

Canada would benefit from granting fathers paid time off ^[1]

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Source: Vancouver Sun

Format: Article

Publication Date: 10 Jun 2014

EXCERPTS

Many families will celebrate the laughter, tears, and frustrations of fatherhood later this week. We have a national day dedicated to the special bond between fathers and their children. Yet, only a small minority of fathers are welcomed into fatherhood with specifically allocated time off work to find their bearings in their new parenting gig.

Just one in four new fathers across Canada claimed parental benefits in 2012. However, Quebecois fathers claim parental benefits at a significantly higher rate. Are Quebecois fathers more dedicated to parenting? Do they prioritize spending time with their children more highly than other fathers?

Some cultural differences are at play, but not in terms of an English-French divide. The key differences stem from government priorities.

The Quebec government has since 1997 provided subsidized universal child care to support working parents, with parents paying just a \$7 daily fee. Although the program is not without its deficiencies, more than half of all Quebecois children under age five are enrolled in regulated child care. Fewer than one quarter of B.C. children under five are enrolled in regulated child care, and B.C.'s fees are 5-7 times greater than Quebec's.

Additionally, since 2006, the Quebec government has offered fathers exclusive paternity benefits under the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan. These benefits are not transferable to mothers; dads either use them or lose them. In contrast, the national Employment Insurance program offers shared parental benefits, resulting in eligible mothers using most or all of the available benefits.

Quebecois fathers claimed parental benefits at a higher rate than fathers in other provinces even before QPIP was introduced. However, in the program's first year, fathers' claiming rate increased from 28 per cent to 48 per cent, and by 2012 the figure had risen to 80 per cent. This figure lies in stark contrast to the nine per cent of fathers elsewhere in Canada who claimed parental benefits.

Making parental benefits non-transferable from the father to the mother is effective because of pervasive traditional gender norms in families and the labour market. Many fathers perceive that shared parental benefits belong to mothers and feel guilty about taking away their leave time.

Additionally, the wage replacement rate for parental benefits under EI is only 55 per cent, and since men tend to be the higher earners, the family would take a larger financial hit if the father were to claim parental benefits. The QPIP reduces this disincentive by offering fathers a higher wage replacement rate of 70-75 per cent.

Another advantage of exclusive paternity benefits is their impact in the workplace. These benefits give fathers the leverage to negotiate leave time with employers who do not always view paternity leave as necessary. Employers also benefit from increased employee well-being and health; in Sweden, the use of paternity leave decreased fathers' use of sick days and in-patient care, resulting in cost savings to employers and to the health care system.

The benefits do not end there. Children who experience positive father involvement develop higher levels of cognitive and social competence and have better academic and professional outcomes later in life. Partners of men who take parental leave are able to pursue academic and professional opportunities and share household chores more equally. Fathers who take parental leave report closer relationships with their families and develop a more positive outlook on marriage and parenting.

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