

Shared parental leave doesn't make financial or emotional sense, says researcher

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

When [shared parental leave](#) was introduced in 2015 in the UK, the then Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government described it as a "[radical](#)" policy, suitable for modern [lives and workplaces](#).

By allowing [parents](#) to share up to 50 weeks of leave in the first year of

their child's life, it was vaunted as a way to encourage fathers to bond with their babies and enable [mothers](#) to return to work sooner, helping to close the [gender pay gap](#).

Eight years on, it's hard to see shared [parental leave](#) as anything but a failure. We don't know exactly what proportion of parents have used it over these eight years, but the number is certainly extremely low.

Figures for [children born between May and September 2017](#) show that just 1% of eligible mothers and 5% of eligible fathers took shared parental leave: the discrepancy coming from mothers taking [maternity leave](#) and leftover leave being claimed as shared parental leave by fathers. [Other research has found](#) that just over 1% of eligible parents took shared parental leave in 2017-18. And that's not even 1% of all parents: some aren't eligible for the benefit anyway.

Unfortunately, there is little data on whether shared parental leave has been taken up by same-sex parents.

More responsibility

The primary caregiver in a child's first year tends to take on the bulk of parenting during that child's formative years—and this is usually the mother. Shared parental leave was intended to challenge this by giving the secondary caregiver, usually the father, the chance to take on more responsibility from the beginning.

Research has shown that this can work. Shared parenting gives fathers more opportunities to [bond](#) with their babies which then [increases](#) their involvement in childcare as the child gets older.

But the way the policy was designed in the UK has left shared parental leave with plenty of downsides too. It requires mothers give up some of

their maternity leave, which means they have less maternity leave overall.

The pay you receive (shared parental pay) is also a disadvantage. The first six weeks of maternity pay is 90% of the mother's average earnings. Shared parental pay is [paid at a statutory rate](#), currently less than half of [the living wage](#) (or 90% of the mother's salary if it's lower than this rate). This means that there's no financial incentive for the mother to transfer her maternity leave within these first weeks.

And if the father or secondary partner earns more than the mother (often referred to as the "[partner pay gap](#)" and the norm within the UK and other European countries), the [financial costs](#) of giving up that wage during shared parental leave are often insurmountable. This also true for couples where one partner is self-employed. Self-employed workers are [not eligible](#) for shared parental leave (or statutory paternity leave).

My [research](#) with parents of babies born in 2020 found that the financial implications and complexity of the policy discourages parents from using shared parental leave.

Parents' wishes

But the problem with the policy goes deeper than this. The UK's shared parental leave fails to take into account parents' desires to spend as much time as possible with their children, especially in the early years. It was designed without considering how beliefs about who provides the "best parenting" can shape parental decisions. Mothers [are reluctant](#) to [sacrifice their time](#) with their child by sharing [their parental leave](#).

The overarching aim of shared parental leave was focused more on [helping the economy](#)—by keeping people in work or encouraging people to return to work—rather than on allowing parents to care for their child

at home for as long as they wish.

Despite its imperfections, shared parental leave does provide families with some options that can be positive for both parents. But to really change societal dynamics around childcare and make caring responsibilities truly equal, we need policies that support children and parents and enable them to make the choices that work best for their families.

A good start would be to learn from places that have much higher rates of parental leave take-up, particularly where men take longer leave. These include [Sweden](#) and Quebec in [Canada](#). The key to these and other successes has been individual entitlement. This means giving fathers and secondary caregivers an independent right to well-paid leave.

If the government truly want to give children [the best start in life](#), it should to reconsider how we support parents. Their ability to spend time with their children should not be linked to their value as a worker or their contribution to the economy.

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