

## News

## Fathers should be 'made' to take parental leave, MPs are told

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By Annie Makoff

But it's not 'financially feasible or sensible' for dads to share childcare at present

Working fathers should be "made" to take parental leave to help address the low-take up rates for the government's shared parental leave regulations, MPs have been told.

Giving evidence at the women and equalities committee's inquiry into fathers in the workplace, **experts said fathers feared ruining their careers if they requested flexible hours or parental leave**, despite wanting to be more involved in childcare. They suggested introducing 'use it or lose it' paid paternity leave comparable to current maternity leave arrangements.

This week's session heard from experts about the childcare support fathers were receiving from their employers, as well as cultural issues at home and in the workplace.

Professor Tina Miller of Oxford Brookes University told MPs that many fathers found it "difficult" to ask for leave and warned it was "all too easy" for new fathers to revert to practices that didn't require "a bit of pushing".

She said: "We have to really try to enable and make fathers take up leave. If we're serious about fathers being involved, that's the only way. If we are serious about men being involved [in childcare], it's the only way. Mothers and fathers don't take decisions about who takes leave from a level playing field – it's gendered, it's historically unequal."

In January, People Management reported that nearly three-quarters of dads wanted more flexible working opportunities with experts warning of a 'fatherhood penalty'. This was backed up by committee chair Maria Miller MP, who emphasised that many fathers wanted to work flexibly to spend more time with their children but felt unable to request it because they feared their employers would question their commitment.

Despite the shared parental leave (SPL) scheme, there remained "significant questions" about whether the culture of work had changed enough for the policy to be effective, she told peers.

SPL – the government's flagship scheme introduced in 2015 – was intended to enable both working parents to share childcare, but projected take-up at the time indicated it would only reach between 2 and 8 per cent. In December 2016, a **CIPD survey of more than 1,000 HR professionals** found that just 5 per cent of new fathers and 8 per cent of mothers had opted for SPL since the scheme's introduction.

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be neither “financially feasible nor sensible” for fathers to take leave as most tended to be higher-income earners. In some industries, it may not be “socially acceptable” for fathers to take a large proportion of parental leave, she added.

The ‘Fathers and the workplace’ inquiry follows the committee’s report on the gender pay gap in 2016, which found that many fathers wanted to take paternity leave to spend time with their children and sharing care between parents was ‘key’ to reducing the gender pay gap.

Meanwhile, the Working Families’ Modern Families Index 2017 revealed that men make up just 25.8 per cent of the UK’s part-time workforce, with part-time working being “strongly associated” with childcare responsibilities.

Sarah Jackson, chief executive of Working Families, said: “Research shows that fathers who are able to take leave in the first year of their child’s life are more likely to be involved with their children’s care in subsequent years – but there are significant barriers to fathers taking SPL. SPL needs to evolve into something more meaningful for fathers. The creation of standalone ‘use it or lose it’ paid paternity leave would be a game-changer.”

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