits of taking leave

Despite small business owners and employees alike reporting not taking as much leave in their baby's first year as they wanted, both can see the benefits in taking longer leave.

With the benefit of hindsight, new parents said the following benefits could be realised with more time off.

*"I would have felt bonded with my child and been part of the inner circle of care sooner."*

*"It probably would be way less stressful."*

Seventy-four per cent of partners found it difficult to support their partner's mental health, with many believing more time off would have helped them support their partner better.

*"It would have allowed me to be more available for my partner, there would have been considerably less stress on her and anxiety as to how she would cope with managing the load of having a newborn."*

*"The leave would have given me the opportunity to assist my wife in the hard times."*



# “

I wish I had stood my ground and taken the leave. You cannot get this time back. They are only little for such a short amount of time.



# THE CHALLENGES

## ADJUSTING TO WORKING LIFE WITH A NEWBORN

Eighty-seven per cent of existing dads and partners indicated they found it hard to juggle work and family demands in the early parenthood phase.

Many of the verbatim comments cited challenges with sleep deprivation, and difficulty adjusting to working life with a new baby at home.

*“Adjusting to life as a first-time parent is taxing – there’s little to no sleep in those first few weeks and being expected to log on and work normal hours and be focused and accurate was hard.”*

While sleep deprivation features heavily as a workplace challenge, so too does the guilt of leaving baby at home, bringing with it additional internal conflict. Recent Treasury analysis indicates that ‘Fathers with young children are more likely than mothers to say their work affects their family life’. Comments on the topic included:

*“Needing to work in order to support my family but feeling guilty for not being there at home as much as I would have liked.”*

*“Going back to work knowing my partner needed help at home, working long days once back at work on little to not sleep and having to come home and still help, wanting to rest on weekend but being unable to.”*

With 68 per cent of expectant respondents planning to return to work in the first four weeks of their child’s birth, it’s critical for employers in small business to be mindful of these adjustment challenges when helping their staff manage the transition back to the workplace.

## Financial struggles

Twenty-two per cent of expectant employees and 67 per cent of existing parents cited finances as a reason they did not take more leave.

With 46 per cent of <250 staff businesses unable to offer paid leave outside of the government Paid Parental Leave entitlements, this is perhaps unsurprising.

Anecdotally, small business owners indicated finances similarly prevented them from taking the time they wanted to spend with the new addition to their family.

*“Owning a small business and then saving for baby is a difficult task.”*

*“I can’t afford to pay for our monthly expenses if I don’t work in the business.”*

## Mental health impacts

For many, it was evident that the perceived pressures and/or lack of support impacted both their mental health and that of their partner’s.

*“Both [work and partner] needed me, and although I wanted to support my wife emotionally and physically, I also needed to support the family by continuing on my business/work. I felt like I couldn’t win completely either way.”*

*“The immense pressure I felt – both from work and home – actually made me less productive and less efficient, and it definitely impacted negatively on my physical and mental health.”*

*“My mental health and relationship suffered due to lack of sleep and having to work long hours. I wasn’t able to bond with my baby as I wanted/expected to. For my youngest I had to quit my job to stay home and my partner had a c-section and her and the baby needed some extra care and time in hospital after complications. Covid hit so I had to homeschool older children so I had to take extra time off work unpaid to look after baby and older children.”*

*“I’ve struggled to bond with bub and it’s hard ‘cause it’s made me feel like such a bad parent.”*

*“I’m just stressed over two massive things now, the business was stressful enough before my wife got pregnant, now I’m terrified all the time.”*



# SUPPORTING EXPECTANT DADS AND PARTNERS IN SMALL BUSINESS

## Identifying signs of mental health distress

Forty-two per cent of small business owners don't feel confident in reducing work-related mental health risks for new and expectant parents.

When it came to identifying signs of mental health distress, the biggest challenge came in spotting the signs and symptoms of poor mental health in fathers during the perinatal period.

Just 18 per cent of respondents indicated they could 100 per cent spot the signs, with 24 per cent stating that they could not spot the signs at all.



# 42%

of small business owners don't feel confident in reducing work-related mental health risks for new and expectant parents.

## How dads and partners want to be supported

For small businesses, it can feel hard to compete with larger counterparts to attract and support working parents.

However, it's not impossible.

When asked how their employer could best support them, dads and partners mentioned the following benefits and support outside of remuneration to help them navigate life as a working parent:

- Being offered more flexible hours, days and working-from-home options.
- Access to counselling when needed.
- Being given time off for fertility, maternal health and other perinatal appointments.
- Having extended leave options available to all carers, even unpaid.
- Being given the option to access annual and personal leave as needed.
- Not being pressured to return to the workplace before they're ready.
- Having an employer who recognises the juggle as a working parent.
- Having someone to hand over their work to before they go on parental leave.



# TOP TIPS FOR WORKING PARENTS

## IF ONLY ...

We asked dads and partners in small business to share with us their top tips for working parents.

*"I wish I knew what I was entitled to and that it is OK to take the full time off. Working when you have a newborn at home is hard, getting sleep is hard and it is hard managing sleep and work with a newborn child."*

*"Take as much time off as possible and put your family first. Work is work. Leave it at work."*

*"Ask for help, have a good schedule, work as a team."*

*"Work doesn't matter as much as family. And get some sleep."*

*"Need to set boundaries and know what's reasonable to ask."*

*Be very clear on what your rights are, and be sure to advocate for yourself and your family, and how important your role as a father and husband is. Don't give so much of yourself to work – focus on your family, who should always be your number one priority."*

*"Go to sleep early to make sure you get enough rest, that way when you do work it will be productive. If you get too overtired you won't be productive."*

*"Try and make sure someone can do your job before taking time off."*



“

Take as much time off as possible and put your family first. Work is work. Leave it at work.

## CONCLUSIONS

The challenges dads and partners face as working parents are many.

Not only are they struggling with the working and home juggle, but often they're playing the role of support person, supporting their partner through what can be a very challenging time.

The risk is that dads and partners can forget to look after their own perinatal mental health.

It's telling that when asked what they'd like to learn more of in relation to working parenthood and supporting staff that many requested access to mental health resources.

*"More knowledge around perinatal mental health in men."*

*"How to deal with emotions and how to support your partner adequately."*

*"Mental health issues related to lack of sleep."*

*"Coping strategies."*

*"Stress management and work balance."*

*Small businesses, and particularly dads and partners who work in small business, will benefit from additional resources to support their transition to working parent.*

*"It would be good to be able to apply for like a 'starter' pack of sorts that covers say the basics or most common questions. It could be via email, or just mail, or both!"*



# WHAT'S NEXT?

The data and insights drawn from this survey will be used to inform the content development phase of The Parent Well, a platform designed to help support managers and parents in small business through the perinatal period.

The testing phase of this project will commence in February 2023, and we encourage all small business owners and their expectant employees to sign up here to play a role in evaluating our progress.

Participation will also grant access to crucial resources to support all employers and staff through the perinatal period.

## Additional resources to support dads and partners

We are proud to be working alongside many experts in the perinatal space. We recommend dads and partners sign up to the following resources to support their mental health through the perinatal period.

**Ready to COPE** – mums and dads can sign up to free emails from the Centre of Perinatal Excellence for supportive insights, strategies and advice about how they might be feeling at all stages within their perinatal journey.

[SIGN UP HERE >](#)



# WITH THANKS

The Australian Perinatal Workplace Wellbeing Program is being delivered in proud partnership with Centre of Perinatal Excellence (COPE) and Pracademia, supported by Council of Small Business Organisations Australia (COSBOA).

**TRANSITIONING WELL** 



**COPE**  
Centre of Perinatal Excellence



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