

Submission to the Inquiry into Paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave

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Leave availability

I work for the Victorian Government in the Department of Human Services. I was eligible for three months leave at full pay or six months at half pay. Leave without pay is also available for a further 6 months (ie up to 12 months). The three months leave with full pay is also available to a woman who has suffered a miscarriage of a pregnancy that has advanced to at least 20 weeks. Males employed by the department are eligible for 12 months leave without pay if they are the primary carer, but only one week paid leave.

I took six months at half pay and a month of annual leave at full pay. This included six weeks before the birth, since the bureaucratic requirements at my work made it too difficult to remain at work longer.

I was going to take the three months until my manager told me that there was an option of taking six months at half pay. The availability of this arrangement (and the leave) certainly influenced how much I took.

Impact on my health and wellbeing

I had a liver condition during the later part of my pregnancy (obstetric cholestasis). The liver usually returns to normal following birth, however mine did not. For over a year I saw a gastroenterologist and had many diagnostic tests including a liver biopsy when my daughter, Eliana, was quite young. Being on paid leave was a great help in this situation.

It was also very stressful getting childcare in my area – we didn't get any formal care until Eliana was 16 months old, even though I went back to work when she was 6 months old. I am glad that I didn't have to worry about finding care even earlier. By the time she was 6 months old my mum felt that she could look after her two days a week, and my husband arranged to stay home one day a week (I worked three days a week). If I had gone back to work earlier this would have been very difficult.

I also found that the friendships I formed with other new mothers from my mothers group and in my neighbourhood were, and still are, invaluable to my wellbeing. Eliana also has some treasured friends among their children. Mothers supporting mothers is very important. This would not have occurred if I didn't have the time to spend with them and their babies during the day.

The other benefit for my own health and wellbeing, including recovering from pregnancy and childbirth, was having time to exercise. I walked to the shops, to the maternal and child health visits, to friend's places, to parks etc – I never have time to do now I work.

Impact on my baby's health and wellbeing

I had trouble breastfeeding early on and feel that being able to take six month's leave was very important in succeeding. I feel that this allowed Eliana to have the best start in life and I was happy that I could breastfeed without worrying about expressing etc early on. I would say that having time to establish breastfeeding was the greatest benefit to being able to take six months leave. This would be even more important for women of low socioeconomic status (among whom breastfeeding rates are lower). Research has shown that workplace barriers and lack of facilities have a greater impact on women in lower income groups¹. The need to return to work earlier may contribute to this.

I also feel that being able to look after Eliana full time for six months was very important for her emotional development and attachment. There is a growing recognition that the early months and years of a baby's life is crucial to their development and that young children develop through their relationships with others². An example of the way she benefited from me being with her full time is that I was able to spend time reading to her. Now that she is two and a half she adores being read to, so it was a great start. During that time I also talked to her a lot - I feel that this has benefited her (she was speaking in sentences by age two), and research supports the importance of talking to babies and young children³.

Paternal leave

My husband took two weeks parental leave (he works for the Australian Government in the Australian Bureau of Statistics). This was very important for my support in the early days, during the time we were both learning what to do with a newborn. I also feel that he gained an idea of what life at home with the baby would be like for me. I do think that more leave should be available for fathers. When my husband returned to work I very much had a feeling of 'what are you doing leaving me all alone with this little thing?'. I had a natural birth but for women who have had a caesarean there is greater time needed for recovery, as well as restrictions on lifting, driving etc for six weeks – these women (around a third of all new mothers) would particularly benefit from the support of their partners for longer.

Effect of leave on work prospects and return to work

I did not really consider the effect of leave on my work prospects. The length of time I took was more decided on availability and our financial situation. Returning to work part time has been far more detrimental to my work prospects than taking leave.

I always intended to return to the same employer. The availability of maternity leave and part time work has influenced me in staying with the same employer, and in the same position.

My views on the best arrangements for parental leave

¹ Department of Human Services (2005) Giving breastfeeding a boost: Community-based approaches to improving breastfeeding rates. A literature review

² Department of Human Services, Best Start, <http://www.beststart.vic.gov.au/whatis.htm>

³ Laura Pappano (2008) The Power of Family Conversation School and community programs help parents build children's literacy from birth <http://www.edletter.org/insights/familyconversation.shtml>

I would have liked to take 12 months off, especially since that seems to be the norm at my work, but we couldn't afford it and I do feel very lucky that I had six months at half pay. Even at six months of age it was hard to leave my breastfed baby in the care of others, since she refused to take a bottle or a cup. I put a lot of wasted effort into trying to get her to do so. As we didn't get formal child care until she was 16 months old, that was also stressful.

I don't have any views on the best way to ensure paid parental leave, but I strongly believe it should be available to all parents. I think that:

- Women should be paid three months leave at full pay. The option to take half pay for six months would be even better.
- The same entitlement should be available to men where they are the primary carer
- Men who are not the primary carer should be able to access at least 4 weeks of leave to support their partners and share in the care of their newborn.

Thank you for your consideration.

Regards Rebecca.