

Should childcare leave be extended?^[1]

Opinion

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EXCERPTS

A bill to revise the childcare and family care leave law so that parents can take time off to care for a child until the age of 2 will soon be submitted to the ordinary Diet session.

Behind the proposal is the increasingly serious problem of children on waiting lists for admission to childcare facilities. The following is a summary of interviews with a local government head in favor of the childcare leave extension, a corporate executive who believes it would adversely affect working women, and an academic well versed in this area. The interviewees also described their ideals for the childcare leave system.

Law would hinder women's careers

Noriko Hidaka / Manager of Teijin Ltd.'s Diversity Development Section

Material manufacturers like Teijin Ltd. still do not have relatively many female employees in terms of the nature of the industry. Teijin has about 10,000 domestic employees, 20 percent of whom are women.

However, like other industries, our industry has taken measures to prepare worker-friendly environments, ensure women can return from childcare leave quickly and take a step up in their careers. This childcare leave extension proposal seems to be forcing companies to deal with the issue of children on childcare center waiting lists, and I cannot support it. It goes against moves to promote women's active participation in society. It is also inconsistent with the government's measures.

Of the female employees in my company, 10 percent are currently on childcare leave. We want them to return to work as soon as possible. Of our leave takers, 90 percent have been able to return to work when their child was 1 year old, balancing work and child-rearing.

However, when we asked about 60 female employees in sogoshoku career-track positions who have children aged 6 or under what they thought would be an ideal time to return to work, 25 percent said "before the child turns 1," while 40 percent said "when the child is 1" and 35 percent said "when the child is 2 or older."

I was surprised by the persistent belief that mothers should care for their children at home until they turn 3. The problem is that long-term childcare leave results in a delay in employees' promotion and a severe labor shortage for the company. I am worried that the revision of the law may lead to people considering putting off their return to work.

If the system is to be revised, an environment should be created in which more men can obtain parental leave. Two years ago, Teijin started sending emails to male employees with newly born babies and their supervisors to encourage the employees to take childcare leave.

The number of men taking childcare leave has doubled since then, to a rate of 27 percent. Many people were unaware that men could also take such leave. Therefore, sending these emails produced good results.

Although the adoption of a proposal to distribute the extended leave period to men was put off at a government council discussing a bill to revise the law, I support it because it would create an atmosphere that makes it easier for men to take leave. Some companies may think letting male employees take childcare leave has no merit, but I think it can actually motivate people to work more efficiently.

To ensure employees can return to work, it is also important to follow up during their leave. Teijin provides employees on childcare leave with free online courses that are useful for work. The system should encourage companies to take such measures.

I gave birth to my oldest daughter 24 years ago and took half a year of leave. She went to a well-staffed public childcare center in Osaka Prefecture. They provided handmade meals and snacks, and took care of children who had food allergies. This allowed me to continue working without worry.

It seems local governments think quality is not important as long as children can enroll in childcare centers. This will cause mothers to feel guilty about working "while leaving my child in such a place" and hesitant about returning to work.

I hope local governments will not only solve the issue of children on waiting lists, but also provide high-quality childcare services.

Hidaka joined Teijin in 1989 after working for a foreign pharmaceutical company. She is in charge of training medical supplies salespeople and other tasks. She took up her current position in 2012. She is 58.

Longer leave won't solve waiting list issue

Shingo Ikeda / Senior researcher at the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training

If we make it possible to obtain childcare leave until children are age 2, we can prevent people from having to quit their jobs because their children were not accepted at childcare centers.

Demand for childcare services for children under 1, for which the required number of certified childcare workers is higher, can be expected to fall to some extent because more people would be able to postpone putting their children into childcare centers to the April after their children turn 1.

However, the revision would have only limited effects in terms of reducing the number of children on childcare center waiting lists.

Parents who need childcare facilities comprise not only those who are eligible for childcare leave. There are the self-employed, freelance and other people who are not eligible for childcare leave, even if they are hired. Even among people who take childcare leave, some choose to return to work earlier than expected for financial reasons or due to a shortage of staff at work.

Also, from the perspective of a policy to promote women's empowerment, a high degree of consideration is given to an early return to work. Thus, a tendency among parents to choose to have their children enrolled at childcare centers before they turn 1 is likely to continue.

Three out of my four children started at childcare centers before they turned 1. My firstborn entered a childcare center at the end of my wife's maternity leave. Neither of us took childcare leave at that time.

We applied for our second child to join a class for 1-year-olds after my wife's childcare leave. However, my second child was not accepted and we were at a loss as to what to do. We learned that it was more difficult for a 1-year-old to enter a childcare facility than an infant under the age of 1. As a result, we enrolled our third and fourth children while they were still under 1. My wife's childcare leave was short, but I felt she could return to work smoothly.

The original objective of the law on childcare and nursing care leave is to support continued employment. We should think of childcare leave not as a system for parents to devote to child-rearing until their children turn 1 year old, but as a system to support parents to return to work by the time their children are 1.

Local governments — struggling with the issue of children on waiting lists — asking parents to care for their children at home because of a shortage of childcare centers will deviate from the original intent of the system. Employees taking longer to return to work would not be desirable for companies.

It is necessary to listen to what local governments have to say, such as not being able to keep up with expanding demand for childcare services and that there are financial limitations. If the participation rate of women in the labor force increases, it will be highly likely that the shortage of childcare centers becomes more severe. We need to have further coordination of labor and childcare policies to avoid a situation in which parents have to return to work but cannot find childcare facilities.

It is also possible to adopt a general approach in which people take parental leave and raise their children at home until age 1, then enroll them in childcare facilities from age 1. This would require the creation of an environment in which everyone can devote themselves to child-rearing without worrying about income or work — including self-employed and freelance people.

All parents who wish to enroll their children aged 1 year old or older at childcare centers must be able to do so.

If the situation regarding enrolling at childcare facilities is left as it is and up to chance, parents will not be able to have children and continue working, or be freed from anxiety. It is important to remove uncertainty about the future and build a system in which there is no need for parents to make special efforts to enroll their children at childcare centers.

Ikeda specializes in sociology and researches the subject of balancing work and family life, including child-rearing and nursing care. As the father of one son and three daughters aged 2 to 11, he takes his children to and from their childcare center and also does the housework. He is 43.

Step would ease demand for infant day care

Ryo Tanaka / Mayor of Sugunami Ward, Tokyo

The number of children on the waiting list for admission to childcare centers in Sugunami Ward, Tokyo, is higher than national standards. That is why I, together with other ward mayors, have asked the central government to extend the childcare leave period.

To solve the waiting list problem, it is necessary not only to build more nurseries but also to reform working styles. I believe that building childcare facilities and expanding the childcare leave system are like the two wheels on a cart in efforts to remove the hurdles to childbirth and curb the declining birthrate.

Although they are responsible for preparing childcare facilities, local governments are nearing their limits. The budget for facilities in Sugunami Ward was about ¥6 billion when I became ward mayor six years ago. This fiscal year, however, it stands at about ¥23 billion. Our general account budget is about ¥180 billion, meaning the budget for the childcare facilities takes up more than 10 percent.

Even if we want to increase our capacity to accept children, securing sites for nurseries and certified nursery staff are extremely difficult.

There were 136 children on our ward's waiting list as of April last year, which was a big increase from the previous year. The number of preschool children in the ward has increased by about 3,000 over the last five years. The capacity of nurseries must increase by about 1,000 both next fiscal year and the following fiscal year.

According to central governmental standards for assigning workers in authorized childcare facilities, the younger children are, the more certified nursery staff must be assigned to them.

The additional operational expenses for accepting infants under age 1 would be a very high ¥3.2 million per year per child.

If the bill passes and it becomes possible to take leave until a child is 2 years old, fewer people will try to get their infants under age 1 into nurseries in April, and the numbers on waiting lists are expected to decrease.

It will also be possible for parents to care for their children at home during that most demanding first year, and the budget for childcare facilities will be cut. I think it is very important for both parents and children that parents can focus on child-rearing for a certain period of time.

However, quite a few parents consult the ward government office, saying, "Unless I submit a notice proving that my child cannot enter childcare facilities, my company will not approve of me obtaining childcare leave." The atmosphere at workplaces that makes it difficult to get leave is definitely a factor.

Women are expected to be active in all fields. It is natural for both parents to work these days. We should establish working styles and societies that are based on these transformations.

Times have changed since the days when men earned money and women stayed home, so it is essential to increase the percentage of men who take childcare leave. I think society as a whole should encourage all people, regardless of gender, to take parental leave as they wish.

At the same time, there are people who cannot obtain childcare leave, such as non-regular workers and self-employed people who cannot take a whole year off. Childcare facilities should be the last bastion for such people.

Tanaka was first elected to the Suginami Ward Assembly in 1991 after working as a TV Tokyo employee. He joined the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly in 1993, and took up his current post in 2010, where he is now in his second term. He is 56.

Chance to join childcare centers highest in April

Based on the childcare and family care leave law, workers can take childcare leave, in principle, until their child turns 1 year old. It can be extended to 1½ years, for example, if the child is unable to enroll in a childcare center when he or she is 1 year old.

However, the rate of men taking childcare leave is not increasing. In fiscal 2015, the rate was 81.5 percent for women and 2.65 percent for men.

If the bill to revise the law is enacted, parents will be able to extend their leave until the age of 2 if they cannot find a childcare center to enroll their child in by the age of 1½. This aims to prevent women from quitting their jobs because they are unable to find a place to leave their children.

April, or the beginning of the fiscal year, is the best time for having children enroll in childcare centers because it is the time of year with the most available spots. If leave is extended to the age of 2, more people will be able to apply for their children to enroll in childcare centers in April of the year when the children are 1 year old.

One certified childcare worker can only watch up to three children if they are under 1, and six once they are 1 year old. If the period of leave is extended and fewer people put their children in childcare centers before the age of 1, local governments will be able to accept more children aged 1 or older. This would help solve the issue of children on waiting lists.

However, some people strongly argue that the legal reform would go against the principle of promoting women's active participation in society.

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