

Study finds paternity leave improves relationships for dual-income couples

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Relationships for couples often improve when fathers take parental leave during the first nine months of a child's life, says a new study from Ball State University.

"Paternity Leave and Parental Relationships: Variations by Gender and Mothers' Work Statuses," a survey of 4,700 couples from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort, finds that when [fathers](#) take a break from their jobs to help with the newborn, the [relationship](#) is strengthened.

"This study makes important contributions to our understanding of the potential benefits of [parental leave](#) policies by highlighting associations between [paternity](#) leave and parents' reports of relationship satisfaction and relationship [conflict](#) after a child's birth within the U.S.," said Richard Petts, a Ball State sociology professor who co-authored the study with Chris Knoester at Ohio State University. The report will soon be published online at the *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

"Results suggest that men using paternity leave and taking longer leaves correlate with [mothers'](#) reports of greater relationship satisfaction and pre-birth working mothers' reports of lower relationship conflict," Petts said. "As such, this study offers evidence that paternity leave may help to reduce gender inequalities and strengthen [family](#) relationships."

The study also found that paternity leave appears to be more beneficial to mothers than fathers, and especially for working mothers:

- Mothers report higher relationship satisfaction when fathers take longer periods of leave (length of paternity leave is unrelated to fathers' reports of [relationship satisfaction](#)).
- Working mothers report less conflict if fathers take paternity leave and longer periods of leave (paternity leave-taking is unrelated to fathers' reports of relationship conflict).
- For mothers who are not working prior to having a child, they report higher conflict if fathers take paternity leave and longer periods of leave.

Petts notes that taking paternity leave may signal a commitment by fathers to be involved at home.

"Given that burdens of housework and child care often disproportionately fall on mothers, taking paternity leave—and longer leaves—may help to promote a more equitable division of labor in families and help mothers to feel that is fair," he said.

Paternity leave may be especially beneficial for dual-income families, he said.

"Allowing time for fathers to be home and become involved may help mothers balance work and family life and reduce relationship conflict," he said. "Overall, evidence suggests that paternity leave may help to strengthen parental relationships. As such, increasing access to paternity leave and supporting paternity leave-taking in the U.S. may help to promote family well-being and help parents to better balance work and family life."

More information: Richard J. Petts et al. Paternity Leave-Taking and Father Engagement, *Journal of Marriage and Family* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/jomf.12494](https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12494)

Provided by Ball State University

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