

# Leaving my baby at day care after maternity leave felt like a gut-punch, but I am 'lucky'<sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

My baby girl was less than 12 pounds when I left her. She couldn't sit up. She could only lift her head. And my breastmilk was keeping her alive.

It took a year to conceive her and nine months to grow her inside of me. In a fraction of that time, we were forced to separate.

It was my daughter's first day of day care.

I couldn't even kiss her goodbye, because I was sick. I wiped a sticky booger from her nose, worried she was catching my cold.

As I watched my husband carry her into school, I thought: "This is the only option."

It was too soon. She was too young. I wasn't ready.

My husband and I didn't want her to go into day care this early. We had planned to put it off at least another month. But family circumstances changed, and I was running out of paid time off.

The first day of day care for my daughter was also the first day my husband was on orders for a new, six-month military assignment – two hours away. Moving the kids to a new day care for the short period didn't make sense – and we couldn't immediately find openings anyway. So, he began driving four hours every day.

Our new normal: I wake up at 4 a.m. and get ready for my work on the early shift. He rushes the kids into day care the minute the place opens and prays he gets to work on time. During my shift, I pump as much as I can, usually only enough breastmilk to fill two 4-ounce bottles. After work, I pick up the kids, breastfeed, prepare dinner, prepare lunch for the next day, label bottles, bibs, boxes and clothes, mix formula, do laundry, vacuum whatever the dog has shredded, eat dinner, potty train, breastfeed again, change diapers, get my son ready for bed, sit with him until he falls asleep, breastfeed more and put my daughter to bed. If it's a good day, my husband is home by this point, and we try to catch up on each other's days while he washes dishes; then, he takes the trash out and goes on a late grocery run.

My days run like a factory, always with disruptions that keep me up later than I want, feeling exhausted and sad that I didn't get to hold my daughter enough, laugh with my son enough and kiss my husband enough. Sometimes, I feel equally defeated about work. There's just not enough time.

If one or both kids gets sick or has an appointment, I figure out how to do my job and take care of them. If my husband must travel for work – sometimes overseas for months – I do everything he does for us, too.

Does this sound like a privileged life? Because it is.

My daughter was 4 months old when she started day care. Some babies start at a few weeks old – their mothers still healing from childbirth.

On top of disability pay for moms who give birth, my company offers six weeks of paid parental leave. Most companies offer none.

While my husband was back to work four days after I gave birth, he eventually was allowed to take three weeks of paid paternity leave. Most men get none.

My bosses are moms who don't mind if I'm holding a baby on a conference call. Many working moms today are fighting just to have an adequate space to pump breastmilk.

Compared with most American moms, I'm living comfortably. I'm considered "lucky."

So, when a record number of women were elected to Congress last fall, our thoughts at USA TODAY went to paid parental leave and affordable child care. With more women leading our country than ever before, would we pass more policies to help working moms and dads?

Polling shows widespread support among Americans. Everywhere we turn, especially on social media, working parents are outraged that it's so difficult and expensive to raise a family in America.

So why do so many lack what they need? We set out to discover who is standing in the way of paid parental leave and affordable child care.

The results of the deep-dive are surprising: Some businesses, large and small, are asking Congress not to mandate paid leave or pass a tax to give it to everyone. Let us take care of our employees, these businesses say. We offer these programs as recruiting perks. Yet 81% of Americans still lack access to paid family leave.

The opposition to affordable child care is tricky. Critics are people in and out of Washington – some who are also moms – who fear government programs to make child care more affordable could penalize stay-at-home parents. Many Americans don't want to pay for someone else's decision to work.

Who is standing in the way? It's us.

If one day my daughter finds herself sitting in a day care parking lot with a child of her own, I hope she doesn't feel defeated. I hope tears aren't running down her cheeks. I hope she feels more ready. I hope she feels supported.

**Related link:** Gender inequality, work hours, and the future of work [3]

**Region:** United States [4]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/19/12/leaving-my-baby-day-care-after-maternity-leave-felt-gut-punch-i-am-> [2]

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2019/12/02/daycare-maternity-leave-paid-family-leave-working-mom-emotional-struggle/2586692001/>

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