

The Effects of Paid Family Leave on Infant Development



PAID FAMILY LEAVE, SEPTEMBER 2019

The years from birth to five are a critical period in a child's life.¹ An overwhelming body of research demonstrates that every interaction and every relationship shape a child's understanding of the world, future brain development, and health and economic outcomes throughout life.^{2,3} Consistent and nurturing relationships with parents or primary caregivers are critical to an infant's early development. Yet, in the United States, one in four new mothers returns to work as early as 10 days after giving birth and quality infant care options for working parents are expensive.

Most New Parents are in the Workforce

Today, most new parents are in the workforce. Among married couples with children, nearly two-thirds of minor children (63 percent) live in households where both parents work.⁴ Close to a quarter of children (23 percent) are living with a single breadwinner mother⁵ and about 60 percent of married and non-married women with children under one year old are in the labor force.⁶ And while all working parents must balance childcare with work demands, the challenges are particularly acute for new parents.

The challenges of procuring infant care begin immediately for new parents as relatively few people—17 percent of workers—can take paid time off after the birth of a child.⁷ The fraction is even lower (only 8 percent) for low-wage workers, who are less likely to have employer-provided paid family leave benefits (see *Paid Family Leave: The Basics* factsheet).⁸ What's more, a large share of people in low paid jobs are working mothers (32 percent), specifically Latina and Black women—meaning that millions of mothers find themselves in an untenable situation: lacking the financial security to take compensated time off to bond with a new child while having to find infant care at a time when child care is most expensive. At present, infant care costs exceed the average cost

of in-state college tuition at a public four-year university. Specifically, families living under the federal poverty level spend 26 percent of their income on childcare for children under the age of six compared to 10 percent of higher income families.⁹ And while funds exist to help low-income working families pay for child care, only 15 percent of federally-eligible families receive child care assistance.¹⁰

While the United States does provide job-protected unpaid leave through the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), 40 percent of workers do not qualify due to employee eligibility requirements.¹¹ Consequently, about one in four mothers (22.8 percent) returns to work as early as 10 days after giving birth.¹²

Why Paid Family Leave?

PAID LEAVE BENEFITS ON INFANTS

- Researchers find that by providing 12 weeks of job-protected paid leave, infant mortality rates were reduced by 600 infant and post-neonatal deaths per year.^{13,14,15}
- Children whose mothers have access to paid leave are 7 percent less likely to be born pre-term, and 10 percent less likely to be underweight.¹⁶
- Time at home with newborns gives parents the time they need to breastfeed—reducing the rate of childhood infections—attend medical visits, and ensure a child receives all necessary immunization.^{17,18} Specifically, findings indicate that paid family leave can increase breastfeeding by nearly 18 days for mothers and up to 65 days for low-income mothers from a base of 221 days.¹⁹
- Findings from California's paid family leave program suggest that access to paid family leave may improve ADHD, weight, and hearing-related outcomes among elementary school children, particularly among low-income families.²⁰
- A study of four OECD countries, including the United States, found that active and regular paternal engagement with children is associated with positive cognitive and behavioral outcomes for children.²¹

PAID LEAVE BENEFITS ON NEW PARENTS

- Each week of paid leave up to 12 weeks can reduce the odds of new mothers experiencing symptoms of postpartum depression.²²
- Leave access can increase employment for both parents and earnings for mothers. In California, mothers' wages rose 10 to 17 percent as did the number of hours and weeks worked.²³
- 63 percent of fathers report wanting to spend more time with their kids and cite work obligations as the main impediment to being more involved parents.²⁴
- Among opposite-sex married couples, studies find that when fathers take two or more weeks of parental leave, they are more likely to be feeding, dressing,

bathing, and diapering their children nine months after leave than fathers who don't take leave—increasing gender parity in household chores and emotional and mental well-being for mothers.²⁵

PAID LEAVE BENEFITS ON SOCIETY AND THE ECONOMY

- Researchers find that first-time mothers who use paid leave have a 92 percent probability of returning to the same employer after leave compared to 73 percent without paid leave.²⁶
- When parents have the time to attend to a child's early medical needs, infant mortality rates and childhood illnesses lower, which in turn lowers private and public health expenditures.²⁷
- Paid time off can give parents the time to search for quality child care that meets their unique needs, thereby enhancing their productivity when they return to their jobs after leave.²⁸
- Nurturing and consistent relationships during infant development produce confident individuals who are better equipped for success in school and in life, paving the way for a higher quality workforce and strong economic growth.²⁹

Endnotes

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