

Submission
to the
Productivity Commission Inquiry
into
Paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave

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Table of Contents

1.	Introduction.....	p.1
2.	Background.....	p.2
3.1	The extent to which an increase in the availability and duration of paid parental leave would significantly alter the quality of infant care and outcomes for the child.....	p.3
3.1.1	The importance of the first three years.....	p.3
3.1.2	Education begins at birth.....	p.3
3.1.3	Children form themselves in relation to their environment.....	p.4
3. 2.	The key impacts of parental, as opposed to non-parental, care on the health and development of children.....	p.4
3.2.1	The impact of parental care on the health and development of children.....	p.4
3.2.2	The impact of non-parental care on the health and development of children....	p 5
3. 3	The appropriate duration of leave to maximise such benefits, and why any minimum period should be mandated.....	p.5
3.3.1	The symbiotic period (0-2 months).....	p.5
3.3.2	The exterogestation period (0-9 months).....	p.6
3.3.3	The duration of leave required to maximise benefits.....	p.6
3.4	How the impacts on child and parental welfare vary across different types of parents and children	p.7
3.4.1	Gender differences in the role of the carer: the differing roles of fathers and mothers.....	p.8

3.4.2 Impacts on child welfare: family income.....	p.8
3.5. The extent to which the introduction of a paid parental leave scheme would assist mothers in establishing and maintaining breastfeeding routines and the benefits.....	p.9
3.6 Complimentary measures that would reinforce the effects of paid parental leave.....	p.10
4. Recommendations.....	p.10
5. Conclusion	p.11
6. References.....	p.1

1. Introduction

Inspired by the vision of Dr Maria Montessori the ultimate aim of the Montessori movement is to place all children at the centre of society and to assist them in becoming the transforming elements leading to a harmonious and peaceful humanity.

On 28 February 2008 Chris Bowen, the assistant Treasurer and Minister for Competition, Policy and Consumer Affairs, pursuant to Parts 2 and 3 of the Productivity Commission Act 1998 referred strategies for the improved support for parents with newborn children to the Commission for inquiry and report by the end of February 2008. In undertaking the Inquiry the Commission is required to examine:

- The potential impact and effectiveness of different models of paid parental leave
- Which elements of these models, or combination of elements, may be most suited to Australia and why

Newcastle Montessori welcomes the opportunity to comment on aspects of the Inquiry into Paid Parental Leave and in particular those that relate to family health and well-being, and the development of young children including the particular development needs of children in their first 3 years.

2. Background

The human infant is born uniquely unfinished and for this reason their education must be seen to begin at birth. Parents, as the child's first teachers, are central to their children's happiness and integration. In the months after the birth, the child's needs are best met where these needs are clearly understood and accepted. Education is not however, the force-feeding of knowledge; rather it is the relationship between a child and the environment. Because children form themselves in relation to the environment, we need to take great care about the environments in which they are placed.

Central to the child's environment are adults who have the power to impact either positively or negatively upon the child's developing psyche. Parents have different roles and in this way complement one another in the care of young children. Parents are the adults best suited in providing their child with the stability and space needed for the child to grow itself.

Childcare workers are generally not qualified, in the way that parents are, for this vital task. Young children also require consistency. By placing children in care before the age of two and a half, children feel confusion and disorientation. And what is ideal for one child, in one moment, will differ markedly from the needs of another; only the home environment is dynamic enough to respond to the young child's varying needs.

The increasing need for women to return to work soon after the birth of their children has also had significant detrimental effects on breast-feeding. Given the physical and psychological advantages of breastfeeding, and of children spending their first few years at home with their parents, it is recommended that the minimum mandated paid parental leave period be nine months, with a further recommendation that this be extended over the next two years to eventually be mandated for a period of two and half years. In so doing the introduction of paid parental leave will benefit parents, children, and society.

3.1 To what extent (and why) would an increase in the availability and duration of paid parental leave significantly alter the quality of infant care and outcomes for the child?

3.1.1 The importance of the first three years of life

The human infant is born uniquely unfinished. The period from birth to three years is one in which “the mind and body must reach a harmonious balance” because the child’s entire subsequent life, depends on the quality of this first phase of development” (Montanaro 1991, p. x). Characterised by unconscious growth and absorption, the internal structure of emotional and intellectual development is being created by means of the Sensitive periods and Absorbent mind (Polk Lillard 1973, p. 48). For the child these three years require unequalled energy and intense effort as “the monumental task of brain-development and self-formation, physical awareness and coordination, will, independence and language” is undertaken (Polk Lillard 1996, p. 24).

3.1.2 Education begins at birth

It follows therefore, that children’s education begins at birth. Learning follows a specific path that allows the child’s intelligence to unfold in a natural process. Adults, rather than forcing learning, should aid the child by observing and following the child’s natural lead (Polk Lillard 1996, p. 28). Based on Montessori’s premise of the ‘absorbent mind’, the role of adults is “not to help the baby form itself” (Montessori 1982, p. 42). Rather, just as in nature the mother provides a suitable environment for the physical embryo, the role of adults is to “continue to provide a suitable environment for the psychic embryo” (Montessori 1982, p. 42). Education is the relationship between a child and that environment.

3.1.3 Children form themselves in relation to their environment

Because education begins at birth, “children form themselves in relation to their environment” (Polk Lillard 1996, p. 28). Children aged three and under have the “unique ability to absorb the qualities of their environment just by being exposed to them” (Polk Lillard & Jessen 2003, p. 40). However the incarnating of impressions is indiscriminate and “the child soaks in like a sponge whatever is there: good or bad, beautiful or ugly, peaceful or violent” (Polk Lillard 1996, p. 26). Therefore the ability of children to absorb every aspect of their environment means “we need to be very careful about what we include in it” (Polk Lillard & Jessen 2003, p. 40).

3. 2. What are the key impacts of parental, as opposed to non-parental, care on the health and development of children?

3.2.1 The impact of parental care on the health and development of children

Maria Montessori believed that parents have the primary responsibility for the life and development of their own children (Polk Lillard 1973, p. 104). Moreover, because education begins at birth, parents must be considered to be the child’s first teachers. The importance of parents as aids to their child’s psychic development was emphasised by Dr Montessori who argued that:

“The child’s parents are not his makers but his guardians. They must protect and care for him, in the deepest sense, as a sacred mission that goes beyond the interests and ideas of external life” (Montessori 1982, p. 228)

For these reasons the family “is a prime determinant for the positive development of the child...Parents hold the key to the development of a happy, integrated, and strong human being” (Montanaro 1991, p. viii).

3.2.2 The impact of non-parental care on the health and development of children

When the first three years of the child's life are spent within the child's home, then parents are in charge of their child's education (Polk Lillard 1973, p. 105). When a child is placed in a childcare institution, parents forgo this fundamental role and instead place their child's education in the hands of staff "who are not really adequately trained for the important task they perform" (Montanaro, 1991, p. viii).

It also needs to be remembered that young children need consistency in their environment. Who children become is influenced by the specific social conditions and cultures in which they live. This is called the process of adaptation. Any changes to normal circumstances are often very disconcerting, especially for young children whose processes of adaptation may not be complete. Without consistency in their environment children become disorientated and confused (Orion, 2005).

3.3 What is the appropriate duration of leave to maximise such benefits, and should any minimum period be mandated?

"During the first year of life there are various periods, each needing a special kind of care" (Montessori, 1984, p. 100).

3.3.1 The symbiotic period (0-2 months)

The biological and psychological relationship between the mother and the child must be protected. It is this relationship alone that "can transform the separation of birth into a new attachment that reproduces, albeit in a different way, the unity of life that has been the basic characteristic of pregnancy" (Montanaro 1991, p. 20). In the first two months of life, during a period referred to as 'symbiosis', the mother should respond to every call from her baby. In so doing, the baby develops "basic trust that the world is a good place and a place that meets one's needs" (Orion 2005, p. 11). This basic trust will eventually lead to the child becoming an optimistic person (Orion 2005). At about two months of age when the baby begins to respond to stimuli outside of the mother the period of symbiosis concludes.

3.3.2 The exterogestation period (0-9 months)

Over the next few months the child gradually acquires motor abilities. During this period, for brief periods of time, the child will turn away from their mother or father towards the environment and then come back to their mother or father. Accordingly, these gradual processes “of separating and reattaching can best be achieved in an environment where these needs are clearly understood and accepted” (Orion, 2005, p. 13). It is not until the human baby is 8-9 months of age, and can crawl and “eat and digest the food of the environment” that the child can “survive, at least biologically, without a mother” (Montanaro, 1991, p. 21). It is also more than a coincidence that “the time needed to reach this important point is identical to the amount of time the child spent in the mother’s body” (Montanaro, 1991, p. 21). For these reasons the nine months after birth are considered to be an ‘external pregnancy’ or exterogestation (Montanaro, 1991, p. 21).

3.3.3 The duration of leave required to maximise benefits

At the conclusion of the exterogestation, at about nine months of age, “children are individuals with well-defined egos” and ideally, “should have developed a basic trust in the environment” and in themselves (Montanaro, 1991, p. 155). Based on the exterogestation time frame, nine months is therefore the recommended minimum period at which paid parental leave should be mandated. However given that the earliest age Dr Montessori recommended placing a child in a school environment “was at the age of two and a half, and more customarily at three” (Polk Lillard, 1996, p. 28) then ideally the appropriate duration of paid parental leave required to maximise these benefits is two and a half to three years of age.

3.4 How do the impacts on child and parental welfare vary across different types of parents and children (for example, by family income, education and Indigenous status, gender of the carer, and for children with disabilities)?

What is of especial importance is the creation of an environment in which children feel no constraint (Montessori 1982, p.148).

3.4.1 Impacts on child welfare: the natural and psychological environment

The environment needs to be the first point of focus when considering the care and education of any child. Adults working with very young children have the greatest influence on their development through the environment they help provide. If difficulties or deviations from a child's expected course of development are sensed, the first attempts to rectify them will be through adjustments to the environment.

Within the environment both the natural and psychological aspects should be considered. The natural environment is composed of the physical and chemical elements that surround us. The psychological environment, in either a positive or negative way, comprises all the elements that stimulate the mind of a human being (Stucky 2006).

Every environment will and should differ in the quality and quantity of psychological elements it includes. This is because at each stage of development, the requirements will vary. So what is ideal for one child will not necessarily be optimum for another. For these reasons the environment needs to be dynamic and able to change to meet the needs of a specific child at a specific moment in time (Stucky 2006).

Caregivers are the link between the physical and psychological environments and the young child. From the caregiver the child will take what they need to construct themselves. However construction of the self does not occur in a vacuum. Adults have the power to distort the child's natural growth and their attitude can make or break a

child's personality. An environment of ambivalence will create contradictions and uncertainties. An environment of acceptance on the other hand, means that an adult really cares about a child and that they accept all the facets of the child's personality (Stucky 2006). Regardless of the circumstances, the optimal environment for the development of children is one that is created with understanding and love, and within which children are accepted for who they are.

3.4.1 Gender differences in the role of the carer: the differing roles of fathers and mothers

The role of the father during the first 8 weeks of the child's birth is primarily to create a relationship with the baby. The mother's role is feeding the baby and ideally she should be the only one to do so (even if the baby is bottle-fed) during the two month symbiotic period (Orion 2005). The father that understands the importance of this special relationship, by forming a protective barrier around the mother and child, is able to protect the privacy of both the mother and baby.

“With such intelligent protection, the gratifying experiences of symbiotic life are more attainable and the first messages to the newborn about the environment are more positive. These experiences will form the components for the child's ‘basic trust’. Paternity leave from work...can certainly help the father in this important task” (Montanaro 1991, p.55).

3.4.2 Impacts on child welfare: family income

Montessori argued that social inequalities “affected children inversely to their parents....While adults suffer among the poor, children suffer among the rich” (Montessori 1984, p 101). This is largely because, Montessori suggests, westernised nations with ‘ultra-modern ideals’ are more likely to treat children in ways “opposed

to their natural needs”

In other countries “mother and child are inseparable”, the “mother talks and the baby listens...and this lasts for the whole period of maternal feeding”...In this way the child’s need for nutrition and the love that unites these two beings, both combine in solving the problem of the child’s adaptation to the world, and this happens in the most natural way possible. Mother and child are one...Except where civilisation has broken down this custom, no mother ever entrusts her child to someone else” (Montessori 1984. p. 107).

“In a number of small ways we are led to see that the things the adult world values can have reversed effects in the world of children” (Montessori 1984, p. 102).

3.5. To what extent would the introduction of a paid parental leave scheme assist mothers in establishing and maintaining breastfeeding routines, and with what benefits?

From a Montessori perspective breastfeeding is a critical aspect of the infant’s and mothers exterogestational life. The mother, in providing the right food

“Establishes the points of reference for attachment. The newborn, on the other hand, offers the mother that the reassurance that what left her body is not lost, helps establish a preferential relationship and, by suckling at the breast, helps the mother’s uterus to contract and shrink back to its normal size and position. This diminishes the risk of hemorrhage and infection...Breast-feeding implies such a special attachment that it is fair to say that the mother and child once more become a single-person, as they were during pregnancy (Montanaro 1991, p. 28).

In this way the child, through their repeated direct experiences with a loving parent, learns that the external world responds quickly to their needs and that the environment, as represented by the mother, can be trusted (Montanaro 1991, p. 29).

3.6 What complementary measures would reinforce the infant and parental welfare effects of paid parental leave?

Parental education such as that provided by the Montessori 0-3 programme, would reinforce the effects of paid parental leave. The Montessori 0-3 programme is an education programme for parents and their children. Working within a prepared environment, a range of age appropriate activities and experiences are provided for children. Parents are taught strategies such as when to offer assistance to a child and when to retreat. The 0-3 environment has different considerations to those for older children as it is important not to replicate the activities suitable to older children, whose objectives are to meet different developmental needs (Stucky 2006). By providing parents with age appropriate advice parents are more able to assist their children in their physical and psychological development.

4. Recommendations

1. That the initial minimum mandated period for paid parental leave be nine months
2. That this leave be extended, within two years, to a period of two and half years

5. Conclusion

The home is the best environment in which to assist children aged 0-3 in their physical and psychological development, as it is this environment alone that can best meet their individual and dynamic needs. The introduction of paid parental leave will mean that parents, as the child's first teachers, will be assisted in fulfilling this vital role. However the benefits of introducing paid parental leave go beyond those of the child and its parents; paid parental leave will impact positively on society as a whole for as Dr Maria Montessori wrote in a letter to all governments in 1947,

"...The child is the forgotten citizen, and yet, if statesmen and educationists once came to realise the terrific force that is in childhood for good or for evil, I feel they would give it priority above everything else. All problems of humanity depend on man himself; if man is disregarded in his construction, the problems will never be solved."

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