

Personal Submission to the Inquiry on Paid Maternity Leave

I am the mother of a 22 month old boy. When I had my child, I was 32 years old and had been a full time worker and tax payer for 9 years. I was quite well established in my career when I had my baby – I had a full time, permanent position in a large university and had been promoted to near the top of my pay scale.

I am fortunate to have had access to excellent maternity leave provisions (by current standards) and I believe that the support I had access to should be a right for all women.

Maternity leave will benefit our whole society – not just those women/families that directly receive the support – by supporting to parents raising happy, healthy, trusting, confident and sociable children.

My responses to several of the questions from the *Personal Feedback Paper* follow.

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)?

When I went on maternity leave, I received 24 weeks paid leave at full pay from my employer, plus 2 weeks annual leave. I was allowed to take this as 52 weeks at half pay. In addition, I was able to use some accrued annual leave to give me an additional 2 weeks leave whilst still pregnant.

In effect I had a total of 13.5 months of leave, commencing 4 weeks prior to my baby's due date.

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

Being given paid leave made me feel more loyal to my employer. I was definitely committed to returning to work after maternity leave, however when I first went on leave, I planned to take further unpaid leave until my baby was 18 months old.

In addition to the maternity leave provisions available to me, my employer also offered a "return to work" bonus. This was equivalent to 12 weeks pay and could be taken in a variety of ways (eg. used to pay for childcare fees, to 'top-up' a part time salary, or for other costs associated with returning to work after maternity leave). I chose to receive the bonus as additional salary, so that when I returned to work at 20% of a full time load, I was paid as if I was working at 50% of a full time load, for a period of 12 months. The Return to Work bonus required that I return to work within 12 months in order to be eligible, so I ended up returning to work when my baby was 11 months old (not when my baby was 18 months as I would have preferred). On the positive side, my manager agreed to me working for just one day per week at first, and I have continued to be part time ever since.

Another condition of the Return to Work bonus is that I have to keep working for a full 12 months after returning to work. If I were to resign from my job before 12 months are up, I would return a portion of the bonus.

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?

My preference would have been to return to work when my child was around 18 – 24 months; essentially I would have preferred to wait until I felt my child was developmentally ready to separate from me for a full day and to be in childcare for a full day. My child's first weeks/months in childcare coincided with him hitting the 'separation anxiety' point. Childcare unsettled my child's sleeping routines and he began to wake more frequently during the night. This took many months to settle down, back into a normal routine.

On days that I worked, my child did not get his usual middle-of-the-day breastfeed (I was unable to express milk). He increased his consumption of cow's milk, and suddenly self-weaned (ie. ceased breastfeeding) at 13.5 months old. I had hoped to breastfeed him until around 24 months, in line with World Health Organisation recommendations.

In hindsight, I feel my child was ready to separate from me for a full day when he was about 18-20 months old (and I know other children who would have needed to be older than this). Delaying returning to work until

my child was developmentally ready would have been beneficial for my child's emotional development, sleep/settling routines and for encouraging continued breastfeeding.

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?

I greatly appreciate the time I had off work to spend with my baby. I sincerely thank my employer for giving me this support (and my union for gaining such great maternity leave provisions during enterprise bargaining). It was extremely important for the health and well-being of myself, my partner and our baby:

- I think the most important thing was breastfeeding. It took me around 8 weeks to properly establish breastfeeding. **Breastfeeding is a fulltime job when a baby is little.** My baby was feeding more often than not in the early months – I was easily spending 8 hours a day feeding my baby. This reduced to about 5 hours a day when he was about 4 months old. When I returned to work, my baby (then 11 months old) was having 3 – 4 feeds a day (in addition to solid food).
- The early weeks and months were essential to forming a loving and trusting bond with my baby. This bonding 'work' is evident now – my child is a loving, trusting, intelligent and confident toddler.
- My baby did not sleep more than 4 hours at a time until he was around 4 months old. This gradually extended to 5 hour long sleeps overnight (from 4 months old), to 6-7 hours (from around 6-8 months old), and eventually 10-12 hours overnight (from around 12 months old). Sleep deprivation, as every new parent will tell you, is very hard to deal with. However, because I didn't have the pressure of having to be a functioning, productive worker in an office each day, this made it easier to deal with the sleep deprivation.

For women, did your partner take parental leave? If so, how long did they take?

My partner was entitled to take 5 days of parental leave, he also applied to take his accrued annual leave (at that time, he had 4 days available). He was granted one day of annual leave in advance. So the total leave period was 2 weeks.

Although 2 weeks is better than nothing, it was not what we had wanted. My partner wanted to take one to two months of leave (with the additional time to be taken as leave without pay), however his manager did not approve this arrangement (approval of leave arrangements are at the line manager's discretion, as long as they meet HR policy requirements).

We were very frustrated by the manager refusing the additional unpaid leave. The organisation is a large one, with enough employees in the work group to cope with my partner being absent for a month or so. In addition, my partner's colleague was granted 6 months of unpaid leave for personal travel overseas, just a few days before my partner applied for leave. The main reason my partner's leave was not approved was because the colleague was going to be on leave at the same time. As it turns out, this colleague resigned from his job at the end of the 6 months leave.

We felt this was very unfair – the birth of a new baby surely is more important than someone taking an extended holiday! Partners should have a right to a period of unpaid leave following the birth of a child. This needs to apply to same sex couples as well.

How important was this time at home for encouraging them to participate actively in the care of your new baby?

The time my partner had at home with me and our new baby was wonderful and again, very important to both my and the baby's wellbeing, as well as for providing our baby with the chance to bond with his father.

My partner's support was the difference between me breastfeeding or giving up when things got tough (attachment difficulties caused a lot of pain!). I know so many other women who did not have someone by their side at every feed for those first few weeks to help them. Those who had breastfeeding difficulties all

gave up and switched to a bottle by the time their baby was 3 months old. This is not a good outcome for the baby or for the mothers who are sad or disappointed that they were not able to keep breastfeeding.

After breastfeeding support, the second most valuable thing about having my partner home those first two weeks was to be able to cope with the sleep deprivation – we were able to take it in turns settling our baby to sleep. I think there is no way my partner could have functioned at work anyway, he was so tired. When our baby was three weeks old and my partner returned to work, the sleep situation wasn't any better; my partner was frequently late for work and took several days of sick leave due to sleep deprivation. If I were his employer, I would have chosen to have an employee on unpaid leave rather than paying a worker who is unable to function properly and whose attendance was poor.

While my partner was home we also shared all other tasks relating to baby care – nappies, bathing, settling, etc. as well as just spending quality time bonding with our baby. My partner was also able to come with me for appointments with the Maternal and Child Health Nurse and to the first meeting of my "New Parents Group" (ie. Mothers Group) organised by the MCH nurse. This was valuable as he got to meet other new parents and babies.

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?

Whilst on leave, I wasn't concerned about maintaining skills or advancing my career. I just wanted to maintain my position, so that I had an option to come back to work when I and my child were ready.

However, since returning to work I can see the importance of maintaining some involvement in paid work in order to maintain skills and networks. After being away for a year, I feel like a lot of things have changed and my networks with other colleagues have been eroded.

This is a dilemma for mothers who want to both be with their babies and return to work. It is hard to pick a right time to return to work – a time that is good for both mother and baby.

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

My preference would have been to wait until I felt my child was ready to be away from me for extended periods of time. And this 'right time' is something that can't be known in advance. However, waiting until the child is ready is not very practical with our current systems - childcare waiting lists, employers needing to know when to expect an employee back at work, etc. I suppose for people who are self employed and have access to a nanny or other in-home carer a flexible return to work date would be possible.

When my child was 18-20 months old, I began to feel quite comfortable leaving him for extended periods. Although, even now at age 22 months, a full day in long daycare is still too long for him. Ideally I would like to work a shorter day, eg. 9 am – 3 pm so I can pick my child up earlier. It is *really* hard at the end of a working day to get an over-tired child home at 6pm then have to get him dinner, bathed and into bed by 7pm.

What do you think was the effect of your parental leave on your employer? Did they discuss the issues with you? Did this influence your decision on the length of leave taken, or the decision to leave employment?

Being a large organisation, the effect of my leave was manageable for my employer. A central fund pays for maternity leave and my manager was able to recruit a person to replace me in my position while I was on leave. We didn't really discuss the impact of my leave on the organisation – just took the necessary steps to manage it; eg. we arranged for a two-week transitional period so I could train up the person who was going to act in my position while I was on leave.

I actually think it is harder for my employer now, since I have returned to work, because I am now working part time when previously I was working full time. The position I was in requires a fulltime workload and is not suited to job-sharing, therefore my employer has had to make special arrangements to accommodate me and the person who acted in my position while I was on maternity leave. I am grateful that my employer –

and specifically my manager – is so willing to accommodate me. However, I am sure this is largely due to my contribution to the organisation over the past 9 years - I have been a dedicated and hardworking staff member.

Working part time is complicated – both for me as an employee and for my manager who has to manage the complexities of a mixed group of full and part time staff. I have found it very difficult to adjust to working part time – I feel much less productive and motivated compared to working full time and I often feel like I am missing out on opportunities because they happen on days I am not at work.

I find that when I am about to go to work I wish I didn't have to be away from my child; but then when I am at work, I want to be able to spend longer there, so I can accomplish more. It is a frustrating, no-win situation.

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

1. I firmly believe that all mothers should have a right to paid parental leave and that, *at minimum*, this should cover the time *until the child is at least 12 months old*. That means providing a total leave period of about 58 weeks, in order to provide paid leave during the last few weeks of pregnancy as well as paid leave until the child is 12 months old.
2. The option for a mother to take further unpaid leave until the child is at least 24 months old should also be a right. Of course, providing paid leave until the child is 24 months would be even better!
3. Pregnant women should have a right to a combination of paid and unpaid leave, not just for the 4-6 weeks prior to their due date, but also for times during the first trimester when women typically feel the most fatigued. I am not sure how much first trimester leave would be required. I would have liked the option to work shorter hours and 4 days a week instead of 5, for the first 14 weeks of my pregnancy, primarily because I experienced morning sickness.
4. Women who are breastfeeding in particular should be guaranteed paid leave. Providing support for lactating mothers at the workplace is important (and should be a legal requirement for every workplace!); it can facilitate women continuing to breastfeed whilst working. However, it should not be assumed that every woman is physically able to express milk. In addition, offering expressed breastmilk (EBM), although better than formula, is still not the natural way for a baby to be fed. EBM does not give babies the oral development, bonding experiences with their mother or other benefits of breastfeeding. And there are risks of EBM being contaminated, etc. which do not occur when a baby is breastfed directly.

I believe offering expressed breast milk in a mother's absence is acceptable on occasion, but mothers should not be compelled to routinely provide their baby with expressed breastmilk simply because they are required to work.

5. Ideally, leave arrangements should be flexible enough to allow a woman to return to work at the time that is most appropriate for the child (rather than arbitrarily making maternity leave last for a set length of time, such as 6, 14, 26 or 52 weeks). After all, it is the child's welfare that is of primary concern, and every child is different. It cannot be assumed that just because a child has reached a certain age, they are developmentally ready for full day care with another carer.
6. I firmly believe that partners should have a right to parental leave too. At about three months of age, babies seem to me to transition from 'newborn' to 'baby' and the intensity of their needs tends to settle down a little. Therefore I would like to see partners have a right to at least one month, and ideally three months paid leave. At a minimum partners should have the right to remain on unpaid leave until the baby is three months old.
7. I would like to see more thought given to ways that might facilitate parents taking turns to be the primary carer who stays home with the child. My partner and I have been considering how, over the next 3 – 10 years (while our child will be in primary school), we might continue to have:
 - a. one of us at home with our child and the other working full time; or
 - b. both of us working part time, so that one of us is always home with the child; or

This would allow both of us to foster our bond with our child as well as to maintain and develop our careers.

I have implicit guaranteed access to continued part time work as a result of returning to work part time from maternity leave (my employer makes a commitment to offering a 'family friendly' workplace in the enterprise agreement). However, my partner's manager has refused him the option of part time work. Now that I am no longer breastfeeding, we would ideally like to be able take turns being the working parent or the stay-at-home parent, eg. swapping roles each year.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

Jane L. Martin