

New parental leave is a test for fathers: New York dads must step up ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

As the newest crop of expectant parents in New York attends birthing classes and decides on paint colors for nurseries, they are also facing a decision that their peers never did: whether and when to take their paid, universal parental leave.

New York's new policy — which went into effect the first of the year — is advertised as the nation's most generous. Most noteworthy is the fact that its benefits apply equally to mothers and fathers.

The benefit begins with eight weeks of leave paid at a rate of up to 50% of an employee's salary. When fully phased in, those numbers will rise to 12 weeks at 67%.

Which presents an opportunity, and a test: As women continue their march toward equal standing in the workforce, is equal standing in the home the next logical step in America's gender revolution?

Hopefully, but not necessarily. The answer depends on whether fathers will actually take the state up on its generous offer.

Torn between the desire to spend time with their children and uncertainties over how they will be viewed at work and what their role will be at home, they may not. When I gleefully shared the news about paid parental leave with my Manhattan-based brother, who is expecting his first child, his reaction was not one of joy but of uncertainty. He was intrigued, but hesitant.

How would his colleagues view him if he actually left to care for a child? Would he be penalized in his annual review? Is it fair to burden his colleagues by stepping away? And is eight weeks of leave really necessary?

Even though the new New York law gives explicit approval that taking time away from the workplace is indeed a valid, valued proposition, men are clearly still fighting against ingrained gender prejudices that may take generations to totally disappear.

Nobody understands those troublesome prejudices better than women. We're still struggling to make cracks in glass ceilings. Now, men are knocking on the front door. It's up to all of us to welcome them in.

Just as women deserve to experience the highs and lows of the workforce — from the thrill of landing a new client to the despair of disappointing a respected boss — men deserve to experience some of the emotional peaks and valleys that come from being at home.

They deserve to know the joy of holding a newborn for hours while they sleep in your arms, with nowhere more important to be and nothing more important to do. They deserve a shot at that first smile, that first word, or those first steps.

They also deserve to know the utter loneliness of staying home alone with a tiny human being that screams for more time than you thought physically possible.

But if they're afraid of the consequences, they won't get it.

A Deloitte survey last year found that 57% of men felt that taking any parental leave would be perceived as a lack of commitment to the job.

In that case, who is supposed to take care of the baby? The mother, apparently. It's a question that too many men have heard when announcing their plan to step away from work, whether it's for a two-month paternity leave or to take their child to a two-hour doctor appointment: "What about your wife?"

The more men are expected and tacitly required to lean in, the more women will lean out to make up the difference. Less flexibility leaves everyone with fewer options, making it less likely that they will come to find the ideal balance, whatever that may mean for them.

Part of the reason I advocate for equal opportunity in the home is that I've personally seen the limitations of the old model. So has my husband.

With no paid maternity leave available to either of us when my son was born in 2014, we followed the path that was most familiar to us: man at work, woman at home. My husband took unpaid "paternity leave" for exactly one day. I am still on unpaid "maternity leave" more

than three years later.

While my staying home did shield him from the difficulties of slow days filled with lots of crying, it also cheated him out of precious time with his beautiful boy.

That's time that he can never get back.

New York fathers have now been handed an amazing opportunity to take the lead in establishing that men have a legitimate desire to embrace their paternal instincts. It is up to all of us to encourage and enable them to do so.

Our kids are watching.

Levy is a former diplomat. After her son was born, she became a freelance writer focusing on parenting and education.

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