

Different Strokes for Different Folks

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Introduction

The typical family that most of us grew up in (and saw on our beloved TV shows) has a new [face today](#), having changed in terms of composition, size and embeddedness in the community. The [2021 census](#) reveals that there are more than a million one-parent families, and nearly half of Australian children have at least one migrant parent. For new parents today, the responsibilities of parenthood, as well as the resources available to navigate those responsibilities, differ significantly from what they were even a decade ago. This calls for a sympathetic re-examination of parental support benefits and policies that organisations have in place.

While some Australian employers have moved to make their parental benefits package [more inclusive](#), there is still a lot of ground that needs to be covered. Reports indicate that [merely one in 20 Australian fathers](#) utilise parental leave, and [women seeking IVF](#) choose to hide it from their bosses for [fear of stigma](#) or adverse consequences. Even when parental leave is taken as mandated by [law](#), it often falls short of providing comprehensive support, leading to [social isolation](#) among new parents. This article draws on social capital theory to design effective parental support policies.

Reimagining Parental Support Policies

It is crucial to recognise that, given the changing structure of families, employees would need more than just time to settle into their parental roles. Strong employer and social relationships within organisations represent [valuable social capital](#), particularly for non-traditional families. Employees tend to lean on [organisational support networks](#), especially during disruptive life events such as the birth of a child. In recognition of that, employers need to reexamine whether parental benefits can be designed to augment new parents' social capital – that is – *'the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit'* ([Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998 p.243](#)).

Meaningful employer support, particularly during times of crisis, fosters a [loyal and well-supported](#) workforce. Recognising the transition to parenthood as a period of [potential crisis](#), employers should offer targeted support to ease the discomfort of this major life change.

The Three Pillars of Support

Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986 as cited in [Siisiainen](#), 2003) offers a framework for designing effective parental support policies. By focusing on three key principles ([Schobert et al. 2023](#)): bonding (creating a supportive community within the company), bridging (connecting new parents with

experienced colleagues for mentoring) and linking (facilitating access to external resources like childcare), employers can foster a positive environment for new parents. This can be achieved through initiatives like facilitated support groups, buddy programs, family-friendly events, workshops on work-life balance, online support platforms and connections to external resources.

Crucially, the theory also reminds us that the mere existence of these benefits is not enough. They must also be readily *available* and *accessible* to all employees. This means ensuring clear communication about the programs, addressing potential cultural barriers to participation and offering flexible scheduling options so employees can take advantage of the support offered.

Conclusion

While robust employer support during parenthood demonstrably fosters employee [loyalty](#) and [organisational commitment](#), the benefits of well-designed parental leave policies extend far beyond these metrics. Parental benefits that function to bridge, bond and link new parents to stronger support networks within organisations represent a modern response to the evolving psychological contract between employers and employees. This contract recognises that employees increasingly expect employers to demonstrate care and serve as a source of support, particularly as traditional societal and familial support structures weaken. The right mix of parental benefits can be a game-changer for attracting and retaining talent, as [Spotify's](#) experience illustrates. It's time for employers to view parental leave policies as a strategic offering rather than simply a [compliance issue](#).



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Bhavna is a practising academic with a diverse educational background, passionate about exploring behavioural change through a multidisciplinary lens. Her research interests include Leadership Effectiveness, Self-in-groups, and Adult Learning – and, she is happy to take on projects and consulting assignments in this space.

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