

UNICEF Canada Key Messages: Parental Leave

- Parental leave is one of the three fundamental “family-friendly” social protection and care policies, along with income benefits and childcare, that gets children off to the best start in life and supports families raising young children.
- In Canada, parental leave is exclusive: Around one-third of infants are excluded from protected and paid time with a parent.
 - > Under the current federal employment insurance–based parental leave benefit, close to 30 per cent of new mothers do not qualify, making time off from work to care for a newborn out of reach.
 - > For Indigenous mothers, the exclusion rate is around 40 per cent; for mothers with low incomes, the exclusion rate is 60 per cent.
 - > For some parents, the low pay rate means they cannot afford to take parental leave even if they are entitled to it, or they take it for a very short time (less than six months).
- Canada’s parental leave system is inequitable, privileging older parents with secure jobs and higher wages, while excluding parents whose children stand to benefit the most.
- Canada (excluding Quebec) falls behind other high-income countries in spending on parental leave, in ensuring all children are included and in providing adequate pay to families – failing to meet international minimum standards.
- The extensive and overwhelming benefits of parental leave include economic stability and parent-child bonding, both of which promote child health and development. Six months of

parental leave is associated with increased rates of breastfeeding and vaccination, greater access to healthcare and mental health services and – when fathers are able to take leave – more equitable distribution of household responsibilities and improved emotional bond between parents and child. Parental leave helps increase food security and reduce preterm birth, infant mortality, family violence and poverty – all outcomes where Canada struggles to give children the best start.

It’s time to finish the job of providing adequate and inclusive support for families:

- Families with young children should have more effective and easy-to-access support and more care options for children at a time when costs of infant care are high and family incomes are not as stable.
- It’s time to rethink parental leave as a child social protection and care policy providing an “infant income guarantee”: universal access with adequate pay in concert with child income benefits.
- Every newborn in Canada should have the right to protected and adequately paid time with a parent or primary caregiver in the first six months (26 weeks) of life.
- Every new parent should have the opportunity to bond with their infant or new child, while maintaining economic and job security.
- It’s time for a holistic care agenda for young children that reflects differing parental preferences and meets children’s different needs.