

# Paternity leave one year on: 'I imagined my time to be more freewheeling than it turned out'

It's a year since extended paternity allowance rules came in. Here two dads who've taken extra leave to look after their children - and one who missed out - reflect on what it taught them

**Leo Benedictus**

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**F**ew laws can truly change society like those that govern parental leave, which is probably why they have changed so slowly, in a series of reluctant tweaks and fudges. If you want to declare a turning point, however, 5 April 2015 looks like it. Last year wasn't the first time that new parents got money from the government. That was 1911, when the Liberals' National Insurance Act gave mothers a 30 shilling grant to pay for a midwife. Nor was it the first time that parents were guaranteed time off. That was in 1975, when the Employment Protection Act gave women 29 weeks' leave and - crucially - the right to their old job back. Since then both the leave and the pay have been gradually improved for women, but it was only a year ago that the opportunity to raise your children (and sabotage your career) was able to be shared almost equally between men and women.

Certainly that was not the case in 2003, when new rules guaranteed leave to fathers for the first time - a mighty two weeks, paid at £128.73 per week. From April 2011, fathers were also allowed up to 26 more weeks, provided the mother had already returned to work, collecting the rest of her statutory pay. For the past year, however, the full 52 weeks' leave and 39 weeks' pay have been more or less freely available to both partners - and about 1% of all employed men have taken up the offer.

## **Seán Clarke, 40, took three months**

When our first son was born two and a half years ago, my wife and I agreed that I would take over maternity duty for the last three months of his first year. There was no financial logic to this; apart from anything else, maternity/paternity pay by then has stopped for either partner. But we both agreed it would be good to share the leave, and the nine-month point seemed, with weaning well under way, a sensible moment for the transition. A couple of weeks ago I came back to work at the Guardian after a similar three months on paternity leave with our second son.

Gender aside, the inversion of roles was startling. Very quickly, my wife's tales of the office seemed as irrelevant to me as mine must have to her. When baby number two came along I made a conscious effort not to go on about desk moves or department politics. I also quickly realised that "being in the house all day" did not necessarily mean that you had any scope to wash up after breakfast - or indeed to eat breakfast - and that even a nap for the baby could be surprisingly hands-on. Without the perspective that comes from the swap, it's easy for each

partner to imagine the other relaxing at home/in the child-free office while they do the hard work of looking after the children/bringing home the bacon.

More than that, though, taking the leave gives you a change of outlook about family and work. Had I not done it, I think it might have been possible to imagine that the children were an addition to my life, rather than a fundamental change in it, and that frightens me.

Anxious mothers who worry about handing over to their partners can relax, though. Mummy never stopped being the preferred parent for tearful babies. But hopefully the boys enjoyed our time together - they seemed to - and maybe got the impression that people sometimes go to work and sometimes look after children and that this applies more or less equally to mummy and daddy.

To expectant or new fathers who are thinking of it I would say: do it. Unless you are supremely empathetic, you have no idea what it's like for the mother otherwise. It may completely alter your balance of priorities, and if you time it right, you get to see the first steps and hear the first words at first hand.

## **Mike Higgins, 44, took three months**

My first daughter was born in 2008. At that time I was working three days a week and - though my wife was the primary carer - I loved that experience. I couldn't believe how much she changed every day (the baby, not my wife). When daughter number two arrived, I was working longer hours as a magazine editor, and wouldn't have as much time with her. So it was decided that I'd do three months additional paternity leave, as it was called then, when my wife went back to work after nine months towards the end of 2012. I had an office job at a largeish company, and fortunately the HR was relatively simple to sort. I was fortunate in another way: though I didn't receive any paternity pay for those three months, I could afford to save for it.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, I didn't know any other fathers then who had taken up a chunk of paternity leave beyond the statutory two weeks, and I know only one person who has taken extended 'pat leave' in the four years since. Reactions to my decision split down gender lines: broadly, male friends and colleagues were vaguely approving but a bit baffled. ('Are you joking?'; 'You're really just going to write a novel, aren't you?'; 'I love my kids - that doesn't mean I want to actually raise them.') The many mothers I knew who had tossed their careers overboard for their families were encouraging. But, I sensed, they were quite aware I would only be at the wheel for a brief few weeks.

There were a few storms en route. I confess I did imagine my time at home to be more freewheeling than it turned out, so the rolling deadlines caught me out: mealtimes, naps, nursery pick-ups, washing-up, laundry, tidying ... it all piles up. My wife had set me three rules: that by 7.30pm, when she returned from work, the kids should be in bed, the flat not be a total bomb site and dinner be under way. In the face of the messy reality, she quietly dropped them.

The four-year-old barely acknowledged the regime change (she occasionally called me 'Mummy' in the first weeks). But she sensed a vacuum in the transition of power and exploited it: telly times and bed times were pushed. What I hadn't realised was how small your geographical world becomes as a stay-at-home parent. The pressure cooker sometimes boiled

over.

Outside the home, the neighbourhood mums - and they were all mums - barely batted an eyelid. I was welcomed in, with the slightly weary sense that, for you' Mike, it'll all be over by Christmas.

## **And one dad who wishes he could have done it ... Ruwan Kodikara, 33**

My son Harrison was born in 2014, so unfortunately my wife Kat and I missed out on shared parental leave (SPL). Kat is a forensic scientist, which means she constantly has to refine her skills to keep up to date with developments in her field. Without SPL she decided to take a year off but when she returned, she had to go through a series of retraining sessions.

When we decided to try for a baby, and I looked into things such as parental leave, we realised that policy-wise dads were largely ignored. I remember asking our office manager about the company's paternity-leave policy, to which she replied: "I'm not sure really ... no one's ever taken it here before.

And so in the end I took two weeks' paternity leave, and then two weeks' annual leave. Luckily my employer was very understanding and allowed me to occasionally work from home or come in late, which meant I could give Kat some help with the feeds and general parenting chaos.

However, during the first year of being a parent, I did feel I was missing out on a number of Harrison's major milestones, which was (and still is) upsetting. It seemed bizarre to us that the system didn't account for dads wanting to take care of their kids, and didn't fit with the way Kat and I saw parenting at all.

I was therefore thrilled when Nick Clegg and the Lib Dems delivered SPL under the coalition government. It was clear he felt the old setup didn't fit modern life - not only in terms of parental leave, but also in terms of gender pay disparity and the high cost of childcare. Weirdly I ended up working in communications for Nick in government, both when SPL finally came into effect.

Thankfully now, if we do decide to have another child, we have a choice as to how we look after them.

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