



## **FAMILIES NEED FATHERS**

### **Reform Report: Productive Parents *an FNF Response***

This report deals with the subject of parental leave, discusses the problems created by the current system and proposes solutions to these problems. The chapters 'The invisible father' and 'Parent pay' are very relevant to FNF and support our policy aims surrounding paternity leave.

In the first chapter, under the subheading 'The current system is not fit for purpose' Reform points to several areas in which the parental leave system falls short, saying that 'Britain's system is one of the most old-fashioned in the developed world'. Questions should be asked, it says, about the purpose of the policies proposed to reform the parental leave system. In particular: "Do they support families and encourage fairness between mothers and fathers?

Do they support maternal and child health and well-being through enabling new mothers to recover from childbirth, breastfeeding and provide one-on-one care?

Do they enhance productivity and skill retention through enabling parents to participate in and keep in touch with the workplace?

Do the significant government funds for which they account represent value for taxpayer's money?

Do they minimise unnecessary costs and bureaucracy for employers?"

The report then takes us through the various different reforms to the parental leave system and why none of these reforms are suitable. This list includes the report by Professor Peter Saunders 'Reforming the UK Family Tax and Benefit System', 'Working Better' by the Equality and Human Rights Commission and planned government reforms of the system.

Its main criticism of all of these proposed reforms is that they increase funding while ignoring fundamental flaws in the system. Its next two headlines 'More spending is not the solution' and 'A problem of underperformance not underfunding' continue this theme, pointing out that 'In 2005 spending on family benefits as a proportion of GDP was the third highest in the OECD'.

The next section of the report deals with the discrepancy between the money received by poor parents when on leave and that received by wealthy parents.

### **'The invisible father':**

The report says that 'On average 70 per cent of women of working age are employed. For 35 to 50 year olds the proportion is even higher at 77 per cent...Almost 70 per cent of mothers work through pregnancy...' This, the report argues, shows a determination by women to have a career, and continue with it whilst pregnant.

It goes on to say "Despite these cultural shifts and economic changes Britain's system of parental leave continues to reflect traditional gender roles and severely undermines the ability of working mothers to remain attached to the work place and continue their careers."

This section argues that the maternity and paternity leave system exacerbates the problems caused by 'absent' fathers and undermines the attempts by mothers (and women generally) to be taken more seriously in the work place. There is also virtually no support for fathers when it comes to child rearing and they are still very much seen as the breadwinners:

"British parental leave still encourages families to adopt a traditional division of responsibilities." Britain has among the highest level of maternity leave and the lowest level of paternity leave of all the countries in Europe. In the UK mothers are entitled to 39 weeks of statutory maternity pay, and it is proposed to increase this to 52 weeks funded leave in 2010. The UK is also unusual in not providing paid family leave – which in the majority of OECD countries is more generous than the total of maternity and paternity leave'

FNF supports the notion of family leave over maternity and paternity leave as a gender neutral way to move forward. This allows either parent to take time out to look after the child. This makes it flexible and easier for the couple involved and doesn't re-enforce outdated gender stereotypes.

In the UK fathers are only eligible for two weeks paternity leave within eight weeks of the baby's birth. The government had plans in 2006 to introduce a 26 week paternity leave programme but this has yet to be implemented.

The report goes on to say "consequently, policies that were aimed to assist mothers to continue employment have forced parents into compromises. Despite attitudes shifting away from 'traditional' expectations about the roles of mothers and fathers, the British system has entrenched the assumption that only mothers bring up children."

This criticism of the UK's parental leave system is very much in line with FNF's aims and objectives. Not only has the current system fallen well behind

society's changing view of parental roles, it is actually hindering a progressive view of parenting.

Under a new heading '**Lack of involvement of fathers**' the report attacks current policy, saying there is too much financial disincentive for fathers to take paternity leave, despite the Government attempting to tackle the problem of absent fathers.

It has several main points:

- Fathers are "constrained in taking time off work to assist with childcare", with only 55 percent of fathers taking their 2 weeks parental leave, a third not taking it at all and 10 per cent unaware they were entitled to any".
- This is not because fathers do not want to spend more time with their children: half of fathers think they spend too much time at work, and 88 per cent of those who did not take paternity leave wish they had done."
- If fathers do not take an active role in a child's life, the child suffers. "Participating in childcare and forming a connection with the child in the first year is crucial for continued involvement and the child's intellectual and emotional development."
- "The promotion of active fatherhood is crucial for removing obstacles that prevent women from achieving their full potential at work".

The report moves on to issues surrounding women in the workplace, arguing that the emphasis on maternity leave over joint parenting arrangements "has a significant influence on the position of women in the workplace." Women are more likely to take part time work and employers are more likely to accept a request for flexible hours from women over men. The report also argues that the current system of maternity leave may discourage employers from offering women jobs, and firms (especially smaller ones) keep women's wages low to cover the cost of maternity pay.

This leads into its assertion that 'policies have exacerbated the pay gap'. Official statistics show, that in 2008 the average hourly wage was 12.8 per cent higher for men than women. The maternity leave system does not just affect women with children as "this pay gap affects all women – not just mothers. Employers often treat all women of child bearing age as potential mothers."

The report goes on to reinforce its argument by pointing to the tax credit system, which it says encourages mothers to stay at home. However it points out that working can in fact benefit new mothers, 'there is also strong evidence to suggest that undertaking employment after pregnancy minimises the risk of depression among mothers'.

The next section of the report deals with the flexibility of the parental leave system and its effect on productivity. This section does not seem particularly relevant to FNF.

In the final section '**Parental Pay**' Reform advocates several very important changes:

- “Change current maternity pay to parental pay – so that it can be used for a father as well as a mother”.
- Abolish the salary related element of maternity pay and instead pay it at a flat rate for all parents.
- Stop making the pay dependent to take time off work.

The report strongly advocates a position that maternity leave policies have affected women's chances in the work place. This idea stretches further than just parental leave: giving both parents an equal role within family life, whether the parents are still together or not. Consequently 'traditional' gender stereotypes would break down and be beneficial to both men and women in a wide range of different areas.

FNF are very supportive of this report, which underlines our aims and objectives. A father's equal involvement right from the beginning of a child's life means shared parenting from the outset. A gender neutral parental leave system paves the way for shared parenting throughout the child's life.