

The Importance of Paternity Leave

A common complaint of mothers is that they “do all the work” when it comes to caring for their children. Although this may be the norm for a lot of families, it is important to look at why it is this way. If mothers are the only ones that are allowed leave when they have a child, then it would make sense that they are the ones doing most of the work. In reality, fathers are actually taking on more work after their child is born due to lost wages from the mother. Although it is imperative to have a good maternity leave policy in place, paternity leave is just as important. Fathers that take extended time off following the birth of their child are able to have a better understanding of what parenting entails, gain the skills necessary of parenting, as well as show a greater involvement in their child’s life.

If you were to ask men if they thought that stay-at-home mothers had a hard job or not, for the most part, they would answer with a no. A father that goes back to work relatively quickly after the birth of their child, does not see all of the daunting tasks that encompass being a parent. Normally, when a father gets home it is almost bedtime, so the amount of interaction that he has with his child is limited. This limited amount of time is not going to allow for a father to get the full picture of what it is the child needs. Rehel (2014) mentions that when a father chooses not to take an extended amount of leave, for whatever reason, it really does limit their understanding of parenting. He even showed that these fathers continued to believe that infant care was undemanding and non-labor intensive (Rehel, 2014). If a father is able to have an extended amount of leave after the birth of their child, then he is going to be there twenty-four-seven for the initial transition. He is going to have a much better understanding of what parenting entails because he is going to experience more of it. Rehel (2014) even talks about the fact that when a father is there for the initial transition, he is able to develop a sense of responsibility that allows him to share in the parenting with his partner. A co-parenting partnership is much more ideal than if a

mother and father end up in a gender division of labor, which is what normally happens in a heterosexual couple after the birth of a child (Rehel, 2014).

Another aspect that fathers miss out on when they are not allowed paternity leave is the hands-on experience of learning the skills of parenting. First-time fathers are especially affected by this because it is an entirely new world when becoming a parent and as Rehel (2014) said, parenting is learned on the job. Having the time to share the parenting tasks from the beginning allows for men to gain more confidence and skill in their own parenting (Rehel, 2014). The view of a father is normally one that does not really participate in bath time or does many diaper changes and is not left alone with the child very often.

Normally when the child is left alone, then the mother is having to give details of how to take care of the child as if it is not the father's job to know just as much. For fathers that take a longer leave and are able to get comfortable with skills of parenting, their time with their children are more autonomous and less reliant on their partner's directions as proven by Rehel's (2014) research. Through this experience, fathers are again better able to co-parent with their partner rather than relying on them to be the main caretaker.

When a father is allowed the time to bond and care for their child from the beginning, it is going to create an initial pattern of involvement that will be more likely to last throughout the child's life. But, the more common stance of parenting for fathers to take is that they "serve as helpers when they are needed and asked" (Rehel, 2014). Meaning, the father is not always playing an active role in diapering, bath time, feedings and things of that nature. These tasks are typically seen as the mother's responsibility which ends up making her the primary care provider. Due to these ideas of women being the ones that should be performing the tasks of infant care, men are not seen as needing to take extended time off for the birth of a child. If our society can change that view and see the importance of fatherhood and need of paternity leave then the policies can begin to change. Rehel (2014) stated that policy itself might be enough of a

motivator for fathers to take the time off and become more involved. Therefore, if fathers were given the opportunity to take the extended leave then it could change the future norms of being a father.

Fatherhood seems to be an afterthought when people are talking about parents. Mothers are the ones that everyone worries about, rightfully so since they are the ones carrying the child. But, this does not need to take away from the importance of a father and his time with his newborn child. If our society is going to be concerned with a mother and her child's bond, then we also need to consider how to better nurture the bond between a father and his child. By creating a policy that allows a father extended leave, it will allow for us as a society to begin supporting the new norm of fathers being equal caretakers in the home. The impact that a father has on his child begins the second that he/she is born, therefore that is when they should begin cultivating a relationship with them. It should not be when they are older, and the mom is done doing the "dirty work" of diapering and bathing the child as an infant.

References

Rehel, E. M. (2014). When Dad Stays Home Too: Paternity Leave, Gender, and Parenting. *Gender & Society*, Volume 28(1), 110-132.