



BUILDING STRONG FOUNDATIONS: Advancing Comprehensive Policies for Infants, Toddlers, and Families



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime



Paid Leave: A Critical Support for Infants, Toddlers, and Families

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Parents with infants and toddlers should have paid sick leave from work when they are ill, when their child or a family member is ill, or to obtain preventive care for themselves or their families. Parents should have paid family and medical leave when a child is born, adopted, or newly fostered.

Parents of infants and toddlers need time to tend to their children's needs as well as their own health and wellbeing. These needs may be short-term, requiring as little as a few hours off, or long-term, requiring several months. Paid leave policies, including sick and family leave, allow workers to take the time they need without worrying about their job security or a loss of income.

The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), enacted in 1993, is currently the only federal policy addressing employee leave. FMLA guarantees eligible employees up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave for the birth, adoption, or fostering of a child or to care for themselves or a family member due to a serious health condition.¹ The policy only applies to certain employees working at covered employers, and as of 2012, just 59 percent of employees were eligible for unpaid leave under FMLA.² FMLA is designed to cover serious conditions and is not extended to employees for such minor illnesses as the flu, strep throat, or the common cold—no federal policy guarantees sick leave of this nature. Even if employees are covered by FMLA, many find it difficult to take leave when it is unpaid, particularly if they work in low-wage jobs.

Parents need access to paid sick leave in order to keep their families healthy and to remain healthy themselves. In the first year of life alone, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends eight visits to the pediatrician, just for well-child check-ups.³ Infants and toddlers catch colds and other minor illnesses easily and often require additional doctors' visits and increased parental supervision at home

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as they recover.⁴ Children whose parents have paid sick leave have greater ability to access preventive health care services, such as immunizations and well-child visits, and are less likely to delay needed medical care.⁵ Adults take better care of themselves as well when they have paid sick leave: they are more likely to take time off work when they are ill and less likely to forgo needed health services.⁶ Working adults are also more likely to receive flu vaccines and preventive care services for themselves when they have paid time off.⁷

Paid sick leave has broader public health and economic benefits, too. When sick parents and children stay home, they reduce the spread of communicable diseases in their workplaces, child care programs, and communities.⁸ Families are better able to go to the doctor during business hours, lessening the odds of expensive emergency care use.⁹ The benefits of offering paid sick leave also far outweigh the costs for businesses by improving workforce stability and worker productivity.¹⁰

Paid family and medical leave promotes strong parent-child relationships and provides a foundation for positive health and development in the first few months of babies' lives. The early bonds parents develop with their babies are foundational to future learning and relationships. Sensitive and responsive parents let infants and toddlers know they are loved, safe, and cared for, which gives them the confidence to explore their environments, acquire new skills and abilities, and develop independence.¹¹ However, it takes time to become a responsive caregiver to a young child, establishing a pattern that will promote the child's long-term cognitive, social, and emotional development.¹² Paid family leave provides mothers and fathers with the time at home they need to foster these connections with their children.

Additionally, paid family leave is important for babies' physical health. Taking leave is associated with healthier births, including slight increases in birth weight and decreases in the likelihood of premature births, as well as fewer deaths in infancy.¹³ Mothers are more likely to breastfeed their infants when they have access to and use family leave, and longer periods of leave are associated with longer periods of breastfeeding.¹⁴ Breastfeeding supports initial bonding between mothers and their babies and provides important health benefits by strengthening infants' immune systems. Moreover, children whose parents have paid leave are more likely to receive recommended preventive newborn care in the first year of life, including well-baby visits, important vaccinations, and screenings for developmental delays and disabilities.¹⁵

Parents benefit from paid family leave, too. Mothers who are able to take longer periods of leave report fewer depressive symptoms and less stress.¹⁶ One nationally representative study found that when leave is paid, mothers report improved overall health as well.¹⁷ Fathers' access to paid leave also supports gender equality at home and in the workplace.¹⁸ Among heterosexual couples, fathers who take longer leaves are more involved in household chores and routine caregiving for their infants over time compared to fathers who take shorter leave or none at all.¹⁹ Higher rates of leave among fathers are also associated with greater female labor force participation,²⁰ which is critical for increasing families' economic security and helping to close the gender wage gap.

The United States lags far behind other developed countries on paid leave. The vast majority of working adults in the United States do not have access to comprehensive paid leave.²¹ Two-thirds of civilian workers receive paid sick time, and only 14 percent of workers have paid family leave. The availability of workplace benefits such as paid leave tends to be highly stratified across employment characteristics, including full- or part-time status, wage category (salaried or hourly wage), and occupation.²²

The lack of paid leave policies in the United States takes a significant toll on low-income working parents—particularly mothers—who are often in positions or industries without robust leave policies. Across income levels, mothers are more likely than fathers to take time off to care for sick children, and a majority of those who do are taking unpaid time off.²³ Less than 40 percent of working, low-income mothers report having access to paid sick leave,²⁴ and just 1 out of 5 workers in the bottom wage quintile has family leave. Many families struggle financially immediately after having a baby due

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to the high costs of caring for infants coupled with a loss of wages.²⁵ Women of color in particular lack paid leave, and consequently are more likely to take short leaves and experience job loss after childbirth.²⁶

Congress is considering several paid leave bills.²⁷ However, in the absence of federal action, states and localities are taking the lead. Three states—California, New Jersey, and Rhode Island—currently offer paid medical and family leave, and family leave laws in New York state, Washington state, and the District of Columbia go into effect in 2018, 2019, and 2020, respectively.²⁸ State family leave laws allow parents and caregivers to take time off to bond with or care for a new child; care for a family member with a serious health condition; or care for their own disability or health condition. Each state's leave program is funded by a payroll tax. Meanwhile, 4 states and 24 cities and counties already require employers to offer paid sick leave, and an additional 3 states and 5 cities have paid sick laws going into effect in 2017 and 2018.²⁹

American workers deserve federal legislation that guarantees them the ability to earn paid sick days and paid time off to care for themselves and their family members and to promote strong bonds with their young children. More than 6.2 million young children live in low-income working families. Parents should not have to choose between their families' health and their economic security. Local progress is encouraging, but action at the federal level is necessary to ensure that paid leave is accessible to all workers, not just those who are lucky enough to live or work where family-friendly policies are available.

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