

‘When I walked into the room his little face would light up’

James was one of the lucky ones – he was able to take four weeks’ paternity leave, paid at 100% of salary



James Taverner, 42, lives in Colchester, Essex. He was working as a social worker for the local authority when he and his partner found out they were expecting their first child. He was entitled to four weeks of fully paid paternity leave, and says this gave space for bonding as a family.

When I started looking into the leave I would get when my son was born, I read an article that Suffolk County Council had increased its paternity leave to four weeks. It wasn't information I knew when taking the job, but something I had stumbled on when searching on the internet.

I went about trying to find the right forms to fill out to access the time off, going into the depths of the council to find people from HR to connect with. Right up until the birth was imminent, my manager hadn't properly prepared all the paperwork. She was much more familiar handling maternity leave and pay, rather than paternity leave and pay. In the end, I had the full four weeks off, paid 100% of my salary the entire time.

During those four weeks, I connected with my son in a way I wouldn't have been able to if I had been worried about work or money. He knew me so well. When I walked into the room, his little face would light up. Although my partner was breastfeeding, I was able to help with some of the night-time bottle feeds. I loved sitting with him feeding, looking into his eyes staring so intently back into mine. He'd often fall asleep on my chest, rising and falling with each breath I took. He knew my smell, knew my voice.

Because I was around him so much, I knew exactly what he needed when he cried. Whether it was a feed, a nappy change, or a change of scenery. We often played him music in pregnancy and did the same when he was first born. I loved getting to see his first smile.

My partner had carried our boy for nine months on her own, and I loved the ability to finally be able to help, to make things easier for her. Instead of her figuring out how to be a parent alone, we worked at it together, often discussing his likes, dislikes, and needs while he napped. We worked as a team.

Since I was being paid my full salary while off, I could just switch off that part of my brain and enjoy my son and support my partner. It was four weeks I will never get back and I'm so glad I was able to have them. As a social worker, I see every single day how important it is for fathers to be involved in the lives of their children. This was one of the reasons I decided to quit working as a social worker. I'd been thinking about it prior to our son's birth and had interviewed for and been offered a position at a school before taking paternity leave.

My social work job just wasn't going to give me the flexibility I wanted and needed to be the type of father than I had envisioned. I didn't want to be the dad that left before the baby woke and arrived home after he'd gone to sleep. When I told my manager I'd be resigning, he was happy for me to continue with my paternity leave and pay.

Although I'm happy with my decision, which has meant I leave school every day at 3:00pm, I've taken a £10,000 pay cut in the process, and my partner will return to work early from her maternity leave. I really hope that in the future, fathers will have the leave, pay, and workplace flexibility in jobs to support their partners and children.