

Financial stress forces tough choices for parents

New research shows finances key motivator in parents' return to work

November 2024 – New research has found that many Aussie parents who took parental leave regretted returning to work when they did (57%), with financial pressures (45%) and missing out on important milestones in their children's lives (39%) being the main reasons for their regret.

The rising cost of living (54%) and meeting basic household needs (48%) are the leading reasons pushing parents to return to work, reflecting the broader impact of Australia's current economic situation.

Commissioned by Real Insurance, in partnership with consumer research group MyMavins, the [Real Working Parents 2024 Report](#) surveyed 1,202 Australians, highlighting the experiences of working parents in Australia. The research looks at the affordability of having children, the challenges and responsibilities faced by parents, and the impact on parents, families and work.

Emotional and financial toll of returning to work

Returning to work comes with significant emotional consequences. Many parents report feeling anxiety (37%), stress (31%), guilt (30%), and sadness (25%) upon resuming their careers. Despite these challenges, 83% of parents appreciate getting a break from their children while at work, highlighting a complex mix of relief and responsibility.

Moreover, over two in three (67%) parents experience guilt when they have to leave work unexpectedly for child-related emergencies. The report also found that two in five (40%) parents feel they miss out on career opportunities, and a further 41% feel judged by their bosses or colleagues. Over a quarter of parents (28%) also believe that colleagues without children are favoured for opportunities. However, more than half (59%) do not feel judged at work for being a parent.

Roxanne Hart, Director and Senior Lawyer at Hart & Co Lawyers comments: “The emotional rollercoaster of returning to work after parental leave is very real. It's crucial for employers to foster a supportive and understanding environment by establishing clear communication channels for emergencies, equitable opportunities for career progression, and a workplace culture free from judgment or bias, regardless of parental status.

Fortunately, in terms of alleviating financial pressures, there have been significant changes to the Government paid parental leave scheme”, she said. “This includes Australia's Parental Leave Pay, which offers eligible parents a combined 22 weeks of paid leave, increasing to 26 weeks by 2026. This shared entitlement, with a minimum two-week requirement per parent, enables parents to take more time off, and also encourages parents to share the parental leave responsibility more evenly as opposed to forcing one parent to take the majority of the leave.”

Financial burdens and childcare costs

The financial burden of raising children is a significant concern for many working parents. Half of the working parents find it unaffordable to have children in 2024. For parents with school-aged children, the costs extend beyond the classroom, with an average weekly spend of \$314 on after-school care,

tutoring, and extracurricular activities. This amounts to over \$12,560 annually, causing 43% of parents to worry about the cost of professional care and turn to family for care support.

To cope, the majority (81%) of parents rely on support from in-laws or other family members. Despite these measures, almost three in four (74%) parents find managing their child's care and education expenses challenging. Many parents dip into their savings (44%) or take on extra working hours (42%) to make ends meet.

Balancing work, parenting, and life

The report underscores the immense pressure on parents to balance work, parenting, and personal responsibilities. More than four in five (84%) working parents feel the strain, with two in five (45%) feeling very or extremely pressured. On average, parents spend 33.6 waking hours per week with their children, yet the overwhelming majority (91%) wish they could spend more time with their kids.

The top pressures include ensuring financial stability (49%), being present for their children (49%), managing household tasks (49%), and finding time for personal care (47%). Parental guilt is widespread, with almost all (91%) experiencing it, mainly due to not spending enough quality time with their children (45%) and financial constraints (38%).

Roxanne Hart comments: "The desire to achieve financial stability while being emotionally present for their children creates a constant tension for many parents. Creating a supportive work environment that allows for flexibility and understanding can be crucial in alleviating some of this pressure.

Significant improvements to unpaid parental leave laws now allow eligible employees to take 12 months of unpaid leave flexibly over two years following a child's birth. Currently, 110 days of this entitlement can be used flexibly, increasing to 130 days by July 2026, a substantial increase from the previous 30-day limit. Employees can utilise this flexible leave in single or multiple day blocks but must adhere to strict notice requirements."

Gender disparities in parental leave

The report also highlights significant gender disparities in the experiences of returning to work after parental leave. Women reported notably higher levels of anxiety (46% vs. 26%), stress (38% vs. 22%), and guilt (40% vs. 18%) compared to men. These heightened emotional responses among women may be attributed to the dual pressures of managing career responsibilities and fulfilling parental roles.

Moreover, more than two in five (44%) women feel they miss out on work opportunities due to their parental responsibilities, compared to around one in three (35%) men. This discrepancy highlights the career sacrifices women often make to balance family demands. Women are also more likely to feel judged by their colleagues or bosses (45% vs. 36% of men), which can contribute to workplace stress and impact their professional growth and job satisfaction.

Concerns about job security are also more prevalent among women, with over a quarter (25%) worrying about their job stability due to parenthood. These findings highlight the need for more supportive workplace policies and environments that address the unique challenges faced by working mothers, ensuring a more equitable experience for all parents returning from leave.

Supporting educational growth

Despite the challenges, working parents are making significant efforts to support their children's education. Nearly a quarter (20%) of parents spend over two hours a day on educational activities with their children. However, over two in three (68%) wish they could spend even more time helping with homework and other educational pursuits. The report found that around one in three (36%) of working parents feel pressured to meet their child's educational and developmental needs.

Roxanne Hart notes: “The ongoing struggle to balance work and family life is evident in parents' desire to spend more time supporting their children's education. Creating supportive environments where both employers and educators prioritise work-life balance is crucial to easing this pressure. One avenue for achieving this balance is through flexible work arrangements. Permanent employees and certain casual employees with at least 12 months of service can request flexible working arrangements, such as changes to hours or location, to better manage work-life balance. We most commonly see parents requesting to work from home on certain days of the week. While employers can only refuse on reasonable business grounds, and disputes can be mediated, denials can still occur, highlighting that this system, while beneficial to some, may not offer a universal solution.”

The report provides an eye-opening look into the complex and often challenging world of working parents in Australia. It highlights the financial pressures, emotional toll, and gender disparities that parents face as they juggle the demands of work and family life. These insights are crucial for employers, policymakers, and society at large to better support working parents and create a more balanced and equitable environment for all families.

For more information on the Real Working Parents report and its findings, [click here](#).

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About the Real Working Parents Report 2024

The Real Working Parents Report was compiled based on research commissioned by Real Insurance and conducted by MYMAVINS between the 1st and 13th of May 2024. The research was carried out through a quantitative online survey, gathering 1,202 responses from Australians aged 18 and above. The sample is broadly representative of the Australian population in terms of age, gender, wealth, and region.

About Real Insurance

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