

Submission re: Paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave Inquiry (or 'Why I like my son more than a plasma-screen TV')

Parental Leave Inquiry
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428, Canberra City, ACT 2601, Australia

I am a 36-year-old mother of a two-year-old boy. Before having my son I was self-employed full-time. My initial plan was to take six months off work then work part-time. That was until the reality of the importance of motherhood hit me. I am sure that it is true of most parents, that it is not until you hold your child in your arms that you come to realise the enormous responsibility and debt you owe to your child. I had worked in highly paid, demanding jobs for years before having my son - managing people and managing multi-million-dollar budgets. And while it is a cliché, there is nothing as difficult, or as rewarding as nurturing and watching your baby grow.

While I have done a little work here and there since my son was born - it has been crammed into nap-time and weekends when his father can care for him. It has become increasingly apparent to me where my priorities lie. Perhaps it is because we spent five years trying to have a baby before our son arrived that I cherish this time above any financial or career goals. Perhaps my son is just exceptionally charming and I'd rather spend time with him than quibble with clients? While I have made my choice - to care for my son myself rather than pay someone else to do it for me - it has certainly taken its toll on our finances and on my self-esteem. I look forward to returning to work when my child(ren) start(s) school, but having the stigma of stay-at-home mum attached to you is not a pleasant experience in our work-obsessed culture. And it certainly is a stigma. The commission's report goes some way to 'normalising' the idea that we should care for our very young babies and should be applauded as a good *first* step. But it's a tiny, tiny step. Eighteen weeks? The report itself concludes that it is in the best interests of (most) children to be cared for by parents until at least age two:

But the age of entry and intensity of child care use seems to matter. Studies generally conclude that the use of centre-based care (other care settings tend not to show any significant interaction) at less than two years of age will have negative behavioural effects compared to children in exclusive parental care (Loeb et al. 2007).

Why is caring for children so denigrated? We pay our child-care workers peanuts and complain about the cost of childcare. Our carer-to-child ratios are appalling. How did we become a culture that is willing to spend money on big-screen TVs and the latest mobile phone but unwilling to spend it on the care of our children?

Women should absolutely have the right to choose the best return-to-work strategy for them and their child. But I believe our society places too much pressure on women to return to work. Time out of the workforce is seen as wasted time, time not ladder-climbing. Opportunities are missed, skills lost. In other words, time spent 'mothering' is seen as dead time.

Eligibility Requirements

The draft report recommendations create two classes of parents: those who work and welfare recipients. If a woman has worked full-time for 15 years and has a child she would be eligible for paid leave. If she cares for that child at home for two years and has another child she is ineligible. In those two years at home she has become deemed as someone with a 'limited attachment to the workforce'. She can now only receive the welfare payment, the proposed 'maternity allowance'. It may seem a semantic argument, the woman receives money in any case, but it is the *cultural value* the government is setting that is important. The government needs to indicate to the community through policy that it values the work that parents do in raising their babies and young children.

Recommendation

Paid parental leave should be extended to women who are already caring for a child under the age of six. This would reinforce the fact that caring for a child is valuable to our community. The government's current Parenting Payment pays women until the child turns six, at which time mothers are obliged to find part-time work or study in order to continue receiving the payment.

Higher Education

I find it grossly unfair that the commission hasn't considered Paid Parental Leave for women undertaking study. There are many references in the report to higher education and its benefits to a family's financial wellbeing, in addition to associated positive outcomes for children.

Recommendation

Women undertaking at least 10 hours of study a week should qualify for Paid Parental Leave

Duration of Paid Leave

The report suggests that parents should use their own savings to top-up the 18-weeks pay in order to stay at home for at least the first six months. Assuming all families have the capacity to save for a baby is an extremely unfair assumption to make. Further, there is the assumption in the commission that many families have willing and capable parents on hand to care for their babies when they do return to work. I know of several women who are in this fortunate position. I also know of many, many more who are not.

Recommendation

The government has an opportunity to forge a better way forward with this policy. I believe 52 weeks pay should be the starting point, to be reviewed in two years time.

Unintended Consequences of the Proposed Scheme

I have no doubts that women will return to work earlier than they would like in order to qualify for Paid Parental Leave. Some other unintended consequences of the proposed scheme:

- In order to qualify for Paid Parental Leave a woman would need to put her child in childcare (or if she is fortunate some other arrangement) for at least 10 hours a week so that she could work at least 10 hours a week. Most childcare centres take bookings by the day, so two days of care would need to be paid for in order for the 10 hours to be worked. As referenced in Appendix D, many experts have concerns about long hours of daycare (more than 10 hours per week).
- The age of first-time mothers has risen steadily, with many women leaving it to their mid- to late-30s before starting a family. For example, a 37-year-old woman has a child, she takes a year 'out' to care for the child, then returns to work part-time. She needs to plan the birth of her next child so that she has been working at least a year so that she qualifies for Paid Parental Leave. That takes her to 39 when she has her next child. If she wants to have a child any sooner, she would be forced to put her first child in childcare earlier or miss out on Paid Parental Leave. If Paid Parental Leave was extended to women who are already caring for a child then the woman need not feel that she has to go back to work in order to qualify for Paid Parental Leave. In other words, her contribution to our community by raising a child is recognised in equal terms as that of working.

It has taken me five weeks (featuring one bout of family-sized gastro and a case of miscellaneous viral infection) to get through reading the entirety of the Productivity Commission's report. If there are any working mothers out there who have a had a chance to get together a submission, hats off to them. Working and taking care of a young child is an enormously difficult juggling act.

Sincerely,
Martine Leonart
Victoria