

Demographic Insights



FATHERS & FAMILY

Spending more time with their children is a wish modern men express much more often than the generations before them. And in many European countries policies try to support committed fathers. However, in reality, the bulk of daily parental duties are still carried by women. Recent research explores the current possibilities and limitations of active fatherhood. Find some of it here and more on our website: www.population-europe.eu.

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The odd man out

Five Questions for Demographer Katharina Micheel

Most European countries are facing low birth rates. What role do fathers play in this?

The increasing labour market participation of women puts the traditional gender arrangements into question. The role of fathers has changed from solely a supporter to a co-nurturer, but there is ambivalence in most countries because, at the same time, traditional attitudes are still common. A growing share of individuals – women as well as men – have no desire to have children or have them very late. But still the desire to have children is more common among women. And for men the decision becomes even more difficult when they are expected to be active fathers. In this case men are confronted with a problem that women have known for a long time: balancing work and family life.

Did you find any indicators suggesting that fathers would like to become more active in the family?

From Germany we know that the share of active fathers is increasing, especially since the implementation of the new parental allowance, the so-called "Elterngeld". One out of four fathers of children born in 2010 claimed paternal leave, but this number has to be put in the right context because still 75% of these fathers take only the minimum leave. At the same time 96% of women claim parental leave - so there is clearly a gender gap.

What is stopping fathers?

I think it's a mixture of reasons. Paid work is, of course, one of the central arguments, because in the majority of cases men are the ones who earn more money. But we also have to keep in mind the normative dimensions. In societies or companies where only a few men are involved fathers and

take paternal leave, even if they're no longer seen as "newcomers" they still are the "odd men out". Their role is highly undefined and they may be seen as having joined the women's world when taking paternal leave.

Who could be the agents of change?

Clearly the individuals could negotiate a more egalitarian share of duties and tasks. But this is not likely to happen if they feel that the obstacles are too great. Creating a more family-friendly environment seems to be important. Employers could provide more flexible possibilities to make combining work and family life more attractive. Additionally policy measures like adequate childcare facilities can help to break barriers. And increasing support for fathers involved in childcare is one central dimension. We know that existing structures can only be overcome in the long run, but pro-egalitarian measures also have an effect eventually.

Finland seems to be the big exception, why?

Finland demonstrates by far the most egalitarian gender role attitudes and a considerable modernisation over the last decades. Notably Finland, France and Eastern Germany, the least traditional societies, provide high levels of institutional childcare. On the normative level, parents there might feel less pressure when they, for example, make use of public childcare. It's important to release parents from the pressure and to decrease the problem of balancing work and family life.



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Daddy's Days in Sweden

Sweden first introduced parental leave with earnings-related benefits in 1974. The length of leave was extended in the 1980s to over a year. A first reform aiming at a gender equal leave use was realised in 1995: One reserved month for each parent was introduced, which meant that this month would be lost if not used by the designated parent (so called “daddy and mummy months”). A similar reform had been introduced in Norway a year earlier. Both were considered radical at the time.

Another month for each parent came in 2002. In addition, one month was added to the general leave length, resulting in an overall leave duration of 16 months. This meant that an increase in one parent's leave did not necessarily entail a decrease in the other's leave. In 2008 Sweden's liberal conservative government introduced a gender equality bonus. The reform implies that the more the leave is shared between the parents, the greater the bonus they receive. Also this reform is gender-neutral but as mothers traditionally use more leave than the father the bonus encourages women to shorten their leave and men to extend their leave.

All three reforms aim to motivate parents to divide parental leave but with different means. For policy makers it is of crucial interest to find out the effectiveness of different reform types. To measure the effects of the three reforms on the division of leave, Ann-Zofie Duvander (Stockholm University) and Mats Johansson (Swedish Social Insurance Agency) analysed them at the same point in time with the same sample selection and control variables.

	Mean number of days					
	First reserved month		Second reserved month		Gender equality bonus	
	Control group	Treatment group	Control group	Treatment group	Control group	Treatment group
Father	25.3 ^a	35.0 ^a	40.7 ^a	47.1 ^a	52.2	51.5
Mother	319.6 ^a	293.6 ^a	271.1 ^a	278.0 ^a	256.6	256.3

^a Significant difference (1 percent level) between control and treatment groups. The dates of birth of children in the treatment and control groups are as follows:

Policy	Date of birth	
	Control group	Treatment group
First reserved month	18 – 31 December 1994	1 – 14 January 1995
Second reserved month	18 – 31 December 2001	1 – 14 January 2002
Gender equality bonus	17 – 30 June 2008	1 – 14 July 2008

Source: Authors' computations
Graphics: Population Europe

Table 1. The average use of parental leave days during the child's first 24 months for parents to children born just before and after the reforms.

The results show that the first reform in 1995 clearly had the largest effect on both fathers' and mothers' use. The fathers' use increased from an average of about 25 days before the reform to 35 days just after the reform. Conversely, mothers' use of leave decreased. Also, the introduction of the second reserved month shows a visible effect on fathers' use of parental leave, on average seven days increase. As the leave is extended at the time also mothers' use increased. In contrast, the gender equality bonus apparently did not lead to any statistically significant changes in either mothers' or fathers' use of parental leave.



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24 out of 34 OECD countries now offer parental leave modules specifically allocated to fathers. The extent and tailoring of these plans, as well as the dates of implementation, vary greatly between countries: For example, as early as 1961 Belgium introduced paternity leave at childbirth. Currently it is three obligatory days that can be extended for up to two weeks, during which fathers receive 87% of their incomes. The most recent implementation of paternity leave entitlement took place in Australia. Since the beginning of 2013, Australian fathers have the right to two weeks paid leave. Mexico, Switzerland, Turkey and the US don't offer any statutory paid leave for fathers. In the other OECD countries leave entitlements can be shared between parents, with Austria, Italy, and Japan also having bonus or quota systems aiming at encouraging men to take their share. According to recent OECD research on “Fathers' Leave, Fathers' Involvement and Child Development”, men's leave periods tend to be considerably shorter in countries without specific paternal regulations. Comparing longitudinal data from Australia, Denmark, the UK, and the US, the research suggests that there is a strong connection between fathers' leave from work and their involvement in the child's upbringing in later years. And the more time fathers took off, the more likely they were to overcome traditional gender roles in parenting.



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Practical Lessons

Engaging men in parental care early on is a successful means of reducing post-natal conflicts and stress for parents. This is a result of the “Positive Fathering Program” in Hong Kong. It consists of a series of classes for expectant couples with a strong concentration on self-efficacy. The classes include lessons ranging from how to bathe a newborn to communication between partners about who will be responsible for specific tasks once the baby is born. An assessment showed that 97% of the participating couples completed the course and the majority reported significantly fewer conflicts and post-natal depression. These results were reported by the project leader, Agnes Tiwari (Head of the School of Nursing, University of Hong Kong) at a presentation with the Interagency Gender Working Group (IGWG) of the Population Reference Bureau in Washington, D.C., USA.



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Publication

Men's participation in family work is one of the topics covered in the report “A Future with Children: Myths, Core Concepts and Recommendations on Fertility and the Development of Society”. The report, conducted by a European team of 25 researchers, focuses on the situation in Austria, Germany and Switzerland.



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