

Submission

Paid Parental Leave and Early Childhood Education and Care as Foundations for Preventing Family and Domestic Violence

July 2026



Prepared for the Second Action
Plan Consultation
National Plan to End Violence
against Women and Children
2022–2032

Submission: Paid Parental Leave and Early Childhood Education and Care as Foundations for Preventing Family and Domestic Violence

The Parenthood welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Second Action Plan. We write not as a specialist family violence service, but as Australia's leading independent parent advocacy organisation, representing 85,000 members living the daily reality this consultation is trying to change.

Our case starts with the infrastructure of the first year. Every family needs the same foundations in the months after a child arrives: care they can afford and access, leave long enough for both parents to share, and support for the mental health of everyone in the household. Australia has treated these foundations as a private cost for families to absorb alone, and the absence lands on parents in many ways at once. It amplifies financial stress. It entrenches unequal caregiving. And, as the evidence in this consultation makes clear, it raises the risk of family and domestic violence.

Treated as infrastructure and funded like roads or hospitals, paid parental leave and early childhood education reach every family before problems take hold — exactly the early intervention this Plan is looking for. Treated as a private cost, they leave families and fathers to absorb that risk alone.

We ask the Second Action Plan to recognise paid parental leave and ECEC for what they already are: the shared infrastructure of early parenthood, and among the most effective family-violence prevention available to it. This submission sets out four ways to build that infrastructure, and one investment that underpins them all.

The economic reality behind the evidence

Australia's birth rate has just hit a record low. Housing, workforce participation, the cost of raising a child, and the decision to have one at all are no longer questions filed under "social issues." They are structural questions with structural consequences, and family safety is one of them.

Parents aren't failing to keep up. The system is. Our economic settings, from parental leave to childcare to the shape of the working week, were built for a family structure that assumed a spare adult at home. That adult no longer exists in most households, and the system hasn't caught up. The result is a cost that lands on parents, amplifying financial stress and the preconditions for family violence.

The evidence provided in the consultation paper reaches the same conclusion from a different angle. It names lack of mental health services, housing insecurity, gambling, financial stress, disasters and conflict exposure as "*known contextual*

and reinforcing risk factors for violence" (Priority Area 5, p.40), and separately flags being a young parent under 21 as "one of the clearest risk factors" for intimate partner violence (Priority Area 4, p.38). Financial precarity in a child's first year isn't a side issue for family violence prevention. It's squarely inside the evidence base the Second Action Plan is being built on.

The same financial pressure is a documented driver of poor mental health in fathers, which the evidence increasingly ties to family safety. A 2026 Northwestern University and Lurie Children's Hospital study of 4,290 new fathers found those who wanted to take leave but couldn't access it reported significantly higher rates of depression and anxiety than fathers who took adequate leave.

Cost was the dominant reason: roughly three-quarters of fathers with depressive symptoms, and around 71% with anxiety symptoms, cited financial barriers as the obstacle. Movember's 2026 survey of 1,216 Australian fathers found one in four rate their physical or mental health in the first year of fatherhood as only poor or fair, and that fathers are less likely than mothers to be asked about their mental health at all during the perinatal period.

Treated as infrastructure and funded like roads or hospitals, paid parental leave and early childhood education deliver exactly the kind of early intervention this Plan is looking for, reaching every family before problems take hold. Treated as a private cost, they leave families and fathers to absorb that risk alone. This submission sets out four ways to close that gap and one investment that underpins them all.

Our recommendations

1. Resource ECEC as trusted infrastructure for the whole family and the disclosure point it already is

Priority Area 3 of this consultation (p.47) already asks how education settings can better recognise and respond to children and young people experiencing violence or harm. We hear regularly from parents and educators that educators already play a significant role in this space. Familiar, stable staff are often best placed to notice change in a child, follow through on concerns, and hold each other accountable, but this depends on workforce continuity and professional development the sector isn't funded to sustain.

What's missing is equal recognition of that fact that ECEC settings are also a disclosure point for parents and carers. Parents talk to educators at drop-off and pick-up in ways they may not talk to a GP or a caseworker. Educators are primary members of the parenting village for the families of 1.4 million children, present at the daily transitions between home, work and education.

We recommend the Second Action Plan:

- Embed body safety and protective behaviours education into everyday practice under the Early Years Learning Framework, from the earliest years;
- Dedicated training for ECEC staff in recognising and responding to adult disclosures, not only child-focused risk indicators;
- Funded, visible safe-disclosure prompts (such as posters and printed information) in centres, normalising help-seeking for parents in a setting they already trust.

2. Fund peer parent networks as first-year infrastructure and the informal help-seeking pathway they already are

Most help-seeking begins informally, as this consultation notes: a conversation with a trusted person, long before anyone approaches a formal service (p. 17). Peer parent networks, like Mum Walk groups operating in communities across Australia, are exactly this kind of trusted, informal space: low-barrier, community-led, and reaching parents in the earliest, most isolating months of parenthood, when formal services are hardest to access.

Demand already far outstrips supply. Mum Walk alone has 800 communities on a waitlist for training and support, ready to give parents a free, consistently available space to connect, but waiting on the resourcing to ensure facilitators can support participants safely, with proper referral pathways into mental health, welfare and family violence disclosure support.

"With 1 in 4 Australian women experiencing domestic violence and pregnancy or the early post-natal period being major escalation triggers - we know many mothers attending Mum Walk are facing this reality right now.

As a volunteer, I've seen this firsthand. Mums regularly disclose what's happening at home or share that they have recently left a violent partner. For many coming out of coerced isolation, our walks are a step toward rebuilding safety. We offer something formal services can't: a peer-led, untraceable space with zero financial barrier. Mums open up because walking side-by-side feels safe, and the trust is already established. With more resourcing, our grassroots volunteer network can become a vital early-intervention pathway, connecting isolated mothers to professional crisis services much sooner."

Mum Walk Volunteer

We recommend the Second Action Plan:

- Formally recognise and fund peer parent networks as part of the informal help-seeking pathway, and invest in training peer facilitators to respond safely when a disclosure occurs.

3. Invest in perinatal mental health and wellbeing checks for both parents

Early intervention in the perinatal period matters, and risk is highest for young and first-time parents (Priority Area 4, p.38). Current antenatal and postnatal checks are built almost entirely around the birthing parent and the infant.

Fathers' groups have been making this case directly. Tom Docking, founder of Dads Group and Man With A Pram, points out that maternal mental health is checked routinely through pregnancy and after birth, while fathers get no equivalent, structural check-in; where it happens at all, it depends on individual clinicians going beyond what the system requires. Dads Group cites roughly [one in four](#) of the 300,000 Australian men who become fathers each year experiencing anxiety or depression in their child's first year, around 205 dads a day, often in silence. Docking links unaddressed paternal perinatal mental health to exactly the outcomes this consultation is trying to prevent: family violence, avoidable relationship breakdown, and child abuse and neglect.

The clinical guidance has already caught up with this call, even if funding hasn't. COPE's 2023 National Perinatal Mental Health Guidelines extended screening and psychosocial assessment recommendations to fathers and non-birthing parents, and current Medicare antenatal and postnatal items recommend mental health assessment in line with those guidelines. But those MBS items are structured around the pregnant or birthing parent's own attendance, not a standalone check for the father. The guidance exists. The standalone, funded mechanism to deliver it does not. Closing that gap is exactly what Dads Group and Man With A Pram are calling for.

We recommend the Second Action Plan:

- Routine, funded mental health and wellbeing checks for both parents across the antenatal and postnatal period: a structured, non-stigmatised touchpoint to catch family stress, including financial stress and relationship strain, before it escalates. This gives Australia's own father-inclusive screening guidelines the funding mechanism they lack.
- Promote further research to identify additional touchpoints where whole-of-family wellbeing check-ins can be normalised, including integration with immunisation schedules, 3-year-old health checks,

Thriving Kids referrals, and the transition period from ECEC to primary school, enabling early identification of families needing extra support.

4. Fund paid parental leave at replacement wage: our primary recommendation

Of all the first-year infrastructure in this submission, this is the single investment that most changes the outcome this Plan is consulting on. The strongest protective-factor finding in this evidence base sits at Priority Area 2, p.31: in the Ten to Men cohort study, men who grew up with positive, affectionate father figures were 48% less likely to become perpetrators of family violence in adulthood. Paid parental leave for fathers and partners is the clearest lever available to build that engagement, but current voluntary settings aren't delivering it.

Dad and Partner Pay hasn't meaningfully shifted men's uptake, and workplace and cultural barriers remain the norm, not the exception.

Dads are willing. The system isn't built for it.

This is not a story about reluctant fathers. Cambridge-published research evaluating Dad and Partner Pay found 75% of the 100 Australian fathers interviewed believed they were capable of playing an active caregiving role in the early months, and most who took leave used it specifically to bond with their child.

The barrier is design, not desire. Only around one in twenty Australian fathers takes primary carer's leave, with 95% of primary carer leave still taken by mothers. Only 27 to 30% of eligible fathers use Dad and Partner Pay, and even where employers offer full-pay parental leave schemes, only 17% of that leave is taken up by men. A de facto primary-carer requirement persists even after 2026 reforms removed formal primary and secondary carer language, because only four weeks of current PPL can be accessed by both parents at once.

The Grattan Institute's *Dad Days* (2021) found fathers who spend more time on caregiving report better partner relationships and greater life satisfaction, and that children with more involved parents show better developmental outcomes, benefits Australia is leaving on the table with one of the least generous parental leave schemes for fathers in the developed world.

This is already named as family violence prevention policy

Our Watch's national primary prevention framework, *Change the Story*, identifies gender inequality as the underlying driver of violence against women, operating through rigid gender roles, men's control of decision-making, disrespect towards women, and male peer cultures that reward aggression. Our Watch has explicitly named unequal access to parental leave as one of the workplace mechanisms entrenching these gendered power imbalances.

Research by Chan, Emery, Fulu, Tolman and Ip (2017), published in the *Journal of Family Violence*, sets out the mechanism: fathers more involved in the physical and emotional care of children, including through parental leave, hold more gender-equitable attitudes and are less likely to perpetrate intimate partner violence. The proposed explanation is that normalising men's caregiving erodes the traditionally masculine ideologies research links to gender inequality and violence against women.

The same link, between father involvement and lower rates of intimate partner violence, holds across the UN's multi-country IMAGES dataset, and Equimundo's *State of the World's Fathers* series has tracked the same pattern across more than 50 countries since 2015: girls raised by involved fathers report feeling more empowered, and boys are more likely to believe in gender equality.

Genuinely shared parental leave, taken early, builds a pattern of shared care that persists. It supports both parents' mental health in the highest-risk period, and establishes from day one that caring for a child isn't one parent's job to carry alone.

The evidence from overseas: earmarked leave changes behaviour

Australia doesn't need to guess whether this works. Iceland's 2001 reform earmarked three of nine months' leave, at 80% wage replacement, exclusively for fathers, use-it-or-lose-it. Uptake jumped from under 1% to 82% in a single year with no campaign beyond the earmarking itself, and couples who had a child just after the reform were considerably less likely to divorce over the following fifteen years, an estimated nine percentage point reduction. Norway, the first country to introduce a father's quota back in 1993, still sees around 90% of fathers use their full entitlement three decades on, a design that has also reshaped household finances: the share of mothers taking full wage compensation rose from 29% to 69% as the quota lengthened.

The pattern across Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Quebec is consistent: leave that is non-transferable, paid near full replacement wage, and long enough to build a genuine caregiving routine shifts father behaviour. The UK's decade-long experiment with optional, low-paid Shared Parental Leave shows what happens without those features: no measurable shift at all.

Our ask: 12 months, at replacement wage, with use-it-or-lose-it design

Of everything in this submission, this is the recommendation we ask the Second Action Plan to carry with the greatest weight: it's the policy ask at the heart of The Parenthood's First Year Foundations campaign. Twelve months of paid parental leave, paid at replacement wage, with a non-transferable, use-it-or-lose-it component reserved specifically for fathers and partners.

Twenty-six weeks split between two parents at minimum wage isn't enough to build two strong foundations, one for mum and one for dad. The maths makes

the decision for families instead: the lower earner takes the leave, the other goes straight back to work, and a caregiving pattern nobody chose becomes the one that sticks for a decade. Use-it-or-lose-it fixes that at the source, making shared care the default rather than something fathers have to fight financial and cultural pressure to take.

This isn't a women's issue, a family issue, or a welfare payment. It's early-intervention infrastructure, funded at the scale of the outcome we're asking it to deliver. Twenty-six weeks was the right first step, and it's already in force. Twelve months is the one that turns a leave entitlement into a lasting pattern of engaged, protective fatherhood. We're ambitious about the destination, and pragmatic about the path.

We recommend the Second Action Plan:

- Australia invests in the first-year foundations of families with 12 months of paid parental leave for all Australian families, paid at a full replacement wage rate.
- Enhancing a non-transferable, use-it-or-lose-it component reserved specifically for fathers and partners as the scheme extends for both parents.
- Recognition of paid parental leave as early-intervention infrastructure for the prevention of family and domestic violence, funded accordingly.

Conclusion

This submission highlights where the evidence indicates Australia can achieve a meaningful impact on family gender equity, while supporting family mental wellbeing as a preventative investment: the first year of a child's life, underpinned by paid parental leave and authentic early intervention. But family safety doesn't stop at twelve months.

It depends on the peer networks, trusted educators and everyday services that stay with families long after the first year ends. Together, these four recommendations build the community-based infrastructure Australia needs to recognise risk early and respond safely, whatever stage a family is at.

The Second Action Plan doesn't need a new argument to justify investing here. The evidence is already in this consultation paper. What's missing is the funding to match it.