

THE NEW DAD:

Take Your Leave

*Perspectives on paternity leave from fathers,
leading organizations, and global policies*

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INTRODUCTION

Among the most significant milestones in life, few compare with the birth of a child. While being a parent is a long-term, some might say lifetime, endeavor, the experience of parenting may never seem more palpable than in the days and weeks immediately following the baby's arrival. The growing importance of fathers' involvement in their families' lives has been a point of discussion of late, from Buckingham Palace, where Prince William utilized the U.K.'s 2-week paternity leave policy, to the controversy over whether it is appropriate for a U.S. Major League Baseball player to miss games by using the 72-hours his contract allows upon the birth of a child.

For virtually every developed country in the world, an appreciation of the importance of this time is acknowledged and supported through paid leave for mothers and many also provide paid leave for fathers. The United States is a highly visible outlier, offering no national policy on paid leave for mothers or fathers.

According to the International Labor Organization, 70 countries had legislated paid paternity leave in 2013. The reasons for extending leave to fathers are numerous, but most often reflect the expression of a few consistent values: the desire for greater gender equity, a reflection of the changing roles of men and women at home and in the workplace, and the desire to allow fathers the time to immerse themselves in parenting on a full-time (albeit often brief) basis. Research suggests that early, more intense engagement in parenting for men has positive long-term effects for father and child, and mother as well.

When men fail to be active co-parents in the first few months of the child's life it sets up a pattern that is difficult to change. For three, four, six months, or even more the mother develops a close bond with her child as well as the confidence and competence to become the primary caregiver. The father is immediately cast in the role of a supporting actor. Unless some extraordinary event occurs – for example the father takes an extended leave following the mother's return to work – there seems to be a low likelihood that the roles will be reversed or even equalized.

With that as context we wanted to deepen our understanding of fathers' experiences in taking time off after the birth of their children, and how these experiences are influenced by the organizations in which the fathers work and the availability of paternity leave. We conducted this research on paternity leave from three perspectives:

1. We surveyed more than 1,000 fathers employed by 286 different organizations across a wide range of industries to better understand their attitudes towards paternity leave. Most were highly educated, professional fathers, and 67% did work for organizations that offer paid paternity leave.
2. We conducted a benchmarking survey of 30 companies, which provided us with information about their current stance on paternity leave and offerings for new fathers.
3. Finally, we utilized existing research to examine paternity and parental leave from a global perspective.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

We appear to be at a transition point where many organizations and governments are evaluating the need for, and feasibility of, offering paid paternity or parental leave to fathers. Here is a summary of important learnings from this study that we hope will support this effort.

- 89% of the U.S. fathers in our survey indicated it was important for employers to provide paid paternity or paid parental leave (with 60% rating it very/extremely important).
- About three quarters of the fathers in our survey recommended that 2-4 weeks of paid paternity leave be provided, believing that was the right amount of time to balance their needs to be active co-parents with their needs to be important contributors at work.
- On average, U.S. fathers in our sample took approximately two weeks off after the birth of their children, and this appears to be true in other countries as well.
- The breakdown of the amount of time taken by fathers in the survey was as follows: 6% of men took no time at all, 12% took less than 1 week, 24% took 1 week, 39% took 2 weeks, 6% took 3 weeks, 4% took 4 weeks, 1% took 5 weeks and 8% took 6 weeks or more.
- The amount of leave taken was made up of a combination of paternity leave (54%), parental leave (13%), vacation/PTO (51%), Holiday time (6%), and sick time or personal absence days (4%).
- A large majority of the U.S. respondents in our survey said they would not make use of paternity leave or parental leave unless at least 70% of their salaries were paid, and forty-five percent said compensation needed to be 100%. International studies have found similar results.
- Among those countries that provided statutory paid paternity leave, the most common source of funding was a healthcare program comprised of employer and employee contributions as well as general taxation funds.
- The trend for leading organizations in the U.S. is to offer paid paternity/parental leave at 100% of salary for an average of two weeks, with a range of 3 days to 12 weeks.
- We observed a trend toward more gender-neutral framing of parental leave, using terms like “primary caregiver” and “secondary caregiver” in place of mother and father. Fathers who identified themselves as the primary caregiver were provided with an average of eight weeks paid leave.
- Common barriers to companies offering paternity leave included: cost, workplace culture, coverage while the father is on leave, and the difficulty of creating the infrastructure to implement paternity leave.
- There was strong support from fathers for having the ability to take the paid paternity time off when it was most needed, not necessarily in consecutive weeks immediately following the birth. Over 75% of fathers would like flexibility in when and how they use their paid paternity leave.
- More than 90% of fathers reported that they spent time caring for their new child and changing diapers during their time off and more than 80% went food shopping, cleaned the house and prepared meals.
- 95% of dads rated flexibility as important, with 79% indicating that it is extremely or very important that their employer provides and actively supports flexible work arrangements.
- It is clear that parental circumstances vary greatly, as do fathers’ expectations and needs. Both company policies and governmental legislation need to be flexible enough to take these variations into account.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Fathers

Our prior studies have shown that most fathers want to be more involved in bringing up their children and in having more equitable child care arrangements with their spouses. Taking time off when children are born is a very important way to follow through on that commitment. With that thought in mind, here are our recommendations for fathers.

- Take as much time off after child birth as is feasible for your circumstances.
- Establish a parenting partnership with your spouse or significant other.
- Be vocal about the importance of your caregiving role with your employer.
- Consider starting a father's group at your organization.
- As a leader, demonstrate your support for employees' lives outside of work, including their commitment to their families.
- Advocate for more family-friendly workplace policies with your employer, as well as with your state and national government.

Recommendations for Organizations

Organizations that acknowledge and respect the multiple roles that fathers play today will reap their rewards in terms of loyalty, productivity, and long-term retention.

- Offer paternity leave as part of your talent management strategy.
- Make paternity leave policies flexible enough to handle a wide variety of situations and needs, including additional time for fathers who want to be primary caregivers.
- Embrace flexible work as a business strategy.
- Understand the impact that men's active caregiving has on women's advancement.
- Develop an employee-friendly culture that supports both mothers and fathers, as well as those who are not parents.

Recommendations for Legislators

Although legislation is not a panacea for creating gender equity, there can be little doubt that effective legislation enables and ratifies fathers' active involvement in caregiving. An increasing number of developed nations are moving forward on this issue of paid parental leave for fathers, and the U.S. is far behind.

- Government statutory rights leave for fathers is needed so that leave is not restricted just to fathers whose employers are family-friendly. This is the only way to get wide coverage.
- Leave needs to be paid for fathers to take it.
- Fathers are more likely to take parental leave if they have individualized rights to this leave that cannot be transferred to mothers.

As with all our research to date on the changing role of fathers, we realize that while we are moving forward with men's evolving roles, gender is still a primary determinant of who plays what role in family life. One step toward increasing men's impact and involvement at home is providing effective and attractive parental leave policies for women and men, including paid paternity leave.

For additional information, access the full report at www.bc.edu/cwf or visit www.thenewdad.org, a website dedicated to the Center's research on fatherhood.