

# **Submission to Productivity Commission**

## **Paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave**

### **Personal Feedback Paper**

#### **Current arrangements for parental leave**

##### What paid maternity leave am I entitled to?

I have 2 children and have been with the same employer for both. I am currently on maternity leave after the birth of my second child, she is now 7 months old. Both times I have been entitled to 12 months maternity leave including 14 weeks at full pay. Prior to the birth of my first child (a son) I was working full time (70 hours per week). Upon returning to work after that period of maternity leave I had the entitlement to return to work on a part-time basis (36 hours per fortnight was the time negotiated), so the hours that I am being paid for maternity leave this time around are based on those part-time hours. I am taking the leave at half pay so I am receiving 18 hours pay per fortnight this time.

##### How much paid leave am I taking?

I am taking all of my paid maternity leave but at half pay to maximise the amount of time that money is coming in.

##### How much time off in total am I taking and did the amount of paid leave influence that decision?

I returned to work when my son was 10.5 months old and I am due to return to work when my daughter is 11.5 months old. First time around I was paid the 14 weeks leave at half pay and I also used any accrued annual leave to maximise the amount of time that money was coming in. Basically I exhausted all paid entitlements possible and then was on unpaid leave, I think the unpaid period was approximately 4.5 months.

This time around I had reached 5 years service with my employer so can take accrued long service leave as well as the maternity leave and annual leave. I am doing this at half pay too so that I can have an income for the whole 12 months.

I think I would have had to return to work earlier if I were not able to access paid maternity leave. The period after my son was born when I was on unpaid leave was hard for our family to manage financially. So the fact that I can take accrued long service leave now is great financially, but I do think that long service leave is not really intended for use as a form of parental leave. It is meant to be recognition of the dedication you have shown to the employer over a long period of time and the value you have brought to the organisation over that time, not as substitution for a proper maternity leave scheme. I agree with Angela Budai's submission published on the website which pointed

out that using up your accrued long service leave for the purpose of being the primary caregiver of a baby or child isn't equitable.

#### Self employed arrangements

n/a

#### Did I take time off prior to my children's births? Did leave provisions influence my decision?

I finished work 6 weeks before the birth of my son because it was a natural break to finish up at Christmas (he was born in February). This was fortunate as it was a very hot summer that year and it would have been very difficult to continue commuting in public transport and driving around and parking in hot car parks etc when heavily pregnant. My role was mainly based outside of an office visiting other workplaces so I would often have to park in a parking station or on a street some distance from my destination. I also experienced quite debilitating back and pelvis pain so it wasn't practical to be very active. For the second pregnancy I finished work only 2 weeks before the birth and this was definitely influenced by the paid leave provisions because I wanted to maximise the period of paid leave that I would get after the birth. Also I think it was more manageable to work until closer to the due date because I was only working part-time.

#### How did access to paid/unpaid leave affect my decision on when to return to work?

I knew I wanted to have my own position held for me with the same employer. If more than 52 weeks of leave had been available I would probably have taken more time off, even if I meant taking unpaid leave. However if I applied for more leave after the end of my 52 weeks maternity leave (eg take a "career break") the terms of our Enterprise Agreement state that my employer would only have to give me a comparable role of the same grade when I returned, rather than give me my own job back. This consideration was relevant for both of my periods of maternity leave.

### **The benefits of parental leave on wellbeing**

#### How important was the time off work with my new baby for the health of me and my baby? What aspects of the baby's care and my own well-being are most affected by the time I am able to spend at home with my new baby?

Without paid maternity leave I don't believe that I would have been able to successfully breastfeed. I needed support and assistance from organisations like the Australian Breastfeeding Association and local Community Nurses to establish breastfeeding and if I were working either part-time or full-time soon after the birth I don't think I would have had enough time to seek out this support and follow the advice given. There is overwhelming evidence for the importance of breastfeeding for both mother and child. We have a family history of conditions like asthma, eczema and depression so I felt it was very important to do everything in my power to try to protect my children against these conditions. I think the benefits to the child are reasonably well-known but I have recently been made aware of the importance of breastfeeding to

the mother's health, as it is documented that mothers who do not breastfeed have a higher incidence of some kinds of cancers. The Australian Breastfeeding Association submitted a lengthy report to the Breastfeeding Inquiry in 2007 which provides documented evidence and reliable data on the importance of breastfeeding to both mother and baby and I would refer you to this document. They also pointed out in their submission that an overwhelming majority of women wish to breastfeed their babies and I believe that a universal paid maternity leave scheme would allow more women to achieve this goal and succeed at breastfeeding.

I found a great amount of satisfaction in being able to breastfeed my children because I knew I was protecting them and myself from higher risks of diseases. This definitely contributed to my sense of wellbeing as I learnt how to be a mother, particularly in the adjustment period with my first baby. I wanted to breastfeed for at least 6 months and when I returned to work when my son was 10.5 months old I was expressing 1-2 bottles a day of breastmilk for him so that he could continue to receive the benefit of breastmilk while I was at work, as well as continuing to breastfeed him on the days I didn't work. I hope to do the same for my daughter.

Aside from breastfeeding, babies and their parents need a lot of time together to learn about each other and to develop a strong and loving bond, particularly in the early months. The demands of caring for a small baby are nearly overwhelming for most new parents, let alone if they are both trying to juggle paid work as well. Because I had paid leave I was able to attend support groups like the Community "Mothers Group" for new mums and the Australian Breastfeeding Association local meetings. These were very important to me in feeling like my struggles were not because I was not a good parent but because everyone goes through these difficult adjustments. Also my daughter is 7 months old now and the hard work of the early days is really repaid at this age as she smiles, laughs and coos so much. Being able to spend time with her at this age rather than returning to work when she was 6 months old gives me a real sense of satisfaction and confidence that I have figured out how to be a good parent.

I believe that being at home caring for my older child when a new baby is introduced to the family is also very important not just for his own wellbeing but also that of the entire family. I value being able to help him through the difficult and complex transition of sharing Mum and Dad's attention and love. If those emotions were being compressed into the busy post-work evening I believe it would make for a very stressful home life and negatively effect our health and wellbeing.

For women, did my 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 the new baby?

My husband does not have any paternity leave entitlements. He saved up his annual leave and took 3 weeks off at the birth of each of our children. This allowed him to become an active parent involved in daily care of our new

baby. This time together was also important for our relationship as mother and father because we were sharing the caring duties. However because he was using up all of his annual leave in this way, he did not return to work after a relaxing refreshing holiday as might normally be the case with taking annual leave. Instead he had just been through the greatest upheaval of his life and now faced the prospect of full-time work without a decent break away from work for many months to come as his leave was exhausted. Therefore I believe that all partners should have an entitlement for 3 weeks' parental leave. We would also have liked to have my husband work only 4 days per week after my return to work, so that he could be the carer on one of the days I work. However his employer is not interested in this.

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?

Yes I would like to have taken more time off. I would like to have waited until my children were 2 years old before returning to work in any capacity. I can see that from the age of 2 my son is actively interested in activities that take him away from me and he interacts with other children socially rather than simply playing side-by-side with other children. He was 10.5 months old when I returned to work and he was often upset at my departure and arrival home, even though he was being cared for by his grandmothers. I think he found it a very difficult adjustment period and it would have been worse in a day care centre environment because of the ratio of 1 carer to 5 children. It concerns me that my daughter may go through a similarly difficult adjustment period when I return to work later this year even though we are hoping that the grandmothers can again look after the children. I think there would be a clear benefit in waiting until the child is developmentally ready to enjoy time away from their parents.

### **The impacts of leave and return to work decisions on career prospects and family income**

Did concerns about the effect of my parental leave on my work prospects (maintaining skills, promotion eligibility etc) affect my decision about the length of leave I took?

No, not with the technology we have at our fingertips. With the ability to remain in contact with the workplace through email and internet connections into the office computer network etc I don't think this is a big issue. There are a myriad of ways that I could regularly update myself on trends and issues in my industry. Eg subscribing to relevant publications both paper and electronic, receiving bulletins and meeting minutes via emails from my organisation. I believe that there would certainly be an adjustment period in which I would need to catch-up on changes in the industry but I wouldn't class this as a concern.

What were my primary concerns about my decision to return to work?

I was mainly worried about how the baby would cope with being left in care and that I would be missing time to play and learn with him. I was also concerned about whether the long days were too demanding on him or his grandmothers who were caring for him. Also I was concerned about how much money we would actually be gaining by me working because of the costs of travel to work, lunches at work, and more expensive ready-made dinners on the days I was working because I was not at home to make a cheaper meal. It also worried me that as a stay-at-home Mum I could devote my energies to community activities and volunteering which I couldn't do when in paid work because I was too busy. It also concerned me that I might become very involved in issues and projects at work to the extent that I would come home very stressed and tired (as I had done before becoming a Mum) and would not be able to give my son the attention and quality of care that he was used to and that I would want to provide for him. The other factor was that as a stay-at-home Mum I was doing a lot of household chores during the day which still needed to be done but somehow have to be fitted into the evenings after work so I was concerned that this would add more stress to our lives.

I share the same concerns for my upcoming return to work, in fact they are intensified because we have 2 children now.

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

Yes I would like to have taken 2 years off after the birth of each child. I see now that he has passed this age, that my son would have been more ready to be away from me while I was working.

Did my access to social security payments (like family benefits part B) affect my decision about taking parental leave or returning to work? If so, in what way?

No. As grandmothers are doing the childcare the benefits like child care rebate etc are not relevant to us. It seems that the government's focus is on increasing the number of places in childcare centres but they should also look at family-based childcare arrangements such as grandparents caring for their grandchildren and aunts / uncles caring for their niece or nephew etc. Many of these care arrangements are made with family members who are employed part-time or students and it should be recognised that in choosing to care for the child they may be giving up the chance to do paid work those days.

Did I return to the same employer when I resumed work? How did the maternity leave I was offered affect my decision to return to the same employer? What other features of my employer influenced my decision?

Yes I returned to the same employer. The entitlement to 14 weeks paid maternity leave was important to me as we planned to have more than one child, but it made sense to continue with the same employer for a myriad of reasons not just that. It was also important to me that I had the right to return to work part-time until the child's second birthday, and still retain the right to return to my previous full-time role. I had an expectation that management would negotiate with me for a part-time arrangement that would work for both

parties and be flexible (and this was the case). My full-time job was 70 hours per week and a 9 day fortnight and I can see that this will give me a good work/life balance as my children get older. I wasn't aware of being able to access my accrued long service leave after 5 years' service until I was already pregnant with my second child so it didn't affect my decision on the timing of the pregnancy but it was something that I was very pleased about when I was informed of this entitlement. I believe that this range of family-friendly initiatives benefit both the organisation and staff.

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

The organisation had to find someone to do my job so they were effectively paying 2 people for the one role for that period. They didn't give me a hard time about this but I am aware of this and it makes me more likely to make an effort to return to work with them. Also before I was pregnant I saw they sometimes had difficulty in finding people who were willing to take other roles for only 12 months maternity leave relief.

This didn't affect my decision as I felt that there was enough movement of staff within the organisation for someone who was employed to do my job, to get another similar role as permanent vacancies arose.

### **The effects on businesses**

It bothers me that there is a perception that maternity leave provisions are detrimental to good business relationships. It can be hard for the clients or customers to deal with frequent changes of staff members and it can prove difficult for the organisation to maintain those relationships but this isn't related to maternity leave at all as staff members change more often for other reasons rather than maternity leave. Eg restructuring, promotions, changes in portfolios, tight labour market etc.

### **Characteristics of paid parental leave**

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

Firstly I am in favour of a scheme which covers all kinds of families ie heterosexual parents, same-sex parents, single parents and adoptive parents. It should cover all parents too (full-time, part-time, casual, contractors, self-employed, students)

I believe that all primary caregivers should be entitled to 12 months paid leave at their full salary. If they wish this could be taken at half pay for 2 years. They should then have the ability to return to work on a part-time basis until their child is 7 years old or at least until they start school. The majority of these people would probably be mothers taking maternity leave, but the scheme should allow for these entitlements to be accessed by fathers rather than

mothers if desired. The parent who is not the primary carer should receive 3 weeks paid leave upon the birth of the child so that they can spend time together learning about being a family. The same would apply for the birth of each child as there is a big adjustment for other children when a new baby arrives and the presence of both parents without financial stress would be very important.

These entitlements would have the following benefits to parents and the community: a solid start to the new family relationship through both parents developing a bond with the baby and each other as parents in the early weeks; having the time to access support for breastfeeding issues if they arise; reduction in financial stress when new parents are already having to deal with so much upheaval; ability to be involved in support networks like the Australian Breastfeeding Association, Community "Mothers Groups" and Playgroups; the ability to volunteer in these organisations to support others in their parenting challenges or in other sectors of the community. I also believe that these entitlements would have benefits to employers as the investment that they have made in their staff members' training and development returns to their organisation.

I don't believe that employers should bear all of the financial costs of this scheme. Many of the benefits of the scheme would be to the community eg more parents volunteering in community organisations would mean more services were available to parents and increased breastfeeding rates would save the health system money in protecting mothers and their children against many diseases. Therefore the government should share the cost. I am in favour of the proposal that the government pay a basic rate which the employer should "top up" to the level of the woman's pay that she was receiving prior to her departure on leave. The government should also provide administrative support and guidance to the many business owners and organisations who have not provided parental leave in the past and struggle with how they could manage to implement such entitlements.

I also believe that there should be more support for parents who are staying home looking after their own children for a longer period rather than returning to the workforce. These parents might require financial support themselves as perhaps they used to be shift workers but traditional childcare arrangements are simply not an option when you work all night. Other parents might not necessarily require a monetary payment but overall there is a need for recognition of the important role that stay-at-home parents are performing and its value to the community in the attention they are devoting to raising the next generation. If all parents are given the opportunity to take paid parental leave then return to work in a part-time capacity I believe there will be great benefits to our communities.

Thankyou for considering my submission.