

## Babies, Bosses, Benefits and Barriers

A WOMAN'S VIEW Ginette Petitpas Taylor

It is quite a badge of failure for a society to know that it gives couples more reasons not to have children than otherwise. Indeed, it is a society shooting itself in the foot.

Parents in many developed countries are having fewer children than they want, according to a new report by the well-respected Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. It compared the different approaches of 30 member countries, including Canada.

Quebec gets high marks for its parental leave and child care services, but the rest of Canada is said to not provide enough support to working parents.

As long as there are people with few work/family choices, there will be too few babies and too little employment. That's clear from what we know in New Brunswick, and that's what the report concludes.

Many parents benefit from what programs do exist but then they are done in by gaps. They take maternity or parental leave but when the leave ends, no childcare is available. Their child enters school and then they can't find part-time child care or their employer does not provide leave when the child is sick from school. We have such a piecemeal system that some of the stress felt by parents comes from trying to make it all work together.

In most of Canada, certainly in New Brunswick, parents face barriers to achieving a good work-life balance. New Brunswick workers need fewer barriers to employment and parenthood. Parents have so few options when it comes to affordable and accessible child care, that some choose between career and family. That is not good for women, for workplace productivity or for fertility rates.

Relying on an underground economy of unregulated child care providers to the extent that we do, is a waste of children's potential. It is also a source of frustration for parents, a drain on government revenue and a dangerous proposition overall. Whether we do it out of concern for child development and value the pedagogic role of child care centers or whether concern for labour supply is what shapes our childcare policy, Canada and New Brunswick need to catch up to other developed countries who are building networks of quality child care supports.

Some people do not have as many children as they had intended, or they decide to not have children because they can't see how they could make it work without sacrificing personal economic autonomy, career or lifestyle.

Some families do have several children, but usually the mother does not maintain her financial autonomy. Some parents cannot afford to stay at home with young children, given our incomplete parental leave program and the rarity of family friendly workplaces.

The lack of protection, standards and benefits for part-time workers makes that option undesirable for many parents, or a source of poverty and exploitation for some.

Quebec has double the rate of growth of working mothers in two-parent families compared to the rest of the country and it has reversed its falling birth rate. Their \$7-a-day subsidized child care and great parental leave program shows what is possible with policy changes.

There is no one-size fits all policy recipe to make parents happy, according to the Babies and Bosses report released by the Paris-based OECD, but giving parents money so that one of them is not working but caring for children – though it sounds sensible – is often counter-productive. It

leads to women being given a disincentive to work and employers not hiring or investing in women since it is assumed that women will eventually stay at home.

A better policy mix would be for both parents – and lone parents – to be given financial incentives to work by the tax system, but also for parents to have access to quality childcare to ensure that they can get to work. A fair deal for families' contribution to society is crucial.

Parental leave reportedly works best when it is short but well paid. Regular rumours in Canada about an extension of the one-year parental leave to two years - instead of investing in infant child care - have been met by some women with: Who is asking for that? I can't even afford one year's leave! How will you guarantee my job and my skill level after I've been away for 2 years?

Currently nearly all the parental leave is taken by mothers, a situation that some countries have addressed by reserving part of the leave for fathers - use it or lose it. Part of the reason fathers don't take much leave is that workplaces are rarely family-friendly.

Recently, when Iceland went from a "shareable" parental leave that either parent could take, to one where each must take part of it or lose it, the rate of take-up by fathers went from 3% to 35%. In some countries, 80% of fathers take parental leave. About 7% of fathers in New Brunswick take advantage of the federal parental leave benefit program.

Even the number of women who remain childless varies significantly even among similar countries. In Switzerland, for example, 40% of women with university education are childless around age 40. But in Sweden, where many programs give parents the opportunity to keep their job and have children, only 20% of the women with a university degree are childless at age 40.

If parents have to choose between a job and looking after their children, we won't like their choices.

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