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A world of difference

The way a culture cares for new families looks different depending on where you are in the world—and there's a lot we can learn from each country's unique traditions.

BY TIFFANY R. JANSEN



TIPS FOR NEGOTIATING PARENTAL LEAVE

While the United States does not mandate paid parental leave, you may be able to work with your employer to come up with a situation that suits you both.

TALK TO YOUR BOSS. "It's often much easier to work with an established employee who requires a leave of absence upon becoming a parent" than it is to hire and train someone new, says employment attorney Valerie Samuels. "Yes, you have this baby now, but you're still a wonderful employee and your company will benefit if your needs are being met," says Jessica Kent, president of the Birthing Circle of Frederick in Frederick, Maryland.

EASE BACK INTO IT. Can you work from home or arrange for flexible hours? Would your employer be open to you working shorter days or weeks for a while? Maybe you can discuss returning to work part-time or coming in on weekends when your partner can take care of the baby.

TAG TEAM WITH YOUR PARTNER. Work together to stagger your combined leave. "My husband took off two weeks, I took off six, and then he took off another two when I went back to work," says Kent.

TAP INTO VACATION AND SICK LEAVE. Talk with your company's HR department about using saved or leftover vacation and sick days to create your own parental leave. If your company already offers leave, you can use these days to extend it.

Travel the globe and you'll soon see that everywhere has its own way of helping families ease into life with a newbie. We've rounded up postbirth customs from France to China (and a few destinations in between) to give you a glimpse into how other countries take care of new parents and their babies, as well as how you can incorporate these practices into your own postpartum experience.

SWEDEN

Paid parental leave

What it is: In Sweden, parents are entitled to a combined 480 days of parental leave per child. This can be taken at any time during the first eight years of the child's life.

How it works: Parents receive up to 80 percent of their salary, paid for by the Swedish government, for the first 390 days, and a flat rate for the remaining 90. "We are aiming for a more equal use of these days; therefore, 90 out of the 480 days are locked to each parent," explains Swedish minister for social security Annika Strandhäll. Like most parents, Rhode Island native Jonathan Ferland took the majority of his days within the first two years. "Parenting wasn't just seeing the kids in the morning and then

again for about 20 minutes before bedtime," says the father of two. "It was being part of every minute of their lives while they were so young."

What you can do: The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) guarantees 12 weeks of (unpaid) job-protected leave following the birth or adoption of a child if your company employs 50 employees or more and you've worked there for a year or longer. The Pregnancy Discrimination Act requires that companies with 15 or more employees treat women with pregnancy-related disabilities the same as they would other disabled employees. "Moreover, a woman who is disabled by the effects of her pregnancy is entitled to a leave of absence under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and similar state laws," says Valerie Samuels, an employment attorney at Posternak Blankstein & Lund, LLP in Boston. (See sidebar for tips on negotiating better parental leave.)

THE NETHERLANDS

Kraamzorg

What it is: The *kraamzorg* cares for the mother and newborn following the birth. "[Ours made] sure I was recovering, taught us how to take care of [our son], helped a

DID YOU KNOW?

Postpartum doulas help parents adjust to life with the new addition.

They do everything from cooking and cleaning to assisting with breastfeeding. They'll even take care of the baby, so you and your partner can get some shut-eye.

lot with nursing ... She also cleaned our house and made me lunch and tea," says Elizabeth Groom, a former Bostonian living in the Netherlands.

How it works: Women generally sign up for the *kraamzorg* between weeks 12 and 16 of pregnancy. For home births, the nurse arrives in time to help deliver the baby and stays with the family for a couple hours after. In the case of a hospital birth, the nurse will meet the family at home after they've been discharged. The 24 to 80 hours of *kraamzorg* care is spread out over an 8- to 10-day period and is covered by insurance.

What you can do: If you plan to breastfeed, check with your insurance company to see if they'll cover a lactation consultant. Groom, who is still nursing her son two years later, credits her success to the support she received from her *kraamzorg* nurse. KellyMom.com and La Leche League International are other excellent resources. Friends and family with child-rearing experience can also be a wealth of information on infant care.

CHINA

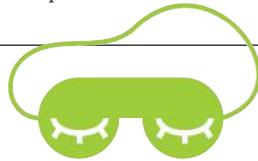
Moon month

What it is: The moon month is about helping the mother restore balance through rest, warmth and a protein-rich diet. In Chinese culture, it is believed that if balance is not restored within the first six weeks, it never will be.

How it works: Care of the mother falls to the in-laws, who typically live with the new parents during the moon month. "My in-laws live nearby, so they would just come over every day and prepare [meals]," says Charlotte Edwards-Zhang, who moved from the Midwest to China 10 years ago. They also did the washing and cleaning and took care of the baby. Edwards-Zhang was expected to stay in bed and relax. Though she didn't follow the moon month exactly as prescribed (she often snuck in reading, late-night computer sessions and neighborhood

strolls with her newborn), Edwards-Zhang lost all of her pregnancy weight and more during that period, a fact she attributes largely to the focus on rest and sleep.

What you can do: "There are just so many different ways that people can help you," says Deena Blanchard, a pediatrician at Premier Pediatrics in New York. "If you need something, it's OK to ask for it, to [accept] help." Share late night feeding responsibilities with your partner, and try to sleep whenever the baby does. And don't hesitate to take up friends, family and members of your community on their offers to help.



Catching up on your Zs

may help you lose pregnancy weight. A systematic review and meta-analysis at King's College London found that those with sleep deprivation consumed 385 calories more per day, on average, than their well-rested counterparts. During the first 24 months after birth, parents can lose up to six months' worth of sleep.

FINLAND

Maternity package

What it is: "It's like a newborn 101 kit," says Johanna Walker, a graduate student in Finland whose youngest was born there. Available to all expectant mothers as a benefit of the Finnish social security system, the package contains 50 items stored in a decorative cardboard box the baby can sleep in. The most recent iteration includes a wearable blanket, bodysuits, regular and footed leggings, socks, bibs, cloth diapers, a bath towel, bed linens, footed pajamas, a cuddly toy, a children's book, nursing pads, nipple cream, baby powder, nail scissors, a hairbrush, sanitary napkins and condoms.

Foreign concept(ion)s

From the moon month in China to perineal re-education in France, each culture has its own way of supporting new mothers. In the book *Knocked Up Abroad* (as well as the soon-to-be-released *Knocked Up Abroad Again*), expat women share their experiences giving birth in another country.

How it works: Packages must be requested at least two months prior to the due date, and the mother-to-be needs to have visited a doctor or prenatal clinic by the beginning of her third trimester to qualify. "It's part of the tradition, and you're a little bit prepared mentally for the newcomer," says Oskari Heikenheimo, professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Helsinki.

What you can do: Go to kela.fi/web/en/maternitypackage, and add the Finnish must-haves to your registry. Or buy your own box at finnishbabybox.com or finnb.in.com. For a wallet-friendly option, request hand-me-downs from friends and family, or hit up thrift stores or yard sales.

FRANCE

Perineal re-education

What it is: Women in France are treated to state-sponsored physical therapy sessions to strengthen the perineal, or pelvic floor muscles, after delivery. "It's very important for women presenting with urinary or fecal incontinence or sexual dysfunction," says Xavier Deffieux, an OB/GYN at Assistance Publique - Hôpitaux de Paris in France and co-author of several studies on pelvic floor rehabilitation.

How it works: Exercises are performed under the guidance of a midwife or physiotherapist to strengthen the pelvic floor muscles, which stretch and weaken during pregnancy and labor. "They have you squeeze [until] you reach a certain level, or they'll have you squeeze in a pattern, and measure the force both manually and electronically," says Seattle resident Claire Lundberg, whose children were both born in France.

What you can do: Check with area hospitals and midwifery clinics to see if they offer postnatal pelvic floor muscle training or perineal re-education. You can also ask your OB/GYN for exercises to do at home.

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