



# Paid parental leave

## Introduction

Paid parental leave is part of a package of government policies that support parents and families. This paper discusses both the labour market dynamics associated with the provision of paid parental leave and the operation and impacts of paid parental leave, informed by New Zealand and Australian evaluations, and other overseas evidence.

The duration of paid parental leave is a continuing topic of discussion, both here and in Australia. In New Zealand, for babies born from 1 April 2015, paid parental leave has been extended from the previous 14 weeks to 16 weeks, and it will increase to 18 weeks from 1 April 2016. This will match Australia's provision for 18 weeks paid parental leave. In both countries, the statutory payment is made from government funds to eligible mothers who are able to transfer some or all of their paid leave to their eligible spouse or partner if they wish<sup>i</sup>.

There are mixed views on the appropriate duration of paid parental leave. In New Zealand, a 2012 Member's Bill proposing to extend paid parental leave to 26 weeks was defeated in February 2015. At the same time, the Australian government shelved its proposal to extend paid parental leave to 26 weeks with an increased, earnings-related payment which was to be funded by a new levy on large employers. A key objective of that proposal was to encourage more highly educated, higher income women to use paid parental leave and return to their employment and careers.

Paid parental leave is intended to support the health and welfare of the mother and child, to facilitate bonding between infants and their parents, and to further early childhood development. However, if the leave period is too long, parents taking leave (almost always the mother) may experience a degradation of skills and lose their job position and workforce attachment. Parents' lifetime earnings and capacity to contribute to family income may be curtailed as a result. At a national labour market level, short and long-term labour and skills supply could be negatively affected by lengthy paid parental leave.

There are no research studies of the impacts of periods of paid parental leave over time in New Zealand or Australia, partly because both were late in introducing paid parental leave, compared to most OECD countries. In New Zealand, two research studies examined the operation of parental leave not long after payment for parental leave was introduced but they do not assess the impacts of the duration of leave. Their key findings are discussed here, along with more recent indications of the use of parental leave in New Zealand. A report on the short-term outcomes of the introduction in 2011 of paid parental leave in Australia is of interest and its findings are summarised. It is the final part of an evaluation of the effectiveness of federal paid parental leave policy which could provide an exemplar and a point of comparison for a New Zealand policy evaluation. This paper also draws on the international literature on paid parental leave, particularly on the duration of leave and its labour market and social impacts.



<sup>i</sup> Short paid leave entitlements for fathers and partners, such as Australia's 'Dad and Partner Pay' for up to two weeks around the time of the birth, are outside the scope of this paper.

## About *In Focus*

Superu's *In Focus* series is designed to inform and stimulate debate on specific social issues faced by New Zealanders. We draw on current policy, practice and research to fully explore all sides of the issue.

## Trends in women's employment in New Zealand

Paid parental leave is an important provision which helps parents to reconcile their employment and family responsibilities. Specifically, it allows women workers to take job-protected leave for childbirth, or to care for a young child in the case of adoption, and to maintain their workforce attachment. Parental leave policy is of particular importance to New Zealand because New Zealand combines one of the highest fertility rates in the OECD with one of the highest female employment rates.

New Zealand also has a very flexible labour market, with many women in casual employment or working part-time until their children go to school. Historically, however, it has also had a comparatively low investment in paid parental leave and socialised care for very young children. As we shall see, the OECD views paid parental leave as a vital means of improving women's lifetime earnings and career potential, leading to higher family incomes and positive child outcomes.

Since the Parental Leave and Employment Protection Act was passed in 1987, women's employment participation, earnings capacity and workforce attachment have strengthened. A report by the New Zealand Institute of Economic Research (NZIER) for the Ministry of Women's Affairs finds that different societal attitudes toward women's employment and child-rearing options for families are strong drivers of (and support) the progressive improvement in women's earning capacity over the past 30 years<sup>(i)</sup>.

New Zealand has experienced persistent strong demand for skilled labour. Successive cohorts of young women with increased levels of qualifications have higher employment

rates and increased hours of work. This has increased the supply of skills in the labour market. The gender earnings gap has narrowed as women have achieved higher qualifications than men, and women have benefited from decreased occupational segregation in the expanding, higher-paid, occupational groups such as 'legislators, administrators and managers', 'professionals' and 'technicians and associated professionals'<sup>(i)</sup>.

The NZIER report concludes that the key to reducing the remaining gender earnings gap are policies and strategies which increase the time women spend in the workforce over their lifetime, and which support women to move from part-time to full-time employment. Currently, one in three employed women work part-time<sup>(2)</sup> with full-time work much more likely to be skilled than part-time work<sup>(3)</sup>.

Paid parental leave, subsidised child-care provision,<sup>ii</sup> and access to tertiary education and training are the main government policy tools which advance the objectives of improving women's employment and earnings<sup>(4)</sup>. Achieving these objectives will also improve the outlook for New Zealand families and the wider economy.

## Parental leave legislation aims to balance the needs of employers and employees

The Parental Leave and Employment Protection Act 1987 and its underpinning policy framework aim to strike a balance between the interests of employees and employers. Employees want to be able to take parental leave at the time of birth or adoption of a child and then return to their job. Employers have an interest in retaining skilled and experienced staff. The Act provides for job protection during pregnancy and parental leave (paid and unpaid), and for the employee's return to work without disadvantage to position or pay rate. Key outcomes are the maintenance of parents' connection to employment and skills supply for the employer.

Eligible female and male employees are able to share a maximum of 12 months parental leave with job protection, each in a single continuous period. A government payment for 16 weeks of the parental leave is integral to the objectives of the legislation<sup>iii</sup>. The balance of the statutory parental leave entitlement is unpaid leave.

The multiple objectives of the legislation are:

- access to leave and payment for working parents
- gender equity in the labour market, including -
  - increased female labour force retention and attachment
  - the opportunity to return to paid work without disadvantage to position or pay

<sup>ii</sup> Jaumotte's cross-national multi-variate analysis found that paid parental leave and subsidised child care stimulate women's full-time rather than part-time employment participation.

<sup>iii</sup> Paid parental leave was first introduced in New Zealand in 2002. The initial 12 weeks paid parental leave entitlement was extended to 14 weeks by an amendment in 2004 and thus met the International Labour Organization standard for 14 weeks paid maternity leave.

- recognising childbearing as a natural function that requires mothers to take time off work
- gender equity within families, including improved support for fathers’/partners’ access to and take-up of leave
- improved health outcomes for mothers, babies and children, so a mother can recover from childbirth and bond with a new baby
- income stability during a significant period of transition for families<sup>(5)</sup>.

Eligibility for parental leave (both paid and unpaid) is based on average hours worked per week and length of continuous employment. These are indicators of the degree of job attachment in the current employment relationship. Over time, these requirements have been amended to allow most of the workforce to become eligible, as a response to the increase in part-time and casual work in the economy. However, some workers still do not qualify for parental leave because they cannot demonstrate sufficient job attachment. This includes some seasonal workers and people with more than one job. A recent Ministry for Business Innovation and Employment paper opens up the possibility of a further widening of eligibility for parental leave and some flexibility between leave and work<sup>(6)</sup>. While the legislation provides

for eligible mothers to transfer some or all of their 16 weeks statutory paid leave to an eligible father or partner, in practice, 99% of payments are made to the mother or the primary care-giver in adoptions<sup>(7)</sup>.

The payment rate is capped at 50% of average ordinary-time weekly earnings and is taxable. Employees who earn less than the maximum payment get paid parental leave at the level of their earnings. The statutory payment does not affect any employer top-up payments. Payments for the self-employed are equivalent to their average weekly income, up to the same maximum rate paid to employees. At the capped level, the statutory payment for parental leave meets only a portion of the foregone income of many of the mothers who take the paid leave entitlement.

A few women with skills in high demand may be able to negotiate a top-up parental leave payment with their employer. Many others will save money to help tide them over a period of paid and unpaid parental leave, while people on lower incomes will not be able to do this. Higher income families will be able to self-fund a longer period of leave (paid and unpaid), while low income families may take only the period of paid leave because they cannot afford to be on unpaid leave. Further, the parental leave payment does not – and is not designed to – meet the costs of having a new baby or adopted child.

## Paid parental leave provisions are largely working to keep women in employment

The job protection provisions of the Act are well established and generally serve to maintain skills supply for employers. Increasing numbers of people take statutory paid parental leave, nearly all of them women, and a majority of them return to work within 12 months, 80% of them to the same employer. Inland Revenue reported that it made \$165 million in payments to 25,836 parents in the June 2014 year<sup>iv</sup>. This compares with 18,000-20,000 parents ten years ago<sup>(8)</sup>.

Two research studies have examined paid parental leave in New Zealand: the Department of Labour’s *Parental Leave in New Zealand 2005/2006 Evaluation* (2007) and a subsequent study, *Work Patterns after Paid Parental Leave* (2008), based on analysis of Linked Employer-Employee Dataset (LEED) data<sup>(9)</sup>. These are complemented by findings from the Growing Up in New Zealand (GUiNZ) study whose cohort children were born in 2009 – 2010<sup>(10) (11)</sup>. This more recent study shows broadly similar patterns of women’s uptake and duration of paid and unpaid parental leave, preferences for a longer period of leave, return-to-work rates, more women in part-time work on return, and financial pressures on families.

All these New Zealand findings suggest that the parental leave legislation is largely working for employers in terms of skills retention, based on high return-to-work rates after employees taking 6-12 months parental leave. Women’s workforce attachment is being maintained, often supported by the option of working part-time or having flexible hours on return<sup>v</sup>. There are some caveats though. Many parents would prefer to take longer leave, if they could afford it.

<sup>iv</sup> To provide some scale, there were 58,610 live births in the same period. The ratio of parents taking paid parental leave to the number of live births has increased slightly since 2012.

<sup>v</sup> From 1 July 2008, eligible employees with caring responsibilities have had the statutory “right to request” flexible working arrangements and employers have had a “duty to consider” the request under Part 6AA of the Employment Relations (Flexible Working Arrangements) Amendment Act 2007. The Employment Relations Amendment Act 2014, which came into effect on 6 March 2015 further extended this right to all employees (not just caregivers) from day one of their employment <sup>(21)</sup>.

## Most women return to work when their child is six months old

The Department of Labour's 2005/2006 evaluation found widespread support for the paid parental leave provision amongst parents and that the leave was almost always taken by the mother. It was estimated that 80% of women employees were eligible for paid parental leave. Eighty-three percent of eligible women took paid parental leave, usually at the end of other available paid leave. Fifty-seven percent also took extended unpaid leave of an average of six months.<sup>(8)</sup> The more recent GUINZ study found that, by the time their child was nine months old, 87% of mothers had taken paid parental leave and 55% had taken unpaid parental leave<sup>(10)</sup>.

The Department of Labour's evaluation found that mothers had high return-to-work rates, with two-thirds returning to the same employer. Twice as many women were working part-time after their parental leave. On average, most women returned to work when their child was six months old. Many women would have liked to have taken more leave but could not afford to do so. They would have preferred to return to work when their child was 12 months old.

The evaluation also found that the level of the statutory payment falls short of financial security for the family but it does help with income stability during the leave period. Fathers tend to use annual leave at the time of the birth and rarely take unpaid or paid parental leave. The evaluation found that fathers soon return to work, feeling increased pressure to provide financially for the family after the birth.

## Women earning the most have the strongest job attachment

The Linked Employer-Employee Dataset (LEED) longitudinal study was based on data from all recipients of paid parental leave in New Zealand for the period July 2002–July 2005<sup>vi</sup>. It showed that 92% of recipients took the full paid leave duration (14 weeks). Over 99% of recipients were women, with most aged 20-39 years. Overall, 76% of recipients returned to work within 12 months of starting parental leave and 49% started working within six months. Of those who returned to work within 12 months, 80% went back to the same employer.

Many people reduced their earnings after returning to work, with around one third earning considerably less than before, consistent with the earlier Department of Labour evaluation which found that twice as many women were working part-time after taking parental leave.

Return-to-work rates and continuing employment were highest for those who had earned the most before taking parental leave. Those in the highest earnings group before starting leave were also more likely to have returned and

stayed with the same employer 18 months later. Thus, the highest earnings group demonstrated the strongest job attachment. This reflects the structure of the labour market whereby lower paid workers generally have less security of employment and poorer prospects for career progression.

The GUINZ study notes that it is common for New Zealand families to experience a drop in income after the child's birth, often because of a parent taking leave from employment. In the time between late pregnancy and the baby reaching nine months of age, 56% of cohort families reported experiencing indicators of hardship such as: having to buy cheaper food to be able to afford other necessities (50%), and putting up with feeling cold because of heating costs (18%)<sup>(12)</sup>.

## Australian evaluation found the highest benefits were for low income women

Australia introduced statutory paid parental leave in 2011 in the form of 18 weeks leave paid at the rate of the national minimum wage. The Phase 4 final report of a multi-year independent evaluation of this scheme was released in March 2015<sup>(13)</sup>. It includes an evaluation of the 'Dad and Partner Pay' component of the scheme. The study compared the outcomes of matched samples of leave-eligible women workers who gave birth 'before' or 'after' the introduction of the scheme. The evaluation assessed changes in women's labour force participation and labour supply, mothers' and babies' health and wellbeing, and gender equity and work-life balance.

The evaluation timeframe focused on women who gave birth within the first year of the scheme's operation, so it looked only at short-term outcomes of paid parental leave. It found that the impacts of having 18 weeks paid parental leave (compared with none at all) were most pronounced for lower income, less educated, self-employed and casual women workers. This was as expected because the payment rate – equivalent to the national minimum wage – is relatively high for lower income women. Lower income, less educated, self-employed and casual women workers were also less likely to have access to employer-funded parental leave than higher income, tertiary-educated women.

Other key findings –

- The availability of paid parental leave delayed women's return to work during the first six months following a birth. More women stayed at home for at least 18 weeks after the birth which was intended by the introduction of the scheme.
- Paid parental leave slightly increased women's tendency to return to work. More women (than before paid parental leave was introduced) returned to work by 12 months after the birth. Of this group, paid parental leave led to increased retention in the same job – an important aim of the scheme. This was particularly pronounced for women with lower

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levels of education. There was also a small improvement in women's perceptions of their career prospects on return to work – possibly an effect of increased job attachment.

- Paid parental leave did not change the gendered division of household labour or mothers' treatment at work while pregnant.
- Paid parental leave produced small improvements in mothers' health, extended breastfeeding duration, and probably improved babies' health slightly. There was some evidence that improvements in mothers' and babies' health and wellbeing were greater amongst lower income women, for whom paid parental leave made the most difference. These were mothers least likely to have access to employer paid parental leave and with little financial security due to their unstable employment.

The report concludes that the scheme has demonstrated progress towards its intended outcomes. It has allowed mothers to remain at home with a new baby for longer while retaining a predictable income, which provides additional security following a birth. The scheme has also increased workforce attachment among mothers and improved retention for employers<sup>(13)</sup>. However, the report concluded that the scheme's impact on child development and on social outcomes, such as the gendered division of household labour, will require long-term research.

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WHEN** **18 weeks**  
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### OECD and other international evidence on the duration of paid parental leave

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According to the OECD, paid work is the most important factor in lifting families out of poverty and women's employment is a key component of family income. In the report, *Doing Better for Families* (2011) the OECD looks at how family-related policies are changing in response to changing family conditions and also the extent to which they are improving work, family and child outcomes. The impacts of paid parental leave on

female labour supply and child wellbeing are considered along with the effectiveness of spending on family benefits (in tax measures, cash and services such as childcare); policies promoting work-life balance, and measures to reduce poverty among families.

#### Duration of paid parental leave and employment effects

The OECD found that short periods of employment-protected paid parental leave around the time of childbirth strengthens women's workforce attachment. Additional weeks of leave had a positive effect on women's employment up to a certain point. Beyond this, additional leave began to detrimentally affect workforce attachment and could diminish future earnings<sup>(14)</sup>. For example, successive extensions of paid maternity leave over time in Norway reported a lack of positive impact on employment and earnings<sup>(15)</sup>.

Data from 17 OECD countries, from 1985-1999, demonstrated that paid parental leave entitlements had a positive effect on female employment rates for women aged 25-54 years, up to 20 weeks. Beyond this point, additional weeks had a negative influence on female employment rates. It was found that extended periods of leave may lead to skills deterioration and damage women's career paths and future earnings<sup>(16)</sup>.

An OECD cross-national assessment of parental leave reforms between 1970 and 2008 across 30 OECD countries analysed their impact on employment rates of women aged 25-54 years. The results show that "the extension of paid leave entitlements – irrespective of payment rates – has had rather a negative effect – if any – on the employment rate of women aged from 25 to 54 years, as well as on the female-to-male employment ratio<sup>(14 pp. 139-141)</sup>." The report suggests that these results may be partly due to many countries further extending paid parental leave since the early 1990s.

Extending parental leave durations beyond around six months can have a negative effect on women's workforce attachment and future careers and earnings, because of the length of time out of work<sup>(14)</sup>. A more recent OECD analysis of cross-national data for 1970-2010 using a different definition of paid leave – the total paid period for maternity and child-care leave in each country<sup>vii</sup> – suggests that up to a certain duration, leave increased women's employment rates, with the effect seen most strongly for periods of 1-2 years. It found that extending leave beyond two years had substantial negative effects on female employment rates<sup>(17)</sup>. The study was not able to identify a precise leave duration at which positive effects become negative.

#### Child development outcomes

The OECD looked at the impact of mothers' return to work on children in the short and long run<sup>(14)</sup>. Six months of paid parental leave for women meets the World Health

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vii The definition of leave duration used is the total period of time for which a woman can receive payment after her maternity leave has ended, regardless of the duration of job protection guarantees. Payment includes a parental leave benefit and/or a cash-for-care allowance.

Organisation’s recommendation for six months of exclusive breast-feeding for infants. The importance of a period of paid leave for mothers’ and babies’ health and the mother-child relationship in the first months of life is widely acknowledged.

More controversial is the debate over the impacts of mothers’ return to work on young children. The OECD uses longitudinal data from five countries<sup>viii</sup> and a literature review to examine the relationship between mothers’ return to work and child development. It concludes that mothers’ return to work six months after childbirth may be negatively related to children’s cognitive outcomes but the association is small and not universally observed<sup>(14)</sup>. The small negative association is seen for families where parents are more likely to engage in stimulating parenting activities with their infants. Children of parents who are less likely to do this will benefit from participating in formal child care, and along with the mothers’ income, this counterbalances any negative effect. The evidence suggests that the quality of parental care and participation in formal child care are often more significant than maternal employment itself in influencing children’s cognitive and educational development. Also, the mother’s earnings can make a positive contribution to child development, particularly in low-income families.

Other research reinforces a view that six months paid parental leave assists with child development. Prior to the introduction of paid parental leave in Australia, the Australian Productivity Commission (2009) reviewed research on the impacts of mothers’ return to work after maternity leave on children. The Commission concluded that six months exclusive parental care fosters improved child development. If the mother returns to employment earlier than six months and the child is in non-parental care for extended periods then child development could be detrimentally affected. The key issue, the report argued, is the quality of child care relative to the care that would otherwise be provided by the mother<sup>(18)</sup>.

### Long term outcomes for children

The duration of paid parental leave has been progressively extended over decades in some European countries. This provides researchers with the opportunity to analyse the long-term impacts on children relative to different durations of paid leave. The question has been raised as to whether longer periods of leave benefits children. Specifically, evidence relating to Germany, Denmark and Norway suggests that longer periods of leave do not improve children’s educational outcomes through to school-leaving age.

For example, extensions in paid leave to six months in 1979, then to 10 months in 1986 and again in 1992 when unpaid leave was extended from 18 to 36 months, did not improve children’s long-term educational outcomes<sup>(19)</sup>. Further, it was found that unpaid parental leave beyond 12 months negatively

affected children’s long-term education. It was argued that children generally benefitted from socialised child-care from around one year old. One study<sup>(20)</sup> looked at the long-term educational effects on children of increasing paid parental leave from 14 to 20 weeks in 1984 in Denmark. It was found that the increase had no measurable effect on children’s long-term educational outcomes, even though mothers’ incomes and career opportunities were slightly improved by the reform.

The most recent of these studies<sup>(15)</sup> assesses paid maternity leave in Norway, focusing on parents’ responses to extensions to leave in 1977, 1987 and 1992, from 12 to 18 and 35 weeks respectively. It suggests that extensions of leave do not necessarily improve outcomes. It was found that mothers did indeed take longer periods of leave as a result of these extensions. The changes, however, had little effect on children’s high school achievements – as well as on parental earnings and participation in the labour market. These findings are not inconsistent with the conclusions of the OECD’s 2010 cross-national assessment, where a minority of countries experienced no labour market effects.

These studies suggest that extensions of paid parental or maternity leave do not lead to better educational outcomes for children in the long run. They supplement the substantial analysis the OECD presents in *Doing Better for Families*.



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for babies born  
from 1 April 2015,  
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**and it will  
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## Conclusion

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Parental employment, and particularly the employment of women, is the key to increasing family income, reducing family poverty and improving child outcomes. Women's workforce attachment needs to be the central focus of paid parental leave policy because of its impact on career prospects and earnings, and for its beneficial impact on New Zealand's economy.

International evidence suggests that a period of around six months paid parental leave is appropriate for sustaining women's employment in the longer term. Six months is recommended for exclusive breastfeeding and supports mothers' recovery and babies' health. There is little evidence that child development outcomes are negatively impacted by mothers returning to work six months after childbirth, particularly if the children are in high quality child-care. Moreover, longer periods of paid parental leave do not lead to improved long-term educational outcomes for children.

Paid parental leave is part of a package of related policies concerning parental employment and family responsibilities. The international literature also points to the importance of combining an appropriate duration of paid leave with

subsidised formal child-care and improving the prospects of women in the labour market by good access to tertiary education. These additional supporting policies are especially important for women with lower levels of education and those on low incomes.

The New Zealand evidence shows that employers often offer employees flexible employment arrangements after a period of parental leave. This helps with the transition of women back into employment. However, the scarcity and expense of formal child care for infants poses real challenges for parents, particularly for those in lower socio-economic groups. This can create difficulties for women's longer term re-attachment to employment.

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