

Shared Parental Leave

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Shared Parental Leave: Why is take-up so low and what can be done?

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With the introduction of Shared Parental Leave (SPL) in 2015, why are so few taking advantage of a policy designed to encourage equal parenting? This brief outlines the results of the first phase of the Equal Parenting project, highlighting the multiple barriers to the take-up of SPL in the UK.

Key messages

- Significant barriers to the take-up of SPL were identified through this research, notably: organisational, cultural, communication, financial and policy barriers. Gatekeeping behaviours were also influential.
- Unlike previous research in this field, this sample includes people who were entitled to but did not take SPL and those who had children but were not entitled, such as the self-employed, as well as those who took SPL.
- Other factors which affected take-up included: socio-economic background and job role, education and information seeking skills and ethnic background.
- Key recommendations include: review workplace culture, improved and timely SPL communications, use relatable workplace champions, review Equality Act (2010) to include paternity characteristics, expand eligibility criteria and remove maternal transfer mechanism.

In 2015, [Shared Parental Leave](#) (SPL) replaced Additional Paternity Leave^{1,2}, which had failed to appeal to families. SPL allows parents to share the care of their child in the first year after birth or adoption and provides much more flexibility for families. Last year take-up of statutory paid SPL was low, at just over one percent³. However, very little academic research has been undertaken to understand why this is the case. The Equal Parenting project aims to understand why SPL does not seem to be appealing to families and what can be done to best improve awareness and increase uptake.

How was the study completed?

70 interviews and 3 focus groups were conducted with mothers and fathers who had had children since April 2015, some of whom had taken SPL and many who had not.

This included parents across 20+ organisations and at all levels, e.g. Board Level, Line Managers and Team Members.

The sample used was not only diverse in terms of job title, but also taken from a range of geographical locations around the UK to allow for a more comprehensive range of results. The results covered people of different ethnicities, ages and class backgrounds.

Only 9,200 new parents (just over 1% of those entitled) took Shared Parental Pay in 2017/18. Just 500 more parents than the previous year.³

So, why is take up so low?

From the data collected, it emerged that there are a number of key barriers to the take-up of SPL which effect different groups in different ways. These are:



- **Organisational level barriers** – there was a significant lack of knowledge of the policy from Human Resource Managers (HR) and line managers in the workplace. In addition, workplace culture often negatively affected take-up. In most organisations there is generally an assumption that the mother will be the primary carer, and the suggestion that the father may take SPL is met with surprise and, in some cases, criticism from their own work colleagues.

“...it’s my time...”

- **Maternal and paternal gatekeeping** – one parent’s views on their role often led to behaviours which affected the involvement of the other parent. Generally, this involved mothers drawing on maternal identities of a ‘good mother’, and other policies, such as those around breastfeeding, to dominate the childrearing duties and, at times, exclude fathers. However, there were also examples of positive maternal gatekeeping, where mothers actively encouraged father’s involvement, and paternal gatekeeping, where fathers actively ruled themselves out of childcaring by drawing on traditional normative paternal identities.
- **Policy barriers** – the real or perceived complexity of SPL, as well as the limitations of the policy itself. Furthermore, the eligibility criteria excludes self-employed and some agency workers. In addition, due to a mechanism in the policy (maternal transfer) which means mothers must gift fathers their leave so fathers can take SPL, the policy itself currently encourages maternal gatekeeping.
- **Communication barriers** – there is a general lack of communication, particularly from employing organisations about the policy’s workings and benefits. What communications there are often appear overly complicated, or are not timely enough. In addition, communications unrelated to the policy often inhibit take-up, for example, messages around the importance of breastfeeding.

“...under the thumb...”

- **Cultural barriers** – all parents discussed societal expectations around the roles of each parent and referred in some way to perceived normative maternal and paternal identities. For example, it was common for mothers to create a maternal identity of a ‘good mother’, which was based around being ‘there’ for their baby. Both mothers and fathers continued to construct fathers’ identities around being the primary bread winner for the family.
- **Financial barriers** – Statutory Shared Parental Pay (ShPP), like Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP), is relatively low and is currently a maximum of £145.18 p/w. In addition, ShPP is often not enhanced by organisations in the same way maternity leave is, and many of the fathers in this sample were the main earners in their families. This means that most families would take a financial hit if fathers take SPL.

“...we’re second, we’re always second. It’s always the mother isn’t it?”

Other findings

- In addition to identifying and explaining the multiple barriers parents encounter which often negatively affect their decisions to take SPL, we are the first researchers to find that taking SPL can be an important gateway to fathers requesting flexible working. Fathers were often nervous of applying for flexible working policies, but, after taking SPL, they felt more confident to request flexible working based on the desire to have greater involvement in child caring.
- What also emerged from the research was that one partner not taking leave for a new child can negatively affect the mental health of both parents. The mother can feel abandoned and the father can feel powerless and forced to leave his partner and new child at a time when they are particularly vulnerable.

- Cost of childcare was also a theme in the research, with parents often explaining their desire to take the maximum entitlement to leave in order to save on childcare costs. This often then meant the mother taking a full 12 months maternity leave, particularly where they were paid less than the other parent.
- The research also demonstrates that different groups are likely to experience SPL in different ways. Three key factors signified how people experienced these barriers and how likely they were to use SPL. These were: socio-economic background and job role, education and information seeking skills and ethnicity. Dual-earning couples with professional roles, or those where mothers earned more, or were more ambitious, than fathers, were more likely to know about SPL and more likely to use it.

“...she’s suffering with depression at the moment and a lot of it’s just being by herself.”

Next steps

A large-scale survey is currently being undertaken as part of the Equal Parenting project, this will offer an in-depth understanding of what drives organisations and employees to explore and utilise family friendly policies. The survey explores attitudes, organisational culture, knowledge, barriers and norms around family friendly policies. Numerous FTSE100 companies and SMEs are participating in the survey in order to collect data which can be used to develop research-informed interventions capable of promoting the uptake of family friendly policies by employees of all kinds; so promoting gender equality in the workplace and home.

Recommendations

Based on these findings the following recommendations could help organisations and Government significantly increase take-up of SPL.

For Organisations

- Where it is possible to do so, organisations should explore enhancing ShPP in the same way they do Maternity Pay.

- Evaluate, and where appropriate address, the workplace culture and subcultures surrounding the uptake of childcare duties by fathers.
- Improve the promotion of SPL and ensure information is available early. Target mothers with communications first and use relatable individuals in promotions.
- Consider the use of parenting groups, peer mentoring and workplace champions.
- Evaluate return-to-work procedures and support for mothers, as well as fathers, after leave, including how breastfeeding is supported in the workplace for returning mothers.

For Government

- Review the Equality Act (2010) and look to include paternity characteristics to ensure fathers are protected from discrimination in the workplace.
- Any policy change needs to place the child at the centre of the policy.
- SPL eligibility criteria should be expanded to include self-employed parents.
- Look at removing the maternal transfer mechanism and offering both parents more leave which is not transferable.
- A coordinated effort by Government Departments is needed to support the uptake of SPL. For example, a coordinated effort between the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and Department of Health and Social Care is needed on the subject of breastfeeding and SPL to ensure that both policies are mutually supportive and not in conflict.
- Target communications about the benefits of SPL for the child at mothers initially and consider promoting SPL at pre-natal appointments (e.g., leaflets).

References

¹ Kaufman, G. (2018). Barriers to equality: why British fathers do not use parental leave. *Community, Work & Family*, 21(3), 310-325.

² O’Brien, M., & Twamley, K. (2017). Fathers Taking Leave Alone in the UK—A Gift Exchange Between Mother and Father? *Comparative Perspectives on Work-Life Balance and Gender Equality* (pp. 163-181): Springer.

³ Taylor, J. (2018). Claimed shared parental leave in 2017/18 update. Retrieved from this [webpage](#).



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