

For Paternity Leave, Sweden Asks if Two Months Is Enough

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By JENS HANSEGARD



Jim Butcher's decision to join Sweden's army of "latte dads" last year didn't win him any popularity contests with family and friends back home in the U.K.



In Sweden, men must take two months' paternity leave to receive generous paternity benefits offered by the government. Some men are now pushing for a third month. It has given rise to a culture of "latte dads" who hang out in Stockholm's plentiful coffee bars. John Stoll has details on Lunch Break. Photo: Christel Lind for The Wall Street Journal.

"When I told my friends in England, they spat up their tea," said the 35-year-old head of communications for digital-music company Spotify Ltd., which is based in Stockholm.

"They thought my out-of-office reply—that I was gone for six months—was a joke." His father, a self-employed bricklayer, was concerned his son was jeopardizing his career.

But Mr. Butcher had a serious agenda for his half-year hiatus: Spending

uninterrupted time with his newborn daughter.

Sweden's paternity-leave benefits, enjoyed by citizens and foreign residents alike, are the most generous in the world—and a debate is under way nationwide over whether to extend them even further. Sweden should require men to take a minimum of three months' leave, instead of the current two months, some politicians argue.

Fathers currently can take off work for as long as 240 days with a government-backed paycheck. Even if a father decides to take a more modest leave than allowed, he must take at least two months before the child is 8 years old to receive the government benefits.



Christel Lind for The Wall Street Journal

Marten Noren, who returns to work from leave on Wednesday, checks on his son, Ellis.

Scores of dads can be seen during typical business hours strolling the streets of Stockholm, Gothenburg and other big cities pushing a stroller with one hand and nursing a cup from Espresso House or Wayne's Coffee in the other. It isn't uncommon to see men feeding babies and changing diapers in Stockholm's famous Djurgarden park island, which is within view of some of the city's biggest companies and financial institutions.

Since being instituted in 1974, the paternity-leave policy has evolved from being a mechanism to encourage women to join what was a depleted workforce in the 1970s, to serve as a tool for gender equality and home stability today.

The Swedish government will pay 80% of a parent's salary—up to a cap of about \$65,000—for 13 months. One parent can sign over all but two of these months to the other.

Government statistics show the vast majority of fathers take off at least the minimum two months. And about 72% of working-age women living in Sweden are employed at least part time, according to



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Tommy Backman strikes a pose familiar in Sweden's parks and coffee shops at an amusement park in Stockholm's Djurgarden island.

the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. This is more than in most other countries. Iceland and Norway—Nordic nations which also grant generous leave benefits, have more women in the workforce.

"If only women stayed home with children, women would be at a considerable disadvantage compared with men," says Johanna Noren, a mother of one who works as a systems developer at Sweden's Royal Library. Although she

supports the idea of fathers taking a third month of leave, "it's better if people make decisions on what they want and believe, rather than on what they feel forced to do."

Her husband, Marten, returns to work as a computer-systems developer on Wednesday, after going on paternity leave in October. Their son, Elis, was born in November of 2010.

In addition to allowing him to share a lot of time with his son, "it also felt important for me and my wife to share the parental leave equally," says Mr. Noren. "We said we wanted to split it evenly from the get-go and that's what we did."



Christel Lind for The Wall Street Journal

Johan Skill, right, hugs his son Tim at a park on the island.

The generosity comes at a cost. Exact figures aren't available, but a report published by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development estimates public spending on parental leave cost 0.8% of gross domestic product, or the equivalent of \$3.7 billion in 2007 alone.

Nevertheless, many Swedish politicians are arguing for even stiffer paternity requirements, including requiring dads to stay home a third month.

The majority of the speaking time at the yearly policy meeting of liberal Folkpartiet party in October was devoted to the issue

of extending paternity support. (The Folkpartiet is a member of the country's ruling coalition, led by the country's deputy prime minister.)

Although the party rejected the proposal to add a required third month, the number of members in favor of the idea is rising. "The fathers of today are not cavemen with clubs in their hand, but men that take an ever increasing responsibility for home and family," wrote leading party member Lisbet Enbjerde in a November editorial in the Helsingborgs Dagblad newspaper.

Tina Acketoft, a Folkpartiet member of parliament, says "it would have been unthinkable" to see a Swedish man taking care of children in the 1950s. "The fact that it is (now) legislated makes it socially acceptable."

Not everyone welcomes the potential for the government to get even more deeply involved in families' home lives.

"We don't mind if fathers want to take paternal leave, but this is something that families themselves should decide, not the government," says Emma Henriksson, a member of parliament for the conservative Christian Democrats party.

Although she is in favor of extending parental leave, she says families should decide how they allocate it. "We don't want the government telling families how to plan their lives."

At Swedish companies such as global retailing powerhouse Hennes & Mauritz AB, long spans of parental leave and time off for new fathers are standard. H&M pays the difference if an employee's salary goes above the government-set salary cap.

"Our company makes no difference between mothers or fathers taking parental leave; it's all parental leave to us," says Jeanette Skjile, H&M's human resources chief. She adds that H&M sees parental leave-taking as an opportunity for its employees to try out different jobs and develop new skills. She noted the manager at H&M's store in Kalmar, located in southern Sweden, is on six months paternity leave.

"The fathers taking leave are actually more worried than we are (and) wonder how we'll cope in their absence," she says, adding each H&M employee has a person appointed to take on his job if he goes on parental leave. "People think they're irreplaceable, but frankly, nobody is irreplaceable."

As the chief executive of videogame maker Electronic Arts Inc.'s Stockholm-based studio, 47-year old Sean Decker found this out firsthand. The Los Angeles native took two months of parental leave after his daughter's birth and managed it by delegating key tasks before he left. He only took two serious phone calls while off, he says.

Even though things apparently hummed along fine at the office without him, he found a stark reality at home alone with the child, with his wife back at work.

Before going on leave, Mr. Decker says he thought: "You get up, you eat—how hard could it be?" He was looking forward to getting a lot of personal tasks accomplished during his time off. He was wrong.

"You're pretty much switched on all day, except for a brief nap midday," he said. "And then there was the food. One week she liked eggs, the next day she didn't...It's really hard to schedule life with an 11-month baby."

Mr. Butcher, from Spotify, had originally planned on spending his six-month leave drinking coffee and writing a script while taking breaks in the park to watch his daughter play.

In reality, "I'd be lucky to have 30 minutes for myself a day. The rest was just endless cleaning, feeding, changing and picking up." He says that, two weeks into it, he wondered if he was going to last the entire leave, "but I'm happy I did it and could bond with my daughter."

—John D. Stoll contributed to this article.

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