

# The limitations of Quebec's family policy <sup>[1]</sup>

Quebec could help parents cope better with crises by allowing parental leave benefits to be used beyond the 18-month limit.

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**Source:** Policy Options

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 14 Dec 2023

## AVAILABILITY

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

### Excerpts

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La Belle Province is recognized as offering the best family-work balance measures in North America. Two main programs make Quebec's family policy exceptional: a network of low-cost childcare services and parental leave – the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP) – with benefits that are more accessible and generous than those offered elsewhere in Canada.

However, these measures focus primarily on early childhood. QPIP parental benefits can only be used in the first 18 months after a child's arrival, and affordable year-round childcare services cease to be available when a child starts kindergarten.

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### It takes a village

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The use of paternity benefits and childcare services calls into question the traditional division of child-related tasks, as well as encouraging greater symmetry in the career paths of mothers and fathers. The "motherhood penalty," i.e. the loss of income caused by the arrival of a child, is less significant in Quebec than elsewhere in Canada.

In times of crisis, however, the village shrinks and equality gains erode. Help from grandparents or other family members is not always available. The few childcare services that remain open are prohibitively expensive. Fathers tend to make less use of paternity benefits, as was the case during the pandemic, presumably to avoid income reduction.

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### A collective responsibility

Times of crisis highlight the fragility of equity between men and women. Canadian and international studies have shown that school closures increase women's family burdens.

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This is the irony of the current conflict. On the one hand, teachers, school educators, nurses and care assistants are fighting for better recognition of the value of their work, which allows our economy to function. It is these workers – predominantly women – who makes it possible to socialize, educate and care for the next generation of taxpayers – as well as previous ones. On the other hand, the possibility for many parents to telework, even with children at home, tends to push child-related tasks deeper into the shadows.

How can Quebec help to maintain the fragile gains made in equality between women and men when schools are closed but children are not yet independent? The question was already being asked before the pandemic, during the spring break and the nine-week school holiday in the summer. The health crisis, and now the strikes, show that occasional school closures are no longer a phenomenon to be ignored. At least, certainly not in Quebec, where 72.5 per cent of mothers with partners and at least one child aged 12 and under have a full-time job.

### Drawing on best practices

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In Sweden, parental benefits total 240 days per parent (for a combined 480 days for couples), of which 384 days must be used before the child's fourth birthday. The unique feature of Swedish benefits is that the remaining 96 days can be kept and used until the child reaches the age of 12. Parents who so wish can therefore bank these days and use them in the event of an emergency.

Quebec could draw inspiration from such an approach, even if it entails certain risks, the most important of which is that of mothers overusing banked leave to the detriment of fathers. But Quebec fathers have already shown they respond positively to incentives that

encourage their involvement in the use of parental benefits.

It is said that every crisis offers opportunity. The provincial government could take advantage of the latest crisis to improve parental leave and Quebec at the vanguard of family policy on the continent.

**Related link:** Why two scientist-mums made a database of parental-leave policies<sup>[3]</sup>

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

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