

## **VOICES FROM THE FIELD - Parental Leave and the Well-Being of Parents and Young Children**

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### ***Service perspective***

Although there is little literature supporting the hypothesis that a mother's early return to work is detrimental to the health of her baby, it may be a contributing factor, which can cause increased stress and anxiety in some mothers who lack support.<sup>1</sup>

Women in two-parent homes with middle-class social economic status appear to be positively affected by returning to work. It provides them with role privileges and greater economic security, leading to enhanced mental status. Working mothers' ability to deal with their early return to work also appears to be related to their job satisfaction. The more support women receive at home and work, the greater their psychological well-being and ultimately, the better the relationship that is created with their child.

Maternal mental-health status is a major determinant in fostering the healthy maternal-child relationship basic to early childhood development and to decreasing the mother's risk of physical illness. Fatigue appears to be an inevitable outcome of parenthood, usually magnified in mothers who choose to breastfeed. If motherhood itself triggers a host of complex and often conflicting emotions, "working motherhood" will magnify these conflicts. For example, mothers who must return to work sooner may face a lack of resources, emotional distress at being absent from their children, self-doubt about their maternal ability, role overload and spousal conflicts.<sup>2</sup>

In our present multicultural context, if motherhood is central to the culture but the woman needs to work to support herself, she may find herself in psychological conflict that can lead to negative reports of health. New mothers may also be at risk for postpartum depression. This can only be exacerbated by the multiplicity of stressors facing the mother who returns to work soon after giving birth.

Single mothers, with little support and/or limited financial resources, appear to have the most physical illnesses and emotional distress. They may have to care for their children in small, unkempt and insecure conditions, have very little time for themselves and have few outlets for personal needs. Children of parents in high-stress situations with insufficient support networks are known to be at risk for Shaken Baby Syndrome.

Children of depressed parents engage in less stimulating play and develop negative mood and attachment difficulties. A mother with depression is unable to engage in positive interactions with her child, and parents are at risk of using inconsistent discipline, which often leads to adjustment problems. Because these children do not have parents who can help them learn how to manage negative feelings, they often deal negatively with new challenges. When combined with the stress of financial difficulties, these negative characteristics are magnified.

Although Canada has one of the most generous policies in parental leave in terms of duration,<sup>3</sup> the plan's financial benefits may not allow all families to maintain their lifestyle, which becomes an additional burden for the family. While some mothers receive up to 90% of their salary for 20 weeks due to their employer's additional compensation, the majority receives significantly less. Self-employed mothers, for example, do not benefit from any parental leave and often return to work within their baby's first month of life.

As a society, we are very aware of the benefits of breastfeeding. In fact, recent literature suggests that a child should be breastfed for at least six months and ideally, up to two years. This is particularly difficult for the working mother who faces a guilt-ridden choice between working or breastfeeding. Although benefits of breastfeeding have been well documented for both mother and child, a mother's level of fatigue will ultimately affect the results of breastfeeding. Due to lack of support, mothers often give up breastfeeding much sooner than most health-care professionals would recommend.

In Quebec, quality daycare is not always available. With the present waiting time at approximately one to two years in our public daycare system, the family may need to turn to private care. When a mother must return to work, the issue of daycare becomes an additional burden, both financially and practically, in terms of choices.<sup>2</sup>

Although Canada has a one-year parental leave in place, that policy alone is not enough to protect all mother-child developments. As more and more women find themselves engaging in multiple roles, they are assuming two major familial roles – wife and mother – and one major social role – worker in the labour force. Because of their expanded roles, changes in the domestic division of labour and childcare patterns must also occur.

As a society, we should insist that our government:

- consider how to protect new families by making the policy accessible to ALL mothers, including self-employed families;
- make the availability and accessibility of quality daycare for all a priority. Daycare should be made available before the mother returns to work so that both mother and child can adapt to the change;
- encourage all employers to have a daycare. If it is not possible to have an internal daycare, employers should be encouraged to link up with a community daycare so that there is available and accessible daycare for all their returning mothers;

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- provide additional supplements to all mothers who decide to breastfeed, not only mothers who are on social welfare. This would increase the financial benefits of staying home longer, as well as promote breastfeeding and all its related benefits;
- increase the financial benefits provided during maternal leave to help the family to adapt to the arrival of the newborn and provide all factors necessary to foster the optimum growth and development of EVERY child.

As a society, we should request employers to:

- give all women access to job-sharing on their return from maternity leave. This would permit a gradual return to full-time work. Not only would this increase the mother's work satisfaction and decrease maternal stress, it would ultimately boost productivity;
- be breastfeeding-friendly. This would not only boost the employer's reputation with all working women; it would also increase their retention level and increase the mother's job satisfaction. To allow mothers to breastfeed, the company could either increase flexible hours to allow a mother time to breastfeed her child or provide frequent breaks, a private room and appropriate storage area. This would ultimately prolong the benefits of breastfeeding.

As individuals within our society, we need to:

- acknowledge paternal parental leaves as a norm, rather than an exception. The attachment developed between father and child definitely promotes child development while decreasing the mother's stress level. This would demonstrate that we, as a society, value our children and their development as a joint responsibility, not solely a maternal responsibility.

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