



The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

Instruments to foster long-term paternal involvement in family work

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Fostering long-term paternal involvement in family work in Finland

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1. Family Leave Policy in Finland: what, who, how much and why?

Since the 1970s, family leave schemes have been a tool to promote work-family reconciliation and gender equality. Families in Finland have the following family leave entitlements after the birth of their child: 1) Maternity and Paternity leave 2) Parental leave 3) Child care leave and 4) Partial child care leave (figure 1 below).



Maternity leave needs to be taken at least 30 days before the calculated time of birth. Thereafter, maternity leave continues for about 3 months, or up to a total of 105 weekdays. **Paternity leave** was prolonged in 2013, and currently the father's entitlement is a maximum of 54 working days (9 weeks) starting immediately after the birth of the child. Fathers can choose to stay at home for from 1 to 18 days concurrently with the child's mother while she is receiving a maternity or parental allowance. The whole 9 weeks, or the remainder of this leave can be taken after termination of the parental allowance period. None of the paternity leave entitlement can be transferred to the mother. Paternity leave must be taken before the child reaches the age of 2 or, in the case of adoption, before two years have passed since the child was adopted.

During paternity leave, the Finnish Social Insurance Institution (KELA) pays fathers a paternity allowance which is normally about 70% of the father's income (on average 83,85 euros/day). The number of fathers taking paternal leave has recently shown a gradual increase. Most (80%) men take the short 3-week paternal leave and this is not linked to socioeconomic status. Over half of all fathers opt for the longer paternal leave entitlement.¹ Since 2017, the father does not need to be living with the child, but must be a caregiver for the child during the paternity leave period. Fathers who are self-employed, unemployed or students can also claim the paternity allowance but are prohibited from working or studying full-time during the leave period. The paternity allowance can also be paid to adoptive fathers and to LGBT parents. Single female parents are entitled only to maternal and parental leave.

It has been documented that the longer paternal leave is taken more often by well-educated fathers and those whose spouse is also highly educated. First-time fathers

¹ Kelan lapsiperhe-etuustilasto 2017 [Family with children statistics, KELA 2017].

also take leave more often than fathers of a second or third child.² Longer periods of paternal leave, without the simultaneous presence of the mother, enables the father to take full responsibility for both child and home.

After maternal leave has ended, parents have the possibility of **parental leave**, up to a maximum of 158 working days. The child will thus be about 9 months old when the parental leave allowance ends. Parents can agree between themselves on how to distribute their parental leave entitlement; they can divide the leave, in which case each parent can take leave, which must be for a period of at least 12 days, on two separate occasions, or all the leave can be taken by one parent. In families where both parents work part-time, the two parents can also take partial parental leave simultaneously. Parents in this situation are paid a partial parental allowance.

In 2017, mothers received 90% and fathers 10% of all family leave benefits. Mothers received on average 62,53 euros and fathers 82,80 euros per day. A parent who was not in the labour market prior to the birth of the child is entitled to the minimum daily benefit (24,64 €/day). According to parents, the most common reasons why fathers do not take up family leave more often are related to the family's economic situation and/or to the fact that the child's mother is at home taking care of the child either because she doesn't have a job to return to or because the family adheres to the ideology that the main responsibility for childcare and the home is borne by the mother³.

Although attitudes to equality in parental leave have taken a more egalitarian turn over the past 20 years, many working parents feel that their employer does not sufficiently encourage them to take family leave. Parents, particularly those working in the private sector report that taking family leave is more difficult for men than women.⁴

After parental leave, there are several ways of arranging day care for the child. The child can continue home care, or the child can attend municipal or private day care. Between the years 1996 and 2016 every Finnish child had a subjective right to unlimited **early childhood education and care (ECEC)**. The change in the law, which came into force in August 2016, means that currently, if one or both parents are unemployed or on parental leave, their child is entitled to ECEC for a maximum of 20 hours per week. Municipalities are responsible for arranging ECEC services and for their quality and supervision.

Parents are entitled to a child **home care allowance (HCA)** or private day care allowance if the child is not in municipal day care and is under 3 years old. This leave can be taken in two parts (minimum length one month). Both parents may not take full-time care leave at the same time. The average amount paid for one child in 2017 was 438.47 € per month. This sum comprises a care allowance (basic payment 338.34 €/month), care supplement, (calculated according to the family's total income) and a possible municipal supplement (depending on the home municipality). In 2017, the HCA allowance was paid mostly to mothers; only 7.1% of recipients were fathers.⁵ Contrary to common belief, only a small majority of mothers stay at home on family leave for several years non-stop, and only a minority take the maximum length of leave. A mother is more likely to be still at home with her two-year-old if she is a blue-

² Lammi-Taskula 2017.

³ Lammi-Taskula et al 2017; Salmi 2017; Attila et al 2018.

⁴ Attila et al 2018.

⁵ Kelan lapsiperhe-etuustilasto 2017 [Family with children statistics, KELA 2017].

collar worker, has a low level of education, had a low-income level before the child was born, has no job to return to, and if she has three or more children.⁶

A flexible or partial care allowance can be granted to parents working up to a maximum of 30 hours per week and whose child is under the age of 3. The mean flexible care allowance is 184.63 €/month. It can be paid to both parents at the same time, if they look after the child at different times. A partial care allowance (98,09 €/month) is paid to parents whose children are in their first or second year of school (8.2 % of recipients were fathers). Parents with children aged from 3 to 7 years (starting school) have only the right to reduce their working hours but not to any financial compensation.

Parents can take **temporary care leave** (max. 4 days) and stay at home if their child (under age 10) suddenly falls ill. This leave is taken almost as much by fathers as mothers. Although part-time work has increased among Finnish women⁷, most parents work full-time and far fewer work part-time than is the norm in the Nordic countries⁸. In 2017, 21 % of female and 10 % of male employees worked part-time.

2. Policy Debate

Recent years have seen much public debate on many different themes in the domain of family leave policy. A long-running debate concerns how to **support fathers** who would like to take up their full quota (9 weeks) and even increase their share of parental leave. One major advance over recent years is that most political parties and many central labour market organisations have presented models for reform of the family leave system⁹. Thus, parental leave reform will constitute a challenge for the next government (parliamentary elections will be held in spring 2019).

Other leave policy challenges remain. One aim is to **improve flexibility** in the use of family leave, e.g., what would be a reasonable age limit on the right to family/parental leave and related allowances? Another debate is about whether allowances could be paid to a non-parent close to the child. Yet another is on better supporting parents in part-time work, for example by increasing partial care leave and flexible care leave with an additional flat-rate allowance.¹⁰ Moreover, leave length for **single parents** is less than it is for two-parent families. It is also the case that because of the fragmented nature and complexity of the leave system many parents are not aware of all their entitlements. One solution is to **better inform parents** (e.g., as has been done in the 2017 Visible Fathers campaign¹¹).

One leave policy issue concerns the proposal to reduce the length of **child home care leave from 3 to 2 years** and increase the length of the home care leave allowance according to parental income. The argument for reducing home care leave is that it will encourage mothers to (re-)enter to the labour market sooner and thus lower the rate of mothers' unemployment.

⁶ Salmi et al 2017; Närvi 2017

⁷ OSF 2018

⁸ Kambur & Pärnänen 2017

⁹ Salmi 2017; Salmi et al 2017

¹⁰ Salmi 2017

¹¹ <https://thl.fi/fi/web/thlfi-en/research-and-expertwork/projects-and-programmes/visible-fathers>

Before 2016, all children under school age had a subjective right to ECEC, although many children under 3 years were still being cared for at home. In 2016, the government decided to **reduce the child's subjective right to ECEC** in cases where the parent(s) were not working or studying full time. This left local municipalities with the possibility to cut ECEC to the statutory requirement of 20 hours/week. There has been pressure to disallow this possibility, as it does not support the children's right to ECEC and increases regional inequality between families.

3. Transferable aspects

In Germany, 24 months of the parental leave entitlement can be taken at any time up to the child's eighth birthday. This is a much longer period than in Finland (which ends when the child turns three). The German model gives parents flexibility and the opportunity to choose the 'right time' to stay home for their family's wellbeing. On the other hand, it is important for the early father-child relationship and father involvement for the father to stay home when the child is very young, and from this point of view the Finnish model is appropriate.

German parents need to live in the same household with the child to be eligible for parental allowances. Perhaps German decision-makers could consider adopting the Finnish practice of making parental benefits available to parents (caregivers only) not living in the same household?

ECEC is free of charge in some states in Germany (e.g., Berlin). This practice could also be important in Finland to ensure equality between children and socioeconomically different families.

Finland operates an individual (progressive) taxation policy; this supports working outside home for both parents but does not reward families with only one breadwinner.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

While the short paternity leave in Finland (the first 1-18 days) gets the father-child relationship off to a good start and helps mothers, it probably does not in the long run have the desired impact on a more equal division of labour and responsibility at home or on a father's position in the workplace.¹² The fact remains that mothers utilise the lion's share of parental leaves and thus the costs of parenthood largely fall on the female-dominated sectors of the economy. While parents are left to themselves to decide how to share the parental leave, change is unlikely to happen. **Father's leave entitlements should be earmarked**, enabling them to stay home more and spend enough time alone with their children. By **increasing the 'father's quota'**, we are starting to build a new norm in family leave practices.

It has been documented that many fathers nowadays subscribe to the cultural ideology of involved fatherhood, and would like the opportunity to be on an equality with the mother and experience a more emotional relationship with their children. However, many fathers continue to feel that they have the breadwinning responsibility and mothers that they have the main responsibility for childcare and household chores.¹³ The prevailing **cultural and individual beliefs** about fatherhood, motherhood and childhood can also be seen in Finnish parents' justifications for their

¹² Lammi-Taskula & Salmi 2014.

¹³ Eerola 2014; Eerola & Mykkänen 2017.

1-year-old's childcare solution, i.e., the child's best interest, parental well-being, 'good' parenthood (referring especially to the mother's rightful place at home) and the family economy¹⁴.

Family leave policies promote gender equality more in **high socioeconomic** families, where longer paternity leave periods are taken, parental leave is more commonly shared and shorter home care allowance (HCA) periods are taken by mothers. Thus, a woman with a fixed-term job contract or not working prior to the birth of her child is more likely to stay at home for a longer period and be reliant on the HCA. It seems, in fact, to have become an income source for unemployed women. It also serves as an alternative to unemployment, especially for mothers who identify with a strong caregiver role.¹⁵ This gives rise to a core question about attitudes and values: Who do we empower as capable of and responsible for the care of our children?

To foster long-term paternal involvement, requires not only economic support but also more **individual, emotional and educational support for fathers'** identities throughout the "fathering life-time" (not only when the children are young). Although support services for parents (e.g., child health centres) are striving to provide gender-neutral services¹⁶, many fathers feel that these services focus mainly on mothers (e.g. child health centres and social services)¹⁷.

One good practice could be to **hear, share and research more** (positive) lived experiences and narratives of fathers who have wanted to stay home for longer than just the 'father's quota'. This would help these stories to gain approval on both the societal and individual levels. Knowledge of the outcomes of involved fatherhood for the child, father, mother and society in general should be more widely communicated and visible.

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¹⁴ Terävä et al 2018.

¹⁵ Salmi et al 2017.

¹⁶ Hakulinen et al 2016.

¹⁷ Mykkänen et al. 2017.

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