

Paternity leave: Why so few Canadian dads take time off ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Toronto dad Adam Shona didn't stay home after the birth of his son two years ago. "My friends hadn't done it. I didn't really think it was an option. I felt dedicated to my job. I didn't know where I would be placed when I came back to work. And fear," he admits. "Fear of being the guy in the finance world who bails, and fear of sucking at it."

"It," being paternity leave.

Shona is definitely not alone. "Only one in 10 eligible fathers was claiming parental-leave benefits through Employment Insurance (EI), a ceiling that has held since an initial rush of men taking paternity leave in the mid-2000s," reports a Macleans' article published earlier this month.

Those men who took leave spent an average of 13 weeks away from work, compared to an average of 31.5 weeks for mothers.

The government of Canada splits the EI benefits between maternity leave (17 weeks maximum) and parental leave to a maximum of 35 weeks. So after having a baby, moms can take at least 17 weeks leave of their jobs. At that point, she and the other parent have the option of taking off the remaining time — up to a total of 35 weeks. A mother could take 20 weeks and a father the remaining 15, for example.

Quebec has its own parental leave benefits, which include an extra five weeks off specifically for fathers.

"We know, through many of the families we work with that dads do want to take on active roles at home, to be with their children and care for their families," says Chantelle Krish, of the YWCA Metro Vancouver. "Many fathers want to support their partners in their careers by taking on more at home and helping to reconcile work-life conflicts experienced by many mothers."

But are workplaces ready for men taking parental leave? When Jason Sallis, of Richmond, B.C., first approached his employer about taking four months off following the birth of his second child, his boss was a bit confused. "He had a hard time wrapping his head around the idea of a father taking parental leave and seemed unaware that it was governed under the same legislation as a mother taking parental leave," explains Sallis.

"Most people seemed surprised that I would want to take such significant time away from work," continues Sallis. "I guess there was this misconception that I should want to be more career focused and let my wife deal with the child rearing."

Sallis thinks some simple changes to the system would encourage more dads to take time off. "I dislike that there's a differentiation between maternity and parental benefits," he says.

"I'd prefer to see the maternity benefit discarded and the time merged together under the parental benefit umbrella, accessible to either parent. Giving a benefit specifically to mothers who have physically carried a child is exclusionary and unfair, especially in an age where alternatives to traditional pregnancies (e.g. adoption, surrogacy) are so commonplace."

Krish has another idea. She thinks Quebec is on the right track, pointing to a statistic cited in the magazine The Atlantic. When Quebec gave five weeks of paid leave specifically to fathers in 2010, the number of men taking advantage of parental leave shot up to 80 per cent.

Krish says the YWCA wants to see parental leave extended to 18 months, reserving the last six months for men: "The objective is that this will shift gender roles to normalize equal shares of unpaid work at home such as cooking, cleaning and caring for children."

"I do regret not taking paternal leave," Shona says, looking back. He didn't even stay on at the job he was worried about taking a break from. "All the commitment and dedication that I was displaying went out the door because I left my job.... There really isn't any other time in your life when you get to spend that much time with your child. It is special, and who knows if you will have another kid?"

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