

Today's dads want to be involved parents, but paid paternity leave is uncommon



By SUZANNE CASSIDY | Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, June 15, 2014 8:00 am

When Paul Renfro's second child was born earlier this year, he used vacation time to take two weeks off from his job as a technical support analyst at Lancaster General Health.

The father of two said he couldn't imagine doing otherwise.

"It's not so much the baby you just had as the one you already had," he said, noting that his 2-year-old daughter needed some attention as the family welcomed their baby son.

And with two kids, he said, "It's all hands on deck."

Most of the dads celebrating Father's Day today expect to be involved in the care of their children.

But they're still not likely to get an assist from their employers in the form of paid paternity leave.

Just 14 percent of employers offer that benefit, according to a 2014 national study by the Families and Work Institute.

"Men both want to be, and are, more involved in the lives of their children," said Ellen Galinsky, the institute's president, in a phone interview. "It seems to me the (U.S.) workplace is not aligned with the workforce."

Employers, she said, are "out of synch with what's going on in the lives of men, especially younger men."

Major league debate

When New York Mets second baseman Daniel Murphy took time off to be at the birth of his first child, he did so knowing that his Major League Baseball contract allowed him to take up to three days' paternity leave.

Murphy missed the first two games of this season. And all hell broke loose on New York radio.

WFAN radio host Mike Francesa derided paternity leave as a "scam and a half."

"You see the birth, and you get back," Francesa said. "What do you do in the first couple days? Maybe you take care of the other kids. Well, you gotta have someone to do that if you're a Major League Baseball player."

Former NFL quarterback Boomer Esiason weighed in, too. “Quite frankly, I would’ve said, ‘C-section before the season starts. I need to be at opening day.’”

Esiason later apologized.

Backlash points to cultural change

Vincent DiCaro, spokesman for the National Fatherhood Initiative, said those comments don’t “seem like the sort of thing that people say out loud anymore even if they’re thinking it.”

He said the backlash that met those comments was an indication that the “vast majority of the public” believes fathers play an essential role from the earliest moments of their children’s lives.

Last week, Daniel Murphy spoke at a White House forum on working fathers.

According to media reports, Murphy said that when his son asks him about the day he was born, instead of replying that he slammed a Stephen Strasburg breaking ball into the right-field corner, he can tell his son he cut the umbilical cord.

Said Murphy: “Long after they tell me that I’m not good enough to play professional baseball anymore, I’ll be a father. And I’ll be a husband.”

The research

DiCaro said the National Fatherhood Initiative — which was founded by East Hempfield resident and former White House aide Don Eberly — is a paternity leave proponent.

“I don’t think we are there yet as a culture to mandate paid leave for all employers,” DiCaro said, “although we did support a bill that would have provided paid leave to all federal government employees.”

That legislation has been introduced repeatedly, but has been opposed by Republicans who say it would be too costly.

Research has shown, DiCaro said, that if fathers are involved in the first days of their children’s lives, they are “much more likely to bond ... and to stay involved in the long term.”

Research also indicates that when companies offer benefits that promote work-life balance, employees are more productive and loyal, DiCaro said.

‘A very special time’

An email blast issued by the Lancaster Chapter of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) yielded responses from several companies that offer paid paternity leave.

Harland Clarke Holdings Corp., which has its Scantron printing plant in West Hempfield Township, offers new dads one week of paid leave.

So, too, does Harrington Hoists Inc., a hoist manufacturer in Manheim.

“It is something we wanted to do for our male employees who have a new baby, to include adoption, and it has been very well-received,” said Lyn Geib, Harrington’s human resources and benefits manager.

Drew Schoenberger, an engineering manager at Harrington, took paternity leave in July 2012 when his daughter was born.

He said he appreciated “the opportunity to get my wife and baby home and get the house prepared for the new one.”

“It’s a very special time for any parent to have the opportunity to be around and enjoy that. It’s a great thing.”

Advanced Cooling Technologies Inc., a manufacturer of thermal management products in Manheim Township, gives new dads three paid days off after the birth or adoption of a child.

Andy Huber is an aerospace welder with ACT, and the father of a 13-year-old and a 7-month-old.

He wasn’t with ACT when his first daughter was born.

She was born on a Friday — that was “the only reason I had three days off,” he recalled.

“I was expected to be at work Monday morning, bright and early.”

Huber said that as a welder, he has worked in some “roughneck” environments.

“I meddle with fire for a living,” he quipped. “There tends to be more machismo.”

The culture at ACT is different: He said he never feels “guilted” into working when he needs to be home.

In November, when his younger daughter was born, Huber gratefully took his three-day paid leave, and then was allowed to use vacation days to take an additional week.

When his wife was hospitalized with mastitis, “it was literally like, ‘How many days do you need?’ ... Just give us a call, keep us updated.”

“This company is very supportive,” Huber said, of ACT. “It’s one of the reasons I love working here.”

Matt Flannery, a research and development chemist at ACT and father of two, took paternity leave when his daughter was born 10 months ago.

He said he feels fortunate to work for a company that offers paid paternity leave.

“Both parents have important roles to play in the family,” Flannery said. “It is important for both mom and dad to assume the responsibilities of caring for a new addition to the family.

“Paternity leave gives dads the ability to focus on those responsibilities, enjoy those precious moments with their new addition, and start a life-lasting bond.”

Jared Montgomery, a product development engineer at ACT, took paternity leave following the births of both of his kids, who are now 1 and 3.

He said it “was very important to me to be able to take the time away from my career to develop a bond with my children in the early stages of their lives.”

Some dads use FMLA

Other respondents to the SHRM email blast said their companies allow new dads to use vacation or paid time off days, or, if they’re eligible, to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave through the Family and Medical Leave Act.

FMLA applies only to companies with 50 or more employees in at least 20 work weeks of the calendar year.

Lancaster Newspapers Inc. is among the companies that do not offer paid paternity leave. New dads who want to take time off may use vacation time or take unpaid time through FMLA.

Kathy Lynn Horne, benefits administrator for Smilebuilderz in Lancaster, said that dental practice has “had a number of new dads apply for (personal or FMLA) leave to stay home with their new arrivals, but not usually more than a week or two.”

She said she can’t recall a new dad ever asking for the 12 weeks allowed by FMLA.

“Some of that may be cultural,” Horne noted. “In our society, the duty of child care is still primarily seen as a woman’s responsibility, and the man is the breadwinner. Happily, I think the trend is moving away from that, but it’s still fairly deeply ingrained.”

Unpaid leave a hardship

A recent survey by Boston College’s Center for Work & Family found — not surprisingly — that “fathers were more likely to take time off when it was paid.”

“Who can take time off without pay? Seriously,” LGH employee Paul Renfro said.

When a baby just has been born, even if you have good health insurance, there are co-pays that need to be covered, he said. “A lot of money just gets spent pretty fast.”

When it comes to taking leave, there are other considerations, too.

Galinsky, of the Families and Work Institute, said two in five employees surveyed by her nonprofit research organization “felt there would be some jeopardy” in using the workplace flexibility offered to them.

After the Great Recession, companies are leaner than ever.

“Work is becoming more demanding and there are fewer people to do it,” Galinsky said. “I think companies are trying to do more with less, so they want people there.”

Supportive coworkers

Paul Renfro said his LGH coworkers were supportive of his desire to take time off after his daughter was born.

The hospital “tends to lean more female, so I think there’s a lot more support here for that kind of stuff,” he said.

Even beyond the hospital setting, he said, “People are starting to evolve. It’s not just the woman being the caregiver. I may not be able to do everything (my wife) can do, but I can support her.”

He said the more invested you are in your child, the better the outcomes, Renfro said. “It’s better for everybody.”

Keith Renner is a pharmacist who works for LGH’s information services department. His wife is due to deliver a baby girl in July.

He is planning to take three weeks of the five and a half weeks of paid vacation he has accrued.

Taking the time off is a priority for him. He said he wants to bond with his new child and be able to give his wife “a little bit of a break.”

He said he has two teenage stepchildren, whom he’ll be ferrying around, too, while his wife is recuperating.

He said he “absolutely” would like it if paid paternity leave was an option.

“I guess it’s got to be a culture change, but what’s going to kick that off, I don’t know.”