Finding out that you'll soon be adding a child into your life raises a lot of questions – like it has for me. Hopefully I can make working through the University's expanded parental leave policy easier for you as I learn to navigate it myself.

I found out my spouse, Connor Kelley, who is also a University employee, and I were expecting our first child while on a work trip to Washington, D.C., for the announcement of the first ever image of the black hole at the center of our galaxy [4]. I was only four weeks pregnant at the time and was feeling fine so far. Mostly, Connor and I were swept up in the excitement of the news, which seemed to us to eclipse even the best media hype I helped garner as a science writer in University Communications [5].

Months passed, and as we started to prepare, I started to have questions about the new parental leave policy and how it works. I sat down with a Human Resources leave adviser to walk me through everything I needed to know – from the work perspective, at least – as we planned to grow our family.

The new policy

In January, the University began offering employees 12 weeks of paid leave and 12 weeks of optional unpaid leave, during which employees can use their accrued sick, vacation or comp time. In total, this translates to a potential six months of leave.

"Developmentally, at six months, most babies start eating solid foods, so they're eating more and often sleeping better and, therefore, parents are sleeping better," said Celina Ramirez, vice president of University Initiatives [7], who partnered with Human Resources to update the parental leave policy. "They're also often sitting up and more interested in engaging with their environments. This allows parents more care options and an easier transition back to work."

The changes to the parental leave policy extend to foster placement, legal guardianship, stillbirth and surrogacy. It also allows two weeks paid leave for miscarriage. In addition, it allows leave to begin up to two weeks before the anticipated birth and leave can continue to be taken for 12 months following the event. About 200 people take parental leave per year across campus.

"Discussions to update the leave began before the pandemic," Ramirez said. "But the pandemic really highlighted the challenges that parents face with child care and balancing work and family. I'm very proud of this initiative."

The University's expanded benefits, she said, were implemented to make us more competitive among our peers; improve employee recruitment, retention, morale and productivity; and improve the health and well-being of parents and children.

Before the expansion, the policy provided six weeks of paid leave to be used continuously, intermittently or part time upon the birth or adoption of a child. Any University employee hoping to use the leave had to have been fully benefits-eligible for at least 12 months. In addition, employees who qualified for Family and Medical Leave were able to take an additional six weeks of leave, although it was unpaid.

Among our Pac-12 peers, our leave policy was among the shortest. The University of Washington, by comparison, offered 16 of weeks paid leave and an optional 12 weeks of unpaid leave, Ramirez said.

"We hope this new policy signals to employees that we value them, and we want to support them," said University of Arizona President Robert C. Robbins. "Pillar five of the strategic plan is about institutional excellence and living our values of inclusion and compassion. This includes supporting our workforce, and we want parents to come back when they're healthy and rested to contribute to our overall mission."

Preparing for leave

I was feeling very sick during my first trimester and missing more work than made me feel comfortable. So, I told my supervisor about my pregnancy earlier than other people might. Many wait until the first trimester is over and the risk of
miscarriage declines. But when and how you tell your supervisor is completely up to you.

Next, I started to think about my leave plan, but quickly felt overwhelmed. What did I even need to consider when designing the best plan for me and my family?

I reached out to my leave adviser, Souky Coneway, a senior human resources specialist, for guidance. Find your leave adviser by clicking this link and scrolling down [8] or emailing hrsolutions@arizona.edu [9] and requesting a meeting.)

Coneway and I met over Zoom, and she walked me through the leave process.

As Connor and I designed our leaves, she told us to consider our duties and responsibilities in and out of the office, the child care support that is available, and any available flexible work arrangements – including flex hours and work-from-home options.

Since Connor and I are both employees, she suggested staggering our unpaid leave. Connor has enough to cover the entire 12 weeks of unpaid leave, but, like many others, I do not. Coneway suggested I return to the office part time during this period so that I don’t run through my sick and vacation days too quickly. Also, during this time, more vacation and sick days will continue to accrue.

Coneway also walked me through how to complete and submit all the forms necessary for parental leave. Employees are expected to complete the parental leave request form [10] at least 60 days before their leave begins. Then, they must request Family and Medical Leave [11] – if eligible – using this form [12], which would run at the same time as parental leave. Human Resources suggests employees request FML at least 30 days before their leave. Lastly, employees are expected to submit all paperwork to their HR leave adviser.

FML is a federal law established in 1993 that says an employer must allow 12 weeks of job-protected leave to eligible employees for qualified family or medical reasons, including the birth of a child.

During the leave, employees must report their time using specific time codes (a chart for which time codes to use can be found here [3]), their benefits continue and they should stay in touch with their supervisor regarding their return plan.

To calculate my FML dates, Coneway counted 60 days – Monday through Friday, skipping University holidays and closures – from my due date. If the start date changes for whatever reason, the end date will change, too, and I can adjust my paperwork accordingly.

One seemingly complicated thing that Coneway helped me work through was understanding how my spouse and I could use FML. Since we’re both employees, we share those 12 weeks of FML. One of us, likely me, will report FML, while Connor will give his department a heads-up that he won’t be reporting FML since I already am.

Navigating the unpaid portion of the leave seemed daunting, but Coneway explained it expertly.

During these 12 weeks – which must be taken consecutively with the paid portion of the leave, unless you obtain supervisor approval – the University does not pay if you don’t work or use your accruals – sick, vacation or comp time. You have up to one year from the day of your baby’s birth to use parental leave.

Since I’m short on vacation and sick time, I will likely return to work part time after the paid portion of my leave, likely 20 hours a week, and use my accruals to cover the other 20 hours per week, with my supervisor’s approval. With this strategy, I am still accruing my normal rate of sick and vacation time every two weeks and receiving benefits. The only time employees wouldn’t accrue sick and vacation time is if they’re reporting unpaid FML or unpaid parental leave. Coneway usually informs people about what it means to take unpaid leave, as employees are required to use any vacation, sick and comp time accrued first and, if they take unpaid time, they will be billed for their benefits.

"Returning to work can be flexible. My suggestion is to have that discussion with your supervisor so you’re on the same page," Coneway said.

Additionally, at the bottom of the parental leave request form there's a link (under Qualified Life Event) to download paperwork that will add the baby to your insurance plan. Parents have 31 days after a child’s birth or adoption to complete it and return it.

One important tip from Coneway that I wish I would have known before pregnancy was to explore short-term disability options. This is an optional benefit that can make postpartum easier on families. Coneway suggests talking with Human Resources about the two short-term disability options if you are thinking of having a child, as employees can receive up to 6-8 weeks of 70% weekly earnings after birth (or up to 26 weeks in the case of complications from pregnancy or birth). You can compare the two plans available side-by-side at this link [13]. To be eligible starting next calendar year, employees need to sign up by the end of this year's open enrollment, which runs Oct. 31-Nov. 18.

Before signing off from our meeting and leaving me feeling confident about my options, Coneway suggested I explore the Life & Work Connections [14] website, where soon-to-be parents can learn more about additional benefits once a child is born, adopted or fostered.

Human Resources also offers a helpful checklist to help employees plan their FMLA and parental leave [15].