

Baby leave for dads

All the research indicates involvement of fathers can make a significant difference to the lives of their children. Baby leave for dads needs to be a key ingredient in 21st century family policy, says Katrina Allen

Today's working fathers increasingly want to spend more time caring for their children.

This is true of many non-resident as well as resident fathers. Parenting is becoming a shared role with responsibilities negotiated and allocated interchangeably between parents: activities such as sports, reading stories and helping with homework have long been a key part of dads' roles. Now, many dads would like to play a bigger role during those important first months and years of their children's lives.

Greater involvement is potentially hugely rewarding for dads and of benefit to the whole family. Research demonstrates that father engagement has a substantial influence on the emotional, social and educational development of children: yet in practice, many dads do not take even the minimal 2 weeks paid paternity leave (current rate: £123.06 per week) to which they are entitled. This is attributed to economic factors and fears about damaging their career prospects. Higher income dads with relatively secure jobs tend to be most able to take paternity leave. Many dads take annual leave in place of paternity leave to maintain their income.

The current UK model of lengthy maternity leave combined with short paternity leave is increasingly divorced from the realities of parenting and family life in Scotland. Plans to introduce 'additional' paternity leave are scheduled to come into effect from April 2011, with new fathers allowed to take up to 6 months, transferred from the mother's 12-month entitlement: in theory, allowing parents greater choice about how much leave each takes. However, additional paternity leave will only be paid for time taken during the mother's paid period – currently 39 weeks. Parallel proposals to extend statutory maternity pay from 39 weeks to the full 12 months have been postponed indefinitely.

While this addition to paternity leave is certainly progress, it is unlikely to transform family life for the majority. In practice take up is expected to remain low. This is partly due to the cultural and workplace pressures that already inhibit many fathers from taking their current paternity leave entitlement. The failure to provide paternity pay for the full 12-month leave period will act as a further disincentive. The British Chambers of Commerce and the Institute of Directors are among business lobbyists who have spoken out against any attempt to increase leave entitlements. The Westminster government acknowledges the scheme in its current form is intended to "minimise" the negative impact on companies, but what about maximising the positive impact upon children?

In the UK, the debate has been dominated by economic arguments. Paternity/parental leave has been framed as a luxury rather than a core component of family policy and gender equality. Yet greater involvement of dads fits well with the Early Years Framework focus upon prevention, early intervention

strategies and support of positive parenting.

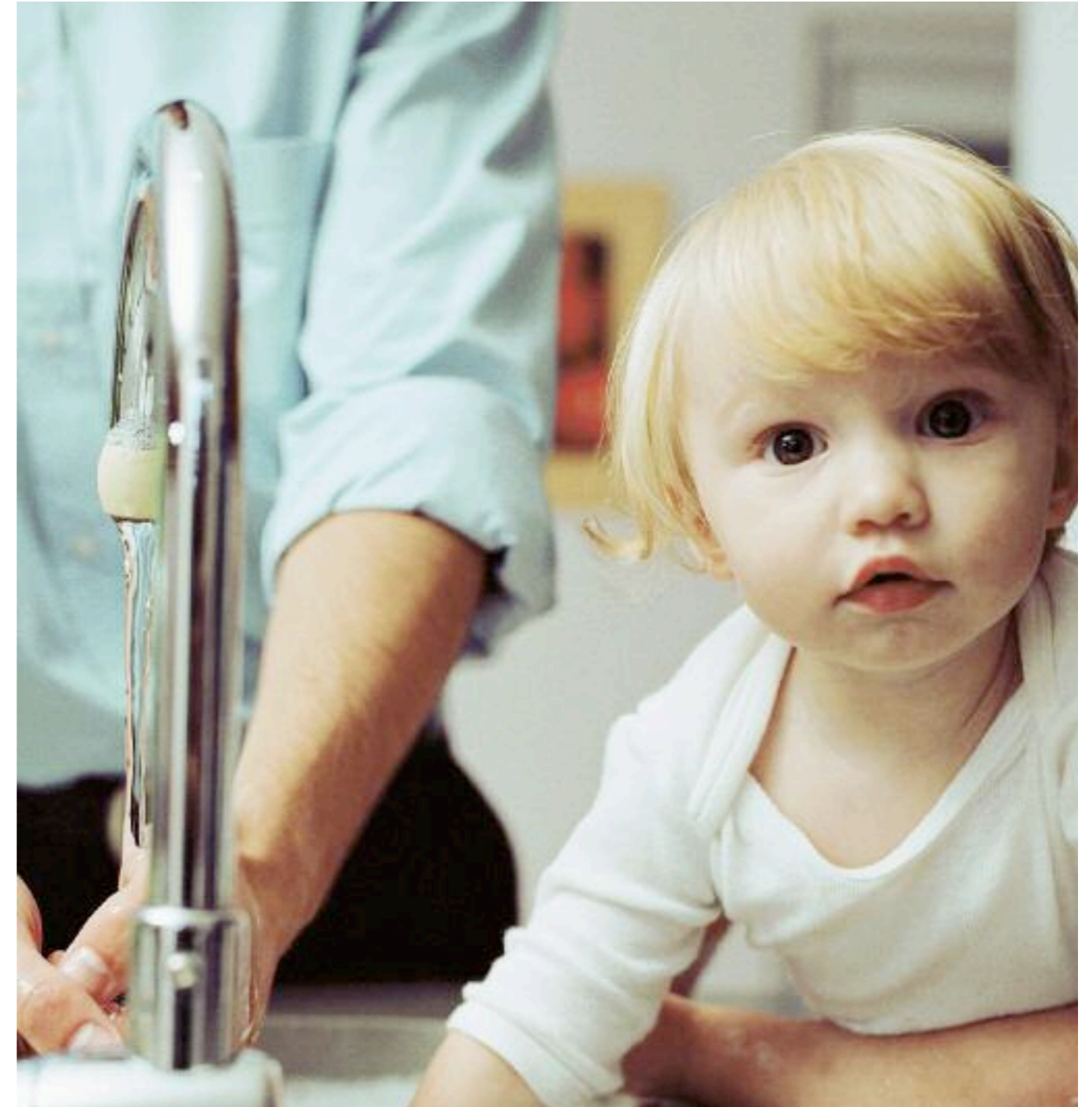
In contrast, Nordic countries are renowned for their more social value driven approach to parental and paternal leave. A key lesson from Norway, Sweden and Iceland is that individual, non-transferable fathers' leave entitlements are widely taken up, so long as these are sufficiently remunerated. Iceland in particular stands out for the speed and extent of the changes introduced. In 2000, Iceland abolished its separate maternity/paternity leave provisions, introducing instead a single system of parental leave. This is composed of a mother's quota and a father's quota, each of 3 months and non-transferable. In addition, a further 3 months can be taken by either parent or divided between them. The full 9 months of parental leave is paid at a generous rate and the majority of new fathers in Iceland now take leave.

The Nordic 'use it or lose it' approach to fathers' quotas provides an incentive for the majority of fathers to take leave. In turn, the uptake of paternity leave is contributing to cultural change around fathering roles and broader gender equality. In fact, in Iceland, the fast-track changes were introduced to improve gender equality and in response to court rulings on the illegality of discrimination between men and women in parental leave.

To what extent should we take collective responsibility for promoting and supporting a universal work-family life balance? At one level, the debate is about extending and promoting the rights of individual parents and children. However, it is also concerned with improving the balance across society. The boundaries of traditional male and female roles are breaking down across all areas of life. Gender equality prompts us to reassess the value we attach to different activities, including caring for children.

Another interesting international example is provided by the province of Québec. Québec is the only Canadian province to have developed a comprehensive family policy, which encompasses children's wellbeing, universal childcare, women's employment, gender equality and the promotion of a more active role for fathers in childrearing. As in the UK, many aspects of social policymaking in Canada are devolved. Québec established the right to develop its own leave benefit programme in 2006 following a legal battle with the federal government and now has greater flexibility and higher pay rates for parental leave than the rest of Canada. Québec has also introduced 5 weeks paternity leave, in contrast to the rest of Canada, which has none. Québec's priority was to develop coherent family policy around parental leave and childcare provision, driven by strong civil society actors who stimulated public debate and kept childcare and leave high on the political agenda.

Can lessons be applied in Scotland from these examples? In the UK, parental and paternity leave provisions currently fall within



Westminster's jurisdiction. However, it is worth considering whether Scotland might benefit from seeking greater freedom or influence in this area. This would enable the Scottish government to bring together childcare provision and parental/paternity leave policies under a single coherent framework, together with child wellbeing and development strategies. The 'Support for All: the Families and Relationships Green Paper' released in January by the Department for Children, Schools and Families, encompasses a wide range of family policies across reserved and devolved power divides and has a lot to recommend it. Frustratingly, the devolved policies and examples documented (for example around education and childcare provision) are England focused, rendering the document of limited value in a Scottish context.

Both working fathers and mothers need the opportunity to bond with their babies, engage with support services

and give quality time and energy to their children, to ensure children have the best start in life. Parental leave entitlements have an important role to play in shaping the society we live in and need to be linked to broader policy goals and objectives. They also ought to reflect our social values in Scotland today, which we all have a role in shaping.

After all, parents are doing something more than raising the next generation of worker ants – aren't they?

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Information about the Children in Scotland project: 'Making the Gender Equality Duty Real for Children, Young People and their Fathers' is available online at www.makinggenderequalityreal.org.uk