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'It was seen as weird': why are so few men taking shared parental leave? [1]

Only 2% of new parents split their entitlement. Fathers tell us what's stopping them

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EXCERPTS

When Paul and Caroline Roberts had their first child almost two years ago, Paul was determined to do more at home than his own father, who had worked 18-hour days, seven days a week. "I never saw him, and I didn't want it to be like that for my son," Paul says. "As soon as he arrived, I knew I wanted to be with him every moment I could."

Paul works in a factory in the north of England, where he lives with his wife Caroline, an accountant for a large organisation. They don't want to be more specific for fear of jeopardising their careers (they have also protected their real names).

The Roberts had heard about shared parental leave (SPL), the policy, introduced in 2015, that allows eligible parents to split maternity leave. Caroline was keen, because she worried about taking too much time away from her career; but the family's wish to share her leave soon hit bureaucratic, financial and cultural brick walls.

"Why would you want to stay at home?" Paul remembers incredulous male colleagues asking. Application forms for SPL were not circulated alongside those for maternity or paternity leave, and the human resources department was unhelpful. Sharing the leave would also have made the family poorer; Caroline earns more than Paul, and her employer's maternity package is relatively generous. Had she transferred a chunk of it to Paul under SPL, it would have dropped to the statutory minimum of £148.68 a week.

Two weeks after the birth of his son, Paul went back to the factory. "It was bad. I felt really down," he says. "I missed my boy." Caroline resented it, too. As well as managing life-changing new circumstances at home alone, she later had to pass up a promotion that would have clashed with the end of her maternity leave.

SPL, which seemed so progressive at its launch, has turned out to be messier than a toddler's dinner. It began as an alternative to maternity leave, which, at the statutory minimum, entitles a mother to 52 weeks off work, 39 of which are paid (90% of earnings for six weeks, then £148.68 for 33 weeks), and paternity leave (two weeks at £148.68 per week). Under SPL, a mother must take two weeks of maternity leave after the birth, but can move to SPL for the remaining 50 weeks, 37 of which are paid. A couple can share those 50 weeks, either taking half in turn – alternating blocks, or, say, 25 weeks together.

The criteria for claiming include a minimum length of employment with the same company and an eight-week notice period. (Agency, contract workers or the self-employed are not eligible.) Employers are required to grant shared leave to eligible staff who apply for it, and pay them, reclaiming it from the government by way of reduced national insurance contributions. Got it?

Dads are still expected to see work as the priority. Many are given grunt jobs for daring to challenge the norms

As the Roberts found, the complexity of SPL has been part of the reason parents aren't rushing to take it – and employers aren't racing to offer it. Earlier this year, the government launched a £1.5m "share the joy" campaign in an attempt to boost uptake of as little as 2%. Meanwhile, research published in August by the law firm EMW, based on claims filed by businesses with HMRC, suggests that less than a third of fathers take statutory two-week paid paternity leave, a figure that is in decline.

"For the modern generation, fatherhood is being expressed in totally different ways from before," says Han-Son Lee, a digital marketer whose experience (he struggled to get decent leave when he became a father) partly inspired him to launch the parenting website DaddiLife. "But the vast majority of workplaces haven't caught up, and dads are still expected to follow the stereotype of being at work is the priority."

Campaigners describe a vicious cycle; even well-intentioned couples submit to a deterrent climate, unwittingly perpetuating low expectations and poor policy. In workplaces, men are too often tacitly or explicitly discouraged from taking leave. "And so many dads are given grunt work for daring to challenge norms," Lee adds. One anonymous father recalls the macho congratulations his colleague at a bank received on returning to his desk the day after leaving the labour ward.

When David Freed was an economist in the public sector in London, he had no problem arranging shared leave when he and his wife, Charlotte, had a son in 2016. Charlotte took five months off her job in finance, after which David took seven months. He felt lucky, but noticed a change when he got back. "I got the message I was doing something a bit weird, that might affect my career," Freed says. "They'd say: 'When you became a dad, your priorities seemed to lie elsewhere.' Well, yeah, but when I was at work, I was at work. Nothing had changed."

Bad policy has far-reaching implications. Earlier this year, researchers from Georgetown University in Washington DC studied the way having children "traditionalised" couples' division of labour, delaying the "second half" of the gender revolution – in the home – long after women have made huge advances in education and the workforce. Even in countries with SPL, women still do more in the home when children arrive. Only one policy appeared to nudge the balance: a form of enhanced paternity leave known as "a father's quota" – a chunk of leave that a couple loses unless the father takes it. Among the couples in the study of 35 countries, 28% practised a modern division of labour without the father's quota, and 34% with it.

Just over a year ago, Freed and his family left the UK after Charlotte got a job in Sweden, a father's quota trailblazer. Today, couples in Sweden have one leave policy. They are entitled to a total of 480 days of leave, 390 days of which are paid at 80% of salary. Within that total, each parent has a use-or-lose quota of 90 days. The remaining 300 days of the 480-day total can be shared. As a result, fathers have been taking steadily bigger chunks of the total leave period – up to 27.9% in 2017.

Quotas, versions of which exist in Norway and Iceland, have critics, and gender gaps persist in these countries; but they have transformed family life, from the playground up. "During the week, there are probably more dads out with babies than mums," Freed says. In workplaces, it is assumed that new fathers will disappear for months, not days. Freed was amazed to observe parents routinely dashing from meetings to nursery pick-ups at 3.30pm – without judgment. If there is a culture of presenteeism in Sweden, it exists at home, not work.

Freed, whose experience in England inspired him to write Dads Don't Babysit: Towards Equal Parenting, alongside fellow frustrated father James Millar, has noticed Swedish dads are better at sharing child-rearing responsibilities as well as day-to-day duties. If a father invites him to a playdate, he'll get straight back. "In the UK, we'd be like: 'Yeah, let me just ask my wife.' It's a huge cultural difference, and it takes pressure off mums to be responsible for everything," he says.

Shared leave – or lack of it – has also been linked to gender pay gaps, which widen drastically when women have children. The gaps never close, partly because mothers are much more likely to work part-time, while families grapple with domestic logistics, childcare costs and the self-perpetuating pay gap itself – which means it tends to make financial sense for fathers to work more.

The UK government at least recognises there is a problem, while also challenging its purported scale. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy said in a statement that SPL uptake is in the range it estimated when it launched (2% to 8%). "We are consulting on options for how we may better balance the gender division of parental leave and pay," the statement added. That consultation, launched in July by Theresa May, envisages longer leave for dads. "We're not sending fathers the correct message when our current leave allowances give women 26 times more leave than men," the former prime minister wrote in the Guardian at the time.

Any improvements will need to catch up with a changing workforce. Dozens of companies are already acting. Just a year after the insurance company Aviva offered parents of either gender 52 weeks of leave, 26 on full pay, 95% of eligible fathers were taking more than two weeks and 67% took six months. Average paternity leave leapt from two to 21 weeks. Netflix, IBM and Twitter also have packages that wouldn't look out of place in Stockholm. But these are corporate giants who can cover empty desks, and for whom progressive benefits are as much recruitment and marketing tools as they are ethical advances.

"If you're a startup and lose your only salesperson for three months, you have a much bigger problem," says Matt Bradburn, co-founder of London-based People Collective, which advises startups on human resources. Founders, while typically socially progressive, are often childless young men who "continue to see statutory leave as the standard", Bradburn adds. When companies grow and age they now tend to enhance paternity leave to avoid the complexities of SPL, another criticism of the policy. Campaigners want the government to better support smaller companies who want to offer enhanced leave.

For the self-employed – now a record 15% of the workforce – having children costs the most. Self-employed mothers can apply for £148.68 a week of maternity allowance for 39 weeks (equivalent to £7,731 a year). Fathers get nothing. The government consultation excludes self-employed parents, because of the "flexibility and autonomy [they have] over the time they take off". But flexibility doesn't pay the bills.

Sometimes bad policy can trigger horrific chains of events – and unexpected solutions. William, not his real name, had to fight for two weeks off after the birth of his first child. He told his boss that a complication in pregnancy would require a caesarean and a long recovery for his wife and son. "'Well, get someone else to help,' my boss said. 'Haven't you got a mother-in-law?' We didn't."

Recovery for mothers after a particularly tough labour has often barely begun after two weeks. William had to go back to work. "My wife phoned me every half hour, crying," he says. Two years later, even in the face of another complex caesarean, nothing had shifted in his company's stance. The stress this caused led to severe mental health problems and suicidal thoughts. "I went down a very dark path," he says.

William got therapy and quit his job. He stayed at home to care for his family for as long as his finances allowed. Then he retrained as a nursery worker. His income has plummeted and, as a rare man in childcare, he's battling the stereotypes and stigma that imbalanced parenting can perpetuate. "I've had everything from 'paedo' to 'what do you know about children?'," he says, while trying to be positive

about progress, if not the speed of it. “It’s still always mums dropping off children and dealing with everything,” he adds. “I don’t see many dads. But that has to change.”

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