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daddy's turn

Slowly, men embrace benefits of paternity leave

Maternity leave isn't just for mothers anymore. With only a few exceptions, under the Family and Medical Leave Act, if your company employs 50 or more employees, you are entitled up to take 12 weeks of unpaid leave for the birth or adoption of a child—whether you are a new mom *or* dad. So the latest trend is paternity leave, though it's rise in popularity has been far from meteoric. Why do dads hesitate to take it? And if they do decide to pursue their legally guaranteed right, how should they prepare?

have a game plan

David Owens, an in-house attorney from Terrytown, decided to take advantage of 10 days of leave available to him under the FMLA. "I knew I wanted to experience as much of Luke's life as possible in those first few weeks at home, especially as a first time dad." David's employer, a local bank, supported his decision to be with his family at such a special time.

"It was a very positive experience. It allowed me to be totally focused on my wife and child, without having to worry about what was waiting on my desk the following morning," says David.

In order to take full advantage of the leave, David kept his work projects ahead of schedule before his son's due date. This prevented a log jam when he did eventually return to work full-time. David also kept in touch with his employer daily. "Mostly it was to keep everyone up to date on Luke's progress," David says.

and a back-up plan

Because his firm very generously provides a full week of paid paternity leave, Christian Blessey, a financial advisor from Uptown, took time off for the birth of his daughter, Sarah. He found, however, that he wasn't much needed.

"I planned to take some time off to help out," says Christian, "but was basically shoed out of the house by my very competent wife and mother-in-law, who took time off herself for our benefit. So, I went back to work." Christian's experience is perhaps not unusual and tracks the traditional understanding of a father's role in the parenting of a newborn. This could be one of the reasons paternity leave is only slowly catching on.

There are disadvantages, too. Unlike with vacation or sick leave, the FMLA only requires companies to provide *unpaid* leave time. Unless you work for a firm like Christian's that has made paternity leave a paid option, you have to factor in the loss of income for the period of time you determine to take off. For this reason, many new fathers use vacation or sick leave instead of FMLA leave and considerably shorten the time they have at home with their newborn.

Further, there is a perception among career-minded men that taking advantage of this time off could hurt their careers. Even though the FMLA makes it illegal to discriminate against an employee who has taken leave, there is no way to say if it will affect career goals because everyone's employment situation is different. If you have concerns, ask around to find other men in your company who may have taken family leave time and what their experiences were.

If you choose to take leave during this important family time, you should discuss it with your employer at least 30 days before you plan to take off. And be certain that you discuss all aspects of the leave, including your benefits. Employers are not required to pay benefits while you are on FMLA leave, but some will. Others, may request that you pay health premiums during the time that you are out of the office. Further, employers may limit 401K contributions while you are on FMLA leave, and it is best to have all of these topics well understood before taking your paternity leave.

think outside the newborn box

With maternity leave, a new mother may require consecutive weeks off for recuperation and care of her newborn. However, men do not suffer the same physical challenges following birth, and thus consecutive leave may not be necessary. New fathers should think of FMLA leave more creatively. Dr. Alan Greene of www.drgreene.com suggests that if you do not need to take 12 consecutive weeks off when your child is born or adopted, consider taking smaller portions of time off

throughout the year.

"During the first year of your child's life there will be so many 'firsts,'" Dr. Green says. "The first pediatrician's visit, the first bath, the first trip to Grandmom and Granddad's house, the first solid food, baby's first birthday, and on and on. As a family, schedule firsts (whenever they are schedule-able events) around your time off from work."

Dr. Greene also suggests that if the hospital allows the baby to stay in the room, use this time to increase your time with the baby. "Undoubtedly, he or she will be up in the middle of the night. Mom will need to sleep after labor, but you can use that time to get to know your child. Those were precious moments for me."

Perhaps it is the traditional difference in parental roles in the birth of a child or the newness of the FMLA itself that keeps many men from taking advantage of this protected time off. Whatever the reason, the trend of Paternity Leave is slowing sinking in, and you can expect to hear much more about it in the future.

For more information about FMLA options and Paternity Leave, go to: <http://www.dol.gov/elaws/esa/fmla/>. Also, the following advice websites are helpful: www.workoptions.com, <http://www.babycenter.com/>, and www.drgreene.com.

