

Tales from the Trenches: The Ups and Downs of Parental Leave

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Debra, a TV editor, with her sons, Cole and Jared. Going freelance after Cole's birth allowed her the flexibility to balance work and child-rearing.

Stories of taking leave from work to care for a new baby run the gamut from ho-hum to horrible. Some parents find the leave process to be business as usual, especially in companies with well-established policies. Others have to fight uphill battles all the way. The worst cautionary tale we encountered was that of former Maryland state trooper Kevin Knussman, who was denied federal family leave rights in 1995 due to his gender. Knussman sued in the first sex-discrimination case under the Family Medical Leave Act and won — but the appeals process continued until 2005. By the time the courts affirmed Knussman's right to spend time with his infant daughter, she was nearly old enough to be a babysitter herself.

Luckily, not all leave situations are so traumatic. These five parents encountered a range of situations, but all managed to find solutions to their challenges.

Anne

San Diego, CA

Job at time of parental leave: Instructor at a major university

Number of leaves: 1

Challenge: Extending leave and handling health complications

Resolution: Strong communication with the boss brought about a reduced work load

"While my pregnancy and the aftermath were actually very challenging, I'm lucky to say my boss made my maternity leave as easy as it could possibly be. Early on, I was sick during my pregnancy and she allowed me to work from home full-time. I planned to take three or so months of maternity

leave after my daughter was born, but then I experienced a number of health problems, including postpartum depression, arthritis, and complications from a C-section. I realized I wasn't mentally or physically ready to return to work after just three months; I was just a mess. I didn't have a set return date, and my boss was extremely supportive and understanding when I talked with her about extending my leave. She had a young daughter herself and thought this time was very important; her response was, 'How often do you have a baby? Take whatever time you need.' So she worked with me to combine my holidays, vacation, disability, sick leaves, and comp time to create a longer leave, and when that all ran out, I just flatlined it with unpaid leave. I ended up taking six months total. If I'd been in a traditional job, I would have had to suck it up and return when my leave ended, and given how severe my health problems were, that wouldn't have worked out well.

"When I did return to work, I started with a part-time schedule — and that turned out to be the bigger issue. I had neglected to discuss with my boss an appropriate reduction in my duties that would be in line with dropping from five days a week to two days a week, and I found myself working until 2 a.m. trying to get all my work done. I added a third day to my schedule and it still wasn't enough to jam everything in. I eventually had a breakdown in my boss's office. Finally we got it worked out by negotiating a smaller workload that would fit into a three-day-per-week schedule without killing me. Looking back, I have to say the leave situation worked out really well, but I would have mapped out a better return to work that would have specified a much more appropriate workload and schedule."

David

San Francisco, CA

Job at time of parental leave: Financial analyst for a major national bank

Number of leaves: 1

Challenge: Handling a boss who put up roadblocks

Resolution: Sticking up for dads' rights paid off after HR intervened

"When my wife and I had our first child, I took one week of paid vacation time to stay home with my family and figured that would be it. But three months later, California implemented its paid family leave program, which allows parents to take up to 6 weeks off with partial disability pay. We decided that I would take advantage of this new opportunity so I could bond with my child and help my wife transition back to work. However, when I approached my female supervisor (a mother of two children) with my request, she was shocked. After giving me a short lecture on how my generation is one based on entitlements and not a strong work ethic, she said that she had to approve my leave request, but it wouldn't look good for my career advancement with the company. I was a bit taken aback by this and discussed the options with my wife; I also mentioned my supervisor's response, off the record, to a friend of mine in human resources. During my second meeting with my manager on this subject, I held my ground and said that I wanted to proceed with the time off. But I did offer a plan that would break up the six weeks into smaller chunks of time, such as taking off each Friday for several weeks in a row. This time, she accepted everything in my proposal with very few questions. I later found out that HR had had conversations with her about this issue, which I assume prompted her attitude change."

Debra

Lancaster, MA

Job at time of parental leave: Assignment editor at a television station

Number of leaves: 1

Challenge: Negotiating a return to the workplace

Resolution: Willingness to leave the company resulted in a better freelance job offer

"My company gave me the FMLA-required 12 weeks, but it was unpaid (they now offer partial compensation). During the final few weeks of leave, as the time approached for me to discuss returning to my job full-time on the night shift, I began to see how difficult it would be. With an hour commute each way and only part-time daycare, it would leave me too little time to spend with my baby and my husband. I asked if it would be possible for me to share or split a full-time shift with someone but was told that wouldn't be possible due to corporate policies. The business manager explained that the parent corporation, which is a nationwide media conglomeration, had designated the position as full-time managerial, and that they didn't recognize such a thing as a part-time manager. It wasn't them trying to screw me, it was just a fact of corporate life that they couldn't give me what I asked for.

"However, I was fortunate enough to have the option of changing to my husband's health insurance, so that cleared the way for me to decide to give up my position at the company and pursue other part-time positions closer to home. As it turned out, several weeks later the company asked me to return on a temporary part-time basis in a freelance position. I negotiated and received a higher hourly rate, partially because I didn't use their insurance anymore. Three years later, I am still with the same company working two days a week — and they work around my daycare schedule. I also substitute on occasion for the person hired to take my night position. I love my flexibility and time at work, as well as the extra money, but I'm also enjoying my now-expanded family."

Dawn

Madison, WI

Job at time of parental leave: Copywriter for national clothing retailer

Number of leaves: 3

Challenge: Letting go of work responsibilities

Resolution: In hindsight, realized she could have cut back earlier

"I took 12 weeks with each of my children, which is what's allowed through FMLA. My company provides eight weeks paid for a salaried employee, plus I took some vacation time. In hindsight, I wish I would've taken off more time, especially with my last one. I was freaking out about the money end of things, but we could have made it if I'd taken another month off. I talked to my boss afterward, and she told me she would've given it to me under the table, but I never asked for it and she didn't offer it.

"With each of my children I kept working until the very last minute, and that is something I wish I'd done differently; it would have been nice to have a week to get ready or kick up my heels a bit. I went to work every day panicked that it would be my last day, making sure everything was in order so my coworkers could find it. I never knew when I was going to deliver. My due date with my daughter was

a Friday night, and we had a meeting scheduled for the next Monday, so I stayed at work that Friday night to get things ready for the meeting. With my youngest son, I was at work and was in labor all day and didn't say anything, then went home and had him. In hindsight, that was ridiculous! If I could do it differently, I would have taken a little more leave beforehand. Although some companies don't let you start maternity leave early unless there's a medical reason, if it's something you really want, things can be negotiated. It doesn't hurt to ask."

Maria

Berkeley, CA

Job at time of parental leave: Academic researcher at a major university

Number of leaves: 2

Challenge: Standing up to a supervisor who penalized her for taking leave

Resolution: Writing a job-review addendum allowed her to correct the record without confrontation

"I took six months of leave with my first son and had no problems. But my second leave, for which I took five months, was a different story. Shortly after my return to work, I was given a surprisingly negative job evaluation, after having received nothing but "outstanding" reviews throughout my career there. During the evaluation interview I was told that although I technically couldn't be reprimanded for taking maternity leave, my performance was being judged not by my individual performance but by the results of a project that I was involved with. Because the project — which was not under my leadership but was rather under the leadership of my boss — didn't advance as much as it could have in the past year due to my absence, my job evaluation would reflect that.

"I was stunned to find that I was being penalized for simply taking my approved time off. Luckily, there was a third person present in my evaluation, so I had a witness. Afterward I discussed the situation with her and ended up writing an addendum for my evaluation that clarified exactly what my boss had said during the meeting, and further stated that it was approved leave that had impacted the progress, not any unexplained absence on my part. I figured that anyone with half a brain could read between the lines there, but it wasn't an overt challenge to my boss. I was able to address the discriminatory comments in a low-key manner without undermining my position in the organization. I still work at the university, although under a different manager, and I feel like the incident didn't adversely affect me in my career — again, probably because I was able to handle it quietly during the review process and not make a big issue of it."