# Making paternity leave pay [1]

**Author:** Hafrey, Leigh
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EXCERPTS

The spring of 1988 lives in my memory in one abiding scene: My son, Nathaniel, aged 20 months, is toddling briskly down a path in Harvard Yard. He is about 20 feet ahead of me. I run to catch up to him, and, when I do, he chortles, maybe because he thinks he has outpaced me, maybe because he knows he hasn't. I kneel down to tuck in his shirt, and an acquaintance of mine walks by, beaming. "Happy father," he says.

The previous fall, my wife, Sandra, then an assistant professor at Harvard, and I had returned to Cambridge from New York. I was on leave from my job at the New York Times Book Review and divided my time between a visiting fellowship at Harvard and looking after Nathaniel. Effectively, I was on unpaid paternity leave. At night, when I put him to bed at 8 o'clock and lay down alongside him to help him settle, I was asleep within two minutes of my head hitting his pillow. It was one of the best years of my life.

While the benefits of paternity leave are well documented, few of my MBA students at MIT Sloan discuss the possibility. They are a highly motivated, ambitious and focused lot. When they imagine their futures, they talk about what they want to achieve, how they will rise through the ranks of their organizations or start companies of their own. They plan to make money and/or do social good, and they recognize, without visible ambivalence, the likelihood that they will belong to the "one percent" in five to 10 years - even as, in many cases, they have six figures' worth of student loans to pay off.

My experience of paternity leave is not unique. Recent social science research confirms the value of it. A study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, for instance, found that fathers who take an early, active role in their children's lives are likely to be more involved for years to come. Paternity leave also benefits women by enabling them to focus on their careers. A study by the Institute for Labor Market Policy Evaluation in Sweden found that a mother's future earnings rose an average of 7 percent for every month of leave her partner took.

What my students are not talking about is how they may one day need (or want) to take time out of their careers for personal reasons. They also do not discuss the kinds of formal, professional accommodations they might require. When pressed to reflect on these issues, it seems, they do so in old-fashioned ways. According to a recent article in Harvard Business Review, based on a survey of MBA students at HBS, "two-thirds of Millennial men expect their partners will handle the majority of child care. Just under half of Millennial women expect that they themselves will do so."

Does this disconnect, both with regard to the future and across gender lines, warrant alarm? Generation Y, which comprises the largest population cohort the U.S. has ever seen, will soon have a determinative voice on these matters. By 2020, they will comprise nearly half of the U.S. labor force. Some members of their generation will wield considerable power in shaping the modern workplace and the social contract between employers and employees, the private sector, and the larger society.

One reason for their lack of foresight is their life stage: They're young! While some of my students are married, and a few already have children, most of them are dependent-free. It's hard to imagine what it feels like to have children before you actually do.

A second reason they're not thinking about these issues is organizational indifference. For all the talk in corporate America about the importance of work-life balance, the reality is that most companies don't promote these quality-of-life policies. According to a report by the Society for Human Resource Management, the share of companies that offer paternity leave declined 5 percentage points from 2010 to 2014.

Worse still, many companies subtly punish men who take paternity leave, similar to the ways in which working women are marginalized for taking maternity leave. Research shows that men who scale back or take time off to be with their children are often penalized for taking advantage of flexible arrangements, passed over for promotions or even demoted. For Sandra and me, it was Cambridge or New York or the People Express shuttle on weekends, complete with 2-year-old. I left my job, and we survived and thrived.

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