

Is Paid Parental Leave a Good Idea?

There is currently much debate about how we should live in a society that now seems to require both parents to work. There seems to be a lot of Government interest in the promotion of both parents in employment with little consideration for those parents who are not in paid employment but certainly work hard to raise their children themselves.

Should governments be funding and promoting the building of large numbers of day care centres? Should governments be cutting funding to Kindergartens because they do not offer hours of operation compatible with a working day (i.e. long day care)? Should governments subsidise employed parents to have time off to bond with their child? These are a few of the many issues that confront us as parents.

The government seems to be promoting the idea that parents can work AND simultaneously maintain the family unit, by paying parents to institutionalise their children and hand over primary care to a bunch of “professionals”.

We live in a world that is changing faster than we have ever known, full of speculation about an unpredictable future. In the past we have turned our backs on nature and decided that the professionals know best. It is hard to believe that in recent history babies were removed from their mothers immediately after birth and placed in hospital nurseries, and bottle feeding was considered far superior to breast feeding. We have now had the debate about “what is best for baby, breast or bottle?”. We all know the answer to this today and it seems ludicrous that we ever accepted “expert” advice that went against our natural instincts.

There is no doubt that when it comes to child care we need to offer choices. Just as we know breast milk is best for babies we cannot ignore the need to offer alternatives for parents that cannot breast feed. The government should not suggest that one is more appropriate than the other through subsidies to baby formula manufacturers or by offering incentives to parents of formula-fed babies.

However, we are rapidly losing our choices when it comes to child care. There are choices for us all when it comes to other issues in our society such as Health or Education. We have doctors who bulk bill or the option of a private doctor with reimbursement of the standard fee. We have state schools and private schools but there is recognition that all children have a cost associated with education, and hence governments support private schools financially to allow parents to have a choice. Why is this not so for the rearing of pre-school children in the home versus an institution?

We are currently, through various policies, indicating to the general population that it is possible to rear children successfully, whilst their parent(s) are working full time. That you can have your cake and eat it too. Yes, it is possible but at what cost to the child? When a child arrives there is a big responsibility to balance the needs of the child with those of the parent or parents. Those parents with careers may choose to put their careers on hold and those parents without careers may choose to put their personal desires on hold. Why should these parents be penalised for such decisions? If we choose to funnel our tax dollars only to those areas of our society that promote parents in employment we are discriminating against those parents for whom the “cost” of child rearing is sacrificing their career or personal desires in the hope that they raise a generation of children better equipped for the future.

Whatever we say and whatever we do, the most important group in this debate is the children. It has been proven in the past that children are best raised in a family unit. Why are we undermining this most fundamental basis of our society? Let us hope we never have the debate “What was best for children, parental care or institutional care?”, and rue the day we abandoned parents.

Submitted by Megan Pitcher BVSc(1st Class Hons) MRCVS.