

'It makes me rethink if I want to have more children'

Ricardo struggled to take more than two weeks' paternity leave when his children were born



Ricardo Gomes is a 32-year-old father of two young children, living in Dunstable. He had to use sick leave after his children were born because his NHS employers wouldn't accommodate for his requested leave. He explains here about how the difficult process of getting more than two weeks of leave after the births of his children has made him think twice about having any more.

I have always wanted to be a present dad, so when my wife became pregnant with our first child in 2020, I started researching what leave I was entitled to. Disappointingly, I found out that as a nurse in the UK, dads are only entitled to two weeks of paternity leave with statutory paternity pay. I knew this would not be enough for my family.

My wife and I moved from Portugal to the UK in 2009 for work and have no family support to help with our children. I needed to be home for more than two weeks to support my wife and bond with our children.

In preparation for the birth of our first child, I asked my manager if I could have two weeks of paternity leave, followed by four weeks of annual leave and two weeks of unpaid leave. I really wanted to enjoy our first baby. I was also anxious about working in a hospital in the middle of the Covid pandemic and bringing home the virus to our newborn.

Although my request for paternity leave was granted, the rest of the time I had requested was denied as she said part of the annual leave I had requested had already been taken and that she wouldn't give me unpaid leave at her discretion. It made me angry and frustrated, like I was fighting against her and the whole system. All I wanted was a few extra weeks with my child.

In the end, I managed to have two weeks of paternity leave, followed by two weeks of annual leave, followed by two weeks of sick leave, followed by two more weeks of annual leave. I was paid 90% of my average weekly earnings during paternity pay, full pay during my annual leave, and statutory sick pay when I took sick leave.

Two years later, when we found out we were expecting our second child, I was hopeful my new manager would grant me my request for extended time off. But it was even harder to settle on what I'd have off.

My manager initially rejected the two weeks paternity leave request, saying she couldn't allow me the leave as we didn't know exactly when the baby would be born. She clearly didn't understand that a plan for paternity leave can be put in place based on the baby's due date, then changed depending on the baby's actual birth date. It verified for me what I already thought to be true – managers often don't know policies regarding paternity leave.

I went to Human Resources, who easily signed off for my paternity leave and pay. But when I requested three extra weeks of annual leave, I was told I could only have the last two because other staff had already requested the first one. Instead, I ended up using sick leave because I was not able to physically work 12 hour shifts due to sleep deprivation - it was not safe for my patients. I also asked for a flexible working pattern

for eight weeks, so I could leave at 4pm to help my wife during dinner, bath, and bed-times. This too was denied, and we do not know yet the extent of this decision to both me and my wife's mental health, as we are trying to survive day by day.

My family needed me, and my work wasn't willing to accommodate us any help in the most vulnerable season of our lives.

While off with my two children, colleagues would often ask me why I wasn't working and earning money for my family. By taking paternity leave, annual leave and sick leave, I was foregoing full pay and extra pay from working nights, weekends or bank shifts. People didn't seem to understand how important it is for a family – the dad, mum, and child – to have ample time off when a baby is born.

Although our finances were not severely strained in the early weeks after bringing our babies home, when my wife's maternity pay stopped at nine months, it would have been amazing if I could have had available paid time off to have the children and support her to both get back into work and bring in extra money through bank shifts.

Having to fight with my employer for time off to support my wife and connect with my children was exhausting. There is so much bureaucracy around it. It made me feel anxious, unsupported, and dismissed. Rather than feeling like a person or worker, I felt like a number. After going through it, it makes me rethink if I want to have more children. I don't want to go through the same process again and again.