

Editorial: Ottawa should do better on improving parental leave ^[1]

A new 18-month parental leave benefit will help too few with too little. Canada should follow the lead of Quebec and European countries when it comes to enriching parental leave programs.

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EXCERPTS

The federal government has taken a baby step toward make Canada's parental leave program more flexible. This is as good as far as it goes. But, sadly, it doesn't go very far.

On Thursday it announced it is changing the rules on parental leave to allow parents to receive up to 18 months of Employment Insurance benefits after the birth of a child.

But the devil, as always, is in the details. It turns out the changes won't help many parents and they underscore the government's overall lack of thinking about what it will take to truly help them out.

First, the government isn't extending existing EI benefits over 18 months. Instead, as first laid out in last spring's budget, it will simply give a parent the option of receiving what they would have been entitled to during 12 months and spreading it out over 18.

That means most families won't be able to afford it, says Kate McInturff, a senior researcher with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, which studies this issue. It's difficult enough to sustain a household for 12 months under the current rules; doing without a full income for even longer will be a struggle for many.

Indeed, right now, outside of Quebec where parental leave packages are much richer, a parent taking leave receives only 55 per cent of their salary, up to a maximum of \$543 a week. Taken over 18 months, it will be 33 per cent to a maximum of just \$326 per week.

Second, it's still extraordinarily difficult for parents who are working part-time or in other precarious work to access the EI parental leave program. Under current rules, which are not changing, individuals are required to work 600 insurable hours of work in the 52 weeks preceding their claim. The federal government should take a lesson, again, from Quebec where it's much easier to access parental leave benefits.

There's a third complication that will make the 18-month option impossible for most parents. As part of its policy change, Ottawa amended the Canada Labour Code for federally regulated workplaces, including banks, transport companies, telecoms and the public service to ensure that employees maintain job protection during that period.

But that covers only 8 per cent of workers. The 92 per cent who aren't federally regulated will have to wait until the province or territory they live in decides to change its labour laws to give similar protection.

Provinces need to act on this. But they will face resistance. One survey found that almost 70 per cent of small businesses oppose an 18-month leave option.

Nor is an extended parental leave necessarily even a good thing for many women. Research shows women tend to drop out of the workforce if they take parental leave beyond 12 months, says McInturff. Even if an employer is required to take them back after 18 months, they may find they get less satisfactory assignments or feel marginalized.

In fact, the government is avoiding the real issue: Creating a universal, accessible, affordable childcare program across the country that would help women get back into the workforce.

Outside of Quebec, with its accessible, subsidized child care program, for the most part women pay more for daycare for kids under 18 months than they earn, she says.

Canada lags badly behind many countries, particularly in Europe, in the generosity and accessibility of its parental leave programs. The government should be moving more quickly toward significant changes, rather than being satisfied with a mere tweak to the existing system.

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