

*Personal Feedback Paper for individuals and small firms*

*Were you eligible for paid maternity or paternity leave when your child was born?*

Yes. This was in 1988. I worked for an Australian Government authority, and was therefore entitled to the Australian public service maternity leave provisions available at that time.

*If so, what were the terms available (period and pay arrangements)?*

I was entitled to 12 months' leave, of which 12 weeks was on full pay. I was also entitled to combine this with any available paid annual leave, and any available paid sick leave. The 12 weeks maternity leave on full pay was for the period of 6 weeks before the birth and 6 weeks after the birth.

*Did you take all of your paid parental leave entitlement?*

Yes.

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

I took 12 months leave after the birth of my child. I also used other paid leave entitlements to take an additional two weeks off before the birth of my child (i.e. a total of 8 weeks off work on full pay before the birth).

I had numerous health problems after the birth, and was able to access paid sick leave once the paid component of the maternity leave was exhausted (i.e. 6 weeks after the birth). As I had long service with my employer and lots of accrued sick leave, I was paid a combination of sick leave on full pay and sick leave on half pay up until my daughter was 7 months old.

*Did the period of paid parental leave available to you influence the amount of total leave taken? If so, in what way?*

No. I always intended to take 12 months off as maternity leave.

*Did you leave your job prior to your child being born? If so, did the leave provisions available influence your decision?*

I stopped work 8 weeks before the date my child was due. It was a requirement to cease work 6 weeks before the birth.

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

If I was returning to the same employer, I would have returned at the latest possible date available with maternity leave (i.e. 12 months after

proceeding on maternity leave). However, I resigned towards the end of my maternity leave after succeeding in an application for a more “family friendly” job. I did not start in my new job till 12 months after the birth of my child, whereas if I was returning to my employer I would have had to go back 6 weeks prior to that. In total, I had 14 months off (counting 8 weeks leave before the birth) around the birth of my child. I needed every day of it.

*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?*

The time off work with the new baby was vital for her health and mine. I had a difficult birth, ending up with an unplanned Caesarian section, and got a wound infection in hospital. I had to take heavy antibiotics in the first weeks of her life to counter the infection.

Being able to rest enabled me to establish and maintain breastfeeding despite these challenges. The baby thrived from the outset. In the early months of her life, I also developed a chronic sinus infection, possibly as a result of the stress of the birth, wound infection and the demands of early parenting. I would never have been able to work through this, and maintain breastfeeding. As it was, I was able to breastfeed my daughter until she was 12 months old. There has never been a healthier baby!

*For women, did your partner take parental leave? If so, how long did they take?*

Yes, my partner took 6 months off work for the baby. He used his long service leave (6 months on half pay). This was in the time before fathers had the right to take a proportion of the 12 months' unpaid parental leave.

*How important was this time at home for encouraging them to participate actively in the care of your new baby?*

My partner took two months off before the birth (to renovate the house and prepare the nursery) and four months after the birth. Having those four months with the baby got him off to a very good start with taking responsibility for her care. In fact, because I was so unwell in the early weeks, he was looking after both of us around the clock, bringing me the baby to feed in bed and taking care of all the nappy changes, bathing and washing. It also forged a very close relationship between him and our daughter, which has endured to this day.

*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?*

In hindsight, I think it would have been better if I (or one of us) had stayed off work till our daughter was 18 months old. As her birthday is in the middle of winter, starting her at childcare when she was 12 months old meant she was exposed to all the other children's germs in the middle of winter and immediately came down with everything that was going around- conjunctivitis, ear infections etc. This was extremely stressful for both of us as parents- many nights of broken sleep with high fevers, trips to the doctor and Children's Hospital, courses of antibiotics and so on. As we had no extended family in Sydney who could assist us with child care, we had to take time off work every time she was ill, and this was particularly difficult for me as I was in a new job with no leave entitlements accrued and with no carer's leave available at that time.

Keeping our daughter at home till she was 18 months old in the summer time would have been better for her health and ours.

*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 keen to return to work when our baby was 12 months old for financial reasons and to maintain my work skills.

*Would you have taken longer parental leave if your family could have afforded it?*

At the time I felt that it was important to return to work regardless of the financial factor, to maintain my career.

*How much longer would you have liked?*

In hindsight, I would have preferred one of us to be entitled to stay at home until our daughter was 18 months old. I would also have liked the option to return to work part-time to ease the transition to combining work and family. Working full-time in a demanding job in those early years with illnesses, teething and broken sleep was very difficult.

*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?*

I did not return to the same employer when I resumed work- I got a new job while on maternity leave (see above). I did not return to the same employer because the working conditions of the job were not family friendly- it had long hours, weekend work and lots of travel away from

home. It was a job that I loved, but I just could not see how I could do it with a baby once I had her. My new job was based in my home town, and was a Monday to Friday office-based job.

*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 maternity leave was government paid, so did not affect my employer financially. My absence on maternity leave meant the loss of a skilled employee, but there was no negative reaction from my employer when I announced I would be going on maternity leave. I did not leave my employment because of any negative attitude on their part to me taking maternity leave, but did so for the reasons outlined above.

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

I believe that parents should be able to have a total of 18 months leave on the birth of a child, shared between both parents if possible. I believe that the first 6 months of the leave should be paid.

Parents should have a right to work part-time after returning from parental leave, up until the child is 3 years old. This is to reduce stress on the parents while a child is young and while sleep is still disrupted because of teething and other health issues.

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

- Anyone who has been employed (including casual and self-employed) for a total of 12 months prior to ceasing work for the birth of a child should be eligible for parental leave, regardless of whether the 12 months' employment has all been with the current employer. The 12 months' employment should consist of a total of 12 months out of the previous 24 months, so that any interruptions in employment do not disadvantage the employee.
- I believe the first 6 months of parental leave should be paid leave.
- I believe that the Federal Government should fund paid parental leave out of consolidated revenue. Working parents, including self-employed parents, pay taxes, and this is a socially beneficial use of their taxes.
- I believe that the government payment should be at the rate of the Federal minimum weekly wage. Payments should be administered by the Government through an appropriate government agency, to minimise the administrative burden for small business.

- I believe that employers who are able to afford it should supplement the government funded component of paid leave up to the level of the employee's usual salary, to allow the employee to maintain his/her usual financial commitments while caring for a new baby. In some cases this supplementation may be negotiated by the relevant union; in other cases it may be initiated by the employer.
- I believe that employees should be able to access paid sick leave while on parental leave after the paid component has been exhausted.
- I believe that other relatives should be able to access both the paid and unpaid components of parental leave in order to become a significant carer for a child. For example, a mother may return to work three months after the birth of the child, with the balance of the 6 months' paid leave being paid to a working grandmother who takes leave from her job to care for the child when the mother returns to work. The grandmother would also be able to take unpaid leave up to 18 months after the birth of the child to be a significant carer for the child, if the child's parents had both returned to work.

*What are the reasons why you would support such arrangements?*

- I believe that a period of paid leave is essential for families to manage financially following the birth of a child.
- I believe it is in the best interests of the health of the mother and the child that the mother is not pressured to return to work too early because of financial concerns. This includes giving the mother the opportunity to recover physically from the birth (especially given the ever-growing numbers of Caesarian births), and the opportunity to establish and maintain breastfeeding, which is important for the health of both mother and child.
- I believe the period of paid leave should be 6 months to enable the mother to breastfeed for the period recommended by health authorities (6 months) as well as to deal with the physical demands of caring for a small baby around the clock, including the disruption to normal sleep patterns in the early months.
- I believe the government should fund paid parental leave because parents pay taxes and paid maternity leave provides benefits to the whole of society, and because some small employers cannot afford to offer paid maternity leave and may avoid employing women of child-bearing age if they have to pay it.
- I believe paid and unpaid parental leave should be available to a relative beyond the parents of the child if that relative becomes a significant carer for the child to enable the child's parents to go back to work. A grandmother or aunt, for example, may be at a better

stage in their career to be taking extended leave than the parents of the child, and may be happy to assist in this way if they can retain an income and some job security. This would be particularly helpful for families that cannot get access to a child care centre, cannot afford child care fees, or who simply prefer to have their babies in the home environment when they are very young.