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Paternity Leave

by Olivia Corey

Congratulations! You just welcomed a new addition to your family! Having a child is nothing short of a life-changing event for anyone. A newborn is a gift, and that gift brings an entire slew of new responsibilities and challenges for new parents. When it comes to maternity leave in the United States, it is commonplace that most mothers get six to eight weeks of paid time off. For fathers, paid time off is almost unheard of. While most fathers would also love to take time off to spend with their children, it becomes almost impossible as most families can't survive financially or feel the pressure to conform to social norms that view fathers taking time off as being "not dedicated" to their jobs. Having a father involved in the child's first few years of life, which are so crucial to development, can be extremely beneficial to the family structure. There is almost no legislation in support of parental leave, and many businesses view it as an unnecessary expense. Currently, as our society moves more and more towards equality, the United States should give equal and paid paternal leave for both mother and father.

Mothers and fathers both have a responsibility to care for and bond with their newborns. The majority of the time in our country, a father bonding with his child is seen as not important, and fathers are sent almost immediately back to work. As stated by Joanna Maselko, during the "early years of a child's life, a father is in a unique position to influence both maternal well-being and his child's physical, cognitive, and socioemotional development." When fathers leave to go back to work, that burdens the new mother who is all alone with so much responsibility, especially if the mother already has other small children or is caring for multiple newborns at a time. My mother was a first-time mother of twins and while my father wanted to help her and stay home with my brother and me, he simply couldn't due to financial constraints and societal pressures.

This put so much more stress on my mother that could have been prevented simply by my father being there. She was so already so exhausted, and consequently his absence put more stress on their marriage. Many mothers also suffer from postpartum depression, which is extremely common as demonstrated by the CDC who states, “nationally, about 1 in 8 women experience symptoms of postpartum depression.” This further complicates caring for a newborn alone. Having the father there takes a huge load off the mother’s shoulders. When a father takes time off, it benefits the child and mother and sets the stage for an egalitarian arrangement (New York Times) between the father and mother which benefits the family structure and aids the child’s development. Still, while a father’s involvement can positively affect both the mother and child, fathers face huge obstacles because of the minuscule amount of access they have to paid time off, as well as the negative stereotypes about working fathers and men always being the “breadwinner” that plague our society even today when we work so hard towards equality.

In the workplace, fathers who want to take time off to spend with their families after childbirth are seen as less dedicated to their jobs and often looked down upon. Even when fathers do take time off, the “majority of them take less than 10 days away from the job” (New York Times). Ten days is simply nothing compared to the six to eight weeks most mothers are offered. Meanwhile, mothers are expected and encouraged to take time off, and if a mother came back ten days after childbirth, she would be extensively questioned on why she wasn’t with her child. Even when time off after childbirth is offered to men, many of them still don’t take it because “new dads fear they might be stigmatized by their employers and miss out on future opportunities” (New York Times). Mandating both maternal and paternal leave would close this gender gap and put an end to this stigma. Men and women both desire to share the workload of a newborn. This is shown in a survey that “A full 76 percent of men and 74 percent of women Harrington and his co-authors surveyed said that caregiving should be shared equally, but only about half of those men and

women said they actually *did* share caregiving equally” (New York Times). This is due to the constraints and social norms that society often subscribes to as well as the ongoing lack of parental leave legislation.

Some critics may oppose parental leave for both mother and father by seeing it as “unnecessary” due to the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). Yet they fail to realize this policy is outdated and incomplete. The current policy was created over twenty years ago in 1993. A policy that affects the modern family should evolve and change to fit the modern family. This policy allows “covered employees the right to take 12 weeks of unpaid leave within a span of a 12-month period to care for oneself, a child, spouse, or parent. Most importantly, FMLA guarantees the right to return to one’s job following the leave” (Arellano) but still offers no income protection for these families. This policy completely disregards the immense number of benefits that both maternity and paternity leave offer a family. Not to mention, it still does nothing to alleviate the huge financial burden a new family faces. This severe lack of legislation is in great contrast to European nations where “subsidized parental leave is standard” (Arneson). Our nation is one of the only modern nations where unpaid parental leave is normalized as well as a normalized lack of protective legislation to go along with it. Without more legislation to protect families financially and socially, our country stands stagnant not only compared to other countries but as a nation so hell-bent on equality for all.

Along with a lack of legislation, many businesses don’t want to get on board with paid time off for both mothers and fathers seeing it as a burden to the employer. Though contrary to popular belief, when businesses offer paid time off, they benefit from it. When businesses give families paid time off, they benefit by retaining employees who already have experience within the company rather than having to hire and train new ones. There is a correlation between paid parental time off and higher labor force participation. This is exemplified by Brigid Schulte who

states, “A 2017 Ernst and Young survey found more than 90 percent of companies with paid family leave policies reported either a positive or neutral effect on morale, profitability, and productivity,” further supporting the fact that when a company gets on board by providing paid parental time off, families not only benefit but employers do as well.

Finally, fathers shouldn’t have to choose between being a good father/partner or their career. Every new parent should receive the opportunity to spend time with and take care of their new child without worry about social norms, financial hardship, lack of legislative protection, or lack of support from employers. Paid parental leave is the obvious solution to better invest in the next generation as well as investing in the current generation. The United States would benefit greatly from a mandated parental leave policy. The current policy is lacking and no parent should have to worry about being there for their child or partner during such a special and memorable time.

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