WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Disabilities have big costs

Earnings are often curtailed, write Angela Crettenden and Annemarie Wright.

Returning to work after the birth of a child is something that most women expect to do. Attendance may be part time at first, but a gradual return to full-time work is usually possible once children reach school age.

The unexpected arrival of a child with special needs, however, leads to many changes.

In Australia, children and young people with disabilities are most commonly cared for by family members at home. This provides psychological and social benefits for children but can have enormous personal and financial consequences for parents and other caregivers.

Our research at Novita Children’s Services with the University of South Australia’s Centre for Work + Life surveyed 651 parents and other carers of children and young people with disabilities, to explore the challenges of balancing these caring responsibilities with paid work.

The results are striking but not surprising, and suggest several ways this group could be better supported. Fewer parents in our study were in paid work than parents in the general population, particularly mothers of children with more severe disabilities and sole carers. When compared with peers, mothers in the study were more likely to work part time or be in casual positions, regardless of the age of the child.

Fathers in our study worked fewer hours than those caring for children without disabilities and almost all reported that working was a financial necessity.

The impact on family income of working part time, casually, or for reduced hours, is significant. This has implications for current and future family quality of life; current superannuation provisions ensure long-lasting penalties for taking time out of the workforce.

Mothers and fathers talked about the consequences for career progression. Needing to have extra time off to attend appointments or therapy sessions or to be there for a sick child was considered reason to be overlooked for more senior positions or work responsibilities.

For all working carers flexibility is crucial, yet 90 per cent of parents in our study were unaware of their right to request flexible working conditions under the Fair Work Act 2009. Flexible start and finish times, flexitime, and the ability to work from home were valued by parents who had these options, and desired by those who did not.

Four in 10 parents did not believe they could access flexibility in their workplace.

The recent amendment to the Fair Work Act 2009 extends the right to request legislation to all employees with caring responsibilities, but the value of such a right is limited by knowledge and lack of enforcement.

Without a comprehensive strategy to raise employee and employer awareness this change will be all but meaningless. There remains no means of appeal for carers should a request be refused.

For some parents caring for children with disabilities, employment may not be feasible and they have every right to be assisted to provide full-time care.

For others though, including almost a third of parents in our study who wanted to work or wanted to work more hours, they deserve the support to do so.

Angela Crettenden, Research Fellow, Novita Children’s Services & Adjunct Research Fellow, Centre for Work + Life, University of South Australia.

Annemarie Wright, Research Officer, Novita Children’s Services.