



# Ready. Set. Parent.

Since the introduction of Shared Parental Leave, couples are changing things up when it comes to how they raise their children. *Stylist* meets four families who are making it work their own way

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**I**s it time to throw out the rulebook when it comes to maternity leave? The following four couples think so. Having taken up the government's Shared Parental Leave (SPL) policy (allowing parents to share up to 50 weeks of leave and 37 weeks of pay), they have all decided to split their professional

and personal responsibilities far more equally than the traditional 'mother gets 52 weeks, father gets two' standard.

This not only challenges traditional gender roles and expectations, but also offers a period away from the nine-to-five for men – a concept practically unheard of in day-to-day business. So, how did the families get on with Shared Parental Leave? *Stylist* finds out...





IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE GOVERNMENT'S SHARED PARENTAL LEAVE CAMPAIGN





## “Toan understands that parenting is an equal job and not that he’s doing me a favour looking after Seren” – Rhian

Rhian Ravenscroft, 34, went back to work six months after having her daughter Seren in 2016; husband Toan, 33, took over for the last three

**Rhian says:** “Toan and I are career-minded and he knows my job is important to me, so SPL was something we were looking into. I’m legal counsel at financial services company MarketAxess and I love my job.

I didn’t think having a child would harm my career, but I had such a great time on maternity leave, it was unfair not to give Toan the same opportunity. As a couple, we share the same knowledge. Toan is totally autonomous with Seren. If he’s going to take her swimming, they just go and I don’t have to tell him what to pack or the time she needs to eat. The fact that he doesn’t have to say, ‘What should I do and how do I do it?’ means we see each other as equal, at home and at work.

If Seren’s ill, there isn’t an assumption that I will take a morning off because I’m the one who knows what’s wrong.

Toan understands parenting is an equal job and not that he’s doing me a favour by looking after Seren. We work as a team – and that’s enabled me to keep progressing at work.”

**Toan says:** “I wanted to play an active role as a father, so SPL was always on the agenda. I didn’t want to be a helpless dad. Because I was the first employee within M&C Saatchi Sport and Entertainment to do it, everyone was like, ‘Go for it’. That made things easier.

I do think men can be overly praised for taking leave. I’d get, ‘Oh, isn’t it *fantastic*, what you’re doing is *amazing*,’ when people found out. And I was only doing it for three months! Yet millions of women take 12 months from their careers.

I went back to work and still knew what my clients were doing. Also, it helped with work as I came back refreshed. You notice things – you don’t get that same head-down-ness you normally have. It makes you check yourself. Like, ‘Does that tiny thing *really* matter?’ It puts things in perspective.”



RHIAN AND TOAN WITH THEIR DAUGHTER, SEREN

## “There are still companies that frown upon dads taking off even two weeks of paternity leave” – Satch

Catherine Buglass, 38, and husband Satch Patel, 37, both from London, took SPL with daughters Amara, 3, and Layla, 1

**Catherine says:** “Timing-wise, SPL was a gift. Satch was planning on taking more than his official paternity leave, but would have done it unpaid, so when SPL came in just before Amara was born, we knew we’d do it.

Our working lives are long, so the chance to take that time is a privilege. You’re not going to look back and say, ‘I wish I’d spent less time with my kids’. Satch had three months with Amara and six with Layla, and we shared our leave.

Sharing the time makes a huge difference, because it’s exhausting. After having Layla, I had postnatal depression. I’d break down and think, ‘How will I get through the day?’ Having someone else to support me really helped.

I think one of the best things about having kids is seeing your partner in a new light – you see

them as a parent and love them in a different way. Satch has a deeper relationship with Amara and Layla, and understands their needs. It’s wonderful, actually.”

**Satch says:** “There were financial considerations involved in taking SPL. My company, Accenture, has a generous policy that enabled me to take the leave, but not everyone can afford to take time off. There are still companies that frown upon dads taking off even two weeks of paternity leave, but hopefully that is changing.

Shared Parental Leave has really strengthened my bond with Catherine and my daughters. It has been a rewarding experience. However, I was often the only father at events, which can be daunting. Maybe an entrepreneur could create a support network app for dads. Not to discriminate against mums, but to make shared parenting more common for dads. We could do with better facilities for fathers with children, too.”



CATHERINE AND SATCH WITH THEIR DAUGHTERS, AMARA AND LAYLA



## "I don't subscribe to gender roles, we should all muck in together" – Alex

**Amy Fletcher, 35, and husband Alex, 31, from Sheffield, took SPL for their firstborn Matilda, 2, and plan on taking it again with James, 5 months**

**Amy says:** "With Matilda, I took off 10 months then Alex took over for the last two. I'm not career-focused, so we did it as we thought it was a good idea to share responsibilities both at work and at home."

I'd had 10 months off with Alex working, and it was only fair he got the chance to see Matilda develop, too. It helped us understand each other and what it's like looking after her all day.

We got a real insight into the different challenges. And a positive thing was me being able to leave Matilda with her dad when I went back to work rather than put her in childcare, because to leave Matilda in nursery or with a childminder while I was transitioning back to work might have been difficult.

By the time we'd both returned to work, Matilda had spent a bit of time away from me, so that transition was easier for everyone."

**Alex says:** "The main thing for me was to build a relationship with my daughter. I don't subscribe to traditional gender roles; I believe we should all muck in together. It's not productive to say, 'This is your role within the house'."

My dad wasn't around when I was younger, so I wanted to be involved with the children. I'd like them to be as happy spending time with me as they are with Amy.

It gave me an understanding of what Amy had been doing. You can't appreciate what it's like when a small child refuses to settle and you've got to make dinner and get everything sorted around the house until you've experienced it.

In fact, I said to one of my colleagues that in some ways, staying at home with the kids can be more challenging than going to work and he didn't quite get it.

Some days things go well and other days, not so much. Which is why Shared Parental Leave has given me much more confidence as a father. I have no qualms now taking the children out on my own."



AMY AND ALEX WITH MATILDA AND JAMES

## "If we hadn't taken time off together as a family, we wouldn't be as strong as we are now" – Lucy

**Lucy Werner, 35, and Hadrien Chatelet, 32, from London, used SPL to travel around France with their son, Rafael, 9 months**

**Lucy says:** "I run my own PR consultancy, The Wern, for small businesses and entrepreneurs. I remember Hadrien and I had a very heated discussion about SPL in the local deli when I was pregnant. He made a remark about not taking time off because it would damage his career, and I was like, 'Are you kidding me?'"

It started a conversation about how it's not even a choice for women about whether they want to take maternity leave. It made me angry. Just because I'm the one who gives birth, I'm the one who has to give everything up?

We have a friend who's moved to Stockholm and he shares the childcare of his two kids with their mother. That helped persuade Hadrien into taking SPL.

After Rafael was born, I spent three months on leave, then we

travelled around France together for three months, visiting Hadrien's family. I was working remotely, so Hadrien looked after Rafael. If we hadn't spent that time together as a family, we wouldn't be as strong as we are now."

**Hadrien says:** "Taking leave can be daunting when you've focused on your career so much. I'm an art director at global marketing firm Endeavor and didn't want to be left behind. You want to be a stay-at-home dad, but how do you balance that with your career?"

I appreciate money comes into whether people can afford to take SPL. But if you really want to, you should try and find a way. For five months I was putting money aside every month and cutting down on expenses to afford it. It can be tight, and you have to be careful, but we did it, and it was worth the trouble."



**For more on Shared Parental Leave, visit [gov.uk/sharetheleave](http://gov.uk/sharetheleave)**



LUCY AND HADRIEN WITH THEIR SON, RAFAEL