



Paid parenting leave from a child perspective: a pillar of sustainable development

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Executive Summary

Parenting leave policies play a crucial role in enabling children to grow up in economically secure, family-based care environments during the earliest and most sensitive stages of life. The first 1,000 days, from conception to a child's second birthday, represent a critical developmental window in which early relationships, emotional regulation, health, and developmental trajectories are shaped. Yet parenting leave has too often been understood primarily as a labour market instrument or as support for parents, rather than as a policy that directly affects children's rights, well-being, and life chances. This White Paper addresses this imbalance by reviewing parenting leave policies across Europe from a child-centred and child-rights perspective.

The White Paper combines a comparative analysis of paid maternity, paternity, and parental leave during the child's first year of life with a review of evidence on how parenting leave policies and their design elements affect child well-being. The findings show substantial variation across Europe in the duration, payment levels, and accessibility of paid leave. While many countries provide some highly compensated leave, fewer offer twelve months or more. Non-transferable entitlements have become more common, partly following the EU Work-Life Balance Directive, but important gaps remain.

The evidence reviewed suggests that the design of parenting leave policies may be as significant as the existence of leave entitlements themselves. While the literature does not point to a single optimal model, several recurring patterns emerge:

1. The **duration of paid parenting leave** appears to be important. Evidence from studies on child health, parental well-being, and labour-market outcomes suggests that relatively short periods of paid leave, particularly those below six months, and in some contexts below the child's first year of life more broadly, may be insufficient to fully support children's developmental needs and family well-being during early childhood. Such arrangements may create gaps between children's care needs, parental caregiving demands, particularly for mothers, and the availability of supportive structures.
2. **Individually reserved and non-transferable leave entitlements for the co-parent, most commonly fathers**, appear important. These entitlements matter not only for promoting gender equality but also for supporting child well-being. Fathers' leave-taking has increasingly been associated with stronger father-child relationships, more equal sharing of caregiving responsibilities, and more supportive co-parenting arrangements.
3. The **level of remuneration** appears critical. Income replacement below previous earnings levels may create financial gaps for families precisely at a life stage characterised by increased expenditures and heightened care demands. This can affect the material conditions and stability of children's early environments. While partial compensation may provide some protection, lower replacement rates may increase financial strain and constrain families' ability to make use of available leave entitlements.
4. **Eligibility for parenting leave** is important as it continues to depend largely on formal employment relationships rather than on the child. As a consequence, not all children benefit equally from existing parenting leave systems. Some children grow up in families with access to long periods of well-paid leave and secure caregiving arrangements, while others are born into circumstances in which parents have only limited access to support or no statutory protection at all.





From a child-centred perspective, this evidence raises a fundamental challenge. Children do not choose their parents' labour market position, family, employment contract, or social circumstances. Yet these factors continue to shape children's access to parental time, income security, and stable care during the earliest phase of life. The differences risk reinforcing any inequalities from the very beginning and may leave behind precisely those children who could benefit most from financially secure and nurturing early environments.

This White Paper therefore calls for a shift in how parenting leave policies are understood and designed towards including a child's perspective. Parenting leave should not be viewed only as support for workers, parents, or gender equality, although these goals remain highly significant. It should also be recognised as a child-rights policy, a mechanism for supporting early development, and a long-term investment in sustainable societies embedded in the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. The Convention on the Rights of the Child provides an important normative framework: children's rights to development, health, social security, and an adequate standard of living imply that nurturing care in early childhood is not only a private family responsibility but also a matter of public concern.

Parenting leave policies alone cannot guarantee child well-being. However, when they provide sufficient time, adequate income protection, inclusive eligibility, and opportunities for both parents to participate in caregiving, they can help create healthier, more secure, and more equitable beginnings for children's lives. A child-centred perspective ultimately implies a simple but powerful principle: no child should be left behind at the beginning of life.





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Introduction

Improving the well-being of children and their families is a major ambition of governments and policymakers worldwide. However, the significance of parenting leave for children's well-being has not always been sufficiently recognised. To address this gap, this White Paper examines how *parenting leave policies*¹ can support early childhood development. In addition to reviewing a range of policy designs, the paper explores the growing body of evidence on the impact of parenting leave on children, parents, and families. It considers which features of parenting leave are most likely to promote children's well-being during the transition to parenthood and to support parents in balancing employment and family life.

Children are deeply dependent not only on the knowledge and commitment of economic and social policymakers in the public sphere, but also on their parents' capacity to provide care and support within the family setting. Rising global insecurity and social turbulence have made the challenges of family life increasingly difficult (UNICEF, 2023; Repo et al., 2025). Uncertainty regarding the availability and resilience of traditional institutional supports for raising children, particularly infants, has made it more difficult for younger generations to envisage having children or combining parenthood with employment (UNFPA, 2025).

A continuing challenge for contemporary societies is to allocate sufficient financial resources to support the time away from paid work that is required when parents have children, for both mothers and fathers. The current over-reliance on women's contributions to early childhood care, together with the lifelong financial penalties associated with primary caregiving, is no longer socially sustainable. As Doucet and Moss (2026) argue, care work must be properly valued, and its costs shared more equitably. This argument is reinforced by changing social norms. Recent EU-wide survey evidence confirms broad support for shared caregiving and active fatherhood (see Appendix 1). In EIGE's 2024 CARE Survey, most respondents across all age groups agreed that parenting should be a shared responsibility, while large majorities agreed that fathers are as well suited as mothers to look after children and that fathers and mothers should equally share time off work when a child is ill (EIGE, 2026).

Policies that recognise both care and financial resources as fundamental to nurturing and safeguarding children in early childhood contribute to the creation of socially sustainable societies (United Nations, 1987). In the landmark report *Our Common Future* (Brundtland Commission, 1987), social sustainability is defined in terms of meeting present needs without compromising the well-being of future generations. Parenting leave policies can contribute to the achievement of several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including ending poverty, improving health and well-being, and promoting gender equality. Their effective implementation signals that a partnership between governments and families is necessary to ensure that even the youngest children are not only "cared for" within families, but also "cared about" at the level of national policy, in line with the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 2025). In the context of rising child poverty across Europe, these goals are particularly important.

The White Paper is organised as follows. The first section introduces a child-centred perspective on leave policymaking. The second section provides an overview of the history and evolution of parenting leave policies for parents, primarily within Europe. The European Union (EU) has played a leading role globally in establishing minimum legal standards for parenting leave systems through instruments such as the Pregnant Workers Directive (1992) and the Work-Life Balance Directive (2019). This section also outlines

¹ This report uses "parenting leave" as an umbrella term for employment-related care leave entitlements, including maternity, paternity, and parental leave, while referring to specific leave types where relevant to a particular country context or academic study (Meil & Romero-Balsas, 2025).



the key dimensions of parenting leave policy design, including duration, payment levels, transferable and non-transferable entitlements, and eligibility criteria. In addition, it examines the diversity of leave arrangements across Europe from a child-centred perspective and presents comparative data on the amount of paid leave time (maternity, paternity, and parental leave) and benefit levels allocated to parents of children during the first year of life. The third section reviews the current evidence on the effects of parenting leave policies on child development and family well-being, drawing on synthesised evidence from systematic literature reviews, meta-analyses, longitudinal studies and qualitative research. Finally, the concluding section discusses implications for policy development and future research, with particular attention to children’s well-being, inequalities in access to parenting leave, and the importance of designing policies that support equitable opportunities for children from the earliest stages of life.





1. Child Well-being and Parenting Leave Policies

1.1 Child well-being as a concept

To understand the significance of parenting leave policies for children, it is first necessary to clarify how child well-being is conceptualised and measured. In both academic research and international policy debates, several frameworks have been developed to capture children’s well-being theoretically and empirically. Prominent examples include the child indicator systems developed by the OECD (2021), UNICEF (UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti, 2020), and the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021), as outlined in Table 1. While these frameworks differ in their methodological approaches and policy objectives, they share the understanding that child well-being is a multidimensional concept encompassing the conditions under which children grow, develop, and experience their lives.

A further influential framework focusing specifically on early childhood development is the Nurturing Care Framework (World Health Organization, United Nations Children’s Fund, & World Bank Group, 2018). Developed jointly by the World Health Organization, UNICEF, and the World Bank Group, in collaboration with the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health, the Early Childhood Development Action Network, and other organisations. The framework provides a roadmap for achieving the child-related objectives of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Global Strategy for Women’s, Children’s and Adolescents’ Health. Launched alongside the World Health Assembly in 2018, it emphasises that efforts to promote health and well-being must begin in the earliest years of life, from pregnancy through early childhood.

Table 1: International frameworks on child well-being

Framework	Focus	Central Dimensions
OECD Child Well-being Framework	Comparative welfare state analysis	Health, education, material conditions, safety
UNICEF Child Well-being Reports	Child rights and lived experience	Health, skills, mental well-being, relationships
WHO Child Health Frameworks	Child health and well-being	Health, development, nutrition, survival, protection
Nurturing Care Framework	Early childhood development	Health, nutrition, responsive care, learning, safety

Sources: OECD (2021); UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti (2020); World Health Organization (2021); World Health Organization, United Nations Children’s Fund, & World Bank Group (2018).

Across these international frameworks, child well-being is typically described through several interrelated domains that together capture children’s health, development, relationships, and material living conditions. International indicator systems commonly distinguish between physical health, cognitive and emotional development, care environments and relationships, and material and economic security. Within each domain, specific indicators are used to capture different aspects of children’s living conditions and developmental outcomes.

Although all dimensions of child well-being are relevant throughout childhood, their relative importance varies across developmental stages. A growing body of research highlights the particular significance of the first 1,000 days, spanning the period from pregnancy to a child’s second birthday (WHO–UNICEF–Lancet Commission, 2020). This phase is widely recognised as a highly sensitive developmental window





during which biological growth, brain development, emotional regulation, and attachment relationships are established. Experiences during this period can have long-term consequences for health, learning, and well-being across the life course.

In this context, parenting leave policies are particularly relevant because they shape the conditions under which children experience this critical developmental phase. As social policy instruments designed primarily to enable parents to temporarily withdraw from the workplace following childbirth, parenting leave policies typically cover a substantial part of the period immediately after birth. While such policies are primarily intended to support working parents, they also create conditions that enable parents and caregivers to respond to infants' developmental needs during this critical stage of life. At the same time, it is recognised that not all parenting environments are equally supportive or nurturing.

Building on existing child well-being frameworks, this White Paper identifies a set of dimensions that are particularly relevant for analysing the relationship between parenting leave policies and child well-being during early childhood. These dimensions correspond to the key domains identified in international child well-being indicator systems and reflect areas in which parenting leave policies may plausibly shape children's early-life conditions.

- (i) **Physical health and survival.** Indicators related to physical health and survival capture the most fundamental dimensions of child well-being. They include measures such as infant mortality, birth outcomes, healthcare utilisation, and early physical development. These indicators are particularly relevant during infancy, when biological vulnerability is greatest and early health conditions may have long-term consequences for later development. In international child well-being frameworks, health indicators are therefore often treated as foundational components of child well-being measurement.
- (ii) **Cognitive, emotional, and developmental outcomes.** A second group of indicators focuses on cognitive, emotional, and early developmental outcomes. These indicators capture processes through which children develop language skills, emotional regulation, and early learning capacities. During infancy and early childhood, such outcomes are strongly shaped by caregiving environments, parental interaction, and early stimulation rather than formal institutional settings.
- (iii) **Care environments and family relationships.** A third group of indicators concerns the relational contexts in which children are born and grow up. These indicators include parental involvement by mothers, fathers, and other caregivers; support for breastfeeding; the stability of caregiving arrangements; and the availability of responsive and nurturing relationships. Early attachment relationships and consistent caregiving environments are widely recognised as central determinants of emotional security and developmental stability during the first years of life.
- (iv) **Material and economic conditions.** Finally, material and economic conditions represent another key dimension of child well-being. Indicators in this domain capture household income, economic security, and the risk of child poverty. Material resources influence children's access to nutrition, healthcare, housing, and safe living environments, all of which contribute to healthy development.

By shaping caregiving conditions, parental time resources, and household economic security, parenting leave policies may affect children's well-being both in the present and over the longer term. This is particularly important because the foundations for healthy development and stable family relationships



are established during the first months of a child's life, with consequences that may extend across the life course.

In this sense, parenting leave policies can play a central role in shaping the conditions under which children experience the earliest phase of their lives. As scholars in the Sociology of Childhood have emphasised, children are both “beings”, with lives in the present, and “*becomings*”, as they move towards adulthood (Qvortrup, 1991; James & James, 2004). The relevance of parenting leave policies for child well-being lies in their potential influence on key determinants of early childhood development, including parental time availability, household income security, caregiving arrangements, and parental health and stress levels. Parenting leave policies therefore form part of the broader policy environment that enables or constrains families' ability to provide nurturing care during early childhood. They can thus be understood not only as instruments of social protection for families, but also as social policy investments in the future development and sustainability of societies.

At the same time, assessing the extent to which parenting leave policies contribute to promoting child well-being is a complex task. Parenting leave schemes consist of several design elements, such as leave duration, benefit levels, and eligibility criteria, which vary considerably across countries and operate within different social policy and cultural contexts. Similarly, the ways in which parents engage with leave policies vary not only according to policy design, but also in relation to individual circumstances, capacities and preferences, family dynamics, employment histories, and cultural contexts.

1.2. Leave policies in the context of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

As babies and young children have no voice of their own, this White Paper also draws on guidance from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) to help articulate their interests and needs. The Convention establishes children as rights holders and places clear obligations on states to create conditions that support children's survival, development, protection, and well-being. Central to the Convention is the principle of the “best interests of the child”. Article 3 states that in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by legislative, administrative, or other public or private bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration. This principle obliges states not only to refrain from causing harm, but also actively to design policies that enable parents and caregivers to meet children's needs. The Convention further emphasises that children born to two parents have the right to care from both parents. In these cases, Article 18 stresses that States Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents, irrespective of residence, share common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child.

Several further provisions of the Convention are directly relevant to early childhood. Article 6 affirms every child's inherent right to life and requires states to ensure children's survival and development to the maximum extent possible. Article 24 recognises children's right to the highest attainable standard of health and calls for measures to reduce child mortality, ensure access to healthcare, and promote healthy development. Article 18 additionally states that States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents benefit from childcare services and facilities, such as nurseries. Taken together, these Articles make clear that conditions in early childhood are not solely a private matter, but also an area of public responsibility.

At the same time, the principle of the “best interests of the child” is inherently complex and cannot be reduced to a fixed formula, since it is interpreted through legal systems, social policies, and cultural values. European countries, for example, differ in their beliefs about how infant care should be organised across parental, non-parental, and institutional forms of care. Defining the dimensions of a good quality of life





for infants is therefore shaped by political dilemmas, economic considerations, and prevailing models of child development within cultural and historical contexts.

Although the principle of the “best interests of the child” is universal, its interpretation must also take account of children’s individual circumstances, as suggested by Cardona (Council of Europe, 2016). He argued that when the same adult assesses the situations of five different children, the result should be five distinct determinations of their best interests, because no two children share identical needs, vulnerabilities, or developmental contexts. At the same time, when five different adults assess the best interests of one specific child, their evaluations should converge toward a single determination—the best interests of that child. This dual logic highlights both the individual specificity and the normative stability of the CRC principle, emphasising that child-centred policies must be sufficiently flexible to accommodate diversity while remaining anchored in a coherent rights-based framework.

Parenting leave policies fall squarely within the CRC framework. As state-regulated instruments that shape caregiving arrangements, parental time availability, and income security around childbirth and early childhood, they directly influence the conditions under which children’s rights and well-being are realised in practice. The following section provides an overview of the principal forms of parenting leave policy and their historical development. Subsequent sections examine how different parenting leave policy designs are associated with child well-being outcomes, drawing on the domains introduced above and the existing empirical literature.

2. Parenting Leave Policies: Historical Roots and Current Practice

Parenting leave policies emerged in individual European countries during the nineteenth century. However, the pioneering International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention on Maternity Protection of 1919 provided the first “global signal” of a societal need to protect women’s absence from the workplace around the time of childbirth (O’Brien & Uzunalioglu, 2022). The Convention called for a minimum of 12 weeks of paid maternity leave (six weeks before and six weeks after childbirth), the right to return to work, free maternal and infant healthcare during and after pregnancy, and two daily half-hour breastfeeding breaks.

Over the course of the twentieth century, many countries, particularly in Europe, established legal minimum standards for maternity leave and gradually expanded leave arrangements beyond maternity and childbirth protection to address broader objectives related to work-family reconciliation, labour market participation, gender equality, and social protection (Deven & Moss, 2022). Parenting leave regulations became a core component of family policy regimes in higher-income countries, as they safeguarded maternal employment continuity after childbirth and enabled parents to reduce or temporarily suspend labour market participation during periods of intensive caregiving. By partially compensating for income loss and protecting job security, paid parenting leave policies intervened directly in the distribution of time, resources, and risks across social groups (Reimer, 2013), thereby contributing to the mitigation of socially undesirable inequalities (e.g. Thévenon, 2011; Whitehouse & Nakazato, 2021). These policies aimed to fulfil both immediate protective functions, such as income security, maternal health, and job protection, and forward-looking objectives related to labour market participation and the reconfiguration of gender relations (ILO, 2022; OECD, 2023).

Drawing on more than two decades of comparative monitoring of parenting leave policies across over 50 countries, the International Network on Leave Policies & Research distinguishes between four main categories of care-related leave, each reflecting a specific policy purpose, timing, target group, and historical trajectory. These include maternity leave, paternity leave, parental leave, and leave to care for





children who are ill or in need of care (Dobrotić et al., 2025). Box 1 provides an overview of the different leave categories in greater detail.

Box 1: Types of parenting leave

| **Maternity leave** is generally understood as a health and welfare measure intended to protect the health of the mother and the newborn child around the time of childbirth. It is typically available only to mothers, taken immediately before and after birth, and closely linked to maternal occupational health, income protection, and job security. In some countries, the term maternity leave has been replaced by more gender-neutral terminology, such as birth leave, while maintaining the same objective of supporting the health and welfare needs of birthing and breastfeeding women.

| **Paternity leave**, by contrast, is usually available to fathers or equivalent co-parents and is taken shortly after birth, with the primary purpose of enabling early involvement in care and support for the mother and child. Within more gender-neutral frameworks, paternity leave terminology is sometimes replaced by terms such as birth partner leave, serving a similar purpose.

| **Parental leave** is primarily conceptualised as a care measure rather than a health protection instrument. It is generally available to both parents or primary caregivers following the end of maternity and paternity leave and may take the form of individual non-transferable entitlements (e.g. mother or father quotas, reserved periods for each parent), transferable individual rights, or family-based entitlements that parents can divide between themselves. In some countries, childcare leave or home care leave exists as an alternative or additional form of parenting leave that extends the period during which parents are entitled to time away from work to care for young children at home. Childcare and home care leaves are typically compensated through flat-rate benefits at relatively low levels.

| **Leave to care for children who are ill** or in need of special care constitutes a further category of parenting-related leave. Entitlements in this area vary considerably across countries in terms of scope, duration, age limits, and payment conditions. In some cases, these provisions are embedded within broader frameworks of carers' leave or time off for urgent family reasons, while in others they are regulated through specific leave entitlements. More recently, some countries have also introduced or discussed additional leave arrangements in cases such as the birth of a premature baby or miscarriage.

Source: <https://www.leavenetwork.org/annual-review-reports/defining-policies/> Dobrotić et al., (2025).

Together, these different forms of leave constitute a country's institutional architecture of parenting leave policies, although the distinction between maternity, paternity, and parental leave is becoming increasingly blurred (Moss et al., 2025), as national schemes differ in terminology, generosity, eligibility, and design. Within the European Union context, maternity leave regulation, first introduced in 1992, establishes a minimum entitlement of 14 weeks of paid leave; paternity leave, introduced in 2019, provides for at least 10 paid days; and parental leave, first introduced in 1996 and subsequently revised in 2010 and 2019, grants each parent an entitlement to four months of leave, of which at least two months are non-transferable and should be adequately paid to support take-up. See Box 2 for an overview of the relevant European Union directives as well as the conventions of the International Labour Organization related to parenting leave, which have established international labour standards in this policy area.

In addition to introducing paid paternity leave for the first time across all 27 EU member states, the Work-Life Balance Directive 2019/1158 introduced a further mechanism intended to encourage greater take-up of leave by fathers (European Union, 2019). The Directive requires that two of the four months of parental leave be non-transferable and compensated at a level sufficient to support take-up. In practice, this means that each parent has an individual entitlement that cannot be transferred to the other parent, for example from fathers to mothers or vice versa. This policy development responded to a growing body of evidence demonstrating that non-transferable parental leave entitlements, particularly when combined with high





income replacement, increase leave take-up among fathers and co-parents (Deven & Moss, 2022; Eydal & Rostgaard, 2023).

The implementation of the EU Work-Life Balance Directive 2019/1158 across member states has proven complex and has encountered cultural and political resistance in some countries, particularly regarding father-specific leave entitlements and the extension of eligibility to non-standard workers (De la Porte et al., 2023; Pircher et al., 2023; Aulino et al., 2024; De la Corte-Rodriguez, 2024; Alvarino, 2025). The European Union is currently reviewing the Directive's transposition across member states, including its relationship with the 1992 Pregnant Workers Directive implemented to ensure the safety and health at work of pregnant workers and workers who have recently given birth or who are breastfeeding (EEC, 1992).

Box 2: Minimum standards defined by the EU and the ILO

| **Maternity leave** (EU Pregnant Workers Directive 92/85/EEC; International Labour Organization Convention No. 183, 2000): Intended to protect the safety and health of pregnant workers and those who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding. Maternity leave consists of a minimum of 14 continuous weeks of paid leave, to be taken before and/or after birth, including a compulsory period of at least two weeks (Pregnant Workers Directive). Additional protections include time off for antenatal appointments, protection from occupational risks during pregnancy and breastfeeding, and income replacement in accordance with national legislation, at a level not lower than sickness benefits. ILO Convention No. 183 recommends at least 18 weeks of maternity leave and includes provisions for paid breastfeeding breaks or reduced working hours for breastfeeding, as well as extended leave for health-related reasons before or after childbirth and time off for medical visits (see Appendix 2 for overview on breast/feeding policies).

| **Paternity leave** (EU Directive 2019/1158, Article 4): Fathers or equivalent co-parents are entitled to at least 10 working days of paid paternity leave around the time of birth. Access to this entitlement must not be made conditional on prior work experience, length of service, marital status, or family status.

| **Parental leave** (EU Directive 2019/1158, Articles 5 and 8): Each parent has an individual entitlement to at least four months of parental leave following the end of maternity or paternity leave. At least two months of this entitlement must be non-transferable for each parent in a couple and should be compensated at a level sufficient to support take-up.

| **Leave to care for children who are ill** (EU Directive 2019/1158, Article 6): This type of leave defines a broader entitlement to carer's leave, establishing a minimum standard of five days, either per year, per person in need of care, or per case, depending on national regulation. Article 7 further provides for time off on grounds of force majeure for urgent family reasons, regulated either per year or per case according to national legislation. No comprehensive international minimum standards or specific international regulations concerning leave entitlements for parents of children with severe long-term illnesses or disabilities were identified in this review (see Appendix 3 for examples).

Source: Adapted from Dörfler-Bolt, Escobedo & Reimer (2025).

While the conventions of the International Labour Organization primarily focus on the protection of workers, contemporary European policy debates on parenting leave remain centred mainly on advancing women's labour market participation and promoting gender equality. By contrast, comparatively less attention is paid to the extent to which parenting leave policies may also contribute to child well-being and broader societal development, including demographic sustainability and fertility outcomes.

The following section provides an overview of differences in paid parenting leave policy design across Europe (Section 2.1), followed by an examination of how children are protected through parenting leave policies (Section 2.2). Only leave entitlements that are accompanied by remuneration are taken into account here; periods that merely provide employment protection for parents are excluded from the analysis.





2.1 Paid parenting leave design across Europe

From a theoretical perspective, paid parenting leave policies can be understood as comprising a set of distinct but interrelated *design elements* that together shape their overall function and impact. Rather than constituting a single, uniform policy instrument, parenting leave arrangements consist of multiple components, such as duration, remuneration, or eligibility criteria, which can be analysed separately but operate in combination.

The configuration of parenting leave design elements shapes both the extent to which parents can balance paid work and caregiving and how effectively children are protected through time, income, and stable care arrangements. At the same time, policy design reflects and reinforces broader cultural norms and social structures by shaping the value attached to women’s reproductive rights, gendered caregiving patterns, and the distribution of social risks, often resulting in unequal levels of protection for families and children (Baird et al., 2024).

The following section provides an overview of the key design elements of paid parenting leave policies in 37 European countries. The focus is on statutory *paid leave entitlements* regulated at the national level. By examining these elements, the section aims to provide a structured basis for understanding how variations in policy design shape the conditions under which parents and children are supported across European countries. Unless referenced otherwise, the information on the dimensions below is based on standardised cross-country calculations from the 2025 Annual Review of the International Network on Leave Policies & Research (Dobrotić et al., 2025²).

| Duration

Maternity leave | Within the European context, maternity leave entitlements vary considerably in duration, ranging from no separate statutory paid maternity leave entitlement in some countries (e.g. Iceland and Sweden) to 59 weeks in Bulgaria. Most countries provide between approximately 14 and 26 weeks of maternity leave, although some countries offer longer durations, such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the United Kingdom (39 weeks), or Kosovo and North Macedonia (39 weeks). In some countries, maternity protection is partly integrated into broader parental leave schemes through exclusive “mother-only” entitlements or “mother quotas”, which reserve periods of paid parenting leave specifically for mothers. Some countries do not provide a separate statutory maternity leave entitlement but instead incorporate paid leave for mothers through parental leave arrangements. Such provisions ensure compliance with the minimum standards established under the Pregnant Workers Directive (92/85/EEC), which requires at least 14 weeks of maternity protection.

Paternity leave | Within the European context, paternity (or partner) leave entitlements vary considerably in duration, ranging from no separate statutory paid paternity leave entitlement in some countries (e.g. Finland, Germany, Iceland, and Serbia) to sixteen weeks in Spain. Many countries provide relatively short periods of paternity leave of between one and five weeks. Examples include two weeks in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom; four weeks in Austria, Belgium, Croatia, France, Lithuania, and Slovakia; and five weeks in Estonia and Latvia. Portugal provides five weeks plus an additional four weeks under specific conditions. In some countries, fathers’ leave rights are partly integrated into broader parental leave schemes that include exclusive “father-only” entitlements or “father quotas” (e.g.

² Technical assumptions:

www.leavenetwork.org/fileadmin/user_upload/k_leavenetwork/annual_reviews/2023/5._Technical_Appendix.pdf

Maternity leave: www.leavenetwork.org/fileadmin/user_upload/k_leavenetwork/annual_reviews/2025/1_Maternity_leave.pdf

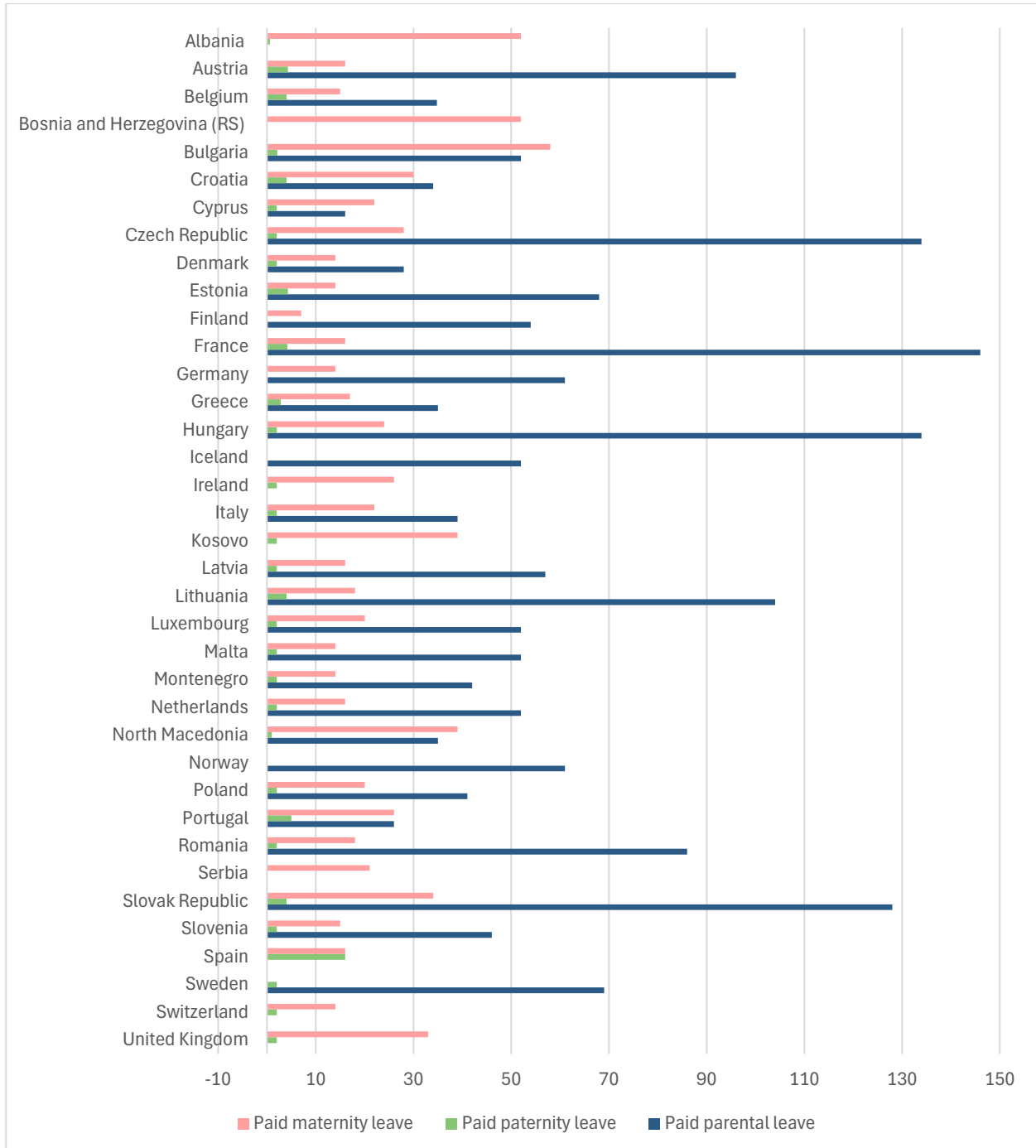
Paternity leave: www.leavenetwork.org/fileadmin/user_upload/k_leavenetwork/annual_reviews/2025/2_Paternity_leave.pdf

Parental leave: www.leavenetwork.org/fileadmin/user_upload/k_leavenetwork/annual_reviews/2025/3_Parental_leave.pdf



Germany), rather than through a separate statutory paternity leave entitlement. This reflects different approaches to implementing the requirements of the EU Work–Life Balance Directive (2019/1158), which establishes a minimum entitlement of ten working days of paid paternity leave following childbirth.

Figure 1: Paid parenting leave duration by leave types across Europe (in weeks)



Source: Country Reports of the International Network on Leave Policies & Research, 2025; for information on additional sources please see footnote³.

³ Albania: https://albania.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/expanding_choices_legal_analysis_ff_policies_eng_0.pdf; Montenegro: file:///C:/Users/thord/Downloads/F1197414255_MGO71999.pdf; North Macedonia: <https://natlex.ilo.org/dyn/natlex2/natlex2/files/download/71332/MKD71332%20Eng.pdf>.



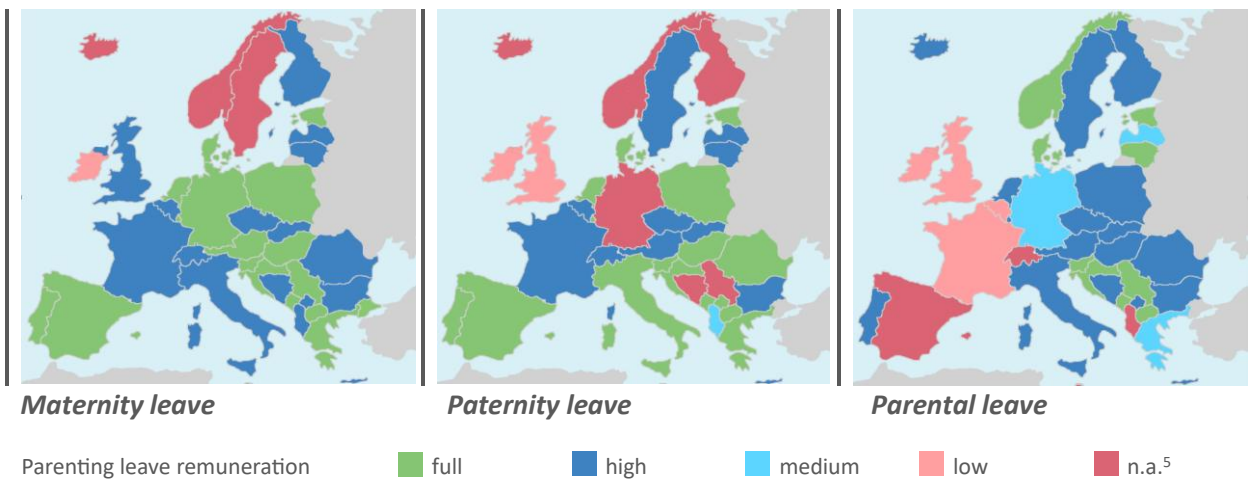


Parental leave | Parental leave entitlements vary considerably across European countries in terms of duration. Based on the combined paid parental leave duration available to both parents, entitlements range from no statutory paid parental leave (e.g. Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom) to 156 weeks in France. Many countries provide between approximately 30 and 70 weeks of parental leave, although a smaller number offer substantially longer durations, including Hungary (134 weeks), Slovakia (128 weeks), Bulgaria and Lithuania (104 weeks), and Romania (86 weeks). The level of remuneration during parental leave varies considerably across countries, ranging from relatively low flat-rate payments to full earnings replacement of up to 100% of previous income, in some cases without taxation.

Remuneration

Payments within parenting leave schemes are primarily intended to replace earnings, although they may also include minimum payment levels, flat-rate benefits, or one-off payments. Across Europe, substantial differences exist in the level of earnings replacement provided. For comparative purposes, the following overview groups remuneration levels into five categories according to the proportion of previous earnings replaced: “full” (100%), “high” ($\geq 66\%$ and $< 100\%$), “medium” ($\geq 33\%$ and $< 66\%$), “low” ($> 0\%$ and $< 33\%$), and “none” (no payment)⁴.

Figure 2: Remuneration levels of paid parenting leave by leave type across Europe



Source: Country Reports of the International Network on Leave Policies & Research (2025); additional sources provided in footnote (1). Note: Reference for remuneration of maternity leave are the first 6 weeks after birth. In relation to parental leave, some countries offer higher rates for shorter leave periods and lower rates for longer leave periods. In these cases, the higher rate is applied.

⁴ Parental leave remuneration level: In some countries, higher benefit levels are paid during the first months, followed by lower rates in subsequent months; in these cases, the higher initial payment rates are shown here. Serbia: “childcare leave” is classified here as a form of parental leave. The classification into payment-level groups used here is based on the grouping applied by the Leave Network. In the subsequent analysis, a threshold of 65 per cent or more is used to distinguish highly remunerated leave from other forms of paid leave.

⁵ The code “n.a.” also indicates the absence of a statutory entitlement under a specific leave type. For paternity leave, some countries provide fathers’ leave indirectly through exclusive parental leave entitlements; this applies to Iceland, Norway, Finland, and Germany. In Spain, there is no separate statutory “paternity leave” entitlement. Instead, part of the “birth and childcare leave” must obligatorily be taken immediately after childbirth and is classified as paternity leave in the LP&R country reports, while the remaining period may be considered parental leave. For maternity leave, some countries incorporate equivalent provisions within parental leave schemes through exclusive entitlements reserved for mothers.



Maternity leave | Maternity leave is most commonly compensated at relatively high levels, often providing full or near-full replacement of previous earnings. In many countries, benefits replace a large share of previous earnings (high or full compensation), with full earnings replacement observed in countries such as Austria, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain. Lower levels of remuneration are less common but are observed in some countries, for example in Ireland, where maternity leave benefits are provided as a flat-rate payment of €289 per week. In some countries, no separate statutory paid maternity leave entitlement exists (e.g. Sweden), with equivalent provisions instead incorporated within parental leave schemes through exclusive entitlements reserved for mothers.

Paternity leave | Paternity leave is also frequently remunerated at relatively high levels, also often providing full or near-full replacement of previous earnings, although variation across countries remains substantial. Several countries provide full earnings replacement (e.g. Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Malta, Montenegro, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, and Spain), while others provide high but not full compensation (e.g. Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, and Sweden). In some countries, no separate statutory paternity leave entitlement exists (e.g. Iceland, Norway, Finland, and Germany). In these cases, partner leave is instead provided through other parenting leave arrangements, such as exclusive parental leave entitlements, and the corresponding remuneration level is therefore reflected under parental leave. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, no statutory paternity leave entitlement exists.

Parental leave | In contrast, parental leave displays substantially greater variation in remuneration. Some countries provide full or high income replacement (e.g. Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, Iceland, Lithuania, Montenegro, Norway, and Slovenia). However, high benefit levels are often capped or paid only up to a certain income threshold, meaning that higher-income groups do not effectively receive the full high replacement rate. Other countries provide only medium or low levels of compensation (e.g. Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, and Latvia) and in some countries parental leave remains unpaid, for example in Switzerland, Spain and the United Kingdom. In Albania, there is no statutory parental leave as such; however, maternity leave extends to one year after childbirth, with most of this period being transferable to the second parent.

Overall, the data illustrate that while maternity and paternity leave are more frequently associated with higher levels of income replacement, parental leave provisions display substantially greater variation in remuneration levels across countries. Figure 2 also demonstrates that not all types of paid parenting leave are available in every country and that some European countries provide only relatively limited welfare-state support through paid parenting leave policies.

| Flexibility

Parenting leave policies differ in the degree of flexibility they provide regarding how and when leave can be taken. Flexibility refers to the extent to which parents can decide on the timing, duration, and mode of leave use. Across countries, leave entitlements may be structured as individual rights, which can be either transferable or non-transferable between parents, or as family-based entitlements that can be shared within the household. Many countries combine these approaches. At the same time, parenting leave policies often include compulsory elements that limit flexibility. These may include mandatory periods of maternity leave following childbirth and, in some countries, mandatory use of paternity leave.

Maternity leave | Maternity leave generally provides only limited flexibility. In most countries, taking at least part of the leave is compulsory, particularly around childbirth. Flexibility mainly concerns the timing



of leave, such as when leave can begin before birth and how the total leave period may be distributed before and after birth. In some countries, additional leave is granted under specific circumstances, including premature birth, multiple births, or medical complications. Another form of flexibility exists in some countries through the possibility of transferring part of maternity leave to fathers or co-parents under standard conditions. In other countries, such transfers are permitted only in exceptional circumstances, such as severe illness or death of the mother.

Paternity leave | Flexibility in paternity leave varies across countries. In some cases, parts of paternity leave may be transferable to the co-parent under ordinary conditions. Several countries also allow paternity leave to be taken part-time (e.g. Luxembourg), in multiple blocks, or within a specified period following childbirth. At the same time, some leave schemes include compulsory elements requiring fathers to take all or part of their leave entitlement (e.g. Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Italy, Portugal, and Spain).

Parental leave | Flexibility may take several forms, including the possibility of taking leave full-time or part-time, using leave in one continuous period or in multiple shorter blocks, or taking leave at different points in time until the child reaches a specified age. The age until which leave can be used varies considerably across countries, ranging from use during the first year of life in some systems to entitlements extending until children reach much older ages, for example up to age twelve in Sweden. In some countries, both parents may take leave simultaneously, whereas in others leave periods must be sequenced. Additional forms of flexibility include extended leave in cases such as multiple births, options to adjust the relationship between leave duration and payment levels (e.g. longer leave with lower benefits or shorter leave with higher benefits), combining transferable entitlements with non-transferable quotas amongst parents and, in some cases, the possibility of transferring leave entitlements to non-parental carers. Where part-time leave is permitted, the overall duration of leave may be extended accordingly, often accompanied by a proportional adjustment in remuneration.

For more detailed information on the flexibility of leave arrangements, the International Network on Leave Policies & Research provides annual comparative reviews of cross-country differences (e.g. Dobrotić et al., 2025). Taken together, parenting leave policies can be located along a continuum between flexibility and compulsion, reflecting different approaches to balancing parental choice, employee protection, and the organisation of care during children's early years.

| Eligibility criteria

Eligibility and levels of inclusiveness within parenting leave policies vary considerably across countries (Dobrotić et al., 2025). Provisions are rarely universal; instead, access is typically determined by national eligibility criteria, particularly with regard to employment status, parental or carer characteristics, and citizenship or residency status (EIGE, 2020; Lammi-Taskula & Reimer, 2026; OECD, 2025).

Employment characteristics | Across most jurisdictions in Europe, and globally, the primary pathway for accessing parenting leave is through formal employment arrangements. Parents working in the informal economy, those in insecure or non-standard employment conditions (including some forms of temporary, gig, or platform work), or those newly entering the labour market are more likely to experience restricted access to leave entitlements. Eligibility for self-employed and unemployed parents also varies considerably across countries.

Parent characteristics | Historically, parenting leave policies were designed primarily for mothers and later expanded to different-sex couples in two-parent families. Over time, many countries have adapted policies to reflect increasingly diverse family forms, including single-parent families, adoptive families, and reconstituted families. More recently, there has been growing recognition of parental gender diversity





and LGBTQIA+ families (OECD, 2025). Within the European Union, most parents in single-parent, adoptive, and stepfamily contexts are eligible for parenting leave, although access for non-residential parents continues to vary substantially. Eligibility provisions for gender-diverse parents remain considerably more uneven and are still absent or limited in some countries.

Citizenship characteristics | Across Europe, access to parenting leave for individuals without permanent citizenship or residency status (e.g. people with temporary visas or asylum seekers) is often more restricted. To reduce potential inequalities for children in these circumstances, some countries, such as Finland, have introduced residency-based provisions that allow access to certain family benefits and support for newly arrived families.

Taken together, these eligibility criteria mean that access to parenting leave remains uneven across social groups and family forms. As a result, some of the families who may benefit most from economic security and time for caregiving during early childhood are also among those least likely to be protected by existing leave arrangements. From a child-centred perspective, such inequalities may contribute to unequal starting conditions in children's lives by limiting access to parental care, financial security, and broader social protection during a particularly sensitive developmental period.

2.2 A child-centred measurement of parenting leaves across Europe

To assess how parenting leave policies contribute to children's well-being across Europe, their institutional design needs to be examined across key policy dimensions using a child-centred perspective. This approach implies that leave entitlements and the associated financial compensation are considered *in combination*, rather than analysed separately across different legislative schemes within a country. Accordingly, parenting leave policies should not be assessed solely based on formal labels or legal terminology, but in terms of the time they provide for parental care and the financial protection they offer during periods of parental work interruption.

The following section therefore examines parenting leave entitlements through a set of dimensions that are particularly relevant from a child well-being perspective. It addresses how much time children can spend with their parents under existing paid parenting leave policies, understood as the period during which parents are economically protected from employment obligations. It also considers the extent to which this time is supported by sufficiently generous public income replacement, and how much leave is specifically reserved for fathers or co-parents through exclusive entitlements designed to facilitate children's access to both parents.

The following comparisons present differences for a specific, standardised group of parents: those having their first child, with both parents employed full-time for at least one year prior to birth and each earning the country's average income. This approach does not capture families who do not meet these criteria, such as self-employed or unemployed parents, those in precarious employment, or, in some countries, same-sex couples. However, it provides a clear and comparable overview of cross-country differences across Europe at first glance. A notable feature of this comparison is that it includes a broader range of European countries (37) than is typically covered in OECD or European Union reports, with the exception of a small number of states. The data used for the calculations are primarily derived from country reports of the International Network on Leave Policies & Research, where available; additional sources for Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia are indicated in footnote 3.

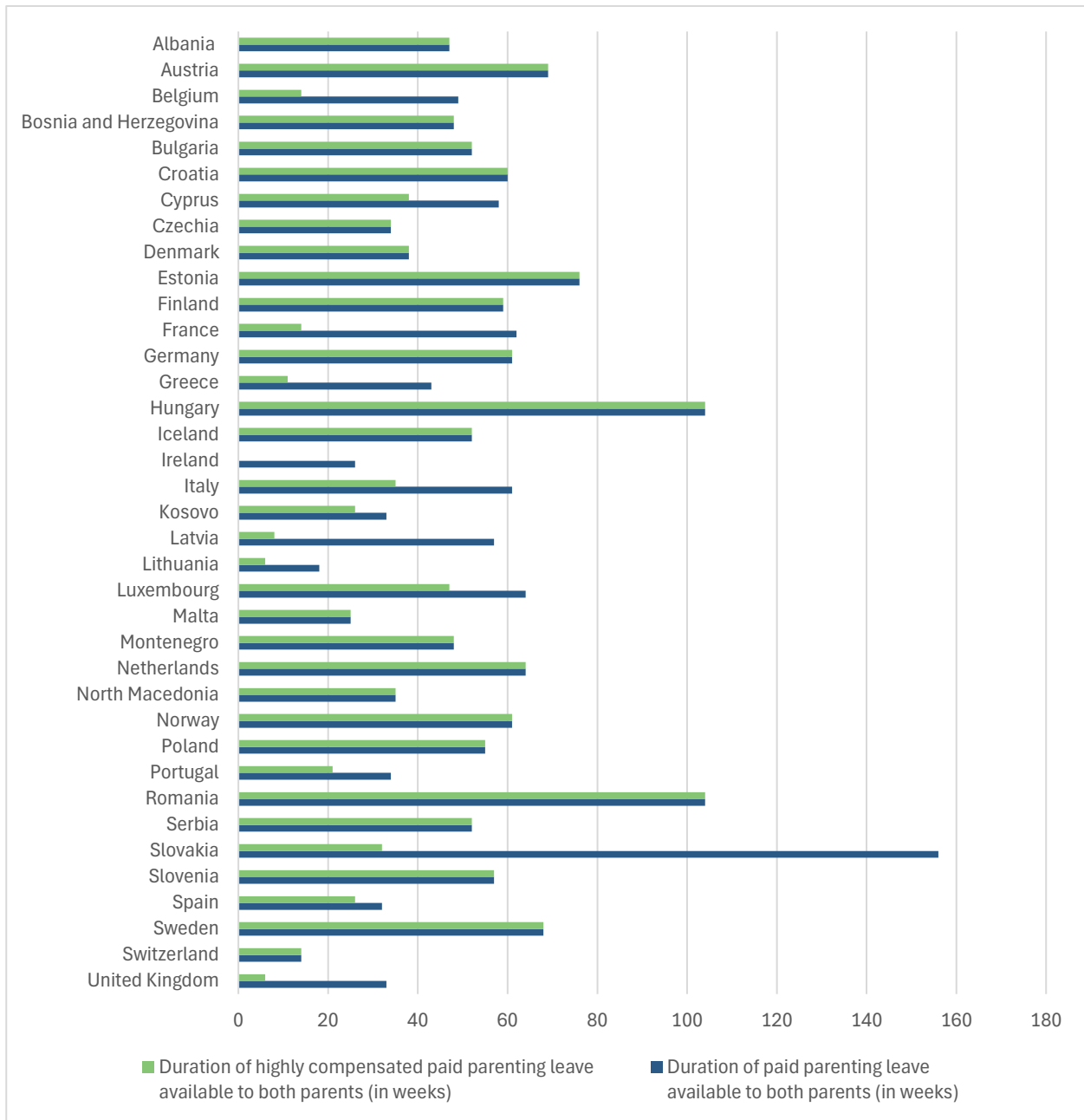
Across Europe, the **total duration of paid parenting leave** available to both parents varies widely, ranging from 14 weeks (Switzerland) to 128 weeks (Slovakia). Most countries cluster between approximately 30 and 70 weeks, although a small number provide substantially longer periods. This indicates considerable





cross-national variation in the total amount of time during which families receive at least some form of financial support while providing care. When focusing only on highly compensated leave, the picture changes significantly. The duration ranges from 0 weeks (Ireland) to 104 weeks (Hungary). Many countries provide between 30 and 70 weeks of highly compensated leave, but several offer only relatively short periods (e.g. United Kingdom: 6 weeks; Latvia: 8 weeks; Greece: 9 weeks).

Figure 3: Duration of paid parenting leave (highly compensated vs. other)



Source: Own calculations based on country reports of the International Network on Leave Policies & Research (2025) and additional sources (see footnote 2). Notes: “Highly compensated leave” is defined here as benefits replacing 65% or more of previous earnings. For flat-rate benefits, payment levels were assessed relative to the country’s average annual full-time adjusted salary in 2024, using Eurostat data (Eurostat, 2026); for Bosnia and Herzegovina, the regulations of Republika Srpska (BS) are used as the relevant reference framework, as regulations vary by territory.





A comparison of both indicators (highly compensated parenting leave vs. paid parenting leave at lower levels) reveals two distinct patterns across European countries:

- **Alignment between paid and highly compensated leave**

In several countries, the duration of paid leave and highly compensated leave is identical, indicating that most or all available leave is compensated at a relatively high level (e.g. Croatia, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Romania, and Slovenia). In these cases, children are more likely to benefit from extended periods of parental care that are also financially supported.

- **Gaps between paid and highly compensated leave**

In contrast, other countries show substantial differences between the total duration of paid leave and the proportion that is highly compensated (e.g. Slovakia, France, Latvia, Austria, Lithuania, and the United Kingdom). In these cases, a significant proportion of leave is either low-paid or unpaid. This suggests that while formal leave entitlements may appear extensive, the effective level of protection may be more limited, as longer periods of leave may not be financially accessible for many families. Families and children may therefore face increased risks of financial strain or economic insecurity if sufficient resources are unavailable to compensate for income losses. This issue may be particularly relevant for children in younger or lower-income families.

Taken together, the comparison demonstrates that cross-country differences are not solely about how much leave is available, but also about how much of that leave is realistically usable. While paid leave provides a formal entitlement to time for caregiving, highly compensated leave is more closely associated with actual take-up and therefore with the effective protection of children through both caregiving and financial stability.

This distribution highlights an important distinction: while paid leave may exist for extended periods, highly compensated leave is more likely to enable parents to realistically afford time away from work. From a child-centred perspective, this distinction is particularly relevant, as highly compensated leave is more likely to translate into effective caregiving time combined with financial security.

The following maps (see Figure 4) illustrate the distribution across Europe of countries providing more than six and twelve months of highly compensated parenting leave. Countries highlighted in green provide at least six or twelve months of leave compensated at a relatively high level, indicating a stronger combination of time for caregiving and financial support.

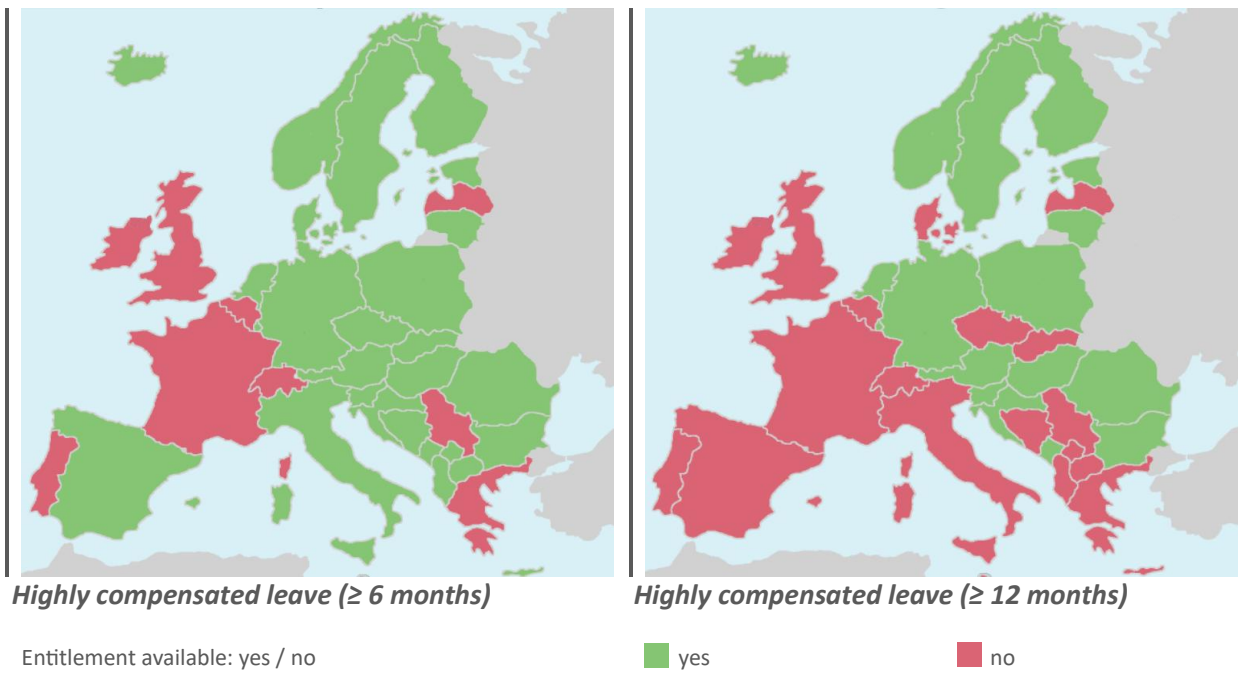
Figure 4 shows that the availability of highly compensated parental leave differs markedly across Europe. While a relatively large number of the 37 countries included in this analysis provide at least *six months* of highly compensated leave (27), only a smaller group offers longer periods of *twelve months* or more (17).

The comparison highlights substantial variation in the level of protection afforded to children in terms of both parental care and economic security. In countries where highly compensated leave extends beyond six or even twelve months, children are more likely to benefit from sustained parental care combined with financial stability during early childhood. By contrast, in countries with shorter durations of highly compensated leave, the period during which families can combine caregiving with adequate income replacement is more limited.





Figure 4: Remuneration levels of paid parenting leave by leave type across Europe



Source: Country Reports of the International Network on Leave Policies & Research (2025); additional sources provided in footnotes (3).

Another important question from a child well-being perspective concerns the extent to which parenting leave policies enable children, particularly in two-parent families, to have access to both parents. While fathers' leave use has traditionally been framed primarily in terms of gender equality, it is also relevant for child well-being, as time spent with both parents can strengthen children's attachment relationships and support child development.

The Work-Life Balance Directive (2019/1158) establishes an entitlement of four months of paid parental leave per parent, of which at least two months must be non-transferable in order to encourage shared caregiving. However, substantial variation exists across countries regarding the length of exclusive parental leave entitlements for the father or the co-parent (see Figure 5).

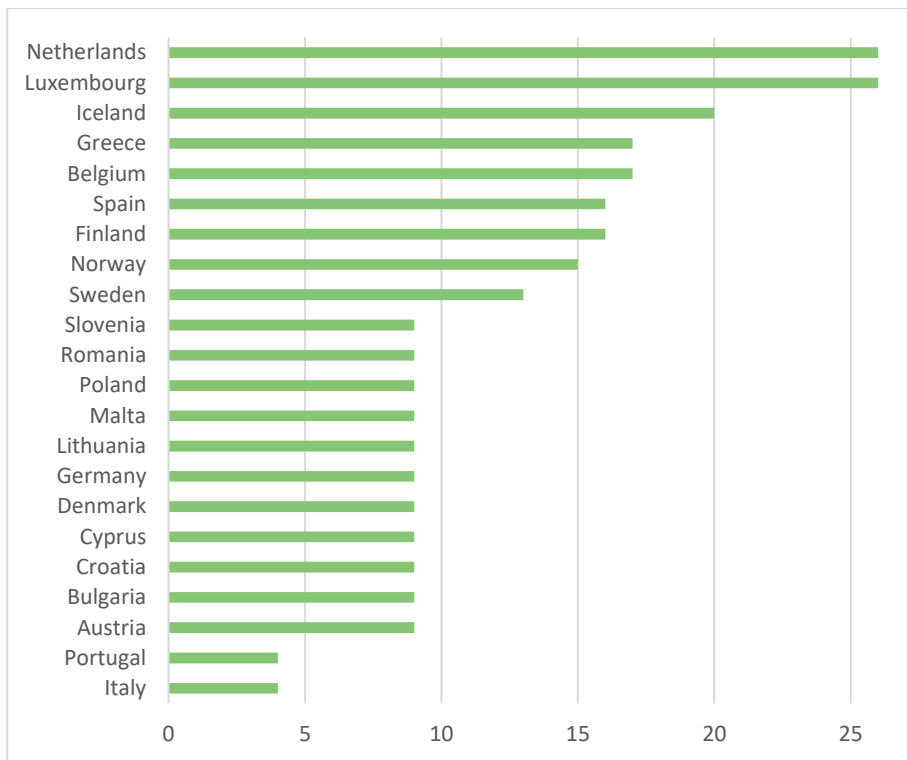
Some countries considerably exceed the minimum requirement, including the Netherlands and Luxembourg (26 weeks), Iceland (20 weeks), Belgium and Greece (17 weeks), and Finland and Spain (16 weeks). Nordic countries such as Norway (15 weeks) and Sweden (13 weeks) also provide comparatively long individual entitlements. A second group of countries offers more moderate provisions of around nine weeks (e.g. Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Germany, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, and Slovenia). In contrast, other countries provide only short entitlements (e.g. Italy and Portugal: four weeks) or no clearly defined non-transferable parental leave entitlements at all.

Non-transferable paid parental leave entitlements are available in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Hungary, Ireland, Kosovo, Latvia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovakia, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

These differences in European parenting leave policies, viewed from a child-centred perspective, point to unequal conditions across Europe regarding the extent to which both mothers and fathers are enabled to provide time, care, and economic resources for children during the first months and years of life.



Figure 5: Non-transferable paid parental leave entitlements for fathers or co-parents



Source: Country Reports of the International Network on Leave Policies & Research (2025); additional sources provided in footnotes (3).

2.3 Parents’ use of parenting leave during children’s early years

Parenting leave policies create opportunity structures for families (Reimer, 2013), but formal entitlements do not automatically translate into actual leave-taking. Mothers may use shorter periods of leave than those to which they are entitled or, alternatively, extend care periods through unpaid leave arrangements. Similarly, fathers in many countries may have access to paid parental leave entitlements but do not necessarily make use of them. The extent to which parents use or are able to use available leave entitlements is relevant for child well-being and for understanding how parenting leave policies may support children’s development and well-being.

Available data suggest that, where gender-disaggregated information exists, parental leave use across Europe continues to differ substantially by gender (Adema et al., 2023; OECD, 2025a). In most countries, mothers remain the primary users of parental leave, while fathers generally account for a smaller share of leave uptake. Only a limited number of countries display more balanced patterns of leave use between mothers and fathers. The extent to which leave entitlements are translated into actual uptake, and the factors shaping these decisions, remain widely debated questions. Existing research points to the importance of policy design, income replacement levels, workplace cultures, gender norms, and family circumstances (e.g. Lammi-Taskula & Reimer, 2026).

However, comparative investigation of these issues remains challenging because data on leave uptake are not consistently available across countries. In many cases, gender-disaggregated information is lacking, or only absolute numbers of leave users are reported, limiting understanding of how formal leave rights are translated into actual caregiving practices (Dobrotić & Arnalds, 2023).



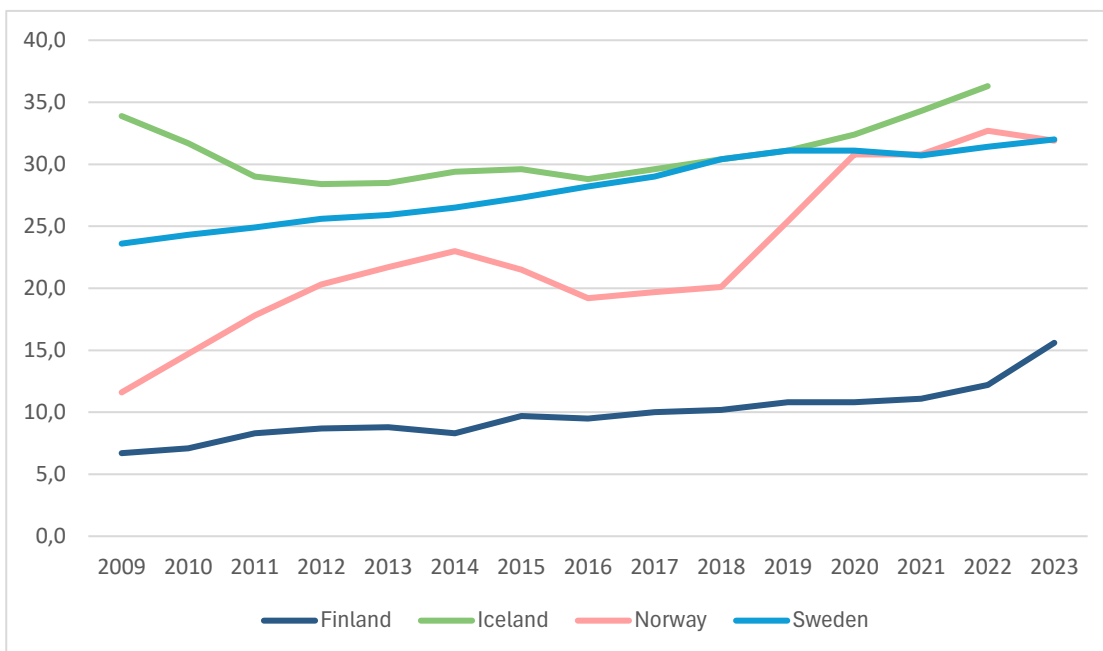
Uptake of parenting leave in Sweden and Finland

The actual use of parenting leave by mothers and fathers can be examined particularly well in the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Sweden and Norway) where high-quality population register data link children and parental leave uptake over time. Some countries also provide data on leave use by the age of the child, making it possible to examine how children’s access to parental care changes during infancy and early childhood. Although legal entitlements vary across the Nordic countries, supporting child well-being and promoting gender equality have been common principles (Arnalds et al., 2025). Parenting leave schemes in the region are characterised by comparatively high income replacement, extensive flexibility, and substantial non-transferable entitlements (or “quotas”) for fathers.

Nordic statistics show that fathers’ share of parental leave, measured as the proportion of benefit days taken by men, increased steadily across all Nordic countries between 2006 and 2022/23 (see Figure 6). By 2022/23, fathers’ uptake was highest in Iceland (36.3% in 2022), followed by Sweden (32.0% in 2023) and Norway (31.9% in 2023), while Finland recorded the lowest share among these countries, at 15.6% in 2023. These patterns broadly reflect the design and strength of fathers’ individual leave entitlements, particularly the existence and length of a dedicated “father’s quota”. In Iceland, Norway and Sweden, fathers used around one third of all parental benefit days, whereas uptake remained considerably lower in Finland (Arnalds et al., 2025).

Figures 7 and 8 illustrate Swedish and Finnish mothers’ and fathers’ leave uptake by the age of the child. In both countries, children experience the greatest simultaneous access to both parents during the first weeks after birth. Fathers’ availability, assessed by leave benefit use, declines thereafter before increasing again later in infancy, earlier in Sweden than in Finland. Across almost all age groups, however, children continue to have substantially greater access to mothers than to fathers (up to week 97 in Sweden and week 43 in Finland).

Figure 6: Fathers’ share of parenting leave in Nordic countries (2009-2022/2023)

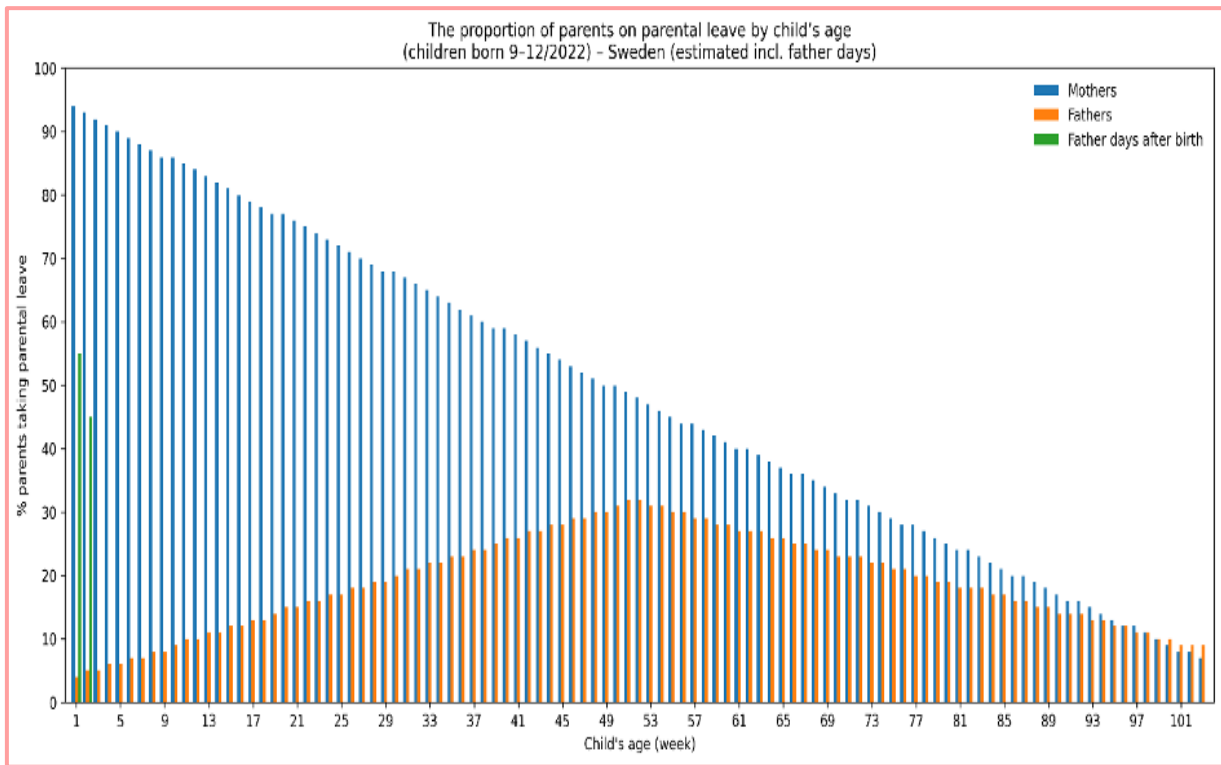


Source: Nordic Statistics database. nordicstatistics@nordregio.org

Note: The indicator shows fathers' share of parental leave, calculated as the share of benefit days taken by men, in percent. Source excludes Denmark.

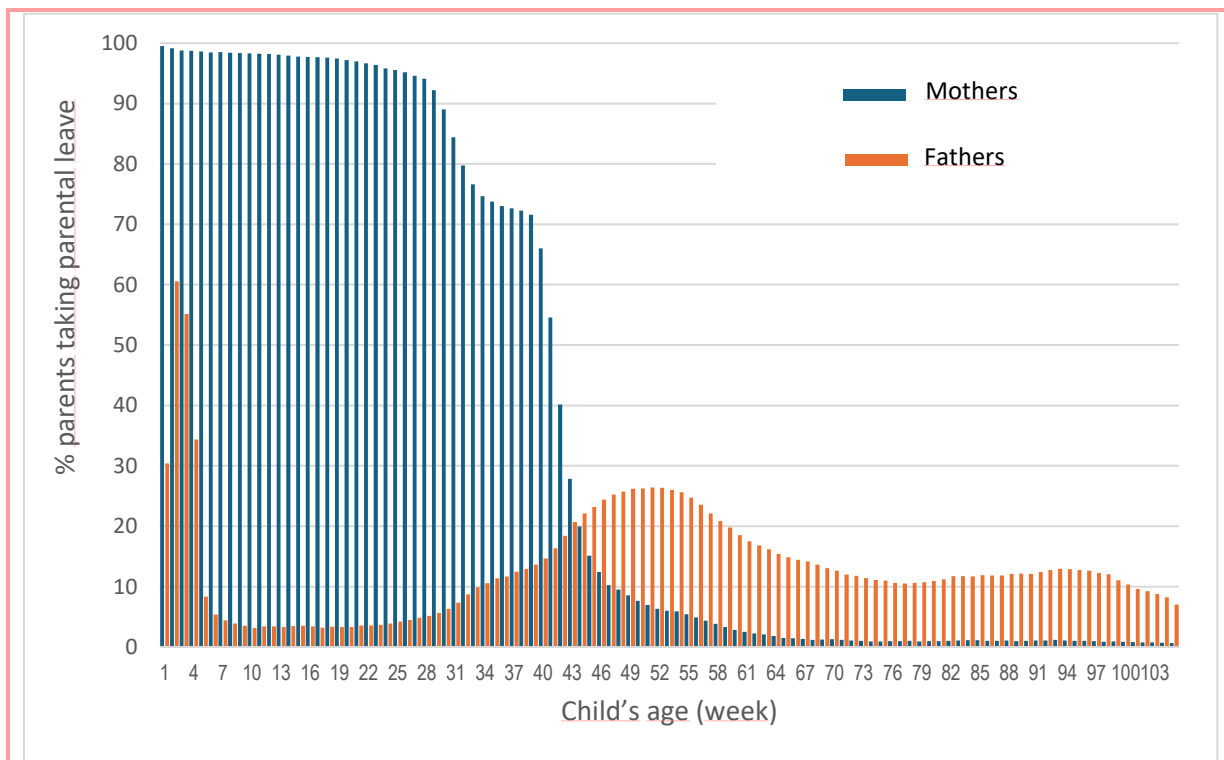


Figure 7: The proportion of Swedish parents on paternity and parental leave by child's age



Source: Nordic Statistics, 2026; own calculation.

Figure 8: The proportion of Finnish parents on paternity and parental leave by child's age



Source: The Social Insurance Institution (Kela), statistical database (2026); own calculation by Anneli Miettinen, 2026.



The following section discusses the cases of Sweden and Finland in greater detail to situate these figures within the broader historical and policy contexts of the two countries.

| *The case of Sweden*

As discussed above, fathers' uptake of parenting leave is generally highest in countries where policy designs provide substantial, well-paid, and non-transferable leave entitlements for fathers. Sweden is one example of this approach. Swedish fathers' share of parental leave increased steadily from 21.9 % in 2006 to 32.0 % by 2023 (see Figure 6; Nordic Statistics, 2026).

Sweden's leave system is closely connected to a broader political commitment to gender equality. Since the 1960s, Swedish family policy has promoted the idea that women and men should share both paid employment and caregiving responsibilities (Haas, 1992). During the 1970s, maternity leave was transformed to parental leave accessible to both parents, while labour market legislation increasingly aimed to support the reconciliation of employment and family life (Haas & Hwang, 2024).

Over time, fathers' rights to paternity leave and parental leave have expanded substantially. Fathers continue to make extensive use of the short "daddy days" (paternity leave) immediately after birth, resulting in high paternal presence during children's first weeks of life. Since 2016, mothers and fathers have each been entitled to six months of parental leave paid by the government at approximately 78% of earnings up to a ceiling, with three months reserved individually and generally non-transferable (Duvander & Löfgren, 2022).

Fathers' leave-taking has also been actively encouraged through public policy and broader societal norms (Ma et al., 2020). Survey evidence indicates that a substantial majority of respondents in Sweden (79%) favour an equal division of parental leave between mothers and fathers (Appendix 1, Figure B). Nevertheless, substantial inequalities in leave-taking persist in practice. For children born in 2019, only 19% of couples shared leave relatively equally, defined as fathers taking at least 40% of paid leave available to the couple within the child's first two years (Duvander & Löfgren, 2022).

Fathers take up increased when the first quota month was enacted in 1995 and again in 2002 when the second month was added. The introduction of a third non-transferable leave month for fathers increased fathers' average leave-taking only modestly (Persson, 2019), while the proportion of couples sharing leave relatively equally remained largely unchanged (Duvander & Löfgren, 2022). More recent reforms appear to have influenced the timing rather than the overall amount of fathers' leave-taking. The introduction of the double days "*dubbeldagar*" in 2012, allowing parents to use leave simultaneously to a greater extent, encouraged fathers to take leave earlier in children's lives. The number of double days was increased in 2024 to 60 days, but these must be used before the child reaches 15 months of age and cannot be withdrawn from the non-transferable days. Flexibility is one of the key characteristics of the Swedish scheme, parents' can use 80% of their leave until the child is four years old, and 20% of the leave can be used until the child reaches 12 years of age. Parents may use leave full-time or part-time and for shorter periods. Furthermore, since 2004, parents have been allowed to transfer 45 days to another person who is not the child's parent, for example a grandparent (Duvander, 2025).

Despite increasing paternal uptake, mothers continue to take the majority of leave during infancy. Most mothers use their parental leave continuously after childbirth until their paid leave days are exhausted and are also more likely than fathers to take periods of unpaid leave. Consequently, although Swedish children experience comparatively high levels of paternal involvement, access to maternal care remains substantially greater during most of early childhood.





| *The case of Finland*

Finnish fathers' share of parental leave increased steadily from 5.7% in 2006 to 15.6% in 2023 (see Figure 6; Nordic Statistics, 2026) with a further increase to 20.9% reported in 2024 (Kela, 2025). However, fathers' uptake remains considerably lower than in Sweden and, more generally, below the levels observed in other Nordic countries. Historically, the Finnish leave system placed stronger emphasis on maternal care during infancy and introduced individual entitlements for fathers comparatively late (Lammi-Taskula, 2022). More recent reforms have increasingly sought to promote gender equality and encourage fathers' participation in caregiving while continuing to support pregnancy and early childcare (Lammi-Taskula, 2022).

Before the 2022 parental leave reform, parents were entitled to approximately one year of earnings-related parental leave, followed by a two-year childcare leave period supported through a low flat-rate home care allowance. Within the parental leave scheme, mothers had a four-month quota and fathers a nine-week quota, while an additional seven months could be shared between parents according to their preferences. Although childcare leave was formally gender-neutral, it was predominantly used by mothers. Both parental leave and childcare leave could be taken either full-time or part-time (Lammi-Taskula, 2025).

The most recent legislation on paid parental leave, introduced in 2022, provides each parent with 27 weeks (approximately 6.4 months) of paid parental leave, of which 15.5 weeks are non-transferable, while up to 10.5 weeks may be transferred to the other parent. Parents may take leave simultaneously for a maximum of three weeks. In addition, mothers are entitled to 6.7 weeks of pregnancy leave, which may begin 30 days before the expected due date (Lammi-Taskula, 2025).

The reform has substantially changed fathers' uptake of leave. Following the introduction of a longer leave quota for fathers, fathers' share of all parental benefit days increased from 12.5% in 2021 to 20.9% in 2024 (Kela, 2025). Fathers of children born in 2022 took an average of 13 weeks of leave, compared with just over seven weeks among fathers of children born in 2021. Evidence from Kela statistics further suggests that parents have increasingly used leave more flexibly following the reform, including through shorter leave periods and greater use of part-time arrangements (Kela, 2024; Lammi-Taskula, 2025).

The Finnish data linking leave uptake to children's age are available for children born in 2023 (Figure 8). These data reveal distinct patterns in mothers' and fathers' leave-taking. Fathers' leave use is highest immediately after childbirth, particularly during the first six weeks of the child's life, reflecting the use of paternity and simultaneous leave arrangements. Fathers' leave-taking then declines before increasing again later during infancy, particularly between approximately 24 and 52 weeks after birth. The data shows as well that almost all mothers make use of available leave entitlements following childbirth. Around 99% of mothers take pregnancy leave (40 weekdays, approximately 6.7 weeks) and 99% also take parental leave (160 weekdays, approximately 26.7 weeks). Among mothers taking parental leave, 96% use their full entitlement of 160 days, or more if additional days are transferred from the other parent. Approximately 3% use between one and 159 days of leave, while fewer than 1% do not take parental leave at all, either by choice or because they are not eligible.

That is, most mothers take parental leave immediately following childbirth and use pregnancy and parental leave continuously until their leave days are exhausted. Some parents postpone parts of their leave entitlement or alternate leave periods between parents, as the current system allows leave to be taken in separate periods and postponed until the child reaches two years of age.

This comparison of leave uptake profiles by child age in two Nordic countries illustrates that parenting leave policies, particularly individual father and mother quota design entitlements, influence actual leave



uptake. At the same time, other factors, such as cultural and normative beliefs about early child development, may also shape the timing and sequencing of leave (Arnalds et al., 2025, Duvander & Fahlén, 2025). While child well-being may potentially be supported through well-designed policies, this relationship is not deterministic. From a child-centred perspective, the potential benefits of parenting leave policies depend not only on formal entitlements but also on how leave is actually used by mothers and fathers. Children experience parenting leave policies through parental time, caregiving practices, and family relationships, suggesting that the timing, duration, and distribution of leave between parents may represent important pathways linking parenting leave policies to child well-being.

Building on these distribution patterns, the following section examines how parenting leave policies across Europe contribute to child well-being through caregiver time, income security, and caregiving environments during early childhood.

3. Impact of Parenting Leave Policies on Child Well-being

Parenting leave policies are particularly relevant during the first months and years of human life. By shaping parents' time availability, income security, and stress levels, they influence key pathways through which early child well-being may be supported or constrained (Britto, et.al. 2017; Draper, et al, 2024). Extensive evidence from developmental neuroscience has shown that children's early experiences are shaped by the interaction of biological, relational, and socio-economic factors (Britto et al. 2017). Physical growth, brain development, emotional regulation, and attachment relationships develop rapidly during this period and lay the foundations for later health, learning, and wellbeing.

Over the last decade the growth in developmental neuroscience evidence has created a renewed interest the "first 1000 days" (UNICEF, 2023; WHO, 2018; Richardson, 2025), the period from conception to a child's second birthday (Section 1). This period is increasingly recognised as particularly important for children's long-term development and well-being.

In section 3, we examine what is known about the influence and impact of parenting leave policies during this period and beyond, drawing on evidence from high-quality systematic reviews and meta-analyses, longitudinal studies as well as qualitative studies. We take a holistic perspective exploring the implications of parenting leave for children's health, economic and general wellbeing, and broader dimensions of well-being, as outlined in Section 1.

3.1 Impact of parenting leaves on child physical and mental health

A substantial body of research has examined the relationship between parenting leave policies and children's physical health and survival, particularly during pregnancy, infancy, and the first years of life. However, the evidence base distinguishes only inconsistently between different types of leave. Studies variously examine maternity leave, paternity leave, parental leave, or broader paid family leave schemes, and these categories differ considerably in terms of eligibility, duration, remuneration, timing, and whether leave is reserved for one parent or shared between parents. Consequently, findings must be interpreted carefully, as effects may depend not only on the existence of leave but also on the specific leave design under investigation. Timing is particularly important, including whether leave is available before birth, immediately after birth, simultaneously to both parents, or sequentially over the child's early years.

Parenting leave policies operate within wider welfare and health policy ecosystems. Their effects are shaped by the broader availability of public investment in children and families, including universal





healthcare, obstetric and paediatric services, child benefits, tax systems, and early childhood education and care (ECEC). Cross-country differences in these wider policy environments may moderate the observed effects of parenting leave.

Of particular importance for this issue is the availability and cost of health services (obstetric and paediatric) during pregnancy, birth, and the antenatal period. For example, the United Kingdom has a penurious statutory parenting leave system but a comparatively generous universal health care system by European standards, available to all children and adults, free at the point of delivery without expectation of insurance contribution. By contrast, the USA has neither federal or state level federal parenting leave entitlements nor a universal health care system (Petts et al., 2025). Universal health care can help mitigate child health challenges in populations without effective parenting leave and some macro-level epidemiological studies do introduce statistical controls for this problem.

Despite often using the term “parental leave” most existing child health evidence, for historical and knowledge base reasons, has focused on maternity leave or parenting leave not designed to encourage take-up by fathers, and so predominantly used by mothers. This research orientation reflects the historical knowledge gap regarding fathers’ biological, psychological, and caregiving contributions during the preconception, antenatal, and postnatal periods (e.g. Kotelchuck, 2021; Jansen et al., 2024; Gatrell, 2025; Aytuglu, 2025), as well as throughout children’s development (e.g. Lamb, 1997). In an evolving knowledge and policy context paternity and father-targeted leave entitlements have emerged (Engeman, 2023) and fathers have gradually increased their uptake of paid parental leave as shown, especially in the Nordic countries reaching up to a third of mothers paid parental leave time in Iceland, Norway, and Sweden by 2022/3 (Section 2.3).

A common feature of parenting leave is that it enables close physical proximity between children and their primary caregivers and, if reimbursed, this proximity is accompanied by a degree of financial security. Evidence shows how important close physical proximity with primary caregivers is particularly in early infancy (Cordolcini et al., 2024). When infants are in skin-to-skin contact with their parents, the proximity can facilitate developing emotional connection with their baby, a growing awareness of infant temperament, and breast-feeding initiation. In the early weeks of infancy and parenthood developing mutual relationships is central and aids infant protection. In developmental psychology terms “bonding” and “attachment” are often used interchangeably but, technically, bonding refers to the emotional connection of parents toward their infant and attachment refers to the quality of emotional connection of an infant toward its primary caregivers (Cabrera, et al. 2014; Humphreys et al., 2024). Both processes take time. With more knowledge about child development, it is now widely recognised that child and parenting processes develop in reciprocal, bi-directional, and multidirectional ways in families.

Despite the relative lack of attention to the family ecosystem, particularly about the relevance of fathers and co-partner influences on child health, the maternity leave evidence does illuminate an understanding of any direct relationship with pregnancy, birth motherhood, maternal recovery, birth complications and infant care.

Evidence focusing on parenting leave taken by mothers is discussed first followed by research specifically on fathers’ leave-taking and paternity leave which has expanded only more recently.

| Parenting leave taken by mothers

Across the literature, one of the clearest findings is that paid maternity leave and maternal leave-taking during the first months after birth are associated with a range of positive child health outcomes (Hajizadeh et al., 2015; Andres et al., 2016; Heymann et al., 2017; Nandi et al., 2018; Khan, 2020; Canaan et al., 2022; Whitney et al., 2023). These studies are systematic reviews and primarily epidemiological.





Together they suggest that paid leave availability to mothers of up to approximately six months is associated with **improvements in infant and child health**, although evidence regarding longer leave durations remains more mixed and context dependent. This existing research generally does not directly compare parenting leave with alternative childcare arrangements, such as ECEC or informal care, nor does it systematically assess the quality of care provided during leave periods. Instead, the research examines the characteristics of maternity leave and child indicators at a country or macro level.

One important area of research concerns infant survival. Studies suggest that paid maternity leave and paid parental leave are associated with **lower infant mortality and under-five mortality rates**. Evidence regarding neonatal mortality (deaths within the first month of life) is more mixed, although some studies suggest benefits where maternity leave systems provide flexibility for women to take leave before birth. Prenatal leave may contribute to reduced stress, increased medical monitoring, and better management of pregnancy complications, potentially lowering risks associated with premature birth, although the evidence base remains comparatively limited.

Research also indicates that paid maternity or paid parental leave may contribute to **higher rates of infant and child immunisation** by increasing parents' time availability and facilitating access to healthcare services (Hajizadeh et al., 2015). Parenting leave is, however, only one contributing factor among others, including healthcare accessibility, institutional trust, and the organisation of public health systems. The evidence does show that **payment is a crucial ingredient** (Heymann et al., 2017; Nandi et al., 2018). It appears that unpaid leave does not confer the same level of benefits for child health. More research is needed to understand the impact of the mix of paid and unpaid leave which is a common parenting leave arrangement in many countries.

| Breastfeeding – the influence of mothers' leave use and partner support

Breastfeeding is among the most extensively researched pathways linking leave policies to child physical health and development. The WHO recommends exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months of life because of its role in immune protection, nutrition, healthy growth, and developmental outcomes. The WHO–UNICEF–Lancet Commission on the Future of the World's Children (2020) describes breastfeeding and breast milk as a form of “personalised medicine” for infants. However, achieving and sustaining exclusive breastfeeding requires substantial maternal availability and physical proximity during the early months after birth and may be difficult to reconcile with lack of partner support and an early return to employment, particularly where commuting distances are long, workplace flexibility is limited, or sleep disruption is substantial. A consistent finding across studies is that paid maternity leave is associated with **higher rates of breastfeeding initiation and longer durations of both exclusive and non-exclusive breastfeeding**, but the evidence on any direct linkage to continued breast feeding after returning to employment is mixed (Dutheil et al., 2021). Comparative research suggests that longer maternity leave and workplace support measures, such as breastfeeding breaks and flexible working arrangements, can facilitate women's breastfeeding goals (Theurich et al., 2019; see Appendix 2). Studies from several countries indicate that exclusive breastfeeding rates often decline after the first months postpartum, which can correspond with mothers' return to employment.

| Parenting leave taken by fathers

Although much of the earlier literature has focused primarily on mothers, more recent studies increasingly examine fathers' leave-taking and co-parenting processes. Some evidence suggests that the effects of paternity leave on child health outcomes may emerge gradually through changes in fathers' involvement in caregiving, household labour division, and family relationships (Khan, 2020). Earlier research may also have underestimated paternal effects because studies often examined only short paternity leave or





maternity leave transfer entitlements (Humphreys et al., 2025) rather than broader parental leave systems with father-specific quotas or incentives.

Recent quasi-experimental studies indicate that **fathers' leave-taking may improve child health through multiple pathways**, including increased paternal involvement in childcare, greater household investment in child health, and more balanced caregiving arrangements (Li et al., 2025; Marharini et al., 2025). Systematic reviews focusing specifically on paternity leave similarly suggest positive associations with child health and neurodevelopmental outcomes (Pizzaro & Gartzia, 2024). For example, Bjarnadóttir et al. (2019) and Burtle and Bezruchka (2016) report positive associations between fathers' leave-taking and improved early neurodevelopment.

Research from Nordic countries has further highlighted the importance of shared parental leave arrangements and joint parental involvement. A Swedish study examining the relationship between parental leave use by both parents and breastfeeding found that longer periods of joint parental leave were associated with longer durations of partial breastfeeding (Grandahl et al., 2020). In this study, mothers took an average of 10.9 months of leave during the child's first year, while fathers took approximately three months. Breastfeeding duration was also associated with higher parental education, older parental age, and non-instrumental vaginal birth.

Qualitative and family-level studies suggest that **fathers' presence during the postnatal period may support breastfeeding** indirectly through practical and emotional support for mothers. Partner involvement can facilitate feeding routines, maternal rest, and the care of older children, while also promoting sensitive co-parenting and parental confidence (Earle, 2000; Flacking et al., 2010; Koksál et al., 2022; Parker et al., 2025). These forms of support may be difficult to sustain where fathers have little or no access to leave or return rapidly to full-time work.

| Leave to care for sick children

Non-severe illnesses are particularly recurrent in early childhood, as children's immune systems mature and they make the transition from parental home care to ECEC settings. A UK study found that infants and children starting childcare can be expected to experience 12 respiratory illnesses and two gastrointestinal illnesses in their first year of attendance (Caddy et al., 2026). Dealing effectively with non-severe illnesses among under-5s is increasingly seen as part of a public health strategy aimed at reducing the spread of infectious diseases transmitted through close contact in ECEC settings (WHO–UNICEF–Lancet Commission on the Future of the World's Children, 2020).

The importance of a child-focused public health strategy became apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, when parents were required to keep their children at home as soon as symptoms appeared (Kosłowski et al., 2022). As parents are increasingly encouraged to assume greater responsibility for managing common childhood illnesses, public health approaches emphasise the need to give children sufficient time to recover before returning to ECEC, and later to school. This can help avoid pressure to resume attendance too quickly, which may lead to overmedication or the masking of symptoms when this is not strictly necessary (Caddy et al., 2026).

Well-paid leave to care for sick children, in addition to maternity, paternity, and parental leave, can contribute to sustaining children's health and wellbeing without significantly reducing families' economic security. Swedish data show that paid leave to care for sick children is highest during children's early years and is most frequently taken after regular parental leave has ended, with mothers taking slightly more days than fathers: 9.1 compared with 7.3 days on average per year (see Appendix 3).





3.2 Impact of parenting leave on fathers' and mothers' physical and mental health

From a child's perspective, it is important that parents, as children's primary caregivers, are in good physical and mental health during pregnancy, postpartum recovery, and the first years of life in order to provide the best possible care and support for their child. Historically, protecting mothers' health and safety during pregnancy and after childbirth has been one of the main objectives of paid maternity leave. Studies, including systematic reviews and meta-analyses, suggest that **paid leave has various positive effects on parental health, particularly maternal physical and mental health** (Bütikofer et al., 2021; Whitney et al., 2023; Aitkin et al., 2015; Hewitt et al., 2017; Heymann et al., 2017; Heshmati et al., 2023; Hidalgo-Padilla et al., 2023; Jou, et al., 2018; Kim, 2024).

Cultural and societal norms surrounding pregnancy and childbirth practices vary in Europe but there has generally been a shift from viewing pregnancy and childbirth as an illness or disability, particularly for the mother, towards a broader emphasis on the health and well-being of mothers, fathers, and children. Nevertheless, recovery after birth requires time and can extend well beyond the immediate postnatal period. A recent study from the Netherlands found that fewer than half of mothers felt fully recovered across physical, mental, sexual, and functional domains even 3-6 months postpartum (Frijemersum et al., 2025). Similarly, biological research suggests that many biomarkers may not return to pre-pregnancy levels for up to a year or longer following childbirth (Bar et al., 2025).

Medical and technological interventions surrounding childbirth have increased over the recent decades, including **a rise in the proportion of births delivered by surgical caesarean sections**. El Radaf et al. (2025) found that caesarean section rates varied markedly across Europe, ranging from 16.9% in Northern Europe to 43.6% in Southern Europe. For example, in 2025, approximately 45% of births in England were through caesarean section, 44% were vaginal births and 11% involved assisted delivery methods such as forceps or ventouse (NMPA, 2025). Around one in five first-time mothers also required an episiotomy (ibid.). Medical guidelines vary, but physical recovery following a caesarean section is generally more intensive than after vaginal birth and commonly lasts 6 weeks (NICE, 2025). In some countries, restrictions such as temporary prohibitions on driving may also apply during the recovery period.

Global estimates further suggest that around one-third of **women experience persistent post-birth health conditions**, most commonly dyspareunia, lower back pain, and urinary incontinence (WHO, 2025). Although these conditions are most prevalent in low-income countries, elevated risks are also found among women from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and minority ethnic communities in high-income countries.

Post-birth recovery and sleep deprivation, for fathers as well as mothers, can create stress and anxiety affecting parenting in the post-partum period. While fathers also experience sleep disruption and stress during the transition to parenthood, sleep disruption is particularly severe for mothers during the first weeks and early months following childbirth because of frequent day- and night-time infant feeding (Astbury et al., 2022).

Evidence from policy reforms and observational studies further suggests that **paid leave may contribute to improved parental physical health**. For example, Bütikofer et al., (2021) found that the introduction of paid maternity leave in Norway in 1977 improved a range of maternal health outcomes, including BMI, blood pressure, pain, and mental health. The reform was also associated with increased health-promoting behaviours, including higher rates of exercise and no smoking. These effects were particularly strong among first-time mothers, low-income mothers, and women who otherwise would have taken little unpaid leave. Evidence for fathers also points towards positive effects, with health-promoting behaviours such as reductions in alcohol consumption being associated with fathers taking paternity leave (Pizzaro & Gartzia, 2024).





The transition to parenthood may also affect parental mental health through biological, emotional and financial changes associated with childbirth and caregiving responsibilities. Existing mental health conditions may be aggravated, and new difficulties may emerge during pregnancy and the postnatal period. Studies show considerable geographical variation in the prevalence of parental depression, but WHO estimates suggest that approximately 10-20% of mothers and 8-9% of fathers experience post-natal depressive symptoms following childbirth (Álvarez-García et al., 2024).

Mental health difficulties are influenced by multiple factors, but a growing body of systematic review evidence suggests that **paid parenting leave may have important benefits for parental mental health, including among fathers** (Philpott et al., 2022). Improvements in parental mental health are particularly important because of their well-established associations with children's social, behavioural, and emotional development.

Paid maternity leave is consistently shown to play an important role in protecting maternal mental health. More generously paid and longer maternity leaves (particularly beyond 12 weeks) have generally been associated with better maternal mental health outcomes (e.g. Hidalgo-Padilla et al., 2023; Heshmati et al., 2023). Women who can decide when to return to work also appear to experience better mental health outcomes than those who return primarily because of financial pressures (Chang et al., 2023).

The optimal duration of paid leave for supporting maternal and paternal mental health has not yet been established. Existing evidence suggests that mothers taking around 12 weeks of leave experience fewer depressive symptoms and better overall mental health compared with shorter leave periods, but evidence regarding additional benefits from substantially longer leave remains less consistent (Whitney et al., 2023; Heshmati et al., 2023).

For fathers, the evidence base remains more limited but generally suggests positive effects of paid leave (Heshmati et al., 2023). The optimal duration and timing for fathers' leave have not yet been established. Some evidence suggests that very short leave periods (e.g. around 10 days following birth) may be associated with increased work-family conflict and anxiety among fathers (Philpott et al., 2022). UK evidence further suggests that short paternity leave may improve mental well-being primarily among higher-income fathers, indicating unequal benefits across socio-economic groups (Humphreys et al., 2025).

Overall, the evidence suggests that **parenting leave that is adequately paid, of sufficient duration, and designed to enable access by both mothers and fathers may support parental physical and mental health**. Improvements in parental health may in turn strengthen caregiving capacity and indirectly contribute to improved child well-being and developmental outcomes.

3.3 Impact of parenting leave on children's cognitive, social, and educational outcomes

Longitudinal and quasi-experimental studies are increasingly providing evidence on the impact of parenting leave on children's cognitive, social, and educational outcomes. However, relatively few studies examine the combined effects of maternity, paternity, and parental leave while simultaneously accounting for broader family and socio-economic characteristics. Much of the existing literature has focused either on maternal leave or, more recently, on fathers' leave-taking and father-targeted leave reforms.

Mikkelsen, et al. (2024) examined a Swedish parenting leave reform reserving one month of leave for fathers and found that it increased the probability that girls, though not boys, later entered maths-intensive upper secondary programmes. The authors suggest that exposure to more gender-equal and less traditional parenting arrangements during early childhood may have contributed to these outcomes.



Similarly, Tugrul et al. (2024) reported long-term benefits of both maternity leave and father-quota parenting leave for children's educational, labour-market, and health outcomes beyond the age of twelve. Children of highly educated mothers appeared to benefit particularly strongly from extended parental time.

A growing body of evidence further suggests that fathers' leave-taking may influence children through broader family processes. Some Asian societies have recently initiated paternity leave policies to encourage fathers' participation in childcare and raise fertility rates. In Singapore, for example, Li and Yeung (2025) found that taking two or more weeks of paternity leave was associated with increased paternal involvement in childcare activities, stronger father-child closeness, and improved family dynamics. These factors were linked both directly and indirectly to higher academic achievement among children aged three to eight years. The authors propose that paternity leave may contribute to cumulative developmental advantages operating through stronger father-child relationships and more cohesive co-parenting arrangements.

Other studies have focused on parents' leave taking more generally by comparing families who used leave with those who did not (Gaston et al., 2015). Their findings suggest that children whose mothers took parenting leave demonstrated significantly higher levels of social competence, communication skills, and general knowledge scores compared to children without a parent who took parenting leave. Children whose both parents took leave also achieved higher scores in communication and general knowledge. In addition, children whose parents took leave lasting between six months and one year scored higher in physical health and well-being, social competence, communication, and general knowledge compared to children whose parents took no leave. For social competence in particular, children whose parents took six to twelve months of leave also performed better than children whose parents took longer periods of leave exceeding one year.

Evidence increasingly suggests that **the effects of parenting leave on children's cognitive outcomes may not be distributed equally across socio-economic groups**. Canaan et al. (2022), for example, found that longer parental leave appeared to benefit schooling outcomes for children from higher socio-economic status (SES) families while potentially having adverse effects among children from lower SES backgrounds. The same review concluded that while extended paid leave improved health outcomes among low-income mothers, longer-term developmental and educational gains were more concentrated among children of highly educated mothers. These findings suggest that parenting leave policies interact with wider patterns of social inequality and access to resources.

Overall, the evidence suggests that **parenting leave may contribute positively to children's cognitive, social, and educational development through multiple pathways**, including increased parental time, stronger parent-child relationships, and improved family dynamics. However, effects appear to vary across family contexts and socio-economic groups, indicating that parenting leave policies may operate differently depending on broader social and institutional conditions.

3.4 Impact of parenting leave on economic protection

From a child perspective, economic protection depends not only on maintaining household income during leave periods but also on supporting longer-term parental employment and reducing risks of poverty. Paid parenting leave should therefore be understood as part of broader welfare-state strategies aimed at protecting children from economic insecurity, for example alongside the European Child Guarantee initiative (Afscharian et al., 2026).





Across Europe, approximately 24.2% of children under the age of 18 remained at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2024 (European Commission, 2025; 2026). OECD evidence identifies parental joblessness as one of the strongest predictors of child poverty, while increases in maternal employment have been associated with reductions in child poverty over time (Thévenon et al., 2018). Estimates suggest that a **one-percentage-point increase in maternal employment may reduce relative child poverty by approximately 0.4 percentage points.**

Following childbirth, families frequently experience increased economic vulnerability due to reduced earnings, interruptions in employment, and additional costs associated with caring for a child. **Mothers are particularly affected because they are more likely than fathers to reduce working hours, interrupt employment, or take career breaks following childbirth.** A recent literature review finds that a substantial proportion of women reduce or interrupt labour-market participation during the first year after birth, although estimates vary across countries, welfare regimes, and policy contexts (Kleven et al., 2024). Torres et al.'s (2024) systematic review on the impact of motherhood on women's career progression report found that approximately 24% of women exit the labour market during the first year following childbirth. Analysis of single mothers with children under six years old across twenty-seven European countries, shows that single mothers are more likely to work and to work longer hours if they are eligible for parental leave (Bartova et al., 2022).

From a child perspective, these changes in parental employment and earnings are important because household income and parental employment are strongly associated with children's material living conditions and broader well-being. Economic strain during early childhood may affect children directly through reduced material resources and indirectly through increased parental stress and lower parenting satisfaction (Gómez et al., 2022). A literature review examining whether household income affects children's outcomes further highlights the importance of economic support during early childhood. Cooper and Stewart (2021) argue that **income support during the early years of a child's life may have lasting consequences, as early advantages or disadvantages can place children on different long-term developmental pathways.** Governments therefore have an important role in supporting parents and primary caregivers during the transition to parenthood, as experiences and conditions in early childhood may have long-term consequences not only for children themselves but also for societies more broadly.

Paid parenting leave is one of the principal policy instruments through which governments seek to protect children and families from economic insecurity during early childhood. **By replacing earnings during periods of caregiving, parenting leave can reduce immediate risks of income loss following childbirth and provide families with financial continuity during a period of increased need.** However, benefit levels vary considerably across countries (see Section 2). While income replacement rates above approximately two-thirds of previous earnings are commonly regarded as relatively generous, most countries provide such levels only for maternity leave, paternity leave, or specific reserved leave periods. **Payments for parental leave, which is still predominantly used by mothers, are often lower or absent entirely** (Dobrotić et al., 2025; ILO, 2025).

A meta-analysis estimates an average motherhood wage penalty of approximately 3.6–3.8% per child (Cukrowska-Torzewska et al., 2020). Reflecting the close link between parenthood and labour-market disadvantages, some authors also refer to this as a “child penalty” (Cukrowska-Torzewska et al., 2020; Domínguez-Folgueras et al., 2022; Kleven et al., 2023; OECD, 2025b). This child penalty may have long-term consequences for mothers' earnings. For example, a Danish study examining motherhood effects on income from both labour markets and public transfers found that motherhood was associated with cumulative income losses over the subsequent two decades despite public transfers (Bay-Smith Christensen & Killeward, 2025).





The duration and generosity of leave are also important considerations. Existing evidence does not identify a universally optimal leave duration. Rather, research suggests that paid, job-protected leave can support women's labour-market attachment during the first months following childbirth, while risks of weaker employment continuity and more persistent wage penalties may increase as leave lengthens, particularly in contexts where leave remains strongly gendered and is not combined with fathers' individual and non-transferable entitlements and accessible childcare (Rossin-Slater, 2018; Ferragina, 2020; Grimshaw & Rubery, 2015; Hook & Paek, 2020). Evidence further suggests that very long leave periods may be associated with larger motherhood-employment gaps and more persistent career penalties. In countries with longer periods of leave, motherhood-employment gaps have been found to be larger than in countries with shorter leave periods (Nieuwenhuis et al., 2017). Several reviews suggest that paid leave periods of approximately five to seven months may be associated with favourable labour-market outcomes in some institutional contexts, although findings differ across leave designs and broader policy environments (Akgunduz & Plantenga, 2013; Kaufman, 2020; Canaan et al., 2022).

A growing body of literature suggests that the design of leave systems may be as important as leave duration itself. **Gender-sharing leave arrangements to care for children, particularly those including substantial, well-paid, and non-transferable entitlements for fathers, have been associated with greater fathers' involvement in caregiving and stronger maternal labour-market attachment** (Patnaik, 2019; Castellanos-Serrano et al., 2024; Lutolf, 2025). Such arrangements may reduce gender specialization in care and strengthen mothers' long-term labour-market attachment and career continuity, thereby supporting children's economic well-being (Hook & Li, 2025; André et al., 2025). Studies from Nordic countries further suggest that fathers' leave uptake may reduce motherhood wage penalties and increase total household earnings through a more equal division of caregiving responsibilities (Johansson, 2010; Andersen, 2018).

Overall, evidence suggests that paid parenting leave can support children's economic well-being not only through immediate income replacement following childbirth but also through its longer-term effects on parental employment and household resources (e.g. Olivetti & Petrongolo, 2017). However, the extent to which these benefits materialise depends strongly on policy design, including payment levels, duration, eligibility rules, fathers' entitlements, and the broader welfare-state context in which parenting leave operates.

3.5 Impact of fathers' parenting leave use on child caring

Over the last two decades, a substantial body of research has emerged on the relationship between fathers' use of parenting leave and their subsequent involvement in childcare. Overall, the evidence suggests a positive association between fathers' uptake of paid paternity or paid parental leave and their subsequent involvement in childcare. The underlying assumption is that providing fathers with opportunities to spend more time at home following childbirth may encourage greater involvement in childcare and family life more broadly (O'Brien, 2009).

From a developmental perspective, fathers' leave-taking may create opportunities for establishing early caregiving routines and strengthening father-child relationships. Using Lamb et al.'s (1987) classic framework of father involvement, paternity leave and parental leave increases paternal "availability", creating opportunities for more direct proximal "interaction" with children (Lamb et al. 1987). Through these mechanisms, **leave may facilitate fathers' engagement in everyday caregiving practices during early childhood**. In line with these theoretical assumptions, Nepomnyaschy & Waldfogel (2007) found that American fathers who took two weeks or more of leave following childbirth participated more





frequently in childcare activities (e.g. bathing, diaper changing) nine months later, even after controlling for antenatal class participation and birth attendance.

Recent systematic reviews synthesising two decades of scholarship conclude that paternity and parental leave are generally associated with higher levels of paternal involvement in childcare across different institutional contexts (André et al., 2025). Across countries, both individual-level and comparative studies indicate that fathers who take leave—particularly when it is well paid and individually earmarked—remain more involved in childcare during early childhood and beyond. Thus, there is growing evidence that take up of earmarked paternity leave may increase fathers’ leave-taking and participation in childcare (Canaan et al., 2022).

Policy design appears to play a central role in shaping these effects. A range of national studies e.g. from Sweden, Germany, and the United States report that fathers who take longer than the average period of leave are more involved in childcare, and in some cases also in housework, after returning to paid work (Almqvist & Duvander, 2014; Bünning, 2015; Haas & Hwang, 2008; Meil, 2013; Rehel, 2014; Reimer & Pfau-Effinger, 2020; Schober & Zoch, 2019).

Particularly strong evidence has emerged from Nordic countries, where “use-it-or-lose-it” leave entitlements have been introduced for fathers. **Statutory, individually earmarked leave that is forfeited if not used has been particularly effective in promoting fathers’ involvement in childcare and more equal co-parenting arrangements** (Brandth & Kvande, 2001, 2012, 2020; Duvander, 2013; Arnalds et al., 2013, 2025). Almqvist and Duvander (2014), using panel survey data combined with qualitative interviews, found that fathers who took longer than average parental leave were more likely to share childcare responsibilities after returning to paid work. Extended leave-taking was associated with a higher likelihood of shared responsibility for everyday childcare and with reports of closer, more routine-based father-child relationships. Similarly, Evertsson, Boye, and Erman (2018) found that longer paternal leave duration was associated with increasingly equal divisions of childcare responsibilities between mothers and fathers. These studies suggest that the duration of fathers’ leave matters: fathers who take longer periods of leave, beyond the minimum reserved entitlement, tend to share care responsibilities more equally, although the shift appears gradual rather than transformative (Schober & Buchau, 2022).

Following the introduction of non-transferable, highly paid quotas for Icelandic fathers in 2000, fathers’ uptake of paid parental leave became widespread. Between 2003 and 2019, when fathers were entitled to three months of reserved leave, average use ranged between 86–101 days, closely corresponding to their individual entitlement (Arnalds et al., 2025). Longitudinal survey data of parents of firstborn children show a steady increase in fathers’ share of childcare since the reform. Among parents of children born in 1997, prior to the reform, few reported an equal division of childcare during the first year; by the time the child was three years old, approximately 40% reported sharing care equally. In contrast, 40% of parents of children born in 2003 reported equal division of care already at 13 months, increasing to 50% at age three. Among parents of children born in 2019, the proportion of three-year-olds reported to be cared for equally by both parents had risen to 85% (Arnalds et al., 2013, 2022, 2025).

Although the evidence overall suggests positive associations between fathers’ leave uptake and later childcare involvement, broader conclusions regarding effects on gender equality and family dynamics should be interpreted cautiously (Schober & Büchau, 2022). Lee & Uzunalioglu (2025) note that variations in measurements, research design, interpretation of results, and institutional contexts complicate causal interpretations. More evidence is particularly needed from countries outside the Nordic region and from contexts with less generous leave systems.

Overall, the evidence suggests that **fathers’ uptake of paid parenting leave may support greater involvement in childcare and more equal sharing of caregiving responsibilities**. However, the extent to



which such effects emerge appears strongly influenced by policy design, leave duration, payment levels, and broader social and institutional contexts.

3.6 Impact of fathers' solo parenting leave use on child well-being and co-parenting

Recent research has increasingly examined whether fathers' solo caregiving during parenting leave in children's early years may have specific implications for child well-being and family relationships. The underlying assumption is that periods of solo caregiving may provide fathers with opportunities to develop independent caregiving routines, strengthen confidence in caregiving abilities, and establish closer relationships with children. Such experiences may also influence how care responsibilities are subsequently shared between parents.

Evidence from qualitative and longitudinal studies suggests that fathers' solo leave-taking may contribute to stronger paternal engagement in childcare. A series of thirteen country-level qualitative case studies of fathers (or mothers' partners) taking some leave alone suggest that leave designs supporting solo caregiving appeared to strengthen fathers' involvement in childcare and family life (O'Brien & Wall, 2016). Some studies further suggest that a minimum duration may be important, with approximately one month to two months of solo caregiving potentially representing a threshold or "tipping point" for developing stronger caregiving routines and identities (Bünning, 2015; Romero-Balsas, 2021; Fernández-Cornejo et al., 2025).

Evidence from Germany provides a further illustration of this pattern. Reimer and Pfau-Effinger (2020) found that fathers' uptake of parental leave was associated with greater involvement in childcare for two-year-old children. The strongest effects were observed among fathers who took leave alone, meaning that fathers used parental leave while their partners had returned to employment. These findings suggest that solo caregiving periods may create opportunities for fathers to assume primary caregiving responsibilities and establish more sustained involvement in childcare.

However, evidence regarding the direct effects of fathers' solo leave-taking on child well-being remains limited, and important questions remain concerning the timing and sequencing of solo leave periods in relation to mothers' leave. Future research may also need to consider how experiences of choice and obligation shape fathers' experiences and outcomes.

Less is known about situations in which parents take leave simultaneously. Joint leave periods (beyond paternity leave periods that are designed to make joint leave possible) may potentially operate in different ways. On the one hand, they may reinforce traditional gender divisions of labour if mothers continue to assume primary caregiving responsibilities. On the other hand, joint leave may provide children with increased parental attention and support parental adjustment and couple relationships during the transition to parenthood.

Only a limited number of parental leave systems include both opportunities for parents to take leave together and individually reserved leave periods. Sweden provides an example through its "double days" (*dubbeldagar*), which allow parents to use a certain number of leave days simultaneously alongside individual non-transferable entitlements. Spain's more recent reforms have also introduced elements of this kind. Research from the Swedish Social Insurance Inspectorate (ISF), using register data, suggests that "double days" may encourage leave uptake among fathers who otherwise might be less likely to use leave, including fathers with lower levels of education. At the same time, Swedish regulations prevent parents from using simultaneous leave during individually reserved leave periods. Other Swedish research indicates that fathers with the lowest income levels are generally less likely to use leave, although fathers may take longer leave when mothers also have low or no income (Duvander & Fahlén, 2025).





Co-parenting concerns how parents share, coordinate, and negotiate parenting responsibilities. Developmental psychology research consistently shows that “positive” co-parenting (supportive, warm, coordination and communication between parents) is associated with improved child-wellbeing. The transition to parenthood and the birth of a first child represents important stages in the development of co-parenting relationships, and parental leave arrangements may provide opportunities for these processes to evolve. Twamley’s (2024) longitudinal qualitative research among couples navigating parental leave further suggests substantial overlap between the quality of co-parenting relationships and broader couple relationship dynamics.

Overall, the accumulated evidence suggests that **fathers’ solo uptake of paid parental leave may strengthen paternal engagement and support more equal sharing of caregiving responsibilities, although more research is needed on its sequencing with periods of mothers’ solo leave and simultaneous leave**. However, evidence concerning direct effects on child well-being remains limited and appears to depend on broader policy design, leave duration, timing, and family contexts. Further research is needed to better understand how solo and joint leave arrangements influence children, parents, and co-parenting processes over time.

3.7 Impact of parenting leave on family relationships and stability

The preamble of the Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasizes the importance of the family environments for children’s development, stating that “for the full and harmonious development of the child, he or she should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.” (Preamble, paragraph 6). The Convention also affirms that “the family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members, and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community.” (Preamble, paragraph 5). From this perspective, social policies may play a crucial role in creating the conditions that support nurturing family environments.

The relationship between parenting leave and family stability has increasingly attracted research attention. Importantly, family stability should not be understood solely in terms of maintaining intact couple relationships. Divorce or parental separation is not necessarily detrimental to children’s well-being. Rather, what appears to be critical is the quality of relationships and the capacity of families to provide a caring and supportive environments. This may include maintaining meaningful relationships with both parents following separation and ensuring equal opportunities and support for single-parent households.

Recent studies, particularly from Nordic countries (Lappegård et al., 2020; Olafsson & Steingrimsdottir, 2020), but also from United States (Petts et al., 2020), suggest that fathers’ use of parental leave, often considered a proxy for men’s engagement in childcare, is associated with greater relationship stability compared with couples in where fathers do not take leave. However, these findings should be interpreted cautiously, as couples in which fathers take leave may differ systematically from other families in ways that also influence relationship outcomes.

Duvander & Jans (2009), for example, found that **fathers’ use of parenting leave was associated with more frequent contact between separated fathers and their children**. Swedish fathers who had taken more than sixty days of parenting leave spent more days per month with their children after separation (6.5 days) compared with fathers who had not taken leave (4.6 days). These findings suggest that early involvement in childcare may contribute to more sustained paternal engagement over time.





In Spain, De Poli (2025) found that a reform extending and increasing paternity leave payments increased family stability by approximately four per cent among couples where mothers had been employed before childbirth. In contrast, Avdic and Karimi (2018) reported that the Swedish reform, in 1995, increased fathers' parental leave uptake was associated with increased separation risks, potentially reflecting new tensions surrounding changing family roles and expectations, while no such effect was found after the reforms in 2002. Differences across findings are likely related to variations in policy design, institutional contexts, and methodological approaches.

A further dimension of family stability concerns the absence of violence and harmful family environments. Emerging evidence suggests that **paid parenting leave may function as a protective factor against both intimate partner violence and child maltreatment**. Leave policies may reduce financial strain, lower parental stress, and support more egalitarian family practices (D'Inverno et al., 2018). Studies of Paid Family Leave programmes in the United States have reported associations between leave-taking and lower risks of infant maltreatment and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (Tanis et al., 2025; Bullinger et al., 2025; Perrins et al., 2025). These findings suggest that paid parenting leave may contribute to primary prevention by reducing parental stress, improving parental wellbeing, and enabling caregiving during the perinatal period.

Overall, existing evidence suggests that parenting leave policies may influence family relationships through multiple pathways, including relationship quality, co-parenting arrangements, sustained parent-child involvement, and reductions in family stress and violence. However, evidence remains mixed and context dependent, indicating that the effects of parenting leave on family stability and children's well-being are also shaped by broader social and institutional conditions.

3.8 Eligibility for parenting leave: Inequalities in children's access to the benefits of parenting leave

Across Europe, some children are born into families whose parents have access only to low-paid parenting leave, basic child-related benefits, or in some cases no paid leave at all. These may apply to **parents without a formal employment contract, those working in the informal economy, or recently arrived immigrants** (Dobrotić & Blum, 2020; Duvander & Koslowski, 2023). Across most European jurisdictions, and globally, a formal employment relationship remains the principal pathway to eligibility for parenting leave entitlements (Lammi-Taskula & Reimer, 2026; Salihoğlu & Vargas-Silva, 2024; EIGE, 2020).

Although estimates of the number of children born to parents working in the informal economy are not readily available, a simulation of nationally representative populations of "potential parents" aged 20-49 years (using EU-LFS and EU-SILC data) found that approximately 10 % of employed women and 12 % of employed men across the EU-28 were not eligible for parenting leave under legal conditions in place in 2016 (EIGE, 2020). Short working duration before birth and a self-employed status were the main reasons for ineligibility. When unemployment was also considered, these proportions increased to 34 % of women and 23 % of men. Other evidence further suggests that more **highly educated, higher earning, employed, and married fathers are more likely to have access to leave options** and related benefits (Koslowski, 2023) and **single mothers, amongst the poorest family group in Europe, are most likely to have lower access** (Bartova et al., 2022; Nieuwenhuis, 2022; Heymann & Raub, 2025).

From a child perspective, **differences in eligibility are important because access to parenting leave may influence children's opportunities for parental time, income security, health protection, and care during early childhood**. In interpreting the evidence presented in the previous sections on the impact of parenting leave on child well-being, it should therefore be recognised that existing studies may disproportionately represent children from economically more secure households while



underrepresenting children whose mothers and fathers work in informal or more precarious employment situations. This issue is revisited in the discussion section.

3.9 Methodological caution

A cautious approach to causal claims is adopted throughout this review, not least because of well-established **conceptual and methodological challenges in interpreting policy implementation and policy impacts** (Doucet & Duvander, 2022). Parenting leave policies do not operate in isolation but form part of a broader ecosystem of public investments and policy instruments affecting children and families, including healthcare systems, child and family benefits, taxation arrangements, and ECEC. Parenting leave is therefore best understood as operating in combination with other institutional supports. Given the considerable variation across Europe in the share of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) devoted to children and family welfare, disentangling the specific effects of parenting leave policies at both country and individual levels remains challenging (OECD, 2025a).

Research adopting child well-being indicators or outcome-based approaches also faces conceptual challenges. Children's well-being is inherently multidimensional and dynamic, and there is a risk that focusing on isolated indicators may result in a fragmented understanding of children's experiences while overlooking the interconnected and evolving nature of child development and family processes. Parenting leave policies may facilitate child–parent proximity and provide financially secure environments for caregiving, but the specific pathways through which these conditions translate into children's developmental outcomes are still being explored.

Similarly, understanding what parents do during parenting leave remains an emerging field of research. Existing observational and qualitative studies increasingly examine parenting practices and family processes during leave periods, but much of this work has focused on gender relations, divisions of labour, and couple dynamics (e.g. Twamley, 2024), while comparatively less attention has been paid to children's direct experiences and child well-being outcomes.

Finally, similar statutory leave entitlements do not necessarily imply similar levels of exposure to leave among children and families. Parents differ in preferences, cultural norms, socio-economic resources, and eligibility conditions, all of which influence the extent to which formal entitlements are translated into actual leave use. In the context of increasing labour-market insecurity, a growing number of parents may be excluded from leave entitlements and consequently underrepresented in research evidence. Drawing on a capability approach, Escobedo and García-Faroldi (forthcoming) suggest that cultural frameworks and social and economic positions act as conversion factors that shape effective opportunity structures. Consequently, similar leave policies may have different meanings, levels of uptake, and effects across social groups and societies.

Taken together, these considerations suggest that parenting leave policies should not be interpreted as having simple or uniform effects on child well-being. Their impacts are likely to depend on broader institutional contexts, family circumstances, and the ways in which parents are able to access and use available opportunities.



4. Conclusion: Caring for Our Children Now and for the Future

This White Paper presents robust evidence that parenting leave policies matter for children’s well-being. If designed well, they can provide children with an economically secure, family-based environment that supports early development during one of the most sensitive periods of human life. The first 1,000 days, from conception to a child’s second birthday, represent a developmental window during which biological growth, brain development, emotional regulation, and early relationships are established and can influence later outcomes across the life course. Parenting leave policies influence this process by shaping parents’ time availability, household income security, stress levels, and caregiving environments.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that parenting leave policies are not only work-family measures but also mechanisms through which societies shape children’s opportunities from the very beginning of life. From a child-centred perspective, **a fundamental question therefore becomes whether all children, irrespective of the circumstances into which they are born, have access to adequate care, parental time, and economic security during early childhood, or whether some children are effectively left behind from the very start.**

Across the evidence reviewed, several findings emerge consistently. Paid leave supports maternal recovery following birth, including recovery from increasingly common medical interventions such as caesarean sections; it contributes to improved child health outcomes and infant survival; and it facilitates breastfeeding initiation and continuation where desired. Parenting leave also appears to support parental physical and mental health and may strengthen caregiving relationships within families. Emerging evidence further suggests that fathers’ leave-taking can contribute to greater paternal involvement in childcare, stronger co-parenting relationships, and more equal sharing of caregiving responsibilities.

A particularly consistent finding throughout the literature is that payment matters. Paid leave repeatedly demonstrates stronger and more positive associations with child and family outcomes than unpaid leave. **The evidence suggests that adequate payment is a foundational component of parenting leave design for supporting child and parental health and well-being. Leave from paid work without financial compensation does not appear to confer the same benefits.**

At the same time, the White Paper demonstrates that parenting leave policies do not automatically translate into child well-being outcomes. Parenting leave creates opportunity structures for families, but the extent to which these opportunities are realised depends on policy design and on parents’ ability to access and use available entitlements in practice. Duration, payment levels, flexibility, eligibility criteria, and fathers’ individual entitlements all appear important. Moreover, parenting leave operates within wider systems of support including healthcare services, ECEC systems, employment conditions, and broader welfare-state arrangements.

The White Paper also highlights an important gap between children’s developmental needs and existing policy frameworks. Historically, parenting leave policies emerged primarily to protect women’s employment and maternal health and have increasingly been linked to labour market participation and gender equality objectives. These goals remain vital, particularly the ambition to improve women’s rights, as the pace of gender equality across Europe remains slow (EIGE, 2025). However, comparatively less attention has been paid to parenting leave as a policy instrument supporting children’s well-being and development. **Contemporary policy discussions continue to be strongly shaped by an adult worker model in which economic activation often takes precedence. As a result, insufficient value may be given to the time, care, as well as economic resources required by children and their caregivers, mothers and fathers, during the first year of life.**



Within Europe, the European Union and the International Labour Organization have played an important role in establishing minimum standards for parenting leave and work-life balance policies. However, from a child-centred perspective, existing minimum standards remain modest.

Taken together, current EU provisions on maternity, paternity, and parental leave are not designed to ensure effective support across the whole first year following childbirth. Nor do they require levels of remuneration that clearly protect families from economic hardship during leave periods. **Comparative analyses presented in this report further show considerable variation across Europe in the amount of time and economic protection available to children through parenting leave policies.** Children's access to parental care and financial security during early childhood therefore differs substantially according to the country into which they are born, as also found by Daly and Uzunalioglu (2026). Access to early childhood education and care, not covered in this White Paper, follows the same variability (Eurydice, 2025).

A central concern emerging from this White Paper is that not all children benefit equally from existing parenting leave systems. While some children grow up in families with access to long periods of well-paid leave and secure caregiving arrangements, others are born into circumstances in which parents have only limited access to support or no statutory protection at all. **Eligibility for parenting leave continues to depend largely on formal employment relationships, and children whose parents work in insecure employment, self-employment, informal sectors, or unstable labour market conditions often experience lower levels of protection.**

From a child-centred perspective, this raises an important challenge related to the principle that no child should be left behind (Richardson, 2025). The children who may benefit most from stable caregiving environments and economic security during the earliest years of life are often those whose families face the greatest barriers to accessing support. In the context of increasing labour market fragmentation and changing forms of employment, **existing parenting leave arrangements may risk contributing to a Matthew effect whereby policies intended to reduce inequalities disproportionately benefit those already in more favourable circumstances** (Van Lancker, 2021). Children already growing up under more favourable conditions may therefore benefit disproportionately from parenting leave supports, while others face greater insecurity at the very beginning of life.

This report therefore points to the importance of adopting a stronger child perspective in the future development of parenting leave policies. Parenting leave should not be viewed solely as a labour market instrument or as a mechanism for supporting parents; it should also be understood as an investment in children's development and in the future sustainability of societies. **The Convention on the Rights of the Child provides an important normative framework in this regard. Children's rights to development, health, social security, and an adequate standard of living imply that the conditions supporting nurturing care in early childhood are not solely private responsibilities but also matters of public concern.**

The evidence reviewed also suggests that the design of parenting leave policies may be as important as the existence of leave entitlements themselves. While the literature does not point to a universally optimal model, several recurring patterns emerge.

- 1) **The duration of paid leave appears to be important.** Evidence from studies on child health, parental well-being, and labour-market outcomes suggests that relatively short periods of paid leave, particularly those below six months, and in some contexts below the child's first year of life more broadly, may be insufficient to fully support children's developmental needs and family well-being during early childhood. Such arrangements may create gaps between children's care



needs, parental caregiving demands, particularly for mothers, and the availability of supportive structures.

- 2) **Individually reserved and non-transferable leave entitlements for the co-parent, most commonly fathers**, appear important not only for promoting gender equality but also for supporting child well-being. Fathers' leave-taking has increasingly been associated with stronger father-child relationships, more equal sharing of caregiving responsibilities, and more supportive co-parenting arrangements.
- 3) **The level of remuneration appears critical**. Income replacement below previous earnings levels may create financial gaps for families precisely at a life stage characterised by increased expenditures and heightened care demands, potentially affecting the material conditions and stability of children's early environments. While partial compensation may provide some protection, lower replacement rates may increase financial strain and constrain families' ability to make use of available leave entitlements.

From a child-centred perspective, the design of parenting leave policies therefore concerns not only the provision of time away from employment but also the quality, accessibility, and stability of the care environments created during children's earliest years. An over-view of explicit and implicit parental leave benchmarks in relation to a child perspective from international bodies (UNICEF, ILO, EU, WHO and OECD) is presented in Appendix 4.

Finally, the White Paper, alongside other COST investigations (Dobrotić & Arnalds, 2023; Engeman et al., 2025) highlights the **need for a stronger evidence and better data infrastructure**. Comparative research on parenting leave and child well-being remains constrained by substantial limitations in available data. Information on leave uptake is not consistently available across countries, children are often absent from administrative and survey-based leave datasets, and existing indicators frequently lack sufficient precision to examine how specific policy designs shape children's outcomes. Strengthening data systems capable of linking children, parents, and leave use represents an important priority for future research and policy development. In future endeavours to enhance a stronger evidence and better data infrastructure it is also important that **attention is given to policy terminology** as advised by the COST investigation led by Meil & Romero-Balsas (2025).

Caring for children in the present is also about caring for societies in the future. Parenting leave policies alone cannot guarantee children's well-being. However, when designed in ways that provide sufficient time, adequate income protection, inclusiveness, and opportunities for both parents to participate in caregiving, they can create conditions for healthier, more secure, and more equitable beginnings to children's lives.

A child-centred perspective ultimately implies a simple but important principle: **no child should be left behind at the beginning of life**. Children do not choose the labour market position of their parents, the type of employment contracts of their parents, or the family and social conditions into which they are born. Policies therefore matter because they influence whether early inequalities become entrenched or diminished over the life course. Our youngest children are not only "cared for" within families but also require "caring about" at the level of national policy. Parenting leave should therefore be understood not only as support for workers or families, but also as a long-term investment in children and in societies committed to providing every child with the strongest possible start in life.





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Appendix 1 | Preferences for overall paid leave duration and the distribution between parents in Europe

The ISSP module Family and Changing Gender Roles was launched in 2022 and included two linked questions on preferences regarding paid parental leave. The analysis presented here focuses on respondents who stated that paid leave should be available. The survey questions were formulated as follows:

Preferred duration of paid leave

Respondents were asked to consider a couple in which both partners work full-time and have a newborn child, with one parent temporarily stopping work to care for the child. They were then asked whether paid leave should be available and, if so, for how long. Respondents could enter the preferred duration in months.

Preferred distribution of paid leave between parents

Respondents were asked: “Still thinking about the same couple, if both are in a similar work situation and are eligible for paid leave, how should this paid leave period be divided between the mother and the father?” The response options were as follows, excluding “Can’t choose”:

- The mother should take the entire paid leave period and the father should not take any paid leave.
- The mother should take most of the paid leave period and the father should take some of it.
- The mother and the father should each take half of the paid leave period.
- The father should take most of the paid leave period and the mother should take some of it.
- The father should take the entire paid leave period and the mother should not take any paid leave.

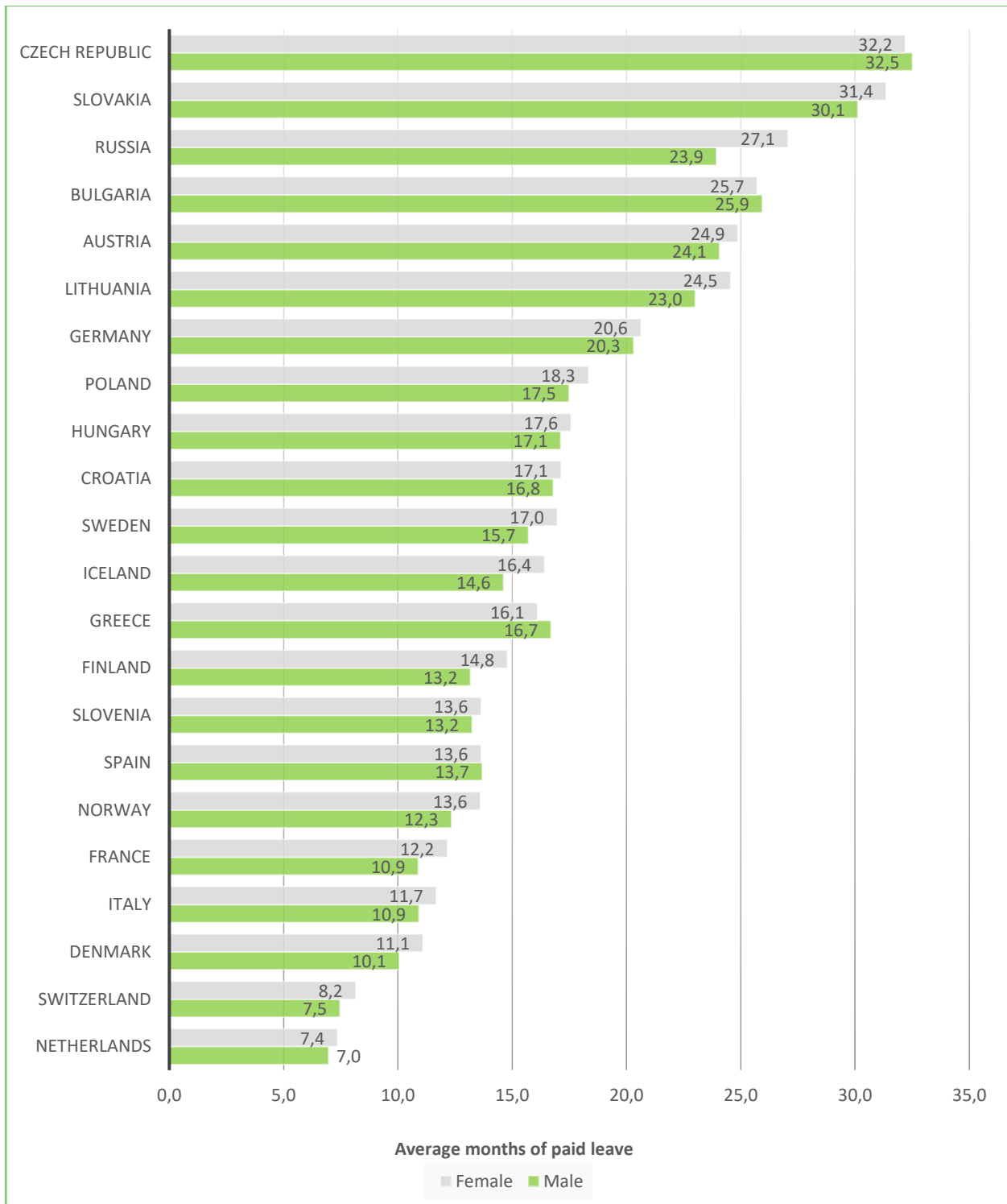
Figure A presents national estimated averages of the ***preferred duration of paid leave***, measured in months, among women and men in selected European countries. Countries are ordered from lower to higher national averages according to women’s preferred leave duration. The results reveal substantial cross-national variation in preferences. Average preferred leave duration ranges from around 7 months in the Netherlands to approximately 32.5 months in the Czech Republic. Overall, women tend to prefer slightly longer paid leave than men, although there are some country-level exceptions. In five countries, average preferences are up to one year, ranging between 7 and 12 months. In twelve countries, preferences fall between 12 and 24 months, while in five countries they range between 24 and 34 months. At the same time, national averages may conceal considerable internal heterogeneity, as preference patterns are likely to differ across social groups. This is also reflected in the variation of standard deviations across countries, which range from approximately 6 to 13 months.

Figure B presents national estimated averages for ***preferences regarding how paid leave should be distributed between parents*** among respondents who believe that paid leave should be available. Countries are ordered from higher to lower levels of endorsement for an equal division of leave between the mother and the father. The findings show that preferences for sharing leave equally are particularly high in the Nordic countries, as well as in France, the Netherlands, and Spain. For example, in Sweden, 79% of respondents endorse the view that paid leave should be divided equally between both parents. By contrast, preferences for the mother taking the entire leave period are more common in several Eastern European countries, including Bulgaria, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. Support for an equal division is comparatively low in these countries, with 10% endorsing equal sharing in Bulgaria and 15% in Slovakia.





Figure A. How long should paid leave be available: average preferred duration, in months, of paid leave for dual-earner couples working full-time with a newborn child, by sex, in selected European countries according to ISSP, 2022–2025.

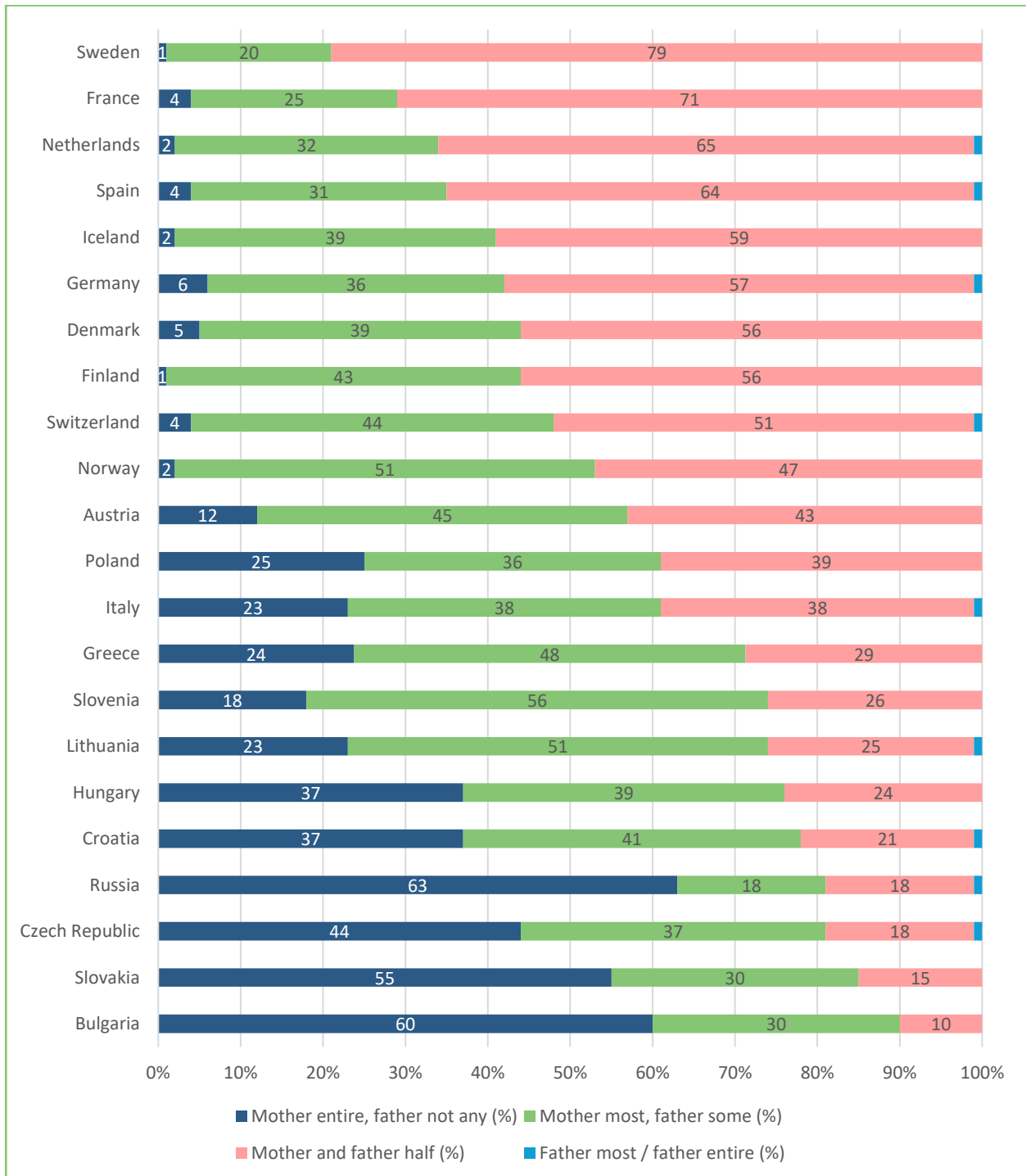


Source: ISSP questionnaire, 2022, selected European countries; own analysis (Prof. Condom-Bosch), University of Barcelona, Department of Sociology.





Figure B. How should paid leave be distributed between parents; selected European countries according to ISSP, 2022–2025.



Source: ISSP questionnaire, 2022; own analysis, selected European countries, Department of Sociology, University of Iceland.



Appendix 2 | Paid time breaks for breastfeeding / feeding (2025)

Twenty one of 27 EU Member States offer Breast feeding breaks at >66% income replacement. Examples:

Croatia

- Two-hour breaks per day for mothers working full-time until child is 12 months.

Germany

- Sixty minutes break per day or 90 minutes if mother works more than 8 hours daily until child is 12 months.

Luxembourg

- Two 45-minute breaks per day or one 90-minute break while employed mother is breast-feeding.

Italy

- Reduced working hours by one hour per day if mother works 6 hours or less per day; reduced working hours by 2 hours per day if mother works more than 6 hours per day. If mother self-employer/ free-lancer transferable to father.

Malta

- One hour per day which can be taken either as one 60 minute, two 30 minute or three 20 minutes breaks.

Netherlands

- Breaks of up to 25 % of working hours per day for mothers until child is 9 months.

Norway

- One-hour breaks per day for mothers until child is 12 months.

Portugal

- Two-hour breaks per day for mothers until child is 12 months. Can be transferred to fathers.

Source: https://www.leavenetwork.org/fileadmin/user_upload/k_leavenetwork/annual_reviews/2025/5_Other_measures.pdf





Appendix 3 | Paid leave for caring for sick children

Examples from Portugal and Sweden | Portugal and Sweden are among other European countries which have developed specific publicly funded well-paid schemes, generally available when needed until children are 12 years old.

Sweden	Portugal
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Available for 120 days per child per year for children under age 12 (and for children aged 12–15 with a physician’s certificate). The benefit is paid at 77.6% of previous earnings, up to an annual ceiling of SEK 441,000 (€41,256). It is a family entitlement used to care for sick children; 60 days may also be used if the regular caregiver is ill. Leave may be transferred to another eligible person. A physician’s certificate is required after seven consecutive days.• For seriously or terminally ill children up to age 18, there is no limit on the number of leave days, and both parents may take leave simultaneously.• Parents of children with long-term illnesses or disabilities may receive a Child Carer’s Allowance (<i>omvårdnadsbidrag</i>) and an Additional Cost Allowance for Children (<i>merkostnadsersättning för barn</i>).• Take-up: Mothers accounted for 62% of all leave days in 2024 (58% in 2023). On average, mothers used 9.1 days and fathers 7.3 days in 2024. Leave use is highest during children’s early years and after regular parental leave has ended.• Administrative data suggest that Swedish parents used approximately 7–10 days per child annually in 2024-2025, considerably below the maximum entitlement. The use of flexible work arrangements, such as teleworking, may partly explain this comparatively low take-up.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Benefits are paid at 100% of net earnings, up to a maximum of 65% of gross earnings, through the Social Security system. Entitlements are individual but cannot be used simultaneously by both parents.• Up to 30 days per parent per year may be used to care for sick children under age 12, with no age limit for children with chronic illnesses or disabilities. Leave is increased by one additional day for each additional child and may continue for the full duration of a child’s hospital stay.• An additional 15 days per parent per year are available for children over age 12 (for children over 18, eligibility applies only if they live in the same household).• Grandparents may also take leave to substitute for parents in caring for sick children and receive the same level of compensation.• Where a child in the household has a disability, chronic illness, or oncological condition, one parent is entitled to six months of leave, extendable up to four or six years, with no limit in cases of terminal illness. Compensation amounts to 65% of previous earnings, subject to a monthly ceiling of twice the IAS amount (€509.26 × 2).

Sources: Duvander et al., 2024, 2025; Leitão et al. (2025). Available at: <https://www.leavenetwork.org/annual-review-reports/country-reports/>.



Appendix 4 | Part 1: Comparative overview of explicit and implicit international parental leave frameworks in relation to a child perspective

Policy Dimension	UNICEF	ILO (2025)	WHO	EU	OECD
Overall Approach	Child-centred, holistic	Labour & gender equality & economic	Maternal & child development (nurturing care)	Legal equality	Evidence-based policy
Paid Leave Duration	≥6 months (preferably longer) supports 6 months breastfeeding	≥14 weeks & maternity leave recommended expansion to 18 weeks	No fixed duration; supports 6 months of exclusive breastfeeding	14 weeks maternity leave; 10 days paternity leave; ≥4 months parental leave (partly non-transferable)	No fixed duration: adequacy emphasized
Leave for Both Parents	Strong (normative)	Strong (individual & non-transferable)	Indirect	Strong (legal right)	Strong (use-it-or-lose-it)
Father-specific Design	Encouraged	Central mechanism	Limited	Required	Central
Policy Design Strength	Broad framework	Mechanism-focused	Limited	Legal structure	Economics & Behavioural evidence
System Perspective	Integrated (leave & childcare & benefits)	Expanding	Enabling environments for nurturing care	Partial	Leave-focused
Child Perspective	Explicit	Increasingly integrated	Core	Indirect	Indirect

Sources: UNICEF (2019), ILO (2025), WHO, UN Children's Fund, & World Bank Group (2018), EU (2019).

Appendix 4 | Part 2: Recommendations by international organizations

UNICEF (2019). Parental leave & family-friendly policies (UNICEF Early Childhood Development). United Nations Children's Fund. <https://www.unicef.org/media/95086/file/UNICEF-Parental-Leave-Family-Friendly-Policies-2019.pdf>.

- Recommend that total paid parenting leave (maternity, paternity and parental leave) “should be long enough to ensure access to all preventive care and to ensure high-quality infant care of at least until the age at which affordable, quality non-parental care is available. This should be at least 6 months and, in many settings, should total 9–12 months” (pp. 14).

ILO (2025). Closing the gender gap in paid parental leaves Better parental leaves for a more caring world of work Care Economy Brief series. <https://doi.org/10.54394/PKXX1390>

- Recommend: “Align maternity protection with ILO standards for all employed women (Convention No. 183 benchmark) of at least 14 weeks of paid maternity leave at two thirds of previous earnings, financed through social protection. Recognize and support fathers’ caregiving role through paid paternity leave. Provide paid parental leave to each parent” (pp. 17-18).