



Rotman School of Management  
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO



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# EXAMINING MEN'S DECISIONS AROUND PARENTAL LEAVE

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Disclaimer: This report was prepared by Alison Zimmer as a part of her 2018-2019 Institute for Gender and the Economy (GATE) MBA Student Fellowship. The opinions expressed in this report are her own and do not necessarily reflect the views of GATE or the University of Toronto.

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## Introduction

Through my research I sought to understand the current decision-making process of men with regards to parental leave. I wanted to learn what inhibited them or allowed them to access leave, and what that leave looked like, including use of vacation time and informal and unpaid leave. In gaining an understanding of their current behavior, I hoped to identify ways that employers and policy makers can solve for the needs and obstacles of fathers.

My project is focused on fathers, but it's clear that men's use of leave impacts their families and partners. I am hopeful that an increase of parental leave use by men will have positive effects on women's career paths and earnings, as well as increase equity in domestic labour.

### **Background on Parental Leave in Canada**

Federal maternity leave benefits were first introduced in 1971's Unemployment Insurance Act. 1990 saw the introduction of a 10-week parental leave that could be shared between parents, which was increased to 35 weeks in 2000.

Currently, parental leave through employment insurance (EI) provides up to 55% of an employee's earnings, to a maximum of \$562 a week. The maternity benefit for the birth parent offers up to 15 weeks at this rate. The standard parental benefit is still 35 weeks at the 55% replacement rate, which can be shared between two parents during the 52-week period after a child is born or adopted. 2017 saw the introduction of extended parental benefits that can be taken in lieu of the standard benefits, offering a 33% replacement rate for a maximum of 61 weeks that can be shared between parents.

As of March 2019, parents who share leave are eligible for an additional 5 weeks of the standard benefit or 8 weeks of extended benefits. All interviews for this research were completed before the introduction of this new benefit, though it was included in conversations with some participants, particularly those currently expecting another child.

Eligibility for EI parental leave requires that an employee has accumulated at least 600 hours of insurable employment in the qualifying period (usually the year preceding the birth or adoption). An eligible applicant must be a Canadian citizen, permanent resident or a person who has a valid temporary work permit to work legally in Canada.

It should be noted that Quebec has its own Parental Insurance Plan, which has offered a distinct paternity benefit since 2006, and offers a higher replacement rate of 70%. None of my interviewees were located in Quebec.

Employers may offer additional parental benefits, often in the form of a 'top-up,' i.e. providing salary replacement in addition to the 55% (or 33%) offered by EI. These plans vary greatly in terms of the replacement rate and length of coverage, and have a considerable impact on uptake and use patterns.

### **Methodology**

I interviewed 12 fathers with at least one child born since 2015. I focused on those who were in heterosexual relationships, in which both they and their partner were eligible for parental leave through employment insurance as Canadian citizens or permanent residents. The vast majority of interviewees

live in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), though I conducted two interviews by phone with fathers in Vancouver and Kitchener. Within the limitations of the small sample size, I tried to find a demographically representative group. My interviewees include four immigrants to Canada and a variety of racial and cultural backgrounds. They range in age from 29-42, and work in industries including financial services, construction, real estate, technology and education. Most were full-time employees, and two were self-employed.

We spoke about their planned and actual use of leave during the first year of their child's life (and for additional children as applicable), including EI parental leave, additional employer benefits, vacation time and other paid or unpaid leave. Beyond the details of the time taken (illustrated in the graphs on page 5), I was interested to hear how they made these decisions with their families and understand the influence of employers and policy in their choices.

## Findings

The amount of time off taken from work in the child's first year ranged from a minimum of four days to a high of six months and some clear patterns emerged in the timing and type of leave used. Nearly all took some leave immediately following the birth, primarily from vacation time though some used other types of paid and unpaid leave. Approximately half maxed out their vacation time (typically two or three weeks), and some supplemented their 'vacation' with additional weeks working from home, which was not part of their typical work routine. This was universally concurrent with their spouse, and many expressed this time as crucial to bond with their new child and share care duties. Several fathers also spoke about the need to support their spouse through the physical recovery from childbirth and be attentive to postpartum issues.

### Deference and negotiation

Many interviewees indicated that the leave decision was their wife's, and most were happy to defer to her plans. Many of their partners expressed a strong preference and expectation to take the full year of benefits. Men's desire to take leave was trumped by 'not wanting to take away her time'. Many emphasized their wives' physical recovery and desire to breastfeed as a major factor in determining the length and structure of leave taken by both parents.



Alex<sup>1</sup> negotiated with his wife to take a 5-month leave with each of their daughters. He felt the time to bond was important and was conscious of fighting stereotypical gender roles. They endured some comments from extended family about him 'taking her time.'

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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms

**Accessing parental leave**

Many men acknowledged that their spouse was (or still is) more knowledgeable about parental leave benefits. Several found the EI website and their employer’s benefits difficult to navigate, and some sought out additional information by calling Service Canada or learned more during pre-natal classes. Arjun, a recent immigrant to Canada, noted that for his previous child (born in his home country) only his wife was eligible for government leave and he had not realized that was not the case in Canada.

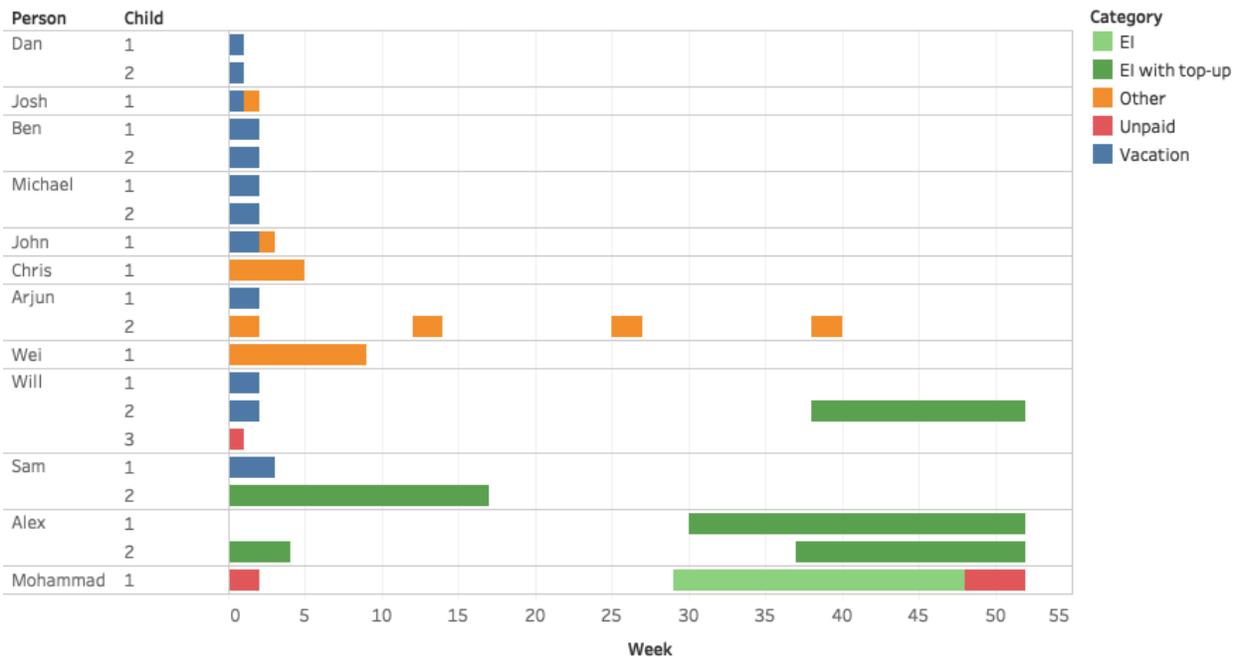
Four interviewees utilized parental leave, two doing so only for their second child. These leaves ranged from three to six months, and three of the four men had employers who offered top-up. The fourth had a lower income than his spouse, and seasonal work that aligned with the birth of his child. One additional interviewee who is a small business owner took six weeks of paid leave, but was not eligible for parental leave as he does not pay into EI.

**Use of informal arrangements**

Multiple interviewees told me of unofficial time off arranged with their employer – one company had a tradition of offering a paid day off for the birth date, and another offered two weeks paid leave (separate from vacation time). Arjun, whose company had recently introduced an eight-week parental leave top-up, agreed to a suggestion from his manager that he take two paid weeks off each quarter, rather than go on a longer leave. Four interviewees arranged for more flexible work schedules and additional time working remotely during the first year.

**Chart: Use of Leave by Men**

Use of Leave by Men



'Other' indicates a variety of arrangements:  
 Working from home (Josh and John)  
 Paid leave (Chris and Arjun)  
 Reduced Workload (Wei - 20%)

In most cases, the interviewees indicated that they were satisfied with these informal arrangements, but the reliance on individual relationships, seniority and the benevolence of employers is somewhat concerning. It's unclear if these policies are applied consistently and equitably, and often these arrangements are also precarious.

**Barriers and mixed messages**

Josh works in financial services for a large employer who held a company forum about paternity leave. The messaging was positive, but it struck him as odd that none of the male executives on the panel had taken leave. Later, when he notified his manager that he and his wife were expecting, she expressed concern that he would become distracted or leave the company and joked about how he couldn't leave. Josh ultimately chose not to take leave beyond a one-week vacation and an additional week of remote work.



Alex works as an early childhood educator in a unionized workplace. His manager was very supportive of his decision to take leave, but he soon learned that his organization only offered top-up to women. He pursued the issue with his union and ultimately helped change the policy. This was a significant barrier, and he noted that the previous policy would have particularly impacted LGBTQ+ families.

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***“When he notified his manager that he and his wife were expecting, she expressed concern that he would become distracted or leave the company, and joked about how he couldn’t leave. He ultimately chose not to take leave beyond a one week vacation and an additional week of remote work.”***

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**Strategizing and financial planning**

For many interviewees, there was strategy and some luck in timing their pregnancies and leave. Josh is married to a doctor and noted that they had planned to have their first child while she was still in residency when she would be eligible for parental leave, as she would soon become self employed. Some tried to plan around major projects at work and anticipated promotions, however, plans don't always work out – an emergency c-section meant one father took a longer than anticipated initial leave from work to care for his spouse and new child.

Several interviewees spoke about the desire to maximize the total benefits available to them – in the majority of couples the father was outearning the mother, and thus it would be a less significant hit to their finances for the lower income partner to be on EI, even more so if their partner's employer offered top-up.

The vast majority of men I spoke to lived in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) or Vancouver, with incredibly high housing and child-care costs. Infant care in particular is incredibly expensive, which makes it very

challenging to take concurrent leave and run out of available weeks before the child's first birthday. Personal preference or what would be best for their family often lost out to what was seen as financially plausible and responsible. Wei, who works in financial services, arranged to reduce his workload by 20% for 2 months following the birth of his child, but would have liked to take a longer leave. Men taking parental leave was unusual at his company and he emphasized that there was a significant physical and mental toll on fathers working full-time during the day while tending to a newborn at night. In fact, he recalled a senior partner who had taken no leave collapsing from exhaustion at work.

Multiple men spoke of recent workplace policy changes around parental leave and paternity leave specifically. Those that were eligible for significant top-up took advantage of it, often planning their leave for the exact amount of eligibility, which they said had become popular with their male peers. The financial role of top-up is significant, but it also seems to play an important role in normalizing the use of leave by men. It signals an appropriate amount of leave to take, and can serve as an anchor regarding what is normal (potentially a barrier in accessing a longer leave).

Seniority came up in several interviews – for Dan, a scientist, his recent promotion and responsibilities at work led him to take less leave than initially planned. He felt a sense of loyalty and responsibility to the small company he worked for, in addition to the financial stress that would be caused by both he and his wife being on reduced incomes. For others, like Ben, he was reluctant to ask for the flexibility he had enjoyed for his first child when he started at a new company shortly after his second child was born. He was eager to prove himself and had not yet built strong relationships. Josh, who decided against taking a leave for his first child, says he may be more likely to do so with a second child due to greater seniority and financial security.

Sam, a software developer, stated that he and his wife budgeted and saved to allow them to take leave concurrently, assisted by employer top-up. With the EI replacement rate capped at a maximum of \$562 a week, high income earners on parental leave take a major hit, which can make it incredibly unattractive to take leave without employer top-up. For low-income earners, the math is even worse – a worker earning minimum wage in Ontario (\$14) and working a 40-hour week would only be eligible for \$308 weekly.

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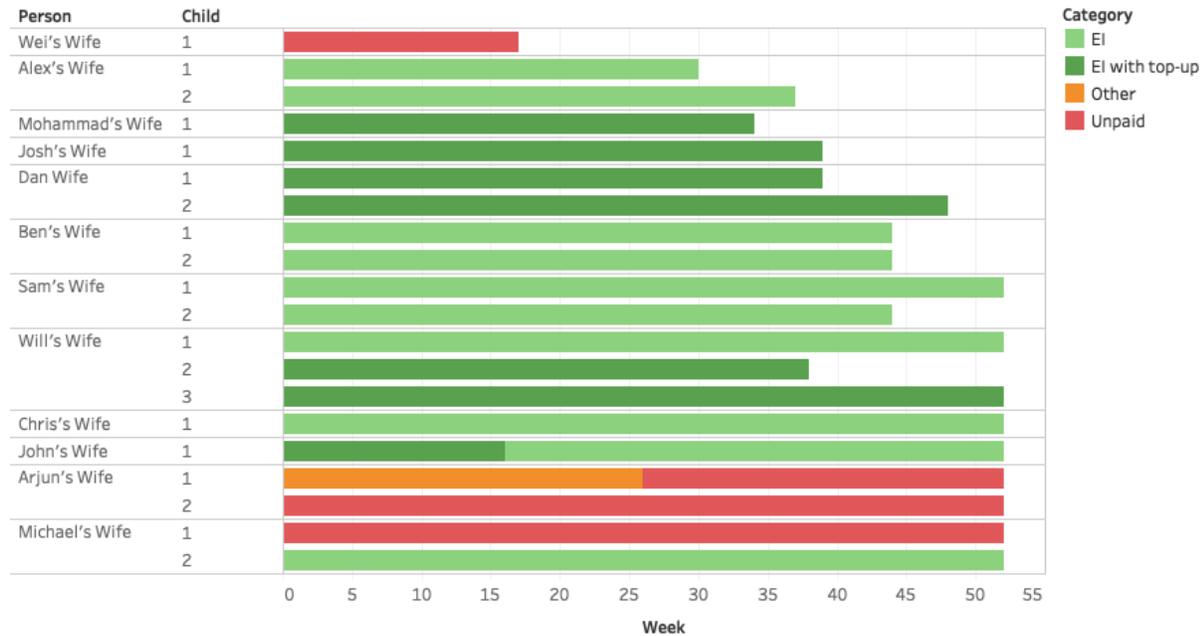
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### **Partners stepping back from work**

Having children was the catalyst for many interviewees' spouses changing career paths or leaving the workforce entirely. Some noted that this was due to personal preference to be with their children, but others noted dissatisfaction with work, combined with dwindling opportunities. The cost of childcare was understood as a major factor, intensifying when a second child arrives. The data below represents only the leave during their child or children's first year, but many women took additional time following the first year or have not re-entered the workforce, which is not depicted. Only one man I interviewed took leave beyond the first year.

**Chart: Use of Leave by Women**

Use of Leave By Women



'Other' for Arjun's spouse was maternity leave in her country of origin, not EI. This data was reported by interviewees, and there may be slight inaccuracies. No vacation time is noted, but I suspect some was used, especially to make up the gap of 50 weeks of EI to 1 full year.

**Lack of models at work or in their peer group**

Most men were not aware of colleagues who had accessed paternity leave in their organization, and only about half knew of a friend or an extended family member who had taken paternity leave.

Alex, who works in a male-dominated industry, endured comments including 'Mr. Mom' from colleagues and superiors before his parental leave as he was the first man in his company to do so. He was very happy to have been able to take the leave and spend the time with his daughter, but did say he found the experience somewhat lonely, often being the only man at activities like playgroups.

**Conclusions and further study**

All of the fathers I spoke with had unique family circumstances, finances and career paths, but clear patterns emerged. Utilizing vacation time as a brief parental leave is common and for many, it's the minimum they can do to support their partner and bond with their new child without infringing on the ability of their spouse to maximize their parental leave time. Those that did take significant leave tended to do so concurrently starting from the time of birth, or consequetively in the later months of the first year, and they were likely to have employer support in the form of both attitude and top-up benefits.

There was a sense among many of the interviewees that it was becoming more common for men to take leave in their industries and peer groups. While they recognized that it was accepted and legally protected, it was still seen as a divergence from the norm. Official policies and provisions for men and parental leave are important, but unless their employer is truly supportive and senior colleagues are

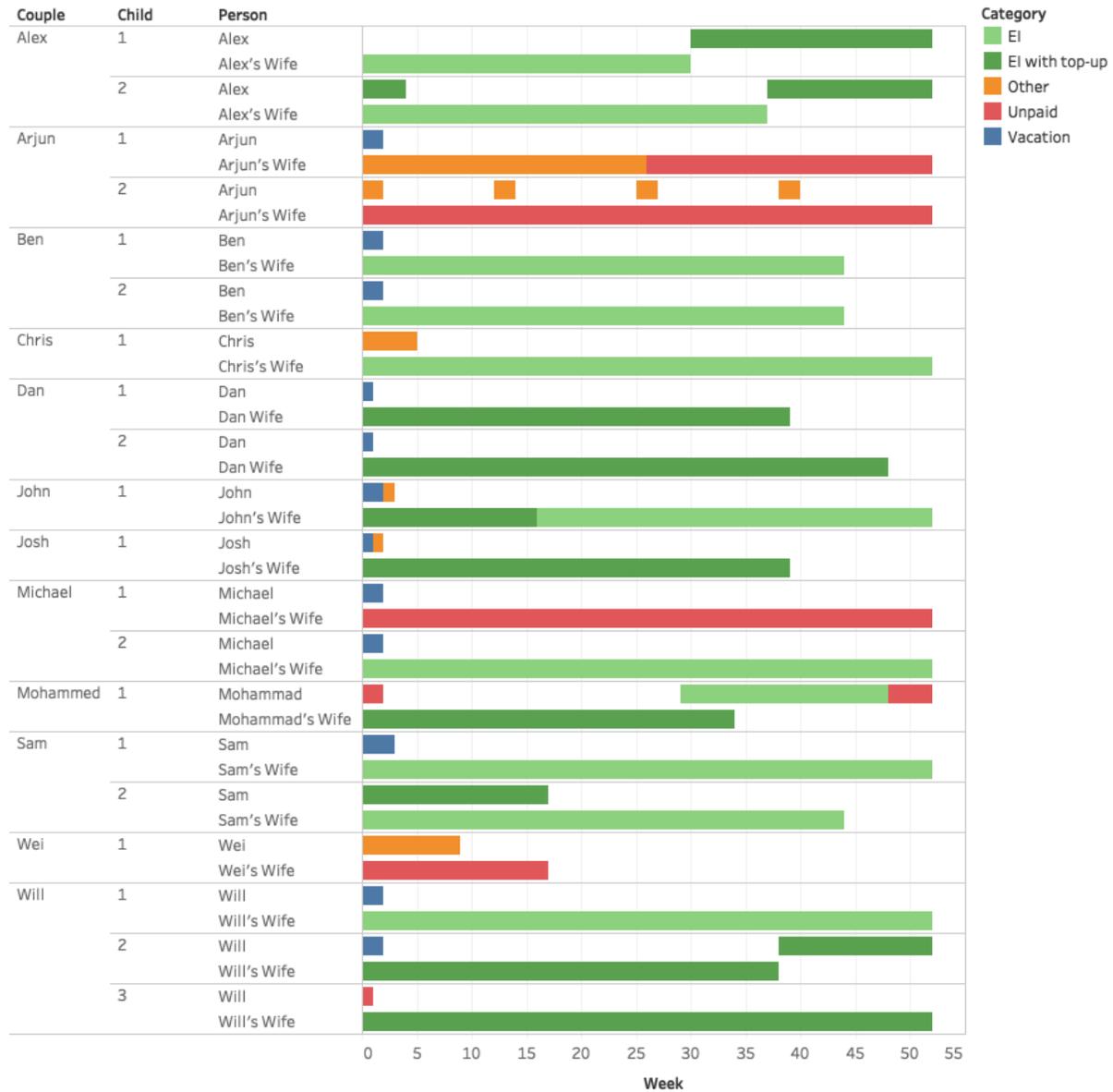
publically accessing the benefits, there is still a perceived risk in taking leave. Finally, many interviewees also indicated that they had not spoken about the possibility of taking leave with their employers, as there is a lack of opportunities for men to discuss balancing work and family.

I am very curious to see how uptake and use patterns will change with the new policy offering an additional five-week shared parental benefit, sometimes referred to as 'use-it-or-lose-it' or a 'daddy leave'. The experience of Quebec suggests that this will increase uptake by men, but the national income replacement rate is still much lower than Quebec's. Few interviewees were aware of this upcoming policy change (several were expecting another child), and while for some it appealed, many expressed that it would still be financially challenging.

The interviewees universally expressed a desire to spend more time with their children and families. Many expressed that they would have preferred to have taken a longer leave if their financial situation or work responsibilities allowed, or if they could do so without encroaching on the leave their wife planned to take. Those who took significant leave were very glad that they did so, and some expressed that they wish it had been longer, or that they had done so for their previous child. Many were passionate about their work and emphasized their role as providers, but were frustrated to not be able to fully enjoy (and endure) new parenthood. It's my hope that men's use of parental leave becomes more normalized, and that those wishing to access it do not face the financial, structural and social barriers currently encountered.

**Chart: Use of Leave by Couples**

Use of Leave By Couples



Week for each Person broken down by Couple and Child. Color shows details about Category. Size shows sum of Duration.