

The International Corner

Parental Leave in Canada

By Diane – Gabrielle Tremblay



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In recent years, parental leave policy in Canada has evolved quite considerably. Since 2001, Canadian employees have a right to a 1-year paid parental leave, while those in the province of Québec have a better paid, more flexible regime and nontransferable paid paternity leave since 2006 (Tremblay, 2009).

The Canadian parental leave is a component of the Employment Insurance Programme, which used to be called Unemployment Insurance until 1994. This is an employer-employee-financed program, that is part of unemployment insurance, but which has seen a few elements be integrated into it over recent years, particularly a scheme for part-time unemployment insurance (unemployment or employment sharing added in 1981) as well as, more recently, maternity and parental leaves. In 1971, that maternity leave was introduced for mothers who had worked 20 or more insurable weeks of employment, with 15 weeks of benefits at 67% of wage replacement to a maximum of \$100 per week at that time. In the 1980s, adoptive parents also gained rights to benefits, and finally, in 1990, the Canadian Benefits Program implemented 10 weeks of parental-leave benefits for the care of a child; this family entitlement enabled both mothers or fathers to take time off work to care for newborn children, but, in fact, it has always been used essentially by women (see Doucet, McKay, and Tremblay, 2009).

To have access to the regime, parents must have worked 600 hours in the preceding year, after which they have access to benefits that are equivalent to 55% of their salary up to a ceiling of \$41,000 Canadian. In 2001, the length of parental leave was increased by adding 25 weeks of paid parental leave for a total of 35 weeks. Since 2001, mothers who take maternity leave as well as all of the shared entitlement parental-leave benefits have access to 50 weeks of leave, compared to 25 weeks previously. All this applied to Québec until 2006, when Québec parents obtained different rights than their counterparts in other Canadian provinces.

The 25-week increase in parental leave has produced a non-negligible increase in use by fathers from 3% in 2000 to 11% in 2003 (Marshall 2003), and then increasing to 15% in 2005 (Statistics Canada 2005). The rate of participation in Canada in general has increased to 23% in 2006, but this is essentially due to the increase in participation of fathers from Québec. Indeed, over half of Québec fathers (56%) have taken the leave since they now are entitled to a 3- to 5- week leave, which is a right “reserved” for them, and which cannot be transferred to the mother.

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