

# Taking paternity leave can increase the chances of a relationship lasting, study shows <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Eric Wainwright just returned to work after taking five weeks of parental leave. He also took two weeks following the birth of his first child 2½ years ago.

“I needed to be there to support my wife,” says Wainwright, the director of content at Toronto Storeys, a real estate-focused website. “It was about being there for my partner.”

There are many reasons why new fathers would want to take parental leave. A recent study adds another reason: Men who take even a short amount of leave are much less likely to see their marriage or relationship end.

“Taking leave, at least two weeks or less of leave, [means] parents are more likely to stay together, at least for the first few years of their child’s life,” says Richard Petts, a professor of sociology at Ball State University in Indiana.

In a study published in the November, 2019, issue of *The Journal of Social Policy*, Petts and colleagues examined data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal study, a project administered by the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics. The study gathered a wide range of information on 14,000 children and their families from the time of their birth in 2001 through to kindergarten.

The researchers found that fathers who took leave were 25 per cent less likely to see their relationships end within the first six years following the birth of a child compared to couples where the father did not take parental leave.

“If nothing else, it’s a symbolic gesture that [says], hey, I’m going to prioritize my family and work isn’t everything. Even that signals a commitment on the part of fathers to make family a priority, which has long-term consequences for parental relationships,” Petts says.

The study findings are more proof of why public policy should be more supportive of paternity leave in the United States, Petts says.

In Canada, the federal government introduced new rules that came in to effect last March to encourage more fathers to take parental leave. Under the new rules, the “other parent” in two-parent families has the option to take an additional five to eight weeks of parental leave above and beyond the standard 35-week option and the extended 61-week option.

It is a use it or lose it incentive, and it seems to be working.

From March to October of last year (the last month for which data is available), 96,940 men took parental leave, compared to 81,480 during the same period the year before, according to data from Statistics Canada.

Fathers who take leave are likely to be the kinds of dads who are committed to the well-being of their families, and so it is less likely for their relationships to end a few years after the birth of a child than fathers who don’t, says Tammy Laber, a Toronto-based marital counsellor and registered psychotherapist.

“A huge element here is the mothers feeling like they’re not alone, that it’s not all on them,” she adds.

When a partner is seen as a good father, it can be a deciding factor in whether the relationship survives low points, as she has often seen in her practice, Laber says.

“Even marriages that aren’t going perfectly well, which is admittedly the kind I normally see, the ones where maybe we can turn it around, one of the factors that is going to help turn it around is: Well, he’s a really good dad,” she says. “If she tells me she feels he’s a really good dad, she’s more likely to forgive him making some kind of mistake,” she says.

Interestingly, Petts’ study did not find that taking more than two weeks of leave had any effect on the chances of a relationship surviving during the six-year time period.

Cultural norms likely explain this finding, Petts says.

“Leave is really beneficial so long as fathers take whatever is considered normal in that country,” he says. “Since taking long leaves in the U.S. is not normal, taking a longer period of time can have negative consequences.”

Those negative consequences, including financial hardship and suffering penalties at work, among others, likely erase the positive benefits of leave, Petts says.

By taking leave, Wainwright hopes it signalled to his wife that he’s a committed father who supports her, which bodes well for the long-term success of their relationship.

“This is the first building block in that process,” he says.

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