

Submission to the PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION INQUIRY INTO PAID MATERNITY, PATERNITY AND PARENTAL LEAVE

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Preface

From the outset I think it is important to establish the purpose of any proposed parental leave. I interpret it to be a form of government funded support for *parents* or more appropriately *families* upon the arrival of a newborn into the parents' lives. The economic burden of such a life-changing event and the income loss from reduced or no work can be quite substantial. Numerous studies have outlined the importance of both parents in any child's life; therefore both parents need to be able to adjust their lives so that they can have *equal relative* input. This may not mean that both parents are home fulltime for any period; nor must it mean one parent stays at home while the other works fulltime. Rather it is about supporting parents in achieving a work-life balance.

Maternity and Paternity Leave

Commonly discussion of parental leave focuses on maternity leave with a substantially smaller time-period being allocated for the father (sometimes referred to as 'supporting parent'). It is important to acknowledge that any mother experiencing pregnancy and the process of childbirth or caesarean should expect support in physical and emotional recuperation. This means financial support but surely must also allow for the father to provide support as well as forming attachment with their child. Unfortunately 2 or 4 weeks for 'paternal leave' may in many cases not be adequate provision for fathers to form bonds with their child and maintain their relationship with their partner. We need to maintain flexibility so that parents can work out what arrangement works for them.

Stereotyping

For the last four decades western societies have questioned the 'traditional' roles women, and to a lesser extent men, play in our societies. I feel that emphasising maternity leave as *being the same* as parental leave reinforces a stereotype of women as being 'care givers' first and foremost. By default fathers continue working to provide for their family and this reinforces men as being the 'bread-winners'. Hopefully we have grown as a society into one that takes a broader view of the capacities of men and women. By preventing either parent from making close and personal bonds with their child (through one-to-one contact) we then prevent the child from readily learning from male and female role models.

An Example

While I do not as yet have children I look forward to being a dad and sharing the experience of parenting with my partner. To provide a context for what our experience would be like; I work in the health sector and she is studying law. Barring an absolute miracle my partner will always possess at least 1.5 times the earning capacity I experience. My concern is that if we decided I would stay at home fulltime for 18 months to care for our child, while my partner returned to work from, say 3 months after giving birth, what kind of leave arrangement will we be able to have? Surely we should not be disadvantaged because my partner earns more than I do.

My Solution

I have been pleased to see mention made of parental leave arrangements in other submissions; citing examples such as that in place in Sweden. I propose a model very similar to that proposed by HREOC. The only difference being the *entire parental leave is transferable*. It may be that for any given parents it is most suitable for the mother to utilise the entire parental leave as *maternity leave*. Whatever the arrangement it is vital that parents have a choice in how this leave is managed. It is also important the language used in any legislation reflects the openness of parental leave in Australia. Language that identifies a parent as a 'support person', 'significant other' or by any other means minimises the role of mothers and fathers should be avoided.