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**Everything you need
to know about
employing parents**

A huge proportion of the UK workforce are parents - according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), in 2021, 75% of mothers and 92% of fathers were in employment so it's highly likely that you're employing parents right now, or will do in the future.

75%
of mothers



92%
of fathers

For this reason and because of changing attitudes towards work-life balance and flexibility, it's important for you as an employer to understand your responsibilities.

Not only to create a supportive and family-friendly workplace for parents but also to ensure that you maximise the value working parents add to your business.

This guide will provide you with an overview of everything you need to know about employing parents in the UK, including their rights and entitlements, the benefits of a family-friendly workplace, and tips on how to create a supportive work environment.

Parental rights at work

Maternity

Maternity rights apply to pregnant employees and new mothers and are protected under the Equality Act 2010 from the start of pregnancy to the end of maternity leave.

During the maternity period, employees are subject to the same terms and conditions as they usually are, except for pay.

Time off for appointments

They are entitled to reasonable time off with pay for antenatal appointments and care.

Partners have the right to take unpaid time off to attend up to two antenatal appointments (at a maximum of 6.5 hours for each). You can request an appointment card or other proof to confirm the schedule of these appointments if you wish.

Pregnancy-related absence

Be mindful of how you deal with sickness absence during pregnancy. Normal episodes of illness can be dealt with in the usual way, but anything relating to pregnancy (including issues that are more difficult to determine if it's related or not, such as sickness) should be treated as pregnancy-related and therefore not dealt with in the same way that you would manage normal absence.

Take time to assess whether any absences have been work-related, and if necessary, make reasonable adjustments to help your employee get back to work. That may mean more breaks, altered hours, or even a more comfortable workstation.



Maternity leave

When it comes to maternity leave, pregnant employees are entitled to 52 weeks off work.

Employees must notify you 15 weeks before the baby's due date, at a minimum.

They need to inform you when the baby is due, and when they plan to begin their maternity leave.

Of course, it's difficult to predict how a pregnant employee may feel during pregnancy, so it's normal to change the start of maternity leave depending on how the pregnancy progresses. Ideally, they should give you at least 28 days' notice of any change, or alternatively come to an agreement with you regarding a new start date.

If your pregnant employee is absent with a pregnancy-related sickness in the four weeks before the baby is due, maternity leave will automatically begin the following day.

Ordinary maternity leave cannot begin until 11 weeks before the due date, unless the baby is born before then.

Additional maternity leave starts after week 26 of ordinary maternity leave (unless your employee returns to work at this point) and lasts up to 26 weeks. If your employee qualifies, they should receive statutory maternity pay for the first 13 weeks of additional maternity leave. The remaining time is unpaid unless you have a more generous arrangement in your contract.

All employees must take a minimum of two weeks' maternity leave, which starts the day the baby is born.

Paternity leave

Partners of pregnant employees are entitled to statutory paternity leave. That's one or two weeks' leave on statutory paternity pay in addition to normal holiday allowance. This cannot be taken before the birth or adoption of a child, and must end within 56 days of the birth, due date, or adoption.

Adoption leave

Adoption leave works in a similar way to maternity leave, with 26 weeks ordinary adoption leave, and 26 weeks additional adoption leave. The start date may be the date the child starts living with adoptive parents or 14 days prior, the date your employee is matched with a child, when a child arrives from overseas, or the day of birth in cases of surrogacy.

Shared parental leave allows new parents to split up to 50 weeks of leave and 37 weeks of pay. It can be taken in blocks, in one go, or separated by periods of working.

Employees can work for up to 10 days during maternity leave without it coming to an end. These are called keeping in touch (KIT) days and employees must be paid their usual daily rate of pay for each, even if they only work one hour. It is up to you to agree these days with your employee.

LGBT parents

It's important to bear in mind that these rights also extend to LGBT employees when they're starting a family, too.

Same-sex couples are more likely to use alternative methods such as IVF, adoption, or surrogacy, so where you can offer your support and understanding.

To demonstrate your commitment to being an inclusive and diverse business, make sure you create inclusion policies that support LGBT employees now and in the future.

Parental leave

This is time for parents (usually unpaid) to spend time with their children. This can be used if a child is ill, if childcare arrangements fail, or for other unexpected problems.

Parents qualify if they've worked for you for more than one year and have children under the age of 18. They have the right to request up to 18 weeks unpaid, per child. You must take all requests seriously, although you may postpone requests for up to six months if it will cause disruption to your business.

Health and Safety

As an employer, you have a duty of care for all your employees. When you're informed that an employee is expecting, you'll need to carry out a risk assessment on their workstation, working environment, and conditions to ensure you're not putting the employee at unnecessary risk.

If you spot anything hazardous to the health or safety of your employee, you'll need to make temporary alterations, offer alternative work, or suspend your employee on full pay until maternity leave begins or it's safe for them to return.





Return to work

Just as you needed to make preparations for a pregnant employee, you'll need to ensure your workplace is suitable for anyone returning from maternity leave, too.

As well as a new health and safety assessment, you'll need to consider how you can cater for breastfeeding employees. The law states that you must provide a place to rest, which includes space to lie down. You also need to provide paid breaks for breastfeeding or expressing, as well as suitable storage for expressed milk.

It may be a sensitive subject to discuss, but it's important to create a breastfeeding policy to help mothers balance work and breastfeeding if they want to.

Consider offering the use of a private room to express milk, secure and clean refrigerators, a place to wash and sterilise equipment, and time off with pay for breastfeeding or expressing.

Pregnancy loss

Sadly, not all pregnancy ends as anticipated, and in cases of miscarriage, stillbirth, and neonatal death, you must navigate a sensitive time with compassion, while also understanding what happens next.

A miscarriage occurs before the 24th week of pregnancy. Employees experiencing miscarriage are not entitled to maternity, paternity, or shared parental leave.

If your employee is not well enough to work during this time, they may take sick leave that is treated in the same way as a pregnancy-related illness. The employee can claim contractual or statutory sick pay for a period of time as stated in your sickness absence policy.

Alternatively, you may consider providing compassionate leave in such circumstances, or arranging a period of annual leave.

Losing a baby after 24 weeks is classified as stillbirth, or if a baby dies after being born alive (even for a few seconds) it is neonatal death. In both situations all maternity leave rights apply, as does paternity leave. Shared parental leave is a little different though. If parents have given notice, they are entitled to take leave as booked. If not, shared parental leave is lost. To cancel any shared parental leave, your employee should give eight weeks' notice. Alternatively, you may agree to a change at your discretion.

Both parents have a right to take two weeks' parental bereavement leave during the year following death.



Flexible working

All your employees - not just parents - have the right to request flexible working after 26 weeks of employment. Employees have a right to make one statutory request per 12 month working period.

It's not uncommon for working parents to make a flexible working request once a new baby arrives. The pressure to balance work, childcare, and other aspects of life can simply become too much. They may request a temporary change to working hours, days, or even location, or they might request a permanent change.

While you have a right to refuse requests for flexible working, often if it isn't detrimental to the business, it's in your interest to try and accommodate requests wherever possible. It can have a positive impact on engagement, happiness, loyalty, motivation, productivity... you get the idea.

Why create a more family-friendly business?

If there's one thing we've learned over the past few years, it's the importance of a good work/life balance.



Burnout can happen to anyone, but working parents are at an increased risk because often the mental load is greater. 75% of mothers return to work, which is a big change to even 20 years ago. Naturally, this creates more problems balancing work and home life, and creates more expense for families that have to rely on childcare.

But the potential in hiring working parents is huge. If you can create positive changes to your business culture to be more inclusive of working parents, you'll reap the rewards. It means you'll have access to a bigger talent pool, you'll bring new skills and expertise to your business, and will also develop happier teams full of dedicated, engaged, productive people, who have trust and loyalty to your business because you've demonstrated the same to them.

As well as offering flexible working to help support working parents, you may also consider creating enhanced maternity pay, shared parental leave pay, and other benefits that can make balancing work and a family easier, such as childcare, or even perks that give employees discounts on both everyday necessities and luxuries, like days out, too.

It may sound like there's a lot to consider when employing parents, but once you understand the benefits, you'll see it's worthwhile. If you'd like any help with anything that's been discussed in this guide, or any of your other HR needs, we'd love to talk. Get in touch today.

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