

# Are the world's richest countries family friendly?

Policy in the OECD and EU

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# Are the world's richest countries family friendly?

## Policy in the OECD and EU

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### Abstract

Children get a better start in life and parents are better able to balance work and home commitments in countries that have family-friendly policies. These include paid parental leave, support for breastfeeding and affordable, high-quality childcare and preschool education. This report looks at family-friendly policies in 41 high- and middle-income countries using four country-level indicators: the duration of paid leave available to mothers; the duration of paid leave reserved specifically for fathers; the share of children below the age of three in childcare centres; and the share of children between the age of three and compulsory school age in childcare or preschool centres. Sweden, Norway and Iceland are the three most family-friendly countries for which we have complete data. Cyprus, Greece and Switzerland occupy the bottom three places. Ten of the 41 countries do not have sufficient data on childcare enrolment to be ranked in our league table. There is not enough up-to-date information available for us to compare across countries the quality of childcare centres or breastfeeding rates and policies. There is scope for the world's richest countries to improve their family policies and collect better data.

### Key words

parental leave, breastfeeding, childcare centres, family policy, OECD/EU countries.

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## Family-friendly policies overview

Family-friendly policies matter because they help children to get a better start in life and help parents to find the right balance between their commitments at work and at home. Yet even some of the world's richest countries fail to offer comprehensive solutions to all families. This report focuses on two key policies: childcare leave for parents and early childhood education and care for preschool children. It reviews these policies in the 41 high- and middle-income countries that are part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) or the European Union (EU), using the most recent comparable data on hand. The analysis includes national breastfeeding rates and policies as well as the quality of preschool education, where comparable indicators are available. It excludes other elements of family policy, such as child benefits or birth grants, to limit the scope of the report to issues that concern the work–family balance.

Policies on maternity, paternity and parental leave can play an important role in supporting families during the first few years of a child's life (*see Box 1 for definitions*). Maternity leave allows mothers to recover from pregnancy and childbirth and to bond with their children. Well-paid, protected leave from work helps female employees maintain their earnings and attachment to the labour market, although leave that is too long<sup>1</sup> can have the opposite effect (Thévenon and Solaz 2013). Leave reserved for fathers, if taken, can promote a more equitable distribution of care in the home and help fathers to bond with their children. Fifteen of the 41 countries have ratified the Maternity Protection Convention (2000) of the International Labour Organization, the most up-to-date international labour standard on maternity protection.<sup>2</sup> It recommends that countries provide maternity benefits for 14 weeks and take other measures to protect women's working conditions.

When parental leave ends, some children attend early childhood education and care institutions. High-quality, preschool education can foster children's socialization and skills development (Sylva 2014) and help parents to reconcile their private and professional roles (Pronzato 2009; Brilli, Del Boca, and Pronzato 2016). One of the targets set out in the Sustainable Development Goals is that by 2030 all girls and boys will have access to "quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education".<sup>3</sup>

Family-friendly policies can support breastfeeding, which leads to better health for both mother and child. The World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF recommend that mothers initiate breastfeeding within one hour of birth and that infants be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life to achieve optimal growth, development and health.<sup>4</sup> After that, infants should receive nutritionally adequate and safe complementary foods while breastfeeding continues until the child is at least two years old. The WHO and UNICEF have jointly launched guidance<sup>5</sup> called 'Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding' for countries wishing to develop a strategy on this issue.

The 41 countries use different combinations of parental leave and preschool education to help working parents to care for their children while remaining employed. The league table ranks each country on four indicators: 1) the duration of paid leave available to mothers (even if the father can take some of it); 2) the duration of paid leave reserved specifically for fathers; 3) the share of children below the age of three in childcare centres; and 4) the share of children between the age of three and compulsory school age attending preschool or childcare centres.<sup>6</sup> A country's overall rank is based on the average of its rank for each of these four indicators.<sup>7</sup> The league table shows the value for each indicator, with its rank in brackets. The column on the far right shows the average rank across the four indicators for countries for which comparable data are available. The column on the far left shows the final league table ranking based on this average rank (*see Figure 1*).

## Box 1: Interpreting the data

This report covers statutory entitlements available nationwide in 2016. It does not include additional provisions within countries that vary across and within regions and employment sectors.

**Maternity leave:** Job-protected leave of absence for employed women, typically starting just before the time of childbirth (or adoption in some countries).

**Paid leave available to mothers:** A combination of maternity leave and paid parental leave that can be used by the mother and is not reserved for the father. Unpaid leave is not included. To account for both duration and generosity of paid leave, it is expressed as the number of weeks of leave multiplied by the payment rate for a mother receiving average earnings for that country. We call this the full-rate equivalent. For example, if a mother is entitled to 20 weeks of maternity leave at 50 per cent of her usual salary, her full-rate equivalent leave is 10 weeks.

Source: OECD Family Database, Table PF2.1.A (updated 26 October 2017). Entitlements in place as of April 2016. See footnotes to Table PF2.1.A for exceptions to cross-country comparability.

**Paternity leave:** Job-protected leave for fathers at the time of childbirth or soon after.

**Paid leave reserved for fathers:** A combination of paid paternity leave and paid parental leave reserved exclusively for fathers. Unpaid leave is not included. As with mothers, full-rate equivalent leave for fathers is expressed as the number of weeks of leave multiplied by the payment rate for a father receiving average earnings for that country. For example, if a father is entitled to 10 weeks of leave at 50 per cent of his usual salary, his full-rate equivalent leave is five weeks.

Source: OECD Family Database, Table PF2.1.B (updated 26 October 2017). Entitlements in place as of April 2016. See footnotes to Table PF2.1.B for exceptions to cross-country comparability.

**Parental leave:** Job-protected leave for employed parents. It usually follows maternity leave. The way parental leave is structured in terms of duration, payment and eligibility varies a lot across countries. Mothers are more likely to take parental leave, even in countries where a portion of parental leave is reserved for fathers (see OECD 2016). Parental leave tends to be longer than maternity leave and is usually paid at a lower rate, if at all.

**Childcare enrolment:** The percentage of children in their age group (under three or between the age of three and compulsory school age, which differs between countries) who attend childcare or preschool education centres. These are formal arrangements that include care organized or controlled by a public or private body. This does not include unstructured care provided by childminders.

Source: Eurostat (last update 23 January 2019; EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions 2016; latest data for 2014 used for Switzerland).

FIGURE 1: League Table – Indicators of national family-friendly policies, 2016

Rank	Country	Paid leave available to mothers (weeks, full-rate equivalent)		Paid leave reserved for fathers (weeks, full-rate equivalent)		Childcare enrolment, under 3 (%)		Childcare enrolment, between age 3 and school age (%)		Average rank
		Weeks	(Rank)	Weeks	(Rank)	%	(Rank)	%	(Rank)	
1	Sweden	35	(17)	10.9	(4)	51	(5)	97	(3)	7.25
2	Norway	45	(11)	9.8	(6)	52	(4)	90	(14)	8.75
3	Iceland	16	(30)	7.8	(7)	65	(2)	99	(1)	10.00
4	Estonia	85	(1)	2.0	(18)	30	(16)	93	(8)	10.75
5	Portugal	20	(25)	12.5	(3)	50	(7)	92	(11)	11.50
6	Germany	43	(12)	5.7	(10)	33	(13)	92	(12)	11.75
6	Denmark	27	(20)	1.1	(22)	70	(1)	96	(4)	11.75
8	Slovenia	48	(9)	2.6	(16)	40	(10)	90	(13)	12.00
9	Luxembourg	26	(21)	10.4	(5)	51	(6)	87	(17)	12.25
10	France	19	(26)	5.6	(11)	49	(8)	94	(6)	12.75
11	Austria	51	(8)	6.9	(8)	21	(22)	89	(15)	13.25
12	Finland	41	(14)	5.7	(9)	33	(13)	84	(19)	13.75
13	Belgium	13	(33)	5.0	(12)	44	(9)	99	(2)	14.00
14	Spain	16	(27)	2.1	(17)	39	(11)	95	(5)	15.00
15	Netherlands	16	(27)	0.4	(29)	53	(3)	94	(7)	16.50
16	Lithuania	62	(4)	4.0	(14)	15	(26)	78	(23)	16.75
16	Hungary	72	(2)	1.0	(23)	16	(24)	87	(18)	16.75
16	Latvia	53	(6)	1.1	(21)	28	(20)	82	(20)	16.75
19	Italy	25	(22)	0.4	(29)	34	(12)	93	(10)	18.25
20	Bulgaria	65	(3)	1.7	(20)	13	(27)	75	(25)	18.75
20	Romania	48	(10)	4.7	(13)	17	(23)	61	(29)	18.75
22	Croatia	39	(15)	2.9	(15)	16	(24)	51	(31)	21.25
23	Poland	42	(13)	2.0	(18)	8	(29)	61	(28)	22.00
24	Czech Republic	53	(7)	0.0	(33)	5	(30)	81	(21)	22.75
25	Malta	16	(29)	0.2	(32)	31	(15)	88	(16)	23.00
26	Slovakia	54	(5)	0.0	(33)	1	(31)	77	(24)	23.25
27	Ireland	9	(37)	0.0	(33)	29	(18)	93	(8)	24.00
28	United Kingdom	12	(34)	0.4	(28)	29	(19)	73	(26)	26.75
29	Cyprus	14	(32)	0.0	(33)	25	(21)	79	(22)	27.00
30	Greece	23	(24)	0.4	(29)	9	(28)	56	(30)	27.75
31	Switzerland	8	(38)	0.0	(33)	30	(17)	66	(27)	28.75
	Japan	36	(16)	30.4	(1)					
	Republic of Korea	25	(23)	17.2	(2)					
	Chile	30	(18)	1.0	(23)					
	Canada	27	(19)	0.0	(33)					
	Mexico	12	(35)	1.0	(23)					
	Turkey	11	(36)	1.0	(23)					
	Israel	14	(31)	0.0	(33)					
	Australia	8	(40)	0.8	(27)					
	New Zealand	8	(39)	0.0	(33)					
	United States	0	(41)	0.0	(33)					

Note: A light blue background indicates a place in the top third of the ranking, medium blue denotes the middle third, and dark blue the bottom third. All figures except paid leave reserved for fathers are rounded to the nearest whole number. The blank cells indicate that there are no comparable data available. Countries are ranked on each of the four indicators. Ranks are shown in brackets. Subsequently, the average of their four ranks (column on the far right) is used to calculate the final rank (column on the far left). Only 31 of the 41 countries are ranked because 10 lack comparable data. Source: See Box 1.

## Findings

- **Sweden, Norway and Iceland** occupy the top three places in the league table of national, family-friendly policies. All three countries rank in the top third of the 31 ranked countries on paid leave reserved for fathers and the share of children under the age of three in childcare centres. Norway offers longer paid leave to mothers than Iceland and Sweden, both in terms of actual weeks and in terms of the full-rate equivalent weeks (i.e. adjusted by the rate of payment for a parent on average earnings).
- **Cyprus, Greece and Switzerland** occupy the bottom three places on the league table of ranked countries. They are the only countries that were in the bottom third for three out of four indicators. None of the 31 countries with complete data scored in the bottom third on all four indicators.
- **The United States** is the only OECD country without nationwide, statutory, paid maternity leave, paternity leave or parental leave. Some states offer paid parental leave insurance programmes to eligible workers (Donovan 2018).
- **The Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia** have generous leave provisions for mothers but are positioned in the bottom third of the summary ranking because they offer poor access to early childhood education.
- Among the 10 countries with data for two indicators only, **Japan** and the **Republic of Korea** rank highest because of generous leave entitlements for fathers. In practice, very few fathers take this leave (OECD 2016).
- **Chile** and **Canada** offer generous leave to mothers – the equivalent of about half a year of pay. However, in 2016 they offered very little or no paid leave to fathers.
- Countries with shorter paid leave for mothers (but longer leave reserved for fathers) tend to have more children under three in childcare centres.

## Job-protected leave

### Childcare leave available to mothers

The amount of paid leave for mothers varies widely among the world's richest countries. Estonia offers mothers the full-rate equivalent of 85 weeks in paid maternity and parental leave (*see Figure 2*). (Actual job-protected leave is longer but some of it is paid at a much lower rate). Hungary offers the equivalent of 72 weeks. At the other end of the scale, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand and Switzerland offered less than 10 weeks in 2016.

Paid maternity leave, which typically starts just before childbirth, tends to be short, averaging 18 weeks across the OECD and 22 weeks across EU in 2016. In 14 of the 41 countries it is fully paid for an employee on average earnings, although the calculation varies across countries. Some countries pay 100 per cent of the mother's previous earnings up to a cap. Some have no cap. Others have a flat rate.

Parental leave, which usually follows maternity leave, tends to be longer but more poorly paid. Even the countries with the longest full-rate equivalent job-protected leave do not offer women full salary replacement for the total duration of the leave. For example, female employees on average wages in Estonia can take job-protected leave around the birth of a child and continue to receive their full salary until the child is 18 months old (comprising 20 weeks of fully paid maternity leave plus the first 62 weeks of parental leave paid up to a ceiling). The payment then drops to 38 euros per month until the end of parental leave around the child's third birthday. The leave in Hungary is nearly as long but structured differently. The 24 weeks of maternity leave are paid at 70 per cent of previous earnings, followed by parental leave paid at 70 per cent of previous earnings up to a ceiling until the child's second birthday. After that, Hungarian mothers receive a flat-rate benefit of 28,500 HUF (88 euros) per month until the child's third birthday.

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