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More Time For Daddy

Québec leads the way with its new parental leave policy

Leave related to the birth or adoption of a child includes maternity leave, paternity leave, and parental leave. In Canada, there was a change in parental leave in 2001, which basically extended the leave from six months to approximately one year, if maternity leave is included. But more recently, Québec has implemented changes that the rest of Canada may want to emulate.

Parental leave is in principle aimed at men as well as women, although in reality it is mainly used by women. Indeed, according to Canadian data, only 10-11% of partners of the women who used the parental leave scheme (part of the Employment Insurance program) used a part of the leave in 2003 and 2004. Data for 2005 indicate that the rate increased to 14.5%, indicating an increase in take-up. However, the length of parental leave taken by men is quite limited: with women averaging 11 months of leave, little is left to be taken by men.

It is clear that behaviours take time to change when it comes to working times and parental leaves (De Terssac and Tremblay, 2000), but the aim was to have fathers and mothers share the leave — something which did not really take place.

In terms of furthering gender equality, parental leave is supposed to play a key role, since it should help to distinguish

between the physiological demands of pregnancy and childbirth on women (demands for which maternity leave was designed) and the care and raising of children. Given that the care and raising of children can be shared by both men and women through parental leave, this is what is at least provided for under Canadian and Québec regulation.

Ultimately, the role of parental leave is to allow both parents to balance their work and family lives. But international data indicate that, without time specifically reserved for the father, it is quite rare to see men take much of the leave. In countries that want men to participate in the same way as women, “daddy’s months” have been introduced in order to increase their participation; otherwise parental leave translates into a kind of extended maternity leave, thus reproducing the traditional division of roles and the economic inequalities between men and women.

However, since Canada has not introduced any measures to encourage fathers’ participation, it has not increased greatly since 2001, when extended parental leave for either parent was introduced. As women generally earn less than men, in Canada as elsewhere, and since the arrival of a child generally entails considerable expense, only about 10% of women’s spouses or partners have been taking part of this leave, even after the its 2001 extension to cover both partners.

Recently, however, Québec introduced a new parental leave designed to remedy this problem by introducing a period reserved specifically for fathers. The new Québec regime also introduces elements aimed at extending the coverage of parental leave and more flexibility in order, again, to try to increase men’s participation and to better respond to the diversity of mothers’ needs.

The Canadian provisions

Maternity leave in Canada is between 15 and 18 weeks, depending on the jurisdiction. As for paternity leave, it is generally of four days, except in Québec, where it was increased in 2006.

Parental leave benefits are paid under the federal Employment Insurance program. Under the federal parental leave, benefits are paid to the father or the mother, both of whom can share the leave in order to care for a newborn child or to adopt a child, if both are eligible. The allowance corresponds to

55% of insurable earnings and, since 2001, is now paid for 37 weeks in most Canadian provinces. In Canada as a whole, no part of the parental leave period is reserved for fathers, as is the case in Sweden with the “father’s month,” so Canadian fathers do not participate to a great degree. In Europe, however, fathers participate to a greater extent in countries where the income replacement rate is high, and to an even greater extent when a leave period is especially reserved for them and cannot be taken by the mother (EIROnline, 1997, No. 9712201, cited in Tremblay 2004; Moss and O’Brien, 2006).

In Canada, the debate on parental leave picked up again in January 2001, when the government extended parental leave to a total of about one year (when combined with maternity leave). In Québec in particular, this policy was criticized. Criticisms touched on four main elements:

- the fact that the income replacement rate should have been increased (it is 55% of income up to a maximum of \$39,000 per year in the federal program);
- access to the leave should have been given to excluded workers (self-employed workers in particular, who make up approximately 15% of the working population) before extending the leave period;
- the program was judged not flexible enough; and
- the absence of time reserved for the father.

All this criticism raised the issue of political and economic choices between universal access to leave and the possibility for workers in non-standard employment to take this leave, as opposed to extending the parental leave period for better-off parents.

The new Québec plan

Since 1997, Québec has sought to implement a parental leave plan distinct from that of the federal government, and asked Ottawa for the additional money needed for this purpose. Following an agreement reached in 2005, the new Québec Parental Insurance Plan came into effect in January 2006. This new plan has a number of advantages in terms of the population covered, flexibility in taking the leave, time for fathers, and the income replacement rate.

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Since January 2006, the Québec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP) has replaced the measures under the federal program in Québec. The new provisions do not change those stipulated in the Labour Standards Act in Québec, which specify the duration of maternity leave (18 weeks) and parental leave (52 weeks) for a total duration of 70 weeks without salary, and the rights and obligations related to departure from and return to work. But the new plan introduces three major changes in paid parental leave:

- The first change provides for weeks reserved for the father that cannot be transferred to the mother, which is an innovation in Canada and even in North America. Some Scandinavian countries (Sweden and Norway) have had weeks reserved for the father for quite some time, and this seems to have an impact on their taking the leave. Québec fathers are now entitled to a 3-to-5-week paternity leave with higher benefits than was the case under the federal program, since the income replacement rate and maximum eligible earnings have also been increased.
- The second change involves the increased income offered by the plan. In addition to the abolition of the 14-day waiting period in the federal Parental Leave Program (two weeks without benefits, as is the case with Employment Insurance with which the Canadian program is associated), the new Québec plan increases the maximum insurable income to \$57,500 instead of \$39,000. As was shown in European research, the higher income rate is also an important incentive for fathers' participation.
- The third change relates to the introduction of more flexibility in the plan, since parents now have two options: a basic plan (longer leave with lower benefits) or a special plan (shorter leave with higher benefits). The latter might interest those who need a higher income replacement rate (especially if their employment income is relatively low) or who cannot afford to miss work too long for various personal or work-related reasons. Whereas the federal program provides for benefits corresponding to 55% of the maximum insurable income (\$39,000) during the 15 weeks of maternity leave and 35 weeks of parental leave (accessi-

ble to both parents, but with a 14-day waiting period in each case), the new Québec basic plan offers benefits of 70% of the average weekly income for 18 weeks of maternity leave and 5 weeks of paternity leave. As regards parental leave, it offers benefits that correspond to 70% of income for 7 weeks and 55% for 25 weeks. Adoption leave can also be shared by both parents and provides for 12 weeks at 70% and 25 weeks at 55%.

The special plan provides for higher income replacement rates, but for a shorter period. Under this plan, maternity and paternity leave benefits are equivalent to 75% of the weekly salary and are paid for 15 weeks and three weeks, respectively. Parental leave is compensated at 75% for 25 weeks and can be shared by the father and the mother. Under this special plan, the mother can receive benefits for a maximum of 40 weeks (versus 50 in the basic plan). Adoption leave can also be shared by both parents and lasts 28 weeks at 75% under this second option.

Lastly, it must be underlined that the new Québec plan is more accessible and will allow more parents — including self-employed workers and students — to receive benefits, since it no longer requires individuals to have worked 600 hours over the previous 52 weeks, as in the Canadian regime, but simply to have earned an insurable income of \$2,000.

The funding of this new program is based on additional contributions that employers, employees, and self-employed workers must pay into the plan. Employers and employees, of course, continue to contribute to the federal Employment Insurance program, and sums are returned to Québec for the parental leave, but additional contributions were necessary in order for the regime to offer more coverage and better replacement rates.

It is still too early to assess the impact of this new Québec plan on fathers' participation in parental responsibilities. However, some preliminary data indicate that 40% of Québec fathers would have participated in the parental leave reserved for them since January 2006. This remains to be confirmed, but indicates the possibility of a high participation rate.

Based on what has been observed in other countries which introduced the measure of a parental leave period not transferable to mothers, it is quite likely that there will be an increase in the

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participation of Québec fathers, at least for these reserved weeks, if not more. This is especially true since, compared to Canadian fathers, there seemed to be a greater number of fathers in Québec taking advantage of parental leave (about double already with the Canadian scheme in 2003-2004), and because the income replacement rate has been increased, making it easier to take the leave at a time when financial needs are considerable.

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Editor's note:

It's been more than two years after the introduction of Québec's Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP), which included higher benefit rates, no unpaid waiting period, coverage of the self-employed and a five-week non-transferable leave for fathers, but the effects—particularly on fathers — were immediate and profound.

Without doubt the QPIP had a profound influence on fathers' use of paid leave in Québec. Of those eligible for the program, 56% claimed benefits in 2006, up from 32% in 2005. The participation rate for fathers outside Quebec remained steady over the three years examined, at around one in ten. However, even though the parental leave benefit program was the same across Canada prior to 2006, Quebec had a consistently higher proportion of fathers claiming benefits, perhaps representing some cultural differences.

Furthermore, an above-average proportion of Quebec fathers claimed paid benefits if their partner was also a recipient (64% versus 56%), whereas fathers outside Quebec were less likely to claim if their partner claimed (8% versus the overall average of 11%).

— *Katherine Marshall. "Fathers' use of paid parental leave."*
Perspectives on Labour and Income. *Statistics Canada. June 2008.*