

GUEST ESSAY

What Paternity Leave Does for a Father's Brain

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After President Biden left paid family leave out of his Build Back Better Act last month, a familiar marshaling of forces took place. Women's groups and female leaders protested. Senator Patty Murray of Washington said Democrats should not "tell all the women in this country that they can't have paid leave." Democratic leaders, well aware that women are the base of the party, have restored four weeks of family leave, at least for now.

But as with so much about parenting, the focus was on mothers, and that's outdated and misleading. Although women bear the brunt of family caregiving in the United States, paid leave is more than a women's issue. Research conducted by our lab and others in our field shows the importance of family leave for mothers *and* fathers. There is more evidence than ever for the benefits of paternity leave — for fathers themselves, and the rest of the family too.

Paternity leave bolsters family relationships. Among 6,000 couples followed from when their child was a baby until kindergarten age, couples in which fathers took even just a week or two of paternity leave were 26 percent more likely to stay married, compared with couples in which fathers took no leave. Another study found that when fathers took paternity leave, their children reported closer relationships with their dads nine years later.

One reason paternity leave might boost fathers' relationships is that parenting experience transforms men's brains and bodies. Men's hormones can shift both before and after a child's birth, and there is exciting new evidence that fathers' brains reflect the transition to parenthood as well.

A recent study of Spanish fathers found post-birth remodeling of a part of the brain linked with social cognition, and greater neural change predicted stronger responses to infant images. Similar remodeling has been observed in mothers, but fathers' brain changes were more variable, perhaps because men's participation in care is more variable. In a study from Japan, men showed stronger brain responses to videos of infants after they became fathers. Men who worked more hours showed less of a change in their brain responses, perhaps because they spent less time with their infants.

Other work has found that parenting experience may foster the development of the fathering brain. A Dutch study found that fathers randomized to wear a soft baby carrier for three weeks (versus fathers given a baby seat to set up at home instead) wore their babies an average of 12 hours over the three-week intervention. Men with the baby carriers subsequently showed stronger responses to infant cry in the amygdala, a key emotion sensor in the brain. This effect was strongest among men who had adverse childhood experiences, suggesting that extra contact with infants was especially transformative for men at greatest risk of bonding difficulties.

In a rare study to look at fathers in same-sex relationships, Israeli researchers found that "primary caregiver" fathers in gay male couples showed brain responses to their infants that looked more like mothers' than like "secondary caregiver" dads', and time devoted to child care shaped their responses.

All this suggests that fathers are made, not born: Time with infants is a key ingredient in building the fathering brain. In other words, policies that support fathers' time at home after birth may help mold men into more attuned fathers.

Paternity leave may not just be transformative for fathers, but good for mothers too. In a new study published in *The Journal of Child and Family Studies*, we measured sleep, stress and depression in couples recruited during their first pregnancy and followed across the first year of their baby's life. We found that mothers showed better mental health trajectories when their partners took paternity leave.

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Among the outcomes we measured, we saw a benefit to dads who took paid paternity leave on one of our sleep-related measures: Although daytime fatigue skyrocketed after birth among many of our new fathers, fathers in the paid-leave group did not show the same rise in exhaustion. Overall, however, we found that mothers gained most when men took paid paternity leave. Women whose partners took paid leave did not show the same rise in stress and in symptoms of depression as moms in the unpaid-leave group. In other words, men's paid leave buffered risks to their partners' mental health after birth.

These results dovetail with other research. Stanford economists studied a Swedish policy reform that made fathers more likely to take paternity leave soon after birth. They found that women who became mothers shortly after this reform were 14 percent less likely to seek care for postpartum medical complications and 26 percent less likely to get a prescription for anti-anxiety medication, compared with mothers whose babies were born before the reform.

Despite these benefits, in 2016 only 9 percent of American workers were employed at companies that offered paternity leave to all of their employees. Although the world's richest countries offer an average paid paternity leave of eight weeks, the United States currently offers zero — and unless the Build Back Better package does wind up including paid leave, zero is where we are likely to stay.

It's incredible that a government controlled by Democrats is struggling to pass a long-cherished party priority like paid family leave, a policy offered by 186 other countries and supported by more than 70 percent of adults in the United States. In the wake of a bruising pandemic and a historic chance to rebuild, supporting families must be top priority.

Going forward, we must reframe paid family leave not as a women's issue but as an issue that matters to everyone — women and men, the young and old, and all types of families. Fortunately, we have a recent example who can testify to this importance: Pete Buttigieg, the U.S. transportation secretary, who took four weeks of paid paternity leave this fall, after he and his husband, Chasten, adopted newborn twins.

Mr. Buttigieg has spoken about how his leave has relieved stress on his partner and allowed the two fathers to tag-team their parenting duties: "My workday as a dad starts at about 3 in the morning when Chasten finally hits the sack and it's my turn."

As a high-profile leader who is unapologetically taking time off to care for his family, Mr. Buttigieg may be the father figure we all need.

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