

How Paid Parental Leave Benefits Men, Too

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(<http://harvardjlg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/adorable-baby-born-2133.jpg>)

In the public debate, paid parental leave is often framed as a women's issue. Advocates of paid leave repeatedly point to research that shows how paid leave policies boost female employment figures (<https://academic.oup.com/qje/article-abstract/113/1/285/1892037>) and decrease turnover at work among women (<https://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/29/health/paid-leave-benefits-to-children-research/>). To make the case for parental leave stronger, the benefits for children (such as lower high school dropout rates (<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/679627>) and reduced infant mortality (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3150137/>)) are also frequently cited.

But in practice, paid parental leave is, or least should be, just as much of a men's issue as it is a women's or children's issue. While supporters of paid leave are correct to emphasize the positive effects for mothers and children, it is equally important to pay attention to the benefits for fathers.

Proponents of paternity leave sometimes appear to argue that the purpose of the policy is only to help mothers (<https://hbr.org/2018/09/how-companies-can-ensure-maternity-leave-doesnt-hurt-womens-careers>) simultaneously have a family and a career, with no upsides for the fathers. But research has shown that paternity leave policies positively impact men in several ways. First, fathers on paid leave tend to build closer relationships with their children (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2016/06/17/give-fathers-more-than-one-day-the-case-for-paternity-leave/>). This result should not be surprising, as paid leave causes men to spend more time with their kids overall (<http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2015/images/10/28/paternitybrief.pdf>).

Second, paternity leave improves male health and reduces household conflicts. One study

(<https://bmcpubhealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2458-8-312>), for example, reported that “fathers who took paternity leave had 18 percent lower risk of alcohol-related care and/or death” than those who did not. And the impact stretches beyond the realm of alcoholism; evidence further suggests that taking paternity leave reduces overall mortality among fathers (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277953610003904>). In addition, another paper (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0049089X11001153>) on the causal effect of paternity leave found that it reduces household conflicts, presumably because paternity leave improves gender equality within the household.

Third, paid paternity leave is linked to increased life satisfaction for men. In a study (https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2862813) using data from a survey with 3,763 respondents in Sweden, I have investigated the relationship between parental leave and happiness. Couples where the father and the mother take a similar number of leave days—in other words, those who exhibit a higher degree of “parental leave equality”—tend to report higher levels of life satisfaction. Gender equality at home, it seems, is thus related to increased subjective well-being, for both mothers and fathers.

Furthermore, I have found that the total number of paternity leave days taken is positively correlated with fathers’ life satisfaction. This implies that it is not just the distribution of leave days within a couple that matters, but also the absolute number of days that the father takes. Although I cannot conclusively rule out the possibility that happier fathers may just be more inclined to take paternity leave, it seems plausible that men (who historically have taken very little responsibility for childrearing even in egalitarian Sweden) appreciate the benefits of taking time off work to develop stronger relationships with their kids. Of course, the point that paternity leave can make fathers happier may seem obvious, but it is still important that the data lends support to it.

Given the growing body of evidence that shows the benefits of parental leave for men, there is no reason to frame paid leave as primarily a women’s issue. To the contrary, by emphasizing the positive effects on fathers, we will be more successful in getting the necessary buy-in from men to introduce paid leave policies across America. Paying close attention to the impact of paid leave on fathers is not only more intellectually honest, but also likely the politically smart thing to do.

Simon Hedlin is a researcher, journalist, and third-year student at Harvard Law School. His study “Parental Leave Equality and Subjective Well-Being” is available as a working paper on SSRN.com (https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2862813). He is currently writing a book for Stanford University Press about women’s economic empowerment. Twitter: @simonhedlin (<https://twitter.com/simonhedlin>)

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