

# An 18-month parental leave needs to include dad <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

This is what happens in a country with well-designed parental leave: parents stay home when their babies need them most, salaries rise for moms, fathers become equal-opportunity caregivers.

To make that possible, two things need to happen: The benefit has to be large enough and the leave needs to be more evenly shared by both parents.

But Canada still tends to forget fathers. And that's not good for families.

As of this week, both the Conservatives and Liberals have now promised to extend parental leave in Canada to 18 months, giving new parents an extra six months home. The NDP have committed to five extra weeks, to go to the second parent, but they are also promising \$15-a-day childcare.

More time with baby is great news – if you can afford it, that is.

The announcements don't include an increase in the benefits, which as of 2015, amounted to 55 per cent of a parent's average weekly earnings, up to a maximum of \$524.

If EI wasn't enough to cover the mortgage for 12 months, it's hard to see how a lower-income family will manage for even longer. Even if they can, it's hard to justify time off for the higher-earning parent (still, mainly, dad).

To give due credit, politicians recognize that the leave needs to be more flexible, allowing parents to stay connected to the work force and earn a bit of extra money, while protecting the jobs of mothers, in particular, until they return to work.

Extending coverage to 18 months is also sound policy. Infant care is the most expensive child care, the hardest to find in Canada and very difficult to do well.

But parental leave is one of those policies that can change how gender roles evolve, how work and home life is balanced as the kids grow up. Designed poorly, and it pushes mothers out of work and fathers out of parenting. Research shows that dads who take parental leave are more satisfied with their relationships with their children, and more involved in child care (and housework).

On the other hand, the longer a woman stays out of the labour force, the more likely she is to land on the "mommy track," or in low-paying labour, thus reinforcing the gender pay gap, as a recent analysis by UBC researcher Paul Kershaw pointed out.

Increasing benefits is one way to correct the balance.

Use-it-or-lose-it policies are another. In countries such as Sweden and Norway – and, here, in, Quebec – a portion of parental leave is available only to the second parent. This is also the NDP's proposal -- the five extra weeks could not be used by the primary caregiver, but would be available to single parents.

As of 2008, Swedish families get a "bonus" tax credit, essentially, when parents take turns. In 2016, the country plans to earmark a third month of leave for fathers.

Sweden, in fact, makes no bones about it: "This is a key issue towards attaining greater [gender] equality," social security minister Annika Strandhall recently told Radio Sweden.

In other words, give everyone their turn at changing diapers, and you change the world.

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

**Tags:** federal election <sup>[4]</sup>

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