

The New Dad Research Series

# Expanded Paid Parental Leave

Measuring the Impact of Leave on Work & Family

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BOSTON COLLEGE CENTER FOR WORK & FAMILY



Sponsored by



“ *My husband and I truly appreciate such a progressive policy and see the benefits—not only to us and our new family, but to even the playing field between men and women in the workplace.*”

## Introduction and Background

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In the global economic landscape, the United States continues to be an outlier in government-mandated supports for work and family challenges. At present, the US continues to be the only developed country in the world that does not offer a national policy for paid leave for new parents. Americans only have access to the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which allows 12 weeks of unpaid leave to employees. Even then, only 60% of US employees meet the criteria for protection under FMLA and many employees cannot afford to take unpaid time off.

In response to this need, parts of the US have developed patchwork solutions. Some states and cities have passed laws requiring paid leave coverage for new parents. Additionally, some employers have stepped up to offer paid parental leave to their employees. According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), paid maternity leave is now available at 35% of companies, up from 26% in 2016.

In 2014, Boston College Center for Work & Family (the Center) published the results of research conducted with 1,100 working fathers that measured their attitudes on paternity leave. The majority of respondents reported having access to only a few days of leave, but most believed that paternity leave should be made available and stipulated that being compensated at or near full pay would be critical to utilizing it. Following the publication of this report, many corporate partners of the Center took significant steps towards offering employees expanded, gender-neutral paid parental leave.

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As leading organizations invest in more generous leave policies, it is important to assess whether employees are utilizing the leave available to them and to what extent personal and workplace factors influence their leave decisions.

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We embarked on the Expanded Parental Leave Study to explore the key drivers of utilization and how effectively organizations are supporting new parents before, during, and after taking parental leave.

In this report, we compare the leave experiences and attitudes of mothers and fathers, recognizing that men's leave is a recent phenomenon and often has different characteristics. We explore common gender assumptions and the degree to which gender differences impact new parents' outlooks and their ability to combine work and family successfully. We conclude with recommendations for employers on how to evaluate and implement parental leave policies and supports that will attract, engage, and retain top talent.

## Key Questions

- What are the key drivers and constraints around utilizing parental leave?
- How do employees utilize parental leave and how does taking leave impact caregiving and return-to-work experiences?
- How does taking leave influence employees' attitudes towards their job, their employer, and their parenting identity?

## Methodology

The Expanded Parental Leave Study gathered survey responses from over 1,400 US-based employees of **four large employers**. Each organization offers gender-neutral, paid parental leave policies that have been in place for at least one year. The parental leave policies vary by company and range from **6 to 16 weeks of fully paid leave** for most new parents.

We administered a voluntary, anonymous online survey from March - May 2019 to men and women who were eligible to take parental leave following the birth, adoption, or fostering of a new child. Each company identified and distributed the survey to eligible participants. For this report, we considered **1,240 survey respondents**, after excluding responses from employees who were not eligible for a minimum of 6 weeks paid leave.

## Study Population at a Glance

65% Women  35% Men 

- 97% married or in a domestic partnership
- 99% birth parents
- 57% first-time parents
- 53% graduate degree; 46% bachelor's degree
- 96% full-time workers; 24% work 60+ hours
- 62% managers and above
- 66% earn \$100K or more per year
- 89% dual-earner households

Figure 1: Job Role

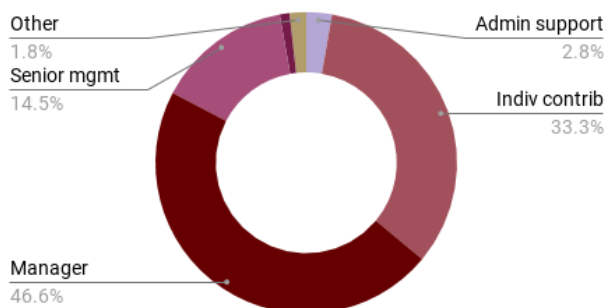
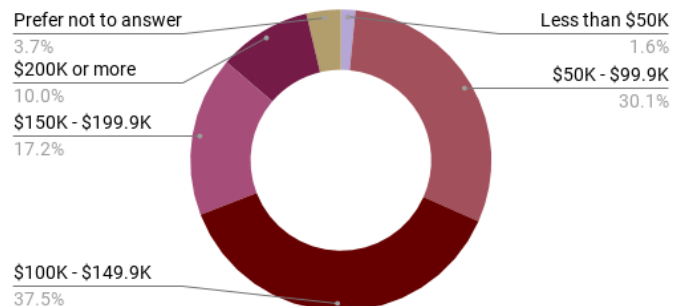


Figure 2: Annual Income



## Summary of Key Findings

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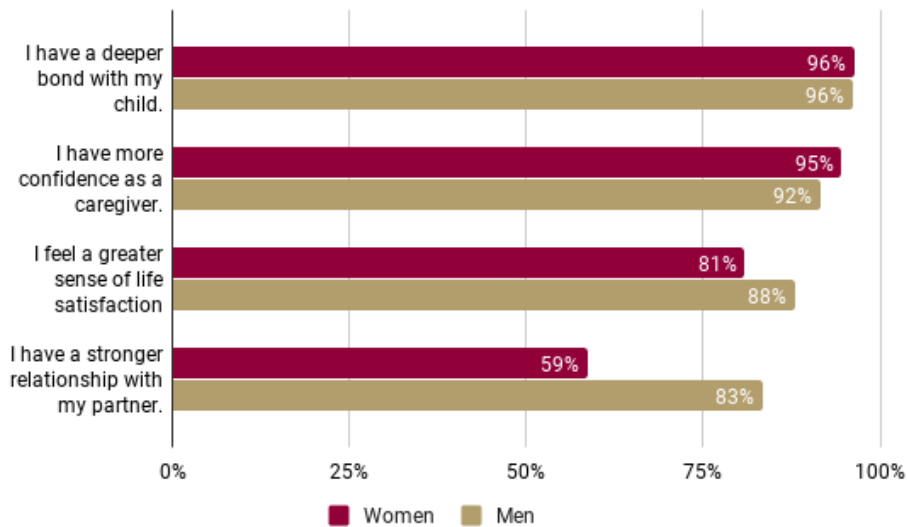
- 1 Employees highly value paid parental leave—it enhances loyalty to their employers and their identity as caregivers.
- 2 The vast majority of women take the full amount of leave offered to them. Men also take a substantial amount of leave and express higher levels of satisfaction with their leave experience.
- 3 While respondents report they are generally well-informed about leave, there is still confusion about how leave is administered, especially among women.
- 4 Workplace support for employees taking leave is high. While women enjoy greater support for leave, men taking leave is becoming more acceptable.
- 5 The return-to-work experience is challenging with perceptions of less support, higher workload, and lower job satisfaction.
- 6 Career advancement is a chief concern for both men and women when taking leave and returning to work.
- 7 Men and women are equally concerned about their ability to combine work and family.
- 8 Men and women strive for an egalitarian approach to sharing caregiving and household duties but gender roles persist.

Overall we found that there is significant agreement among men and women about the drivers and benefits of taking expanded parental leave. We also found that men and women look remarkably similar in their views on career and balancing work and family, yet gendered norms persist at home.

# 1 Employees highly value paid parental leave—it enhances loyalty to their employers and their identity as caregivers.

- **Three-quarters (75%) of respondents agree that they are more likely to remain with their current employer because their employer offers expanded leave.** In addition, 30% of respondents report an increase in loyalty to their employer compared to 13% who report a decrease. This net increase in employer loyalty is more pronounced for men (27%) than for women (12%).
- Respondents view the leave policy favorably with 94% reporting that they are more likely to encourage co-workers to take parental leave and 78% reporting that they are more likely to take parental leave in the future because their employer offers expanded leave. In addition, **90% of managers surveyed agree that leave is an important recruitment/retention tool.**
- The vast majority of men and women agree that they feel a deeper bond with their child, have more confidence as caregivers, and have a greater sense of life satisfaction as a result of taking leave. Men are more likely than women to report that they have a stronger relationship with their partner as a result of taking leave (83% of men, 59% of women agree).

**Figure 3: As a result of taking leave...**  
(% somewhat/strongly agree)



**96%**  
of men and women feel a deeper bond with their child as a result of taking leave

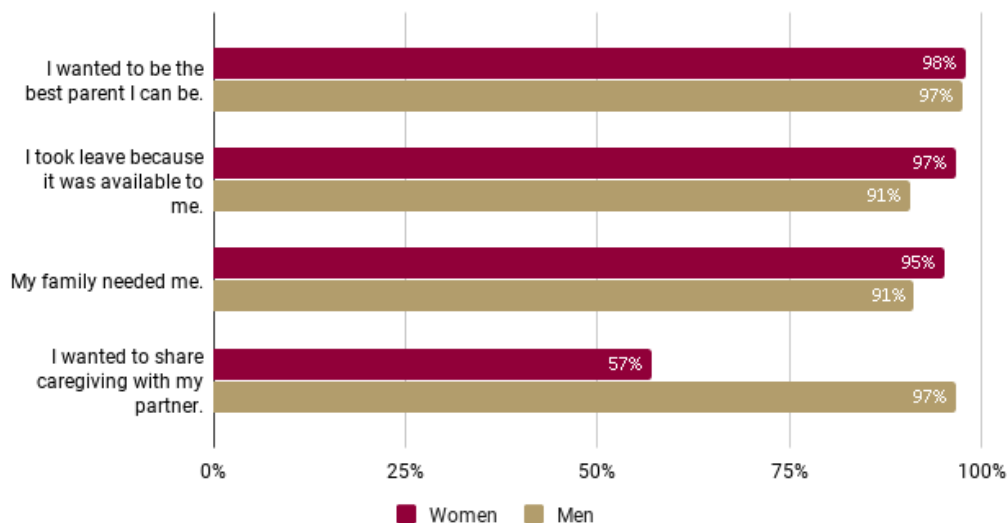
Following leave employees report a notable increase in company loyalty. Very importantly, three-quarters report that they are more likely to stay with their present employer because of the parental leave policy. As organizations develop enhanced leave policies, retention is often cited as a primary goal. Our data on loyalty and intention to stay support that objective.

Taking leave also significantly enhances caregiving and life satisfaction for both men and women. For men, in particular, taking extended leave has an additional perceived benefit to their relationship with their partner. These positive outcomes should also benefit employers. Evidence has shown that higher life satisfaction has positive spillover effects, enriching home life as well as attitudes in the workplace.

## 2 The vast majority of women take the full amount of leave offered to them. Men also take a substantial amount of leave and express higher levels of satisfaction with their leave experience.

- **Nearly all women (93%) take the full amount of leave** for which they are eligible. In our sample, the largest cohort of women were eligible for and took 16 weeks or more of leave.
- **Fewer but still a majority of men (62%) take the full leave** available to them. Even when men do not take the full leave available, they take a substantial amount. For example, men eligible for 8 weeks of leave took an average of 7.2 weeks (90% of available leave), while men eligible for 16 weeks took 12.8 weeks on average (80% of available leave).
- **Men were more satisfied with the amount of leave available to them** (87% of men vs. 71% of women) and the **amount of leave they took** (79% of men and 74% of women).
- When citing the top factors that encouraged them to take leave, men and women were aligned in their responses. **Over 90% of men and women agreed with the statements: (1) I wanted to be the best parent I could be; (2) I took leave because it was available to me; and (3) My family needed me.**
- Men were much more likely than women to agree that they took leave because they wanted to share caregiving with their partner: 97% of men compared with 57% of women agreed that this is a top factor.

**Figure 4: Top Factors Encouraging Leave**  
(% somewhat/strongly agree)



It is not surprising that women take all the leave available to them. However, the conventional wisdom that “you can offer men leave, but they will not take it” did not hold true in our study. In fact, 91% of men said they took leave because it was available to them and most men took a substantial portion of the leave that was offered. Men’s higher satisfaction is also not surprising given men were previously granted much shorter leave, typically two weeks or less, if it was offered at all.

### 3 While respondents report they are generally well-informed about leave, there is still confusion about how leave is administered, especially among women.

- **88% of respondents agree that they made an explicit plan with their manager** prior to taking leave and 73% agree that their organization has an explicit process for planning for leave.
- 83% of respondents agree that they are well-informed about their leave policy. However, when asked about specific aspects of the policy, there was a **drop-off in understanding**: the length of leave for which they are eligible (68%), the timeframe within which leave must be utilized (65%), and how leave can be taken (61%). **Only 45% of respondents understood very/extremely well how leave is administered.** On all these measures, women rated their level of understanding significantly lower than men.
- In open-ended responses, **women report that they rely on word-of-mouth with co-workers** to navigate the leave planning process. Many could not identify the appropriate HR or 3rd party contacts and felt they were not given adequate information as to how parental leave interacts with other types of paid leave such as short-term disability, state-mandated leave, and vacation. As a result, they were not easily able to calculate the amount of leave available to them and their return date.

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45%

have a solid understanding of how leave is administered

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“*The policy as it stands is great, the opportunities really are around communication to both employee and manager. There is no single point of truth or accountability for smooth transitions. So it becomes a game of leveraging your network of new moms/dads to understand the policy and things to look out for.*”

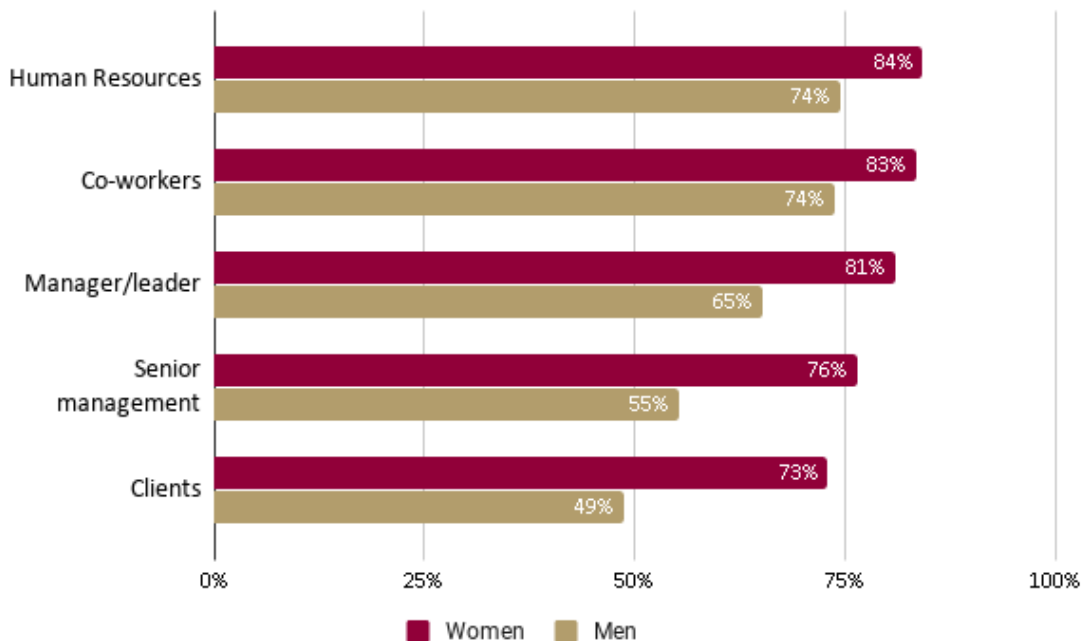
The majority of respondents made an explicit plan for taking leave with their manager. While this is positive, the data reveal that a significant minority do not understand the policy well; planning is often ad hoc and varies significantly for each employee. Women are most concerned with planning for leave well in advance and maximizing their available leave. This is not surprising given that women often must combine several types of leave for birth and recovery as well as bonding. Developing a more streamlined, consistent, and formal organizational process for planning leave would reduce stress and confusion. Moreover, it would allow employees and managers alike to plan better for an employee's absence and return to work.



## 4 Workplace support for employees taking leave is high. While women enjoy greater support for leave, men taking leave is becoming more acceptable.

- A large majority of women considered all groups in their workplace extremely supportive of their decision to take leave. Overall **men were less likely to feel extremely supported, especially by senior management (55%) and clients (49%).**
- Respondents were asked to assess the impact of their employer expanding its leave policy. **81% of men and women agreed that fathers taking leave has become more acceptable in the workplace** and 74% agreed that their employer is equally supportive of mothers and fathers taking leave.
- 63% of women and 60% of men agree that their **manager encouraged them to take leave**. 60% of women and 53% of men feel that their **workplace culture has improved** because their employer offers expanded paid parental leave. Nearly half of men (47%) in the study agreed that **"it was expected that I would take leave."**
- In open-ended responses, respondents believe that leaders could do more to openly encourage leave-taking, including taking full leaves themselves. **"Lead by example"** was a common phrase from men and women alike.

**Figure 5: Support for Leave Decision**  
(% considered extremely supportive)



Nearly four out of five women felt extremely supported in their decision to take expanded leave. Fewer men felt the same level of support, especially from senior management, whom they would like to see model greater support for leave-taking. However, there are encouraging signs that workplace attitudes are changing regarding men taking leave. More than half of men and women feel their workplace culture has improved as a result of the leave policy and nearly half of men agree that it was expected that they would take parental leave.

## 5 The return-to-work experience is challenging with perceptions of less support, higher workload, and lower job satisfaction.

- **Respondents are less likely to feel extremely supported in their return to work** compared to when they took leave. Women report the most significant drop-off in support from human resources (84% before vs. 42% after), managers (81% before vs. 65% after), and senior management (76% before vs. 50% after).
- Open-ended responses confirm that many new parents feel they are expected to “hit the ground running”. More than two-fifths of women and one-third of men report that **job responsibilities increased** following their return to work. In addition, 36% of women and 25% of men feel that their **manager had higher expectations** of them after their return from leave.
- **While men in the study report a small net increase in job satisfaction, women report a substantial net decrease after returning to work.** Nearly one-third (32%) of women report a decrease in job satisfaction compared to 14% who report an increase. Among men, 17% report a decrease in job satisfaction compared to 20% who report an increase.
- The **use of flexible work arrangements increased for 50% of women and 27% of men** after returning to work. Respondents most commonly report utilizing Flexplace (37%) and Flextime (25%), but far fewer utilize a reduced schedule (5%) or gradual return to work (1%).

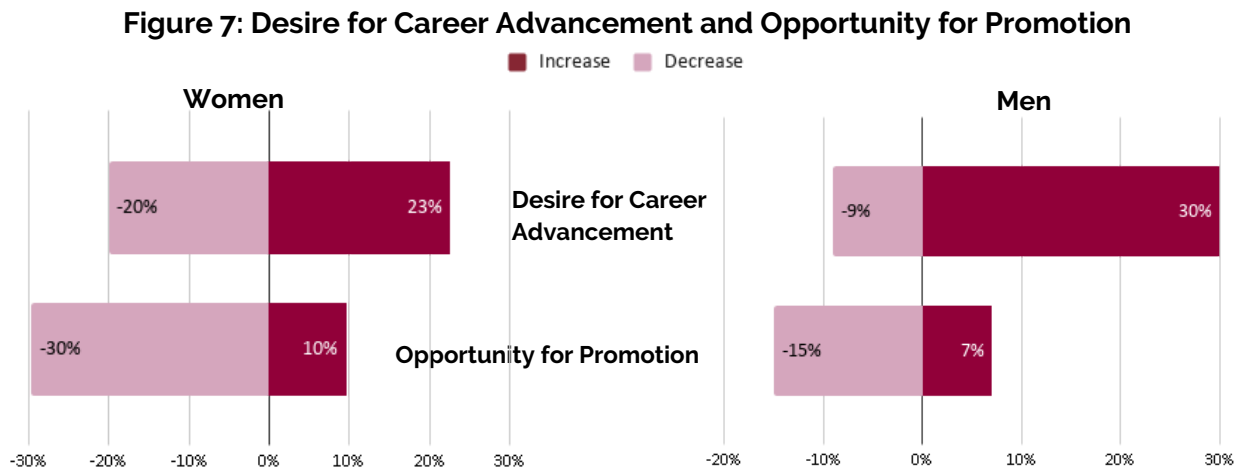
Figure 6: Return-to-Work Experience



The return to work following leave was difficult for many parents. Perhaps as the result of a backlog of work, respondents report that both job responsibilities and manager expectations increased after their return. Supporting this finding, nearly one-quarter (23%) of managers say they did not have adequate resources to manage the workload when employees were on leave. The perception of increased workload and the challenges of adjusting to life as a working parent may explain the notable drop in job satisfaction, particularly among women. Flexible work arrangements and a more gradual, well-defined return-to-work process would facilitate a smoother transition.

## 6 Career advancement is a chief concern for both men and women when taking leave and returning to work.

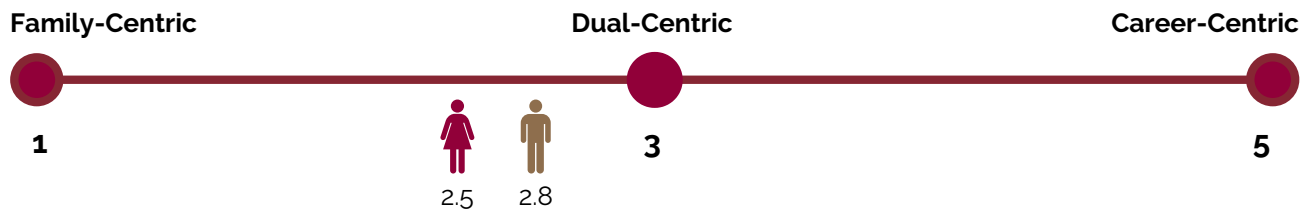
- **Women and men have similar views on career identity and satisfaction.** In fact, women are somewhat more likely to agree that they enjoy their career (85% of women, 79% of men) and that work gives them a sense of personal accomplishment (75% women, 70% of men). Likewise, women are more likely than men to say they consider work to be central to their identity (52% women, 44% men).
- **Respondents were most concerned that taking leave would delay their career advancement.** Women were somewhat more concerned than men with 59% of women and 49% of men agreeing this was a limiting factor. In open-ended responses, both men and women express concern that taking leave may jeopardize their promotability and long-term career progression.
- **When returning to work, both men and women feel an increase in desire for career advancement but perceive that their opportunities for promotion have decreased.** 30% of men report an increased desire for career advancement compared to 9% who report a decrease (21% net increase). 23% of women express an increased desire for career advancement but almost the same number (20%) report a decrease (3% net increase). By comparison, more women than men perceive a decrease in opportunity for promotion (30% of women, 15% of men).



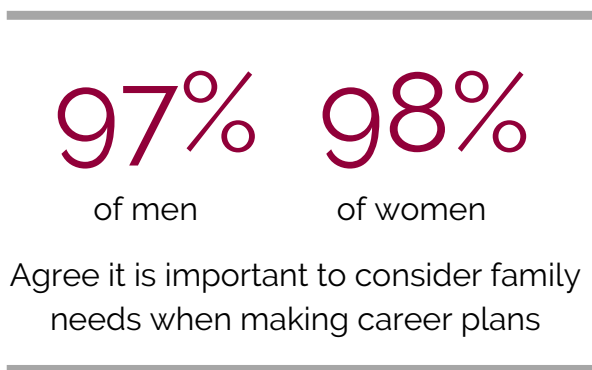
Traditionally gendered views on career advancement would suggest that fathers' desire for advancement increases, while mothers' desire decreases after the addition of children. While men in our study do express greater desire for advancement than women, nearly one-quarter of the mothers are looking for advancement following leave. Women report greater concern about how leave will affect career advancement and see fewer opportunities for upward mobility compared to men. This suggests that making assumptions about career aspirations based on gender and parental status are outdated and biases need to be challenged.

“It'd be extremely helpful if each group leader/senior management [would] explicitly encourage eligible employees [to take] parental leave. The concerns of negative impact on career advancement are very real.”

## 7 Men and women are equally concerned about their ability to combine work and family.



- When respondents were asked to place themselves on a continuum between family-centric and career-centric, **both men and women consider themselves dual-centric**, or equally focused on family and career. Women were somewhat more likely to lean toward being family-centric.
- The large majority of men (97%) and women (98%) agree that it is important to consider their family's needs when making career plans.
- **Women and men share the same top two concerns upon returning to work**, ranking "adequate time for family needs" and "managing work priorities" highest. Likewise, women and men agree in similar numbers that it is not easy to combine work and family (28% of women and 30% of men).



“ Flexibility with regard to being able to care for family is a top priority. I would [give up] higher pay elsewhere in favor of a company culture around workplace flexibility.”

The men and women in the study, by and large, share the same concerns around balancing work and family with a substantial number reporting that it is not easy to combine the two. Organizational programs such as expanded parental leave should recognize that these challenges are common to all employees and should be framed in a gender-neutral way.

## 8 Men and women strive for an egalitarian approach to sharing caregiving and household duties but gender roles persist.

- **The vast majority of men (76%) and women (74%) agree that they should provide equal amounts of care but most men (54%) and women (49%) say that women actually do provide more care.** Only 2% of men report that they do more caregiving than their partner.
- **A substantial minority of men (43%) and women (40%) state that they do share caregiving equally with their partner,** reflecting an egalitarian approach to parenting. However, a smaller and nearly equal number of men (22%) and women (20%) agree that women should provide more care than their partners.
- While most men (80%) and women (83%) also agree that household duties should be shared equally, **fewer report that these duties actually are shared equally.** (54% of men and 43% of women).

**Figure 8: Attitudes towards Sharing Caregiving**

	Men	Women
Should be 50/50	76%	74%
Shared 50/50	43%	40%
Partner does more	54%	8%
I do more	2%	49%

Even in a sample in which the men took extended paid parental leave and the women were employed full-time, mothers were still far more likely to bear the majority of the responsibilities at home. While it is encouraging that mothers' and fathers' aspirations for shared caregiving are both high, the reality is that in the home, traditional gender roles persist. We would expect to see these gender norms shift as the number of dual-earner households grows, more men take expanded parental leave, and the workplace increasingly recognizes and supports men's roles as caregivers.

## Recommendations

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Our study finds that expanded parental leave is a highly valued benefit for both men and women, which yields positive outcomes for organizations in terms of employee loyalty and retention. Following are recommendations that provide a framework for employers to evaluate and implement parental leave policies that can effectively support new parents and, in turn, enhance their reputations as employers of choice.

- **Make full leave available to all employees and provide maximum flexibility.** To the degree possible, leave policies should not distinguish based on job status, partner's employment, or other designations. For example, some organizations ask leave-takers to designate themselves either "primary" or "non-primary" caregivers, where non-primary caregivers (who are almost always men) have access to shorter leave. Policies should also allow employees to take leave at the same time as their partners and over a longer period (e.g. 12 months) to provide employees greater flexibility with timing their leave. This does not increase the leave time offered but it does increase its value to employees.
- **Promote the company's stance on leave and leave-taking.** "Lead by example" was a common refrain among respondents. Employers should share success stories of women and men, especially senior managers, who have taken expanded leave. Leaders can also vocally support the policy to reduce the stigma of leave-taking or the fear that taking leave will limit career advancement.
- **Provide clear information that allows for advanced pre-planning.** While the organizations in our study offered assistance in planning for leave, it is clear that employees need better information well in advance of taking leave. Employees would benefit from improved online resources and access to a single point of contact. In some cases, parental leave is complemented by other forms of company time-off (e.g. holidays, vacation time, sick leave) or state-mandated leave. Employees need clear guidance on how these interact and can be optimized.
- **Provide assistance to line managers.** Line managers are the critical link in making the leave process successful. Managers in our study view the parental leave policy as an important recruitment/retention tool, but one-quarter of those surveyed felt they did not have adequate resources to manage the workload while employees were out on leave. Supporting managers, as well as new parents, will ensure that they continue to encourage employees to take parental leave.
- **Improve the return-to-work experience.** The challenges of returning to work are clear from the results of the study—employees feel overworked and under-supported. Encouraging flexible work arrangements and implementing a gradual return-to-work program for new parents can help minimize the "shock" of leaving a newborn. Respondents were looking for a more formal re-entry process that might include mini-orientations, mandatory check-ins with HR and managers, and new parent coaching. Measures like these that ease employees' transition from leave should positively impact job satisfaction and employer loyalty.

## Acknowledgments

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We would like to thank Dove Men + Care for their generous sponsorship of the Expanded Parental Leave Study. We are extremely grateful to the four companies and their employees who participated in the research to explore these important issues. The Institutional Review Board and Research Services teams at Boston College provided valuable guidance and support, which enabled us to bring this study to fruition.

## About the Center

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The Boston College Center for Work & Family is the country's leading university-based center focused on helping organizations enhance the employee experience. By bridging the worlds of academic research and corporate practice, the Center helps progressive employers find the most relevant, evidence-based information available in order to craft the best possible workforce management practices. For more information, please visit [www.bc.edu/cwf](http://www.bc.edu/cwf).

## About The New Dad Research Series

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The New Dad Series, a ten-year research effort of the Boston College Center for Work & Family led by Professor Brad Harrington, examines the evolving roles and attitudes of working fathers. Over the past decade, this research has explored such topics as the transition to fatherhood, paternity leave, at-home dads, and Millennial fathers. The New Dad Series has garnered extensive international media coverage and offers valuable lessons to men and their employers who seek to better understand the career aspirations and work-family challenges facing today's fathers.

## About the Authors

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**Dr. Brad Harrington** is the Executive Director of the Boston College Center for Work & Family, a research professor in the Carroll School of Management, and a faculty member in the University's Capstone Program. **Tina Lawler McHugh** is a Senior Research Associate who works with the Center's member organizations to design, perform, and produce primary research on workforce management issues. **Jennifer Sabatini Fraone** is the Director of Corporate Partnerships and leads the Boston College Workforce Roundtable.



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