



# What the FAMILY Act Means for Men

By Sarah Jane Glynn     December 12, 2013

In many ways, families look the same today as they have for decades. People fall in love and get married. Babies are born, grow up, and start the cycle anew. Parents and family members age and often rely on care from others during their senior years. While the love that bonds family life has not changed over time, the way families live and work has. Most parents work, and most families rely on two incomes<sup>1</sup>; more families are providing elder care as Baby Boomers age,<sup>2</sup> and 80 percent of children live in a household without a full-time stay-at-home caregiver.<sup>3</sup> Families today do not love each other any less than in the past, but how families juggle work and family has changed dramatically—and workplace policies have not kept up.

The United States is the only advanced economy in the world that does not guarantee workers access to any form of paid leave.<sup>4</sup> Without access to leave, individuals too often find themselves in a position where they have to choose between providing care for a loved one and bringing in enough money to cover rent, groceries, and basic household repairs. The Family and Medical Insurance Leave Act, or FAMILY Act, will help address this core issue facing working families today: the need to coordinate paid employment with unpaid caregiving in the home.<sup>5</sup> While we pay a great deal of attention to the role of mothers as caregivers, even mothers themselves will at some point rely on partners, sons, daughters, or other relatives for care. As gender roles and families change and as Baby Boomers retire, everyone is increasingly likely to be a caregiver. The FAMILY Act will provide up to 12 weeks of leave with partial wage replacement to male and female workers after the birth of a new child, to recover from a serious illness, or to provide care for a seriously ill family member.

Access to family leave insurance is designed to benefit all workers, regardless of their gender, parental status, age, ability, or income level. While the program has universal benefits, there are also specific ways that it will benefit men.

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## Benefits to men

### Men want to take leave

Although being a good father was traditionally synonymous with being a good provider, the rising share of female breadwinners has shifted that narrative. Modern dads equate being a good father with spending time with their families, not just bringing home a paycheck.<sup>6</sup> More than two-thirds of fathers say they want to spend more time with their children, which indicates a greater desire to provide family care but an impediment from doing so.<sup>7</sup> Two-thirds of fathers say parenting should be split equally between partners, but two-thirds also admit that their female partners are more likely to provide child care.<sup>8</sup>

### Families and children benefit from men taking leave

Any parent will tell you that children grow up fast, but what happens in children's early years has lasting effects. This is certainly true in terms of child development,<sup>9</sup> but it is also true of households' divisions of labor. Mothers often stay home after giving birth for at least a short period of time in order to physically recover from childbirth. When moms are the primary caregivers early on, they develop skills and competencies that carry onward as their children age. Moreover, girls are more likely to be socialized from a young age to fulfill roles as caregivers and mothers.<sup>10</sup> This makes it easy for women to then appear to be "naturally" more attuned to parenting and child care, when really it is just an issue of practice.<sup>11</sup> Fathers who are able to spend more time with their kids report having greater confidence as parents.<sup>12</sup> Giving men access to and better enabling them to take paternity leave results in more competent and committed fathers whose greater involvement persists as their children grow up.<sup>13</sup> But even though men want to take extended family leave, it usually is not a viable option for them and their families. The use of parental leave since the Family and Medical Leave Act, or FMLA, was passed in 1993 has barely changed, indicating families need more than just job-protected leave.<sup>14</sup>

### The FAMILY Act will make taking leave feasible and affordable for more men

Only 9 percent of workers have an employer who offers paid paternity leave to all their male employees, which means that taking time off after the birth or adoption of a baby is not always an option for fathers.<sup>15</sup> While some men are eligible for job-protected leave through the FMLA, that does not guarantee wage replacement. As a result, men are less likely to take parental leave than women, and those who do take leave are home with their baby for far less time. A surprising 7 in 10 fathers who take FMLA leave take off two weeks or less after the birth of a new baby.<sup>16</sup> Only 6 percent of dads take the full 12 weeks allowed under the law, compared to nearly 40 percent of mothers.<sup>17</sup> But this result seems a lot less shocking given the fact that women are more than twice as likely to receive pay when they take FMLA parental leave.<sup>18</sup>

## Men are more likely to take leave when it is paid

On average, men earn more money than women, even controlling for education and occupation.<sup>19</sup> While the economic contributions of women to their households is significant in the majority of families, 60 percent of married men earn more than their wives.<sup>20</sup> Because of this earnings imbalance, men are less likely to take unpaid leave to provide care for a seriously ill family member or a new baby. In many cases, it makes more sense for the higher earner to keep working while the partner with lower wages takes leave. This is not because men care about their families less than women do; it is often the result of simple economic calculations.

The majority of men who take FMLA leave from work do so in order to recover from their own illnesses or injuries.<sup>21</sup> Somewhat alarmingly, the majority of people who needed but did not take leave required leave because of a personal illness.<sup>22</sup> Nearly half of those who needed leave but did not take it did so because they could not afford to take unpaid time away from work, while about one in five said they did not take leave because they were afraid they would lose their job.<sup>23</sup> When leave is paid, men are significantly more likely to take it, allowing them to spend the time with their families that they desire and to take the appropriate time to recover from their own illnesses or injuries.

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## Conclusion

The FAMILY Act will help lift our entire economy by providing a vital and earned benefit for workers of every background, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, parental status, age, ability, or income level.<sup>24</sup> It is impossible to predict what challenges individuals will face down the road, but supporting them with paid family leave is an important first step to ensure that these hardships do not spill over and negatively impact their families and our economy.

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## Endnotes

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- 14 Heather Boushey, John Schmitt, and Jane Farrell, "Job Protection Isn't Enough: Why America Needs Paid Parental Leave" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2013). XX Will post on Thursday with the rest of these XX
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