



Parental Leave: For Every Child

Parental Leave Should Not Leave Infants Out

Every child should have protected time with parents who have enough income to provide their children with the best start in life. We can deliver on this goal by ensuring full and fair access to Canada's parental leave system – for every child.

Early moments matter and depend on inclusive and adequate “family-friendly” policy support, including income benefits, childcare and parental leave. But **close to one in three infants is deprived of protected and paid time with their parent or primary caregiver** at a critical time of life. About one in three new mothers is ineligible for parental leave benefits.

Parental leave is a regressive policy that amplifies inequalities. Benefits are more likely to go to higher earners. They are less likely to go to younger, Indigenous or racialized parents and children. Canada lags well behind international standards when it comes to parental leave. Twenty-nine high-income countries invest more to provide more inclusive, better-paid parental leave.

The cost of caring for a newborn is high, at a time when parents tend to have lower incomes and less job security. Infants are most vulnerable to poverty and deprivation during the most critical early months of life.

It's Time

It's time to make sure every infant is included in a parental leave system that provides a good start at the most vulnerable time of life.

Time for newborns to be ensured enough social protection and care

1. Guarantee every newborn at least six months of adequately paid, protected time with a parent or primary caregiver, regardless of the employment, parental or citizenship status of their caregiver.

2. Increase parental leave pay to international standards. Parental leave pay must be high enough to make taking time with a newborn affordable and to prevent poverty during the critical early months of life.

Time for inclusion

About 30 per cent of women are ineligible for parental leave benefits because of the nature of their employment or lack of employment. For Indigenous women, the rate is 40 per cent. Women with higher earnings are more likely to be able to claim parental leave and take more than six months of leave to achieve the greatest benefits for children.

Only 50 per cent of families with annual incomes under \$20,000 receive parental leave benefits compared to more than 80 per cent of families with incomes above \$60,000. Parental leave policy is more likely to exclude children whose parents are unemployed, underemployed, precariously employed, workers in unregulated jobs, students or younger parents. It also excludes parents who simply do not earn enough income to take leave at the program's wage replacement rate.

www.unicef.ca/en/what-we-do/our-domestic-work/parental-leave

Time for enough income

Parental leave time depends on parental leave pay. Pay should be high enough to prevent families from falling into poverty. This is especially true during a child's critical first months of life when the prevalence of poverty in Canada is high and children are most vulnerable. Federal parental leave benefits replace only about half of weekly earnings for up to 12 months, dropping to a third for extended leave (12 to 18 months).

Canada is lagging well behind international standards. Among high-income countries, 29 had more generous benefits than Canada. The International Labour Organization Maternity Convention and the European Commission set two-thirds of income as the minimum earnings replacement for parental leave. The pay rate should, in concert with child income benefits, ensure a "guaranteed infant income" with a floor that is, at minimum, aligned with the median family income or average wage. Employed parents should receive 100 per cent of their income (with a ceiling) for the first six months of parental leave.

Time for enough care

Ensuring parents can afford to take enough time to care for a newborn is a cost-effective way to promote healthy children and families. Parental leave of six months is associated with a wide range of physical, mental health and development benefits for children and parents.

It is time to pick up the pace of policy progress. It is time to act on the compelling evidence to translate our knowledge about early child development into policies that support families and children.

Investing in children at the start of their lives is the right thing to do. It is the smart thing to do. It is time to do more.

It's time to make adequately paid parental leave available to every family.