

Paid Paternity Leave in Switzerland: Worth a Consideration?

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Walking around the corridors of our institute I find brilliant scientists, who are also mothers and fathers, working vigorously to climb up the merciless steps of the academic ladder and promptly rushing to pick up their offspring from child care after work. Academic careers demand to be fed by high profile publications, networking, and obtaining funding, amongst many other exigencies. How can these scientists balance their careers and their families? If we generalize, how could working mothers and fathers around the world be aided to fulfill their family's needs economically, and emotionally? Moreover, how can they find a balance between their careers and family, such that the compromises for success do not have to lean heavily on either side of the scale?

Finding a complete solution to this issue may seem impossible, yet significant steps, could, and are being taken to tackle the challenges of being successful in both family and career. One of such steps is paid paternity leave. This is an employee benefit that entitles men to a paid time off work, holding a secure return to their job position, in order to facilitate the care of a newborn child, enforced by governmental laws. The time of leave permitted varies widely amongst governments, but more benefits have been reported from programs where the leave allowance is greater than two weeks, and before the child has reached two years of age [1]. While programs of this nature are already in place in some countries, Switzerland, home of the ZNZ, is not amongst them.

I asked a postdoctoral fellow, member of the ZNZ, who recently became a father what were his thoughts on the issue? I was not done asking when he emphatically responded: "yes!". This also seemed to be the sentiment of a series of new parent-scientists whom I interviewed in the quest to explore the subject of paid paternity leave. "Do you think that paid paternity leave would benefit society, and why?" I asked him. He told me he assessed that paid paternity leave could have many positive effects within the nuclear family, and consequently on society. "Especially the earliest days of development are crucial to the upbringing of a child. If you can decrease the stress on the mother by being able to support her during this critical period, the child would consequently benefit from a less stressed mother, and parents. Also, the bond between father and child would be stronger, as well as the bond between mother and father". Could these opinions be correct on this hypothesis? Could paid paternity leave benefit the upbringing of children, and strengthen the connections between father, child, and mother?

The institution of paid paternity leave has been pioneered by the Nordic nations, where it has been established in an effort to aid parents balance family-work life, and to promote gender equality [2], but those are not the only benefits that have been associated with this practice. In 2007 Allen and Daly extensively reviewed the existing literature on the effects that increased father involvement in child rearing has on family life [3]. They found that vast amounts of literature reported that children benefit from the increase of father's involvement in their upbringing, that is, positive effects on the child's cognitive [4][5][6], emotional [7][8], social [9], and physical development [10][11]. Moreover, they found that co-parenting and partner relationships were also positively impacted, with parents reporting higher levels of satisfaction with their partners [11][12]; after all the ZNZ postdoc's hypotheses were on target.

The implementation of paid paternity leave challenges traditional gender roles by giving fathers the chance to increase their involvement in child rearing, and by promoting an egalitarian distribution of family workload between mothers and fathers. Evidence taken from pioneer countries on the issue suggests that the redistribution of childrearing labor contributes to the closing of gender gaps [13]. This became evident after fathers were given incentives to take paid paternity leave; the resulting increase in fathers taking time off to care for their newborn children marked a decrease in the time it took for mothers to return to the workforce [13], thus decreasing the negative impact that a prolonged maternity leave can have in a woman's career.

Of the 37 developed nations, only United States and Switzerland do not have laws entitling fathers to paid paternity leave [15]. In Switzerland, the idea has been rejected thirty times, according to the political organization Travail.Suisse [16]; the most recent proposal was rejected last April. It can be argued that paternity leave programs may carry along some negative aspects [17]. However, there seems to be more evidence on its positive impact upon the nuclear family, and thus on society. A new initiative named 'For a reasonable paternity leave – in favor of all the family', which proposes a twenty day paid paternity leave, is now running its course within the Swiss political system to potentially be up for vote at the end of 2017. If it goes up for vote, I would suggest that you take the ZNZ postdoc's opinions into close consideration.

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