

Parental Leave

March 2018

Introduction

Parents have the biggest influence on a child's early life, particularly in their first year. The experiences children have during their first year lays the foundation for the rest of their childhood and for the adults they will become. Paid parental leave, shared between both parents, is increasingly recognised as both in the best interests of the child and a social good by policy makers internationally. An ever increasing number of countries are adopting paid parental leave policies which span a child's first year (and often beyond) giving families the flexibility and support they need at this crucial point in a child's development. This tidal shift towards shared paid parental leave threatens to leave Ireland behind.

Barnardos works with over 14,000 children and their families each year. We work with parents to improve their understanding of their children's needs and equip them with the knowledge and skills to meet those needs. We see first-hand the positive affect a nurturing parent-child relationship can have in a child's life. Barnardos is calling on the Government to introduce a paid parental leave system for a child's first year to better help parents to support their child's early development.

The importance of parenting in a child's first year¹

The rate of development in the first year of a child's life is unparalleled. During this time children are also at their most vulnerable, dependent entirely on their adult carer to meet their physical, emotional, cognitive and social needs. Parents, therefore, have the greatest impact on their child's earliest development. The positive relationships and attachments formed during this year are critically important. Research shows that securely attached children demonstrate more positive outcomes when compared with their insecurely attached peers. For example, more securely attached primary school children are more social, less aggressive and more emotionally mature. Securely attached teenagers are more likely to be leaders and have higher self- esteem. Even

¹ Barnardos, (2017) *Birth to 2 years*, Dublin: Barnardos

into adulthood those with secure attachments during childhood are more likely to be able to form and sustain mutually rewarding relationships.

Secure attachment forms through interactions between children and their parent. Parents must be physically present and emotionally and mentally available for their child to develop a secure attachment. Carrying out daily caring tasks creates opportunities to nurture and develop the parent and child relationship. Everyday activities such as cuddling, playing, talking to, responding to and relaxing with a child help develop secure attachment. Furthermore, positive, supportive parenting facilitates children's development and promotes resilience in children.^{2 3} By supporting parents to care for their child in its first year the State would be promoting positive outcomes for all children.

Parental Leave in Ireland

There is a limited scheme of paid parental leave covering a child's first year currently operating in Ireland. Under the Maternity Protection Acts 1994 and 2004 mothers are entitled to 26 weeks maternity leave and to claim Maternity Benefit from the State. Mothers are entitled to a further 16 weeks unpaid maternity leave. Additional leave for mothers of premature babies became available in 2017. In 2016 statutory Paternity Benefit was introduced which gave fathers two weeks paid leave to be taken before the child reaches six months. Maternity and paternity benefit are paid at a standard rate of €240 per week, with a discretionary option for employers to top up. Both parents can avail of 18 weeks unpaid parental leave per child up until their eighth birthday. The Government has indicated it won't oppose an opposition sponsored amendment Bill introduced in 2018 which proposes to extend unpaid leave to six months available until a child's eighth birthday.

Take up of paid maternity leave is high with more than 90 per cent of eligible mothers availing of the scheme.⁴ The take up of paternity leave is lower with around 2,000 fathers availing of the benefit so far each month.⁵ The lower take up of paternity leave likely reflects the relative newness of the scheme, but also the gender pay gap. Gender

² Barnardos, (2013) *Child development guide*, Dublin: Barnardos

³ Nixon, N. Swords, L. Murray, A., (2013) *Growing up in Ireland: Parenting and Infant Development*, Dublin: Department of Children and youth Affairs

⁴ Russell, H. Watson, D. & Banks, J. (2011) *Pregnancy at Work: A National Survey*. Dublin: HSE Crisis Pregnancy Agency & The Equality Authority

⁵ Press Statement by Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Regina Doherty, T.D. (2017). [online] Available at <https://www.welfare.ie/en/pressoffice/Pages/pr221217.aspx> [Accessed at 22 February 2017]

pay inequality means paternity benefit may represent a higher portion of income loss for many families.

The Programme for Partnership Government commits to increasing paid parental leave to a child's first year; however no scheme has been introduced since the document was published in May 2016.⁶ A recent Red C poll carried out in January 2018 by Early Childhood Ireland found 69 per cent of respondents were in favour of giving all parents financial support to stay at home with their child for the first 12 months of the child's life.⁷ In May 2017 the European Union repealed and replaced its Parental Leave Directive. The new Directive means Member States will have to ensure parents have access to at least four months, non-transferable leave paid at least at statutory sick pay level. This leave must be flexible (available to take full-time, part-time etc.) and can be taken up to the child's twelfth birthday. This new decision means the Irish Government will have to take action if it is to fulfil its European Union obligations.

Paid Parental Leave Internationally

Internationally there is no uniform approach towards parental leave entitlements, with countries varying in both how much leave parents are entitled to and the amount of compensation offered. There is also a variance in who can take parental leave. Most offer more leave to mothers, but some share the leave more equally between parents. In some cases countries offer a small amount of paid maternity and paternity leave but balance it out with greater paid parental leave allowances; usually this leave is available beyond a child's first year. Below is a comparison of Ireland with a sample from the 35 OECD countries.⁸

	Maternity leave in weeks	Parental leave in weeks	% of average wage	No. of weeks at full rate of pay
Ireland	26	0	34.3	8.9
Estonia	20	146	51.2	85
Germany	14	44	73.4	42.6
Japan	14	44	61.6	35.8
Sweden	12.9	42.9	62.3	34.7
UK	39	0	30.9	12.1

⁶ Department of the Taoiseach, (2016), *Programme for Partnership Government*.

⁷ Early Childhood Ireland, (2018) *Childcare Barometer 2018*

⁸ OECD, (2016) Family database, www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm [accessed 1 February 2018]

Fig. 1. Paid leave entitlements reserved for mothers

At first glance of OECD maternity leave entitlements Ireland fares well, offering longer paid leave than many of its counterparts. Where Ireland falls short is in the amount of remuneration it offers mothers. It amounts to just nine weeks' paid leave or around 30 per cent of the average weekly salary. Many mothers simply can't afford to take the whole six months paid leave off and many more can't afford to take any of the additional unpaid leave.

	Paternity leave in weeks	Parental leave in weeks	% of average wage	No. of weeks at full rate of pay
Ireland	2	0	32*	0.6*
Estonia	2	0	100	2
Germany	0	8.7	65	5.7
Japan	0	52	58.4	30.4
Sweden	1.4	12.9	76	10.9
UK	2	0	20.2	0.4

Fig. 1. Paid leave entitlements reserved for fathers

*Calculated using CSO Quarterly National Household Survey.

Despite offering just two weeks paid paternity leave, Ireland has one of the more generous schemes; however just as with maternity leave, the rate paid is low and the lack of additional paid parental leave means Ireland has one of the worst compensation schemes for fathers wishing to care for their young child. In April 2018 the Minister for Social Protection and Employment Affairs, Regina Doherty, announced the Government's intention to introduce two weeks paid parental leave for each parent at a likely cost of €30 million per year in order to comply with the State's obligations under the EU Directive.⁹

Conclusion & Recommendations

The cost of an additional 12 weeks maternity leave paid at the current rate of €240 per week is €115.2 million and an additional 12 weeks paternity leave would cost €62.4 million.¹⁰ The Programme for Partnership Government committed to shared paid leave for parents in their child's first year. It also established a Prevention and Early

⁹ Hilliard, M. (2018) ' New two week paid parental leave plan will cost State €30m a year', *Irish Times (online)*, 6 April 2018 [accessed 12 April 2018]

¹⁰ Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Regina Doherty), *Ceisteanna- Questions- Dáil Éireann*, vol.570, 24 April 2018

Intervention Unit in the Department of Finance tasked with investing in initiatives which would improve outcomes for children and society in the long run. If the Government is truly committed to better outcomes for children it must not delay any further in implementing a year's paid leave for parents.

Recommendations

- Introduce an additional 24 weeks paid leave in a child's first year to be shared between both parents at a cost of €177.6 million per year.
- Implement an increase in the rate of paid maternity and paternity leave to 75 per cent of the average industrial wage (€532) at a cost of approximately €533 million phased over five budgets (€106.6 million per annum).^{11 12}

¹¹ Central Statistics Office. (2017) *Earnings and Labour Costs Annual 2016*. Dublin : Central Statistics Office

¹² Based on 38 weeks maternity benefit and 14 weeks paternity benefit.