My Experience of Shared Parental Leave

“The balancing act of parenting young children while running a research group is a challenging undertaking and can leave even the most organised of people feeling they are not fulfilling any roles as well as they would like. As a longstanding member of the Athena Swan Self-Assessment Team, I have become acutely aware that this is a dilemma particularly faced by many female academics during maternity leave, and the recent 2015 introduction of the Shared Parental Leave policy provides some avenue to redress this particular gender imbalance. I took up this opportunity to look after my third child Edie for 3 months, while my wife Amy returned to work as a science teacher. During this time, I was full time dad to all three of our children; relentless school runs, nursery runs, baby classes, playgrounds, activity planning, nappies, food, house work. The boredom of the endless logistics and repetition is something easy to miss from the outside. Exhausting. And yet the rewards are impossible to quantify; the responsibility, the love, the imagination, the fun. The change in the bond with my daughter was seismic; Edie’s responsiveness towards me incomparable even within a few days. Where Mum had always been the first point of call, I became a new option. Being the primary parent for this short period, completely altered the dynamic and gave both emotional reward and a sense of pride that that I could fulfil this previously exclusive role. I also gained an invaluable view of how different being a stay-at-home parent is to life with young children when in fulltime work. The impact of your partner coming home late when you’ve been pushed to your wits end by the children all day being a particularly telling example. The perspective shift is a lesson that can only improve parenting balance and I would recommend all Dad’s to have a go. And for the record, my wife absolutely loved the role reversal. It would certainly help if the Shared Parental Leave policy was a little less muddled; currently the onus remains on mothers to forgo their full maternity entitlement and pay calculations are confusing. There also remains a need for cultural change to normalise men taking time off for family and this need to be positively driven from above. My only regret? I didn’t do the same for my other wonderful children Lola and Fraser.”

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