

Organization Practice

# A fresh look at paternity leave: Why the benefits extend beyond the personal

Fathers who take leave help their partners, their families, and themselves. In this era of employee mental-health challenges, companies should take notice.

*This article was a collaborative effort by Francesca Colantuoni, Wahi Diome-Deer, Karl Moore, Shaibyaa Rajbhandari, and Gila Tolub.*



**As we enter** year two of the COVID-19 crisis, we continue to see the gruelling effects the pandemic has had on employee populations. Take women, among those bearing the brunt of the economic and social fallout from the crisis. According to the latest *Women in the Workplace* report, coauthored with McKinsey and LeanIn.org, more than one in four women in the United States are considering downshifting their careers or leaving the workforce entirely. As the report starkly puts it: this is an emergency for corporate America.

To help reduce burnout among working mothers, what if more new fathers took on caregiving responsibilities in the home? What if they began making that commitment by taking paternity leave? And what if taking that time improved the home lives and work-life balance for fathers, while also making them feel more positive about their own careers and employers?

We looked at those questions and others in recent interviews with 130 new fathers and their partners, across ten countries, about extended paternity leave.<sup>1</sup> Although our survey size was small, the men told us resoundingly that their experience was a positive one, despite some having concerns about what it might

mean for their careers. While our research focused on heterosexual fathers taking paternity leave, we recognize that there are many other kinds of families (families with two mothers or two fathers, adoptive families, and so on) that face similar challenges and thus can benefit from parental leave. The findings of this article extend equally to all.

The cultural context around paternity leave is changing, as more countries and companies are offering the benefit to new fathers. Worldwide, 90 out of 187 countries offer statutory paid paternity leave,<sup>2</sup> with almost four in ten organizations (38 percent) providing paid leave above the statutory minimum.<sup>3</sup> In OECD countries, men's use of parental leave is increasing overall,<sup>4</sup> even though the number of days taken is still fairly minimal. Despite this considerable shift in cultural and employer support of fathers, less than half take advantage of all the leave benefits offered to them.<sup>5</sup> Companies are also offering "parental bonding leave" and "secondary caregiver leave" for LGBTQ+ and adoptive parents, recognizing the tremendous benefits to individuals and families. But, as with paternity leave, the number of people taking these benefits is still small.

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<sup>1</sup> Our interview subjects were mostly millennials in dual-career couples, with college degrees and financially stable jobs (70 percent make more than \$150,000 in annual combined household income) in different sectors. All of the men took two months or more of paid paternity leave, either continually or in increments over a period of one year; the vast majority had become fathers in the past two to three years. After the interviews, conducted between April and June of 2020, a follow-up survey was conducted in July with a subset of respondents. Participants were from the following ten countries: Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Iceland, Israel, Singapore, Sweden, and the United States.

<sup>2</sup> *Annual report 2019*, Promundo, [promundoglobal.org](http://promundoglobal.org).

<sup>3</sup> *2016 Global parental leave*, Mercer, September 2016, [mercer.com](http://mercer.com).

<sup>4</sup> Nikki Van Der Gaag et al., *State of the world's fathers: Unlocking the power of men's care*, Promundo, February 2019, [promundoglobal.org](http://promundoglobal.org).

<sup>5</sup> "PF2.2: Parents' use of childbirth-related leave," OECD Family Database, [oecd.org](http://oecd.org).

While the challenge of getting men to take paternity leave is long-standing, the COVID-19 crisis has created fresh urgency for companies grappling with how to support employee well-being. The pandemic's siege on mental health is real, with companies reporting that employees' initial productivity sprints have given way to fatigue. Diverse employees have been hit especially hard—including working parents, who continue to feel the stresses of balancing work and childcare.

In this article, we explore our survey respondents' attitudes toward paternity leave and what their views may mean for companies looking to provide more support for all their employees.

### The pluses of paternity leave

Our interviews revealed five areas in which paternity leave can provide a boost—from lifting families' relationships and finances to generating increased enthusiasm among fathers for the employers that supported them (Exhibit 1).

### Strengthening partnerships

The benefits of paternity leave begin in the home. Ninety percent of the men we interviewed noticed an improvement in their relationship with their partner. And their partners also felt that the support was critical to forging a stronger bond. "I think I would have resented him if he had been at work and I would have had to do all of this alone," one mother told us. It was less about dividing household tasks and more about providing emotional support and being present during early, challenging days of baby care.

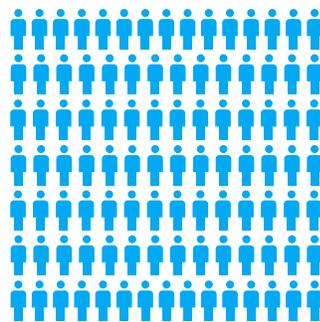
Recent research supports this point, indicating that paternity leave is associated with greater relationship stability. That may be because when fathers take leave, it signals a greater investment in family life—reducing the burden on the mother and strengthening parental relationships.<sup>6</sup>

Studies also show that a father's increased involvement in baby care can mitigate maternal postpartum-depression outcomes. A study of how paternity leave affects maternal postpartum

Exhibit 1

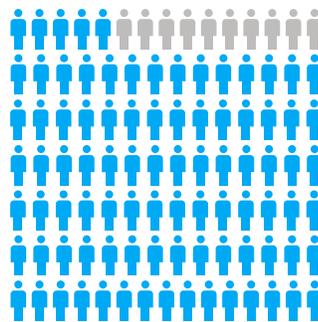
## Men who took paternity leave viewed it overwhelmingly as a positive experience.

Views of paternity leave, % of respondents (n = 126)



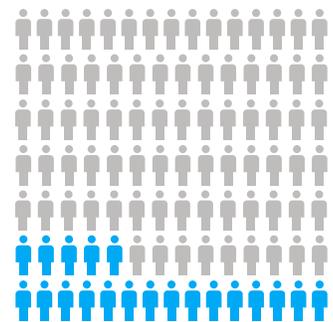
100

Were glad they took the leave and would do so again.



90

Noticed an improvement in their relationship with their partner.



20

Felt that the risk of a career setback was the main downside but that the benefits outweighed that worry.

Source: Joint McKinsey–McGill University research on paternity leave, 2020

<sup>6</sup> Richard J. Petts, Daniel L. Carlson, and Chris Knoester, "If I [take] leave, will you stay? Paternity leave and relationship stability," *Journal of Social Policy*, October 2020, Volume 49, Number 4, pp. 829–49, cambridge.org.

depression showed that a lack of paternal involvement was a significant predictor of the intensity of depressive symptoms.<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that mothers' improved postpartum outcomes were not simply because of the presence of the father but from his participation in the care of the baby.

### **Establishing the parental role from the get-go**

Parenting together in the first days, weeks, or months of a child's life is instrumental in shaping family dynamics, our survey showed.

"The beginning of becoming parents was a very important time to be together," one father said. "We both learned together about the baby, how to raise a child, and the approach we would take as parents and how to be part of that process together."

Paternity leave also allows fathers to set the foundation for a more equal distribution of responsibilities in the future (for instance, getting kids to day care). One study showed that paternity leave can influence parents' decisions about how to allocate resources to childcare, domestic work, and paid work in later years.<sup>8</sup>

### **Securing a lifelong bond with your child**

Paternity leave can help bring about very strong relationships with children over time. In some instances, according to our respondents, the time spent at home allowed fathers to develop what they characterized as a "special" bond that would last for years to come. In a world where nearly half of fathers report dissatisfaction with the amount of time they spend with their children (twice the rate of mothers who say the same),<sup>9</sup> paternity leave equalizes the opportunity for men to "be there."

Fathers in our survey attributed this tighter bond to their increased presence, as well as to an increased rhythm of interactions with their children and a

recalibration of what they should prioritize. "It was incredible in terms of building my relationship with my daughter," one father said. "A year later, we have a very close relationship."

Indeed, research indicates that longer periods of paternal leave are associated with more frequent engagement in developmental tasks and caretaking during the first few years of children's lives.<sup>10</sup>

### **Helping a spouse's career—and the family finances**

Paternity leave can level the playing field for working mothers. Many fathers emerged from the experience feeling like "being at home, with a strong presence of mind, allowed me to reduce stress on my wife and for her to return to the workforce earlier." As one father put it, "It's not just about getting to know your kids at a crucial age but also about committing to a fairer relationship."

These fathers also noted that their leaves helped them to support their partners' career goals and to minimize the negative impact on career progression. One couple in a dual-career relationship said that because they were both able to take parental leave, they could "preserve our profession, identity, and nonparental value and worth, which was great for our relationship."

Those choices can also create financial benefits for families. Paternity leave reduces the gender wage gap within households by increasing mothers' wages in the short term and helping to increase total household financial well-being in the long term.<sup>11</sup> Research conducted on roughly 9,000 families observed parental pay one year prior to childbirth and again when children were on average four years old and found that mothers' incomes rose about 7 percent for each month that a father spent at home on paternity leave.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Natalène Séjourné et al., "[Effect of paternity leave on maternal postpartum depression]," *Gynécologie Obstétrique & Fertilité*, June 2012, Volume 40, Number 6, pp. 360–64, sciencedirect.com.

<sup>8</sup> Ankita Patnaik, "Reserving time for daddy: The consequences of fathers' quotas," *Journal of Labor Economics*, October 2019, Volume 37, Number 4, pp. 1009–59, journals.uchicago.edu.

<sup>9</sup> Wendy Wang, "Parents' time with kids more rewarding than paid work—and more exhausting," Pew Research Center, October 8, 2013, pewresearch.org.

<sup>10</sup> Richard J. Petts and Chris Knoester, "Paternity leave-taking and father engagement," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, October 2018, Volume 80, Number 5, pp. 1144–62, onlinelibrary.wiley.com.

<sup>11</sup> Signe H. Andersen, "Paternity leave and the motherhood penalty: New causal evidence," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, October 2018, Volume 80, Number 5, pp. 1125–43, onlinelibrary.wiley.com.

<sup>12</sup> Elly-Ann Johansson, "The effect of own and spousal parental leave on earnings," Institute for Labour Market Policy Evaluation working paper, number 2010:4.

### **Feeling energized as an employee**

Men who spend time with their children report a boost in happiness and fulfillment that may also extend to the workplace. In one 2018 study, 60 percent of men described childcare hours as “very meaningful,” almost double the percentage of men who described paid work that way.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, many new fathers also discover a newfound appreciation for their employers.

While 20 percent of our respondents did acknowledge that the risk of career setback was the main downside to taking leave, most told us that they felt the benefits outweighed the risk. They appreciated the chance to take time off, as well as the support from their peers in making it happen. “I see it as an investment in employees,” one respondent said. “Because of that, I really do respect the bank I work at—it’s really human oriented.”

Many of the fathers we interviewed said that they felt more motivated after taking leave and that they were considering staying in their organization longer. They also said that the leave led them to change the way they work, becoming more productive and prioritizing their time better. “Having kids made me very aware of how valuable my time is and where I wanted to place my efforts more strategically,” one father told us.

With a renewed sense of priorities, some fathers started to make positive changes in their work lives. One said that it led to “changing my network to work more closely with other parents who have similar focus, identifying sponsors who can help plan a path back that balances both family and career.” Some suggested that taking paternity leave may have given their careers a longevity boost. “It was an opportunity to take a step back and get my head above water, to get some sort of perspective,” said one father. “It was incredibly valuable for me to remember what I really like about the job and stay in the job.”

Many men also felt that their leave-taking could inspire others to make similar choices. One said that he enjoyed being an example “to friends and family that a successful male can proudly take paternity leave.”

In short, it’s possible for employees to be better fathers and better partners while also being inspiring leaders. The fathers we spoke with unanimously agreed that the upsides of improving relationships or prioritizing family more than outweigh the risks of slowing down their careers. All of them said that they would take paternity leave again, and their partners agreed.

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<sup>13</sup> Wang, Pew Research Center, 2013.

## Advice to employers from new fathers

When recommending paternity leave to a peer, respondents to our survey noted three key conditions: a work culture that encourages taking leave (70 percent), policy support from their employer (63 percent), and an unaffected promotion timeline (30 percent). Given the overwhelmingly positive feelings toward leave shown by our respondents, offering paternity leave or extending its benefits appears to be an area of great promise for employers that choose to embrace it (Exhibit 2).

### Give fathers the same benefits given to new mothers

While fathers do not go through the same physical strains as birth mothers (recognizing that some mothers have their children through adoption, surrogacy, etcetera), spending time at home to bond with their child and their partner is critical. Providing a longer paid-leave period, offering more flexibility in the timing of the leave period, or increasing the level of financial support provided would help new fathers take the leave. One in four of the fathers in our study wished that they had longer paid paternity leave.

### Create a culture that embraces paternity leave

Creating an encouraging culture in which taking paternity leave is normalized and men can share their positive experiences is pivotal. Fathers in our survey felt that having the right policy in place wasn't sufficient if the work culture looked down on them for taking time off. Some pointed out that in many cases "the company was supportive, but the culture was not."

Tim Allen, CEO of Care.com, wrote in personal terms about how he wished he had taken more time as a new father and how he regretted that he didn't become more of a role model so that more men felt that they could take the time without penalty. On the other hand, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg openly announced his plan to take paternity leave by taking advantage of company's paid parental-leave policy.

### Clarify the impact on one's career

Despite the strong enthusiasm for paternity leave, 20 percent of the fathers we interviewed said that career setback was a challenge. One even described leave as having "irrevocably" harmed his progress,

Exhibit 2

## Offering paternity leave or extending its benefits can be an area of great promise for employers.

### Five ways to make leave more attractive

<b>1</b>	<b>Give fathers the same benefits given to new mothers</b>	Fathers want greater flexibility around timing their leave, as well as options to take more time off.
<b>2</b>	<b>Create an encouraging culture that embraces leave</b>	Having the right policy isn't enough—companies need to normalize paternity leave and make it clear that they encourage it.
<b>3</b>	<b>Clarify the impact that leave will have on one's career</b>	Creating transparency around career trajectory and promotion postleave and providing support for covering workload helps those considering leave.
<b>4</b>	<b>Help with reintegration after leave is over</b>	Establishing formal mechanisms can help fathers reintegrate into the workplace and feel engaged.
<b>5</b>	<b>Establish family-friendly policies</b>	Creating an environment that supports employees and their families can help retention/longevity.

Source: Joint McKinsey–McGill University research on paternity leave, 2020

though he still believes it was the right thing to do for his family. Many others were simply frustrated about the lack of transparency regarding the impact of paternity leave.

Creating an environment where leave does not negatively affect promotions would be ideal. And, at a minimum, increasing transparency about the impact that paternity leave has on career trajectory and promotion timeline would be a valuable starting point. As one father noted, it is hard when there are “not many men taking time off, and managers and colleagues complain the workload won’t be covered.”

### **Help fathers reintegrate into the workplace after leave**

A few fathers expressed difficulty about reintegrating into working life, primarily due to the overall lack of role models. Given the low number of men who take leave, many employers lack the formal support needed for reintegration. Policies and processes dedicated to transitioning employees would help—it could be as simple as extending those that already exist for mothers.

### **Establish family-friendly policies to support working fathers**

After fathers return from leave, many would love to stay just as involved in their children’s lives.

Introducing more flexible work arrangements would allow employees, including men, to fulfill more of their family duties (for instance, arranging meetings around taking their children to school or providing time to attend doctor’s appointments).

Clarifying the impact on career, helping employees reintegrate into the workplace, and establishing family-friendly policies apply to all types of parental leave. However, fathers may face further challenges related to career navigation and reintegration because of a lack of role models, with no clear precedent to follow.

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While offering paid leave and building a culture that supports it may come at an added cost to employers, the fathers we spoke with showed how it can also increase employee engagement and retention. According to McKinsey research on how leaders can improve employee experience post-COVID-19, companies should target the smallest possible groups, including working fathers, who, in a survey from this summer, appeared to be the happiest group of those working from home. Paternity leave can be a key part of higher satisfaction for fathers, who in turn make happier employees over the longer term.

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