

Parental leave: Where are the fathers?

MEN'S UPTAKE OF PARENTAL LEAVE IS RISING BUT STILL LOW

- ▶ **All OECD countries**, except the United States, provide nationwide paid maternity leave. Over half also offer paternity leave to fathers right after childbirth.
- ▶ **Paid parental leave**—for use by both parents—is now available in 23 OECD countries, but uptake by fathers is low.
- ▶ **Fathers are more likely** to take paid parental leave if encouraged by “daddy quotas” or bonus months.
- ▶ **By enabling fathers to take** on a greater share of the childcare burden, parental leave can support women’s careers.
- ▶ **Flexible leave arrangements**, such as part-time working, can ease the financial cost of taking leave and make it easier for parents to remain in touch with work.

What’s the issue?

All OECD countries, except the US, offer nationwide paid maternity leave for at least 12 weeks, and over half grant fathers paid paternity leave when a baby arrives. More and more countries now also offer paid parental leave, i.e. a longer period of job-protected leave that is available to both parents.

Mothers generally use much of their leave entitlements—almost all take maternity leave and often extend it by taking at least some parental leave. But the picture is different for fathers. While men commonly take a few days of paternity leave right after the birth of a baby, only the most committed and bravest use their right to longer parental leave. In many countries, fathers account for less than one in five of those taking parental leave. The share of men among parental leave users goes up to 40% or more in some Nordic countries and in Portugal, but is as low as one in fifty in Australia, the Czech Republic and Poland.

The good news, however, is that men’s use of parental leave is rising on average. In Finland, the male share doubled between the 2006 and 2013 while in Belgium it grew by almost 10 percentage points over roughly the same period. Still, some countries have seen little change. In Austria and France, men account for just 4% of parents taking parental leave, broadly the same as about a decade ago.

Why is this important?

Parental leave can benefit mothers and fathers and, especially, children.

Taking leave helps women recover from pregnancy and childbirth, is good for child health, and increases female employment, which in turn reduces the family’s poverty risk. The positive employment effects are strongest when the period of leave is relatively short; taking leave for longer

than a year can damage future earnings prospects and make it more likely that people leave the labour force altogether. Parental leave may also help reduce discrimination against women in the workplace and particularly in hiring. The reason is that if men and women are roughly equally likely to take leave, employers will be less reluctant to hire women of childbearing-age. However, fathers are often hesitant to take leave as they fear the career implications. In Japan and Korea, for example, one year of paid leave is reserved just for the father—the most generous allowance in the OECD—but very few fathers take advantage of it.

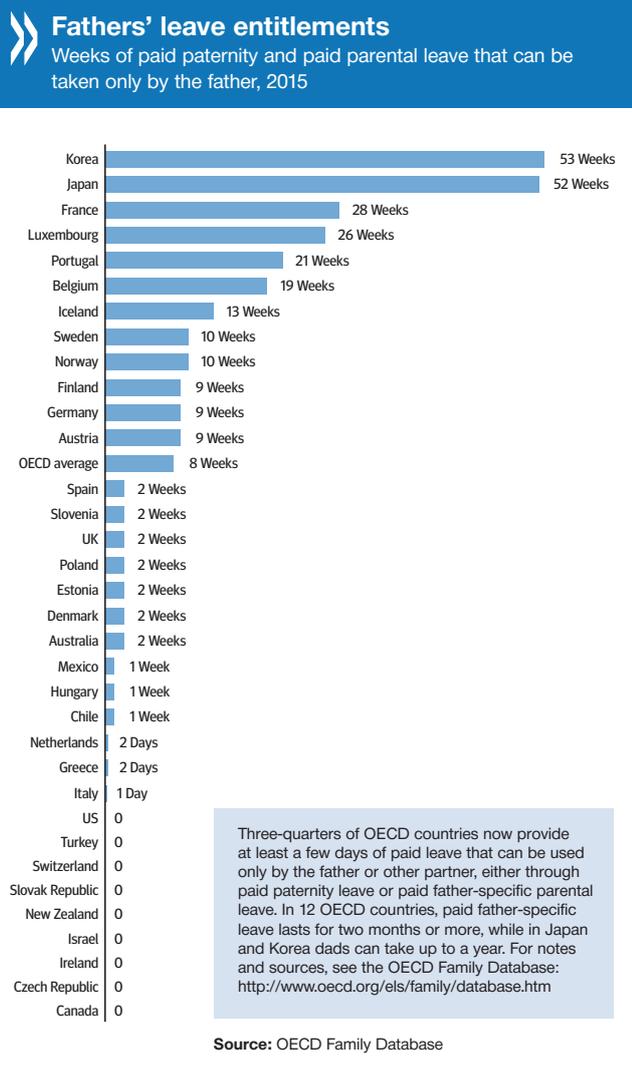
OECD research shows that fathers who take paternity or parental leave are more likely to perform tasks such as feeding and bathing children. And this is a lasting effect: Fathers who care for children early tend to stay more involved as children grow up. Where fathers participate more in childcare and family life, children enjoy higher cognitive and emotional outcomes and physical health. And fathers who engage more with their children tend to report greater life satisfaction and better physical and mental health than those who care for and interact less with their children.

What should policy makers do?

Decisions around childcare and who does what at home are, naturally, taken by families themselves, so there are limits to what policy can achieve in this area. Nevertheless, policy does have a role to play. For example, it can reserve specific periods of leave for fathers or other partners; support awareness campaigns; limit the financial cost for parents taking leave by providing financial incentives; and ensure leave arrangements have maximum flexibility.

Reserve some portion of paid parental leave for fathers:

In many OECD countries, gender norms and cultural tradition can make it all but inevitable that the mother takes all or most



of the leave entitlement. But leave decisions can also be driven by simple financial logic: Where a mother has lower earnings than her partner—not unusual in OECD countries, where the gender pay gap still stands at around 15% on average—there is a strong incentive for fathers to continue working.

In response, more and more OECD countries are turning towards reserving non-transferable periods of paid parental leave exclusively for use by fathers. This approach has several advantages. If a father decides to take leave it does not affect his partner's entitlement. Also, it legitimises the idea of fathers taking parental leave, so easing potential objections from employers.

Such father-specific parental leave, which typically lasts between two and three months, takes different forms. Most common are “daddy quotas,” or specific portions of paid parental leave reserved as a non-transferable entitlement for the father. Some countries offer “bonus periods,” where a couple may qualify for some extra weeks of paid leave if the father uses up a certain period of a sharable leave. Others simply provide both parents with their own individual

entitlement to paid parental leave with no sharable period at all.

Providing father-specific leave seems to increase men's uptake of parental leave. In Iceland and Sweden, the “daddy quota” has led to a doubling in the number of parental leave days taken by men. It is also working in other parts of the world: In Korea—where men accounted for only 4.5% of leave takers in 2014—the number of men taking leave rose more than three-fold following the introduction of a father-specific entitlement in 2007.

Ensure parental leave is well paid: Simply providing fathers with an individual leave entitlement is not enough. Many OECD countries already offer fathers *unpaid* parental leave, but—given the potential loss of income—take-up is usually low. Not surprisingly, research suggests that fathers' use of parental leave is highest when leave is not just paid but well paid—around half or more of previous earnings. To increase take-up, countries could associate higher payments with shorter leave periods. For example, in 2007 Germany switched from a low flat-rate, means-tested child-raising allowance that was payable for two years to a higher, earnings-related parental leave benefit with floors and ceilings. Payments were set for 10 months, with a further two months available if the partner (typically the father) used at least two months.

Ensure leave arrangements are flexible. For parents who may be unwilling or unable to stop work completely, flexible or part-time leave arrangements may provide a solution. Such arrangements can help minimise the financial impact of taking leave, while allowing employees to remain connected to their jobs and to care for children. They can also help partners to “shift-share” part-time leave and work commitments. Employers may benefit too: In many cases, they may not have to go to the expense of finding and hiring a replacement worker if the employee is on leave only part-time.

Find out more at the **OECD Gender Data Portal** (www.oecd.org/gender/data) and the **OECD Family Database** (www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm).



Sources

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