

# Are the world's richest countries family friendly? Policy in the OECD and EU <sup>[1]</sup>

Family-friendly policies report

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## AVAILABILITY

Full access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## Introduction

Family-friendly policies matter because they help children to get a better start in life and help parents to find the right balance between their commitments at work and at home. Yet even some of the world's richest countries fail to offer comprehensive solutions to all families. This report focuses on two key policies: childcare leave for parents and early childhood education and care for preschool children. It reviews these policies in the 41 high- and middle-income countries that are part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) or the European Union (EU), using the most recent comparable data on hand. The analysis includes national breastfeeding rates and policies as well as the quality of preschool education, where comparable indicators are available. It excludes other elements of family policy, such as child benefits or birth grants, to limit the scope of the report to issues that concern the work-family balance.

## Key messages

- There is no time more critical to children's brain development – and therefore their futures – than the earliest years of life. Parents hold the biggest stake in creating the nurturing environment their children need, and governments should give them the resources to do so.
- Family-friendly policies – including paid parental leave, universal quality, affordable childcare from birth to the first grade of school and breastfeeding breaks – strengthen the bond between parents and their children, which is critical for the development of families and socially cohesive societies.
- The report highlights that while Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Estonia and Portugal offer the best family-friendly policies among 31 rich countries with available data. Switzerland, Greece, Cyprus, United Kingdom and Ireland rank the lowest.
- The report notes that in many countries, there's a lack of paid parental leave, with only half of countries offering at least six months of leave at full pay equivalent for mothers. The United States is the only country included in the analysis with no national paid leave policy for mothers, or fathers.
- The report also finds that there is a significant lack of paid paternity available to fathers. However, even when fathers are offered paid leave, many do not to take it. In Japan, the only country that offers at least six months at full pay for fathers, only 1 in 20 fathers took paid leave in 2017.
- Universal access to quality, affordable childcare from birth to children's entry into the first grade of school is critical for children's development and for enabling parents to go to work – and thus helping them become more financially stable.
- However, for some parents looking for childcare options, affordability is the biggest barrier. Data from 29 countries highlighted parents of young children in the United Kingdom were the most likely to cite cost as the reason why they do not use childcare centres more.
- The report highlights strong disparity between maternity and paternity leave. Leave reserved for fathers makes up at least one third of all available paid leave in only four countries -- Iceland, Japan, Republic of Korea and Portugal. In Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Norway, Spain and Sweden the father's share is more than a tenth of a total allocated time. In the remaining 19 countries with some paternal leave, the father's share is less than 10 per cent of total time.
- UNICEF is advocating for at least six months of leave for all parents; safe and comfortable public and work-based places for women to breastfeed; and universal access to quality, affordable childcare from birth to children's entry into the first grade of school.

**Related link:** Family-friendly policies in rich countries: How Canada compares <sup>[3]</sup>

**Region:** International <sup>[4]</sup>

**Tags:** policy <sup>[5]</sup>

maternity and parental leave <sup>[6]</sup>

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