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The Child Development Case for a National Paid Family and Medical Leave Program

In the first months and years of life, young children discover the world through experiences with their parents and other caregivers. A young child’s early relationships, especially with parents, shape the architecture of the developing brain.¹ These relationships require care, consistency, and, above all, **time**.

Enacting public policies that provide parents with paid leave from work to care for their young children is critical to the healthy development of children and families. Because early brain connections form the foundation for all learning and relationships that follow, parents and caregivers are on the front line of preparing our future workers, innovators, and citizens. Yet too many working parents and caregivers are forced to choose between caring for a new child and their economic security. Now is the time for policymakers to secure the best beginnings for children and the best future for our country by supporting a national paid family and medical leave program.

The need: Public policies that promote time for parents and caregivers to care for and bond with very young children, without jeopardizing the ability to pay for basic necessities

Relationships with parents and other caregivers are critical to a baby’s early development.

- For babies, every minute and every interaction is a lesson in how the world works, how individuals relate to one another, and how they are valued. Caring, consistent relationships experienced by young children can mitigate the impact of stress and help develop the foundations of a child’s ability to learn, to form positive relationships, and to exercise self-control.²
- It takes several months of focused attention to become a responsive caregiver to a young child, establishing a pattern that will influence the child’s long-term cognitive, social, and emotional development.³
- The capacity to recognize a caregiver’s voice, smell, and face develops around 3 months old.⁴ Paid time to care gives parents and babies important time to foster these connections.
- Parents and caregivers may also need time with a new baby to identify and intervene in a variety of developmental difficulties. This time is especially important for caregivers of infants who are considered at high risk, such as babies born preterm or at low birth weights and those who have illnesses or birth defects.⁵
- Studies of two-parent, opposite-sex households show a number of positive outcomes when fathers take leave. Fathers who take 2 or more weeks off after the birth of a

child are more involved in that child’s direct care 9 months after birth than fathers who take no leave.⁶ Involved fathers also promote children’s educational attainment and emotional stability.⁷ And, a father’s involvement in a newborn’s care in the first 6 months can mean both mother and baby sleep better.⁸

Too often, out of economic necessity, new parents are forced to go back to work and forego precious bonding time with their children.

- Most employed women do not have access to paid maternity leave. About one third of private sector workers (35%) are employed at worksites that offer paid maternity leave to all or most female employees, and only about one fifth (22%) are employed at worksites that offer paid maternity leave to all female employees.⁹
- Most employed men do not have access to paid paternity leave. Of private sector workers, 11% are employed at worksites that offer paid leave to most male employees, and 9% are at worksites that offer paid leave to all male employees.¹⁰
- Access to fully paid leave during the period of maternity-related disability at larger companies (those with 50 or more employees) is decreasing. Among employers voluntarily offering paid leave for new mothers, just 9% provided fully paid leave in 2014, a decline from 16% in 2008.¹¹

The solution: A national paid family and medical leave program

A national paid family and medical leave insurance program would support working people, their families, and businesses. The Family And Medical Insurance Leave (FAMILY) Act, currently proposed in Congress, embodies the core principles that a comprehensive federal program must include:

- Accessibility for *all* working people;
- A meaningful length of leave—at least 12 weeks;
- Coverage for the full range of personal medical and family caregiving needs established in the Family and Medical Leave Act;



- Affordability and cost-effectiveness for workers, employers, and the government;
- Inclusivity when it comes to defining “family”; and
- Protections from adverse employment consequences for workers who need to take leave.

The benefits of paid leave for babies, their families, and the nation

A period of paid leave after the birth of a child contributes to the healthy development of infants and toddlers.

- Time at home with newborns, infants, and toddlers gives parents the time they need to breastfeed, attend well-child medical visits, and ensure that their children receive all necessary immunizations.¹²
- Studies show that paid leave yields higher rates and longer periods of breastfeeding,¹³ which reduces the rates of childhood infections.¹⁴
- For low-income families in New Jersey, where a statewide paid family leave program has been in effect since 2009, researchers found that new mothers who use the state paid leave program breastfeed, on average, 1 month longer than new mothers who do not use the program.¹⁵
- Time for parents to provide care facilitates the early detection of potential developmental delays at a time when problems can be most effectively addressed and interventions identified to minimize them.¹⁶

Paid leave improves outcomes for the entire family, including parents and caregivers.

- Longer leave periods are associated with health benefits for new mothers, including declines in depressive symptoms, a reduction in the likelihood of severe depression, and improvement in overall health.¹⁷

- Parents who use California’s paid leave program, in effect since 2004, report that leave has a positive effect on their ability to care for their new children and arrange child care.¹⁸ And in Rhode Island, which implemented a paid leave program in 2014, parents who use the state program are much more likely to report higher satisfaction with their ability to care for their new children and arrange child care, better health, and lower general stress, compared to parents who do not use the program.¹⁹
- Preliminary research in California suggests that paid leave may also help prevent child maltreatment, perhaps by reducing risk factors such as parental stress and depression.²⁰

Paid leave policies can benefit employers, taxpayers, and the economy, now and in the future.

- When parents can attend to a child’s early medical needs, infant mortality and the occurrence and length of childhood illnesses are reduced, which in turn lowers private and public health expenditures.²¹
- Paid leave can give parents and other caregivers time to search for quality child care that meets the unique needs of their families, thereby facilitating greater productivity when they return to their jobs after leave.²²
- Positive, consistent relationships during a child’s early years yield confident individuals who are better equipped for success in school and in life,²³ paving the way for a higher quality workforce and strong economic growth.

ENDNOTES

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⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

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¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Zigler, Muenchow, and Ruhm, *Time Off With Baby*.

¹⁵ Suma Setty, Curtis Skinner, and Renee Wilson-Simmons, *Protecting Workers, Nurturing Families: Building an Inclusive Family Leave Insurance Program, Findings and Recommendations from the New Jersey Parenting Project*. National Center for Children in Poverty, 2016. Retrieved from http://nccp.org/projects/paid_leave_publications.html

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¹⁷ Pinka Chatterji and Sara Markowitz, *Family Leave After Childbirth and the Health of New Mothers*. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.nber.org/papers/w14156>

¹⁸ Eileen Appelbaum and Ruth Milkman, *Unfinished Business: Paid Family Leave in California and the Future of U.S. Work-Family Policy* (pp. 49), 2013. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

¹⁹ Barb Silver, Helen Mederer, and Emilija Djurdjevic, *Launching the Rhode Island Temporary Caregiver Insurance Program (TCI): Employee Experiences One Year Later*. Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training and University of Rhode Island, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.dlt.ri.gov/TDI/pdf/RIPaidLeave2015DOL.pdf>

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²² See note 2, p. 74.

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