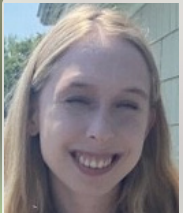


EXPECTING PARENTS EXPECT PAID LEAVE



Tara Burke
she/her
Junior
Public Health

Melissa Petro is a writer, teacher, wife, and mother in New York City who did not qualify for paid or unpaid leave from any of her employers. She did not take time off to recover from the birth of her first child because she needed the money. She now regrets this, as she wished she had more time to recover from giving birth and bond with her newborn. Tending to her newborn's needs while also completing the demands of her employers proved impossible. Paid parental leave is not unnecessary. It is a basic need that all mothers, including Melissa, should be given in the U.S.

Paid parental leave can promote family well-being and support continued employment. However, there are too many parents in the U.S. who do not have access to this. They must return to work too quickly upon the birth of a new child because they have no choice if they want to pay the bills. The Federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) requires eligible employers to provide certain workers unpaid family leave; however, unlike other industrialized nations, the U.S. does not have national standards on paid family or sick leave. Besides the United States, all developed countries like France, Canada, Norway and the United Kingdom have a national policy that provides new parents with paid time off with their children. As a result,

the U.S. falls behind many countries for their paternal leave.

The conditions in the U.S. for parental leave do not support the health of mothers. Paid parental leave gives mental health benefits for mothers, including fewer symptoms of depression, both after childbirth and long-term post-pregnancy care, which data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study confirms. For their study, they focused on a sample of mothers that worked after their child was born and measured their health status and indicators of depression. They found that mothers who took less than eight weeks of paid maternal leave were associated with increased depressive symptoms and worse overall health. In addition, research from The National Library of Medicine states that mothers who do not take maternity leave are more at risk for parental burnout and other mental health concerns. These findings suggest that longer paid parental leave may improve the mental health and overall well-being of new mothers.

The lack of paid parental leave in the U.S. also causes poor health for children. There is a growing body of work that focuses on the effects of different lengths of parental leave among mothers who return to work during the first year of their newborn's life. According to data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, parental leave of 12 weeks or fewer is associated with lower cognitive test scores, lower rates of child care immunizations and higher rates of externalizing behavior problems

in children. The data also claims that the first few months of infancy are a critical period during which parents familiarize themselves with their newborns and learn to adapt to their needs. If these first months are disrupted by a mother's return to work, this theory predicts a disruption to the child's growth.

As aforementioned, mothers who are not given paid parental leave are more likely to be depressed. Their depression could have negative consequences for their children. Depressed mothers of infants are less interactive with their children and are less likely to seek appropriate health care for their children.

Furthermore, the lack of paid parental leave in the U.S. does not support worker productivity. Paid leave policies benefit businesses by improving worker retention and productivity. According to The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the state of California shows the benefits of paid parental leave because their paid leave program lowered the risk of poverty among mothers of infants, while increasing household income for those mothers.

Paid leave can also boost workplace participation. Job -protected paid leave keeps women connected to their employers when some otherwise would have exited the labor force to care for their children. In California women who take a paid leave are 93% more likely to be in the workplace 9 to 12 months after childbirth than women who did not take leave. This highlights that the state's paid leave program is beneficial for employees.

As I mentioned previously, The Federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) requires

eligible employers to provide certain workers unpaid family leave. Unpaid leave is not affordable for many workers. Black, Hispanic, and Native American workers are less likely to be able to afford unpaid leave from work compared to white workers, reflecting racial disparities in our society. About 44% of workers do not have the option to take unpaid leave under FMLA.

This proves the need for the U.S. to have a national paid program. This would not only benefit expecting parents but the economy as well. A successful federal leave program would have a quality outreach plan with an emphasis on reaching low paid workers, workers of color, and women. People's access to paid leave should not depend on where they work. If the U.S. developed a national paid leave policy this would allow mothers sufficient time to be with their children, regardless of their employer status.

Overall, the U.S falls behind many countries for their paternal leave. According to an article from the BBC, America's individualism from World War II fed into perceptions of the social value of maternity leave. Paid parental leave was seen as entitled. Over several decades the U.S. workforce has changed significantly. Today both parents work in almost half of two parent households. There is a greater push for mandatory parental paid leave. While the U.S. remains the last wealthy country without paid parental leave, change is coming. The issue of parental leave has been gaining momentum on both the state and national levels. If the U.S. wants to see mothers like Melissa prosper, they must implement a national paid parental leave.

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