

Shared parental leave? He can take all of it! New mother reveals why she was more than happy to share her maternity – and why she's NOT cut out to be a stay-at-home mum ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

My phone beeped as I sat at my desk. Opening the WhatsApp from my husband I saw he had sent me a photo.

There he was, looking on cloud nine with a pair of bunny ears on his head, surrounded by laughing women in matching animal apparel.

No, my husband hadn't stumbled into the Playboy Mansion. He was at a baby sensory class with our nine-month-old son Arthur, and those bright eyed, bushy tailed women? They were my friends from the NCT group we had joined a year ago.

The daily photo updates had been bringing a smile to my face for the past few weeks while I was sat at my desk in central London. Three months earlier I had relegated my beloved dungarees to the back of the wardrobe, dug out the heels and swapped baby sensory for the 6am train and a Starbucks.

My husband David meanwhile had slapped on the out of office with glee and most days could be found singing row row row the boat on the floor of the town hall or trying to convince our son Arthur that broccoli is simply delicious.

David and I are part of the two percent of couples who have opted into the government's Shared Parental Leave scheme over the past three years.

The policy was introduced in April 2015 and gives parents (including adoptive) the right to split up to 52 weeks of shared parental leave (SPL) between them, as well as up to 39 weeks of statutory shared parental pay.

After six months off my job as a journalist, my husband took over. By the summer when our son turns one, we'll both be back at work having enjoyed six months off each with Arthur. But we're in the minority. As revealed by the Department for Business in February of the 285,000 couples eligible every year for SPL, take-up is as low as 2%, with a lack of awareness and equal pay issues being blamed.

As the scheme reaches its three year anniversary the Government has launched a £1.5m advertising campaign to boost its take-up, but why are couples shunning this very 21st century approach to parenting?

In many ways I can't say I'm surprised that there's been so little take-up. Other people's reaction to our decision to share the leave has ranged from surprise to curiosity to, in some cases, actual disgust.

'How could you even consider it'" one particularly vocal mum at a pregnancy group asked me when I casually mentioned I'd be returning to work after six months. 'I just know I won't be able to part from him' she said, deliberately, to my mind at least, rubbing her bump that little bit harder.

In a changing world where we're outraged and march on parliament when a man is paid more than a woman for the same job why are many of us so shocked that a man wants to bring up baby?

My husband has often had it worse. Many of the dad friends and acquaintances he has made automatically resort to caveman mentality. 'You work, wife baby' has been the essence of what he has heard on a daily basis.

Others asked him before he went on leave if he was looking forward to six months 'off'. While he may not be back at a desk until summer, I can assure you he's still working, and in my opinion working harder than he ever has at any 9-5 job.

My husband and I knew from way before Arthur arrived that we'd at least seriously consider SPL and I knew from the moment we found out we were expecting that in many ways he would be a better parent than me.

While I can be impatient, selfish and easily bored, my husband relishes time at home, is the kindest, most selfless person I know and has always been a complete natural with children. I can drive myself crazy singing a nursery rhyme for the 107th time that day, but he has no qualms about being silly and feels completely unselfconscious while doing so.

Crucially perhaps, I have always been ambitious in my career and have known I'm not cut out to be a stay at home parent. I take my hat off to those mums who are, and a big part of me envies them. I'd give my right arm to feel content and confident enough to give my all to my life as a mum.

It's slowly becoming more acceptable to say such a thing out loud. In my early days as a parent of a newborn it was both my real life mum pals and my insta 'friends' who got me through.

And those Insta inspirers are all about the happy mum, happy baby movement. The likes of Giovanna Fletcher (the wife of McFly star Tom Fletcher whose book has that very title) voice the need for self care.

Meanwhile Anna Whitehouse aka Mother Pukka and Joeli Brearley, the woman behind the Pregnant Then Screwed campaign are fighting on the front lines for creating that work life balance more harmonious for both mums and dads through flexible working, and striving for a fair deal for both parents after birth - including six weeks leave at 90% pay for mums and dads.

As well as emotionally, practically the figures also stacked up for us when considering SPL. One of the main gripes of couples I have spoken to who were keen to take up SPL but didn't, was the disparity between pay for mums and dads while on leave.

For those mums whose companies offer them a generous maternity pay package, the same can't be said for their partners meaning a drop to statutory pay once dad takes over. In our case, my bigger salary meant it actually made more financial sense for me to return to work after six months.

But what about the dads? While the happy mum, happy baby movement is making great strides, in many small but significant ways dads are increasingly being left out of the parenting equation. Literally left out.

My husband and I had three weeks crossover after he finished work and before I went back and we learnt a lot during that time. As well as our first family holiday and plenty of memory making, I treated those couple of weeks as a handover.

Detailing Arthur's routine, which Disney tune calms him down (the Bear Necessities) which one we have to skip (Kiss the Girl, sorry Ariel), his favourite foods and to never leave home without Piggy McPigson.

While there were plenty of things I had to learn during my maternity leave, there were some things I didn't need to think twice about. But David did.

For instance when we went out to a pub or restaurant we soon noticed that many of the baby changing facilities were in the woman's toilets, leaving my husband little choice than to venture into the forbidden land in order to tend to his child's most basic need. Hollywood star Ashton Kutcher has been leading the fight on this over in the States.

If we can't ensure dads have the same everyday amenities open to them as mums, how can we expect them to feel able to take on the task?

And then there's the baby groups. My husband has been lucky in that he's had the support of our NCT pals when taking over from me at the local baby sensory classes. But more often than not he's the sole dad there.

Sure, there's the odd Saturday class (normally to celebrate the likes of Christmas or Halloween) where all the dads show up in force. But if I found it nerve-wracking taking that step over the threshold of my first baby group, I can only imagine how intimidating it must have felt for David to walk into a room full of women.

One dad friend told me that on one venture to soft play with his toddler, a mum he'd been chatting to snatched the juice carton out of his daughter's hand telling dad "oh she won't drink that, have this darling", as if my friend didn't know what to feed his own daughter. We experienced a version of this ourselves when Arthur had to undergo hospital treatment recently. Despite my husband being right next to me, all questions and conversation from one doctor were directed to me 'mum'.

But my husband's biggest gripe? Many have commented to him when he's out with our son that it's "so lovely you're babysitting". Since when have we ever said a mother is "babysitting" her own child?

As a society we find it hard to wrap our heads around the fact that dads want to be dads. As we're loudly championing women moving forward in the workplace, alongside that we need to move away from the 1950s model of family life.

While we've both had challenges, sharing the care has had its benefits too. The biggest positive is the impact it's had on my husband and I's relationship. We were both left shell-shocked in those early weeks by the tiny human who had invaded our lives and our family of two.

Bickering over whose turn it was to empty the dishwasher and mornings filled with passive aggressive comments about how much sleep we'd both got were the norm. I used to feel the bubbles of rage rising inside me when my husband got home from work and after a brief hello to us both, would disappear for five minutes when I was desperate for a loo break/a hot cup of tea/an adult voice.

But now I'm back at work I get it. He needed those minutes to decompress from work, and gear himself up for the often stress-inducing event that is dinner time and bed time. After the daily desk grind and commute I often find that I'm giving myself an inner pep talk as I walk through the front door.

As much as I can't wait to hug Arthur and sniff him (THAT smell) there's still a plethora of possibilities as to how the evening routine could pan out. Bedtime is still very much a battlefield.

I can honestly say that I am less stressed at my desk than I am after a whole day with Arthur. I am and always will be learning with my son whereas after ten years of working, sitting down at my desk, with the bonus of a hot cup of tea in hand, and a to-do list to get through suits my organised mind. It is the unpredictability of childcare which can still cause me to break out into a sweat.

But the most important lesson? I've realised I was a great mother when I was at home every day, but I'm still a great mother now. In fact, I

truly believe I'm a better parent (and come to think of it, partner) now I'm working and then giving my all to those precious few hours in the evenings and the weekends with my wonderful boy.

And as for my husband, what has he learned from his time with Arthur? I hate to stick him in with that blokey stereotype but I do believe he underestimated how much actual WORK is involved with stay-at-home parenting. He got a card on his last day at work with the message "enjoy your break!" plastered cheerily across the front.

But his 'break' has turned out to not only be the hardest job he's ever done, but also, for him, the most rewarding and one he excels at. Full time parenting is a full time job and shared leave has shown us that sometimes it's the dad who deserves the job of CEO.

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