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of Ministers

State of Nordic Fathers

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Carl Cederström



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Introduction



Photo: Johnér

Introduction

Much has happened since the Nordic countries introduced shared parental leave between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s.

Back then, very few fathers used any leave, and those who did met fierce resistance. They were ridiculed as being “unmanly” in the media. In Sweden, they were called by a pejorative name—“velour dads”—raising the image of a feminized man dressed in one-piece velour pyjamas. In the early 1980s, a group of psychologists publicly warned parents against the risks of letting fathers stay at home with their children. They claimed that children need a mother and a father. Not two mothers.

A few decades down the road, norms have changed considerably. Today, father’s leave has become normal in the Nordic countries.

As this report shows, parents in the Nordic countries agree that fathers, as much as mothers, should be an active presence in the early years of their children’s lives, with over 90 percent of both fathers and mothers saying a father should be heavily involved in childcare. They agree that it is as much a mother’s responsibility as it is a father’s to care for children during their first years.

The survey, on which this report is based, gathered responses from an online questionnaire completed by a total of 7515 people, evenly distributed between the five Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The survey was carried out in partnership with the 2019 “State of the World’s Fathers” report, coordinated by Promundo as part of the MenCare campaign.

Three quarters of these are parents (n = 5575), and 85 percent (n = 4745) of the parents had taken at least two weeks of parental leave.

When featuring in film and media, fathers are often represented as clumsy, awkward and incompetent. However, the fathers in this report regard themselves just as adept at looking after their children as their partners. When asked if they feel competent at taking care of their children, 96 percent of both fathers and mothers said they agree or strongly agree; and fathers are almost as satisfied as mothers with the involvement they have with their children (77 vs 80 percent).

Parental leave, according to the respondents, is no longer for mothers only. Three quarters of both men and women agree that parental leave should be shared equally between parents.

For fathers, this means that they get a chance to grow closer to their children. For mothers, it means that they have better opportunities for career advancement and to thrive also outside the home. And for children, it means that they have access to not one, but two, or more, parents.

And yet, parental leave is not shared equally in the Nordic countries. In Iceland and Sweden, the fathers take roughly 30 percent of the total available leave. In Norway, the figure is 20 percent, and in Denmark and Finland 11 percent.

This report seeks to examine why this is the case; and, by extension, identify possible avenues to help increase fathers' share of both childcare and parental leave.

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Since the dawn of fatherhood research in the 1970s, numerous studies have highlighted the important role that fathers play. Children who grow up with fathers are less likely to experience psychological and social difficulties and perform better academically. Relationships where fathers contribute more actively in childcare are more stable. Fathers who spend time with their children in the early years also tend to have better relations with their children as they grow older.

What makes fathers so important to children is not that they add something distinctly different to their children's life by virtue of their gender. What they add is the presence of another parent, who is capable of providing social, physical and emotional support. This is not to say that single or separated parents would be any less capable at caring for their children than parents living together.

While this report will speak in terms of fathers and mothers, it is crucial to remember that children are just as likely to grow up healthily in households with parents living in same-sex relationships as with heterosexual parents. What matters is the presence of caring parents, whether the parent is a man, a woman, or otherwise.

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What this report contributes to existing research is an in-depth look at the role of parents in the Nordic countries, and how their experiences of parenting and attitudes to childcare vary with the length of their parental leave. While it is impossible from this survey to distinguish between cause and effect, it is abundantly clear that when fathers take longer leave, they experience a range of benefits, from better relationships with their partners, greater satisfaction with the involvement they have with their children, to even experiencing a higher level of life satisfaction.

With responses from over 3099 fathers and 1646 mothers who have been on parental leave, this survey is able to compare attitudes and behaviour of parents who have taken no leave with those who have either taken short, long, or very long leave.

And, whether cause or effect, fathers who have taken long leave distinguish themselves in many respects from those who took no leave.

These insights should hopefully inspire fathers to assume a greater share of the parental leave they are eligible to take, as well as prompt policy-makers to support parents in their outspoken ambition to share both childcare and parental leave equally.

Key findings

Finding 1

Both fathers and mothers agree that parental leave should be shared equally.

On average, almost three quarters of both fathers (72 percent) and mothers (73 percent) agree that parental leave should be shared equally between mothers and fathers, and 85 percent of both fathers and mothers agree that fathers should make it a top priority to take all available leave they are eligible for so they can bond with their new-born child.

Finding 2

Fathers believe they are as competent at taking care of their children as mothers are, and they are almost as satisfied with the level of involvement they have with their children as mothers.

According to the survey, 96 percent of both fathers and mothers consider themselves competent or very competent at taking care of their children. When asked if they are satisfied with the involvement they have with their children, fathers were almost as likely to say they were either satisfied or very satisfied (77 percent) as mothers (80 percent).

Finding 3

Fathers believe childcare responsibilities are shared equally between partners, but mothers don't.

Fathers and mothers have different views on how childcare work is divided in their households. Almost two-thirds (65 percent) of the fathers in this report believe they share childcare responsibilities equally with their partner. In contrast, fewer than half of the mothers (45 percent) say that childcare responsibilities are equally divided between them and their partners, with more than half (53 percent) claiming they do most of the work.

Finding 4

Fathers who took longer paternity leave say they are less likely to rely on a female partner to do most childcare work than those who took short leave or no leave at all.

Almost a quarter of fathers who either took no leave (24 percent) or took leave for a month or less (23 percent) said their female partner did most of the childcare work at home, compared to only 15 percent of fathers who had been on leave for three months. Fathers who took longer leave were also more likely to say they shared childcare responsibilities equally.

Finding 5

Fathers who took longer paternity leave are less likely to adhere to traditional norms of masculinity.

Previous research has suggested that traditional and rigid ideas of what it is to be a man may be an obstacle for men to bond with their children. In line with those findings, this survey indicates that fathers who took short or no leave were more likely to affirm traditional attitudes about manhood.

Finding 6

Both mothers and fathers say they are more satisfied with their relationships when childcare responsibilities are shared equally.

Both mothers and fathers say they are more satisfied in their relationships when childcare duties—such as physical care, emotional care, and daily planning — are shared equally between the two partners. When shared equally, around 85 percent of mothers and fathers are satisfied with their relationships. When one parent feels they do most of the work, that number drops to 70 percent.

Finding 7

Fathers, but not mothers, are more satisfied with their roles as parents when childcare responsibilities are shared equally.

When childcare duties are shared equally, fathers are more satisfied with the involvement they have with their children and they also feel more competent as parents. Mothers, however, are most likely to feel competent at taking care of their children when they take the larger share of childcare responsibilities. When their partner takes the main responsibility for childcare, mothers feel less competent as parents but are more satisfied with their jobs.

Finding 8

Fathers who have taken long leave are more likely to seek out information about parenting from books, doctors, friends or partners.

Mothers are often seen as the expert parent, taking children to doctors, and speaking to friends and family about parenting. But fathers who took longer leave were consistently more likely to seek out information about parenting than fathers who took short or no leave. Fathers who took leave for longer than three months were as likely to seek information from books, doctors, friends, family and internet as mothers who had been on leave for seven months or less.

Finding 9

Fathers who took no, or short, paternity leave are more likely to say their relation with co-workers or managers would deteriorate if they took long leave.

Previous research has pointed out career penalties and unsupportive colleagues as barriers to fathers' uptake of parental leave. This survey shows that fathers who believe long leave would have a negative impact on their relation to co-workers and managers were less likely to take long leave. Fathers who took no leave were also more afraid that taking long leave would negatively impact on their chances to advance.

Finding 10

The longer a father has been on parental leave, the more willing he is to make changes to his work-situation to care for his children.

One of the main reasons women are over-represented in part-time work is that they spend more time caring for their children. This report shows that while mothers on average are more willing to change their work situation than fathers, fathers who took long paternity leave are more willing to make changes to their working situation than fathers who had taken no leave or short leave.



1. Nordic fathers in context

Photo: Moa Karlberg

1. Nordic fathers in context

The Nordic countries are the most gender equal in the world.

Since 2006, the World Economic Forum has published the Global Gender Gap Index, to examine gender disparities between countries, and for ten consecutive years, Iceland has held the top spot. In the most recent ranking, from 2018, Norway, Sweden, and Finland held the other top four slots. Denmark was the only Nordic country not to rank among the top-five, ranking thirteenth.

According to the "Fairness in Family Index", a ranking conducted by the Fatherhood Institute, a UK-based think tank, each of the five top positions are occupied by countries from the Nordic region. In contrast to the World Economic Forum report, which reviews equality between men and women more broadly, this index explicitly examines the conditions for mothers and fathers in each country, and how successful these countries have been in promoting equality between fathers and mothers. Sweden held the top spot both in the first analysis, published in 2010, and the second, conducted in 2016.

What makes fathers in the Nordic countries stand out from fathers in other parts of the world is that they spend a considerable amount of time with their children during their early years. And, as numerous research studies have shown, fathers who are present from early on are also more likely to have a close relationship to their children as they grow up. For instance, one study showed that fathers who were present at birth were also more involved in childcare later on.

Nordic fathers, this report shows, want to be with their children early on. Between 89 percent (in Denmark) and 96 percent (in Sweden) say they want to be very involved in the early months and years of their children's lives.

But they are not alone, we learn from the recent global 2019 "State of the World's Fathers: Unlocking the Power of Men's Care" report, which includes survey responses from six countries: Netherlands, United Kingdom, Canada, Brazil, Argentina and Japan. The Nordic survey was adapted from this study, so many of the questions were similar, or even identical. When asked, in both surveys, if fathers wanted to be heavily involved in their children's life already from the start, an overwhelming majority of them from all countries agreed.

With regard to the father's role, between 86 and 94 percent of the fathers living in one of the Nordic countries agreed that it is a father's responsibility to be heavily involved in childcare. Nordic fathers proved not to be unique in this regard. Similarly, fathers in Japan and Brazil also agreed overwhelmingly (82 percent) with that same statement. In Canada, UK, and the Netherlands, the percentage was even higher (88 percent), just below the Nordic average (92 percent).

When listening only to what fathers say, we may get the picture that all fathers around the world are committed to be as involved in their children's lives as mothers are. This is no doubt a laudable attitude and ambition. After all, the more fathers who say they want to take a greater share of the responsibility during the early years in their children's lives, the better. Yet, in most countries, this picture bears little correspondence with reality.

While they support taking on a new parenting role, in which they are heavily involved in emotional and physical care and engage in their children's daily activities, the fathers in the survey are less optimistic about attitudes among other men, especially if they happen to be their manager.

Compared to other surveyed countries, Nordic fathers are relatively optimistic about managers attitudes. They see their immediate managers as only slightly less inclined to think of fathers as active caregivers (85 percent) than they themselves are. Fathers in other Western countries, including in the UK, Canada and the Netherlands, were found to be less hopeful, with only 65 percent saying that their managers would think of fathers as active caregivers.

This suggests that, with respect to attitudes, the difference between the Nordic countries and other Western countries does not lie in what fathers think about their own roles as parents—but instead in what their managers think. The fact that many of the fathers in the survey were managers themselves—and that they were almost as likely to say they were in favour of a father taking responsibility for childcare as the other fathers—reveals something interesting. Namely, that fathers may be keen to say that they themselves are in favour of equality, but they think that other fathers are not.

Another difference between the Nordic countries and the three other Western countries is what mothers say about their male partners. In the Nordic countries, mothers are more prone to say that their partners think fathers should be heavily involved in childcare. For instance, 85 percent of mothers living in Sweden said their partners believe they should be heavily involved in daily planning such as arranging playdates and other activities related to their children. In the United Kingdom, only 65 percent of the mothers agreed their partners would think that way.

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To conclude, then, this survey suggests that fathers believe they should be heavily involved in childcare, whether they live in the Nordic countries or elsewhere. But, when fathers are asked what their managers believe, or when mothers are asked what their partners believe, the difference between fathers living in the Nordic countries, and fathers living elsewhere, whether the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, or Japan, becomes all the more striking.

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2. Parental leave in the Nordic countries



Photo: Adobe Stock

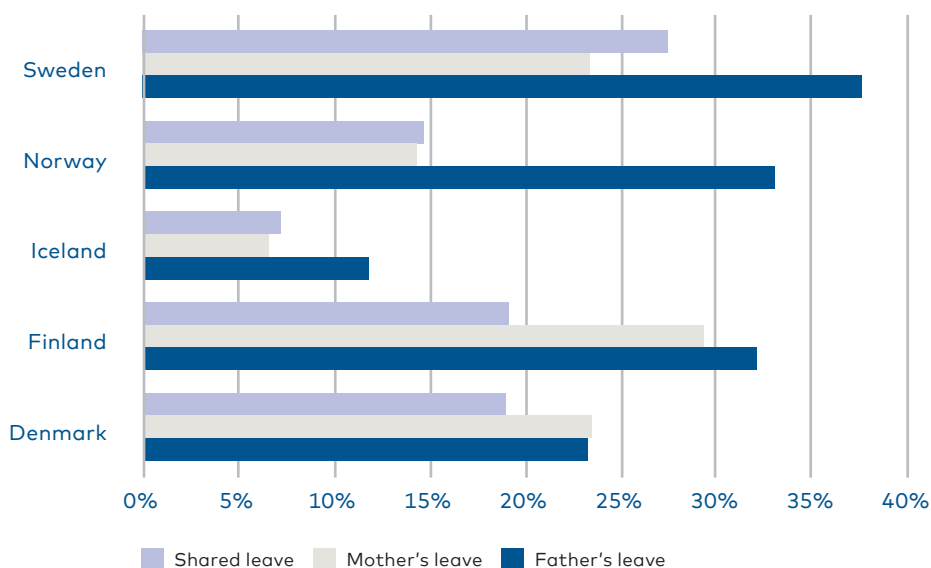
2. Parental leave in the Nordic countries

What makes fathers in the Nordic countries different from fathers in most other countries is not that they want to be with their children. The difference is that they *can*.

The Nordic countries offer the most generous leave schemes for parents in the world, and they also take longer leave than parents in most other countries. And, as this survey shows, they want more. Both fathers and mothers in all of the Nordic countries say they want longer leave.

When asked if they think parental leave overall is already long enough, only a quarter (26 percent) of the total 7500 respondents answered in the affirmative. For shared parental leave, 18 percent of respondents said it was long enough, and 21 percent said that mother's leave was long enough. Iceland had the least number of mothers and fathers who considered their available leave long enough, out of all five countries.

Graph 1 - Fathers and mothers who think parental leave (shared leave, mother's leave and father's leave) in their country is already long enough



Beyond the Nordic region, there are other countries which also offer leave for extended periods. Several OECD countries have long father-specific leave. France, Belgium and Portugal offer about twenty to thirty weeks. And Japan and Korea offer as much as 52 weeks each. But none of these countries offer a compensation level that exceeds 60 percent of the fathers' previous income.

Meanwhile, several OECD countries offer high compensation levels for paternity leave, including Chile, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Mexico, Poland, the Netherlands, Spain, Malta and Romania – all of which offer 100 percent of the father's previous salary. But the length of this paternity leave in these countries is strongly limited, ranging from just a couple of days up to four weeks, and designed, mainly, to allow fathers to be present during birth and the days or weeks that follow.

Only five of the OECD countries offer leave longer than ten weeks with a compensation level higher than 65 percent, and four of those are from the Nordic region.

Even though the Nordic countries stand out as a distinct group among other nations, there are many differences and variations between them. Sweden offers the longest paid leave with 69 weeks altogether; followed by Norway, Denmark and Finland, with around 50 weeks each; and Iceland with close to 40 weeks.

The payment levels range from 70 to 100 percent. Several of the systems allow the possibility of extending the number of weeks to a lower payment level, or for longer leave but with little or no payment.

One of the most significant differences between the systems is around flexibility. Finland and Denmark have adopted more flexible systems in relation to which parent can use the available leave. In Denmark, two weeks are reserved for fathers and 32 weeks can be shared, compared to Finland where nine weeks are reserved for fathers and 26 can be shared. In Sweden, thirteen weeks are earmarked for fathers and mothers respectively, and they have an additional 43 weeks to share.

Iceland and Norway have a three-part leave system (or close to, in the case of Norway). In Iceland, there are 13 weeks allotted to the father, 13 weeks to the mother, and 13 weeks to share. In Norway, there are 15 weeks allotted to each parent and 16 to share.

The effect of father-designated leave

In 1974, Sweden became the first country in the world to offer parental leave for fathers, and, soon after, the other Nordic countries followed suit: Norway in 1978, Iceland in 1981, Denmark in 1984, and finally Finland in 1985.

But during the first couple of decades, few fathers made use of the leave. It was not until earmarked periods were introduced that the effect became visible. In 1993,

Norway became the first country to introduce a so-called "daddy quota". Since then, the number of men who took parental leave has skyrocketed, from four percent to 70 percent. When Iceland, in 2002, introduced their three-part system, the effect was even more dramatic. In just a few years, the number of fathers who were on leave went from less than one to 80 percent. In 2011, 90 percent of all Icelandic fathers took the three months they were entitled to.

Despite proving effective to increase men's share of parental leave, these initiatives have been criticized for constraining families' freedom to divide parental leave as they see fit. As a response to these concerns, Denmark decreased the number of earmarked weeks for fathers to two weeks in 2002, while at the same time increasing the number of shared weeks. In 2014, Norway reduced the number of weeks reserved for the father, from fourteen to ten weeks. As a result of these reforms, fathers' uptake of parental leave instantly decreased in both countries. While Norway has since then increased the weeks reserved for fathers, Denmark has not.

Today, just over ten percent of the total available leave is used by fathers in Denmark and Finland, compared to close to 30 percent in Iceland and Sweden, and 20 percent in Norway.

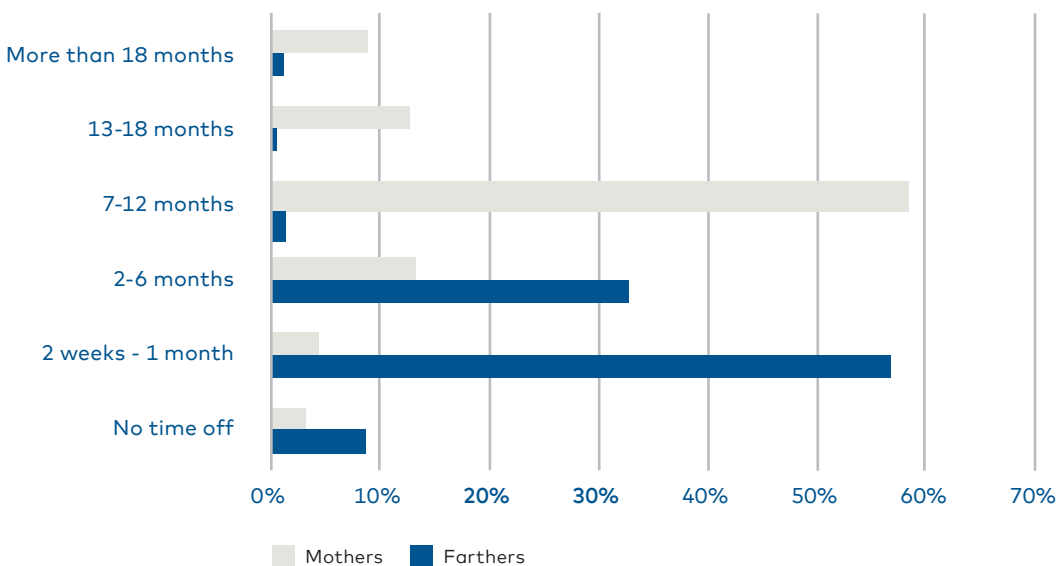
Findings from previous research on 21 European countries revealed that, in general, large majorities of men take high-paid non-transferable leave while only a small minority take forms of leave that are either low-paid or transferable. This applies to the Nordic countries, too, where most of the shareable leave is taken by mothers. In Norway, for instance, the fathers' uptake has followed the trend of the father's quota.

Survey results

As the respondents of this survey reported the length of their parental leave in onths, rather than days, it is difficult to assess exactly how closely the current sample of over 3500 parents reflect the reality of Nordic parents. Even so, it is clear from the current sample (of 1816 mothers and 3734 fathers) that mothers take the lion share of the parental leave.

For instance, close to 80 percent of the mothers in the survey were on leave for more than six months, compared to just over five percent of the fathers. And while 56 percent of the fathers were on leave for no more than one month, only six percent of the mothers stayed at home for that short a period.

Graph 2 - Length of respondents' parental leave



The majority of the fathers (between 60 and 65 percent) had been on leave for between 2 weeks and one month, while between 3 and 4 percent had been on leave for more than six months.

While Finland is the country in the survey where most fathers take no leave at all, closely followed by Iceland and Norway, we see that fathers in Denmark and Sweden are least likely to take no leave at all.

Swedish fathers in the survey are also much more likely to be on leave for longer than six months, and slightly more likely to be on leave for more than a year, although that group is very small (2.3 percent).

Finally, in Iceland, a very high proportion of the fathers (58.7 percent) take leave between two and six months.

For the mothers responding to the survey, the pattern is different. In Iceland, the number of mothers that use between two and six months is much larger than it is in the other countries, which is likely to be a result of their three-part system. In Norway, six percent of mothers took no leave at all, compared to roughly three percent in the other Nordic countries.

In this survey, a third of mothers living in Finland said they were on leave for more than 18 months, and a third of mothers in Sweden were on leave between 13 and 18 months, making mothers in these two countries stand out as those who go on longest leave. Roughly fifty percent of them went on leave for more than a year, compared to thirty percent in Norway, and twenty percent in Iceland and Denmark.

While these figures may not perfectly represent the reality of the Nordic countries, they are important to take into account when reading the rest of this report, as they directly reflect the results of this survey.

Due to the disparity between the length of parental leave that mothers used compared to fathers, this report will use different brackets when referring to mother's leave than when referring to father's leave. While the first bracket of mother's leave is "less than 7 months" (n = 356), the first bracket for father's leave is "no leave" (n = 445). This is to make sure that each of the brackets include enough respondents to be representative.

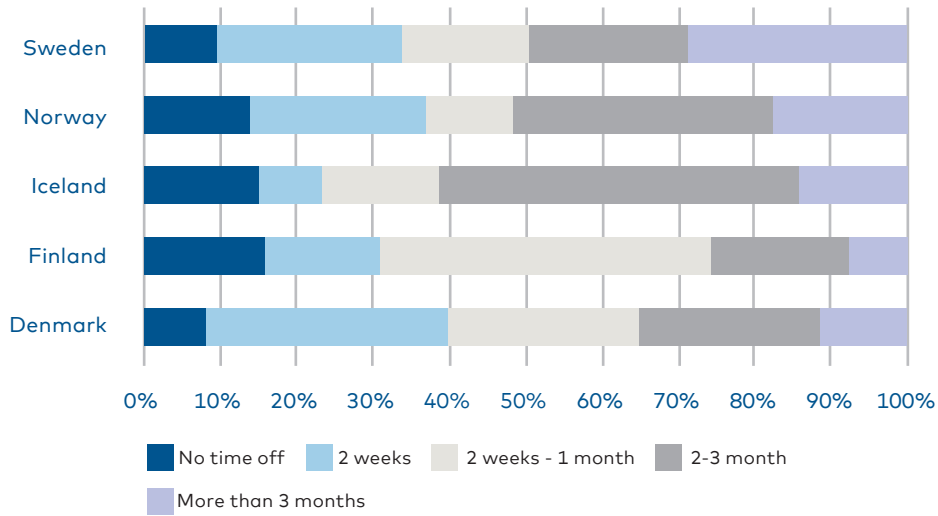
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In the report, "long parental leave" for fathers refers to leave for two months or more; and, for mothers, seven months or more. "Short leave", for fathers, refers to leave for two weeks or less; and, for mothers, less than seven months.

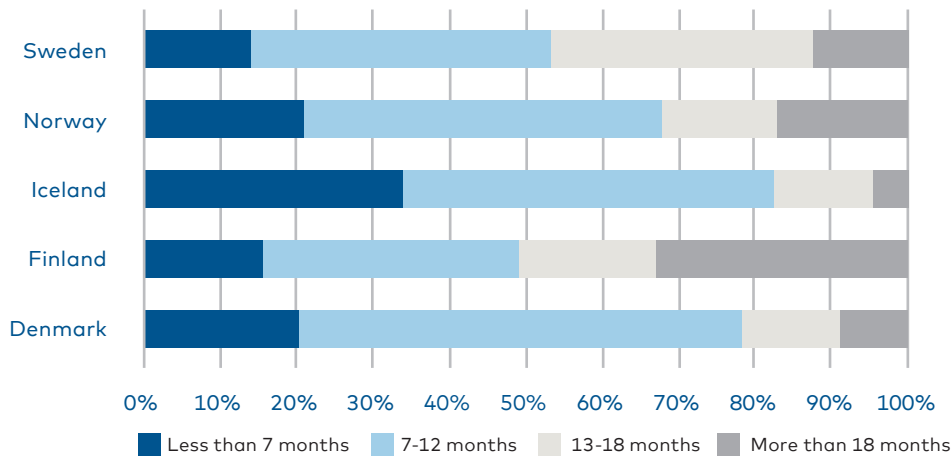
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Using these brackets, the use of father's and mother's leave for each country is distributed as follows:

Graph 3 - Length of respondents' father's leave, by country



Graph 4 - Length of respondents' mother's leave, by country





3. Equality between fathers and mothers

Photo: Johnér

3. Equality between fathers and mothers

Across the world, mothers take the main responsibility for childcare and household work, and the Nordic countries are no exception.

Still, this survey shows that most fathers wish to contribute equally, and that most fathers believe that they contribute as much as mothers do.

Whatever it is that makes fathers believe they share care work equally with their partners, when mothers did not feel the same, it is important to acknowledge this divide and ask what can be done to help parents reflect on their own contribution.

Attitudes towards childcare responsibilities

In the survey, respondents were asked to what degree they think fathers and mothers have a responsibility to be heavily involved in each of these childcare activities:

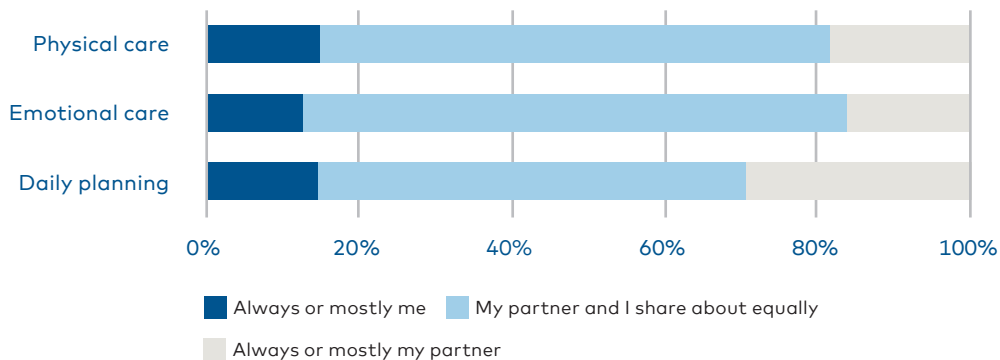
Daily planning (i.e. anticipating and thinking ahead for things like playdates, what children will wear, dropping and picking up from school, planning transportation, and weekend and free time activities)

Emotional care (i.e. being affectionate and listening and responding to children's thoughts and feelings)

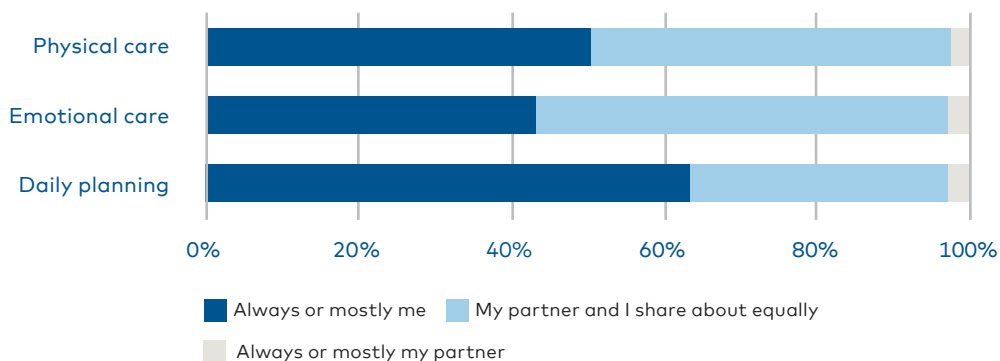
Physical care (i.e. feeding children, keeping them and the home clean, putting them to bed, and providing needed medical care)

An overwhelming majority of both mothers and fathers agree that it is the responsibility of both the father and the mother to be heavily involved in all three forms of childcare. In fact, fathers are slightly more prone to say it is a father's—rather than a mother's—responsibility to engage in these childcare activities.

Graph 5 - Division of childcare work according to fathers



Graph 6 - Division of childcare work according to mothers



How childcare responsibilities are shared

Despite their commitment to share equally, mothers take the larger share of each of these activities.

According to the fathers in the survey, childcare activities are almost shared equally between their partners and themselves. Mothers, however, give a very different picture.

While 55 percent of fathers say they share daily planning equally, only 33 percent of mothers agree, saying instead that they either do most or all of the work (64 percent). Between 66 and 70 percent of fathers say they share physical and emotional care equally with their partners. In contrast, about half of the mothers say they share the responsibility equally (46 and 54 percent), while the other half say they either do most or all of the work. Only 2 to 3 percent of the mothers say their partners do most or all of the emotional and physical care.

The benefits of sharing the childcare and household work equally

Previous studies have indicated that both men and women experience greater dissatisfaction when living in relationships plagued by what researchers call "gender-based inequities".

One study on married couples found that the more hours a husband works away from home, the less satisfied both partners are in their marriage. The same study found that husbands experience more marital conflict when their wives feel that household chores are not shared fairly.

The results of the present survey are in tune with these findings. For instance, when perceiving they take the larger share of childcare and household responsibilities, both men and women are less satisfied with their lives in general. And when shared equally, both men and women are more satisfied with their relationships.

The experience of work and parenting differ between fathers and mothers. When childcare is shared equally, fathers are consistently more satisfied with all aspects of their lives, including jobs, relationships and roles as parents. Mothers, on the other hand, are not always most satisfied when childcare is shared equally. For instance, when their partners do most of the work at home, mothers are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs, although they feel less competent in their role as parents.

Even if equality is desirable on its own terms, this survey suggests that fathers who live in relationships where childcare responsibility is shared equally also experience a greater satisfaction with their relationships and the involvement they have with their children. On the whole, fathers seem more comfortable in their roles as parents, and better off with their lives, relationships and jobs when they perceive childcare and household responsibilities to be shared equally, although they seem to be almost as comfortable when this is taken care of by their partners as well. But when they, in their estimate, take the larger share of childcare work, they report to be less satisfied.

When we look at mothers, a somewhat different pattern emerges. For instance, when their partners assume the principal responsibility for daily planning, mothers are less likely to feel very competent in their role as parents and less satisfied with the level of involvement they have with their children, while being more satisfied with their working life and slightly more satisfied with their lives, overall. And unlike fathers, they are more likely to feel competent as a parent when they take the greater share of daily planning, physical care and emotional care.

Overall, mothers seem equally satisfied with the involvement of their children if they take the greater share, or if they share equally. But in the (very rare) event that their partners take more of the responsibility, they feel less satisfied with the involvement they have with their children.

This may indicate that mothers who pursue a career rather than taking the main responsibility for childcare are judged more harshly than fathers. No doubt, there is still a stigma attached to women who choose work over childcare.

Finally, according to the survey, both fathers and mothers say their relationships are improved when the responsibility of childcare is shared equally.

4. Does parental leave change a father's values?



Photo: JØRGEN KIRK RITZAU - SCANPIX

4. Does parental leave change a father's values?

The reasons why fathers should take parental leave are many. It offers an unprecedented opportunity for fathers to bond with their children, allows mothers to return to work, and gives the child access to more than just one parent.

Yet another reason to promote father's leave is that it makes relationships between partners more equal. A longitudinal study from Iceland, conducted at three separate intervals, revealed a relation between uptake of parental leave and contribution to the household. In other words, a father who took leave also took a greater share of the responsibility at home, contributing more to both childcare and other household chores, even after the leave had ended.

Based on their own assessments, fathers in this survey also contributed more to childcare work the longer leave they had taken. Two-thirds of fathers (66 percent) who took more than three months of leave said they shared childcare work equally with their partners and only 15 percent said they relied on their partners to do the majority of the childcare work. In contrast, fathers who took no leave shared caregiving equally to a lesser extent (57 percent) and were also more likely to rely on their partners to do most of the work (25 percent).

This is a key finding, in line with previous research, but there seems to be a range of other outcomes that are associated with the length of a father's leave.

As we will see in the present chapter, what fathers think about gender and equality, and their inclination to learn more about parenting, vary with the length of their parental leave.

This may indicate that fathers who subscribe to a particular set of values are less inclined to use the parental leave they are eligible for. But it might also indicate that something happens during the course of parental leave, and that taking time off to care for a child helps shape the way fathers think. It may also make them more interested in parenting, not just in practical terms, but also in theoretical terms, prompting them to seek out information about parenting from books or internet, or talking about parenting with friends and family.

The assumption that a father's values change over the course of parental leave is not far-fetched. Previous research has indicated that fathers who adhere to traditional perceptions of gender are facing greater obstacles to bond with their children^{xiii, xvi}. The result presented here may be read along those lines: that a father's set of values with regard to issues of gender and equality is determining the amount of leave he takes. In that case, traditional norms of masculinity are a key barrier for fathers to take leave.

But the result could also be read in a different light. In the same way that fathers in Iceland changed their behaviour as a result of taking longer leave, it may well be the case that a father's set of values with regard to equality and gender is shaped over the course of his leave.

The most likely scenario, however, is that each inform the other. Either way, this survey shows a strong and consistent relation between length of parental leave on the one hand and norms of equality and masculinity on the other.

Irrespective of how one chooses to read these results, they have implications for fathers as well as for policy-makers. For new fathers, these findings should be read as an inspiration to take long leave. For policy-makers, politicians, employers and others who are involved in shaping the conditions for new fathers, the findings should be read as an invitation to facilitate the situation for fathers in such a way that they can take leave without worrying about career penalties and financial constraints.

Traditional gender norms

Nordic fathers may be among the most gender-equal men in the world. However, the longstanding expectation on fathers to be breadwinners and mothers to be care-givers is still lingering. In the survey, more than half of the fathers (55 percent), and almost three quarters of all mothers (62 percent) say it makes more sense for women than for men to take longer leave because a child needs the mother more than the father. And when asked whether it is a mother's responsibility to contribute to the family financially to help pay for the expenses of raising a child, about half of the mothers strongly agreed, compared to 41 percent of the fathers.

There is a difference between what fathers and mothers think about these questions. However, that difference is small compared to the difference we find when comparing fathers who took no leave with fathers who took long leave.

While the majority of the fathers (59 percent) who took no leave agreed that a child needs a mother more than a father, only a third of the fathers (35 percent) who had been on leave for more than three months agreed. And fathers who took no leave were less inclined to say that mothers should contribute financially to the household (33 percent) in comparison to fathers who took more than three months of leave (51 percent).

Researchers have long pointed out that traditional gender roles can be restrictive for men as much as for women. Men who adhere to traditional, rigid ideas of what it means to be a man are often less capable of expressing their emotions, and, by extension, more prone to depression and lower levels of satisfaction with both their relationships and lives in general.

The notion of the father as financial provider and stern disciplinarian began to be called into question already in the 1960s. But half a century later, many fathers are still struggling to navigate between the role as an emotionally available father on the one hand and traditional assumptions that a father's principal role is to set boundaries and act as a male role model on the other.

A study from 2018^{xiii} showed that ideas of what a "real man" is shape fathers' behaviour. Those who adhere to traditional notions of manhood are less involved in emotional care and more likely to use harsh discipline.

It is against this background that the following findings—indicating that fathers who took long leave are less likely to conform to traditional gender norms than those who took no leave—should be read and interpreted.

When asked, in this survey, whether they agree to statements such as, "men should not ask for help", "not talk about their worries", and "act strong even if they feel scared", the answers varied depending on the length of leave a father had taken. A third (35 percent) of the fathers who had taken no leave either agreed or strongly agreed to these statements, compared to less than a quarter (24 percent) of those who had taken more than three months of father's leave.

How fathers want to share parental leave

Compared to other countries, the Nordic countries, despite their internal differences, provides favourable conditions to share parental leave equally. Despite this, the division between fathers and mothers is still far from equal, and there are concerns that the progress has not only slowed down or halted, but even back-fired.

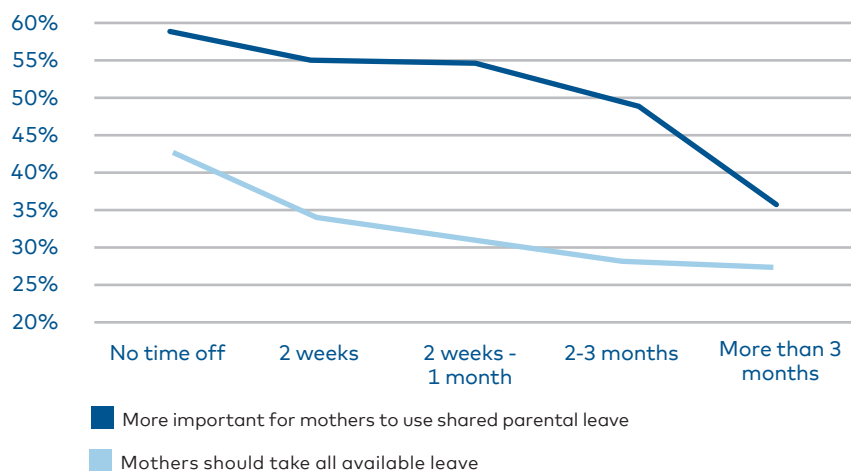
The disparity between the length of mother's leave and father's leave depends on an array of interconnected reasons, some of which may be more obvious than others.

One reason that does not seem to explain the disparity is what fathers and mothers think about sharing parental leave equally. Judged from the result of the present survey, parents in the Nordic countries are committed to sharing leave, and fathers (74 percent) were just about as likely as mothers (75 percent) to say that mothers and fathers should share parental leave equally. What is perhaps most striking is that, while the answer to this question varied slightly between the Nordic countries, it was answered in almost exactly the same way by mothers and fathers.

But whereas mothers and fathers were generally in agreement, there is a considerable gap between fathers who took no leave and fathers who took long leave. Between 67 and 69 percent of fathers who had taken leave up to one month either agreed or strongly agreed that both parents should share leave equally. In contrast, as many as 84 percent of fathers who had taken more than three months of leave said they agreed.

The same gap was evident when looking at questions that were closely related. When asked whether they agree to these two statements—"mothers should use all available leave", and "it is more important for mothers to use all available leave"—fathers who took no leave were most likely to agree (59 and 43 percent respectively), compared to fathers who took leave for more than three months (36 and 27 percent).

Graph 7 - Fathers' attitudes regarding mothers' responsibility to take parental leave in relation to length of father's leave



Seeking information about parenting

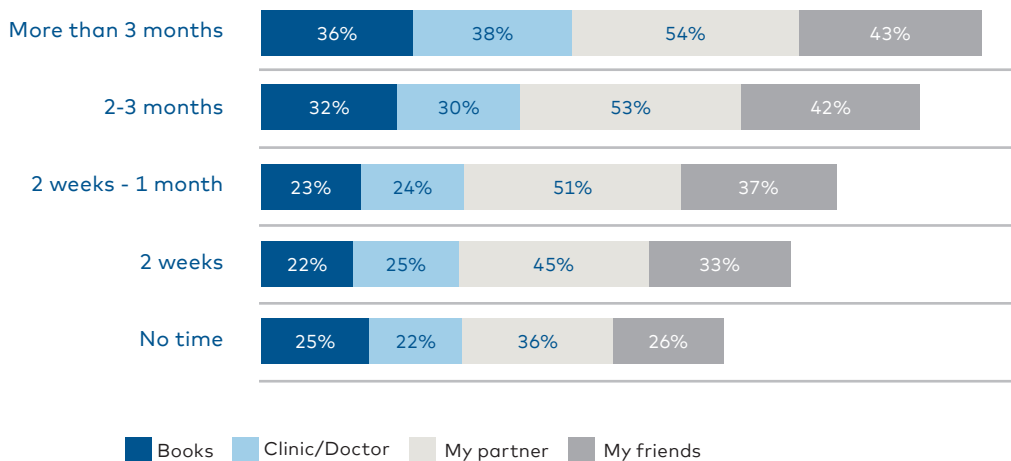
Fathers who took longer leave were not only less inclined to adhere to stereotypical gender norms, but also more likely to say parental leave should be shared equally between partners. They were also more likely to actively inform themselves about parenting. This may suggest that fathers who take longer leave become more interested in aspects of parenting than they would have been if they didn't take leave.

Whether in the Nordic countries or elsewhere, it is enough to visit one's local bookshop to see that most parenting advice is still directed towards women. While there are some magazines and blogs about parenting directed at a male audience, they are still relatively marginal, and women remain by far the largest group of readers.

This survey may shed new light on the disparity between the level of men's and women's respective efforts to inform themselves about their children and their roles as parents.

It is no doubt the case that mothers are seeking parenting advice more actively than men. Close to half of the mothers (46 percent) said they seek information from books, compared to just over a quarter of the fathers (27 percent). Whether they turned to books, friends, internet, doctors, or family, women were consistently more active in their search for information about parenting.

Graph 8 - Fathers who seek information in relation to length of father's leave



However, some fathers were less prone to seek information than others. Between 27 and 28 percent of the fathers who had taken two weeks of leave or less, said they don't seek information about parenting advice at all, in contrast to 16 percent of the fathers who had been on leave for more than three months. Fathers on long leave were consistently more likely to seek information about parenting than those who took shorter leave. More than half (54 percent) of the fathers who had been on leave for more than three months said they were seeking advice from their partners, compared to only 36 percent of those who had taken no leave. Fathers on leave for more than three months were also much more likely to speak to friends about parenting (43 percent), compared to those who had taken no leave (26 percent).

This may indicate that, as fathers take longer leave, they are not only engaging in parenting-related issues more deeply, but are also more prone to engage friends, partners and family in conversations about children and their role as parents.

Father groups

One initiative to facilitate conversations like these is so-called "father groups", which began emerging in the Nordic countries in the 1990s. While taking different forms, they usually involve in-depth discussions about the participants' experiences as new fathers, and their relation to their partners. The purpose is to engage fathers in conversations about parenthood and manhood to help them reflect on equality and gender norms.

In the survey, fathers were asked if they had participated in any training for fathers. While this may include antenatal classes and hands-on courses on preparing for childbirth, it also includes father groups.

According to the survey, fathers who participated in such trainings were less likely to agree with traditional assumptions of the father as breadwinner and the mother as caregiver, and less prone to adhere to masculine ideals. They were also more likely to say that parental leave should be shared equally. Fathers who took longer leave were over-represented in this group. One-fifth of the fathers (21 percent) who took more than three months of leave had attended father's training, compared to 9 percent of those who took no leave.



5. Does parental leave change a father's experience of parenting, relationships and work?

Photo: Johnér

5. Does parental leave change a father's experience of parenting, relationships and work?

The experience of caring for young babies is, for the most part, immensely rewarding for parents. Staying close to the baby at almost all times, parents can observe their babies developing, day by day, seeing when their child laughs for the first time, or rolls over from back to stomach, or makes their first trembling attempts at crawling or walking.

But taking care of infant babies can also be exhausting, and lead to feelings of isolation and boredom.

Women have written candidly about their experiences of motherhood for a long time, and are accustomed to sharing their joys and miseries of parenting with other mothers. Fathers, on the other hand, have not shared their experiences of parenting to the same degree. It is only more recently that male authors have shared more intimate accounts of their parenting experiences, describing how the time on parental leave has shaped their relation not just to their children, but also to their partners and work.

Research to date has said very little about how parental leave informs a father's experiences, and it is one of the aims of this survey to explore this interrelation further. The experiences vary significantly with the length of a father's leave, and may imply that longer paternity leave has a positive impact on how fathers see themselves as parents, the relation they have to their partners, and the relation they have to work, including managers and co-workers.

Feeling competent as a parent and satisfaction with involvement with children even though care work is demanding, and not always fulfilling, this survey shows that almost all parents wish to be an active presence as their children grow up.

Still, as this survey confirms, fathers say they are more likely to miss out on key moments in their children's lives than mothers, and more fathers who took no leave said they had missed important events because they had to work.

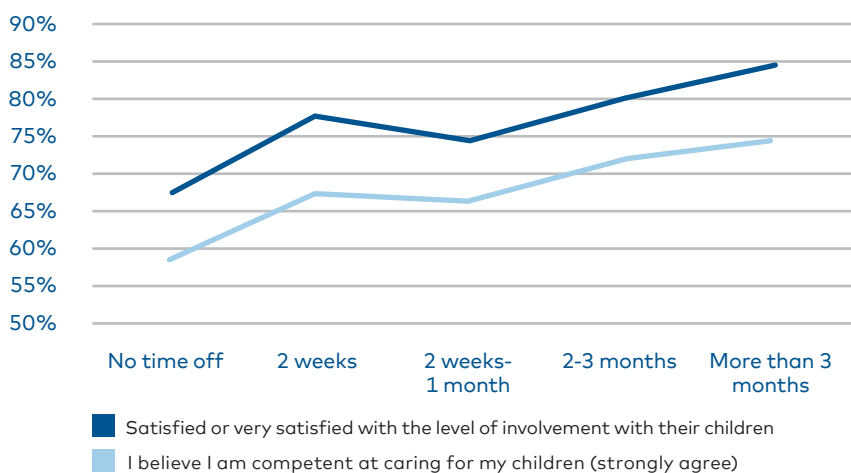
Even though fathers spend less time with their children than mothers, this survey shows that mothers are only marginally more satisfied with the involvement they have with their children.

Apart from the time they spend with their children, there are many reasons that may help explain why some parents are more satisfied with the involvement they have with their children than other parents. Still, the fathers included in this survey reported very different levels of satisfaction depending on the length of parental leave they had taken.

Two-thirds (67 percent) of the fathers who took no leave said they were satisfied with the involvement they have with their children, compared to close to 84 percent of fathers who stayed at home more than three months. Meanwhile, less than sixty percent (58 percent) of the fathers who took no leave strongly agree that they are competent parents, compared to almost 84 percent of those who stayed at home more than three months.

These figures do not say much about the everyday experiences fathers have when spending time with their children, but they go a long way in demonstrating how long leave impacts on their overall satisfaction as parents. It shows that fathers who took long leave are more confident around their children and more at ease with the time they spend with them. It is also likely that, the more competent a father feels, the more he will enjoy the time he spends with his children.

Graph 9 - Fathers' perception of involvement in relation to length of father's leave



Parental leave and fathers' relationship to their partners

One potential barrier for fathers to bond with their children is the relationship they have with their partners. Studies have shown that a father's involvement is related to the confidence that their female partners have in them, and whether or not they treat the father as a competent parent.

Deeply ingrained norms of the mother as primary caregiver can be an obstacle for fathers who wish to spend time with their children. Paternity leave is an opportunity for fathers to both develop a close relationship with their children and also to develop the skills they need to feel confident in their role as caregiver.

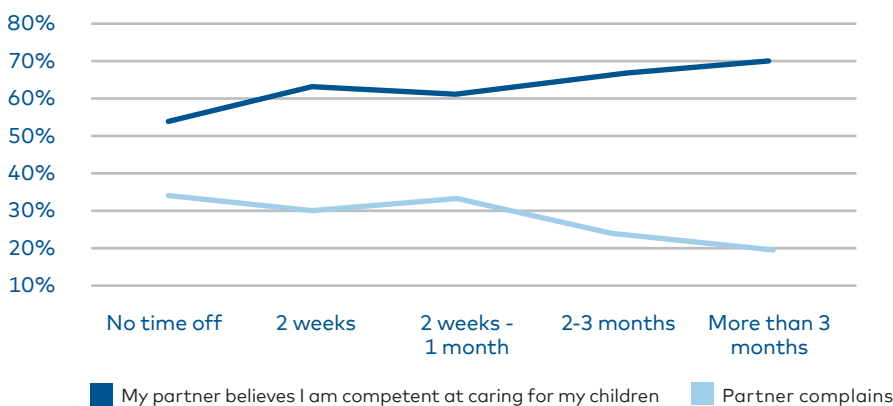
Previous research has indicated that when men are dissatisfied with their relations, they also face greater obstacles to bond with their children.

In this survey, we find that fathers who believe that their partners think they are not competent as parents are also considerably less satisfied with the relationship they have to their partner. Fathers who say their partners think they are competent as parents are more likely to be satisfied with their relationships (82 percent) compared to fathers who say their partners don't think they are competent (56 percent).

We also find that the more paternity leave a father took, the less likely he is to say that his partner complains, and he is also more likely to say that his partner believes he is competent at taking care of his children.

This shows that fathers are not only more satisfied in a relationship when their partners think they are competent as parents, but also that they perceive their partners more likely to regard them as competent, and less likely to complain, when they have taken longer leave.

Graph 10 - Fathers' perception of parenting with a partner in relation to length of father's leave



Parental leave and work experiences

It is difficult for both parents to find a good work-life balance when they also need to care for young children. In the survey, fathers and mothers have slightly different perceptions about their work situations. Fathers are, on the whole, more satisfied with their jobs (74 compared to 67 percent) and they experience no more work-related stress when they are with their children than mothers do (33 percent of fathers compared to 31 percent of mothers).

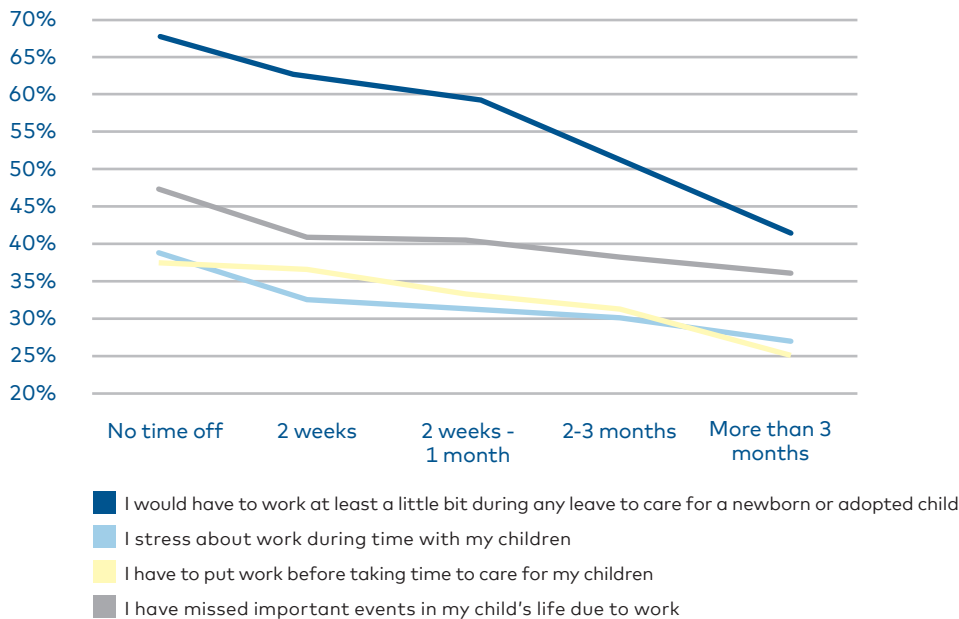
However, fathers are more likely to say that they have to put work before children (32 compared to 27 percent), are more likely to have missed important events in their children's lives due to work (39 compared to 32 percent) and are far more likely to say they have to work at least a little bit when they are on leave with their children (55 compared to 27 percent).

These differences, however, are relatively small in comparison to the differences experienced by fathers who took no or short leave on the one hand, and fathers who took long leave on the other.

The number of fathers who say they need to bring work back home, even at times when they are on leave to care for their children, drastically drops with the amount of father's leave they have taken. As many as 67 percent of fathers who took no leave agree this is the case, compared to 42 percent of those who had taken more than three months of father's leave.

These findings may suggest that when fathers take longer leave, they are able to retain a boundary between work and family life. In other words, they can give their undivided attention to their children, and be attentive to their needs without feeling distracted or experiencing work-related stress.

Graph 11 - Fathers' perceived stress at work in relation to length of father's leave



Parental leave and relation to managers and co-workers

Another obstacle for fathers to take leave is that they fear career penalties. They may fear that, being away from work for too long, will decrease their prospects of advancing professionally, and they may also fear their relation to co-workers and managers will deteriorate.

Such concerns have been documented in previous research set in Sweden, showing that fathers sometimes refrain from taking longer leave out of loyalty to their co-workers. In organizations where fathers are not replaced during their parental leave, co-workers have to fill in the extra work. This in turn, may prompt fathers to return to work more quickly than they had originally planned.

These are crucial concerns that need to be addressed to allow fathers to take leave without feeling a personal responsibility towards their co-workers.

The result of this survey shows that fathers who took no leave were more likely to say that their relationship with both managers and co-workers would deteriorate if they took leave for three months or longer. They were also more likely to say that their chances to advance would decrease as a consequence of taking long leave.

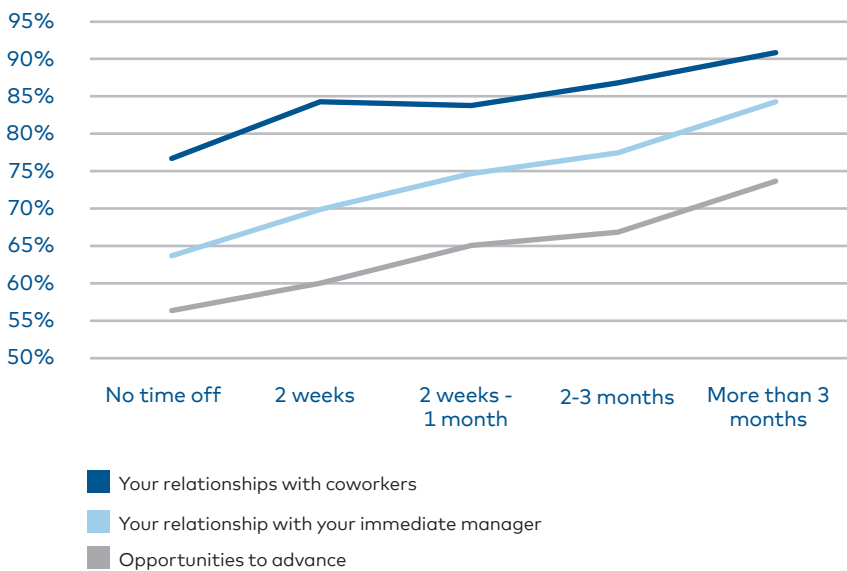
Fears like these are certain to inform a father's decision when contemplating whether or not he should take leave.

However, these findings may also suggest that fathers who have never asked for leave or for flexible hours believe their managers to be more unwilling to agree to such arrangements than they actually are.

We find that fathers who took long leave were more optimistic about their managers' willingness to support them develop a good work-life balance, and they also felt more comfortable asking their employer for flexible working hours to care for children.

Fathers were asked about the consequences they would face if they were to take leave for three consecutive months or more. The results show that the longer a father had been on leave, the more likely he was to say that this relationship with his co-workers and with his manager, as well as his opportunities to advance, would be neutrally or positively affected by the prospects of long leave.

Graph 12 - Fathers' perception of how relationships and opportunities to advance would be positively (or neutrally) affected by the prospects of long leave in relation to length of father's leave



Parental leave and willingness to change work situation

After becoming parents, mothers are not only more likely to take longer parental leave, they are also more likely to make changes to their work situation—whether by working less, or working flexible hours—so they can meet the demands of taking care of a child. Fathers, however, tend to be less willing to make such changes.

In all of the Nordic countries, part-time work is more common among women than men. In Norway, Iceland and Sweden roughly 30 percent of the women work part-time, compared to 35 percent in Denmark and 20.5 percent in Finland. In contrast, about 15 percent of the men are working part-time in Denmark, Norway and Sweden and between 10 and 12 percent in Finland and Iceland.

According to previous reports, one of the key reasons that women are overrepresented in part-time employment is because they assume a larger share of family and care responsibilities.

This tendency can be found among self-employed parents in this survey, too, where 54 percent of the mothers (compared to 34 percent of the fathers) said they had chosen to work as freelancers or independent contractors because they wanted flexibility to take care of their children. The most common reason among fathers to become self-employed was because it was the type of work they wanted for their career (37 percent of fathers, compared to 20 percent of mothers). Yet another reason why fathers may be less likely to change their work situation after a child is born is that they often earn more than their partners, although no more than 28 percent of the fathers and 29 percent of the mothers said it made more sense for mothers to take longer leave if the father's income was higher. Whether couples jointly agree that it makes more sense financially for mothers to make changes to their work situation, or if fathers are unwilling to make changes based on the belief that they need to assume the principal role as breadwinner, it is clear that this divide is an obstacle for couples who wish to share parental leave and childcare responsibilities equally.

In this survey, mothers were more likely to be willing to change their work situation than fathers. As many as 93 percent of the mothers (compared to 80 percent of the fathers) said they were willing to make changes to their work situation during their children's early years; and 80 percent of the mothers (compared to 62 percent of the fathers) were willing to work part time until their children start school.

But we also see that fathers who took long parental leave were more willing to make changes to their working situation than those who had taken no leave or

short leave. The number of fathers who were willing to change their work situation grew from 72 percent among fathers who took no leave to 87 percent among fathers who took more than three months of father's leave. Along the same lines, between 55 and 60 percent of fathers who had taken two weeks or less were willing to work part time, compared to 75 percent of fathers who had taken more than three months.

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In this chapter, we have seen that fathers perceive their relationships differently depending on the amount of time they have been on leave. Fathers who took long leave were consistently more satisfied with the relationship they had with their children, partners, colleagues and managers. They were more likely to feel competent as parents and were also more likely to think their partners regarded them as competent. Finally, fathers who took long leave were not only less stressed at work and less worried about career penalties. They were also more open to changing their work situation to accommodate spending time with their children.

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Conclusions

Photo: Magnus Liam Karlsson - Image Bank Sweden

Conclusions

Half a century has passed since the Nordic countries started to take concrete political action to help fathers become involved in their children's lives. In 1970, the Swedish prime minister Olof Palme gave a speech at the Woman's National Democratic Club in Washington D.C. He said that the emancipation of women is absolutely crucial, but that it must be accompanied by the emancipation of men. While women should have the same opportunities to find fulfilling careers outside of their home, men should have better access to their families so they can bond with their children.

Much has happened since. The sight of a father pushing his infants in a pushchair is no longer strange or exotic in the way it was only a few decades ago.

But the progress is slow, and a situation in which fathers and mothers would share parental leave and childcare responsibilities equally is nowhere in sight.

Father's leave is a crucial part of promoting a more gender equal society, where mothers and fathers are provided with the same opportunities.

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This report has showed that fathers, just as much as mothers, want to be heavily involved in childcare from the time their children are born. Most parents believe parental leave should be shared equally between mothers and fathers. And parents in the Nordic region want longer leave, especially in Iceland, where parents are offered the fewest days of leave out of all five countries.

However, women are still assuming the larger share of the responsibility at home, spending more time with children. They are also more likely to change their work situation, either by working part-time or flexible hours.

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In this report, fathers and mothers have different views of their respective contribution to childcare and household work. Most fathers perceived their relationships to be equal, saying they do as much care work and household work as their partners. Mothers, on the other hand, said they were doing most of the work. Disparities like these are often testing for couples who strive to share responsibilities equally, but there are ways to help parents develop a more reflective approach to assessing their own contribution. For more than two decades, father groups in the Nordic countries have invited new fathers to speak about their role as men and parents.

One recurring assignment is to ask fathers to illustrate in a pie-chart how a normal day is structured, hour by hour, which often helps them reflect on the division of childcare work.

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Using data from thousands of fathers who have been on parental leave, this study shows that the norms and experiences of parenting vary significantly between fathers who took no leave and fathers who took long leave.

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Whether their norms changed over the course of taking leave, or their norms determined whether they took leave in the first place, these questions need to be explored more closely and over longer periods of time. Either way, it goes to show how central father's leave is to promote equality between mothers and fathers, and women and men.

This report does not answer conclusively why some fathers refrain from taking any leave at all. It is clear, though, that those who took no leave were more worried about career penalties, whether from co-workers or managers, than fathers who took longer leave. It is also clear that new fathers who are not employed, or fathers with low incomes, are over-represented among those who took no leave. How to help these fathers take leave, so that they can bond with their children, is a challenge that will require additional efforts. Even so, given the multiple benefits that are associated with taking longer leave, such efforts would not be without good justifications.

Finally, based on several decades of detailed data on the use of parental leave in each of the Nordic countries, we know that what determines whether a father takes leave or not is less dependent on his own willingness or the support he receives from work than it is dependent on the design of the leave system, and whether or not it has earmarked time for fathers. Over and over, reserving specific time for fathers has proved the most efficient way to prompt fathers into taking longer leave.

About

State of Nordic Fathers is the first Nordic regional report. It builds on the 2019 “State of the World’s Fathers” report, produced by Promundo as part of the Men-Care campaign. It joins a growing set of reports on fatherhood and equality in unpaid care work around the world.

All editions are available at:
www.stateoftheworldsfathers.org

State of Nordic Fathers is commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers for Gender Equality and The Nordic Gender Effect at Work; an initiative by the Nordic prime ministers to enable exchange on gender equality in the labour market.

A Nordic knowledge hub about gender equality and work-life balance is available at:
www.norden.org/gendereffect

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Fatherhood norms have changed considerably in the Nordic countries over the past decades. The sight of a father pushing his baby in a pram is no longer rare, and parental leave is no longer for mothers only. Yet parental leave is still not shared equally, despite parents having the right. Nordic fathers only use 10-30 percent of the total leave. State of Nordic Fathers examines why; and identifies possible avenues to increase fathers' share of childcare and leave.

10 key findings reveal that fathers' involvement is a key to gender equality and fathers who have taken long leave distinguish themselves in many respects from those who took none. State of Nordic Fathers is based on a survey capturing the attitudes of 7515 men and women, mostly parents, in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, on childcare work, parental leave, masculinity norms, and workplace and family relationships.



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