Self-employed Dads need real paternity rights too

I spent Father’s Day this year with my Dad and my young son reflecting on parenthood. Dad is retired now but he has had a wide range of different jobs over the years, ranging from apprentice butcher, haulier, working on the roads constructing Spaghetti Junction and buying animal feed. The jobs may still be similar to now, but the responsibilities and opportunities for working dads has changed a great deal.

Statutory paid paternity leave didn’t exist when I was born. A lot of people now, as then, simply can’t afford to take unpaid leave. Dad was soon back to work and he expected my Mum to feed and care for my infant self as well as ensure his clothes were clean and a meal ready on the table. Like a lot of men at that time he wasn’t a particularly ‘hands on’ Dad and viewed his contribution as working hard to provide the bulk income for the family. He insists he did change some nappies but I’d hazard a guess it was in the single digits!

Over the years parenting roles have become less divided and bringing up children is much more of a joint endeavour at home, although still lop-sided. More and more evidence shows that involving fathers in the early stage of childhood is good for the whole family, builds close emotional bonds and confidence in parenting skills. Paid parental leave and rights are a big step forward but the changing labour market is inhibiting recent progress.

Growing numbers of self-employed workers expose significant holes in our social security net. The TUC has calculated that almost 600,000 of the UK’s working fathers had a child in the last year but 131,000 did not quality for two weeks’ statutory pay. The biggest reason was self-employment which affected 99,000 dads and 32,000 missed out because they hadn’t been continuously employed long enough to qualify.

Given that one in five working men in the UK is now self-employed our social security system must reflect the new labour market. The TUC is calling for a number of sensible changes that would give all dads paternity pay and as a result that precious time with their new born children.

The government should introduce a paternity allowance for dads who currently miss out on statutory paternity pay. This would be similar to the maternity allowance which self-employed mothers and mothers who haven’t been with their employers long enough can claim. Secondly the TUC believes that employees should be entitled to statutory paternity leave from day one. This is just the same way that maternity leave is. Thirdly we believe paternity pay should be increased. It’s currently £139 a week and only just above half the rate of someone working minimum wage 35 hours a week.

Men, women and most of all children would benefit from paid parental leave being accessible to all. Too many who want it are missing out. It’s time we made this magical time a possibility for all dads regardless of their job.

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