

Inquiry into Paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave

I would like to submit this personal issues paper to the Inquiry. It outlines my recent experiences of parental leave.

Background

I am the mother of two small children and would like to share my experiences of parental leave with the Commission.

My first child was born in August 2005 and the second in December 2007. I am a professional person employed in a managerial position within a large, successful organization. I have an Honors degree in Psychology and an MBA.

Were you eligible for paid or unpaid parental leave? If eligible, did you take it all – and if not, why not?

When my first child was born in 2005, I was eligible for 12 months unpaid maternity leave, but despite having some family friendly policies, my organization did not offer any paid leave at that time. I had worked with the organization for 10 years, so with some luck and some planning, I was eligible for 8 weeks long service leave when the baby was born. At the time I was quite disappointed that my organization did not offer paid leave. When I went on parental leave I had accrued over 100 days sick leave, but was not permitted to take any sick leave, even though legally I was not allowed to return to work until six weeks after the birth of my child.

One very positive policy that my organization has is that it requires managers to let new parents return to work on a part-time basis at least until the child's second birthday. Given this policy, I arranged to return to work one day per week when my baby was 7 months old. When my baby was 18 months old I returned to work 3.5 days per week.

By the time I had my second baby in December 2007, the organization had introduced paid parental leave. They offer 8 weeks full pay when the parent goes on leave, and then four weeks pay if they return to work after parental leave and they work for 6 months.

I have just negotiated to return to work one day per week, but will do this work from home until the end of the year.

Did (or would) it affect the time you took off work, your capacity for breastfeeding, the baby's and your health, stress, relationships, your interaction with your baby, and your family life generally? How and why?

My return to work was largely motivated by the need to contribute to the household financially and to ensure that my career does not stagnate while I am parenting young children.

I have been fortunate to only work 1 day per week while my children have been very young, which is mostly manageable and not too stressful for me or the children.

However, I was under pressure from my workplace to return to work at least 3 or 4 days per week so that I could return to my former position. Subsequently I did my full-time job over 3.5 days rather than five days. I found this to be stressful and it did affect my health as juggling a demanding full-time job while only working part-time hours, as well as caring for a young child was very difficult.

What were the distinctive benefits of prenatal as opposed to postnatal leave?

In both of my pregnancies, I finished work two weeks before the birth of my children. Ideally I would have taken more prenatal leave but did not do this mainly for financial reasons. I was also aware that the longer I took off before the birth, the younger my baby would be if I returned to work at the end of the parental leave period.

I found it physically difficult to maintain a full-time workload after I was 35 weeks pregnant, but did not really feel the need to stop working completely. I would ideally like to have worked part-time for the last two or three weeks.

Did your partner get paid parental leave, and did you both use it to care for the baby?

With our first child, my husband was not eligible for the two weeks paid paternity leave his company offered as he had not been working with the company for 12 months. He took one week of annual leave so was at home to help for the first week I was home from hospital and then he went back to work. He was eligible for 12 months unpaid parental leave, as long as the child is under 12 months of age. As I was breast-feeding for the first year, it wasn't practical for him to take leave at this time while I went back to work even if I wanted to.

Did you use other types of leave to care for your baby? If so, what types and for how long?

With my first child, I used 4 weeks annual leave and 8 weeks long service leave. With my second child, I used 4 weeks annual leave that was paid prior to the 8 weeks parental leave.

What were the good and bad aspects of the leave arrangements?

Needing to rely on annual leave when you have a child obviously means that you don't take holidays during the year so that you will have as much leave as you can when you have the baby. I only took two days leave in the two years of part-time work between my first and second children.

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 happy to return to my former role after 18 months of leave on a part-time basis so that I could re-establish my career and to ensure my skills were maintained.

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

I ideally would have liked to work fewer hours when I returned to work when my child was 18 months old but this was not offered by my workplace and the additional money helped our family meet mortgage repayments.

How did your leave arrangements affect your employer? Was your employer positive or negative about you taking leave. Why?

The organization I work for has very clear family friendly policies and I have found this very helpful. However, how much support, understanding and communication you receive from the workplace often comes down to your individual manager and also the culture of the organisation.

While my manager was happy to adhere to organizational policies, I felt that he and other managers within the organization could certainly have used some training or education about how to handle staff taking parental leave and their return to the workforce. In my case, my manager

was an engineer who was close to retirement. He had previously worked in male dominated fields and despite good intentions had very little personal or professional experience in dealing with staff returning to work after parental leave. My organization also had very few part-time staff employed, and managing a part-time staff member especially one that had managerial responsibilities seemed to pose a number of challenges. Subsequently my initial return to the workplace was not a very positive experience.

Did you return to work? On a full time, part time or casual basis? To the same employer? To the same or a similar job?

I returned to work one day per week when my first child was 7 months old. This was to the same employer, doing projects related to my old role. When my child was 18 months old I returned to my old role, but undertook this job on a 0.7 FTE basis.

Did your leave arrangements affect how quickly you went back to work? In what way?

Soon after having my first child, I investigated child care options in my area. I was informed that for community based centres, there was an 18 month to 2 year wait for a place and that intakes generally occur in January. At private centres the waiting lists were not as long, but they also had intakes in January. As my 12 months of parental leave finished in July, I soon realized that if I wanted to take my full 12 months leave and return to work in July, it was unlikely that I would have any child care options available. Many friends of mine were in a similar position to this and had to either find alternate care, like a nanny at great expense, or they returned to work when they got a child care place which was earlier than they wanted to. Others chose not to return to work.

For this reason, I think that the period of unpaid leave should be longer than 12 months. Having leave for 18 months or even two years would ease the difficulty of needing to find elusive child care places exactly 12 months after you go on parental leave.

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 think the issue of what parental leave scheme Australia should adopt depends on the underlying rationale for the scheme. On one hand some of the motivation seems to be about what is best for the child and parent and on the other hand it seems to be about ensuring parents return to the workforce.

If the ultimate goal is for healthy and happy parents and babies, then the scheme should enable a parent or parents to take up to 2 years of unpaid parental leave when they have a child and then have flexible working arrangements like part-time work available. I believe that as a minimum at least 8 weeks of this leave should be paid, which allows for a mother to take 2 weeks leave before the birth of their child and 6 weeks after the birth. This should be regardless of how long the mother has been working with an organization. However, I believe that if organizations have the funds, they should pay for a longer period, to encourage more mothers to breast-feed their babies if they wish to.

In my experience whether many parents return to work after parental leave is not usually related to how much paid parental leave they received when their baby is born. Other issues like whether their employer has family friendly policies and practices that encourage parents to return to work on a flexible, part-time basis is more critical, as is whether you can find good quality, affordable child care.