

# Stop the baby battle, and give dads their own paid leave <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

It's the signature marital dispute of the 2010s, one that has got new parents across Canada bickering with one another: Which one of them gets to take the paid parental leave. While 15 weeks of Employment Insurance-subsidized baby time is reserved for birth mothers, two parents are allowed to share the subsequent 35 weeks of leave as they see fit. When fathers brought in the lion's share of the salary and maternal instincts were lionized, it wasn't much of an issue. But the desire of men to hang with their kiddies has grown in tandem with the contribution of women to the household income. Now that a fifth of Canadian fathers take some sort of post-partum leave and a third of wives out-earn their husbands, those 35 weeks are at the centre of many a marital tussle.

I've heard parents argue over who gets to stay home longer and at which point of baby's development (by the second time around, each knows the difference between cuddling a stationary six-month-old and handling the domestic chores while managing a crawler). More than once, I've heard a mom flat-out refuse to share, as though she were a kindergartener herself. "I just feel like I deserve it all," one friend said recently near the end of her pregnancy, and after 40 weeks of heartburn, kicks to the diaphragm and round-the-clock urination, it's hard to disagree.

When the choice has to be made, mom usually stays home: dads are three times more likely to apply for parental EI if their spouse isn't doing so, and in 2012, four per cent fewer men took leave than those who became fathers the year before.

Father involvement is a societal miracle pill, said to promote smarter, more emotionally stable children and mothers with measurably lower amounts of stressed-out cortisol racing through their blood. But maternity leave is obviously crucial to the health of both mother and child, not least because it makes women more likely to stick with breastfeeding, that holy grail of motherhood. The only reason this is a conundrum is because most of Canada has yet to reach for the obvious solution. Instead of making parental leave an either-mom-or-dad proposition, it's time for subsidized leave that's saved especially for the so-called secondary parent (any increase in leave can only benefit adoptive and same-sex parents, too).

"Dad-only" leave already exists in Quebec, where a separate five-week paid post-partum leave program has existed for fathers since 2006. An impressive 80 per cent of fathers in Quebec take some time off after their babies are born, compared with just 25 per cent in the rest of the country. Quebec dads take longer leaves, too, staying home to bond with their offspring and deal with the mountains of laundry for almost six weeks, compared to just two and a half across the rest of the country.

Fathers outside of la belle province aren't hard-hearted. Their leave is more likely to be informal and unpaid than government-sanctioned and job-guaranteed, a frightening idea when there's a new mouth to feed at home and mom is also taking a break from the payroll.

Another argument in favour of second-parent leave is the chance for Canadian fathers to stand up and be counted. Too much paternity leave is made up of cobbled-together vacation days and work-at-home long weekends - hazy, informal and more or less invisible to bosses and brass, making it easy for companies to continue defining work-life balance as a mommy problem. In Sweden, 60 days of post-partum leave have been available only to fathers since 2002. Now, with more than a decade of statistics to examine, researchers have found that mothers' incomes take less of a hit after child-bearing, while fathers' incomes have remained steady.

More financial stability for families, stronger mental health for mom and increased snuggle time for dad: The only flaw in assigning some parental leave for the one who didn't give birth is an increase in governmental paperwork, and possibly a slight increase in EI premiums. That's always a groaner, but the happy children and reduced bickering over those precious 35 weeks will be worth it.

**Region:** Canada <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** maternity and parental leave <sup>[4]</sup>

#### Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/14/07/stop-baby-battle-and-give-dads-their-own-paid-leave> [2]  
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/stop-the-baby-battle-and-give-dads-their-own-paid-leave/article19721608/> [3]  
<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/maternity-and-parental-leave>