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Australian Government

Fair Work
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Best Practice Guide Parental leave

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Working at best practice

Best practice employers have in place parental leave policies that are practical, flexible and tailored to the specific circumstances of the business and its employees. Employers operating at best practice go beyond their minimum legal obligations and strive to implement initiatives that benefit their business as well as their employees.

The best parental leave policies benefit both employers and employees. They assist employees to manage their transition out of and back into work by providing clarity around entitlements and expectations. They also help employers ensure that valuable members of staff are attracted, retained and feel appreciated.

Best practice parental leave policies acknowledge the importance of an employee's parental and family responsibilities, and complement other family-friendly policies by helping employees to achieve genuine work-life balance. Best practice employers recognise that employees who feel valued and supported are more likely to remain attached to their workplace and be flexible and committed employees.

This Best Practice Guide explains:

- the advantages of having a best practice parental leave policy

- the benefits to employers of parental leave

- employees' entitlements to paid and unpaid parental leave

- what employers can do to make parental leave work for them and their employees

- how employers can assist a new parent whose partner is on parental leave

- implementing best practice return to work policies

- discrimination in relation to pregnancy and parental responsibilities.

Why work at best practice?

The benefits of a best practice parental leave policy and family-friendly, flexible working arrangements can be enjoyed at all workplaces. Businesses with flexible working arrangements, including good parental leave policies, can benefit from:

- lower staff turnover, resulting in lower recruitment and training costs
- recognition as an employer of choice
- improved employee satisfaction and commitment
- greater ability to attract new employees
- smoother transitions for employees between work and parental leave.

The Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) showcases a number of organisations that have implemented flexible working arrangements on its website: http://www.eowa.gov.au/Case_Studies.asp

What is parental leave?

Parental leave allows employees to take time away from work for the birth or adoption of a child. The term 'parental leave' encompasses several types of complementary entitlements, including:

- employer-funded paid parental leave, including paid maternity and paternity leave
- government-funded Parental Leave Pay
- unpaid parental leave
- adoption leave
- foster parent leave
- the right to return to work.

Workplace parental leave policies at individual workplaces may provide some or all of these entitlements. There are certain legal minimum entitlements that all workplaces must provide. More information on these entitlements is outlined later in this Guide.

Paid parental leave

Paid parental leave can include both employer-funded and government-funded parental leave schemes.

Employer-funded paid parental leave

Many employers currently provide paid parental leave to their employees. This may be through a contract of employment, enterprise agreement or a workplace policy.

The introduction of the Australian Government's Paid Parental Leave scheme is not intended to replace existing entitlements to employer-funded paid parental leave, and having an existing entitlement to employer-funded paid parental leave does not affect an employee's potential eligibility for the Australian Government's Paid Parental Leave scheme. If an employer currently provides paid parental leave through an industrial agreement, they cannot withdraw the entitlement for the life of the agreement.

Australian Government Paid Parental Leave scheme

The Paid Parental Leave scheme is a new entitlement for working parents of children born or adopted from 1 January 2011.

The Australian Government's scheme does not provide eligible employees with a new entitlement to leave. The scheme provides Government-funded Parental Leave Pay at the National Minimum Wage for a maximum period of 18 weeks. Parental Leave Pay can commence from the date of birth or adoption, or a later date. It must be taken in one continuous period and must all be used before 12 months from the date of birth or adoption. Parental Leave Pay is taxable and can be received before, after, or at the same time as existing entitlements such as annual leave and employer-funded paid parental leave.

From 1 July 2011, employers must provide government-funded Parental Leave Pay to an eligible employee who:

- has a child born or adopted from 1 July 2011

- will have been an employee for 12 months or more prior to the expected date of birth or adoption

- will be an employee for the period of their Parental Leave Pay

- is an Australian-based employee

- is expected to receive eight weeks or more of Parental Leave Pay.

If an employer is not required to provide Parental Leave Pay, they can still choose to provide it to an employee. Both the employer and employee must agree for this to happen.

To make sure they are ready to provide Parental Leave Pay to any eligible employee, employers can register for the Paid Parental Leave scheme through Centrelink Business Online Services.

The Family Assistance Office will provide Parental Leave Pay to an eligible parent who does not receive it from their employer. This includes parents who are contractors, self-employed or parents who are no longer employees, but who have still satisfied the Australian Government's Paid Parental Leave scheme's eligibility criteria.

For further information on the Australian Government's Paid Parental Leave scheme visit www.familyassist.gov.au

Unpaid parental leave under the National Employment Standards

Under the National Employment Standards (NES), employees (including long term casual employees) with 12 months or more of continuous service with an employer are entitled to take up to 12 months of unpaid parental leave from work, with the right to request an additional 12 months of unpaid parental leave, subject to some requirements under the *Fair Work Act 2009* (the FW Act).

The NES provides employees with a return-to-work guarantee, allowing them to return to the same position they held before they commenced their period of parental leave. If upon their return to work their pre-parental leave position no longer exists, the employee is able to be transferred to an available position which is nearest in status and pay to their pre-parental leave position, and for which they are suitably qualified.

These provisions are discussed in more detail in the *Parental leave and related entitlements and the National Employment Standards* fact sheet, which is available on the Fair Work Online website.

Best practice parental leave schemes

The positive impact of extended leave entitlements on the attraction and retention of staff has long been recognised. Policies should be tailored to the specific needs of the employer and employees in a particular workplace. Options available to best practice employers wishing to introduce a paid parental leave scheme include:

- extended periods of employer-funded paid leave

- 'topping up' an employee's pay during the period of Government-funded Parental Leave Pay to their full rate of pay

- continuing to pay an employee's superannuation contributions while on unpaid leave

- a return-to-work bonus, payable after an employee has returned to work following parental leave

- the option of taking paid leave at half pay

- non primary carer (usually paternity) leave provisions to be taken at the time of the birth or placement of a child

- allowing the non primary carer to access existing leave entitlements, including personal leave, for extended periods around the birth of a child

- allowing employees to purchase and repay longer periods of paid leave.

In consultation with their employer, employees can choose to organise their paid parental leave in a way which best meets their financial and caring needs. Subject to the terms of employer-funded paid leave policies, employees can elect to receive paid parental leave from both government-funded and employer-funded schemes consecutively or concurrently.

Keeping in touch with employees on parental leave

All best practice parental leave policies should include details about keeping in touch when an employee is on leave. Good communication arrangements can help an employee on leave feel attached to the workplace, their career and their colleagues. Some ideas to assist employers with keeping in touch with an employee on parental leave include:

- sitting down with an employee before they commence their period of leave to discuss key contacts, handovers of work or clients, important dates and milestones during the leave

- arranging a pre-determined time to get in touch with an employee on leave, so the employee's expectations and preferences concerning contact during parental leave can be considered and managed

- making sure a particular person in the workplace is given responsibility to forward important information about the workplace to the employee on leave, such as any important changes to the structure of the employee's workplace

- forwarding staff newsletters, updates and important emails to the employee's home email account where appropriate, or arranging for them to have remote access to their work email account where practicable

- inviting all employees on parental leave to attend any social events, planning days, training, or team building days which occur during their leave

- arranging a meeting with the employee when they are nearing the end of their leave to discuss the return-to-work expectations of the employee and the employer, such as hours of work, flexible working arrangements, or any adjustments that will need to be made to their role.

It is important to remember that an employee can choose whether they participate in any work-related activities while on a period of leave; it can not be a requirement for an employee on leave to attend work meetings or functions as a condition of their leave. If the employee does attend work during a period of leave, they need to be paid for any work-related activity performed at their usual rate of pay.

The Australian Government Paid Parental Leave scheme allows employees to keep in touch with their workplace for up to 10 days from the time they become the primary carer until the end of their Paid Parental Leave period without losing their entitlement. Similarly, the *Paid Parental Leave Act 2010* provides that where an employee and employer agree to a 'Keeping in Touch' day, the employee will continue to be eligible for the Paid Parental Leave scheme.

Under the FW Act, an employee taking unpaid parental leave from their employment must take the leave in a single continuous period. The Government is committed to introducing amendments to the FW Act to ensure that accessing a 'Keeping in Touch' day does not break an employee's continuous period of leave. Until that time, employers should advise employees whether accessing a 'Keeping in Touch' day under the Paid Parental Leave scheme will affect their entitlement to unpaid parental leave. Unpaid parental leave can be taken at the same time as other forms of paid leave (such as, employer-funded paid parental leave, government-funded Parental Leave Pay or paid annual leave).

Best practice example

Sheridan has been working for SJL Pty Ltd as a full-time logistics manager for 3 years. Sheridan is soon to have a baby and meets with her supervisor, Jess, to discuss her parental leave arrangements.

SJL Pty Ltd provides all ongoing employees with 14 weeks paid parental leave at full pay after 12 months of service, which is able to be taken at half pay over 28 weeks. Sheridan meets the government-funded Parental Leave Pay eligibility criteria, so can also choose to receive 18 weeks of government-funded Parental Leave Pay.

Sheridan wants to take 12 months off work and structure her leave to ensure she maintains a regular income throughout that period. She decides to take her employer-funded parental leave at half pay first, and then the 18 week government-funded Parental Leave Pay, which needs to be paid in a continuous 18 week period. Sheridan also has 4 weeks of annual leave accrued, which she negotiates with her employer to receive at half pay after she receives the Government-funded Parental Leave Pay.

Jess and Sheridan fill in SJL's leave request forms, and Sheridan applies to the Family Assistance Office for the government-funded Parental Leave Pay. Jess and Sheridan discuss hand-over arrangements for her work, and Jess provides Sheridan with an information pack containing the contact information and forms she will need to take with her on leave. Megan, Sheridan's co-worker, agrees to forward any important workplace bulletins to Sheridan's home email account while she is on leave. Jess and Sheridan book in a phone catch up 2 months after her due date to arrange a visit to the workplace with her baby.

Returning to work – flexible working arrangements

A successful parental leave policy should incorporate innovative and flexible arrangements that assist parents before, during and after a period of parental leave.

A best practice employer should facilitate flexible arrangements in their workplace for new fathers and mothers around the time a child is born. It is important to remember that an employee returning from parental leave is legally entitled to return to the same job they held prior to going on leave. If that job no longer exists, they are legally entitled to return to an available position for which they are qualified and suited, which is nearest in status and pay to their pre-parental leave position.

There are a number of things an employer and employee should consider to ensure a smooth transition back into work, including:

- ‘Keeping in Touch’ with the employee during the period of leave

- beginning discussions early about how the employee plans to manage their return to work and what their role will be

- speaking to the employee about any accommodations that the employer may be able to make at the workplace, e.g. access to a place for breastfeeding or expressing breastmilk; or flexible working arrangements during the early weeks for settling a young child into child care

- clearly communicating expectations around working hours and the taking of leave

- giving appropriate consideration to any requests the employee makes for flexible working arrangements, an obligation set out in the FW Act.

In addition to the paid leave options listed above, flexible, family-friendly working arrangements which a best practice employer may consider for employees returning from parental leave include:

- accessing annual leave in single day periods or part days

- taking time off in lieu of overtime payments

- working additional hours to make up for time taken off

- accessing accrued rostered days off in part days or more flexibly

- enabling children to access the workplace (where safe) or providing a carer’s room, child care facilities or information about where parents can access these facilities near their workplace

- working part-time or creating part-time work opportunities

- job share arrangements

- telecommuting or home-based work.

Employers need to ensure that they comply with legal obligations as prescribed by industrial instruments, awards and the FW Act.

The Fair Work Ombudsman’s *Work and Family Best Practice Guide*, available on the Fair Work Online website, provides more guidance on implementing workplace practices that encourage flexibility to support a balance between the family needs of employees while achieving positive outcomes for employers.

How to implement Best Practice

Employers who wish to implement a new parental leave policy should consider the following steps:

- consulting with employees and their representatives to get a sense of their needs and ideas

- seeking advice from an employer association or business advisor

- developing draft policies and consulting with employees and their representatives on its content

- considering an enterprise agreement to formalise the arrangements

- publicising the new policy, with a view to attracting a wider pool of potential new staff.

The Fair Work Ombudsman's *Consultation and Cooperation in the Workplace, Best Practice Guide*, available on the Fair Work Online website, provides guidance on developing and implementing effective consultation mechanisms which encourage cooperation and engagement between employees and employers.

Checklist for a Best Practice Parental Leave Policy

- ✓ Does the policy meet the minimum legislative requirements? Visit the Fair Work Online website for further information.

- ✓ Is the policy in writing, and do staff know their entitlements?

- ✓ Have I sought advice from my employer or employee association or other advisor?

- ✓ Does our policy meet the unique needs of our employees?

- ✓ Is there a mechanism for constant review of the policy to ensure its continued relevance?

- ✓ Can the policy be used to attract potential staff?

A note on discrimination

It is unlawful for an employer to take adverse action against an employee for reasons related to their pregnancy or their entitlement to parental leave. More information on discrimination and adverse action can be found on the Fair Work Online website, or by contacting the Fair Work Infoline on 13 13 94.

For more information

Fair Work Online

www.fairwork.gov.au

Fair Work Ombudsman

13 13 94

www.fairwork.gov.au

Fair Work Australia

1300 799 675

www.fwa.gov.au

Family Assistance Office

Parents 13 61 50

Employers 13 11 58

www.australia.gov.au/paidparentalleave

Acronyms used in this guide

FWA Fair Work Australia

FW Act *Fair Work Act 2009*

NES National Employment Standards

Disclaimer

Fair Work Ombudsman is committed to providing useful, reliable information to help you understand your rights and obligations under workplace laws. It is your responsibility to comply with workplace laws that apply to you.

The information contained in this publication is:

- general in nature and may not deal with all aspects of the law that are relevant to your specific situation; and
- not legal advice.

Therefore, you may wish to seek independent professional advice to ensure all the factors relevant to your circumstances have been properly considered. Produced Feb 2011. FWOBPG13

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