

SOME MOTHERS

Raising a child can be one of *life's most rewarding experiences* as well as present some of life's biggest challenges. Three women weigh in on motherhood and the *issues they face in Australia today*



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Any day now, I'll give birth to my second child. Honestly, I feel like she could pop out any minute. Thankfully, I've just finished work and have started my parental leave. My workplace is among the 50 per cent of Australian workplaces that provide paid parental leave (PPL). Together with around 80,000 new parents across Australia, I'm combining the government's 18 weeks of PPL with my employer PPL to maximise the time I'm able to spend at home with my new baby.

Australia's PPL system – still young at just six years old – is one of the stingiest systems in the developed world. Most developed countries offer something closer to a full year of paid leave. The World Health Organisation recommends a minimum of six months.

Australia offers a lot less than that – 18 weeks at minimum wage with no super, but you can combine it with anything your employer might also provide.

The Australian government wants to gut our PPL system, arguing that if you get paid parental leave from your employer you shouldn't have access to the government's

18 weeks. This completely undermines Australia's PPL system which was designed to have government and employers work together to provide new mums maximum time with their babies. Other

countries are leaving us behind. Swedish parents are entitled to 480 days of PPL, and of those, 90 days are reserved for the dad. We can't catch up if we're going backwards.

"We can't catch up if we're going backwards"



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When I was eight, it was revealed to me that my father had committed suicide because he had been publicly exposed as being transgender. Until then, I had grown up believing my father had been killed by a drunk driver when I was two. It was the early '90s, and two things stand out clearly to me now about how different that time was: the language that was used and the connotations attached to being transgender. I grew up believing that being transgender was something to be embarrassed about and that was practised in secret.

Fast-forward to my late twenties and I was the parent of two girls and pregnant with my third child. We were completely ecstatic to discover we were having a little boy. We bought into every dream and expectation having a son could mean to us. My husband looked forward to the time when he could take him to his first soccer game.

As the years went by, we couldn't help but notice that our child behaved differently to other boys. By age two, we were confronted with a strong-willed little kid who detested anything even remotely considered

a "boy thing". By three, we were trying in vain to ignore the mermaid dress-ups and Barbie playtimes. I naively thought it was because they (we prefer to use gender-neutral pronouns) had older sisters, so decided it was up to us to fix it. We put a great deal of effort into coming up with ways to man up our child. It was a fraught and desperate time for us all.

Our beautiful child changed; this previously outgoing kid started hiding who they were, turning inward and retreating from us. Feeling safe at kindergarten to express freely, they confided in their teachers that Mum must not know they had played in the home corner, wore dress-ups or played with dolls – something they were being forced to hide at home.

By the time they reached school age, my husband and I really started to struggle with the constant distress our child was feeling, and the stress and arguments it was causing. I had friends say, "They're probably just gay" or even transgender. Gay was something I understood, transgender was not. From an early age, I'd formed the belief that being transgender was a choice. It was a chaotic time filled with fear and uncertainty. My moment of clarity came one afternoon when I was furious to find my child with a blanket wrapped around their head pretending to be a girl. It was then they screamed at me, "Why can't you accept I'm different!"

I knew then what I had been avoiding all along – it was me who needed to change. My child was perfect just the way they were. So out came the computer. Googling "transgender" and "children" puts you a click away from some of the most confronting information you will ever see as a parent – the words suicide, self-harm, addiction and homelessness. It took me searching across the globe to find information; at the time it seemed like there was nothing online based in Australia.

After a lot of self-education, I felt certain I had a gender non-conforming child and it was likely they were transgender. I read or heard that in Melbourne there was a Gender Service at the Royal Children's Hospital. We learned so much in that first appointment and it was life-changing. But there wasn't a lot of support for parents. I needed to be able to talk to others who just got it.

In Australia, a Facebook chat group had just started and after a few months of chatting to other parents we organised a catch-up. When parents are supported they find the strength and resilience they need to support their children, so a core group of us started Parents Of Gender Diverse Children (PGDC), with the key goal of finding a way to reach more families.

In just six months, PGDC has supported more than 120 families directly, and the wider work we do supports many more. We're passionate that no family will feel as lost and confused as we did at the start of our journey. What's needed is friendship, support and education.



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Like many parents of small children, my husband and I spend a significant portion of our income on childcare. It's frustrating and expensive, but I'm grateful we can send our sons to a quality centre where they have access to a diverse range of passionate carers and teachers. I'm also grateful that being able to access such care gives us the opportunity to earn an income. For many parents – mothers in particular – the cost of childcare is simply too high to make returning to work worthwhile.

This isn't just a problem for the careers and earning abilities of women, but also for our economy. Currently, Australia is ranked equal first in the world for women's educational attainment, but 71st for women's labour-force participation, according to the World Economic Forum. That's a lot of wasted potential because

we can't figure out how to provide an accessible, affordable system of care. Our childcare system is broken, possibly beyond repair. While planned reforms will offer some relief, it's not enough to see Australia significantly lift its game on women's workforce participation.

This year's International Women's Day dared us to "be bold for change", and childcare is one issue where being bold on overhauling the system may be our last opportunity to get it right. What can

we learn from other countries that are making progress, such as Germany, which in 2013 guaranteed a subsidised childcare place for every child from the age of one? How can we reframe how we treat childcare to better understand its place in vital early learning and development? Childcare is not a women's issue, it's an economic issue that affects all of us. But if more mothers could access affordable, quality care, we could transform our workforce and get closer to gender parity. □

"My moment of clarity came when they screamed, 'Why can't you accept I'm different!'"

"Our childcare system is broken"

"Australia's paid parental leave system is one of the stingiest in the world"

Compiled by Geneva Leek. If you or someone you know is struggling, visit beyondblue.org.au. For information and guidance on gender dysphoria, visit roh.org.au.