

Mandatory paternity leave is an investment in career and family

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Author: Seth, Reva

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EXCERPTS

Father's Day is the perfect time to say this: I regret the name of my last book, *The MomShift: Women Share Their Stories of Career Success After Kids*, because for the past year or so every time I say the title I feel like I am unintentionally further sidelining dads from the conversation and issue of work, parenting and care.

And that's the exact opposite of what's needed.

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While Canadian dads are more involved with family life than ever before, currently, only one in 10 eligible Canadian fathers claims parental-leave benefits (a number that has held constant since the mid-2000s).

Similarly, in Australia only one dad for every 500 moms takes parental leave, and in the U.S. 96 per cent of dads are back at work after two weeks or less.

It's a problem because dads are the untapped potential catalyst that could actually disrupt the current undervaluing of family and care, and correspondingly increase everyone's choices around flexible, result-driven work.

Amplifying both of these phenomena would ultimately create better lives for more Canadians -- and a mandatory national paternity leave would be the most effective, efficient and enjoyable way to do this.

"Canadian uptake of paternity leave has remained so low because as long as paternity leave remains discretionary, cultural stigma and the threat of financial penalties mean that the majority of men will opt out of using it," said Mike Moffatt, assistant professor of business, economics and public policy at Ivey Business School at a panel of dads I hosted last year on the issue of care, career and gender.

"That's why the most successful paternity leave schemes, such as those in Finland, Norway, Sweden and Germany, make it mandatory for men to take a number of weeks' leave -- if they don't, their family isn't eligible for the full amount of leave available," he said.

"When Quebec introduced a similar scheme, with reserved 'daddy-only' time, participation increased by more than 250 per cent. In 2010, 80 per cent of Quebecois dads were taking paternity leave," continued Moffatt.

"Once the stigma is gone, more follow. When Germany legislated that of a possible 14-month parental leave, two months must be taken by fathers, the percentage of men taking paternity leave went from three per cent to more than 20 per cent -- in only two years," he finished.

I appreciate that the word "mandatory" is off-putting (no one likes to be told what to do), but the benefits that come with mandatory paternity leave are an incredible web of interwoven and reinforcing benefits -- in terms of improved gender equality, child's health, the valuing of care, as well as greater life happiness and deeper relationships.

Here are five reasons why mandatory paternity leave is a magical nudge point that would actually be the best gift we could give dads, kids - and, really, all Canadians.

1. More flexible workplaces

Taking care of an infant gives you front-line experience on the unpredictable nature of care, and dads who take paternity leave come back to their workplaces with a new insight and understanding on the demands of care and the need for flexibility around how and when work happens.

And since research shows that dads who take paternity leave remain more engaged in their child's lives -- the issue will continue to remain relevant to them and they will drive change in the workplace to reflect their own best interests, something that hasn't happened in significant concentrations as of yet.

Increasing the number of men who share the experience of direct care will have a positive ripple effect in terms of work norms and styles.

2. Healthier kids

Engaged dads helps strengthen a child's ability to thrive physically, emotionally and mentally.

Research shows that children who grow up with fathers who are involved have higher self esteem, better cognitive and social skills, fewer behavioural problems, as well as higher academic achievement.

These outcomes are true across income levels and regardless of how involved mothers are (making the traditional model of moms trying to compensate for distant dads is inherently flawed). Girls with engaged dads have higher self esteem and boys are better equipped to cope with stress and less likely to get into fights.

3. Disrupt the gender gap

Mandatory paternity leave would disrupt the status quo on the gender gap in Canada where women still earn 72 cents to a man's dollar and struggle with the motherhood penalty: where being a mother means, despite equal qualifications and experiences, women are offered fewer interviews, job opportunities and an on average \$11,000 less than identically qualified men and women who have no children.

Accelerating dad's engagement on the homefront would also mitigate the challenge of the "second shift."

Despite high expectations for a new generation entering the labour market and women taking on significantly more in the workforce the U.S. Bureau of Labor found that the number of hours which men and women spend on housework, cooking and child care has hardly moved between 2003 to 2011.

The accumulation of these additional hours of care and work have direct detrimental impact on a woman's career, earnings, health, mental well-being and choices.

Mandatory paternity leave would prompt families (many of whom may not have grown up seeing equal partnerships themselves) to re-frame their own lives, and by doing so, set up of for a broader societal change.

Swedish Deputy Prime Minister Bengt Westerberg first introduced a month of paternity leave in Sweden in 1995 explaining that, "Society is a mirror of the family." The only way to achieve equality in society is to achieve equality in the home. Getting fathers to share the parental leave is an essential part of that.

4. More choices for everyone

In her recent best-seller, *Unfinished Business*, Anne Marie Slaughter calls for a men's movement. She argues that the majority of gender inequalities will only be solved when both men and women have the same range of choices in terms of careers and caregiving.

Similarly, Brigid Schulte, best-selling author of *Overwhelmed: Work, Love and Play When No One Has The Time*, advocates that the conversation this International Women's Day should be on men, since that is the only way to effectively disrupt the current paradigm where women are confusingly expected to act like professional men as well as traditional women.

Changing deeply entrenched and traditional cultural norms on care, masculinity and the stigmas that dads still describe facing when they are pushing a stroller at 9 a.m. on a work day towards a park instead of a daycare all suggest that men need help -- mandatory paternity leave would create a normal that would benefit everyone.

5. Better relationships

Father's Day can be a difficult day. So many of us have grown up with distant, disengaged or removed dads who saw their role as primarily that of the breadwinner and now in their later years struggle to build deeper relationships with their children.

We can do better than that and a national policy like mandatory paternity would help establish the frame or better relationships.

While researching this piece, I came across numerous studies and data that form the business and policy case for mandatory paternity leave -- but one of the most powerful was a point that Anne Marie Slaughter makes in *Unfinished Business*, where she references Bonnie Ware, the Australian palliative care nurse and author of *The Top Regrets of the Dying*. Slaughter shares that the second most common regret she heard from every male patient she nursed was that they wished they hadn't worked so hard and missed their children's youth.

Mandatory paternity leave would give permission to men to openly value and invest in the quality relationships that ultimately form the foundation for happier and more fulfilling lives for more dads, their children and families -- which, to me, seems like the best reason of all.

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