

I am a mother of four children aged between 13 and 1. Prior to my first child being born I was in full time paid employment and after this period I have worked in casual and permanent part time positions. I have never been eligible to receive paid maternity leave. In my most recent job I did try to negotiate to have a paid maternity leave component put into my contract. At the time my youngest child was 6 and I didn't think I would be having any more children. In negotiation with my socially conscientious employer I suggested that even if it was unlikely that I ever access this leave it was important for the company to publicly commit to the principle of paid leave. They have been happy to provide a wide variety of family friendly working conditions however my workplace felt the cost to a small business (less than 5 employees) of providing paid parenting leave was too high. A shame for me, because I did go on to have another baby.

With my first child I theoretically took 12 months unpaid leave. However the company asked me to undertake casual work from home after about 3 months. It was the convenient nature of this that led me not to return to work full time at the end of my 12 months unpaid leave but remain casual. After the birth of my second child, being a casual I had no leave eligibility. However my husband was retrenched when she was 12 months old and I returned to casual work at this point, again I was not offered any unpaid leave when my 3<sup>rd</sup> child was born. When my third child was 4 months old I was offered casual work from home with a new company which I took up. This turned into permanent part time work. It was in this position negotiation for paid maternity leave was attempted. When I had my 4<sup>th</sup> child I took 6 months unpaid leave. Ideally I would have liked to have taken my full twelve months however financial circumstances did not avail. Being only part time the baby bonus almost covered me for 6 months salary, however due to the nature of my labour i.e. very quick and the shortage of birth centres we chose a home birth. As this type of birth is not yet Medicare rebateable most of my baby bonus went toward paying the medical costs for this. So for most of my six months we lived off 1 income.

Having access to 12 months unpaid leave was very important in allowing me to make the choice of when it was right and or necessary for me to return to work. However I did feel especially with the latter child that the pressure for women to return as soon as possible is getting greater from both the employer and the society point of view. The fact that I had no paid leave made the unpaid leave time stressful financially although doable. However a combination of all these pressures on a new mum is very hard to resist.

Having time at home with a new baby is so important for everybody's health. Establishing breastfeeding and the health benefits of this to both Mother and child alone are enormous. Anyone who has had to express breastmilk knows it is a poor substitute for the real thing and the effort and pressure on the mother to produce enough milk and the lack of down time at work with many women using all their breaks to pump milk is not inductive to good health. Along with Breastfeeding the whole sleep issue comes into question. Research is leading to the fact that it is quite normal for babies to wake in the night beyond the newborn stage. Working mothers of young children face a choice of sleep training their babies which some of the new research suggests is quite damaging to a young child's brain, emotional development and can interrupt breastfeeding supply etc. Or fronting up for work on interrupted sleep which may pose significant OHS issues and affect a mother's health. I know that when I returned to work after only six months that my ability to perform was quite reduced and that I took many leave without pay days. My employer also in appreciation of my early return to work allowed a lot more flexibility and was prepared to cover some of the time I needed to be away. (I guess proxy paid maternity leave)

Having a baby is quite a physical experience for the female body. In modern society we often scoff at some of the old customs surrounding rest and recovery. The pressure is on to be up and at it straight away. However while I think the old practice is perhaps a bit restrictive on women, the new way doesn't take into account that the first few years of a child's life requires the primary carer to be quite physical, lifting, carrying, bending etc. The rest and recovery period especially in the first three months is crucial to being able to sustain the heavy workload of the first 2 years.

My partner was able to take 2 weeks Annual leave when we had our first child. His employer allowed him to pre book roughly the time and when the baby was born he didn't return to work for two weeks from that date. This was a great experience for all three of us and the learning and bonding during this time was the best. Also as a new mother having someone to reassure you in the early days was very important to building my confidence. With our 2<sup>nd</sup> child he was with the same employer only this time he was only allowed one weeks leave and he had to be on call and went into work 3 times during the week for a few hours. Not so good, his focus wasn't totally on the new baby and the pressure and stresses of work were still there. With the 3<sup>rd</sup> child he had just started a new job 2 weeks earlier. They gave him 2 days paid leave the day the baby was born. He returned to work and we had a terrible time with the whole family ending up being terribly ill. In the end the visiting mid wife rang his work place and told them he needed time off they gave him an extra day and a half. When my 4<sup>th</sup> child was born my husband was eligible for a weeks paid leave. However he had been away from work for 8 weeks with a back injury. This was a terrible strain on the family. He was unable to help much or bond with the baby during this time. Even though he was still eligible to take the paternity leave when he recovered he felt like the pressure to return to work was too great and that the workplace didn't understand that while he was on sick leave he hadn't really had the baby bonding time. He traded the paid leave with a week of his sick leave and missed out on that important time.

When my partner had 2 weeks home with a child he was the chief nappy changer and bather and even on return to work he loved to do these things when he was home. On the two occasions where he had virtually no leave his ability and confidence to help with the baby was virtually nil and had to be fostered and encouraged over a longer time.

Being absent from work for long periods definitely affects the status and peoples attitude toward you. During my years as a parent there were times when my husbands wage would have been able to sustain the family but I felt to stay away from the work place longer would put me in peril of not being able to get back in. There are still many folks particularly young men who equate women putting family before career with not being too bright and not very good at your job.

Access to social security payments in the past definitely affected the timing of return to work. It was only easy if your baby fitted nicely into the financial year. When you have no money coming in, you need social security support but then when you went back to work you had to pay it all back, making the time at work not worth it. Also at one point the system was so ridiculous that when I looked at all the benefits childcare and family benefit with tax brackets etc. It was only financially viable for me to work 1, 3 or 5 days a week but if I worked 2 or four days I would be worse off than staying at home. The system appears to be much better when I had my last baby where they supported me to stay at home and when I returned to work they started a new calculation period.

I returned to work with my employer because the work conditions are flexible and suit my needs as a mother. I can mostly work my hours when I choose from home. I am very lucky in this sense. I do still have a bit of a sour taste that I had no formal paid maternity leave.

Ideally I would like to see some kind of paid parental leave arrangement that covers the first two years of a child's life. The world health organization recommends children are breastfed for a minimum of two years and this is much more achievable if a mother has access to the child i.e. at home or the child can be brought to the mother. Additionally I believe studies done in both Britain and Scandinavia point out that the most cost effective way to provide quality childcare for under two's is to pay parents to stay home and look after them and I believe Sweden has such a system in place.

Having said this being realistic about this country's values and views of the family and the skills shortage I realize that perhaps the best I can hope for is the minimum. I would suggest that in order to recover physically from the stress of pregnancy and birth and to establish good breastfeeding and bonding and to adjust to less sleep a new mother should have paid maternity leave for 3 months. I believe this payment should be jointly funded by government and business. Government because they value and are responsible for the well being of children and families and Business because they value their employees and will receive a more satisfied employee on return. I do however stress that I would not want to see any undermining of the 12 months unpaid leave as I truly believe families should have the option of caring for their children in these formative years without losing their jobs. In fact I would like the unpaid portion to be extended to 24 months. Part time opportunities and flexible work hours i.e. parents can divide the day so the need for the unsatisfactory kind of institutionalized childcare services we currently have are minimized.

I think society also needs to remember that stay at home parents tend to contribute much to the volunteer bodies in our community. Some of the things I have done while not being in the paid workforce is look after the children of friends and relatives so they don't have to take time out of work, volunteer with community support organizations such as run a playgroup, breastfeeding education, kindergarten committees, care for my elderly neighbor who has no family assisting her to stay in her home, guest speaker talks at the local schools, coaching after school sport etc. So when society is paying stay at home parents they are getting more than healthy well adjusted families and I would suggested it's a lot of bang for your buck.

In summary I think the advantages of a paid maternity scheme for the individual, the employer and society are overwhelmingly positive with a large synergistic benefit. It is long overdue in this country where we consider ourselves to be at the forefront of the fair go and good humanitarian practices. It is definitely time.

Thanks for reading

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