

Personal Response

The Commission is keen for people to tell us about their experiences of time away from work to have a baby and how this has (or could be) affected by the provision of paid parental leave. For example, issues that you might address could include:

The current arrangements for parental leave

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)?

Paid maternity leave is not available from my organisation.

How much parental leave (paid or unpaid) did you take after the birth of your child?

I took 14 and a half months unpaid leave after my baby's birth. During that time I was offered a redundancy due to significant organisational re-structures. I did not exercise that option but chose to extend my leave for an extra 2.5 months for 3 reasons:

1. I hoped the organisational situation would change again and more work would be generated that I was suited to
2. I was not ready to return to work prior to my son's first birthday (I took unpaid leave from 1 month prior to his arrival)
3. I was not ready to return to work prior to my son's ability to walk. This was particularly important to me as he is in child care 2 days a week and I wanted him to be a little more capable and independent before he entered the child care centre. I was very concerned that he would be open to more issues if he could not walk.

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

My decision to return to work was influenced by the availability of legislated 12 months unpaid leave, and I was fortunate that my company was willing to extend that leave for a further couple of months. If the company had not been so amicable, I would have returned to work after 12 months but would have suffered stress and guilt (also known as mother-guilt in this situation).

The benefits of parental leave on wellbeing

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 unquantifiable in its importance for my health and my baby's health. It enabled me to breastfeed until my son was 11.5 months old, when he self-weaned. I was adamant before my son was born that I would breastfeed for 12 months. I was fortunate that I did not experience any problems with breastfeeding. If I had suffered problems, I would have suffered from depression and would have required counselling. My work does not provide facilities for expressing milk and I would have been forced to wean my child earlier than I wanted. I would also not have coped with the sleep deprivation and a paid

employment workload (even in a part-time capacity). Additionally there is substantial research by the World Health Organisation (WHO) supporting the benefits of breastfeeding. My time off also enabled me to learn to cope with the change in our lives from quite structured living to learning to be far more adaptable to the baby's needs. My son was not in a routine until he was well past 9 months old. If I had been required to return to work before he was settled in a routine that worked for him and my husband and I, this would also have caused untold worry and stress, and compounded the issues we encountered with sleeping.

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 husband took leave for a couple of days whilst I was in hospital and for 2 weeks after we came home. His time at home helped me in the transition from having midwives at the hospital available immediately, to relying upon my husband, to managing on my own. He encouraged me to go for walks and leave the house, especially when it was so easy to remain in the little cocoon of our home. He was solely responsible for cooking for both of us and for bathing our baby. My husband didn't need any encouragement to care for our baby, but he loved that he was entitled to the time with his new family without feeling pressured from his company.

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 have liked to wait longer before returning to work and was able to extend my maternity leave for an additional 2.5 months. I would have much preferred to not have to negotiate this with my employer; I would have preferred if the entitlement enabled me to stay at home for up to 2 years. I am currently pregnant with our second child and would again see the benefits of not returning to work until this baby has good sleep patterns and is walking independently.

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

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?

I was promoted whilst 4 months pregnant so initially I was not concerned with maintenance of skills or promotions. However whilst on leave, my company undertook a significant organisational restructure which resulted in hundreds of redundancies. This caused me considerable stress at times. My role was made redundant but my stress was reduced as I was protected by the law that required the company to address the situation after the 12-months maternity leave had expired.

My primary concerns about returning to work were related to:

- a change in my employment status from full-time to part-time
- my company's expectation to work long hours and not be considerate of childcare responsibilities (e.g. I must be home by 5.30pm, etc)
- being out of touch with the latest work projects and missing out on opportunities
- and the personal need for mental stimulation and prolonged adult interactions

At my level of management, a change in my employment status from full-time to part-time was a considerable concern because a change to my employment status is not a right and had to be negotiated with my employer. It was a possibility that the company would not find a suitable alternative role and I would be made redundant.

I was seriously worried about the ability to deliver quality work in a part-time capacity. I was anxious that I would be required to work additional hours, as previously expected by my company's management, and this would have negative affects on my time and commitments with my husband and son, and my stress levels. And I was worried that I was missing out on exciting project opportunities at work.

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

I did take additional leave, an extra 2.5 months, as we were able to afford it. I would have liked to have the option to take up to 2 years maternity leave. I would not have exercised this option for the full 2 years but would have appreciated the opportunity to have a greater say in what timing suited our family situation.

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

None whatsoever.

Did you return to the same employer when you resumed work? How did the maternity leave you were offered affect your decision to return to the same employer? What other features of your employer influenced your decision?

Yes, I returned to the same employer. I returned because I enjoy the company I work for and the colleagues, the opportunities it provides for interesting and varied work, and it is almost impossible to find part-time employment for professional roles without already being established in an organisation.

Other factors of my employer included the fact that I had already established key contacts and built a wonderful network within the organisation, that I had proven my worth to the company and did not have to "start from scratch".

I did not wish to seek an alternative employer because this would have required negotiating a part-time status, developing new business networks, and establishing my credentials within the new company - all of these would require considerable time and I was cognisant that I need to drop my son off at child-care, travel and arrive at work at an acceptable time, work for an 8-hour day, travel home and pick my son up also at a reasonable time. I did not think it was possible to achieve all these requirements without serious compromise thus risking my new role or sacrificing more time with my son.

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?

My parental leave affected my employer because I left partway through a project. This meant hand-overs were required to multiple replacements before I commenced my leave. It meant that a number of design issues that arose after I left were difficult to understand and resolve because the full history of the problem was not known. My leave also provided the opportunity for a couple of colleagues to take on my roles that were highly sought after. Additionally, my parental leave allowed my employer to provide promotion opportunities for another employee.

The issues were not discussed with me, because my employer took the view that these were not issues I was responsible for or should be held accountable for, it was the natural way of the world.

These factors did not influence my decision on the length of my leave.

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

A government funded paid parental leave at minimum wage replacement for a period of 12 months would be the most beneficial. I would also like to see this topped up by employers. As an employee of an organisation that has significant numbers of female employees I do not see this happening unless legislated. These payments should be available for either parent. As I was breastfeeding for the first 12 months this would mean I would not have to compromise my principles on breastfeeding. For other families, this would allow fathers to play a more active role in raising the children. I believe that nowadays Dads are far more willing to find a work/life balance but do not necessarily have the flexibility with their employers to achieve this goal. It also allows families flexibility, particularly where one partner earns considerably more than the other parent.

Characteristics of paid parental leave arrangements

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 support a government funded paid parental leave scheme at minimum wage replacement for a period of 12 months. As I work for an organisation that employs significant numbers of women, I would be seriously concerned that women would be discriminated against if a paid scheme was the sole responsibility of the employer. In addition, as a society I see the responsibility for future generations to be shared by the community. I understand that if small businesses were required to fund paid parental leave that it could severely hamper these businesses. As the payments would be not the responsibility of employers, I believe paid leave should be granted after 12 months employment regardless of employer. With the change in the baby bonus payment to be means-tested in the budget just released, this penalises wealthier families for procreation rather than encouraging our birth rates across all sections of society. I do not support a means-tested paid parental leave scheme; it needs to be a community responsibility for all people to enable future generations to support the current ageing population of Australia. I also support the right for part-time employment status for both parents until the youngest child attends primary school (my husband and I both work part-time - this benefits the entire family and limits the number of days our son is in childcare to something that is acceptable to all three of us).