

For mothers, parental leave is a penalty whether they take it or not^[1]

On the flip side, if more parents took time off, a mother's earnings would increase by about 7% for each additional month her spouse or partner takes off work.

Author:

Source: Fast Company

Format: Article

Publication Date: 17 Jun 2019

AVAILABILITY

Access online^[2]

EXCERPTS

Corporate parental leave policies are earning their share of headlines: Netflix offers 52 weeks of paid leave, Microsoft offers 22 weeks to birth parents and 10 to those who don't give birth (and now will only work with companies that offer paid leave as well), and Amazon offers 20 weeks to mothers and will even shell out for their partner's parental leave pay—even if they don't work for Amazon. These are glimpses of progress among companies in a country still behind the curve on parental leave. But even these changes haven't made a dent in a culture that still is yet to fully embrace the idea of parental leave.

In the U.S., only 14% of the men who have access to parental leave take more than two weeks after the birth or adoption of a child, according to a study by Ball State University.

Why aren't fathers taking paternity leave? They don't want to suffer the motherhood penalty.

A Deloitte survey found that 57% of men say taking paternity leave would be perceived as a lack of commitment to their careers—a penalty all too familiar to mothers who also do paid work.

For fathers, taking parental leave is seen as optional, even unnecessary. So when they take paternity leave at all, they're regarded as committed to their family; when they come back after fewer than two weeks, they're committed to working. It's when a larger amount of time is taken that they risk professional penalty.

For mothers, maternity leave is used to measure on a sliding scale a woman's level of "commitment," with her role as a mother on one end and her role as a professional on the other. If she takes time away from work, she lacks commitment to her career. If she uses her time to work, she lacks commitment to her family.

When fathers are given the option, they're rewarded for not taking parental leave, they're rewarded for taking it too. When mothers are given the option, they're penalized either way.

A 2010 study by Harvard University examined normative workplace discrimination against mothers.

In a behavioral experiment with 260 undergraduate students, female study participants rated successful mothers as significantly less likeable and less committed compared to otherwise identical fathers. Highly successful fathers were thus seen as having more positive interpersonal skills than mothers.

Psychologist Eden B. King writes of the study's findings: "Simply being labeled as a 'mom' seems to convey that a person is lacking in ability."

WHEN FATHERS TAKE PARENTAL LEAVE, MOTHERS PROSPER

Data suggests that when fathers do take time away from work after the birth or adoption of a child, the mother's wages actually increase. A study by the Institute for Labour Market Policy Evaluation in Sweden (which offers one of the world's most extensive parental leave policies), shows that a mother's earnings increase by about 7% for each additional month her spouse takes off work—possibly the result of more equal distribution of childcare and household duties between partners. Long-term, this opens the door for the normalization of leave and a dent in the gender pay gap.

Paternity leave is also backed by the majority of women. InHerSight asked 3,000 women how important they feel it is for men to take the paternity leave offered to them: 97% of women consider it important, 75% of them call it very important.

Women continue to take on most of the family and household obligations, even when both partners do paid work full-time. This imbalance widens the gender pay gap. On average, mothers earn 4% less for each child they have, while fathers earn 6% more.

When men take parental leave, not only does this create a more equitable distribution of household and family duties, it also contributes to ending the stereotype that childcare is “women’s work” and de-genders family and household obligations.

NORMALIZING THE PRACTICE OF PARENTAL LEAVE

Parental leave practice must change on a systematic and cultural level—and it needs to start from the top down. Sweden, for example, has instituted a “use it or lose it” policy for parental leave, a measure intended to increase the share of parents taking time away from work to care for their families.

The data supports this as well. In a 2014 study, researchers at the Boston College Center for Work and Family (BCCWF) found that “the greater the support for fathers taking time off after the birth of their children” by the workplace culture and immediate manager, “the more time that fathers took off.”

When we normalize parental leave across genders, we make it more possible for all parents, and especially women, to take time—time they need to welcome a new child into the family.

Related link:

Region: United States [3]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/19/06/mothers-parental-leave-penalty-whether-they-take-it-or-not>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/19/06/mothers-parental-leave-penalty-whether-they-take-it-or-not> [2]

<https://www.fastcompany.com/90363981/for-mothers-parental-leave-is-a-penalty-whether-they-take-it-or-not> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7865>