

How to Take Parental Leave

By C.C. Holland

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Taking time off from work to care for a new child may be a federal right for many American workers, but doing it without mapping out a sound strategy can derail your career. Men and women taking parental leave may have to contend with pitfalls, ranging from unsupportive managers and resentful coworkers to difficulties adjusting after a return to the job. Failing to plan ahead can spell disaster both professionally and personally. Luckily, a little research and planning can help you build a solid strategy for managing your leave. To get the time you deserve while keeping your company happy, follow our step-by-step guide for making the most of your parental leave and paving the way for a smooth re-entry to work.

Things you will need:

- \$0 to several months pay in the bank, depending on how much unpaid leave you will take
- A few hours for research and planning
- **Information:** Current federal and state regulations governing parental leave (See the "Other Resources" box below), plus your company's guidelines
- **Support:** Co-workers who have previously taken parental leave can act as sounding boards about corporate culture. If you're the first, seek out local working-parents groups or online bulletin boards.
- **Diplomacy:** Although time off is guaranteed for many American workers, a soft approach will usually yield better results for your career trajectory than an entitlement attitude.
- **Flexibility:** With any pregnancy or adoption, the best-laid plans can go awry. Be ready with a Plan A, Plan B, and Plan C — or to build an entirely new plan on the fly.

A yellow sticky note icon with the text 'step 1' written on it in a handwritten style.

Know Your Rights

Goal: Determine exactly how much time — paid and unpaid — you may take for parental leave.

There are three levels of rules that govern family leave — federal, state, and employer — and all of them apply differently depending on your job situation. For example, under the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993, "eligible" employees may take up to 12 work weeks of unpaid leave in any 12-month period for the birth or adoption of a child. However, "eligible" is defined as someone who has been employed for at least 12 months; who has worked at least 1,250 hours; and whose company employs 50 or more employees within 75 miles of the worksite. If you don't meet these criteria, you can't take leave under FMLA. State laws vary similarly, as do company rules, so it pays to do your research. In some companies, sick, personal, or vacation time can be taken in lieu of or in addition to parental leave, but not all

employers offer that kind of flexibility -- or even any sort of guaranteed leave. Talking to your human resources coordinator can make things clear.

"So many people make assumptions that their company will take care of leave time like they do vacation or sick time, but that's not always the case," says Scott Adler, managing editor of Babycenter.com. "Know your leave rights and what FMLA and state aid is available. And find out what your job will offer you, because for some people, that can be a big negative surprise."

Be aware that most family-leave rules apply equally whether you're male or female. Many fathers are unaware of how extensive their rights are and may lose out on the opportunity to bond with a new child as a result.

Just as an aside: When it comes to the generousness of parental-leave policies, the United States ranks dismally low when compared to other countries. A new study from McGill University's Institute for Health and Social Policy found that the United States, Liberia, Swaziland, and Papua New Guinea were the only countries out of 173 examined that didn't guarantee any paid leave for mothers. Contrast that to the liberal policies of Norway, which guarantees 52 weeks of leave (paid at 80 percent) for either parent and reserves four weeks of this time exclusively for fathers.

Other Resources

Online Tools

Here's where to go to find out more about family leave law in the United States:

- [Family Medical Leave Act](#) Covers rules, regulations, and frequently asked questions.
- [State Family and Medical Leave Laws](#) Provides information about various state laws and policies governing family and medical leave. Most guaranteed leave is unpaid, but six states offer varying degrees of paid leave ("wage replacement"), either through temporary disability payments or low-income assistance. See "[The Five Biggest Dangers of Parental Leave](#)" for more on state leave assistance.

step 2

Map Out Your Leave

Goal: Consider all of your options and decide how and when you'll take your time off.

Once you've determined how much time you're legally allowed to take, you'll need to figure out how to apply it to your own situation. Financial planning usually plays a huge part in making this decision. While some companies might be happy to offer 12 months of unpaid leave, it may not be feasible to go without income for a full year. Analyze how much replacement income you'll need and compare it to the paid leave that's available to you. Consider using up outstanding vacation and personal days, which are compensated, before using medical or

family leave. Decide if you'd like to take time off before the child arrives or if you'll work until the last possible minute. If you have a partner, find out how much time he or she can take off and consider taking alternating, rather than simultaneous, leave. "Start thinking early and build as much flexibility into the process as possible," Adler says. "Find out what the basics are, but also what happens if your kid is early or late, if can you structure leave differently than a block of time, and so on." Don't forget to include your re-entry into your planning — toward the end of your leave, for example, you may decide to build in one day a week back at the office and gradually increase to full-time. FMLA allows you to take time off in small increments, such as days or even hours, so you can use your remaining leave time to ease your transition back to work.

Hot Tip

It Never Hurts to Ask for More

Don't feel as if your company's policies are set in stone. According to Carol Evans, CEO of Working Mother Media and author of "This Is How We Do It: The Working Mothers' Manifesto," flexibility is the new watchword for family leave in corporate America. "There's no reason not to ask about other arrangements, such as additional unpaid leave," she says. And the answer is often yes: according to a 2005 survey Evans commissioned of more than 500 working mothers across the country, more than two out of three had asked their companies to make family-friendly changes — and 74 percent of them succeeded in their requests.

step 3

Break the News Early

Goal: Give your boss and coworkers plenty of time to adjust.

While federal guidelines require that you request leave at least 30 days before you take it, giving your boss as much advance warning as possible reflects well on you and allows you both time to get used to the idea and plan ahead. "Telling early rather than late shows you're a responsible person who's going to make this work," Evans says. "It shows a level of cooperation, that you're not trying to put anything over on them." The unspoken rule of thumb is to wait until the three-month mark in a pregnancy to let the cat out of the bag, says Evans, but anytime thereafter is fair game.

If you're concerned that your boss will be less than thrilled about the news, you can soften the blow by maximizing your value to the company before you reveal your plans, Evans says. "Build up a bank of goodwill before you have your baby, because you will need it," she says. "It's a matter of not only doing your job well, but also tooting your own horn. Talk about all the things you've done that are really valuable, find a reason to ask for an evaluation and get a positive one, do favors for people, and make them think about all the good things you've done." Employers are reluctant to alienate valuable employees, so even if your boss is

unsupportive of a pregnancy or adoption, he or she will be less likely to make waves if you're viewed as an essential part of the team.

If you need help figuring out how to break the news, talk with your human-resources representative, chat with co-workers who have been through parental leave already, or visit an online forum such as Babycenter.com's "[How To Break the Big News](#)" bulletin board.

Danger! Danger! Danger!

Beware the Gossip Mill

No matter what, don't fall into the common trap of sharing your big news with co-workers before you tell your boss. Tempting though it may be to gossip with a good friend at work, it can backfire badly if your boss hears rumors through the grapevine before you share the information yourself. Telling your boss before the rank-and-file conveys respect and lets him or her know that you take your professional relationship and responsibilities seriously. If you're not sure about the best time to tell your boss, consult your human-resources representative for guidance. You can obtain valuable insights about what previous employees have done and how those actions played out — and your HR person is required by law to keep your conversation confidential, so your manager won't hear about it.

step 4

Set Up a Transition Plan

Goal: Score points with your colleagues by creating a contingency plan for your absence.

One of the best ways to get your boss and your coworkers in your corner is to collaborate on a strategy for covering your job responsibilities when you're gone. They'll be less likely to carp about your time off and more likely to pitch in if you can demonstrate that you're not simply waltzing out and leaving them in the lurch. "Make it easy by planning out how your work will get done," Adler says. "Figure out a plan and stock up capital with your boss so you can show that you've done X, Y, and Z to take you through your leave." Some options you can explore include moving deadlines up, doubling up on projects, delegating work, hiring temps, or asking several co-workers to cover the various areas of your responsibilities.

However, be careful of going to extremes with extra work ahead of time. "Don't kill yourself! Twelve percent of all babies are born prematurely, so if you're pregnant it's important to rest, eat well, and take care of yourself," Evans warns. "Keep your performance even, cool, and straightforward — don't suddenly go traveling a lot so you don't have to travel after the baby arrives, for example."

The Legalese

Laws You Should Know

Don't assume that pregnancy makes your job bulletproof and use it as an excuse to slack off. Although pregnancy is a protected class under federal law and the law of many states, it doesn't confer immunity for job-related concerns. "If you're having disciplinary problems and the employee gets pregnant, that's not an automatic protection for her against disciplinary action," says Devjani Mishra, a partner in the New York office of Seyfarth Shaw LLP and an expert in employment law and discrimination. If a company denies a promotion to a pregnant applicant and can show a sound business reason that applies equally to a non-pregnant applicant — for example, the job requires extensive travel or no leave for the next 12 months — then claims of discrimination won't fly.

For men, Mishra says, discrimination laws have emerged around the right to take leave. "In various states, such as New York and California, there are laws ensuring that an employer can't create a benefit to employees that appears to be limited based on gender," she explains. That means if a woman can take a certain amount of non-medical parental leave under her company's rules, so can her male counterpart. "However, I will tell you that anecdotally, I've yet to see any men in my own office taking full advantage of our policy of four weeks' paid leave," she says. "It's a corporate culture thing; there seems to be a mentality of, 'You didn't do anything, so get back to work.' It will be interesting over the next ten years to see if men begin to avail themselves of those benefits."

step 5

Stay Connected — But Not Too Connected

Goal: Remain looped in to the office, but avoid the temptations and pressures to combine work with leave.

When you're out on leave, expect the first few weeks to be overwhelming. But once you're acclimated to your new life, resuming casual contact with your office and coworkers can help keep you tapped in to what's going on. Occasional e-mails or phone calls to say hello or answer a quick work-related question are fine, and dropping by the office with the baby can give you valuable face time. But keep your interactions low-key and focused more on sharing the baby than on talking office plans or politics; your goal is to stay fresh in people's minds without making them think you're available for work. "Don't shortchange yourself on the experience [of becoming a parent]," Adler says. "Some people get freaked out that they'll never get another job or their careers will go down the toilet, but this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, so milk it for all you can."

In some industries there is intense, although often unspoken, pressure to take short leaves and to continue to work while you're away. Law firms, for example, are notorious for not respecting boundaries between office and home, says Deborah Epstein Henry, founder and president of FlexTime Lawyers LLC. "You're supposed to be away from work and tending to a

newborn, but you're responding to Blackberrys all day," she says. "The notion of never being off call is really a heightened problem. There's an expectation that if you're at home, you can get back to people — and should." Those expectations can be even worse for fathers, who haven't gone through the physical demands of having a child even though they're legitimately sharing the duties (and sleep deprivation) of early caregiving.

What to do? Just say no, Evans says. "You won't be getting any sleep or rest, you'll be at low energy — this is not the time to be thinking about your job," she says. "The best advice is to really focus on your baby. The time off is so damned short in the U.S.; it's not like we're being given any gifts. If someone on your work team had a heart attack, they would take six weeks off without being expected to work. That's how [parental leave] should be viewed."

Hot Tip

Five Reasons Not to Shortchange Your Leave

If you're concerned about keeping your parental leave short due to office politics or financial concerns, here are five reasons that might persuade you to take your full allocation.

1. **Beat the blues:** Mothers who take at least three months off after childbirth show 15 percent fewer symptoms of depression after they return to work, compared with women who take six weeks or less, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research.
2. **Connect with your kid:** Fathers who take parental leave establish closer relationships with their children that persist long after they have returned to work, according to a Swedish study.
3. **Make more money:** Women who are offered parental leave end up earning more than other women because they are considerably more likely to remain with their employers after their children are born, according to studies by Jane Waldfogel, a professor of social work at Columbia University.
4. **Use it or lose it:** If men don't make use of a company's parental leave policies, the company may change or eliminate those benefits. Think of taking leave as a favor to the guys of the next generation.
5. **Boost your baby's behavior:** A recent analysis from a long-term study funded by the National Institute of Health found the more time children spent in center-based care before kindergarten, the more likely their sixth grade teachers were to report such problem behaviors as "gets in many fights," "disobedient at school," and "argues a lot."

Make a Graceful Re-Entry

Goal: Get back up to speed without crashing and burning.

Getting back to work can be a shock to the system, both physically and emotionally, so it's important to plan this transition well. If possible, use the last weeks of your leave to create a gradual return in which you might work one or two days a week, then slowly ramp up to your old schedule. Establish your childcare arrangements ahead of time and, if possible, simulate what your typical workday would be like by conducting a few practice runs — drop your child off at daycare and use the time to catch up on e-mail or visit the office. Mothers who need to pump breast milk at work should find out when, how, and where they can take the necessary breaks.

Be careful about changing your plans to return at the last minute. While it can be tempting to ask for more time off, "Don't postpone your return to work unless it's necessary," Adler says. "If you said three months and then change it to four, it might not look good." Then again, circumstances can and do change. If you feel you really need more leave, discuss alternatives with your boss, such as telecommuting or working part-time for a few weeks.

Big Idea

The Gradual Return

"Phase-back" leave, in which an employee returns to work on a part-time basis and gradually returns to full-time work, is becoming an increasingly popular option among employers. It's a win-win scenario that allows companies to increase retention and gives workers the chance to transition back to work without being overwhelmed. Eighty-one percent of the companies listed in Working Mother magazine's "100 Best Companies" offer some form of phase-back, which can range from flex time and telecommuting options to a six-month ramp-up period during which an employee works successively increasing numbers of days per week. Workers may also craft a phase-back plan of their own using the reduced-leave schedule, a little-known provision of FMLA, in which they can take time off in hours or days rather than weeks.