



Wait 'til your (FIFO) father gets home

More and more families are adjusting to life in which one parent has a 'Fly-In, Fly-Out' job. The money is good, but the hard part is keeping everyone grounded, writes Karen Fontaine

Parenting can be challenging when both parents are present and accounted for week in, week out. However, for an increasing number of Australian families, one parent keeps the home fires burning while the other flies out for weeks away from home followed by the decompression chamber that is reentry into domestic life.

“Like many countries, Australia has always had itinerant workers such as shearers, truck drivers and oil riggers, but the mining boom means that more everyday mums and dads who don't necessarily come from itinerant working families are working away,” says Angie Willcocks, an Adelaide-based psychologist who counsels FIFO families.

Of course, the pitfalls of a FIFO work roster, common in the resources and construction sectors, are manifold.

For starters, it's a schizophrenic-style existence for everyone. One month, it's mum plus the kids and their routine. The next month, Dad's back on home turf and often it might take him days to successfully reenter the family dynamic. It might take the kids even longer.

Resentments can simmer, tempers can flare, tiredness takes its inevitable toll and parental pining (Dad for the kids, Mum for Dad, the kids for Dad) is par for the course.

At Edith Cowan University, Jacinth Watson, a PhD student from the Child Health Promotion Research Centre, is investigating the effect that a parent's FIFO employment has on the health and wellbeing of their adolescent children.

Jacinth said the FIFO work roster was a relatively recent phenomenon and it remained to be seen how regular and lengthy absences of a parent affected their adolescent's capacity to be resilient.

“We want to know if adolescents who live in FIFO families adapt to the absence of the parent and become more self reliant, develop higher levels of self esteem and have increased capacity to be resilient,” she said. “Or is the absence of the parent a disruptive effect on the adolescent, making it more difficult for them to cope with other challenges in their life?”





Results of Jacinth's study have found:

- ▶ 73.5 per cent of adolescents are sad when the FIFO parent returns to work;
- ▶ 43.1 per cent felt nervous or anxious when the FIFO parent returns to work;
- ▶ 45.6 per cent worry about the FIFO parent's safety at work;
- ▶ 86.8 per cent communicate with their FIFO parent (when the parent is at work). The telephone is the most frequent means of communication for the FIFO parent and adolescent, with email (84.3 per cent) SMS (34.5 per cent) and Facebook (25.8 per cent) also used.

For Perth-based Nicole Ashby, whose husband Joe works four weeks on an offshore oil rig followed by four weeks "being a happy house-husband", FIFO life is hard but manageable for their children Tana, seven, Chase, five, and Angelina, three.

"Kids find it easier to adapt to the situation when things such as their routine don't change too much when the FIFO parent comes home," says Nicole, who set up www.fifofamilies.com.au because of what she identified as a real need in the community.

As Nicole points out, "there is an opportunity cost for everything and for every family" – even for those where one or both parents works long hours in the city.

And although Jacinth notes that companies are providing increased support to families – including counselling, social support and 'health days' – she hopes her study and similar works will spawn more family-friendly rosters.

"More equal time rosters are best," she says. "Four weeks on, one off rosters and three weeks on, one off are not particularly good."

Angie Willcocks, resident psychologist for Mining Family Matters (www.miningfm.com.au), offers tips for making FIFO work with kids:

- 1. Set shared goals.** "First and foremost, it's really important to be clear why you are going to work FIFO and setting clear goals around this. It's not enough to say 'to get ahead financially' – they need to make specific goals and stick to these. Individuals and couples who really struggle are those who have no idea why they're working away and who feel stuck in the working-away lifestyle. Those who do well know why they're doing it and work together for shared goals. This helps work together when things are tough such as when you're both tired."
- 2. Be positive and proactive.** "Recognise your strengths and weaknesses and work on what you can. Work on problems together as a couple by identifying problems as being about working away rather than blaming each other – for example, say to each other 'we haven't been spending enough time together as a family because of FIFO – so how can we work on this?'"
- 3. Don't dwell on the negatives.** "Face the problems head on and don't dwell on the downsides."
- 4. Be interested in your partner's life.** "Whether or not you're the at-home or away partner, make sure you're keen to know what goes on. Organise a site visit if possible, or get pictures of what the donga is like. Also, create shared interests so you have something other than the 'groundhog day' to talk about. For example, read the same books or watch the same movies or work on a project you can discuss while apart."
- 5. Stay united when it comes to issues about the kids.** "Be clear about rules and expectations and discipline styles for the kids. Lots of parents have differing expectations for their kids but this can become a really major problem when one person works away – this has to be worked on for the sake of the kids."