

SHARED PARENTAL LEAVE TWO YEARS ON

Introduction

Reps bulletin EQA 24 explained the provisions for the then new shared parental leave rights.

These were heralded as an opportunity to move away from the traditional family picture of a mother at home looking after the children while the father leaves home to go to work and thus has little input into his children's lives. Recent researches by Office Genie, Working Families and My Family Care have sought to analyse the impact of the changed rights.

Legislative intent

The 2015 shared parental leave legislation was intended by the government to bring the opportunity for much-needed flexibility to households wishing to move away from the traditional family structure identified above. Babies born after 5 April 2015 now come with 52 weeks of shared parental leave, 50 of which can be used by either of their two parents, along with 39 weeks of statutory parental pay. Mothers cannot work for the first two weeks after giving birth, and fathers (or partners in single sex relationships) remain entitled to two weeks of paid paternity leave. At the time of the announcement this was heralded as a step towards equality and new flexibility for parents.

Research findings

Two years down the line, little has changed. The new "freedoms" have made virtually no difference to behaviours.

Research carried out by Office Genie found that, from 1,000 working people surveyed, only 5% of new fathers had taken up shared parental leave.

Research by My Family Care in 2016 found that four out of 10 companies had not had a male employee take shared parental leave.

Comparative approach

International comparison makes a telling tale. In Sweden the picture is very different. There, 100% of earnings are replaced while parental leave is taken. Unsurprisingly the take up of paternity leave is around 90% - a marked contrast to British fathers.

There is little doubt that for new parents everywhere the first few weeks and months of life are among the most special and important in the lives of both the child and the parents. These times have primarily been enjoyed by mothers while, anecdotally, there seemed to be many would be fathers who were very keen to share in these special times.

Financial pressures

Office Genie asked fathers why they would not take up parental leave. Almost half cited financial reasons. A 2016 survey by Working Families found that 48% of its respondents (300 fathers) said they would not take up parental leave. A third said the reason was they could not afford it. Statutory shared parental pay (ShPP), while it is marginally increased each year, remains around £140 per week – hardly comparable to many salary levels and as a consequence entails a dramatic fall in household income at precisely the time when costs are rising.

The Office Genie survey found that this is not the only financial consideration. Unsurprisingly, they found that fathers generally earned more than their female partners, and that this was a prime concern in family considerations about who takes parental leave. Men earning only ShPP represent not only an absolute reduction in household income, but also a relative one. The truth is that in most families, a father giving up their earnings represents a larger drop in total household income than if a mother gives up hers. The gender pay gap bites on families, not just on women.

Employer pressures

The second reason given for non-take up was employer pressure and while it is arguably less tangible than household income, it was cited by a third of survey respondents.

Seemingly, men are encouraged by their employers not to take months away from their work to look after their new offspring. It also seems likely that a father may be concerned about what will happen to his job in his absence if an employer is reluctant to see him go.

There is also a concern about the number of opportunities he might miss out on while his attention is focused on matters of childcare and domesticity.

Other pressures

The final reason found in the Working Families research is perhaps more complex. Just over half of mothers said they did not want to share their maternity or parental leave, but wanted to be the primary carer for their new baby.

From the research with men about this topic it seems evident that there is still a stigma, in some workplaces, about them taking time off work to look after children. Some men seem to feel it is not a manly activity, while others believe this is what their employers and colleagues would feel about them. Tradition is also a very strong driving factor, whether or not people believe themselves to be in a traditional society. Since women have become used to swapping their jobs for childcare, all things being equal, that is the way we carry on doing things. However, the Swedish example seems to suggest that where the financial burden is removed, attitudes and expectations can change over time. Legislation itself is insufficient to promote rapid change – financial and cultural issues must also be addressed for societal change to occur.

Reps action

Reps can identify whether there is a shared parental leave policy in place for their workplace and if so, ask for statistics about applications for the leave, and success rates of those applications. In addition, company councils can seek to ensure shared parental leave payments are enhanced beyond the basis statutory level in order to encourage take up.

Acknowledgements and further information

More information on this and other employment law matters is available from:

- Val Stansfield, Employment Rights Adviser at stansfieldv@tssa.org.uk or 020 7529 8046
- TSSA members' helpdesk at helpdesk@tssa.org.uk or 0800 3282673

The full survey details are available from Office Genie, My Family Care and Working Families.