

Paternity leave: Overcoming barriers to uptake

 openaccessgovernment.org/article/paternity-leave-overcoming-barriers-to-uptake/190270

24 March 2025

Deborah Da Costa, PhD, Associate Professor in the Department of Medicine at McGill University and Scientist at McGill University Health Centre, discusses the benefits and barriers to fathers' uptake of paternity leave following the birth of a child

In response to the importance of involving fathers in the caregiving of their children and to encourage more equitable distribution of household tasks, an increasing number of countries have implemented paternity leave policies following the birth of a child. ⁽¹⁾ While more generous paid paternity leave policies positively influence uptake and duration of paternity leave, personal and contextual factors also play a role in the decision to take leave following the birth of a child.

Paternity leave policies

Paternity leave is typically designated only for fathers, allowing them to take a short period of leave following the birth of a child. Same-sex partners of birth mothers and other co-parents are increasingly becoming included in this leave entitlement. ⁽¹⁾ Across countries, there are variations in both the duration of paid leave and the flexibility around when the leave can be taken in the postnatal period. Since 2005, the International Network on Leave Policies and Research (refer to the network's website, www.leavenetwork.org) has been producing an annual review of leave policies, which includes Maternity, Paternity and Parental leaves, with the most recent review covering 51 countries. ⁽¹⁾

Benefits of taking paternity leave

While the results are not always consistent across studies, the majority have shown that paid maternity leave is positively associated with breastfeeding initiation and duration and improved mental and physical health outcomes for mothers and children, with longer leaves generally associated with greater benefits. ^(2,3) Much less is known about the benefits associated with fathers' leave. A recent review of the limited research found paternal leave associated with better mental health for fathers, with longer leave duration associated with higher levels of paternal mental wellbeing. ⁽⁴⁾ Additional benefits associated with the uptake of paternity leave include increased father involvement in household and childcare tasks, greater satisfaction in the couple relationship, greater co-parenting quality, longer breastfeeding duration, improved father-child attachment and more positive child developmental outcomes. ⁽⁵⁾ Fathers who are more engaged early on tend to remain more involved across their children's lifespan, which can positively impact the child's socioemotional development and extend into adolescence.

Determinants of fathers' leave practices

Despite the many benefits associated with fathers' leave, multiple factors can weigh in on the decision to take paternity leave following the birth of a child. A recent review of the literature found that at the macro level, reforms towards more egalitarian leaves are effective in removing barriers to the use of parental leave by men, particularly when these policies create individual rights for fathers, such as reserved weeks for fathers in parental leaves. ⁽⁵⁾ Workplace factors, including cultural norms of the organization related to paternity leave, human resource policies and practices in relation to work-life balance, gender stereotypes in specific professions and perceptions of workplace support for parental leave at the organizational, supervisor and co-worker levels can also influence the use of paternity leave by men following the birth of a child. ⁽⁵⁾

Individual/family level factors have been less studied but may also impact fathers' leave practices. Financial factors can be an important determinant of the uptake and duration of paternity leave. ⁽⁶⁾ Fathers may be concerned about the financial strain placed on the family by taking leave and may opt out or take a shorter duration of the leave. We and others have found that gendered traditional views toward the roles of mothers and fathers in relation to family life and caretaking can influence fathers' leave practices. ^(7,8) In a qualitative study conducted in my research lab in Quebec, Canada, one father described the pressure from his parents to take shorter paternity leave because of his gender and their traditional views around fatherhood. ⁽⁸⁾ However, this father felt supported to take a longer paternity leave by Canadian society, given the additional weeks of parental leave provided when a father takes the full amount of paternity leave available. This example illustrates how multiple and interconnecting factors can influence fathers' leave practices.

Conclusion and future directions

While there is an increasing body of evidence demonstrating associations between fathers' parental leave following the birth of a child and better outcomes for each parent and their child, many fathers are still hesitant to take leave or feel pressure to take shorter leaves. Social stigmas associated with paternity leave and traditional views of fatherhood and masculinity persist and can be barriers. Research directed at exploring the factors that can shape fathers' and non-birthing parents' leave practices remains limited. Future studies using an intersectionality lens are needed to better understand how social identities such as race, socioeconomic status, gender, and sexual orientation overlap to create unique experiences for individuals in relation to leave practices of fathers and non-birthing parents.

References

1. Dobroćić, I., Blum, S., Kaufmann, G., Koslowski, A., Moss, P. and Valentova, M. (eds.) (2024) International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2024. DOI: 10.31219/osf.io/2frts. Available at: <https://www.leavenetwork.org/annual-review-reports/review-2024/>

2. Van Niel, M.S., Bhatia, R., Riano, N.S., De Faria, L., Catapano-Friedman, L., Ravven, S., Weissman, B., Nzodom, C., Alexander, A., Budde, K. and Mangurian, C. (2020). The impact of paid maternity leave on the mental and physical health of mothers and children: a review of the literature and policy implications. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, 28(2), pp.113-126.
3. Whitney, M.D., Holbrook, C., Alvarado, L. and Boyd, S. (2023). Length of maternity leave impact on mental and physical health of mothers and infants, a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 27(8), pp.1308-1323.
4. Philpott, L.F., Goodwin, J. and Saab, M.M. (2022). Paternal leave and fathers' mental health: a rapid literature review. *International Journal of Men's Social and Community Health*, 5(SP1), pp.29-49.
5. Pizarro, J. and Gartzia, L. (2024). Paternity leave: A systematic review and directions for research. *Human Resource Management Review*, 34(1), p.101001. DOI: 10.1016/j.hrmr.2023.101001
6. Kaufman, G. (2018). Barriers to equality: Why British fathers do not use parental leave. *Community, Work & Family*, 21(3), pp.310-325.
7. Birkett, H. and Forbes, S. (2019). Where's dad? Exploring the low take-up of inclusive parenting policies in the UK. *Policy Studies*. DOI: 10.1080/01442872.2019.1581160
8. Vaillancourt, M., Deville-Stoetzel, J.B., deMontigny, F., Dubeau, D., Gervais, C., Meunier, S., Pierce, T., Ditto, B. and Da Costa, D. (2024). A qualitative study exploring the perinatal experiences of social stress among first-and second-generation immigrant parents in Quebec, Canada. *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth*, 24(1), p.575.

Contributor Details

Stakeholder Details

- Article Categories
- Social Sciences
- Article Tags
- Child Care
- Men's health
- Workplace
- Publication Tags
- OAG 046 – April 2025
- Stakeholder Tags
- Department of Medicine - McGill University Health Centre Research Institute