

WORK AND CARING RESPONSIBILITIES: PRIORITY IMPROVEMENTS TO PARENTAL LEAVE

Feedback on the NACEW's draft recommendations

Submitted by:

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Parents Centre NZ Inc is a community based not for profit organisation set up by parents for parents with 52 main Centres throughout New Zealand. Parents Centre is one of, if not the largest, parenting support and education infrastructure to the community in New Zealand.

The Parents Centre movement commenced in 1952. Parents Centre offers 54 years of experience working with parents in the community. Parents Centre touches in excess of 16,000 parents annually and has opportunities to touch families well in excess of 60,000 times per annum. The organisation is operated from a National Office in Mana, Wellington and supports over 3500 volunteers who run and offer Parents Centre programmes nationally in all areas; both rural and metro.

Parents Centre shares a vision of New Zealand being a society that values parenting as being fundamental to the well being of all members of society and sews the fabric of our social structure. We deliver education, support and services to support and drive that vision.

Parents Centre shares a mission to bring about a society in which Parents are highly valued in their role in the community through positive birth experiences, informed parenting and advocacy.

Our core business is serving parents of age 0 - 5 children with a focus on pre-conception, coping skills, knowledge and information transfer and life skills through to antenatal and postnatal education and to include care for and services to support premature birth, miscarriage and stillbirth.

Parents Centre believes that breastfeeding is the ideal form of infant feeding. Enhancing the knowledge, skills and self-awareness of expectant parents contributes to a positive and affirming pregnancy, birth and parenting experience. Prospective parents, parents and families have a right to quality childbirth and parenting education and information, enabling them to make informed decisions about their parenting role including the form of nutrition that their children receive.

We welcome the opportunity to provide feedback on the NACEW's Draft Recommendations on the Parental Leave provisions in New Zealand.

Wider eligibility criteria

Recommendation - widen the eligibility criteria for PPL to the following groups of workers:

- more casual and seasonal workers and people with more than one job
- whāngai and customary adoptions.

Objective - this would allow more workers who have demonstrated workforce attachment to access the parental leave scheme. The parental leave payment would be particularly beneficial to the low income workers in these groups. It would also provide for a greater diversity of family caring arrangements.

Parents Centres supports this recommendation. It is important that the diversity of our country is recognised in all facets of our legislation including the accommodation of a different framework of employment or adoption of a child or infant.

PPL entitlement for fathers

Recommendation - ring fence some PPL solely for use by fathers/partners. This would be in addition to entitlements for mothers which can be shared.

Objective - this would support greater choice for parents and gender equity in the home. It would assist working fathers to take leave irrespective of whether the mother has an entitlement to PPL, and support fathers to be more involved in the early care of their children. Both mothers and fathers indicated they wanted this in the evaluation.

Parents Centres is delighted by the recommendation that highlights the importance of fathers in the role of parenting their infants and young children. In the very early days of parenting a new baby, mothers require substantial support both with caring for the infant – especially while establishing breastfeeding – while also being given the opportunity to maintain strong parental links with any existing children.

Parenting successfully requires teamwork and extending the entitlements will enable parents to establish a partnership that works for their unique family relationship.

Flexible leave

Recommendation - more flexible options for taking parental leave, e.g. parents can take leave together or one after the other, or leave can be taken on a part-time basis up to a certain point in time such as when the child turns three years old. This could include allowing a parent to work for a limited number of days while they are on paid leave without losing their payment e.g. to complete a handover or to undertake training.

Objective - this would support the labour market participation and care choices of parents, allow parents to spread their leave for longer until their child(ren) are able to access more affordable childcare, and make both the start and the return to work easier to manage for both employees and employers. It is also consistent with employer support for the provision of quality flexible work.

Parents Centres wishes to support the premise that there needs to be more flexible options for taking parental leave. The ability to work part-time without being penalised financially in a significant manner, allows for stronger attachment with pre-school children in their extremely important formative years. This flexibility may also provide opportunity for women to explore successful options for maintaining lactation beyond the first six months of exclusive breastfeeding. The benefits of breastfeeding into the second year of life are well supported by both evidence and the recommendations of the World Health Organisation.

Prolonged breastfeeding enables the key objective of *Improved health outcomes for both mother and child to be met*

Longer leave

Recommendation - increase the length of PPL to one year as a first step, and then increase the level of payment.

Objective - this would: meet parents stated preferences to be able to take longer periods of leave than they can currently afford; support the labour market participation and care choices of parents; and provide a greater degree of income support for families during a period of significant transition. Increasing the level of payment would also encourage fathers to take more leave to share in their caring responsibilities, allowing mothers to maintain their labour market attachment should they choose to and in turn contribute to pay equity for women.

Further to our comments above, the recommendation to extend the length of PPL and then the level of payment will enable parents to creatively establish a parental leave programme that meets both their families and their career requirements. The increase in PPL to 12 months is an integral step in allowing women to breastfeed their infants into the second year of life, whilst also allowing for pre-school children to engage and form a strong attachment with their primary caregiver in their formative years.

Employers

Recommendation - find ways to support employers manage workflow when an employee is on parental leave. This may not require legislative change.

Objective - this would help employers to manage their obligations under the Act and support the parental leave scheme to operate flexibly for both employers and employees. This in turn would allow

parents to return to work at a time that meets their needs without disadvantage to their position or pay.

Parents Centres would welcome any provision that allows for employers to work constructively with their employees to ensure a mutual beneficially arrangement.