

Flexible Working and Flexible Fatherhood - Paternity Leave or Shared Care?

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Aberdeen academics challenge the government proposals on paternity leave.

The coalition government have announced proposals for flexible paternity leave by dividing the 52 weeks maternity leave between fathers and mothers so that parents could take the leave separately or together to take effect in 2015. The aim is to enable fathers to participate more in the upbringing of their children and form stronger bonds with them. This is something that fathers have consistently stated that they wanted in questionnaires, even though fathers of young children are in fact likely to spend even longer hours in the workplace than other men. Another aim of these proposals is to enable women to participate fully in the labour force, with fathers taking more of a share of childcare.

Will the government's proposals should enable these aspirations to be met?

Evidence from elsewhere in Europe, compiled by Claire Wallace and Pamela Abbott suggests that this is not likely to work in the way intended because:

1. Fathers are not likely to take daddy leave if it is transferable in this way. Countries where paternity leave is taken is taken up are those where it can only be taken by the man on a "Use it or lose it" basis, such as Sweden.
2. Fathers are unlikely to take up paternity leave unless it is compensates them adequately for lost earnings, which the statutory paternity/ maternity pay that they would be entitled to does not. In Norway fathers are more likely to go on paternity leave during the first year of the infant's life because they can claim full wage compensation for 46 weeks. Research suggests that fathers should receive at least 50% wage compensation to find paternity leave realistic.
3. Employers discourage men from taking parental leave and are much more likely to refuse a request for flexible working from a man than from a woman.
4. Paternity leave is more likely to be taken by better educated men, those with higher hourly earnings and those whose wives are in professional and managerial conditions.

Furthermore, the proposals will not do much to alleviate the burden on working mothers who are still mainly responsible for domestic work as well as childcare and whose working careers suffer as a result. The proposals focus only on fathers and not upon how childcare can best

be managed between parents. Hence, the UK family friendly policies continue to reinforce the view that women are the main carers, but should be working too.

Nevertheless, research suggests that increased involvement of fathers would lead to better quality family relationships and better cognitive development of children.

It would be great if these things could be achieved, but research suggests that the coalition government's policies will not achieve them in their current form.