

Ordinary parental leave

Taking 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 employees are usually entitled to, such as:

- 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
- holiday

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

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](#)
- have worked for their employer for 1 year or more

Important: From 6 April 2026, employees will be eligible for parental leave from the first day of employment.

An 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.

If someone is separated from the other parent or does not live with their child, they still have the right to parental leave if they have parental responsibility for their child.

Taking parental leave

Each parent can take up to 18 weeks of parental leave for each child until each child is 18 years old. If an employee takes it, it must be:

- in blocks of weeks
- a maximum of 4 weeks a year for each child

Example

Alex and Robin have twins. They are both entitled to 36 weeks of parental leave to care for the two children.

Each year of entitlement starts on the date an employee first becomes eligible. 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

Important: From 6 April 2026, employees will be eligible for parental leave from the first day of employment. Parents who will become eligible on 6 April 2026 because of this law change can give notice from 18 February.

The employee must give their employer:

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

When an employer can change parental leave dates

Employers cannot refuse or completely cancel parental leave.

They can postpone it if it's going to 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 to:

- explain why the leave needs to be postponed
- give other suitable dates after consulting with the employee

An employee might ask to start their parental leave on the day of birth or adoption, before paternity leave. In this situation the employer cannot postpone parental leave. Find out more about [adding parental leave to paternity leave](#).

Example of an employer postponing parental leave

Kai wants to take 1 week of parental leave at the start of March to take their child to visit their grandparents.

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

The employer says Kai could take the week from the start of 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 day or two to look after their child.

In these situations, they could use one of the following types of time off work:

- [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 one week. 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 have asked to 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

Employees have the right to return to the same job after a standalone period (not combined with other statutory family leave) of ordinary parental leave.

If they've taken more than 4 weeks

Employees have the right to return to the same job if they have taken more than 4 weeks of ordinary parental leave as a standalone period (not combined with other statutory family leave).

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, the following must be the same:

- pay
- benefits
- holiday entitlement
- seniority
- where the job is

Combining ordinary parental leave with another period of family leave

If employees take ordinary parental leave immediately after another period of family leave such as maternity, adoption or shared parental leave, the right to return may be different. If you need more information on the right to return to work, [contact the Acas helpline](#)

Get more advice and support

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

Employers and managers can get [training from Acas about changes to paternity and parental leave](#).