

# From Here to Maternity

*As more working women have babies,  
parents and employers ponder  
the future of 'parental leave'  
policies*

By BRUCE BOWER

For a rapidly increasing number of parents with infants younger than 1 year old, traditional family ties are unknitting. Mom and dad are working stiffs who troop home in the evening to pick up where relatives, neighbors, daycare workers and other "substitute parents" leave off.

This trend is unlikely to subside anytime soon. In the United States, nearly half of all married mothers of infants worked outside the home in 1984, up from 28 percent in 1975. With 80 percent of new U.S. jobs now being filled by women, the proportion of working mothers with infants is expected to keep on growing. Moreover, 1 out of 4 mothers was single in 1984, and estimates put that number at 1 out of 3 by 1990. The financial burden faced by these women often makes outside work unavoidable. Add to this the fact that 80 percent of working women in the United States are of childbearing age, many of whom will become pregnant at some time during their working life.

As more parents grapple with the conflict between the need for two paychecks and the desire to nurture their children closely in the early months of life, pressures gain momentum for some form of paid parental leave from work after a child's birth.

Nevertheless, says psychologist Roseanne Clark of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, "paid maternity leaves are almost unheard of in this country." Clark is one of a growing number of social scientists taking a closer look at the attitudes of parents and employers concerning infant-care leaves, with an eye toward influencing public policymakers.

The major piece of national maternity leave legislation now on the books is the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978. It mandates job-guaranteed leave for the

period of physical disability due to pregnancy and childbirth—typically between four and eight weeks depending on the physician's determination—as well as the same sick pay and insurance coverage offered to other disabled employees. The law applies only to the 40 percent of women working for companies with disability insurance.

Some states, including New Jersey and Massachusetts, are considering laws to allow up to 26 weeks leave to care for newborn, adopted or seriously ill children. Last April, Wisconsin mandated six weeks of unpaid, job-guaranteed maternity leave. Legislation pending in the House of Representatives calls for 10 weeks of unpaid parental leave, but in its first three years of implementation it covers only workers in businesses with more than 50 employees. After that, the bill extends to workers in businesses with more than 35 employees. Proposed legislation in the Senate also calls for 10 weeks of unpaid leave and covers employees in businesses with more than 20 employees.

A preliminary investigation conducted by Clark and psychologist Janet Shibley Hyde indicates, however, that women want considerably more leave than current and proposed legislation provides. "Most of the working women we've interviewed believe women have a right to job-guaranteed leave lasting three to six months," says Hyde, who presented their findings at the recent annual meeting of the American Psychological Association in Atlanta. In a sample of 55 employed women in Milwaukee, 75 percent sup-

ported full or partial pay during maternity leave and nearly all agreed that benefits such as health insurance should apply to the leave.

The time these mothers want for maternity leave corresponds fairly closely to what Harvard Medical School psychiatrist T. Berry Brazelton calls the "important period of intense communication" between parents and a baby—the first four months after birth. Trust and an emotional bond are established in these early months, Brazelton maintains in the January 1986 *AMERICAN JOURNAL OF ORTHOPSYCHIATRY*. The infant learns to pay attention to social cues from the parents, who gradually develop their parenting technique.

Women in the Milwaukee sample were interviewed in the ninth month of pregnancy and one month after giving birth; follow-up interviews one year after the birth are now being conducted. Most of the women are first-time mothers, recruited through childbirth education classes and from a health clinic for low-income women.

Unexpectedly, says Hyde, mothers who work part-time in the year following their baby's birth appear to fare the best. Compared with full-time homemakers and full-time workers, part-timers report less depression and anxiety, perceive



Philadelphia Museum of Art. Bequest of Anne Hinchman

their marriage as more equitable, display less anxiety during short separations from their infant and have a more well-rounded relationship with the youngster.

The Wisconsin researchers are assessing parent-child relationships four months after birth by videotaping each mother and baby in three situations: mother feeding the child, mother attempting to teach the child a simple task, and free play with a variety of toys. Two independent observers rate the interactions on six scales that cover the mother's behavioral and emotional involvement with the child, the infant's attention, social skills and irritability, and the extent of mother-child cooperation. Each mother is then shown her videotape and tells the experimenters what she expects from the mother-child relationship.

Hyde and Clark regard this technique as superior to another test—the “Strange Situation”—usually used to measure the emotional bond between mother and child. The Strange Situation involves separations from and reunions with the mother, sometimes in the presence of a stranger. An infant's behavior during reunions is scored for his or her security of emotional “attachment” to the mother.

The increasingly heated debate over whether daycare has adverse effects over the first year of life is based almost exclusively on studies using the Strange Situation (SN: 7/25/87, p.54). Yet that approach focuses only on an infant's

responses to separation, Hyde notes, not the broader types of mother-child situations and maternal behaviors considered with the Milwaukee women.

“Not every woman we talked to wants three to six months of maternity leave,” she says. “But our findings suggest women need to be guaranteed an option to choose part-time work during an infant's first year.”

A crucial task for many mothers of newborns is to find a balance between their own desires for employment and what they think best for their infant, says psychologist Ellen Hock of Ohio State University in Columbus. In a study of 130 mothers interviewed when their infants were 7 weeks, 8 months and 13 months old, Hock found that women who stayed at home although they preferred to be employed reported the most depression and stress in their role as mother.

These women are pulled in two directions, Hock reported at the American Psychological Association meeting. Anxiety over leaving their baby in the care of others keeps them out of the workplace; yet they experience increasing concern over the loss of career opportunities and fears their job will go to someone else.

In previous studies, Hock and her colleagues found that a mother's satisfaction with her work status—whether it involves an outside job or full-time infant care—is linked to a more stable relationship with her infant, as measured by the Strange Situation. For many women, a great deal of anxiety surrounds the decision to work or stay at home, Hock adds. This gener-

ates a sense of confusion among working women about what type of formal maternity leave policy would serve them best.

Nevertheless, women appear to want more leave after a birth than their husbands or partners endorse. Many fathers believe job-guaranteed maternity leave should last up to—but no more than—three months, says psychologist Marilyn J. Essex of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Essex and a colleague interviewed husbands or partners of women in the Milwaukee sample described earlier. Contact was made one month after the baby's birth.

Men also report less depression and stress if their wives work part-time, Essex says. They spend considerably more time taking care of the child than husbands of full-time homemakers and their wives are significantly more likely to view the marriage as equitable. This, in turn, is associated with lower depression among the men.

Leave options for fathers remain scarce in the United States, says psychologist Joseph H. Pleck of Wheaton College in Norton, Mass., although unpaid leaves comparable in time to those offered mothers are becoming more common in union contracts for state and municipal employees. Many large companies allow fathers to take a few days off after the arrival of a child by using paid vacation or sick leave.

A minority of fathers are likely to use a formal paternity leave, Pleck maintains, and those who take time off from work prefer leaves of from several days to one or two months. His view is largely based on the experience in Sweden, where parents can divide between themselves 12 months of leave and receive 90 percent of their prior income up to \$20,000 for the first nine months. About 85 percent of Swedish fathers take a week off with the birth of a child, but only 11 percent take paternity leaves of one month or more.

Joseph P. Allen of Harvard Medical School in Boston has reviewed parental leave practices in Sweden, West Germany and France. Concerns in the United States that parental leave will hurt small businesses and cost too much are not borne out in the European nations, according to his analysis in *The Parental Leave Crisis* (E. Zigler and M. Frank, editors, Yale University Press, 1988).

In each European location, Allen interviewed government officials, representatives of women's organizations, union representatives, social researchers, employers and parents. He conducted the interviews in 1983, a period of economic recession and high unemployment in the three countries.

Allen says the broad spectrum of people he talked to felt leaves for infant care

cement women's ties to the workplace and benefit businesses as well as families. Employers reported some problems with administering parental leaves, particularly in smaller firms where absent employees are more difficult to replace. Cutbacks in maternity leave payments were being considered in West Germany as part of a general austerity program, "yet, even in the midst of recession-induced cutbacks, no one questioned the importance of maintaining a leave system of some sort," Allen says.

West German and Swedish leave programs largely rely on funds from the payroll tax, with additional payments either from employers or general government revenues. France finances its program through the general social security system.

In the United States, proposals for government-mandated paid parental leaves create considerable apprehension among small businesses. Ironically, many may already have formal and informal leave policies, report Barbara Butler and Janis Wasserman of Yale University.

They surveyed employers' attitudes toward leaves in 30 organizations in Connecticut, New Jersey and New York. Companies included professional firms, private nonprofit agencies, service companies and retail and manufacturing organizations. Businesses ranged in size from five to 500 employees.

If an employee is valued, the employers

usually work out a parental leave plan to guarantee their return to the job, explain the investigators in *The Parental Leave Crisis*. This is believed to be in the best interests of the company, since key personnel are difficult to get and keep. Most organizations in the study arranged for unpaid, job-guaranteed leaves, but no two firms took the same approach, Butler and Wasserman say. Proposals calling for employee and employer contributions to an insurance fund to finance leaves may ease fears that paid leave policies will empty the coffers of small businesses, they add.

The United States nonetheless remains the only Western industrialized nation without a government policy on maternal leave. The development of such a policy is essential, argues psychologist Jay Belsky of Pennsylvania State University in University Park, because daycare placement of infants currently is risky. State regulations do not guarantee quality care with low staff-to-child ratios, he says, and most parents know relatively little about what makes a good daycare program. Furthermore, high-quality infant care is too expensive for most families.

A handful of daycare bills are now before Congress, including one that would allocate \$2.5 billion a year to help low- and middle-income families pay for

child care and improve its availability and standards.

High-quality daycare is an important goal, Belsky says, but it still may have negative psychological consequences for some infants younger than 1 year old. Studies conducted since 1980 suggest nonmaternal infant care, whether in the home or in centers, is associated with a tendency of the infant to avoid or maintain a distance from the mother in the Strange Situation. Some mothers may overwhelm their babies with too much attention and stimulation after a long day of separation, Belsky contends, unknowingly promoting the avoidance displayed in the Strange Situation.

Other researchers say these studies merely demonstrate that separation is not stressful for infants who have experienced it daily for nine or 10 months. What Belsky calls "avoidance" behavior, they term "adaptive" behavior.

Less arguable are the demographic data. The number of single mothers continues to grow. Women are now marrying later, becoming mothers later and having fewer children. Today, whether married or not, more than 52 percent of the U.S. work force is female.

Remarks Ellen Hock, "Corporations and businesses are going to have to move quickly on the issue of parental leave in a few years, because by then much of the labor pool will consist of working mothers." □

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