

# Allison Hanes: Paternity leave is win-win <sup>[1]</sup>

Fathers who take advantage of new federal program will be more involved in caregiving — and that can make a real difference in promoting equality of the sexes

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## EXCERPTS

The day I switched places with my husband and went back to work while he stayed home with our eight-month-old daughter was a learning experience for us both.

“What do I feed her?” he asked as I headed out the door.

“Oh, there’s some baby food in the freezer,” I replied.

“No. What. Do. I. Feed. Her?” he asked, more insistently this time. Then it hit me: he wanted me to dish out the sweet potatoes and the apple purée because he had no clue what our child ate for lunch or how much.

By the end of his first week of parental leave, however, my husband no longer wanted or needed my advice. He knew what she liked to eat. He had taught her to crawl finally. He got the hang of solo parenting pretty quickly without me around to take charge or second-guess his moves.

This is the genius of the new use-it-or-lose-it paternity leave program announced in the federal budget Tuesday. It will give new dads in the rest of Canada (or same-sex or adoptive parents) the same benefits Quebec fathers have enjoyed <sup>[3]</sup> for over a decade.

Canadian fathers will also get five weeks all to themselves (or eight weeks at a lower premium) when their children are born. While many will likely take some or all of this time in the all-hands-on-deck early weeks when mom is also off, there’s a chance it will give them the experience, confidence and desire to take some of the leave that can be split between parents. This time has long been open to fathers, but mostly gets used by mothers.

It’s a clever bit of social engineering that — as studies of the Quebec example show — makes a real difference in promoting equality of the sexes.

A policy paper by the Institute for Research on Public Policy <sup>[4]</sup> found that 78 per cent of Quebec fathers took their paternity leave, and just over a third used some of the benefits available to either parent, up from 14 per cent before the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan launched. In comparison, 27 per cent of dads in the rest of Canada took some time off after the birth of a child and only four per cent claimed any parental benefits.

Research on Quebec also shows that fathers who take paternity leave tend to be more involved in child-rearing and household chores <sup>[5]</sup>,

even many years after the fact. This more equitable division of domestic labour over the long term is perhaps the critical element in achieving equality of the sexes.

While more women are working outside the home after having children, many still shoulder the bulk of family duties compared to their male counterparts. This may in part explain the lack of women in leadership roles, corporate boardrooms or politics, as well as the stress and frustration these would-be supermoms experience in chasing the elusive goal of having it all.

As Anne-Marie Slaughter, an American academic, foreign policy analyst and high-powered Obama-era government official argued, this impossible balancing act remains the key reason “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All” <sup>[6]</sup> (the title of her 2012 essay in The Atlantic). Slaughter has said that none of her accomplishments would have been possible without her husband, academic Andrew Moravcsik, taking on the role of lead parent to their two sons — a choice that worked well for their family.

And in a recent video interview <sup>[7]</sup>, Slaughter pondered the fact that society still values traditional men’s work — breadwinning — over traditional women’s work — caregiving — even when it comes to these ongoing discussions of feminism and equality.

“We’ve focused on advancing women, and what we’ve really meant is allowing women to be men,” she said. “Caregiving is the entire spectrum of caring for a child. ... It’s the joy of raising a family, and men have been shut out of that. But many men say: ‘Well, I have work and I support my family, but I see my family very little and I would like to have more time with them.’”

She argued that it’s time to make “women’s work” everyone’s work.

The exclusive paternity leave announced in the federal government may be one small way of freeing dads to take this more active role. Often, it’s not a lack of will on their part. Factors like social pressure, employer expectations, who has the higher income and personal preference also help determine who stays home with the baby. And many roll up their sleeves happily without a program to nudge them along.

Some are already predicting the lower payout in the federal plan (55 per cent of a maximum income versus 70 per cent in Quebec) won’t be enough incentive to get more men to take parental leave. But part of the point of the program is also creating a new norm and removing some of the lingering stigma about men stepping away from work to focus on their families.

Of course, programs like Quebec’s — and now Canada’s — aren’t perfect.

As writer Marilyse Hamelin noted <sup>[8]</sup> in her treatise Motherhood: The hidden face of sexism, 10 years of paternity leave in Quebec hasn’t totally evened out domestic burdens or eliminated the glass ceiling holding back many working moms. But she nevertheless concludes more dads stepping into the essential role of caregiver is the next step on the path to gender equality.

-reprinted from Montreal Gazette

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