

The Case for Father-Designated Parental Leave

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Soon after my wife Caroline became pregnant, we planned that she would take the first eight months of parental leave provided through Employment Insurance and I would take the final four months. As a political science professor, this meant that I would be on parental leave for an entire semester.

I assumed that parental leave would be like a vacation. I made plans to polish up an article for submission to an academic journal, edit a book, and read widely in my research areas. I often made comments about how I was looking forward to having lots of free time on my hands.

Boy, was I wrong.

To my surprise, parental leave was much harder than I anticipated. I soon realized that being the sole caregiver of a child is more taxing than a full-time job. For the nine hours from when my wife leaves for work to when she returns, I worked very hard with only short breaks. When our daughter Anne was awake, I was busying feeding her, doing dishes, changing diapers, and going on our daily outing to the library, swimming lessons, or shopping. During her daytime naps, I had to do the laundry, prepare her next meal, and clean the house. When my wife arrived home at 5:30pm, we prepared supper together, ate, and then I did the dishes while she gave Anne her bath. By the time that Anne went to sleep at 8pm, I was so tired that I was unable to concentrate on the intricacies of fiscal federalism or theories of multiculturalism. I simply checked my e-mail, read the newspaper, and headed to bed to recharge for the next day.

How was I so unaware about what I was getting myself into?

Despite being a self-proclaimed feminist, I made the sexist assumption that the “women’s work” of taking care of a child is easy. Before I flagellate myself, why wouldn’t I make this assumption? Prior to my parental leave, many people asked me how long I would be “off work.” Embedded in our language is the assumption that taking care of children is somehow not “work.” Notwithstanding all of the feminist political theory that I had read, it turns out that I am more a product of my society than I thought.

Dutch economist Heleen Mees suggests that achieving women’s full equality in society now depends on men taking over a larger share of caring for their children. She argues that the present situation, in which women take almost all state-sponsored parental leave, entrenches women’s

position as primary caregivers in their families. The result is that women are more likely to work part-time or put their career ambitions on hold for family reasons after parental leave than men. To address this, Sweden has designated a portion of parental leave to be used only by fathers – a policy that makes more sense to me now than it did four months ago.

Even though parental leave is hard work for a father, I am convinced that it is worth it. What persuades me most of the need for father-designated parental leave is the strong bond that I have created with Anne that I think all fathers should have the opportunity to develop. Mothers have an automatic bond with their child due to pregnancy and breastfeeding while fathers feel that they are on the sidelines during the first year of their child's lives.

At the end of my parental leave, the journal article was not submitted, the book remained unedited, and I had not read anything in my areas of research. And yet the time had been more successful and rewarding than I could have imagined. My daughter now turns equally to myself and my wife for both consolation and to play. Anne and I are closer than ever and it is bond that I hope will last all of our lives.

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