

WITH MUMS FOR THE LONG HAUL

How ISSR is extending its landmark Paid Parental Leave evaluation to shed new light on working families

Researchers involved in these projects*

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2014 marked the end of ISSR's four-year evaluation of the national Paid Parental Leave scheme for the Australian Government Department of Social Services.

The Paid Parental Leave (PPL) evaluation is one of Australia's largest ever public policy evaluations. Involving more than 7,500 parents, valued over \$3.2 million, and including an assessment of the national Dad and Partner Pay scheme, the project is significant because of its scale and implementation. It also produced valuable data and research. Funding for the evaluation was announced at the same time as funding for the scheme itself, so that it is a surprisingly rare example of a social policy evaluation that collected baseline data prior to the scheme taking effect. This allowed for a true picture of how Australia's first national PPL scheme has impacted the employment and health and wellbeing outcomes for both mums and dads.

So did the scheme work? In short, yes. ISSR's research showed that the 18 weeks of PPL following childbirth was successful in its main policy aims: encouraging more mothers to take more time off following birth; and benefiting them both personally and professionally, as well as their babies and employers.

Key findings from the research included:

- ▶ Greater workforce participation:
 - » Paradoxically, having longer time off after birth increased mothers' tendency to return to work in the longer term, so that more mothers had returned to work by 12 months after the birth of their baby.
 - » PPL increased the likelihood that mothers would return to their pre-birth employers when they went back to work, an effect that was particularly marked among mums with lower levels of formal education, and one with real benefits for mums and employers.
- ▶ Improved health and wellbeing:
 - » PPL produced improvements in mothers' health, extended breastfeeding duration, and probably improved babies' health slightly.

- » The additional time and income security provided by PPL reduced the proportion of mothers who felt rushed and pressed for time, thus enhancing work-life balance.
- ▶ Positive family and social outcomes:
 - » PPL had the greatest benefits for those less likely to have other parental leave support, including: lower income mothers; those with lower formal education, including casual workers; and self-employed mothers.
 - » Dad and Partner Pay seemed to have the effect of legitimising fathers' role in parenting, both for fathers and employees.

While these effects were found within the first year following the birth of a child, ISSR's researchers are extending the research to follow employment and health and wellbeing outcomes for 'Millennium Mums' as children move through their pre-school years.

Work is being funded with an Australian Research Council Linkage Project grant in partnership with the Department of Social Services. ISSR is hoping to mine the rich data resource that has already been collected to uncover further knowledge about a range of issues related to working parents and gender equality, including the impact of: flexible working arrangements (both formal and informal); employer characteristics; women's career trajectories and job quality; and childcare arrangements. Long-term labour force and child development outcomes will not be evident until the scheme has been operational for a number of years.

ISSR led the evaluation in partnership with researchers from The University of Sydney, The University of Melbourne, Australian National University, and The University of Tasmania. The project has thus far provided research training opportunities for seven Honours and PhD students studying at these universities.

RELATED LINKS:

The full reports from the evaluation are available online at:
dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/programmes-services/paid-parental-leave-scheme



TOP IMAGE: PPL Team, from left to right, Laetitia Coles, Ning Xiang, Judy Rose, Maria Zadoroznyj, Bill Martin, Laura Dunstan, Michelle Brady, Belinda Hewitt (Absent team members: Wojtek Tomaszewski, Gillian Whitehouse, Janeen Baxter, Andrew Jones and Emily Stevens)