

Fathers remain locked out of family life ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A new report from the Women and Equalities Select Committee, released yesterday, recommends changes to policies to help working fathers to balance their parental responsibilities with work. Through conversations with a range of experts, from employers and researchers to fathers and mothers themselves, they found that many fathers want to be supported at work to take a more equal share of childcare, but current policies leave too many hurdles in the way, especially for less well-off fathers.

From research in the UK and abroad we know that **children benefit** ^[3] when fathers are involved early in a child's development. Fathers who take leave from work tend to be more involved in childcare and to build closer relationships with their children, which is linked to **better outcomes** ^[4] for those children.

Sharing caring responsibilities more equally between mothers and fathers can narrow the gender pay gap. The gap is far wider between mothers and fathers than it is between women and men in general, largely because mothers are more likely to work part time, and part time work is paid less per hour than full time work.

We gave evidence to the Committee that many families are unable to access suitable childcare, either because it is unavailable or unaffordable. When parents cannot find the childcare they need, they are left with few choices. Mothers can be frozen out of the workplace, putting additional pressure on fathers to earn for the family, which in turn can limit their time for parenting. Similarly, one of the ways to relieve pressure on the childcare market is to split caring responsibilities between parents. If fathers have more time looking after their children, pressure on mothers and demand for childcare is relaxed.

Our evidence included feedback from our **Young Dads Collective** ^[5], a group of dads under 25 who work with professionals to transform how organisations engage with young dads and overcome the barriers that shut them out. The young dads' own experiences were of an increased pressure to be earning for their children. One dad said "You're not earning for yourself any more. You're earning for your children."

The urgency of earning for their children made undertaking training harder for the young dads, which could leave them trapped in low paid work rather than building skills and progressing. Some of the young dads also thought that longer parental leave could help them to get to grips with the new and complex role of being a dad.

The Committee found that current policies to support working fathers are inadequate for fathers in the 21st century who increasingly want a caring role in line with mothers'. Policies giving unequal rights to fathers and mothers are likely to reinforce cultural attitudes about parenthood, which still have a tendency to view fathers as breadwinners and mothers as carers. These views about parenthood 'can mean that fathers are "embarrassed" to ask their employers for their entitlement, or fear the impact it could have on their career if they do.'

The report recommends a strengthening of paternity rights to make more fathers eligible, bringing these closer to maternity rights to paid leave. Shared parental leave was introduced in 2015 and allows eligible parents to split a significant portion of paid maternity leave but take up appears to be as low as two per cent. The Committee recommends giving fathers 12 weeks' paid leave without affecting mothers'

existing entitlements to reduce the costs of taking paternity leave.

The benefits for fathers, mothers and children of supporting fathers to balance their parental responsibilities and work are clear. This report highlights some of the many barriers that shut fathers out of family life. We urge the Government to show its commitment to its aim of enabling families to share caring roles more easily and equitably by taking on board its recommendations.

-reprinted from Family and Childcare Trust

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