

What would paternity leave mean for the Swiss? ^[1]

Labour law in Switzerland does not provide any paternity leave. Now Swiss voters must decide whether to introduce it.

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EXCERPTS

In practical terms, what would it mean if fathers had time off work to devote to their children?

"It would be a first step which could change the whole social set-up," says Davide Dosi of the popular initiative on paternity leave, soon up for a vote in Switzerland. He and his wife Arianna make their home in Chiasso, a Swiss community of 8,000 on the Italian border.

While the Dosis are strongly in favour of the initiative, it is not because they expect to benefit from it themselves. Their two daughters are grown; in December, Anna will be 11 and Elena 7.

Change the law?

In May 2016, following the narrow defeat of a similar parliamentary initiative, four organisations including the Christian trade union federation Travail Suisse launched the people's initiative "For a reasonable paternity leave – for the sake of the whole family".

The text proposes to enshrine in Swiss law the right to a paid paternity leave of at least four weeks, with compensation for lost earnings during that time. The timing of the 20 days of leave would be flexible but they would have to be taken within the first 12 months of a child's life.

Supporters quickly gathered more than 107,000 signatures in support of the initiative, and federal authorities recently confirmed that the vote may proceed. A 2015 opinion poll carried out by Travail.Suisse showed that 80% of Swiss voters were in favour of some kind of paid paternity leave.

However, in October, the Federal Council recommended that people vote against the initiative, arguing that the estimated costs of CHF420 million (\$419.5 million) per year are too much for the Swiss economy to shoulder. The seven-member executive branch said that paternity leave should remain an issue to be worked out in families and with individual employers, choosing instead to emphasise the need for more affordable and accessible child care options outside the home.

'A treasure no one can ever take away'

Davide and Arianna know what's at stake in the initiative. Davide took time off but paid for it out of his own pocket after the birth of his two daughters. Both times, when Arianna's maternity leave of four months was up, Davide cut down his working hours by 20% for six months. He recalls the experience with enthusiasm and deep emotion.

"Staying at home, I could see my daughters grow. This is a treasure which no one can ever take away from me," he says, explaining that it helped him and his two daughters to get to know each other better.

"There are so many things that you'll never get back if you don't experience them at that point."

Talking through problems

Of course it is not all plain sailing for fathers who elect to spend more time at home. But the challenges can help personal growth, says Davide.

"You come to realize what it means to stay at home alone all day with the kids. It's a learning experience." It contributes, he says, not just to mutual understanding between father and children, but also between husband and wife.

Sharing the caregiving role can cause friction, since the two parents have to agree on the ground rules, notes Davide, who does not hide the fact that he and Arianna had their differences at times. "You have to be ready to talk about things, and not assume that things will work a certain way if just one of you is establishing a rule."

"You learn so much that way," adds his wife. "What I came to realise is that Davide dealt with particular situations in his own way. This can lead to each of you learning from the example of the other."

A privileged situation

This couple has no regrets: they would handle parental leave the same way all over again, even though it meant losing a chunk of the monthly paycheck.

"We never thought of it as a burden or a sacrifice," Arianna says. "The experience I had with my husband and daughters was priceless."

Arianna, who works as manager of international relations and mobility for the Università della Svizzera italiana^{external link}, points out that she and Davide, a historian and librarian, could afford to cut down on work time because they enjoyed "a privileged situation – our earnings left us free to make such a choice, and our employers were open-minded."

Equal rights

If Swiss labour law guaranteed paid paternity leave of four weeks, the ability to take leave would no longer depend on families' financial situations or on individual employer policies.

"Just like every mother, fathers would have the right to devote some time to their own children. It would mean an enormous social change," Davide argues.

Translated from Italian by Terence MacNamee, [swissinfo.ch](https://www.swissinfo.ch)

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