

**PARENTING**

In the first of a series of 15 features on what's best for you and your baby, we look at how pregnancy affects working women – what are your rights and how do you face a boss who isn't as ecstatic about the news as you are?

**MOTHERS' RIGHTS**

**T**WO YEARS ago, Caroline was delighted to find out she was pregnant. However, when a threatened miscarriage forced the marketing assistant to ask – on her doctor's advice – for two weeks' leave, her (female) boss was less than enthusiastic. Her exact words? "You're a liability and I can't afford you." She went on to imply that a termination would be a good idea – in other words, Caroline was asked to choose between her baby and her job. She chose her baby.

Caroline isn't alone. Three months ago, the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) reported that almost half of all pregnant workers face discrimination, from losing bonuses and promotions – in a shocking 30,000 cases a year – to losing their jobs. "Women should not be penalised simply for being pregnant," says Julie Mellor, chairwoman of the EOC. "The impact on women, their partners and families, and even on the health of their baby, can be disastrous."

Progressive employers have a different approach. "My boss offered generous maternity pay so I could take leave without financial hardship," says Fiona Thornton, a copywriter from Essex. "I was also allowed to change my hours when I returned, which means I can pick up my baby from nursery."

In fact, any mother-to-be who has worked for her employer for 26 weeks now has the right to request to return to part-time or flexible working – the problem is, her boss doesn't have to agree. And this is despite the fact that positive employment practices often bring increased productivity and better staff retention. The publishing group Penguin, for instance, offers 26 weeks' maternity pay at full salary, four weeks' paid paternity leave, a



childcare allowance and flexible working – as a result, the company says, 99 per cent of its employees return after maternity leave.

However, Cary Cooper, a psychology professor at Lancaster University who co-wrote a report with the charity Working Families on the effects of long working hours on the life and health of families, believes these types of flexible working policies are not sufficient if the dominant culture doesn't support their use. He adds: "The first five years of a child's life are fundamental... the parents' physical presence is critical for bonding."

Attitudes to new working parents are improving. The past few years have seen an increase in the length of statutory maternity leave and the introduction of paternity and parental leave. But according to Katie Wood, of the charity Maternity Alliance, significant steps still need to be made: she would like to see mothers given £224 per week maternity pay – what the charity considers a "living wage".

Until then, you need to make current legislation work for you. The amount of maternity pay and maternity leave you get depends on how long you have worked for your employer and how much your current salary is, so it's important to know exactly what you're entitled to. "Get written information on all your rights before you approach your boss," advises Wood. And what if your employer doesn't respond positively to your good news? Be prepared to negotiate, but be firm, she says. "Assume that any negative response is due to ignorance rather than malice. After all, many employers have only one or two pregnant employees every 10 years."

For full details on pay and leave entitlements go to [www.dti.gov.uk/workingparents](http://www.dti.gov.uk/workingparents)

For more information and links to dozens of other useful websites, visit [www.milupa-aptamil.co.uk](http://www.milupa-aptamil.co.uk)



**PARENTS' FORUM**

**ARE EMPLOYERS DOING ENOUGH FOR NEW PARENTS?**

**YES:** Lucy, London

"Being able to have a full year off is important, as is the fact your job is guaranteed. Plus, it's great there are plans to be able to transfer paid leave to the father. My employee benefits continued during maternity leave and I was able to come back initially for 12 hours a week, then move to a four-day week. Now that I have two children, I know the 13 weeks' parental leave is going to be really helpful."

**NO:** Claire, Basingstoke

"With my first child, my previous employer gave only the statutory maternity pay. I had to go back to work after two-and-a-half months, when I wasn't ready physically or mentally. With my next two children I got enhanced benefits from my new employer: six weeks at 100 per cent salary and the remaining 20 weeks at 50 per cent. This was essential, especially as I was paying for childcare for the older children. If I had received just the statutory minimum, I wouldn't have been able to afford more than one child."

**FACT BOX**

- Most working women qualify for either the maternity allowance (£106/wk for 26 weeks) or statutory maternity pay (90 per cent salary for six weeks, followed by £106/wk for 20 weeks)
- All employees qualify for 26 weeks' maternity leave with the right to return to the same job at the end of that time. Some qualify for an additional 26 weeks' leave with the right to an equivalent job on their return
- Fathers can also take up to 13 weeks' unpaid parental leave before your child turns five
- Fathers may qualify for two weeks' paternity leave at £106 a week

**NEXT WEEK: Are Caesareans the best choice for you and your baby?**