

Opinion: New family care policies provide more flexibility, but for whom?^[1]

It is unclear if these newly announced federal policies will solve the family care problems they were meant to address, especially when it comes to parental leave.

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Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 12 Nov 2017

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EXCERPTS

Last week, Jean-Yves Duclos, the minister of Families, Children and Social Development, announced new family care policies designed to increase flexibility for people needing to care for children and other family members. The new policies increase parental leave from 12 to 18 months and offer caregiver benefits of 15 weeks for sick or injured adult members of families and 35 weeks for sick or injured children.

There are many appealing features of these plans, especially the caregiver benefits, which are now extended not just to parents but to other family members providing care and also allow for a broader range of medical professionals to certify the claim. This makes it easier for families to rally around the needs of family members.

However, it is unclear if these new policies solve the problems they were meant to address, especially when it comes to parental leave.

First, the goal is to provide families with more flexibility upon the birth of a new child. One of the reasons this flexibility is appealing is that some parents would like more time at home to bond with their children.

On the other hand, many people need time at home to extend to 18 months because day care programs do not accept children under that age. In this sense, we are using parental leave to substitute for more adequate child care options.

It is unclear how many parents would avail themselves of pre-18-month daycare if it were more widely available. Extending parental leave should not be put in place to solve the problem of lack of available daycare options.

Second, the current plan allows parents to share parental leave but does not specify which parent takes what portion of the leave. Evidence suggests that, in the case of heterosexual couples, when the option to share leave is offered, men are unlikely to take much advantage of the program. Only when “use it or lose it” parental leave is implemented do men actually go on leave.

For example, when Quebec offered in five weeks of paternity leave, the percentage of Quebecois fathers taking paternity leave leapt from around 10 per cent to more than 80 per cent from 2001 to 2010.

The danger of extending leave but not putting in place measures to assure parents share the time is that women are simply out of the workforce for longer. The longer women are away from work, the more likely they are to lose ground in their careers and the harder it is to slot back into work upon their return. This then contributes to the gender wage gap and also to the dearth of women in senior leadership roles.

While people emphasize the greater time with children that the increase to 18 months provides, they have neglected to consider the detrimental effects that this might have on women’s economic advancement.

Finally, these new policies announced last week may not benefit much of the Canadian population. They only apply to federally regulated industries, which means the vast majority of workers are excluded.

Further, because they continue to be based on the Employment Insurance (EI) system, the benefits may actually not be affordable to many. The extension to 18 months does not come with more money but simply spreads the benefits across more months. A 12-month leave pays 55 per cent of wages up to \$543 per week. An 18-month leave pays 33 per cent of wages up to \$326 per week.

We know that these levels of payments may actually not be a living wage and therefore may only benefit people at the higher income levels. In best practice Nordic countries, people get around 80 per cent of wages while on leave.

Further, EI benefits can only apply to people who have worked at least 600 hours in the previous 12 months or to self-employed workers who opt in and have made more than \$6,888 in the past year. As a result, the new benefits may not help out those in most need of support.

In short, it is good news that the federal government is working on helping out families with caregiving needs. However, there may be unintended consequences of this policy that mean that most Canadians will not truly benefit from the greater flexibility provided.

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-reprinted from Toronto Star

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