

Shared Parental Leave: Another Perspective

IDAHOBIT 2022 (International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, & Transphobia) is coming up next week.

The Staff Pride Network are marking the date with an online event:

IDAHOBIT: Becoming and Being Gay Parents

Tues 17 May, 17:30 – 18:30 BST

Register to attend via Eventbrite / find out more

See below for a blog post from Nicola Osborne, Programme Manager in the Bayes Centre, with an important perspective of Shared Parental Leave.

This blog was originally posted by the Bulletin staff newsletter – see the original post [here](#).

Shared Parental Leave: Another Perspective

I was so pleased to see Shared Parental Leave highlighted in the last issue of Bulletin, and it was good to see men's mental health month as part of the Shared Parental Leave experience, but I was disappointed that there were other parents who take Shared Parental Leave missing from the piece.

Shared Parental Leave isn't just for fathers, it's for partners of any gender whose partners are expecting a baby, or who have a child coming into their lives through adoption. Parents who benefit from SPL include all kinds of people including queer, lesbian, gay, trans, and non-binary people, not just heterosexual men and not just families with two biological parents.

I'm one of those whose experience wasn't captured in that piece: I'm the non-birth mum of our wonderful three-and-a-half-year-old daughter Carys. I am listed on the birth certificate of my daughter, because although I'm not her birth mum, I am in a civil partnership with her birth mum and UK law recognises me as her legal parent. The University also recognises me as her legal parent and eligible to take SPL, something I am delighted I was able to do – taking over her full-time care when my partner Heather curtailed her maternity leave after six months.

Like all couples looking at SPL, it was a joint decision with lots of factors coming into play. We wanted to be equal parents in our daughter's life, we both wanted to have time to spend with her in those early months, and we looked at the practicalities of our respective employers' policies. For us, the decision was financially simple: the University had an SPL period of 16 weeks full pay, whilst my partner's employer offered statutory maternity pay (six weeks at 90per cent of pay then down to ~£145 per week). My partner did an amazing job of our daughter's first months, then after two weeks where we were off together, I took sole care of her until she started nursery at 10 months.

The world of parenting is often quite heteronormative – I remember cringing at NHS ante natal sessions at the highly gendered portrayal of roles and responsibilities. I rarely see representation of families that look like ours: our daughter has her two mums but also an extended family of people who care for her, whether their connection is biological or not. Making a non-traditional family takes time, planning and often complex communication and I think it is therefore not surprising that whilst I know many couples with children, my experience is that the queer families I know have all taken SPL under equitable terms.

When the University originally introduced and still when it talks about SPL and SPL experiences, a lot of that

communication focuses on 'fathers' not 'parents' and that has always felt excluding for me. I know that men (across the UK) have been notoriously poor at taking SPL – when negotiating the terms of my own SPL (in 2018) I learned that the uptake had been terrible (both in terms of number of people and number of weeks taken). At that time the SPL policies at the University were well intended but problematic in terms of the timeline in which partners could take their SPL – making it difficult for partners to take fully paid SPL as full-time carer of their child, which meant it was being treated by many as an extension of paternity leave, taken only whilst the 'lead' parent was also on leave. That policy was, thankfully, changed in time for me to take the fully paid SPL entitlement when my partner returned to work after six months. I'm extremely pleased that non-birth parents (of all varieties) are now taking advantage of the University's generous SPL policy more often, and enjoyed reading those experiences shared in Bulletin last time.

For me SPL was a wonderful and challenging time. I got to know and bond with my daughter intensely; I learned a lot about where my own parenting skills excel (memorising calming stories to recount at nappy changes) and where they are terrible (remaining calm in the face of crawling and climbing missteps). I particularly gained a new level of appreciation of just how amazing my partner had been in those first months and how hard that must have been whilst I was at work. I did also have a chance to step away from my day-to-day work – something that was both challenging and helpful for my own mental health, and which ultimately led to a change of role to my current (wonderful) job. It wasn't time off, but SPL was a rare opportunity to focus purely on being a parent for a while and I wouldn't have missed those months with my daughter for anything. I hope parents of all types remember that they have that same opportunity – fathers of course, but also all the other many diversities of parents eligible to take SPL to take care of their newly born or adopted children.