Synthesis

How Important Is It?

Parental leave policies were developed in response to increasing numbers of women participating in the labour market and out of concern for the health and well-being of both mother and infant.

In Canada (2001 statistics):

- 60% of women with children under three years of age were employed;[1]
- 85% of Canadian mothers and nearly as many fathers (employed full-time) felt there were not enough hours in the day.[2]

Typically, national policies include a period of job-protected leave and some degree of replacement (benefits) in order to take time off from work following the birth or adoption of a child.

For example, in 2000, Sweden was providing 12 weeks of maternity leave (100% of wages replaced) and 18 months of parental leave (80% of earnings for 1 year); Norway was providing from 42 to 52 weeks of parental leave (100% of earnings for 42 weeks, 80% for 52 weeks); Italy, 21 weeks of maternal leave (at 80% of earnings) and 10 months of parental leave (30% of earnings); Denmark was allowing 18 weeks of maternity leave (100% of earnings) and 10 weeks for each parent as parental leave (paid full-time). In Canada, 12 months of partially paid maternity and parental leaves were available; in the U.S., 12 weeks of unpaid leave were offered to those who were eligible (firms with 50 or more workers)[3].

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In Canada (2001 statistics):

- 61% of new mothers were receiving maternity or parental leave benefits;[4]
- 10% of husbands claimed or planned to claim paid parental benefits.[4]

What Do We Know?

Prenatal & Perinatal Stress

It is difficult to establish, measure and define causal links between maternal stress and anxiety during pregnancy and birth outcomes. Pregnant women assess their levels of stress according to a variety of factors, such as their personality type, disposition and whether the source of their stress is perceived as internal or external.

Stress during pregnancy has been linked to various developmental outcomes in children: reduced early attention and motor maturity, slower learning and impaired emotion regulation in offspring. Research also indicates that stress is not always harmful and that a certain degree of stimulation and activation may be beneficial for development. In addition, maternal depression after pregnancy is a significant risk factor linked to adverse psychosocial outcomes in children. The implications of maternal stress on the postnatal environment may be of greater consequence than the biological effects of prenatal exposure.

Parental Leave

Studies on parental leave and children's well-being suggest that early maternal employment (within the child's first year of life):

- is associated with increased behaviour problems in children (at age four);
- is associated with slightly lowered scores in measures of language, cognitive development and academic achievement in later years;
- may be disadvantageous for children from middle- to upper-income two-parent families; and beneficial for children from low-income and single-mother households on measures of language and cognitive development at age four.

Additional studies have demonstrated that paid leave is associated with reduced rates of infant and child mortality, and maternal health and well-being are more strongly associated with the

mother’s role satisfaction and the support received from spouse and society.

What Can Be Done?

Currently, more than 100 nations have established some form of maternity or parental leave policy. Existing parental leave policies vary in length and financial support.

Researchers recognize three key issues around policy leave:

- eligibility criteria for qualifying for a leave;
- duration of leave;
- level of benefits.

These issues and other factors, such as the type and availability of quality child care, significantly affect the duration of leave. Mothers have additional concerns, including the nature of their occupation (e.g. self-employed), employer-provided benefits, return-to-work options, job security and career advancement. There is evidence that women who take maternity or parental leaves may experience negative financial consequences.

Additional studies focusing on parental leave programs that offer options such as those available in European countries are needed. Key areas of further research include:

- Why do women return to work early?
- Why do most men not take parental leave?
- What determines how long a mother or father will take a leave?
- How can we normalize leave-taking for both mothers and fathers?
- What can organizations do to assist parents to balance work and family?

Parental leave is only one component in a set of policies and supports developed to help parents balance competing work and family demands. Examination should not be limited to social policies (i.e. maternity and parental leaves), but include reviews and assessments of employment structures, employee performance rewards and support in the workplace (scheduling flexibility, breastfeeding accessibility, quality child care facilities). Additional research could help to determine how workplaces, communities and governments can respond to enhance the positive long-term development of healthy families and children.

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