

# UNICEF urges 'transformative shift' in family-friendly work policies to reap 'huge' benefits <sup>[1]</sup>

Because the “earliest years” of life are the most crucial, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) published a list of new family-friendly policy recommendations on Friday it says will likely reap “huge” benefits.

**Author:** UNICEF

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

“There is no other time more critical to children’s lives than their earliest years”, said Henrietta Fore, UNICEF Executive Director, “which is why we need a transformative shift in how businesses and governments invest in policies and practices that not only support healthy brain development, but also strengthen the bond between parents and their children – and reap huge economic and social benefits in return.”

And yet, policies, such as paid parental leave, breastfeeding breaks and affordable childcare are not available for most parents around the world. *Family-Friendly Policies: Redesigning the Workplace of the Future*, outlines the latest evidence and new recommendations that lay the foundation for healthy development, success and poverty reduction.

### **Paid parental leave**

According to UNICEF, a one-month increase in paid maternity leave in low-and-middle income countries has been found to reduce infant mortality rates by 13 per cent. In high-income countries, each additional week of paid parental leave is associated with more than a four per cent lower chance of single mothers living in poverty. Paid parental leave of six months also helps promote exclusive breastfeeding, according to the agency.

Moreover, it also contributes to lower staff turnover rates, lower recruitment and training costs, and retention of experienced employees. For countries that have had these policies in place for the past several decades, increases in female employment have boosted GDP per capita growth by between 10 per cent and 20 per cent.

UNICEF recommends at least six months of paid leave for all parents combined, with 18 weeks reserved specifically for mothers.

### **Breastfeeding**

Regular breaks during working hours to breastfeed, or to express breastmilk in a supportive environment, contributes to lower rates of acute infant and chronic child illness as well as improved cognitive and educational outcomes, UNICEF says.

The benefits for mothers include lower rates of postnatal depression, improved physical health and a reduction in the lifetime risk of breast cancer. Optimal breastfeeding practices produce societal benefits in what UNICEF estimated to be a \$35 to \$1 return on investment.

And yet, the latest available data shows only 40 per cent of children under six months are exclusively breastfed, as recommended.

Because the workplace represents a substantial barrier to breastfeeding, with around 16 per cent of workplaces without any statutory requirements to support it, breastfeeding is another priority recommendation of the new policy manifesto.

“The gains of family-friendly policies far outweigh the cost of implementation: improved health outcomes, reductions in poverty, increased business productivity, and economic growth,” Ms. Fore asserted.

### **Universal childcare**

Universal access to affordable, quality childcare from the end of parental leave until a child’s entry into the first grade of school is the brief’s third recommendation.

Children who receive quality and nurturing early childcare are healthier, learn better and stay in school longer, and have higher earnings as adults. Childcare provisions enable parents to meet their work obligations and be parents at home.

### **Child benefits**

Expanded coverage of cash benefits should be part of all countries’ social protection system for young children.

A recent analysis indicated that only one-in-three households globally receive child or family cash benefit that varied from 88 per cent in Europe and Central Asia, to 28 per cent in Asia and the Pacific, and 16 per cent in Africa.

In translation, the majority of children in the poorest countries do not yet receive cash benefits to support their development.

“Investing in our families is smart social policy, but it’s smart economic policy as well”, concluded the UNICEF chief.

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