

Will 18-month parental leave reduce pressures on working families?^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has yet to fulfil his promise to extend parental leave to 18 months, but many Canadians are already thinking about how the federal government could fill the gaps in the current system.

Under the Liberal plan, parents would have a year and a half to take unpaid parental leave but they wouldn't see an overall increase in any benefits from employment insurance. Instead, they could opt to receive the same benefits in smaller blocks of time during the 18-month period or be absent for the whole duration and receive benefits at a lower level.

So while the proposal allows flexibility in how long parents can take unpaid leave, critics say it fails to address the financial barriers many families face in being eligible for benefits in the first place.

"It's an equity issue. . . . Many are just not eligible," says Karen Duncan, an associate professor in the department of community health sciences at the University of Manitoba.

In May, a Canadian study revealed that 41 per cent of mothers outside Quebec aren't able to receive employment insurance because they don't have the required 600 insurable hours to qualify.

The same study showed 63 per cent of Canadian women who earn less than \$30,000 didn't qualify for benefits, compared to just 11 per cent in Quebec.

Quebec created its own parental insurance plan in 2006. Workers contribute directly to the plan and pay less in federal employment insurance premiums.

The province requires workers to earn only \$2,000 to qualify for benefits, and there's no two-week waiting period before they receive their entitlement. Unlike the rest of Canada, parents can receive payments that cover up to 75 per cent of lost income for up to 55 weeks.

Quebec is also one of just three provinces with no minimum number of weeks of continued employment for women to qualify for leave.

The disparity across the country is "jaw dropping," notes Duncan. "This is where the federal government might play a useful role in getting the provinces to examine their own legislation around unpaid leave."

A benefit for middle-class parents

Extending parental leave would mostly address middle-income earners, says Alisa Fulshtinsky, creator and chief administrator of Toronto Mommies. The support group for mothers filed a petition in April for the government to enact extended leave as soon as possible that so far has accumulated more than 66,000 supporters.

"The women who approached me [to create the petition] were middle-class women with demanding careers," says Fulshtinsky. "They knew that they would not be able to maintain their seniority or position in a company and have daycare-aged children at the same time."

While the government's proposal may not be the perfect solution, it does provides an opportunity to consult employers and families about how to improve the parental leave system in Canada, says Judith Martin, an adjunct professor of sociology at the University of Saskatchewan.

"There needs to be some forward thinking because many are not able to use the program [in the first place]," she says. "The best parenting comes from families being able to make choices."

More time to find childcare

Extended leave helps families by providing them with six additional months to find childcare, says Fulshtinsky.

Childcare rules vary by province. In Ontario, for instance, a home-based daycare can only have two infants (two years and under) in its care. The rules for licensed childcare require three staff to supervise a group of 10 infants (18 months and under).

That makes childcare not only scarce but very expensive, says Fulshtinsky. “Every day, you see dozens of mothers looking for child care or nannies. People are increasingly frustrated and women are forced to resign [from work].”

The system has been challenging for women with demanding careers, says Martin, who recalls hearing female scientists share their concerns at a conference. “They have these experiments going on and yet they’re on maternity leave,” she says. “They’re home most of the time but they have to go in on a regular basis, maybe every week or every three days, depending on the experiments they’re doing.”

Despite the hours logged at work, they didn’t get paid because they were already on parental leave and receiving employment insurance benefits, adds Martin.

Potential hitches in an extended leave

On the flip side, extended parental leave can carry drawbacks when the parents don’t share the time off, says Duncan. Mothers are still more likely to take the leave, she notes, as there “are still employers that are not supportive of male employees taking parental leave.”

In an interview in April, Labour Minister MaryAnn Mihychuck expressed interest in making dedicated paternity leave a part of the promised changes to come from the federal government.

Designating part of the leave for fathers is important, says Martin. “Eighteen months is a long time if it’s primarily mothers taking that time. There should be some way of encouraging fathers to take that leave. In Quebec, they have five weeks of paternity leave added on.”

Among the research into the potential drawbacks of only women taking a lengthy parental leave is a 2013 report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development on Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden) that offer extended leave. The report said that studies suggested women who take longer leaves tend to get lower wages upon their return.

“The longer the maternity leave, the higher the likelihood that women will not return to paid work at all or will return on a part-time basis,” said Kathleen Lahey, a law professor at Queen’s University, in a Maclean’s article last year.

Coupled with the fear of reprisal, women on leave may also lose essential skills and relationships in the workplace, says Fulshtinsky.

How employers fit into the picture

Employers, then, play a big role in addressing the challenges and can start by being open to their employees’ needs, says Duncan. An obvious way to show support is for employers to top up parental leave benefits, she notes.

But accommodation can be as simple as planning a smooth return to work for new parents, says Nora Spinks, chief executive officer of the Vanier Institute of the Family.

Recognizing diverse needs in the workplace is key, according to Duncan. For some employees, a gradual return to work may ease the transition because it allows parents to “find other care arrangements for their children.”

As well, it allows them to stay in touch with the workplace, says Fulshtinsky. “You don’t lose as much in information and relationships with co-workers and clients.”

Perhaps due to the challenges faced by new parents, many Canadians aren’t taking parental leave. The coming changes, then, may be an opportunity to address the difficulties.

“It’s important to look at the big picture,” says Duncan. “Parental leave is interesting because there’s a combination of labour and family policy. Those are big things to balance, but the fact that the government has indicated [it’s] interested in the question is a good sign and if [it’s] going to talk about more than just length of leave, it could be a significant opportunity to make life better for families.”

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