

Policies to assist parents with young children^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Article in pdf^[2]

Future of Children journal webpage and table of contents^[3]

Summary:

The struggle to balance work responsibilities with family obligations may be most difficult for working parents of the youngest children, those five and under. Any policy changes designed to ease the difficulties for these families are likely to be controversial, requiring a careful effort to weigh both the costs and benefits of possible interventions while respecting diverse and at times conflicting American values. In this article, Christopher Ruhm looks at two potential interventions- parental leave and early childhood education and care (ECEC)-comparing differences in policies in the United States, Canada, and several European nations and assessing their consequences for important parent and child outcomes.

By and large, Canadian and European policies are more generous than those in the United States, with most women eligible for paid maternity leave, which in a few countries can last for three years or more. Many of these countries also provide for paid leave that can be used by either the mother or the father. And in many European countries ECEC programs are nearly universal after the child reaches a certain age. In the United States, parental leave, if it is available, is usually short and unpaid, and ECEC is generally regarded as a private responsibility of parents, although some federal programs help defray costs of care and preschool education.

Ruhm notes that research on the effects of differences in policies is not completely conclusive, in part because of the difficulty of isolating consequences of leave and ECEC policies from other influences on employment and children's outcomes. But, he says, the comparative evidence does suggest desirable directions for future policy in the United States. Policies establishing rights to short parental leaves increase time at home with infants and slightly improve the job continuity of mothers, with small, but positive, long-run consequences for mothers and children. Therefore, Ruhm indicates that moderate extensions of existing U.S. leave entitlements (up to several months in duration) make sense. He also suggests that some form of paid leave would facilitate its use, particularly among less advantaged parents, and that efforts to improve the quality of ECEC, while maintaining or enhancing affordability, are desirable.

Region: United States^[4]

Tags: work/life balance^[5]

maternity andparental leave^[6]

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