What does Additional Parental Leave mean for fathers?

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Fathers of children born after 3 April 2011 are entitled to take Additional Parental Leave (APL), in addition to two weeks statutory paternity leave. By allowing both (qualifying) parents to share paid parental leave, APL seemingly demonstrates a commitment to giving fathers a genuine opportunity to parent their children in the first year of life. In fact, it is not obvious that APL will make a significant difference.

First, APL cannot be taken in the first 20 weeks of the child's life. This reinforces the message that it is mothers who should be primary care-givers in the first five months, and places fathers in the role of secondary care-giver, establishing a pattern of behaviour that may be hard to change. It is, however, consistent with the 'breast is best' campaign and, although exclusive breastfeeding at four months in the UK is relatively rare, there are marked class differences in patterns of initiating breast feeding that are likely to be reflected in take up rates for APL. What is lacking is evidence that the health and wellbeing of mothers and/or infants is harmed by the mother not being the primary care giver in the first five months. Without this, it is difficult to justify not giving individual families the freedom to choose who is best placed to take that role from the outset.

Second, APL does not entitle expectant fathers to take time off work to attend antenatal appointments. Whilst attendance at antenatal appointments (particularly scans) is a key part of the transition to fatherhood, and an important means by which men can engage with the pregnancy and prepare for the birth, attendance is still dependent on the goodwill of employers. Class differences, this time related to control at work, again emerge. APL further reinforces the, arguably incorrect, view that fatherhood begins at birth.

Third, qualifying for APL is only apparently straightforward. On the one hand, a man appears to qualify by virtue of a biological connection to the child; or by virtue of an intended relationship (like adoption); or by virtue of having a pregnant partner/adopting partner. At the same time, his qualification for paid APL is linked to that of his partner (who must return to work in order for him to qualify) and his own employment history. This means that a man cannot qualify for paid APL in his own right; though a woman still can. This suggests that a man's relationship with his child remains, to some extent, mediated through his relationship with the child's mother. The policy also reinforces the view of the single, primary carer rather than shared parental care. Patterns of care when parents are together are likely to be reflected in patterns of care when parents separate.

Encouraging patterns of shared parental care may increase the likelihood of shared care arrangements being successful if parents separate. Insisting on a man's biological relationship with the child as a qualifying criterion would have been impossible as it would have discriminated against parents by adoption and gamete donation. Including it as an independent qualifying criterion is somewhat puzzling. Although it suggests that a man may qualify for APL when he has no relationship at all with the child's mother, he is at the same time dependent on her (and her willingness to return to work and to leave the child with him whilst at work) to meet other qualifying hurdles.

APL is likely to be advantageous to working couples whose employers offer generous paid parental leave arrangements and where economic considerations favour either the father taking paid leave or the mother working instead of the father. Although it appears to be a move towards recognising and promoting the roles of fathers in the care of their children, it is only a small step for some fathers and uptake is likely to reflect employment circumstances.

It tacitly reinforces the view that it is mothers who ought to be the primary-carers for infants in the early months in all circumstances, and a model of parenting where there is primary and secondary rather than shared care.

The qualifying criteria suggest that this is a formula for fathers in two parent families. As such, is it not obvious that this change will promote more equal division of the burdens and joys of parenting.

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