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Stay-at-home dad

Will the idea of paternity leave catch on in Malaysia, PATSY KAM asks.

FATHERS today are a different breed from Raymond Barone's father, Frank, from the TV sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond*. They have no qualms about helping out in the house or taking care of the baby.



Eddy Wong and his newborn baby.

First time father Yusoff Hassan took a week off work to get acquainted with his new baby. Yusoff, who works in a local bank, says some foreign banks give up to a week but his allows only three days.

"I took a few more days off to do the necessary errands, you know, like going to the National Registration Department, buying groceries and stuff like that. Now, we have a midwife to help out but I also helped to change the baby and kept my wife company when she woke up to breastfeed," says Yusoff, 38, whose newborn son is now six weeks old.

He adds that paternity leave is important to help the family "acclimatise" to the new baby and vice versa. "Since this is my first child, I have no idea what should be done. You're fed information from all sides and you need first-hand experience to be able to sieve through what's needed and what's not. The first few days are normally spent at the hospital so three days paternity leave isn't really enough. At least a week would be good."

Yusoff has no issues about staying home to look after his son if he has to and having to do chores like cooking and cleaning is no big deal as he maintains he's no chauvinist.

Likewise, Eddy Wong, a branch manager for a logistics company, feels that support from the husband is essential during the first month confinement period.

“New mothers need that time to recover emotionally and physically. So it helps if the father can do his part to help settle the new baby and mother in,” says Wong, 41, whose wife just delivered their second child.

Wong took a week off to run errands and help take care of his older daughter.

“The first time round, I did some of the cooking, trained the (then) new maid and looked after my first daughter. Earlier I had taken six months off prior to the baby’s arrival to do my thesis so I was practically a househusband, taking care of my pregnant wife, and doing the household chores. Some men think looking after children is a woman’s job but that’s not true. There’s no harm switching roles and I wouldn’t mind staying home for six months again if I had to. A year, I think, would be too long,” he adds.

According to child development expert Ruth Liew, most companies don’t understand the importance of paternity leave.

“When my husband took three days off 10 years ago for my daughter’s arrival, his colleagues belittled him, saying things like, ‘My wife managed fine without me. Why do you have to be there?’ But trends are changing and men are learning to take equal share of parenthood.

“My two girls really appreciated him being around for them, and even now, they’re very close to him. I feel if you’re not there in the beginning, it’s a sign that you’re probably not going to be there (to parent) much anyway.

“The first few days are very important as that’s when you ‘fall in love’ with your baby, plant nurturing seeds and bond. Fathers also provide that extra pair of hands to help out during that crucial period. They should take the initiative and ask for paternity leave, otherwise companies won’t recognise the need for it. I think two weeks would be an appropriate time,” she says.

However, if men were to take too long to revel in newfound fatherhood, employers might not take the situation sitting down. In Britain, when it was announced that the government may be considering giving new fathers six months unpaid paternity leave, small business bodies balked at the idea, stating loss of productivity and “administrative nightmare” as possible downsides to the proposal.

UMW Toyota Motor’s senior manager of human resources, S. Ananthan, feels that two to three days would be good enough for fathers to provide the necessary assistance, celebrate and run errands. Anything more would be a burden on the employer.

“We’ve always understood that women need maternity leave to recover. But men, who are the cause (of babies) in the first place, surely don’t need so much time,” he says in jest.

Commenting on countries that offer up to six months paternity leave, Ananthan feels that it would take

time for such a practice to be accepted here, given our cultural differences.

“But if someone wants to take six months unpaid leave, it would be up to the discretion of the employer to grant leave.”

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