

Paid Parental Leave: A Key Policy for Advancing Health Equity Among Children

Findings from *Vibrant and Healthy Kids: Aligning Science, Practice, and Policy to Advance Health Equity*



The single most important factor in promoting children's well-being is having safe, stable, and nurturing relationships with their parents or other primary caregivers.

That means support for primary caregivers is key to ensuring all children can grow up healthy. There is strong scientific evidence that paid parental leave could help by supporting mothers recovering from childbirth and parents taking time off work to care for new infants.

The United States remains one of the very few countries without a national paid guaranteed maternity leave policy. As of 2019, only six states and Washington, D.C., have paid leave programs. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine recommends that federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial policy makers implement paid parental leave across the nation.

POSITIVE EFFECTS

Evidence suggests that paid parental leave is associated with

- 1. Lower infant and child mortality and fewer premature births.**
- 2. Increased breast feeding, which provides important nutrition for developing infant brains and bodies and reduces the incidence of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).**
- 3. Increased labor force participation of women, which can help sustain income and other economic indicators that have been linked to the health and well-being of children and families.**

EXAMPLE: PAID PARENTAL LEAVE IN CALIFORNIA

California was the first state to implement a comprehensive paid family leave program in 2004. Almost all employees are eligible, regardless of the size of their employer. The program provides eligible employees up to six weeks of wage replacement leave (55 percent of regular weekly earnings) when they take leave from work to bond with a new child or to care for a seriously ill family member. The program is structured as an insurance benefit built on California's State Disability Insurance system and funded by a payroll tax on employees, so employers do not bear any direct costs.

- **100 percent growth in use of maternity leave in California from 1999-2010**
- **88 percent of paid family leave claims are to care for a young child**
- **10-20 percent increase in breastfeeding**

MORE RESEARCH NEEDED

In partnership with researchers, policy makers should model variations in the level of benefits, length of leave, and funding mechanisms to determine how paid parental leave can best improve child health outcomes and reduce health disparities.

Read about the science behind paid parental leave and find more recommendations related to early childhood development at [nationalacademies.org/VibrantHealthyKids](https://www.nationalacademies.org/VibrantHealthyKids).