

The International Corner

A New Regime for Paid Parental Leave in Québec

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In 2006, Québec (a francophone province of Canada) introduced a new Parental Leave program. Québec parents now have a better paid and more flexible regime than Canada as a whole. The main change however, and a true innovation for North America, is the introduction of a non-transferable right to paternity leave, which has translated into a steady increase in participation of fathers; on average, some 56 % of fathers have taken a 7 week leave in 2007.

The province of Québec has always been very active in family policy issues. This is largely due to the active role that progressive family associations, unions, and womens' groups have played in the process. In recent years, universal and affordable access to child care has been the centerpiece of the policy, including Family Allowance (income security) and parental leave benefits (Tremblay, 2009). The program represents a unique innovation in North America and the regime has been such a success that it has increased the fertility rate (from 1.45 to 1.6).

The first change is that there is more eligibility to this program compared with the Canadian scheme, since it is no longer required to have worked 600 hours, but simply to have had \$2000 in insurable earnings; 77% of Québec mothers thus had access to parental leave in 2007, while it was only 62 % in the rest of Canada (Marshall 2008). The Québec Plan is thus more accessible and allows more parents, including students, part-time workers, and self-employed workers to receive benefits.

A second important change has to do with the introduction of more flexibility into the Plan. Québec parents now have two options: a basic plan (longer leave with lower benefits) or a special plan (shorter leave with higher benefits). The basic plan provides benefits of 70% of the average weekly income for 18 weeks of maternity leave (plus a possible 7 extra weeks of parental leave) and 5 weeks of paternity leave; then it is 55 % for an additional 25 weeks of parental leave. The so-called "special plan" offers higher income replacement rates but for a shorter period of time: maternity and paternity leave benefits are 75 percent of the weekly salary and are paid for respectively 15 weeks and 3 weeks. After this, parental leave is offered at 75 percent for 25 weeks and

can be shared by father and mother. Under this second plan, the mother can receive benefits for a maximum of 40 weeks. Adoption leave can also be shared by both parents for 28 weeks at 75 % by using the special plan.

The third change involves the increased maximum eligible income, which is important for the participation of fathers. In addition to the abolition of the 14-day waiting period without benefits (under Canadian EI), the Quebec Plan has increased the maximum insurable income to \$61,000 instead of \$41,000.

Finally, the most important change concerns paternity leave. A unique situation in North America, a non transferable paid paternity leave, has been implemented; fathers can take 3 to 5 weeks of paid paternity leave and these weeks cannot be transferred to the mother.

It of course remains to be seen exactly how the use of parental leave, and paternity leave in particular, will evolve in Québec. We are now researching obstacles to the effective use of parental and other forms of leave by parents, particularly fathers. (Tremblay and Genin, 2008).

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