The benefits of paid parental leave for children’s well-being

Public policy scholar Jane Waldfogel explains how paid parental leave can lead to improved child health and development

Interview by Meeri Kim
December 4, 2017

Meeri Kim: Your research focuses on the impact of public policies on child and family well-being, one of these being parental leave programs. Notably, the U.S. is the only developed country that doesn’t mandate paid parental leave. What are the known benefits of policies that support working mothers and fathers taking time off after the birth of a child?

Jane Waldfogel: We now know a lot about the benefits of paid parental leave for children’s and parents’ health, as well as parents’ labor market outcomes. We also know that these benefits occur mainly when the leave is paid — because many parents can’t afford to take unpaid leave.

For example, there are several studies that take advantage of policy variation across countries and over time and show that when periods of paid parental leave are longer, rates of infant mortality are lower. Also, longer periods of maternity leave have been linked to increases in child birth weight and a lower likelihood of premature birth. We also know from work in the U.S. that longer leaves are linked to more breastfeeding and higher rates of children receiving well-baby care and immunizations.

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MK: Have studies shown that paid parental leave is associated with improved child development later on in life?

JW: Yes, studies have shown benefits of paid parental leave for child development. There is also research that shows that children do better in terms of their cognitive and socioemotional development when parents can stay home longer in the first year of life on at least a part-time basis.

In a monograph for SRCD, my colleagues and I looked at maternal employment and child cognitive outcomes in the first three years of life, analyzing data from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care. We found that children whose mothers were working during the first year after the birth had lower Bracken School Readiness scores at age 3 than children whose mothers did not work by that time, particularly if the mother was working full-time.
In another study using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, my colleagues and I found that a mother’s return to work within 12 weeks of giving birth was associated with a greater likelihood of the child having externalizing behavioral problems at age 4.

MK: What about the effects of paternal leave in particular? You’ve done research on the relationships among father’s leave, father’s involvement, and child development. What do the findings tell us?

JW: I found both in the U.S. and the U.K. that when fathers take longer leaves after the birth, they are more involved with their children’s care later in infancy and childhood. And that involvement, in turn, is beneficial in the long run for the children. For instance, we found some evidence that children with highly involved fathers tend to perform better in terms of their cognitive test scores.

But fathers are very sensitive to leave policy. In particular, fathers are unlikely to take leave unless it is paid. Conversely, when more paid leave is offered, fathers do take advantage of it. So it’s important that as we move toward paid leave policy in the U.S., we make sure to include fathers as well as mothers.

Jane Waldfogel is Compton Foundation Centennial Professor for the Prevention of Children and Youth Problems at the Columbia University School of Social Work, and co-Director of the Columbia Population Research Center. She is also Visiting Professor at the London School of Economics. Waldfogel received her Ph.D. in public policy from the Harvard Kennedy School in 1994 and has written extensively on the impact of public policies on poverty, inequality, and child and family well-being. Her current research includes studies of poverty and social policy, work-family policies such as paid family leave, and inequality in child development and achievement.

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