

## **Personal Feedback: Inquiry Into Paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave**

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

With my first and second child, I was entitled to 6 weeks paid maternity leave and then up to 52 weeks of unpaid leave. With my third child, I was entitled to 12 weeks paid maternity leave and then up to 2 years of unpaid leave.

***Did you take all of your paid parental leave entitlement? If not, why not?***

With my first and second child I took the full 12 month leave entitlement.

With my third child, I have returned to work after 9 months primarily because I have been keen to return to a work project that is of great interest to me. I am only able to do this because of flexible work arrangements (ie. I am contracted for 12 hours per week, but can work from home for half of this time) and I am very fortunate to have access to on-site child care where I can continue to breastfeed and interact with my baby during my working day. I would not have considered returning early from leave if the flexible work arrangements and on-site child care were not available to me.

If it were not for this particular project, I would seriously consider taking up to 2 years unpaid maternity leave, despite the financial challenge.

***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?***

With each child I was fortunate to have accumulated a large portion of leave, so I was able to minimise the amount of unpaid leave, although it was not officially parental leave. I arranged part-time payment of accumulated annual leave for ~6 months of my first and second maternity leave episodes, and with my third child, arranged part-time payment of annual leave and long service leave. I am committed to being fully available to my babies in their first year, so I would have taken leave for the same period of time regardless of access to paid leave, but it would have been difficult financially.

I believe that I have been in a fortunate and uncommon situation; so many women do not have large amounts of accumulated leave and particularly now, with the enormous rise in the costs of housing and living, it is not an option for many families to survive on one income.

***Did you leave your job prior to your child being born?***

No, I kept my job and took leave with each pregnancy.

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

If I did not have access to accrued annual leave, it would have been financially difficult, but I still would have taken leave for the full 12 months. However, for many families that have taken on mortgages in the last 3 years, it would not be an option, financially, to take any extended unpaid leave, and this is not fair on the wellbeing of the baby or his/her family.

***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?***

My time off work was crucial to establishing my role as a mother (following the birth of my first baby), to the establishment and continuation of breastfeeding, to the development of a strong, trusting relationship with my baby, and to the development of supportive networks within my community.

Having studied and worked full-time for 15 years before becoming a mother, there was a major adjustment to the mothering role. My voluntary work with new mothers in the community, and statistics regarding the increasing age of Australian first-time mothers would suggest that this is a significant issue for many women. Motherhood is an under-valued,

physically, emotionally and socially challenging role for which our society poorly prepares us. For some women it can take months to adjust to their new and important role; the pressures of returning to work is not conducive to this role adjustment.

Extended time off from work enabled me to persevere through the breastfeeding challenges of the early weeks, establish a successful breastfeeding relationship and go on to enjoy it over an extended period. There is ample evidence regarding the health benefits of breastfeeding for both mother and baby; from a personal perspective it has also been very rewarding in terms of the mother-baby relationship. Women that choose to breastfeed (and that's the vast majority of Australian mothers!) and their infants deserve the support to establish a successful breastfeeding relationship, and continue for as long as they desire, including support through the absence of pressure to return to paid work.

Time off from work has enabled me to meet the baby's needs and respond to normal baby behaviours such as night-time waking and feeding, periods of unsettled behaviour and the need for close contact with mother, thus establishing and reinforcing a close, trusting relationship with the baby. It can be difficult and tiring to respond to these needs at times. Not having to attend paid work has meant that I have at least had the option of resting during the day, and allowing my baby to express his/her needs rather than trying to manage their "problem" behaviour and engineer their patterns into a routine that will fit around a work schedule.

Lastly, time off from work has enabled me to develop supportive networks within my own community, ensuring that I am never "alone" in my mothering role. Community support groups such as the Australian Breastfeeding Association, resources such as the local library and child health nurse, and even getting to know neighbours that I barely knew when working full-time, all ensure that I am well supported as a mother. I'm sure that this has a positive effect on my whole family.

***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?***

My partner took 2 weeks annual leave after the birth of each of our 3 children.

After the birth of our first child, he spent most of that 2 weeks preparing meals and doing housekeeping tasks as I was recovering from a Caesarean birth. We had decided before the birth that he would be responsible for bathing the baby; that was to be his special time with the baby as I would be breastfeeding. It was a great way to start...I think I only bathed our first baby a couple of times in that first year!

He also had 2 weeks off work after the birth of our second and third babies. After the normal, uncomplicated births I was physically in much better shape, so could contribute more to the running of the house, but my partner was much needed to care for the older children.

On the suggestion of our midwife, my partner took extra leave after the birth of our third child; he returned after the initial 2 weeks of annual leave but then worked 4 days/week for 5 weeks, having Wednesdays "off" as an annual leave day to spend at home. This was great for all of us...eased him back into work, and helped me to transition to caring for 3 small children on my own, knowing that I'd only have two days of "going solo" before he was home to help out.

For our family, I'm not sure that his provision of care for the newborn has been an issue; we both accept that I'm the primary caregiver, and that his job is to care for me so that I can care for our newborn baby. Of course he has helped with things like nappy changing and rocking a restless baby so I can have a break, but particularly as we have had more children, it has been more important to all of us that he can care for the older children and manage the house so I can get on with meeting the baby's needs.

***Did your access to social security payments (like family benefits part B) affect your decision about taking parental leave or returning to work?*** No

***Did you return to the same employer when you resumed work?*** Yes

***How did the maternity leave you were offered affect your decision to return to the same employer?*** Didn't really affect my decision, I really enjoy my job.

***What other features of your employer influenced your decision?*** On-site, high quality child care and flexible working arrangements.

***What do you think was the effect of your parental leave on your employer?***

My parental leave enabled a less experienced, but suitably qualified employee to develop her skills in a more senior position.

***Did they discuss the issues with you?*** Yes. I felt well supported by my employer; that they were accepting of whatever length of leave I wanted to take.

***Did this influence your decision on the length of leave taken, or the decision to leave employment?*** Did not influence length of leave, but I probably feel more loyal to my employer because they have been so supportive.

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

A regular parental leave payment paid through the employer, where the parent on leave has the option of continuing contribution to superannuation scheme. I think that mothers that choose to take extended leave, or even work part-time are really disadvantaged when it comes to superannuation.

***What are your views on the best arrangements for a paid parental leave scheme?***

***What are the reasons why you would support such arrangements?*** I would be happy to see the Baby Bonus scrapped. New babies need their mother, not a plasma TV – a regular payment is more likely to keep a mum at home than a lump sum payment! I would like to see paid parental leave (80% of salary) for up to 12 months, with the option of extending to 2 years (no pay in second year). While mother is generally the primary caregiver in the first year, families can decide who is best placed to take the paid leave.

Maybe the tax system could be adjusted to benefit the family during the period of unpaid parental leave eg. split the employed parent's income between the parents, eg. if income earner's gross income is \$70,000, that person pays tax on \$35,000, and the primary care giver on unpaid parental leave "earns" and is taxed on the other \$35,000, so family has more disposable income during the time of unpaid parental leave.