'Some have the old-school mentality that the role of men is to earn money'

More dads are putting kids first

SUNDAY MAIL (SA)
Date: 3/2/2013
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FAMILY comes first for a growing number of Australian dads as they put their kids ahead of work.

Experts believe changing attitudes towards the roles of men and improved support from workplaces have spurred the trend - with kids the big winners.

"Traditionally, the relationship of father and child has been strained because of long working hours," Diana Seyer, from Relationships Australia, said.

"But fathers now realise they don’t need to be the sole breadwinner and want to be involved in nurturing the family."

ABS figures reveal a 45 per cent jump in dads with young children (under 15) employed part time over the past 10 years.

Even though far greater in number, those working full time increased by only 15 per cent. Tass Mousafiridis, from BeyondBlue’s Men’s Program, said better employment policies catering to the needs of families had been a critical factor.

"Men are now requesting and demanding flexibility to participate in their children's lives," he said.

"Employers are doing better to be supportive of families. Healthy and happy employees means better productivity in the workplace."

Guy Wilson has no regrets about reducing his workload to help raise his kids.

But the dad and painter, from Happy Valley, believes there is still a stigma about the roles and responsibilities of men.

"I get some men asking me if I am spending my day out having coffee," he said.

"Some are jealous because they would like the opportunity to do it themselves. But some have an old-school mentality that the role of men is to earn the money."

"It's not 1962."

Mums, too, are benefiting from the shifting attitudes which has seen a 105 per cent increase in workforce participation of women since 2002.

"Men and women both now have a shared responsibility for raising their family and earning an income," Ms Seyer said.

And she has seen relationships between couples and their children improving because both mums and dads are less stressed.

"Kids benefit from having either parent home. It provides them with more stability," she explained.

"While kids may want the latest toys and technology, they really do value quality time with parents and their family. These are the last memories that matter."

Equal rights for men

MEN have won the same right to family-friendly jobs as working mothers, under new laws to promote equal pay for women.

Companies with more than 100 staff must meet minimum "gender equality" standards - or be locked out of Federal Government contracts.

The director of the Workplace Gender Equality Agency, Helen Conway, called for a change to the culture of men using work as an excuse not to help look after children and ageing parents.

"Family and caring responsibilities are not just for women - it's a family and societal issue," she told The Advertiser.

Ms Conway said men who did want shorter or more flexible working hours to care for family members now found it difficult, as many employers tended to restrict leave and part-time hours to working mothers.

The laws passed through the Senate on Thursday night, and the Federal Government will impose "minimum standards" to be negotiated with big business over the next two years. Companies that do not meet those standards will not be able to bid for government contracts.

Ms Conway said the standards would cover flexible working hours, equal pay between men and women, ways to deal with pregnant or breastfeeding women, and arrangements for workers caring for children or elderly relatives.

Companies could let workers "buy" extra leave, work longer hours over fewer days to get a day off work, or work school hours. Parents could be given extra unpaid leave to care for children during the school holidays, which cover 12 weeks a year.

Ms Conway called on employers to "get with the program". "There is no doubt that if flexible work is available to them, people will be more productive and less stretched," she said.

Sex Discrimination Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick said the laws would encourage men and women to share their domestic duties. "It's about men wanting to spend more time with their families, because they have been missing from the picture," she said.

"When a man does it (work family-friendly hours) it sends a message that you can be a serious player at work and an engaged dad."

The Federal Minister for the Status of Women, Julie Collins, yesterday said the laws would help close the gender pay gap.

THE ADVERTISER (Adelaide)
Date: 24/11/2012
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