



The Case For Paternity Leave

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If you were a prospective father 20 years ago, getting paternity leave was almost universally a tricky business, no matter where you lived or worked. Often, men who tried to get it faced skepticism, bewilderment, or worse -outright hostility or retaliation-from their employers. Even in cases where men successfully arranged for time off after the birth or adoption of a child, they felt isolated and uncomfortable during the process. For Joe Jones, the founder of the [Center for Urban Families](#) who worked at the time for the Department of Health in Baltimore in maternal and child health, "it just felt so awkward."

These days, the situation is different, to say the least. Countries like Germany have boosted paternity leave participation from just five percent to 30 percent with "use it or lose it" policies for dads, who are understandably reluctant to leave money (in the form of paid time off) on the table. Dad bloggers like Doug French of Dad 2.0 and Simon Isaacs of Fatherly populate an increasingly vibrant internet community around fatherhood in the U.S., which also includes sites like [Mocha Dad](#). During this year's Super Bowl, several examples of what Isaacs calls "Dadvertising" lit up America's television screens. For French-who along with Isaacs spoke during a recent [event](#) at New America-the era of the "doofus dad" on TV is over. Borrowing from the oft-cited title of [Hanna Rosin](#)'s book, Isaacs contended, "It's not about the end of men. What we're seeing is the rise of dad."

Well, of some dads. The experts agreed that though we've made great strides, there is much still left to be done to make paternity leave a universal-and universally acceptable-option for dads around the world.

One strategy to get there: make the economic or business case for fathers taking leave. There's a growing trove of evidence that suggests robust parental leave policies are good for the bottom lines of businesses and countries. On the country side, in just one example offered by Promundo founder Gary Barker, if women in Brazil worked outside the home in the same numbers as men (a situation for which a paternity leave policy could create the conditions), the country's GDP would increase by 13 percent.

On the business side, both Liz Peters, who directs the Urban Institute's Center on Labor, Human Services and Population, and Latifa Lyles, director of Labor Department's Women's Bureau, pointed to research that shows that strong leave policies reduce turnover and foster morale for employers and support workforce retention for employees. Although more and more companies are acting on this data, states have been slower to adapt. Only California, New Jersey, and Washington now mandate paid leave for both parents. Notably, the data coming from California (where the policy has been in place longest) indicate that businesses of all sizes-many that opposed the law before it took effect-are seeing positive results [\(or at least not negative ones\)](#).

"I think paternity leave is going to have big payoffs," said Barbara Wankoff, Director of Workplace Solutions at KPMG, a company that has offered a parental leave to fathers since the early 2000s. According to Wankoff and Lyles, one of those payoffs is that paternity leave helps women stay in the workforce. Not only are women whose partners have the ability to take leave less likely to opt out of the workforce, says Lyles, but they are also less likely to experience adverse health outcomes such as postpartum depression and other complications.

The takeaway for experts in business, government, academic research, and nonprofit work is that when mothers can return to work knowing that their child is in the care of another parent, everyone benefits.

That includes the dads themselves. Mike Feigelson, executive director of the Bernard van Leer Foundation in The Hague, said that fathers who were early caregivers were healthier overall than those who weren't, a subject about which Barker has [also written about extensively](#).

And of course, when both parents have a turn as primary caregiver, the kids benefit, too. New America President Anne-Marie Slaughter mentioned her husband's creative and fun parenting techniques, which expose her kids to a masculine role model who works as a professor and shares his extensive knowledge of movies and poker around the house while taking care of them. And Feigelson cited a study that found that when young children saw fathers doing domestic work, they would be more likely to choose a career in engineering or other STEM fields. To laughter and cheers from the audience, Feigelson reported that since reading this study, he has been ironing in front his 9-month-old daughter, just in case she's picking up on those signals early.

Critically, the case for paternity leave is housed within the case for paid family leave, which would extend benefits to an even more expansive swath of the population. At the end of the day, this debate is about getting leave for anyone who has to care for someone who needs them at some point in their lives-not just parents who must bond with their children, said Liza Mundy, the Director of New America's Breadwinning and Caregiving Program.

Even though the U.S. remains one of a handful of countries without mandated paid family leave and two recent campaigns for expanded paternity leave in the U.K. and Brazil ended in defeat, there was a prevailing positive attitude for the future. For one thing, said Barker and Adrienne Burgess of the Fatherhood Institute in the UK, even policy failure can be productive by challenging cultural narratives about fatherhood and garnering media attention. To keep that forward momentum, noted Slaughter, Wankoff, and Barker, women must also confront their own reverse sexism about mothers being superior primary caregivers.

This piece was originally published in New America's digital magazine, [The Weekly Wonk](#). Sign up to get it delivered to your inbox each Thursday [here](#), and [follow @New America](#) on Twitter.

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