

FAMILY LEAVE IN THE EARLY YEARS

During the earliest days and months of life, babies discover the world through their experiences with their parents and other caregivers. Positive early relationships, especially with a parent, literally shape the environment within which early health and development unfold and early learning takes place.¹ This critical time in a child's life is a unique opportunity for parents to build secure and healthy early attachments with their baby and ensure that they receive vaccinations and appropriate medical attention when ill. But in order to do so, parents must have access to adequate leave—for bonding with their children right from the very beginning of life, and for caring for themselves and their family members when ill. Parents also need time to bring their child to the pediatrician for well-baby visits and to seek medical care. Yet, too often, working parents are unable to take leave from work to provide even the most basic care for their infants, toddlers, and families. Since the federal government is the nation's largest single employer with close to two million civilian employees, and state and local governments employ an additional eight million employees, family leave is a particularly important issue for governmental consideration.² Now is the time for federal and state policymakers to secure the best possible start for young children by ensuring that working families receive paid family and sick leave to support their young children right from the beginning.



Did You Know?

Did you know that when workers who are sick are able to take paid sick days, they are healing the economy too? In fact, for every paid sick day workers receive as a benefit, the economy saves a total of more than a billion dollars due to reduced turnover, increased productivity, and reduction in spread of contagious illnesses. If workers are provided seven paid sick days per year, employers, workers, families, and taxpayers will experience a net cumulative savings of \$8.1 billion.³

FAST FACTS

• **56%** of mothers with children under the age of 3 are employed.⁴

• **40%** of the workforce is currently not covered by the Family and Medical Leave Act.⁵

• Without access to such leave, employees find themselves reporting to work during times when ill, resulting in lost productivity which costs the national economy **\$180 billion** every year.⁶

• More than **3 in 4** eligible employees reported that they could not afford to take the leave that they needed because it was unpaid.⁷

• **57 million** working Americans do not have paid sick leave.⁸



Policy Recommendations

1.

Expand access to FMLA to cover more employees. The 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) allows employees to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave in a 12-month period to care for newborns, newly adopted and foster children, and seriously ill family members, including themselves. Since the law only applies to employers with at least 50 employees, a full 40% of the workforce is currently not covered by the federal law.⁹ However, FMLA does allow states to set standards that are more expansive than federal law. In fact, several states have already passed legislation to cover employers with as few as 10 employees for all leave and even fewer employees for more narrow leave categories.¹⁰ By lowering the threshold of firm size from 50 to 25 or even fewer employees, federal and state policymakers can allow more working parents to take leave to care for their young children and build the healthy attachments newborns, infants, and toddlers need, without worrying that they might lose their jobs.

2.

Guarantee paid family leave for working families. Although FMLA has had great success, far too many workers are still unable to take leave because it is unpaid. As is the case with the expansion of unpaid family leave policies, states are also taking the lead in the endeavor to offer paid family leave. For example, California has the country's most comprehensive paid family and medical leave insurance program. Over 13 million workers can receive partial pay (55%–60% of wages) to take up to six weeks of leave a year to care for a newborn, newly adopted or foster child, or to care for a seriously ill family member, and up to 50 weeks of leave a year to recover from their own serious illness, including pregnancy- or birth-related disability.¹¹ By providing for at least partial payment during family leave, federal and state policymakers can reduce employees' economic anxiety by providing job security and consistent income during a time when it is essential for parents to focus on their new baby or ill families rather than worrying about how to make ends meet.

3.

Enact state and federal paid sick leave. Working men and women are more productive and loyal to their employers when the benefits they receive support them and their entire family. In particular, when employees receive paid sick leave to recover from their own illnesses, care for sick family members, or attend routine medical and well-child visits for themselves and their family members, they contribute more to the economy through their jobs and through their purchasing power. Federal and state governments are leading the way in terms of providing paid sick leave to their own employees; however, private sector employees lag behind. Maintaining flexibility for working families will ensure that young children have consistent and dependable caregivers present when it matters most—in the earliest years of life. Policymakers should enact legislation to ensure that public and private sector employees have paid sick leave that is all-inclusive of the employee and their family members, which will benefit companies and the overall economy through increased productivity and reductions in staff turnover.

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4.

Expand disability or unemployment insurance to help families take paid leave. In the absence of explicit paid leave policies, states have used creative financing mechanisms to allow employees to draw on income while they are on unpaid leave. Specifically, five states—California, Hawaii, New Jersey, New York, and Rhode Island—and the territory of Puerto Rico offer temporary disability insurance that provides partial wages to employees who are temporarily disabled for medical reasons, including pregnancy- or birth-related reasons.¹² State and federal lawmakers should enact legislation to allow parents (biological, foster, or adoptive) on leave to collect unemployment insurance or state disability insurance to enable them to spend time with their infants and toddlers in the first years of life.

Research

Infants and toddlers need nurturing relationships in order to thrive. We know from the science of early development that early relationships and attachments to a primary caregiver are the most consistent and enduring influence on social and emotional development for young children.¹³ Research demonstrates that forming secure attachments to a few caring and responsive adults is a primary developmental milestone for babies in the first year of life. Infants and toddlers who are able to develop secure attachments are observed to be more mature and positive in their interactions with adults and peers than children who lack secure attachments.¹⁴

Generous periods of leave contribute to the healthy development of infants and toddlers.

Research shows that dedicated time at home with newborns, infants, and toddlers allows parents the time they need to facilitate breastfeeding and ensure that their children receive the immunizations and medical check-ups necessary to lower infant mortality and reduce the occurrence and length of childhood illnesses, which in turn reduce private and public health expenditures.¹⁵ In fact, studies have shown that paid parental leave, in particular, leads to higher rates and longer periods of breastfeeding (which reduces the rates of childhood infections) and less maternal stress.¹⁶ Furthermore, after reviewing family leave policies in 18 countries, researchers found that a 10-week extension in paid leave was predicted to decrease infant mortality by 2.6% and post neonatal (28 days–1 year) infant mortality by 4%.¹⁷ More time at home also allows for bonding between parents and young children which fosters positive social-emotional development.

Benefits of leave policies extend to employers as well as families.

In addition to benefiting employees and their families, leave policies also benefit employers—including federal, state and local governments—by reducing staff turnover and the subsequent training and hiring costs associated with new staff. Such costs can be upwards of 150% of a salaried worker's annual pay or 50%–75% of an hourly worker's annual pay.¹⁸ Other benefits include less transmission of illnesses among co-workers, increased productivity, fewer absences, lower overall health care costs, and increased company loyalty. Presenteeism (lost productivity

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resulting from employees being physically present at work, yet unable to be fully engaged due to illness) accounts for 18%–60% of all costs associated with ten leading health conditions.¹⁹ The result is that approximately one-fifth to three-fifths of all spending on common health conditions that employers are faced with could be the result of on-the-job lost productivity.²⁰ Every year, lost productivity costs the national economy \$180 billion.²¹

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About Us

The ZERO TO THREE Policy Center is a nonpartisan, research-based resource for federal and state policymakers and advocates on the unique developmental needs of infants and toddlers. To learn more about this topic or about the ZERO TO THREE Policy Center, please visit our website at www.zerotothree.org/policy.



National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families

1 National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Jack Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, eds. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000.

2 Federal government data excludes employees working for the U.S. Postal Service as well as those who work in the intelligence departments of the federal government. U.S. Department of Labor; Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Career Guide to Industries, 2008–09 Edition: Federal Government, Excluding the Postal Service*. U.S. Department of Labor, 2008, www.bls.gov. State and local government data excludes public employees working in education and hospitals. U.S. Department of Labor; Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Career Guide to Industries, 2008–09 Edition: State and Local Government, Excluding Education and Hospitals*. U.S. Department of Labor, 2008, www.bls.gov.

3 Estimates of savings are calculated based on employees working at least 20 hours per week (or at least 1,000 hours a year) in firms employing more than 15 employees. Vicky Lovell, *Valuing Good Health: An Estimate of Costs and Savings for the Healthy Families Act*. Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2005, www.iwpr.org.

4 U.S. Department of Labor; Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Table 5." In *Women in the Labor Force: A Databook*. U.S. Department of Labor, 2007, www.dol.gov.

5 U.S. Department of Labor; *Balancing the Needs of Family and Employers: Family and Medical Leave Survey*. U.S. Department of Labor, 2000, www.dol.gov.

6 National Partnership for Women and Families, *Paid Sick Days Make Good Business Sense*. National Partnership for Women and Families, www.nationalpartnership.org.

7 U.S. Department of Labor; *Balancing the Needs of Family and Employers*.

8 Heidi I. Hartmann, "The Healthy Families Act: Impacts

on Workers, Businesses, the Economy, and Public Health." Written testimony before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, Hearing on "The Healthy Families Act: Safeguarding Americans' Livelihood, Families and Health with Paid Sick Days," February 13, 2007, <http://help.senate.gov>.

9 U.S. Department of Labor; *Balancing the Needs of Family and Employers*.

10 States with comprehensive leave policies covering fewer than 50 employees include: Vermont (10 or more employees to take leave to care for a newborn or newly adopted child; 15 or more employees to care for a family member or one's own medical condition); the District of Columbia (20 or more employees); Oregon (25 or more employees); and Maine (25 or more employees). Additional states lower the threshold of firm size in more limited circumstances (e.g., maternity or pregnancy disability leave only). These states include: Hawaii (1 or more employees); Montana (1 or more employees); Connecticut (3 or more employees); Iowa (4 or more employees); California (5 or more employees); Massachusetts (6 or more employees); New Hampshire (6 or more employees); Washington (8 or more employees); Louisiana (25 or more employees); and Puerto Rico (all employees). Other states with narrow leave policies for reduced firm size include: Kentucky (all employees for leave for adoption of a child under 7); Minnesota (21 or more employees for leave for birth or adoption); and Maine (15 or more employees for family and medical leave for 10 weeks in a 2-year time period). National Partnership for Women and Families, "State Family Leave Laws That Are More Expansive Than the Federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)." National Partnership for Women and Families, 2002, www.nationalpartnership.org.

11 National Partnership for Women and Families, *Where*

Families Matter: State Progress Toward Valuing America's Families. National Partnership for Women and Families, 2007, www.nationalpartnership.org.

12 Ibid.

13 National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*.

14 Ibid.

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16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Jodie Levin-Epstein, "Responsive Workplaces: The Business Case for Employment That Values Fairness and Families." *American Prospect*, February 19, 2007, www.prospect.org.

19 Ron Z. Goetzel, Stacy R. Long, Ronald J. Ozminkowski, et al., "Health, Absence, Disability, and Presenteeism Cost: Estimates of Certain Physical and Mental Health Conditions Affecting U.S. Employers." *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 46, no. 4 (April 2004): 398–412.

20 Ibid.

21 National Partnership for Women and Families, *Paid Sick Days Make Good Business Sense*.

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