

Were you eligible for paid maternity or paternity leave when your child was born? If so, what were the terms available (period and pay arrangements)?

I was self employed when our daughter was born, so I had no paid leave entitlements whatsoever. I know that they have paid maternity leave for self employed women in New Zealand. I am not sure about other countries.

How much parental leave (paid or unpaid) did you take after the birth of your child? Did the period of paid parental leave available to you influence the amount of total leave taken? If so, in what way?

I was working on a contract prior to the birth of my child. When she was three weeks old, I drove to that office and collected work to do from home. I continued my freelance work from home throughout her first year of life – earning approximately a third of what I was earning prior to her birth while working as a freelancer. The fact that I had no paid leave entitlements certainly influenced my very early return to working from home.

How did you arrange your leave to have a baby if you were self-employed or were a contractor to a business?

The person I was contracted to on a freelance basis prior to my daughter's birth was a lovely, flexible employer. I stopped full time work on this contract four weeks prior to my daughter's birth but continued doing part time work from home until her birth. As mentioned previously, I returned to that work soon after her arrival. I would have preferred to have had much more time off after her birth, but it was not financially possible.

How did access to paid or unpaid parental leave affect your decision on when to return to work?

Having no paid leave affected my decision to re-start freelance work when my daughter was three weeks old and to continue freelance work during her first year with me working at home. I worked solidly through most of her naps. In hindsight, I really should have been napping with her: healing, repairing, and sleeping to enable me to get through each day and night.

How important was your time off work with your new baby for you and your baby's health? What aspects of the baby's and your care were most affected by the time you were able to spend at home with your new baby?

Being home with my daughter was essential for both of us – to adapt to this gigantic new world of parenting, and to give her the attention, immediate care, love and nurturing she needs. It was also essential to establish and continue breastfeeding which I did on-demand. I needed time to repair physically and emotionally and to

transition in to this amazing new experience of life. Importantly, I got to know my daughter and to learn her needs through our constant presence with each other.

For women, did your partner take parental leave? If so, how long did they take? How important was this time at home for encouraging them to participate actively in the care of your new baby?

Sadly, no. Our daughter was born on a Friday night. My partner negotiated to have the weekend off but was straight back to work on the Monday. Working six days a week. Shift work. Early starts. Late finishes. Sometimes double shifts. He was working as a Carer in an Aged Care facility (a very low paid sector) and on top of that, he was a Casual. He therefore had no sick leave, no annual leave, and certainly no parental leave. As it is an industry where they find it hard to recruit and retain, and as he had a great relationship with his employer, there was no risk he would lose his job (like many casual jobs) if he took time off, but we couldn't afford for him to. It really wasn't until our child turned one, and I returned to paid work outside the home, and he reduced his hours and started spending time with her, that they developed a relationship. She is two now, and they spend a lot of time together, go to Playgroup together on Friday's (he's the only dad there), and they have the most beautiful friendship. But all three of us know that he and our daughter really missed out in that first year. And I missed out too, because he wasn't here to support me either! My daughter and I left hospital on that Monday night. My mum drove the two of us home. My partner was at work and he couldn't even bring his own daughter home. Experiences like that scar.

If you returned to work, would you have liked to wait longer before returning to work? What do you think the benefits of a longer time at home would have been?

I started part time work outside the home when our daughter was one. I had been working from home as a freelancer prior to that. I certainly would've liked to have waited longer before I resumed the work at home, but I felt ready when I started the work outside of home. For my daughter, I think I should have waited longer. If we have another child, I would like to think I would wait until he/she is between 14 months and 2 years before returning to work outside the home. Our daughter is cared for by her grandparents on two days a week when we are both at work, and then cared for by us – her parents – the other five days. I certainly would not have put her in child care at 12 months of age. If her grandparents were not available, willing, and so loving, our circumstances would most certainly be different. I think she would have benefited if either or both of her parents were home for longer because she would be walking and talking more before she started being cared for by other people – therefore being able to navigate her way around, and communicate her needs. It would also strengthen the parent/child relationship even more.

Did concerns about the effect of your parental leave on your work prospects (maintaining your skills, promotion eligibility etc.) affect your decision about the length of leave you took? What were your primary concerns in your decision about returning to work?

My primary concern about returning to work was financial survival. After that, down the track, came the need to exercise my brain along with my heart. And then came the consideration of continuing my long-term career prospects.

Would you have taken longer parental leave if your family could have afforded it? How much longer would you have liked?

I would have not worked at all for the first six months, and then gradually built up the freelance work from home at a manageable pace. If we could afford it, I would have liked my partner to me home with us for the first three months, and then to return to work part time.

Did you return to the same employer when you resumed work? How did the maternity leave you were offered affect your decision to return to the same employer? What other features of your employer influenced your decision?

I returned to myself as I was self-employed and I guess the only benefit of that was that I could choose the hours I worked and take on as much as I thought I could cope with. When I returned to paid work outside of home, for the first time, I looked in to paid parental leave benefits as part of the process. I know that places like Banks have reasonable schemes, (and I know that my sister in England gets 12 months paid maternity leave), and I know universities in South Australia offer very attractive paid maternity leave ie. one I know of has 6 months at full pay or 12 months at half pay. I am working at a not-for-profit community organization where we are currently negotiating 18 weeks paid parental leave for male and female employees.

What sort of paid parental scheme would help you most in balancing your work and family goals?

I believe that a government funded paid parental leave scheme of six months paid leave at full wage replacement for women, and three months paid leave at full wage replacement for men would be ideal. When we talk about balancing work and family, we really need to place more emphasis on the parenting roles that men play. (As mentioned earlier, my partner is the only dad at playgroup, and at swimming lessons, there are no dads. Every child activity I have ever done with my daughter, it is always the mums doing all the work.) I am a passionate advocate of breastfeeding, and I truly believe that women need more time to recover physically from birth, and to establish breast feeding. But we really need to encourage men to do more and the only way we can do that is to support them with paid parental leave as well. (We also need to look at things like the gender pay gap, the long working hours we demand of employees, flexible work arrangements, gradual return-to-work schemes, breastfeeding friendly

workplaces, on-site child care etc.) Where possible, I also think that employers should supplement government funded leave. My dad runs a small business, and he says it would cripple him if the onus was on him to pay it all. I also really fear that employers would discriminate against women, and not employ them, if they had to do it all alone.

*What are your views on the best arrangements for a paid parental leave scheme?
What are the reasons why you would support such arrangements?*

As mentioned above, I support a government funded paid parental leave scheme for women and men, with employer contributions where possible. I support this kind of scheme because the welfare of children, the welfare of mothers, the involvement of fathers, and the health and wellbeing of a happy, well-slept, adapted, supported society is what will make us the kind of country and community we deserve to be.

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