

I am a self employed child care worker, known as a Family Day Carer. Everyday I work with parents and care for their children. These parents are wrought with guilt at leaving their child with a stranger, in order for them to return to work. These parents need to return to work, in order to live, but most do not want to. They have no access to paid maternity leave, or very little maternity leave. I believe that Australia should introduce a paid maternity leave system, in order to benefit the children and the parents.

I had a new boy begin care; he was 3 months old when he first began. His mother had to return to work as they needed her extra income. She was able to use maternity leave, but this was unpaid. On this child's first day of care the mother dropped the child off, very reluctantly and had to hurry out the door before she burst into tears. I called her about an hour later to let her know that her boy was settling in okay and was actually having a sleep. When I called the mother she was sitting at work, crying quite heavily, being comforted by colleagues, eating a packet of Tim Tams. I spent some time talking to her on the phone and the guilt she felt at leaving her little boy was immeasurable. Not only was she very emotional, but for the company she wasn't very productive. She is not the only one to feel like this, it is something that women feel at returning to work while having to leave their baby.

Although I have not had any children of my own, currently if I were to fall pregnant, when the baby was born I would need to return to work straight away (or use the baby bonus which would mean I could then afford to have about 4 weeks off work) and my husband would only get some time off using his annual leave. I know of many women who are in this same situation.

I have spoken to many women about this issue and it is one that sparks passionate responses. Of the women I have spoken to, everyone has very different entitlements when it comes to the amount of maternity leave, and how much they are paid for. There are no similarities across the board. When collating the data, from speaking to different women, I wasn't even able to use the information in graph form, as everyone's leave situation was completely different. Some women are even required to provide proof in the form of doctor's certificates to employers before they are entitled to receive any leave. Generally, of those I have spoken to, none of their partners receive parental leave. There needs to be a universal system for paid parental leave.

But what about fathers? Fathers want to be with their children too! They too return to the workforce after the birth, as very few workplaces offer leave to fathers, and they too are wrought with guilt, are tired and emotional. They too need time to bond with their child and to bond together with their partner, so they are able to provide a nurturing environment for their child, in a home that is full of support. Parental leave should be made available to fathers and this should be separate to the leave given to the mother. Generally the first 12 weeks of a child's life is the time when they sleep for smaller amounts of time, but sleep frequently. For the parents this means interrupted sleep, which then combined with having to go to work puts enormous pressure on the parents themselves, but also their workplaces, which then in turn puts those they work with at risk.

Of those I have spoken to there is one general consensus. They agree parental leave should be introduced in Australia for the health and well being of the children, the parents themselves and for those they work with. If a parent is stressed at having to return to work straight after having a child, this puts a great stress on their workplace as they are tired, emotional and feeling very guilty at not being able to spend some time with their new child to bond and to be able to provide breast milk, which studies have shown to be of great importance to a newborn up to 6months of age.

Those I have spoken to, and I, believe minimum 14 weeks paid parental leave for women should be introduced by the Government, and funded by the Government for women in the workforce for employees, employers or the self employed.

Men should also receive paid leave for minimum 6 weeks which is funded by the Government for those who are employees, self employed and for employers.

When I asked the women I had surveyed, they all believed that parental leave should be funded by the Government, as women of child bearing age believe they would be discriminated against in potential jobs, especially as small business operators would not want to have to pay for their leave if they ever had a child.

So who should have access to parental leave? I believe those who need it the most are those who are working, and have been working for at least 12 months prior to falling pregnant. Those who are not working before falling pregnant do not need to receive parental leave payments as there are already payments available to parents who do not work. Therefore, these payments could stay in place for them, and just make parental leave for those who are working. The amount paid for the duration of the 14 weeks (and/or 6 weeks for fathers) should be based on an average of income for the parents over a 12 month period.

I know that the financial considerations to implement parental leave are immense. If parental leave is implemented my business, family day carers and child care centres would have a loss of clientele as those under 4 months of age would no longer require care, but the social and emotional benefits to the mum, dad and the baby would be immeasurable.

Hopefully at the conclusion of this inquiry Australia decides to help its mothers, fathers and children and provides a system that is fair and beneficial.