



stretched: working parents' juggling act

'I Wasn't There To Help': Dad With Newborn Struggles With Lack Of Leave

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NPR STAFF

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Transcript



Mike Cruse changes his daughter Olivia's diaper, while his 4 year-old son Benjamin and wife, Stephanie, fold laundry in their home in Alexandria, Va. Mike went back to work less than two weeks after Olivia was born.

Claire Harbage/NPR

Mike Cruse is the father of a new baby. His daughter Olivia was born in July. But like

most fathers in the U.S., he doesn't get paid parental leave. That means his wife, Stephanie, will have to take care of the baby mostly herself — an already difficult task that may be even harder for her since she's dealing with postpartum anxiety.



AROUND THE NATION

How To Get Dads To Take Parental Leave? Seeing Other Dads Do It

Cruse, who manages the warehouse for a lighting company, had to take vacation days from his job to stay home and help for those first 10 days. Now he has no vacation left for the next calendar year.

And that's better than the situation about four and a half years ago, when his son Benjamin was born. Cruse says he wasn't able to take any vacation at all then — he was working for a different company that told him to be back at work in five days. Those days off were unpaid.



(Top) Just after Mike gets home Olivia wakes up from a short nap. (Left) Benjamin eats dinner after getting home from preschool. Mike picks him up every day on his way home from work. (Right) Stephanie holds Olivia after prepping dinner for the family.

Claire Harbage/NPR

"This is exactly what millions of men all over the country are dealing with," says Josh Levs, who was written about parental leave in the book *All In*. Levs is a journalist and advocate for paid family leave, including paternity leave. (Disclosure: Levs has reported for NPR in the past.)

Levs thinks the solution is a government fund taken from payroll deductions that

would pay for time off after a baby is born as well as time needed to care for sick or elderly family members. As of now, just three states — California, New Jersey and Rhode Island — offer paid parental leave.

That's not an option for Cruse, who lives in Alexandria, Va. He recorded an audio diary with some of his thoughts during those first days after Olivia was born. The diary is part of *Stretched*, an *All Things Considered* series on the challenges facing working parents.



Benjamin reads to Mike and Olivia. When Benjamin was born Cruse was working at a different company and says he wasn't able to take any vacation time. He could only take five unpaid days.

Claire Harbage/NPR

"For whatever reason, people in this country don't see parents, let alone dads, like they do in other countries that offer family leave," Cruse says in one audio diary entry. "I don't think people quite understand what's all involved when you have a child and how much work it is and how much help you need."

He recounts his wife's earlier struggle with postpartum depression after their first

child was born. She was alone with the baby for three months while he had to be back at work. "It was just hard on both of us — and I wasn't there to help or understand," he says.



MEN IN AMERICA

More Dads Want Paternity Leave. Getting It Is A Different Matter

On July 31, he was preparing to go back to work. His daughter was less than two weeks old. But he really wanted to be there for his wife.

"It would be nice for me to be able to stay home and be there with her," he tells his diary. "And be able to assist her and help her. Whether it's changing diapers, holding the baby, going grocery shopping, fixing meals, getting a glass of water — or just being there as a presence. Just being there as someone to talk to, someone to support, someone to care."



(Left) Olivia gets a bath every evening just before 7 p.m. (Right) Stephanie and Benjamin play after dinner. (Bottom) Mike wanted to stay home longer after Olivia was born.

Claire Harbage/NPR

Fathers across the country feel the same way.

"What's happening now is that men — working fathers — are very involved in home life. And not just at birth," Levs, the author, says. "The average working father spends three hours every work day caring for his children. But we have no infrastructure in this country to give families real choices. And when it comes to a birth, we have no

system in place to make sure that a parent can be at home and put food on the table for at least a block of weeks."

A report from the Boston College Center for Work & Family says 96 percent of men surveyed in 2011 took two weeks or less off from work following the birth of their most recent child. Even more, 99 percent, felt "that their supervisor expects no change to occur to their working patterns as the result of their becoming parents."



After the bath, Mike dries Olivia and lets Benjamin crawl on the bed trying to get her attention. It's 7:30 p.m., and Mike hasn't had a break since he got home from work.

Claire Harbage/NPR

Among private sector workers in the U.S., just 13 percent have access to paid family leave, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Men also typically take shorter leaves than women after the birth of a child.

The U.S. is an outlier when it comes to the issue. Among 41 countries studied by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the U.S. is the only country that does not mandate paid leave for parents after the birth of a child.

**STRETCHED: WORKING PARENTS' JUGGLING ACT**

On Your Mark, Give Birth, Go Back To Work

The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 lets workers at many private and public-sector jobs take up to three months of leave and come back to their jobs. But that leave is unpaid; certain conditions apply and not all workers are covered.

"This is essential for building a stronger economy," Levs says. "When you make gender-neutral paid family leave available as a social project — available on the state level and hopefully nationally, you keep more people in the workforce."

Now back at work and speaking in late September, Cruse says he hopes things change in the country going forward. "I hope that the conversation just continues to pick up as the next generation starts to move into the senior management realm," he says.

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