5.3. Conclusions

There is a wide array of parental leave arrangements across the OECD area. If there is something like a common trend, it is that in many countries the combined duration of maternity and parental leave is about one year, while policy in about a quarter of OECD countries provides supports for a three-year full-time parental care.

The different policy objectives that underlie public leave policies often reinforce each other, but there can also be some tension between them. Parental leave can promote labour supply, but if it is too short or too long, parents, in practice mothers, are less likely to return to work for their previous employer. From a narrow labour market perspective, the optimal period of leave seems to be around four to six months. In terms of child development, the available evidence seems to suggest that child development is negatively affected when an infant does not receive full-time personal parental care for the first six months of a child’s life. Cognitive development of a child benefits from participation in good-quality formal care (and interaction with its peers) from approximately age two, with the evidence being ambiguous regarding the intermediary period. If both parents were to take their individual leave entitlements consecutively (or take their leaves simultaneously on a part-time basis, as, for example, is allowed in the Netherlands), this would go some way