

**Written evidence from Fiona Woollard, Professor of Philosophy, University of Southampton, Alexandra Kent, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, Keele University
Serena Williams, Founder, bump & glide Ltd, Maternity Mentoring Company
[SPL0017]**

Summary

1. The MaMeT (Maternity Mentoring Toolkit) project brings together three experts: a specialist in the philosophy of pregnancy, birth, and early motherhood / parenthood; an academic with a focus on qualitative research methods in psychology and understanding infant feeding decisions; and the founder of a maternity mentoring company with more than seven years of experience supporting mothers before, during, and after maternity leave. We draw on our shared expertise as well as the data produced in the project to produce the following evidence that is relevant to this inquiry.
2. We draw attention to three key assumptions that interact to undermine uptake of Shared Parental Leave.
 - a. The assumption that childcare is primarily a mother's responsibility.
 - b. Fear that taking parental leave will have a negative impact on a parent's career.
 - c. The idea that parental leave is a burden to employers and respect for parental leave, especially for fathers, is a favour and not a right.
3. These shared assumptions can lead parents to reason that, given the negative impact that leave has on a parent's career, it makes sense to restrict that impact to one person – and for that one person to be the mother.
4. The design and communication of the Shared Parental Leave scheme may inadvertently confirm views that childcare is primarily a mother's responsibility and that fathers do not have a right to parental leave by framing the leave as something that belongs to the mother by default.
5. Our own data shows that there is justification for parents' fears that taking parental leave may have a negative impact on a parents' career.
6. We recommend that fathers and non-gestational parents should be entitled to a substantial period of leave in their own right, rather than receive a transfer of leave from the mother. We would, however, strongly recommend that this action should not lead to a reduction in maternity leave, given that short maternity leave may make women leave the workforce or avoid having children (Keck and Saraceno 2013).
7. We also provide steps that employers can take to mitigate the potential negative impact of parental leave on a parent's career and recommend that policymakers should introduce guidelines to encourage employers to take these steps.

Why we are submitting evidence

8. Maternity Mentoring Toolkit: Accelerating Impact of Philosophical and Psychological Research to Improve Perinatal Employee Support and Communication (MaMeT) is a collaboration between researchers in philosophy and psychology and maternity mentoring

business [bump & glide](#). The project is funded by The University of Southampton's AHRC Impact Acceleration Account.

9. The project involved (a) knowledge exchange to enhance bump & glide's maternity mentoring toolkits and (b) field-testing of the enhanced toolkits through semi-structured interviews with new mothers.
10. The results of the project show that targeted maternity mentoring can help employees navigate the challenges of new parenthood and productively return to work at the end of maternity leave. They also provide insight into how employers can improve the wellbeing, resilience, and work-readiness of employees returning from maternity leave.

Question: Why has take up of statutory shared parental leave been low and what could be done to increase take up?

11. Parents make decisions about shared parental leave against a background of influential ideas about motherhood, including the assumption that mothers have the primary responsibility for caring for children (see e.g. Woollard 2016, Mullen 2005). The Shared Parental Leave Scheme is an extremely important step in resisting such assumptions, but it still operates within such assumptions.
12. We would like to draw attention to how this assumption interacts with two other key elements to undermine take-up of Shared Parental Leave:
 - a. Fear that taking parental leave will have a negative impact on a parent's career.
 - b. The idea that parental leave is a burden to employers and respect for parental leave, especially for fathers, is a favour and not a right.
13. Consider this quote from Riley, a male study participant in Twamley (2024)'s interviews with mixed-sex couples about how they navigated parental leave, explaining why he did not take shared parental leave.

"I would love to take some time off but again, it's a very tough decision to take, not least because Rita will have already taken time off, and as a woman, they [employers] have patience for you to take that time off. But that does impact your career. If we have another child, Rita will probably have to take off a couple of months, so somehow it makes sense that one of us stays more career-focused than the other one, who will be more child-focused. That sounds awful but ..." (Twamley 2024).

14. Riley's awareness that society still treats childcare as a mother's responsibility is reflected in his belief that employers have more 'patience' with women taking time off. We can see (an awareness of) assumptions about responsibility for childcare interacting with our other key elements: the fear that taking parental leave will have a negative impact on a parent's career. Riley reasons that, given the negative impact that leave has on a parent's career, it makes sense to restrict that impact to one person – and for that one person to be the mother. Moreover, Riley's description of employer's as 'patient' with mother's leave, frames employers' respect for parental leave, especially for fathers, as a favour and not a right.

15. The design and communication of the Shared Parental Leave scheme may inadvertently confirm views that childcare is primarily a mother's responsibility and that fathers do not have a right to parental leave. The 'maternal transfer' model frames the leave as something that belongs to the mother by default and that may be transferred to the father or non-gestational parent. Fathers are therefore presented as having neither a responsibility nor an entitlement in their own right to take time off work to care for their children.
16. Our own data shows that there is justification for parents' fears that taking parental leave may have a negative impact on a parents' career.

"All mothers [in the study] experienced some concern over the impact of maternity leave on their career progression, but some experienced significant job insecurity and negative consequences arising from organisational change during their leave" (Kent et al., 2025).
17. One participant spoke of being "vulnerable and isolated" and "almost entirely at the mercy of a line [manager]" who used maternity leave to "gate-keep my access to my colleagues, my engagement, my feeling part of a team, any professional development opportunities" (Kent et al, 2025).
18. Nonetheless, our data also shows that there are steps employers and policymakers can take to mitigate the impact of parental leave on a parent's career. Targeted support for employees, appropriate training for managers, processes designed to accommodate parents' needs, and policies that reduce parents' vulnerabilities, can improve the wellbeing, resilience, and work-readiness of employees returning from parental leave.

Recommendations

19. Fathers and non-gestational parents should be entitled to a substantial period of leave in their own right, rather than receive a transfer of leave from the mother. We would, however, strongly recommend that this should not lead to a reduction in maternity leave, given that short maternity leave may make women leave the workforce or avoid having children (Keck and Saraceno 2013).
20. Policymakers should introduce guidelines to encourage employers to take the following steps to mitigate the potential negative impact of parental leave on a parent's career:
 - a. Review processes to ensure that they recognise and respect the inflexibility of childcare arrangements and the need for parents to be able to set fixed boundaries to working hours.
 - b. Support staff in accessing effective specialist mentoring programmes during their transition to parenthood. This may be offered through an employee benefit scheme. Ideally, staff should be able to access repeated maternity mentoring sessions with the same mentor during pregnancy and after the return to work and the programme should give parents the resources to extend the mentoring process into their everyday lives, such as a mentee toolkit, summary emails from the mentor, suggestions for resources, readings to access, and pre-session activities (such as the mentoring programme bump & glide provides).

- c. Create and maintain up-to-date onboarding protocols for staff returning from extended periods of leave (including all informal changes of practice at a local level).
- d. Ensure that working roles are not changed – unless absolutely necessary – and that any changes are clearly communicated, through pre-agreed means of communication with the staff on leave.
- e. Broaden lines of communication and connection with staff on parental leave to include staff outside line management. Include a named person that employees on parental leave can communicate with, in addition to their line manager.
- f. Provide appropriate training and resources for line managers to ensure that they understand best practice. This process may include training as part of the initial line manager development training, and/or online training that can be activated at point of need.

January 2025

References

- Keck, W. and Saraceno Ch. (2013), The impact of different social-policy frameworks on social inequalities among women in the European Union: the labour-market participation of mothers *Soc. Polit.* 20 (3) 297-328
- Kent, A. Tumilty A. Williams, S. and Woollard, F. (2025) Maternity Mentoring Toolkit: Accelerating Impact of Philosophical and Psychological Research to Improve Perinatal Employee Support and Communication (MaMeT): Final Report. University of Southampton.
- Mullin, A. (2005) *Reconceiving pregnancy and childcare: ethics, experience, and reproductive labor*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Twamley, K. (2024) *Caring is Sharing? Couples navigating parental leave at the transition to parenthood*. UCL Press: London, UK.
- Woollard, F. (2016) Motherhood and Mistakes about Defeasible Duties to Benefit. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 97,126-147