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Towards an ECEC system in synergy with parenting leave

Margaret O’Brien and Peter Moss

The need for transformative change

First day back at work today after two weeks’ paternity leave. Bewildering that in the 21st century dads are granted only a fortnight after the birth to hang out with their new kids. It’s not only about spending time with your children but it’s supporting your partner. (Twitter, 5 June 2019, UK journalist)

In this chapter we consider the relationship between two important policy fields for young children and their families: early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, and leave for parents; in doing so, we develop the discussion in Chapter 6 about the need for ‘a wider set of family-work policies’, including leave, to complement and mesh with ECEC services. We shall argue that the relationship in the UK lacks synergy, the policies not being integrated, and that leave policy is more generally (like ECEC policy) flawed and dysfunctional. But we want to frame this discussion and critique within a wider introduction to leave policy itself – some definitions, its rationale and impact, and the spread internationally of leave policies in recent years that has made this field one of the most important today within national welfare states and social policy. We hope in this way to supply readers coming from an ECEC background, and who may know less about leave policy, with necessary information about this important field for children and parents.
Some definitions

Leave policies provide job protection for a period so that a worker can take time away from employment to be available to care for a dependant – usually, though not always, a young child – and, after this period of time, return to employment with the same employer. Policies can also include an element of wage replacement during this period (Ray et al. 2010). These policies can take several forms. Maternity leave, first established in Germany in 1883, is usually available to mothers only, to be taken just before, during and immediately after childbirth; it is a health and welfare measure intended to protect the health of the mother and newborn child. Paternity leave is available to fathers only, to be taken soon after the birth of a child, and intended to enable the father to spend time with and care for his partner, new child and older children. By contrast, parental leave, introduced in Sweden in 1974, is available equally to mothers and fathers and is taken after the end of maternity leave; it can, however, assume various forms, for example being a ‘family entitlement’ that parents choose how to divide between themselves or an ‘individual entitlement’ that allots a period of leave to each parent, sometimes transferable to the other parent and sometimes on a ‘use it or lose it’ basis. It is usually understood to be a care measure, intended to give both parents an equal opportunity to spend time caring for a young child. A final form of leave enables parents to take time off work to care for a child who is ill or for some other medical reason.

In this chapter the summary term ‘parenting leave’ or ‘leave’ is adopted to encompass the full range of statutory leave policies, while the terms ‘maternity leave’, ‘paternity leave’ or ‘parental leave’ are used when these specific policy measures are being discussed.

Rationale for leave policies and their impact

As we shall discuss below, statutory leave policies are now widespread, and not only in rich countries. Why has parenting leave moved so widely onto the policy agenda? The introduction of maternity leave, the oldest form of parenting leave, was driven by health and welfare concerns, and more recent forms of leave, paternity and parental leave, have also been seen as supporting the health and well-being of children and their parents. But they have also been advocated for other reasons, including in some cases the stimulation of flagging fertility rates and, most importantly, the promotion of gender equality: maintaining the presence of mothers in the labour market (Dearing 2016), reducing gender pay gaps
(Kamerman and Moss 2009; Andersen 2018), and increasing the opportunities for fathers to spend more time caring for their young children (O’Brien 2009; di Torella 2014). More generally, leave policies are seen as an important means of improving work–life balance for women and men with children, so contributing to better family lives.

Although the evidence base has focused mainly on the impact of maternity leave, there is a growing body of scholarship on economic, health and social advantages associated with parenting leave polices more generally (for example, Budig et al. 2016; Nandi et al. 2018). Early epidemiological research has shown improved child and maternal health, with child health benefits for instance in immunisation uptake, breast-feeding and employment retention (for example, Tanaka 2005; Han et al. 2009). Positive health gains for children are maximised when the maternity leave is paid, provided in a job-secure context and with a duration of at least 10 weeks.

The Nordic countries have provided fertile ground for ‘before and after’ studies of impact at a country level (Duvander and Johansson 2012; Ekberg et al. 2013) and, more recently, Germany, with its parental leave reform of 2007, created a new incentive for men to take parental leave by introducing two well-remunerated ‘daddy months’ (Schober 2014). The natural experiment paradigm, which has framed many of these studies, has produced evidence for greater engagement of leave-taking fathers in the care of children after policy reforms, in comparison with fathers who do not take leave. In addition, there are emerging indications that duration matters, with leave-taking of one month by fathers, particularly if taken alone, being a tipping point for priming subsequent greater engagement in the care of children (Buening 2015; O’Brien and Wall 2017). Research in Denmark has found that a redistribution of care in the early years, from women to men, facilitated by parental leave policy reforms has been associated with a reduction of the within-household gender pay gap (Andersen 2018).

Being on leave: Personal experiences

There are a growing number of qualitative studies describing the transition to parenthood for employed men and women, including their experiences of parenting leave and returning to work (for example, Brannen and Moss 1991; Doucet 2009; Miller 2010). Parental experiences are diverse, and contingent on intersecting personal, workplace and institutional influences as well as the unique contribution of children to family
dynamics. Understanding the experiences of fathers taking leave has been an area of interest particularly as, despite social change in gender norms, mothers still tend to be positioned as more salient in children’s early years.

In her longitudinal qualitative study of a group of 17 employed men and their partners, when they anticipate and then experience parenthood for the first time, Miller (2010, 93) portrays their daily individual lives and everyday practices of caring: ‘one of the biggest things I’ve noticed is, it’s just this little baby, but … how much time it will take up, that was … yeh, that’s the most phenomenal thing, we just weren’t prepared for that’, as one father said. The fathers described highly emotional encounters with their infant children, using the language of caring and conveying tender masculinities. Their accounts illuminate the tensions fathers face when they return to work after paternity leave and find it difficult to keep as connected to daily baby routines – ‘returning to a new normal’ (Miller 2010, 11).

Fathers taking more than one month’s leave, particularly if taken alone, describe both the joys and emotional toll of intensive caregiving (O’Brien and Twamley 2017, 176):

*Interviewer:* So having taken more responsibility – in what way does it affect your relationship with [son]?

*Simon:* Well just because I know, like, I can just read him really well. Like I knew he was doing a poo earlier on, I saw half an hour ago he was getting quite tired and it’s just you know what he’s up to and what he’s thinking, or how he’s feeling. And also the way he responds to me when, I like, come home from work, he’s generally quite happy. So we have this like – I don’t know, quite a strong bond, which I don’t think would have happened in quite the same way if I hadn’t have been off with him. Just you know, trying to keep him from being grumpy before bed time, things like that. (Simon, lawyer, 35 years old, three months’ leave)

Taking leave can be critical to help fathers establish a close relationship with their child, especially because of the female embodiment of pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding. Fathers taking leave describe experiences of intensive and involved caregiving, learning to take responsibility alone; being preoccupied and absorbed with their child; shaping daily life around their child’s routines; enjoying increased physical contact with their child; sympathising with mothers’ stress; learning to balance care and housework; experiencing the time as fulfilling, joyful, ‘a luxury’,
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‘an oasis’ (O’Brien and Wall 2017). But as studies of mothers’ experiences of care have repeatedly found, there is also ambivalence with reports of anxiety, saturation, fatigue, loneliness and boredom mixed with these affirming experiences.

Observations of fathers on leave demonstrate the routine and repetitive nature of life with a new baby, whatever the gender of the carer (O’Brien and Twamley 2017). The most time and effort is spent on feeding and encouraging babies to sleep, with fathers entering into long and detailed conversations about the various whims and particularities of their babies, along with how they attempt to arrange some order on the day, while also following their child’s lead.

The emotionally and physically demanding hard work of caring for young children is exacerbated when social norms and public policies assume babyhood and early childhood care is best carried out in the private home by one primary caregiver only with ‘support’, as this mother makes clear:

I do like being a professional person and myself … I really felt by the end of my maternity leave that I was treading water and the whole world was getting on with their lives and mine was on hold … Even if I was achieving something with him, I didn’t feel it was enough for me. That might sound selfish, I don’t know? I felt so trapped by the end of my maternity leave, I felt so isolated. (Miller 2010, 164)

Interview accounts confirm epidemiological data that this period of early parenthood can be a time of high stress and worry, and for a minority trigger mental health concerns and not only for women (Ramchandani and Psychogiou 2009). New generations of women and men prefer family lives where they can integrate employment with caring for children. Parenting leave can help achieve this goal.

International leave policies

Today, the spread of leave policies has become global. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO 2014), in its 2013 survey of legal provision in 185 countries, all provided some form of statutory leave for pregnant women, and all but two (Papua New Guinea and the United States) included some payment. But widespread leave provision is no longer confined to women. The ILO’s survey found that paternity leave was available in 79 out of 167 countries for which information was available, with payment of some sort in most cases. Parental leave in some
form was present in 66 out of 169 countries supplying information, though only paid in 36 countries.

Coverage and standards of leave do, however, vary. According to the ILO (2014, xiii), ‘only 34 per cent (57 countries) fully meet the requirements of [ILO] Convention No. 183 [2000] on three key aspects [of maternity leave]: they provide for at least 14 weeks of leave at a rate of at least two-thirds of previous earnings, paid by social insurance or public funds or in a manner determined by national law and practice where the employer is not solely responsible for payment’. Standards for leave are particularly low in Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, with a mixed picture in Asia and the Middle East. Leave provision for men is found most often in higher-income countries.

Regionally, the highest levels of leave provision are to be found in Europe. But Europe’s leadership on leave has not only been at national level; it is the only part of the world where leave provision is mandated through regional-level legislation, the European Union (EU) acting as a supra-national legal entity to require its member states to meet minimum standards for maternity leave (since 1992), parental leave (since 1996) and, most recently, paternity leave (2019). Following earlier directives on the first two kinds of leave, in 2019, the EU adopted a Directive on Work–Life Balance for Parents and Carers (https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/PE-20-2019-INIT/en/pdf), introducing more work–life balance measures throughout the EU. For the first time, at least 10 working days of paternity leave paid at the level of sick pay is mandated across all member states; while the existing right of each parent to four months of parental leave is amended to require that at least two months is non-transferable from one parent to another, an additional incentive to encourage greater take-up of this leave by fathers. The directive also introduces a new European entitlement: 5 days of carers’ leave for workers providing personal care or support to a relative or person living in the same household.

The EU has recognised that not only do there need to be a variety of types of leave for parents, but that leave needs to be part of a package of policies. As far back as 1992, a Council Recommendation on Child Care (92/241/EEC) was adopted by member states of the European Economic Community (EEC; the precursor of the EU), including the UK, in the interests of ‘the reconciliation of occupational, family and upbringing responsibilities arising from the care of children’ and the furthering of gender equality. This document, a statement of political commitment rather than legal requirement, ‘recommended that member states should take initiatives’ in four related areas: (1) the environment, structure and
organisation of work, (2) promoting increased participation by men in the care and upbringing of children, (3) childcare services and (4) leave.

Such legal and political initiatives do not, however, mean that leave policies are at a uniformly high level across Europe. Standards mandated by the EU are a minimum, and there are wide variations between countries in terms of length of leave, levels of payment, eligibility for leave and the degree and types of flexibility available to parents taking leave. Furthermore, synergy between leave policies and other measures for reconciling work and family life is lacking in most countries, producing a gap between the end of well-paid leave and the start of an entitlement to ECEC (Koslowski et al. 2019). Later in this chapter we will describe the leave entitlements in a country with some of the most advanced policies in Europe (though not a member of the EU); now, however, we turn to a country with a very different approach and far less generous entitlements.

From policy neglect ...

The recent history of leave policies for parents of young children in the UK follows a similar trajectory to those for ECEC policies in England – a period of neglect followed by a burst of activism characterised by missed opportunities to rectify flaws and dysfunctionalities. The UK was late by European standards in introducing any form of statutory leave provision, maternity leave only being adopted and implemented in 1976–7. Maternity leave not only came late in the day, but was introduced in an unusual form, very different to other European countries. Whereas maternity leave in the six original member states of the EEC ran from 12 to 14 weeks (except for Italy, where it was 20 weeks), the UK’s new legislation went for 40 weeks, with up to 29 weeks available after birth; and while the full period of leave in the former countries was paid at a high level of earnings replacement, in the UK only 6 weeks were highly paid (at 90 per cent of earnings), the remainder being paid at a low flat rate (12 weeks) or unpaid (22 weeks).

For more than 20 years after the introduction of maternity leave, little further happened to UK leave policy. This was a period dominated by a Conservative government (1979–97) opposed on principle to regulation of the labour market, including leave policy. Indeed, the UK government used its veto to block a 1983 proposal from the European Commission (EC) for a directive setting minimum standards for parental leave, despite a Parliamentary Committee reporting in 1985 that ‘parental leave can be seen as a bold social innovation bringing important benefits for childcare
and equal opportunities at work … [and] is a proper subject for legisla-
tion’ (House of Lords Select Committee on the European Communities
1985, para.83).

Similarly, in 1994 the Conservative government declined to support
a recommendation, from the All Party Parliamentary Group on Parenting,
for statutory paternity and parental leave, one of seven recommenda-
tions for the International Year of the Family (APPG 1994). The only
change in UK policy during this period was an easing of the restrictive
eligibility conditions for maternity leave, in 1994. This was not, however,
voluntarily entered into, but resulted from another European directive,
which the government on this occasion could not veto as it was a ‘health
and welfare’ measure requiring only a majority vote of member states.

... to policy mainstream

We have already seen in earlier chapters how the election in 1997 of a
Labour government brought about change in ECEC policy, moving it from
decades of neglect into the policy mainstream. The same is true of leave
policies for parents of young children, as the new administration made a
priority of supporting employed parents and promoting gender equality.
As well as measures to improve the supply of and access to ‘childcare’,
steps were taken to develop leave policy. The government adopted, in
1999, an EU directive on parental leave that other member states had
agreed in 1996 (at that time, the UK had an opt-out from such European
social policies). It subsequently introduced paid paternity leave in 2003,

Yet despite this activity, the overall results were problematic. The
Labour government inherited one leave measure, a maternity leave that
was both very long in duration and largely low paid or unpaid; as such it
was out of kilter with most other European countries, which had shorter
periods of leave, but all paid at a high level of income replacement. Rather
than question this legacy, the new government put most of its energies into
further enhancing maternity leave, increasing the already long period of
leave from 9 to 12 months (2003) and the low flat-rate payment from 12
weeks to, first, 20 weeks (2003) and then to 33 weeks (2007).

Parental leave was adopted early on, but was very much the poor
relation to maternity leave – thin in substance and marginalised in posi-
tion. The UK opted for the bare minimum then required by EU law: three
months per parent and unpaid. Furthermore, this leave could only be
taken in short blocks of time: one month per year, spreading the entitle-
ment over three years. While some other European countries permitted
parental leave to be split and taken in short blocks, all allowed leave also to be taken as one continuous period of time. Over the two decades of its existence, the UK’s parental leave has always looked like an afterthought and had minimal impact: unknown of by many, used by few and ignored in policy changes.

Apart from this weak measure, the Labour government did take some other steps to increase fathers’ use of leave. A short period (2 weeks) of low paid paternity leave was introduced, but the main initiative was based on a change to maternity leave. Towards the end of its period in office, in 2010, Labour introduced a new twist to UK leave policy: mothers could transfer unused maternity leave and pay to fathers after 20 weeks. It also brought in another new feature of policy – the distortion of terminology. The new arrangement was called additional paternity leave (APL). A true paternity leave is a father-only entitlement, while APL was, in actual fact, a system of transferable maternity leave; fathers had no inherent entitlement to this leave, instead depending on the mother’s eligibility for maternity leave and her willingness to transfer part of that leave.

When Labour lost power in May 2010, they left a UK policy that remained centred on maternity leave, indeed even more so than when they came to power. Opportunities for fundamental reform, by a government that took parental employment seriously, had been missed. Matters have not improved under subsequent governments. A proposal to reform leave policy (HM Government 2011), based on shortening maternity leave and extending parental leave, introduced by the Conservative-led Coalition government in 2011 was dropped, and in its place the existing policy was reinforced; since 2014, mothers can choose to transfer up to 50 weeks of maternity leave to their partners, now re-named, still incorrectly, ‘shared parental leave’ (for a fuller discussion of this attempt at reform and earlier missed opportunities, see Moss and O’Brien 2019).

After 40 years of intermittent development, the UK has today a leave policy based on a long period of mainly poorly paid or unpaid maternity leave, mostly transferable if the mother agrees, and then mis-labelled as ‘parental leave’. Actual parental leave is unpaid and inflexible, languishing on the margins. Put another way, UK leave policy in practice reflects a maternalist assumption, that mothers are primarily responsible for the care and upbringing of very young children; if that responsibility is to be shared through taking leave, it is at the mother’s behest, dependent on her agreement to transfer some of her entitlement to the child’s father.

There is now much evidence that points to the key conditions for fathers’ use of leave, in particular there should be a leave entitlement that is for fathers only and is well paid (Moss 2007, Schulze and Gergoric
Since neither ‘shared parental leave’ nor the UK’s actual parental leave meet these conditions, it is not surprising that fathers’ use of leave (apart from the short period of paternity leave) is low in the UK. As one recent newspaper article put it, ‘Shared parental leave is a flop because taking it makes no financial sense’, going on to note that:

A recent freedom of information request by law firm EMW revealed that just 9,200 people took shared parental leave (SPL) in the year to March [2018]. That means that out of every 1,000 eligible people who had a baby during that period, around 15 opted to share their leave … Out of all new parents, just eight people per 1,000 used the scheme. That’s even lower than the Government’s dismal calculation that 2pc of eligible parents took advantage. (Davidson 2018)

Low take-up for fathers is not the only problem with leave policy for parents of young children in the UK. Since most leave is either paid at a low flat rate or unpaid, it is difficult for many women, as well as men, to take it – taking leave means a financial sacrifice for parents and families.

Moreover, not all parents are eligible. Recent evidence (O’Brien et al. 2017) has shown that there are significant minorities in the UK working population who are not eligible to receive basic paid forms of leave. Twenty-seven per cent of employed fathers who had had a child in the last year were not eligible for paid paternity leave due to their employment status – that is, self-employment (20 per cent) or not earning enough to reach an earnings threshold (7 per cent). A smaller minority (16 per cent) of employed mothers who had had a child in the last year were also not eligible for paid maternity leave because their earnings fell below the earnings threshold (7 per cent), they were self-employed (7 per cent) or they did not meet the continuous employment condition (2 per cent). In addition, 4 per cent of new mothers were not even eligible for the basic maternity allowance payment, designed as a fall-back. Similarly, even access to unpaid parental leave is restricted with the UK, alongside Greece and Ireland, having significantly lower eligibility than in other EU-28 countries (EIGE 2020); to be eligible for this parental leave, UK parents need a continuous record of 12 months’ length of service, which is not always possible for those with a history of unstable and precarious employment.

Last but not least, there is a lack of synergy between leave and ECEC policy, with a long gap between the end of well-paid leave, at six weeks after birth, and the start of an entitlement to early childhood provision, when a child reaches 3 years of age. In this respect, the UK finds itself...
Towards transformative change

What it looks like in practice: The case of Norway

To see what a transformed leave policy looks like in practice, we could turn to any of the Nordic countries, but we have chosen the case of Norway because, on balance, it has the most comprehensive and gender-equal system. It has also been a trail-blazer, ‘the first country to reserve part of paid parental leave for fathers, making it a leader in parental leave policies and fathers’ rights’ (Brandth and Kvande 2009, 192). This innovation happened in 1993, when fathers were given the right to four weeks of paid parental leave that could not be transferred to the mother – a case of use it or lose it.

This ‘father’s quota’ has subsequently been extended in length. Since July 2018 it is either 15 weeks paid at 100 per cent of earnings or 19 weeks at 80 per cent (up to a ceiling of six times the basic national insurance benefit payment, that is, NOK98,866 (about £7,910) per month as of May 2020). This is one part of the parenting leave system, which today is based on the total leave period being split equally into three portions: the ‘father’s quota’, and similar periods for the mother (the ‘mother’s quota’) and for the parents to divide between themselves as they choose (the ‘shared period’). In addition, the mother is entitled to 3 paid weeks of leave before the birth. Overall, therefore, a two-parent family (including same-sex parents) can take up to 13 months of leave at 80 per cent of earnings or just under 11 months at 100 per cent.

There is flexibility in how leave can be used. As well as a choice between a longer period at a lower rate of benefit or a shorter period with full income compensation, parents can take leave at any time until a child is aged 3 years, can work part time and extend the period of leave accordingly and can take leave in one block of time or several.

How have parents responded to Norway’s policy of well-paid, flexible leave, with increasing amounts earmarked for the sole use of fathers? It is clear that the introduction of a father’s quota, in 1993, had an immediate
and long-lasting impact. Leading Norwegian researchers, Berit Brandth and Elin Kvande (2019a, 7), conclude that:

In the years prior to the introduction of the father’s quota, less than four per cent of fathers took some parental leave. Only a few years later, the take-up rate was over 70 per cent … [and with every subsequent] expansion of the father’s quota, fathers have increased their uptake the following year … Fathers take the number of father’s quota days that corresponds to the number of weeks granted by the rules.

But while most fathers use their quota, the ‘shared period’ of leave is mainly taken by mothers, a finding replicated in other countries – leave designated as a ‘family’ entitlement is, in practice, mainly leave for mothers.

Commonly ‘fathers in Norway take their leave after the mother has taken hers, usually starting when the child is about nine months old’ (Brandth and Kvande 2019b, 210). As the quota has extended, more fathers have used it flexibly, with around 25 per cent taking leave part time, combining work and care. Such flexible use, however, has adverse consequences for equality in caring: ‘Our [research] results show that taking leave on a part-time basis in combination with part-time work has negative effects on fathers’ caregiving … The boundaries between work and childcare become blurred and prevent men from becoming fully immersed with their babies’ (Brandth and Kvande 2019b, 217–18).

Taking leave piecemeal, that is in short blocks of time, may have similar negative effects on shared caring, if it involves a father taking leave as a holiday together with the mother; but if the block of leave taken is fairly long and the mother is at work, it can support equal sharing of caregiving.

In addition to parental leave, each parent of one or two children under 12 years has a right to 10 working days of leave per year when children are sick (or when the childminder or grandparent is ill, in the case that children are not in kindergarten), or 15 days if they have more than two children. Single parents have the right to 20 or 30 days a year. For severely or chronically sick children, there are extended rights to such leave until the child is 18 years old. Leave is paid by the employer at the same rate as sickness benefit, that is, at 100 per cent of earnings.

The ECEC system in Norway, which was discussed in Chapter 6, is in synergy with parenting leave policies. Well-paid leave is available for over 12 months, while there is an entitlement to a full-time place in a kindergarten from the age of 12 months. Parents with a child between 1 and 2 years old are entitled to receive a flat-rate cash benefit (NOK7,500
[about £600] per month) on condition they do not use a publicly funded ECEC service. This ‘cash-for-care’ scheme has had a chequered history. Originally introduced in 1999, and initially available to parents (in practice, mainly mothers) of 1- and 2-year-olds, take-up was high to begin with, at 75 per cent, but subsequently plunged, dropping to only 25 per cent of parents at the end of 2011 (Ellingsæter 2012). While take-up has fallen across all groups, ‘those receiving the benefit have become more homogeneous. Parents with low income and education, immigrants from Asia and Africa and mothers with weak labour market attachment are overrepresented’ (Duvander and Ellingsæter 2016, 80–1). As cash-for-care has dropped back, attendance at publicly funded ECEC has risen rapidly, and by 2016, 53 per cent of children under 3 years old were attending a formal service.

Towards reformed parenting leave and policy synergy

As with ECEC services, transformation of leave policies in England is not a case of starting from scratch, but of reforming in fundamental ways an existing system that is not fit for purpose. In some respects, that is much harder to do. It will require opening up a democratic debate about what society wants for its children and families, a debate that will call for better information and better understanding (for example, understanding that so-called ‘shared parental leave’ is not actually parental leave), but also arguing about changes that some people and organisations may regard as regressive, even if they are not so. Thus the 2011 attempt to reform UK leave policy fell prey, in part, to opposition to the proposed reduction in maternity leave and the compensating increase in parental leave, on the grounds that it undermined an established employment right for women – though the proposed change would actually have enabled women to take the same amount of leave as before if they had taken full advantage of the proposed extension to parental leave (Moss and O’Brien 2019). Making such change, therefore, requires careful and clear explanation. It would also be assisted if accompanied by the introduction of additional benefits, such as, for example, increased payments and greater flexibility.

Bearing these points in mind, and focusing again on the big picture rather than getting too embroiled in detail, we would propose the following seven steps:

1. A clear set of aims to be agreed for leave policy, for example, more equal sharing of leave-taking between women and men to promote gender equality. Where possible clear targets should be attached to
these aims, for example, a level of take-up by fathers to be achieved within a defined period.

2. Leave policy to be reformed and restructured by reducing maternity leave, removing ‘shared parental leave’ and increasing actual parental leave, while retaining a short-form of birth-related paternity leave (father only). For example, at present there are 20 months of leave available to parents (excluding paternity leave) – 12 months of maternity leave and 4 months per parent of parental leave. This might be reconfigured to 4 months of maternity leave and 8 months per parent for parental leave, that is, giving mothers potentially the possibility of 12 months’ leave and fathers 8 months – though some would argue that in the interests of gender equality, mothers and fathers should have equal entitlements to leave.

3. Eligibility conditions to be removed from leave provision, making it a universal right to care for all women and all men who have parental responsibilities, irrespective of employment status, length of service or household composition.

4. Over a period of time, say 10 years, payments to parents taking leave to be improved to a high proportion of earnings for the greater part of leave, for example, ensuring that both parents can take six to eight months of leave at 80 per cent of earnings, with a generous ceiling. Immediate priority should be given to introducing one month of well-paid and non-transferable parental leave for both parents.

5. Flexibility to be increased, in particular ensuring parental leave can be taken either in one block of time or several, and on a full-time or part-time basis.

6. Paid leave to care for sick children to be introduced, the duration to be built up over 10 years.

7. The gap between leave and ECEC to be removed by ensuring well-paid leave will be available for at least 12 months, and a child’s entitlement to an early childhood service provided from at least 12 months of age.

Such change would not complete the transformation of social policy to support the reconciliation of employment and child-rearing, and to promote gender equality based on a new and sustainable relationship between employment, care and gender. Going back to the 1992 Council Recommendation on Child Care, it would leave much still to be done in the workplace, as well as the need to find other ways to support more equal sharing of responsibility for children between women and men. It
would, however, take England and the rest of the UK a long way forward in creating a society that took seriously the needs of children, parents and families and made early parenthood less demanding and stressful than it often is today.³

Further reading

The annual *International Review of Leave Policies and Research* by the International Network on Leave Policies and Research, available free at [www.leavenetwork.org/leave-policies-research/](http://www.leavenetwork.org/leave-policies-research/), is an invaluable reference source on leave policies in over 40 countries, including the relationship between these policies and ECEC provision.


Exploring similar issues of gender and care, Andrea Doucet’s book *Do Men Mother? Fathering, care, and domestic responsibility* (University of Toronto Press, 2006) is a study of Canadian fathers who decide to stay at home and care for their children rather than work full time outside the home. Doucet argues the case for leave as a universal right to care in a book edited by Peter Moss, Alison Koslowski and Ann-Zofie Duvander, *Parental Leave and Beyond* (Policy Press, 2019), which includes other contributions on possible future directions for leave policy, as well as examining a range of current issues in the field.

Notes

1. Leave policy, unlike ECEC policy, is not devolved to the four nations that constitute the United Kingdom; thus Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales can develop their own ECEC policies, but have no say when it comes to leave policies.
2. Subsequently women could choose when to start maternity leave before giving birth, with 11 weeks before birth being the earliest at which leave could begin.
3. At the time of writing, the UK government has published a consultation paper inviting comments on maternity, paternity and parental leave policy ([HM Government 2019](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/consultation-on-maternity-paternity-and-parental-leave-policy)). With one exception, the consultation does not propose any substantive changes to the current system of leave, but rather poses questions on existing leave policies. The one exception is a proposal for a new paid leave for parents with a baby requiring neonatal care after birth.
References


