

Uniting Paid Parental Leave and Child Care

Unifying Family Policy series

By Elliot Haspel

Where should family policy in the United States head over the next five to 15 years?

The *Unifying Family Policy* series reimagines key areas of family policy as interconnected threads in a shared tapestry. The series challenges underlying assumptions and invites fresh thinking in light of the deep societal transformations underway and those still to come. Each brief explores how a specific policy area intersects with others, and how, woven together, they can build a coherent, stable foundation for families in a rapidly changing world.

The current patchwork of family policies—paid leave, child care, tax credits, health coverage, etc.—is fragmented, reactive, and out of step with the realities families face. Over the next decade, we must recast family policy as an integrated, future-oriented system—one that recognizes caregiving as vital infrastructure, addresses the real costs of raising children, and gives families true agency to make choices that align with their values, cultures, and needs.

This brief focuses on one essential step in that transformation: uniting paid parental leave and child care into a single, cohesive effort. We argue for a clear national policy goal: The United States should ensure that any family who wishes to have a parent stay home to care for an infant during the first year of life can do so, without suffering major financial hardship or employment loss.

Current Context and Future Trends

In an era of increasing parental stress and loneliness, declining family formation and shrinking kin networks, and rising precarity from climate change and other disruptions, setting families up for the strongest possible start to life with a new child is imperative. A key element of this strong start is helping parents achieve what they want in terms of care—and most parents say they want time to care for and bond with their children during their first year. However, the U.S. positions paid leave as an isolated family support, making it unnecessarily difficult to achieve these aims.

The disconnection is particularly glaring when it comes to the relationship between paid leave and child care.

A good paid parental leave policy—one that is comprehensive and that maximizes desired parent-provided care during the first year of life—can cultivate resilience today and in the future. All the reasons why paid parental leave has long been needed will be exacerbated by trends shaping the late 2020s and 2030s. A good parental leave policy, like a robust child care system, will improve the “[supportive, predictable, and nurturing care](#)” that influences so much of early childhood development.

And it’s not just children and families who will benefit. From a societal standpoint, as the country finds itself with fewer families with children, there is that much more of a stake in how well those families do.

Yet in the United States, paid leave and child care have long been considered separate if related issues—cousins, perhaps. In general, paid leave and child care policies are separately negotiated and go through separate legislative committees. They have historically had separate though overlapping advocacy coalitions. As constructed, the policy areas’ underlying philosophies and goals are not fully aligned, nor are they both necessarily focused on what babies need throughout their first year, or how to best help parents or other close caregivers provide care during that period.

As a result, child care for infants (defined here as children under the age of one) is a massive challenge not only for individual families, but also for human development more generally. It is also a thorn in the side of those fighting for a strong external child care system: infant care is expensive for parents and expensive for providers to offer, and it frequently becomes a political flashpoint.

There is also a moral dimension that is often overlooked in the conversation about paid leave. As of 2023, a mere 27% of the civilian workforce in the U.S. has access to paid family leave through their employer, a number that drops to 6% among the lowest-paid workers. It is barbaric to force mothers to return to work outside the home within two to four weeks of childbirth, a reality for [far too many American women](#). In fact, while robust data is hard to come by, a 2019 Census Bureau [study suggests](#) that close to *one in four* U.S. mothers who gave birth for the first time returned to work within two months.

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It is unhealthy for a society to coerce regular separation between infants and parents who want to stay home with them in the early months of a child's life. Plainly put, a nation cannot claim to value families as its cornerstone while pressuring new parents back to work long before most are ready and before many have recovered from childbirth.

Quite simply, paid parental leave should be considered infant child care—a framing shift that can simultaneously strengthen paid leave and external child care policies.

The Opportunity

Most of the world thinks and talks about paid parental leave differently than we do in America. This is not merely a question of why the U.S. is [the only major economy in the world](#) without a national paid maternity leave law. It is a question of how and why societies seek to support families who are having a child.

The logic used by most of the world rests on two linked ideas. These ideas go by many names, but here we'll use these terms:

- **Early infant care leave (often called maternity/paternity leave):** Mothers need time to physically recover from childbirth, and parents and babies need time to bond during the critical and fragile first months of a child's life; one-on-one caregiving is particularly important during this period. Thus, parental time at home with the baby during the first three or so months of life should be maximized.
- **Extended infant care leave (often called parental or home care leave):** During the rest of their first year of life, infants remain vulnerable and preverbal and need time-intensive care as they develop. Many families prefer to have a parent provide primary care during this period. Thus, parental care during the rest of their first year of life should be a reasonably supported option.

These policies are, of course, mediated by parental preference: that is to say, parents who do not want to take advantage of leave when given a viable choice (for any number of personal or professional reasons) should be respected.

To illustrate how these two ideas play out in practice, consider the following chart of mothers' paid leave entitlements in select countries as of 2023:

Summary of paid leave entitlements available to mothers

PAID MATERNITY, PARENTAL AND HOME CARE LEAVE AVAILABLE TO MOTHERS, IN WEEKS, 2023

	PAID MATERNITY LEAVE			PAID PARENTAL AND HOME CARE LEAVE AVAILABLE TO MOTHERS			TOTAL PAID LEAVE AVAILABLE TO MOTHERS		
	Length (weeks)	Average payment rate (%)	Full-rate equivalent (weeks)	Length (weeks)	Average payment rate (%)	Full-rate equivalent (weeks)	Length (weeks)	Average payment rate (%)	Full-rate equivalent (weeks)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)=(1)+(4)	(8)	(9)
Austria	16	100	16	44	75	33	60	82	49
Canada	16	34	6	35	39	14	51	38	19
Chile	18	100	18	12	100	12	30	100	30
Finland	7	85	6	154	22	33	161	24	39
France	16	100	16	26	14	4	42	47	20
Germany	14	100	14	44	65	29	58	73	43
Israel	15	100	15	0	0	0	15	100	15
Italy	22	80	17	26	30	8	48	53	25
Japan	14	67	9	44	60	26	58	62	36
New Zealand	26	45	12	0	0	0	26	45	12
Portugal	6	100	6	24	60	14	30	68	20
United Kingdom	39	30	12	0	0	0	39	30	12
United States	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: [OECD Family Database](#); numbers rounded. Note 1: “Full-rate equivalent weeks” means the number of weeks’ worth of leave at which the person taking the leave continues to receive 100% of their previous wages. Note 2: Chart does not show unpaid leave. For instance, in New Zealand, mothers are entitled to 26 additional weeks of unpaid job-protected leave following their paid maternity leave allotment.

The United States should commit to providing both types of parental leave—for early infancy and for the remainder of a child’s first year—to promote the stability and quality of life for American families. Doing so will help the millions of parents who want to stay home with their infants and will lay the foundation for families to navigate an uncertain future. It will also help defuse cultural battles over whether infant child care is even appropriate—battles that rage even though [relatively few infants attend licensed programs](#)—by ensuring that all parents have real options, while easing pressure on a system where infant care is both expensive and difficult to deliver. Reframing paid parental leave as infant child care will thus move all families forward.

What To Do

To unite paid parental leave and child care, Capita recommends a mix of actions (messaging, funding, policy changes, and more) by a wide range of parties (government, advocates, philanthropy, and others).

Combine every discussion of child care with a discussion of paid leave: Every speech, report, and media appearance about child care should include at least one line about the imperative of securing robust paid parental leave.

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Merge paid parental leave proposals with child care policy proposals and ensure that advocates for each work together: Child care proposals, in particular, should all include measures related to paid parental leave during the first year of a child's life.

Philanthropic actors should ensure that all child care advocates have a paid leave strategy: Paid parental leave is, in a sense, a subcategory of child care. While paid leave advocates should reinforce child care messaging, the onus is ultimately on child care advocates to integrate paid leave into their work. Doing so likely requires a prior shift in philanthropic priorities.

Push for a more robust paid leave policy than is currently on the table, including early infant care leave: Stakeholders should develop a “north star” paid leave proposal that includes at least 12 weeks of early infant care leave with 100% wage replacement for low- and moderate-income individuals, as well as strategies for supporting parental care during the rest of the first year of life. (Current proposals seek, at most, 12 weeks of partial wage replacement with no further support.) Options for addressing the remainder of the first year include, at generous-enough levels to make parental care a viable choice:

- Extended infant care leave
- Home care stipends (i.e., direct payments to stay-at-home parents)
- At-home infant care programs (i.e., allowing families that qualify for a public child care subsidy to self-pay during a child's first year)
- Major tax benefits for families during the first year of a child's life

If necessary, separate paid parental leave from other types of paid leave, without abandoning them: While other types of leave—such as leave to care for an elderly relative or an adult child with a disability—are crucial, paid parental leave has a unique logic in terms of the impact on child development alongside families' economic security. Therefore, if there is an opportunity to win a parents-only leave policy, it should be seized, but only with the understanding that advocates will continue to press for other forms of leave.

Ensure that parents (particularly mothers) are not harmed by taking time away from the labor force: Some parents are wary of taking extended parental leave, even with job protection, because time away from the paid labor force can have real consequences on career prospects, future financial security, and retirement savings. Therefore, paid parental leave policies must be complemented by a series of related policies that prevent families from being harmed for taking advantage of leave. These may include:

- Ensuring that all paid leave wages continue to count toward Social Security during leave periods.

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- Offering Social Security “[caregiver credits](#),” as many other high-income nations do, so that leaving the labor force during the first year of a child’s life (and beyond) does not harm parents’ retirement security or their eligibility for Social Security disability insurance.
- Closing loopholes allowing employers to “claw back” employer health insurance premium contributions if a parent chooses not to return to work after the leave period.
- Enshrining protections preventing discrimination against parents who take advantage of leave and against hiring discrimination based on parental status.
- Establishing tax incentives for businesses that help parents return to work after leave or after a period of providing infant child care, and funding programs that further this goal.

Invest in community infrastructure for parents with infants: While it is important to get paid leave policies right, it is also important to nourish the local institutions and communities that strengthen and sustain young families and to ensure that communities are welcoming places for such families. Government at all levels, philanthropies, and the private sector should consider investments in:

- Libraries and their family-focused programming
- Public parks, playgrounds, pools, museums, and splash pads (ideally with zero or nominal fees for children)
- Family-friendly recreational sports leagues, local music venues, coffee shops, etc.
- Sidewalks wide enough for strollers, and easy stroller access to public transportation
- Community-wide “care evenings” akin to First Friday art walks
- Co-location of services for families with children (ideally further co-located with services for the elderly)
- Abundant family-friendly housing, including affordable housing capable of supporting multigenerational households
- Convenient parking spots for families with young children and expedited family lanes at airports
- Spaces and events to provide support or solidarity during a child’s infancy, such as free or very low-cost drop-in playspaces or facilitated playgroups, including scaling up existing offerings offered by faith-based institutions and other community groups.

The Tough Questions

How do we preserve health care coverage for workers who take parental leave? Given the lack of a strong health care system in the U.S. and the fact that most American workers get health care through their employers, how can long leave periods ensure uninterrupted access to health care without exacting an undue toll on employers’ budgets?

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How can the U.S. labor market accommodate a far higher percentage of workers taking leave? The U.S. does not have the same tradition of temporary parental leave workers that exists in many peer nations, whereby firms hire people to cover the responsibilities of workers on long leaves.

If we split efforts for paid parental leave from other types of paid leave, how do we navigate the political trade-offs? Without a well-thought-out strategy, there is the risk of creating setbacks for efforts to secure holistic paid leave policies.

How can we respond to the needs of parents without an earnings history and parents who have not been in the labor force for some time? Paid parental leave can sound like it should only apply to those who are actively in the labor force. Yet stay-at-home parents and those with little earnings history also need financial support postpartum. Some countries fold all parents into their paid leave programs, ensuring a minimum universal benefit.

How do we meet the needs of non-birthing parents or caregivers? There is no one established practice internationally for how to balance maternity and paternity or non-birthing parental leave (e.g., for the non-birthing woman in a same-sex female marriage), although in most countries, maternity leave tends to be far longer than paternity or non-birthing parent leaves. That said, most countries do offer some amount of paid paternity or non-birthing parental leave, a needed complement to maternity leave. Cultural norms, alongside policy design, have been found to help determine how much paternity or non-birthing parent leave is actually used, so norms should also be taken into consideration.

How do we meet the needs of parents who prefer or need external infant child care? Some percentage of parents will continue to prefer or, due to circumstances beyond their control, need external infant child care regardless of paid leave policies. How can we ensure that there are enough high-quality, affordable infant child care providers for these families?

Recommended Reading

For more reading on the research base and different perspectives on this topic, we recommend these resources.

[Left Out: A Framework for Non-Contributory Paid Parental Leave](#), Niskanen Center

[The Real War on Families: Why the U.S. Needs Paid Leave Now](#), In These Times

[Getting Paid While Taking Time: The Women's Movement and the Development](#)

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[of Paid Family Leave Policies in the United States](#), Megan Sholar

[Paid Maternal Leave is Associated with Better Language and Socioemotional Outcomes During Toddlerhood](#), Kozak et al.

[The Paid Family and Medical Leave Opportunity: What Research Tells Us About Designing a Paid Leave Program that Works for All](#), PL+US & Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality

Connections

- Mandated paid parental leave strengthens **JOB QUALITY** by increasing job security via smoothing the income shock from having a child and ensuring that a pregnancy does not jeopardize the viability of a job (which unpaid leave job protections may); in this way, parental leave complements jobs' **PREDICTIVE SCHEDULING**.

See: capita.org/unifying-family-policy-series/predictive-scheduling

- Paid parental leave improves **FAMILY FORMATION** by eliminating a key stressor that may prevent a couple from having children on their preferred timeline or having the number of children they desire.

See: capita.org/a-new-lens-on-the-birth-rate-conversation

- The first year of a child's life is an important use case for **SOCIAL SECURITY CAREGIVER CREDITS** as a complement to paid parental leave, so that parents (especially mothers) do not take a hit to their retirement security in order to provide care to their young child.

See: capita.org/unifying-family-policy-series/caregiver-credits