

*Written evidence from Professor Carmen Clayton, Leeds Trinity University
[SPL0037]*

CONSIDERING YOUNG FATHERHOOD

Equality at Work: Paternity and Shared Parental Leave

Women and Equalities Committee

Why this evidence matters?

When considering shared parental leave and ways to incentivise equal sharing of childcare between parents, it is vital to include the views of those from diverse circumstances, including people who are frequently marginalised in society, such as young fathers. Men who enter parenthood at a young age (aged 25 or under) often come from more vulnerable or disadvantaged backgrounds, are more likely to face economic, social and health challenges, and may lack informal or professional support in comparison to young mothers, and also to fathers who are older. As such, young fathers' needs as working parents can differ markedly in comparison to others. Furthermore, young fathers are invisible to national statistics, since data is not routinely collected on them. As a result, they are largely ignored by policymakers and receive little practical support compared to young mothers. This can further exacerbate inequalities. Understanding the views of young fathers can therefore offer a unique and different perspective on paternity/parent leave schemes which needs to be inclusive and equitable towards the youngest men.

Recommendations for young fathers

- More flexibility, choice, and support around paternity leave including the length of their paternity leave can enable young fathers to better support their families and to promote their involvement as fathers.
- Young fathers often felt discriminated against and frequently reported unfair treatment in the workplace compared to other employees. There needs to be additional protection for young fathers within the workplace through employment policy or other formal and informal mechanisms.
- Making parenthood and caring a protected characteristic would help provide protection when discrimination or unfair treatment occurs.
- There is a need for more joined-up working between professionals, employers and other key stakeholders, to ensure that young fathers can engage with, trust, and benefit from, relevant policy, programmes or initiatives.
- Employers saw the benefits of flexible working arrangements and inclusive practice in the workplace. Additional government support in terms of advice, training, and funding was seen as vital by employers.
- Creating opportunities for peer support can also help young men to have informal conversations relating to parental policies and parental leave options.

The evidence below highlights young fathers' views on employment, paternity leave, and shared parental leave. Followed by explanations for why take up rates are low amongst this group, what can be done to address low take up rates and addressing issues of inequality.

Employment views

- All young fathers in the study stressed the importance of paid work. Reasons for this included financial security, providing economically for their family, mental health benefits, developing employment skills, career progression, and being a good role model for their children. For young fathers who were unemployed, finding work was a high priority for the same reasons as above.
- Although young fathers felt that working and earning money were important, they also valued 'being there' for their children and wanted to be 'hands on.' Such views increased after the experience of the COVID-19 lockdowns.
- Young fathers felt that the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic had highlighted the importance of finding roles with job security and working for organisations with family friendly work policies to enable a better balance between home and work life.
- Fathers were reluctant to return to pre-pandemic employment conditions which could negatively affect the balance between work and family time.

Paternity leave

- When asked, a small number of young fathers had taken up paternity leave across different sectors.
- Of the young fathers who took up paternity leave, they were offered two weeks from their respective employers. Some fathers used annual leave to extend their time off after paternity leave had finished.
- Young fathers expressed the importance of accruing savings when taking time off for paternity leave and any further leave in addition to this, due to the significant changes in earnings and expenditure.
- Some fathers were unable to take up paternity leave due to the eligibility issues. For example, those who were agency workers, casual, or irregular workers and young fathers who were self-employed.
- When speaking separately to small, medium and large sized enterprises, these employers offered a paternity package which ranged from 2-6 weeks. Organisations which offered an 'enhanced' paternity leave tended to be in sectors such as the civil service and finance industries.
- Some employers reported that new fathers were reluctant to take up paternity leave due to worries that it may harm their careers.
- Other employers suggested that statutory paternity pay and shared parental pay/SPP were set too low which put off fathers-to-be.

Why has the take-up of statutory shared parental leave been low?

- Only one young father had considered shared parental leave/SPL. But as the young man was the primary earner in the household, the decision to take up SPL would have left the family in a compromised financial position. SPL was therefore seen as undesirable.
- Other young fathers were not aware of SPL or other policies and legislation which may benefit them in the workplace, such as shared paternity pay/SPP.
- Fathers who did not qualify for paternity leave, were not eligible for SPL either.
- When asked, employers reported that SPL was rarely taken up by employees in general.
- Employers felt that one significant barrier for SPL uptake was the dominant cultural assumption that mothers will be the primary caregiver when the child is born.
- Other employers received feedback that fathers-to-be (young or otherwise) at the workplace did not want to reduce the mother's maternity leave, and so, did not consider SPL as a viable option.
- Employers suggested that fathers are often worried about the negative impact SPL can have for career progression and promotion opportunities, especially those who work part-time or flexibly.
- However, in a small number of cases, employers had noticed an increase in fathers enquiring about SPL since the COVID-19 pandemic due to shifts in parental attitudes towards work and childcare.
- Employers, family support professionals and young fathers felt that the cost of living crisis was said to be barrier for SPL.

What can be done to increase the take up rate of shared parental leave?

- Many young fathers were unaware of SPL and SPP. Increasing awareness of SPL in the workplace is needed.
- Managers should be provided with appropriate training so that they have a full understanding of the options available to fathers-to-be and to be able to lead positive discussions around SPL. Our interviews demonstrated the strong impact that empathetic and supportive managers can have on young fathers' decision-making in the workplace.
- As some young fathers received little employer support at work including HR advice, providing clear and accessible information regarding SPL outside of the workplace is important (such as websites, social media).
- Professionals in the family support sector can play an important role as an alternative source of work advice. Our findings demonstrated that young fathers who had positive relationships with professionals often appreciated their support and guidance.
- Our participants felt that a shift in workplace culture and societal values relating to gendered expectations of parents were key factors in changing attitudes towards paternity leave and SPL.
- Providing training to employers regarding the benefits of supporting expectant fathers regardless of age (such as potential increase of workplace productivity, boosting workplace satisfaction, loyalty to the workplace, and gender equity at work) can facilitate positive views of paternity leave and SPL amongst employees.
- Increasing the pay for SPL would make it a more attractive option for parents-to-be.

How can inequalities in take-up of shared parental leave be addressed?

- Several young fathers felt vulnerable at work due to their young age, low work status, lack of confidence, and/or parental status. In addition to this, young fathers felt that they had to debunk negative stereotypes associated with young fatherhood compared to other employees.

As a result, young fathers did feel comfortable enquiring about or speaking out on employment rights for fear of losing their jobs or gaining a negative reputation.

- Some fathers placed pressure on themselves to be the ‘breadwinner’ due to personal reasons and based on cultural values which emphasise traditional gender roles. Addressing and challenging gender expectations of mothers and fathers is vital to increase the popularity and uptake of SPL.
- One young father self-classified as a ‘stay at home dad’ (as his partner was the higher earner) and felt that there is continued stigma attached to fathers being the primary caregiver, which affects men’s and employers’ perspective on working and caring commitments.
- Employers and family support professionals spoke of the benefits of ‘equal parental leave’ and the benefits this had for working parents, families, and organisations. However only one employer in the sample was able to implement this.

Summary

Participants saw the benefits of more flexible parental leave options for young fathers. Fathers wanted a better balance between home and work life and employers commented on the benefits of an inclusive and gender equitable workplace for both organisations and employees. A number of young fathers took up paternity leave and some were in a fortunate position to be offered enhanced paternity leave. However, no fathers had experience of shared parental leave/SPL. A large number of fathers were unaware of SPL. Others who were aware, did not see SPL as an attractive parental leave option due to low pay, reducing maternity leave for the mother, and societal expectations where mothers are seen as the primary caregiver and fathers as breadwinners. Participants felt that a more inclusive and equitable workplace was needed to facilitate changes in attitudes and take up rate of SPL. Challenging gendered views of parenthood were said to be essential to such endeavours.

Research Study Information

Contained in the above submission are the key findings from a Research England funded study – ‘*Connected Young Fatherhood: Rural and Urban Experiences during the Pandemic.*’ ‘*Connected Young Fatherhood*’ was a collaborative research project led by Leeds Trinity University with the County Councils Network, DaddiLife, and Leeds City Council. We explored young fathers’ employment experiences since the outbreak of COVID-19 in both rural and urban areas. 46 participants were interviewed for the study, which included professionals from the family support sector, employers from small, medium and large sized enterprises, and young fathers who were defined as age 25 or under when entering fatherhood. The interviews highlighted the complexities related to parenting, paid work, flexible working, and parental leave. Our analysis also demonstrated the value of both professional and employer support with respect to young men’s employment choices and journeys.

Project Details

‘Connected Young Fatherhood: Rural and Urban Experiences during the Pandemic’

February 2025