

Distress on returning to work: First-time fathers' experiences

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There is increasing research interest in the experiences of new fathers taking paternity leave, but less insight into men's experiences of returning to work after the birth of their first baby

This poster focuses on fathers' experiences of negotiating the workplace as part of an overall theoretical framework related to broader transitions to fatherhood and sheds light on the distress, guilt and psychological challenges that participants experienced when they initially returned to work.

Studies have shown that parental leave policy alone does not enable all fathers to co-parent their children, with deeper socio-cultural and structural barriers also apparent (1-4). These include traditional views on masculinity (4) and gendered norms regarding whose job it is to care for children (5-9).

A constructivist grounded theory methodology (CGTM) (8-10) underpinned by symbolic interactionism (11,12) was adopted to generate theory from the data gathered (13). Approval for this study was granted by the university's research ethics committee (ERC: 2023/13/19 and AUA/2024/05-311).

Audio-recorded, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews (16) interviews generally began by asking the participants to tell their story of becoming a father for the first time. Follow up questions sought to understand their preparations for becoming a father, experiences in the workplace, and any other topics participants highlighted as being important.

Twelve new fathers shared their experiences in this study, six aged 25-34 and six 35-44. Eleven identified as "White British" and one as "White Other". All lived with their partners, six married and six co-habiting. Eleven fathers had a baby under one year and one had a child under two years.

Theoretical sampling and constant comparison processes (14); line by line coding, focused coding and theoretical coding led to the iterative formulation of the theoretical categories and final core category (15). CGTM typically seeks "translating rather than generalisability" (16) hence the findings of this study may be applicable to men in different contexts or workplaces to those interviewed.

First hours, days, and paternity leave



"It was scary, possibly the most scary experience that I've ever been through, especially looking back now, it was so close to losing both of them."
Mark

"So, I'll go home then at four o'clock in the morning, and I think all that happened so quick and then you're allowed left on your own to deal with it really... and then to see the sights that you've seen and the emotions that flood through."
Alan



"It was just mainly running around, just doing whatever I could to try and make things a bit easier. I don't think, there was much fathering there, as much as there was husbanding. It was very much supportive...trying to predict what Louise might need."
Rob

"Everything got on top of me, I had to go back to work and leave a baby crying...I can't just not go to work, as much as I'd love to stay here and help you, I can't, because I'm only allowed two weeks, that's all you're allowed...I felt like I was abandoning my duties...and you feel so guilty but what can you do?"
William



Fathers in this study both explicitly and implicitly described distress on their return to work, and all indicated a change in their worker identity which for some participants led to uncertainty in the workplace. Men returning to work at this time in the parental period are unlikely to be supported in the workplace could be protective of their mental health.

According to the findings of this study, men's experiences of returning to work with new children who are relatively young (aged 0-2) differ from those who have older children (aged 3-17). Men with older children have more established routines and roles in the home and workplace, and are more likely to have a support network in place. Men with young children are more likely to experience a sense of isolation and lack of support in the workplace, and are more likely to experience a change in their worker identity. Men with young children are also more likely to experience a sense of guilt and responsibility for their children's well-being, and are more likely to experience a sense of loss of their own identity. Men with young children are also more likely to experience a sense of being overwhelmed and stressed, and are more likely to experience a sense of being unsupported in the workplace.

Return to work

"I'd not really thought about coming back to work and kind of knowing that I will miss a big chunk of his life because I am at work, I'm out of the house most of the day... is this what it will be like for me, not forever, but for the long-term future... I'm out of his life for more time than I'm actually in it."
Iain

"I remember... crying on the bus on the first day, I remember falling asleep on the bus in those first few weeks back at work, a number of times. So a combination of just being sleep deprived and really not wanting to be there when I was at work, I felt pretty rotten, definitely for the first few weeks back at work."
Frank

"It stinks, losing a little bit of that identity about you know I'm kind of kind of known at work as the film buff and someone to talk to about those things and that is kind of slowly going and people are saying, oh have you seen this film (name) and I'm like, what's that?"
Albert

"Don't know if that's just me with anxiety, or whether that's more normal... what everyone goes through. It's hard to tell. Cos... a lot of blokes keep their feelings to themselves. It's very rare that you get the truth about what blokes are feeling, cos they like to put up a wall, as protection for themselves."
Neville



Recommendations for policy and practice

1. Actively promoting access to flexible working for both fathers and mothers.
2. Education and awareness-raising to promote parental wellbeing in the workplace and encouraging an environment which is supportive and inclusive.
3. Training for all levels of management and human resource departments to help to positively support new fathers in the early weeks of parenting.

Recommendations for policy and practice continued...

4. Dedicated and protected paternity leave to replace shared parental leave.
5. Management workplaces based psychological support or mental health champions for new fathers which aims to endorse and validate their feelings of distress and exhaustion but also their joy and pride in their new father roles.
6. Workplace peer supporters for new fathers.

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