

Ordinary parental leave

Eligible parents have the right to unpaid time off work when they need to look after their children.

This is called 'ordinary parental leave' or unpaid parental leave.

Parental leave is additional to other types of time off. For example:

- maternity, paternity, adoption and shared parental leave – for when someone's having a baby or adopting a child
- neonatal care leave – for parents to have additional time off to be with a baby who is receiving neonatal care
- carer's leave
- bereaved partner's paternity leave
- holiday

Pay

Parental leave is usually unpaid but some employers might offer pay. This should be written in the employment contract.

Reasons for taking parental leave

Someone might take parental leave to be with their child so they can:

- provide care when usual childcare arrangements are disrupted and the time off can be planned in advance
- spend more time with them
- look after them during school holidays
- care for them when they're off school sick
- go to school open days or events with them
- settle them into new childcare arrangements
- visit grandparents or other relatives with them

Eligibility for parental leave

To be eligible for parental leave, a parent must have the [legal status of employee](#).

From 6 April 2026, employees are eligible for parental leave from the first day of employment. Previously they needed to have worked for their employer for 1 year to be eligible.

The employee must have parental responsibility for the child. This means they must be named on one of the following:

- the child's birth certificate
- the child's adoption certificate
- a parental order, for surrogacy
- a legal guardianship

Step-parents can also have parental responsibility where it's agreed between all parents.

Someone who separated from their partner can still take this leave. They must have ongoing responsibility for bringing up the child.

Taking parental leave

Each parent can take up to 18 weeks of parental leave for each child. This leave is available until each child turns 18.

Parents can only take leave:

- in blocks of weeks
- up to 4 weeks a year for each child

For example, Alex and Robin have twins. They are both entitled to 36 weeks of parental leave (18 weeks for each child) to care for the two children.

Each year of entitlement starts on the date an employee first becomes eligible. For example when a child is born or adopted. The year of entitlement is specific to each child.

Employees still accrue (build up) their holiday entitlement as usual while on parental leave.

Taking parental leave for a disabled child

An employee can take parental leave in blocks of days or hours if they are entitled to one of the following for their child:

- Disability Living Allowance
- Personal Independence Payment

Notice for parental leave

In most cases, an employee must give their employer:

- 21 days' notice before the date they want to start a block of parental leave
- the exact dates they will start and finish the leave

Some people might want to start parental leave on the day their child is born, or the day an adoption placement starts. They must give notice at least 21 days before:

- the expected week of childbirth
- the week when the adoption placement is expected to start

When an employer can change parental leave dates

Employers cannot refuse or completely cancel parental leave.

They can postpone it, if it will cause problems at work. For example if there's an important deadline.

They can postpone it for up to 6 months after the date the employee originally asked for. The employee must be able to take it before their child's 18th birthday.

If the employer needs to postpone parental leave, they must write to the employee within 7 days of their request. For example, in a letter or email. They must:

- explain why the leave needs to be postponed
- consult with the employee so they can agree other suitable dates

An employer cannot postpone the dates of parental leave if the employee has asked to start it on:

- the day of a child's birth
- the date a placement for adoption starts

Example of an employer postponing parental leave

Kai wants to take 1 week of parental leave in March.

A big project at work is starting then that Kai needs to lead on. Their employer talks with them about this. They explain that it will be very disruptive and no one else can start the project.

The employer says Kai could take a week in April as the team will have settled into the project by then. Kai agrees and the employer puts it in an email to confirm.

Taking less than a week off to look after a child

In an emergency or unexpected event an employee might need a few days to look after their child.

Parents who are not eligible to take leave in blocks of days or hours could use:

- [holiday](#)
- [time off for dependants](#)
- special leave – this is usually leave that an employer might provide in a contract and can be paid or unpaid

An employee can take [carer's leave](#) to look after a dependant with a long-term care need. They can take up to 1 week every 12 months. They need to give their employer notice.

Employees' rights when taking parental leave

It's against the law for an employer to dismiss someone or cause them detriment because they take parental leave.

Detriment means someone experiences one or both of the following:

- being treated worse than before
- having their situation made worse

Examples of detriment could be:

- they experience [bullying](#)
- they experience [harassment](#)
- their employer turns down their training requests without good reason
- they are overlooked for promotions or development opportunities
- their employer reduces their hours without good reason

The right to return to work

An employee's right to return to the same job as before depends on how much ordinary parental leave they have taken.

If they've taken 4 weeks or less

If someone takes up to 4 weeks of parental leave, they usually have the right to return to the same job. This right applies if they take ordinary parental leave on its own and do not combine it with other statutory family leave.

If they've taken more than 4 weeks

Employees might take more than 4 weeks of ordinary parental leave in one go. They could do this if they have more than one child.

In this case they have a right to return to work on the same terms as before. This right applies if they take ordinary parental leave on its own and do not combine it with other statutory family leave.

In many cases this should be the same job as before.

But, if it's not possible because there have been significant changes to the organisation, they could be offered a similar job.

In this case, the job cannot be on worse terms than before. For example, it must have the same or similar:

- pay
- benefits
- holiday entitlement
- seniority
- location

Combining ordinary parental leave with another period of family leave

Employees might take ordinary parental leave immediately after another period of family leave such as maternity, paternity, adoption or shared parental leave. In this case, the right to return may be different.

Contact the Acas helpline

If you have any questions about parental leave, you can [contact the Acas helpline](#).