

Taking Paternity Leave? A Do!

Most men don't (and many can't), but Toms founder Blake Mycoskie did—and it changed *everything*. A Father's Day read, as told to Genevieve Field.



Mycoskie with his six-month-old son, Summit
Vince sweater, jeans.
James Perse T-shirt.
Toms shoes.

Earlier this year I took 12 weeks' leave from my company, Toms Shoes, to help my wife, Heather, care for our newborn son, Summit. It's an experience I wish every new dad could have, but I realize how lucky I am. As the company founder, I've been able to establish 12 weeks' paid leave for *all* our new parents. Sadly, though, we're an exception: Only 12 percent of all American workers have access to formal paid parental leave,

and the vast majority of men take off less than a *week* when their children are born. In fact, when I announced I'd be taking leave, some of my CEO peers were mystified. Responses ranged from "You're going to get real bored, real quick" to "How are you supposed to lead a company while changing diapers?" I must admit they played on my psyche, but Toms colleagues who'd taken leave were inspiring. Our building operations manager, Travis, had gone on a family road trip during his paternity leave and returned with a renewed sense of pur-

pose—for work, for life, for everything. His attitude was infectious, and I wanted to set the same example for other guys at Toms. Little did I know just how much I'd grow—as a dad, a husband, and an executive—in those three short months. Here are a few of the lessons I learned:

Lesson #1: The truly dedicated dare to unplug.

After 36 hours of labor, Heather had a C-section, so when the baby emerged, they handed him to me. I was hold-

ing Summit for the first 30 minutes of his life, looking straight into his eyes, and *wham!* I was his. Over the next few days, I adjusted to my new reality: Nonstop meetings were replaced by a *Groundhog Day* loop of diaper changings, feedings, and "baby TV" (that's what Heather and I called the hours we stared endlessly at Summit). And baby TV was about as high-tech as it got: I had uninstalled my email service from my laptop and phone so I wouldn't be tempted to check it. It was difficult at first. I realized I constantly looked at my phone for "important

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messages”—they validated that *I* was important. But I soon found that the best validation came from Heather, who kept commenting on how present I was. Going off the grid made it clear: Being fully unplugged is really the greatest offering we can make to the people we care about.

Lesson #2: Gratitude is a miracle tool.

Becoming a new parent is hard—especially the first time around, when you're not used to sharing your partner's love and attention with another human. The moment Summit came into our world, I knew I'd be second fiddle to him in Heather's eyes. Coming in second can make you feel uneasy, but I discovered that starting each day with a quiet moment of gratitude—almost like meditation—was the best antidote. It worked so well during paternity leave that, now that I'm back at work, I've learned to take simple pauses during the day to count my blessings; it's a great guard against the chronic stress executives, and all workers, experience. If we spent half as much mental energy on why we love our jobs as we do on why they stress us out, who knows what we could achieve?

Lesson #3: You can choose to see the best in people.

The hardest part about taking leave was dealing with Heather's postpartum blues. It sounds like a cliché story, but one morning I left out the milk and she came down hard on me, which isn't like her at all. I'm not the type of person who sits back and takes it, so I was like, "You're crazy!" and instantly I regretted my words. No matter how many hours of sleep I'd lost, I hadn't given birth and nursed around the clock for the past 17 days. So the next time Heather started to go off on me for something small, I took a deep breath and pictured her at her best: smiling



In Sync

The new parents in Malibu. Taking leave "deepened our bond," Mycoskie says.

“Heather and I felt ridiculously connected during my leave.”

and sun-speckled from a day in the surf. And just like that, my anger evaporated. Sometimes the best defense is to have no defense at all.

Lesson #4: To take good care of others, first take good care of yourself.

About four weeks into my leave, I realized I hadn't worn anything but sweats since Summit was born. I had to remind myself that taking paternity leave wasn't only for Heather and the baby; it was something I was doing for me. So I bought some basic exercise equipment on Amazon. Whenever the baby was napping, I'd head outside to work up a sweat or read a book instead of dozing on the couch. The result? I felt more sane, focused, and up to doing the little acts of service that made a big difference to Heather—foot rubs, grocery shopping, and cooking!

Lesson #5: Need a creative boost? Fall in love.

What surprised me most about paternity leave? It's actually

very romantic. And Heather and I *know* romantic: We've traveled to 23 countries together, lived on a sailboat, and kissed under I don't know how many sunsets. But none of that compares to how ridiculously connected we felt during my leave. On one of the last afternoons before I went back to work, we went hiking in the canyon behind our home. We'd both been feeling a bit down about my time off ending (she would still be at home, where she works running the Toms Animal Initiative), but as we walked—with the dogs ahead, our tiny son snug on my chest, and Heather's hand in mine—my mind began to swirl with new ideas for Toms. Suddenly I wasn't sad about going back to work; I was *inspired*, and I knew I'd return better than when I'd left. Shouldn't all companies get to benefit from that kind of creative boost?

Frankly, it's nuts that more companies haven't figured out what a win-win paid family leave is. The Family and Medical Leave Act requires companies with more than 50 employees to give new parents up to 12 weeks off—but that's

without pay, and plenty of families can't afford to miss a single paycheck. Dads especially, who are still the primary breadwinners in 60 percent of households, miss out on an incredible opportunity to bond with their kids. That's a loss for families and also for companies. I have a hugely talented friend who could afford to take only one week off when his son was born; he was so upset that he left for a new job. What a loss to that company! So my pitch to bosses everywhere is this: Support family leave. If your employees don't return to work more creative and productive than before, I'll be so shocked I'll send you a Toms bag.* 

Blake Mycoskie is the founder and "chief shoe giver" of Toms.

**Seriously, if you're a CEO who implemented paid parental leave and haven't seen it benefit your company, write me at blakemail@toms.com and I'll send you our newest One for One bag, which supports guess what: maternal health.*