

**Proposed changes to Canadian maternity and parental leave:  
Response to the federal government consultation from the  
Childcare Resource and Research Unit  
October 27 2016**

Since paid maternity leave was introduced in Canada in 1971, improving it has been discussed on a regular basis. The duration of family leave benefits increased considerably when parental leave was added in 1990 and increased in 2000. Outside Quebec, however, few improvements with regard to other elements have been made.

Responsibility for maternity and parental leave in Canada is split between federal and provincial/territorial governments, with the federal government responsible for benefits (payment) under Employment Insurance and provincial/territorial governments determining characteristics (such as duration) of job protected leave. Since 2006, Quebec has had its own program, the Quebec Parental Insurance Program (QPIP) which specifies both benefits and leave provisions.

Today Canada's maternity/parental leave program outside Quebec is considered to be less than adequate (see, for example, [\*The Child Care Transition\*](#), UNICEF, 2008) especially when compared to the advances that many of Canada's peer nations have made in the last two decades. Among the key identified problems with the Canadian EI program are: the absence of a paid leave earmarked for fathers; exclusion of many new mothers and fathers who do not meet the eligibility requirements; low benefit payment levels; inequities between groups of parents by region, socioeconomic and job status, by status as adoptive parents or in the case of multiple births, and between men and women.

There have been multiple recommendations for improvements to family leave in Canada over the years. For example in 2009, the Standing Committee on the Status of Women recommended that "Human Resources and Skills Development Canada make maternity and parental benefits as flexible and equal as the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan by expanding eligibility, benefit levels and duration of EI benefits".

In the 2015 federal election, the Liberals made a commitment to work with provinces to introduce new parental leave options, stating that these would "provide more flexibility and security - without increasing Employment Insurance". The commitment to improve parental leave options is a most welcome one.

In October, 2016, the Government of Canada released a discussion paper and consultation materials for considering two new options for eligible Canadians who are off work to care for a newborn or a newly adopted child, in addition to the current possibility option of a combined 12 months of maternity and parental benefits.

In response to the request for Canadians to respond to the online consultation, the Childcare Resource and Research Unit is pleased to submit the following recommendations:

1. We recommend that the federal government extend several elements of the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan to new parents in the twelve other provinces/territories.

Specifically, we propose:

- a) Introduction of a five week paid earmarked leave for second parents regardless of gender;
- b) A more inclusive approach to eligibility based on earnings of \$2,000 in the last 52 weeks;
- c) Inclusion of self employed workers under terms similar to those used in Quebec, and
- d) Benefit payments calculated at 70% of earnings.

While these changes would still leave gaps and questions to be answered, it would demonstrably provide more equity between men and women, between Quebec and the rest of Canada and among socioeconomic groups. These elements of family leave have been “test driven” by the Quebec population for a decade and are shown to yield a number of positive outcomes.

2. With regard to the proposals to:

- a) allow combined maternity and parental benefits and unpaid leaves to be extended to up to 18 months at a lower EI benefit rate (more time off work, with less money per month);
- b) allow the current amount of parental benefits and unpaid leave to be taken in smaller blocks of time over a period of up to 18 months rather than over 12 months;

we urge the government not to pursue either of these options. Instead we suggest assessing them thoroughly together with a more comprehensive package of possibilities for providing equitable work-family options and flexibility for parents.

We submit that the proposed options are neither “test driven” nor backed by research or evidence. While the problem of the absence of data and research is a general one, we believe it is not appropriate to proceed on this basis. Specifically, we argue that it is inappropriate to address “flexibility” through an option based on an even lower rate of payment than the current low Canadian/EI rate, while eligibility is weak and inequities pervade the system.

3. We also recommend that the government consider outstanding questions associated with Canadian and Quebec family leave through research, analysis and consultation within the context of comprehensive, longer term solutions.

The outstanding questions we suggest addressing include:

- a) options for providing flexibility for families;
- b) family leave for new parents who are not able to access leave even in Quebec's more inclusive eligibility system;
- c) ensuring an inclusive approach with regard to children with disabilities;
- d) fair leaves for adoptive parents, single parents and parents of multiples;
- e) how the family leave system is financed, including the option of government reassuming a share of responsibility rather than solely relying on higher employee/employer contributions.

4. We also urge the federal government to consider family leave policy and early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy and provision holistically. While we do not believe that parental leave is a substitute for a universal system of affordable, quality child care, we have long argued for a comprehensive approach to these policies. We argue that these need to be considered together as related policies to support families, women and children while providing the range of options needed to meet the diverse needs of families in all regions of Canada.