

Ottawa should go ahead with use-it-or-lose-it paternity leave ^[1]

In 2006 the Quebec government created a use-it-or-lose-it five-week paid paternity program. The result: happier, healthier families and more gender equity. The federal government should follow suit.

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EXCERPTS

Back in 2015, federal Liberal policy advisers had a very good idea:

If the party was elected it would create a dedicated leave program for new fathers. While ideas on how it would work varied, one suggestion was to model it on the wildly successful use-it-or-lose-it paternity leave program that Quebec has had since 2006. That five-week program is in addition to the parental leave that mums and dads in that province, and across the country, already enjoy.

But after they were elected in 2015 the Liberals lost sight of this admirable goal. They shouldn't have.

As Prime Minister Justin Trudeau noted at the United Nations in 2016, such a program would lead to more gender equality and increasing opportunities for women in the workforce.

Now a plan along these lines is apparently back on the government's radar. Trudeau mused about it last week in Davos, calling it a "really, really interesting idea" and saying "that message of making sure that there is more sharing of the responsibilities around child-rearing is something that we do have to do a better job of."

His government should push ahead with the idea. A host of benefits come with dedicated leave for new fathers.

First, when paternity leave is a use-it-or-lose it program, like Quebec's, more dads are inclined to participate. According to The Vanier Institute of the Family, 86 per cent of fathers in Quebec claimed parental benefits in 2015, up from only 28 per cent before the plan was implemented.

Compare that to the rest of Canada, where only 12 per cent of recent dads claimed parental benefits in 2015, barely changed from 11 per cent in 2005.

The reason for the difference? Without a separate paid paternity leave program, mothers and fathers are left to negotiate who will take time off. That usually falls to the woman, since she more often earns less than the man. Unfortunately, that only reinforces the gender wage gap.

As Sarah Kaplan, director for the Institute for Gender and the Economy pointed out in the Star: "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 also contributes to the “dearth of women in senior leadership roles.”

Alternatively, when dads take time off the gender wage gap diminishes and women make career gains. Astonishingly, one Swedish study found that for every month of paternity leave fathers take, the income of their partners rises by 7 per cent.

Paternity leave also improves the bond between child and father and leads to more gender-neutral habits within the home.

A 2015 study of the Quebec program by the U.S. Council on Contemporary Families, for example, found that by 2010 men who had taken the leave were already spending 23 per cent more time doing housework and child care than were men in other parts of Canada.

The research shows the Quebec program had an immediate effect on the behaviour of new fathers. It found there was an immediate jump in men’s participation in housework and child care between Jan. 1, 2005, when the Quebec plan wasn’t in place and Jan. 1, 2006, when it was. “It’s incredibly unlikely that everyone all of a sudden had egalitarian beliefs,” says the study’s author, Ankita Patnaik. Instead she believes the daddy program made the difference and sends out an important message: “This is what we, as a society, think dads should be doing. This is what’s normal.”

Similar effects are found in countries that have instituted use-it-or-lose-it paternity leave programs. Iceland is one of them. It gave mothers and fathers three months of paid leave each, plus three months for the family to share. If fathers don’t take their three months, the family forfeits them. By 2015, 90 per cent of fathers were taking paid leave and three years after the birth of a child, 70 per cent of the parents who lived together shared child care equally.

That has important effects on children. A 2016 study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development found that when men do take time off work to help care for their newborn children, they stay more involved in their lives as they grow up. In fact, the children do better physically, mentally and emotionally. Further, both parents report greater life satisfaction.

Nor are use-it-or-lose-it paternity leave programs overly expensive. Quebec’s is financed by the Quebec Parental Insurance Program. In 2016 \$188 million was paid out of the fund to fathers.

The evidence is in. Dedicated paternity leave creates healthier, happier families while helping to close the gender pay gap and increasing the number of women in senior positions.

For a prime minister who has stressed his belief in gender equality there can be no ignoring the facts. It’s time the rest of Canada followed Quebec’s sensible lead and introduced use-it-or-lose-it paid paternity leave.

-reprinted from Toronto Star

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