

Narrative Review of Parental Leave Policy: How is the Implementation and Impact on Child Development?

Nurinas Dzakiyah Firman^{*1}, Luthfia Ayu Rizky Hermawan¹

¹*Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Diponegoro, Indonesia*

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Abstract. The importance of adequate parental leave and childcare policies cannot be overstated, as they provide essential social protection for children and families. While most studies on parental leave policies focus on the impact of childbearing on women's labour market participation, limited evidence is available regarding their effects on child development and well-being. Adopting a narrative review approach, this study examined the impact of parental leave policies on child development by analysing 10 empirical articles published within the past decade, retrieved from various databases and reviewed using an inductive analysis approach. Findings suggest that parental leave not only enables mothers to provide optimal care and strengthen the mother-child emotional bond but also encourages fathers to take an active role in childcare, which is critical for children's cognitive and socio-emotional development. These insights highlight the need for policymakers to design inclusive parental leave policies that support both parents in providing the best possible care for their children.

Keywords: child development; intervention; parental leave; social policy

Developing a child-friendly environment, which encompasses a friendly physical space and social environment, is a viable way to foster healthy and prosperous children. The child-friendly environment emphasizes the importance of the social environment (Cordero-Vinueza et al., 2023). In the context of development, the Ecological Model by Bronfenbrenner (1993) describes the environment as a series of hierarchical structures consisting of microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems.

Microsystem consist of an individual's activity patterns, social roles, and interpersonal relationships, encompassing the social environments of family, school, and community. Mesosystems refer to the interactions and dynamics that take place between multiple environments experienced by the individual, such as the connection between home and school. Exosystem include the interactions and dynamics that take place between multiple environments, with at least one environment not directly occupied by the individual. Events in this external environment can indirectly influence processes in the individual's immediate setting, e.g., the connection between a child's home

^{*}Address for correspondence: idzakiyaa@gmail.com



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environment and their parents' workplace. Macrosystems involve the overarching patterns of characteristics found in microsystems, mesosystems, and exosystems, within a culture or subculture. This includes belief systems, knowledge, material resources, customs, lifestyles, hierarchical and institutional structures, risks, and the lifelong choices associated with each of these broader systems. Meanwhile, the chronosystem comprises temporal changes or consistencies affecting both individual's characteristics and their surrounding environment. This includes variations over a lifetime in family structure, socio-economic status, occupation, residence, and daily busyness (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

The microsystem, or first-level system, where children primarily engage in social interactions, should be the primary emphasis in fostering a child-friendly social environment (Chu et al., 2024). As a place where children develop, the home is shaped by the public policies implemented (Romich, 2006), where it is part of the ecosystem.

This study examined the parental or maternity leave policy regulated by the state and companies as a form of employee rights, which allows parents to nurture and care for their newborns. While the phrase parental leave will be used throughout this study, the terms maternity leave and paternity leave will also be employed concurrently in this study. The phrase maternity leave denotes leave designated for mothers, while paternity leave refers to leave allocated for fathers (Franklin, 2019).

According to Denboba et al. (2014), as a type of social protection, parental leave and sufficient childcare regulations are among the 25 critical interventions necessary for family and child development. In the conceptual framework of child welfare, family policy is an important component in developing dimensions of child welfare, including material, physical health, social, emotional, cultural, developmental, and educational dimensions (OECD, 2021).

A literature review on child welfare was conducted by Amerijckx and Humblet (2013), referencing Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model, indicates that approximately 65% of studies connect child welfare to the microsystem. Empirical research on child welfare associated with the macrosystem constitutes approximately 23% of the total published research. In this analysis, within the macrosystem category, they found more research on policies aimed at certain types of households: single-parent families and low-income households. Moreover, various studies discuss the pros and cons of social policies, including leave periods, aimed at balancing work and family life demands. Nevertheless, research has primarily focused on the influence of children on women's labor market participation in the context of gender issues.

On the other hand, the current discussions regarding policy impact on various aspects of child development and welfare remain under-explored. This suggests a need to further explore how maternity leave contributes to children's long-term well-being and development. So far, there has been very little empirical research examining how maternity leave impacts parent-child relationship dynamics and specific aspects of child development, with each study focusing on only one parent. Therefore, this narrative review was conducted to explore how parental leave taken by fathers and mothers affects child development, and what factors might influence parents' decisions to take their leave. This study also aimed to serve as a reference for policymakers in improving child development and family welfare.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach in the form of a narrative review. A narrative review aims to describe articles without a specific method of selecting articles (Ferrari, 2015). The articles examined in this study were obtained from various databases, including SCOPUS, Google Scholar, SAGE Journals, ProQuest, ScienceDirect, and WILEY. The keywords used in the article collection process were “parental leave”, “maternity leave”, “paternal leave”, “maternal leave”, and “child development”. Further relevant materials were identified and incorporated by systematically reviewing the reference lists of previously found articles, employing a snowballing technique.

The inclusion criteria for article selection in this study were quite specific, ensuring the relevance and quality of the literature utilized. Firstly, only English-language academic research articles published within the last 10 years (i.e., between 2014 and 2024) were considered. This timeframe is not only crucial for ensuring the analyzed information is the most current, but it is also based on the findings of Amerijckx and Humblet (2013) study. They highlighted that research concerning the impact of social policies on child well-being, particularly parental leave policies, has tended to focus more on how these policies affect women’s participation in the workforce. Thus, this 10-year span is expected to capture recent developments within the scholarly and scientific discourse that may have shifted or broadened this focus.

Referring to the predetermined criteria, researchers prioritized the articles that examined and offered quantitative and mixed-method (quantitative-qualitative) empirical insight about the impact of parental leave in relation to child development. This preference for quantitative approaches is primarily due to their prevalence and widespread application in research concerning this topic, which contributes to greater uniformity and comparability of findings. Furthermore, the inclusion of mixed-method studies is crucial as they integrate the breadth of quantitative findings with the depth and contextual understanding derived from qualitative data, offering a more comprehensive and nuanced perspective on this complex social phenomenon. The literature was considered relevant because they discussed how parental leave policies with varying implementation in different countries affect child development.

The analytical approach employed by the researcher in this study is inductive analysis. This approach encompasses methodologies that primarily involve the close examination of data to uncover concepts, themes, or a conceptual model, derived through researcher-led interpretations of the source material. The process of inductive analysis culminates in the creation of a model or framework, which organizes raw data into categories and highlights key themes and underlying processes (Thomas, 2006).

Data analysis was guided by the evaluation objectives of each study, facilitating the identification of relevant topics, foci, and variables. Inductive coding involved closely examining text for its inherent multiple meanings and seeking core meanings pertinent to the research objectives. The primary form of this analysis was the development of categories containing key themes, constructed through a coding process. These categories were derived directly from phrases or meanings within

specific text segments, and relevant segments were subsequently added to established categories. The resulting codes were shaped by the researchers' interpretation, assumptions, and perceptions of the acquired data (Thomas, 2006). No specific software was utilized for category development. Based on this analysis, findings from the article review were grouped into six themes, forming the structure of the review's analytical sections.

Result

Country Characteristics and Data Sources

Drawing from the selected scholarly works, research on the impact of parental leave policies primarily concentrates on OECD member nations, including Norway, Canada, Sweden, Denmark, Australia, UK, and US (Cools et al., 2015; Gaston et al., 2015; Grandahl et al., 2020; Houmark et al., 2024; Huerta et al., 2014; Kozak et al., 2021; Petts et al., 2019; Plotka & Busch-Rossnagel, 2018), with the inclusion of non-OECD developed countries such as Singapore (Yeung & Li, 2022). Furthermore, several of these studies (Cools et al., 2015; Houmark et al., 2024; Huerta et al., 2014; Yeung & Li, 2022) specifically rely on secondary data from annual national surveys within these respective countries. The utilization of large-scale data from national surveys ensures high data quality and yields statistically more robust findings. Moreover, the annual nature of data collection is crucial, as it enables longitudinal analysis to track impact of policy over time and to understand child development in the long term.

The Impact of Parental Leave Policy on Child Development

Based on the review of selected articles, several research themes emerged regarding parental leave. Key research themes concerning parental leave delve into the multifaceted impacts of such policies on families and child development. Firstly, the review explores (1) maternity leave's direct role in infant care and breastfeeding activities (Grandahl et al., 2020; Tsibu & Oppong Frimpong, 2023), examining how the duration and support provided during this period facilitate optimal early health practices for newborns.

Research on working mothers in Ghana suggests a non-significant trend where a three-month maternity leave appeared to encourage exclusive breastfeeding (Tsibu & Oppong Frimpong, 2023). These findings implicitly question the sufficiency of such leave periods for achieving the six-month exclusive breastfeeding target set by health practitioners. A more robust correlation is evident in studies from Sweden, a country characterized by longer parental leave rights and utilization. Grandahl et al. (2020) observed that within an infant's first 12 months, mothers commonly took an average of 10.9 months of parental leave, compared to partners' average of 3 months. Their research established a direct positive link between mothers' total parental leave and exclusive breastfeeding duration, and between partners' leave and partial breastfeeding duration. Significantly, increased combined parental leave from both parents over the infant's first two years was associated with extended durations of both exclusive and partial breastfeeding during the first year (Grandahl et al., 2020). These findings are particularly relevant given that evidence consistently suggests breastfeeding is associated with a

lower occurrence of numerous childhood illnesses (Bartick et al., 2016; Binns et al., 2016). Indeed, early breastfeeding practices can protect newborns from potential diseases, thereby supporting their healthy physical development.

While the preceding discussion highlights the impact of parental leave on physical health outcomes, it is equally crucial to recognize that child development encompasses more than just physical well-being. Psychological developmental areas are also particularly important during the early postnatal period. This review investigates (2) how maternity leave contributes to the development and strengthening of the mother-child bond and interaction (Plotka & Busch-Rossnagel, 2018; Tsibu & Oppong Frimpong, 2023), acknowledging the critical early period for attachment and emotional development.

Continuing with findings from Tsibu and Oppong Frimpong (2023) research on working mothers in Ghana, a three-month maternity leave was found to contribute to the mother-child bond. Similarly, Plotka and Busch-Rossnagel (2018) investigated the influence of maternity leave duration on the quality of mother-child interactions through their study involving working mother-child dyads in the United States. In their research, the average leave duration utilized was 12.57 weeks, approximately three months. They found that the duration of maternity leave directly influenced the quality of mother-child interactions, and this quality, in turn, mediated the effect of maternity leave duration on attachment. In parallel manner, research indicates that the quality of mother-child interactions during infancy is a predictor of secure attachments (De Wolff & van Ijzendoorn, 1997).

This finding holds considerable importance given the central function of attachment in child development. Children with high attachment security tend to exhibit greater emotional regulation and employ constructive coping strategies for sadness during childhood (Ferreira et al., 2024; Saija et al., 2022). This quality of attachment remains crucial as children age, influencing self-control in adolescence and career aspirations in adulthood (Kumar & Mattanah, 2016; Sun et al., 2021).

Beyond these crucial foundational aspects of early development, the influence of parental leave continues to be observed as children grow. The review extends to (3) analyze maternity leave's broader impact on child development context (Gaston et al., 2015; Houmark et al., 2024). The findings of a study by Houmark et al. (2024) that utilizes a large, population-based sample of Danish elementary school children from the Danish Well-Being Survey (DWS) directly demonstrate that longer maternal leave positively influences a child's socio-emotional skills. Specifically, extended leave is associated with increased adolescent conscientiousness, emotional stability, and well-being, alongside a reduction in school absenteeism. Furthermore, longer leave is linked to improved school grades and a decreased risk of receiving a psychiatric diagnosis. In line with this, research by Gaston et al. (2015) found that kindergarten children whose parents took leave lasting between 6 months and 1 year exhibited higher scores in physical health and well-being, social competence, and communication and general knowledge when compared to children whose parents did not take leave. In summary, these studies consistently indicate that extended parental leave is associated with a wide range of positive developmental outcomes for children, spanning socio-emotional skills, academic performance, and overall well-being.

Beyond the maternal aspect, the review also highlights the crucial involvement of fathers. It investigates (4) how paternity leave influences a father's involvement in childcare and family life (Huerta et al., 2014; Petts et al., 2019), acknowledging the growing recognition of paternal roles. Research by Huerta et al. (2014), drawing on annual survey data from four countries (Australia, Denmark, United Kingdom, and United States), indicates that fathers' roles and involvement in childcare notably increase during a child's early years when fathers take paternity leave, especially for durations of two weeks or more. During the first year, common activities fathers engage in include changing diapers, bathing the child, and putting the child to bed. Beyond these direct childcare responsibilities, paternity leave also contributes significantly to the quality of the father-child relationship. Research by Petts et al. (2019) supports this, indicating that longer paternity leave (two weeks or more) in the U.S. context is positively associated with a higher quality father-child relationship. This positive association is partially mediated by fathers' engagement, parental relationship dynamics, and fathers' identities.

Specifically, evidence suggests that taking two or more weeks of paternity leave can lead to 9-year-old children expressing greater satisfaction with their fathers' involvement and reporting better father-child communication. This outcome appears primarily linked to increased parental relationship satisfaction resulting from longer leave periods, and to a lesser extent, to enhanced fathers' engagement and stronger fathers' identities. Collectively, this body of research underscores how paternity leave serves to cultivate a positive family environment and foster robust father-child relationships by increasing fathers' active roles and involvement in childcare, ultimately benefiting both parents and children.

Building on the understanding of how paternity leave shapes family dynamics and father-child bonds, the literature further highlights broader impacts on child development. This review specifically (5) examines the impact of fathers' involvement on child development (Cools et al., 2015; Yeung & Li, 2022), exploring both the direct and indirect ways a father's presence and engagement contribute to a child's growth. Research by Yeung and Li (2022) on Singaporean families revealed that a paternity leave of two weeks or longer is significantly associated with reduced family conflicts, lower maternal parenting aggravation, increased marital satisfaction, enhanced father involvement, and closer father-child relationships. Moreover, their findings indicate that paternity leave, mediated by positive family dynamics, is significantly linked to fewer behavioral problems in children. Expanding on these benefits, a study by Cools et al. (2015) in Norwegian families demonstrated that children's secondary school performance improves when fathers take paternity leave.

While the benefits of leave duration is evident, a complete understanding of parental leave's impact necessitates examining its financial aspects. Lastly, a significant theme that emerged is (6) the beneficial impact of paid leave, underscoring how financial compensation during parental leave can positively influence child developmental outcomes (Kozak et al., 2021). Results indicated that maternal compensation during postpartum leave correlated with significantly higher language scores in toddlers, though no links were found with cognitive or socioemotional scores. This result was obtained by comparing it with the scores of toddlers whose mothers took unpaid leave. However,

the association between paid leave and lower potential risk for social and emotional developmental problems or delays in social competence was only significant for mothers with a high school education or less, highlighting an interactive effect of socioeconomic status (SES) on socioemotional outcomes.

To conclude, these findings reveal that parental leave significantly impacts child development across various domains, including physical health, psychological well-being, and academic performance, with duration, paternal involvement, and financial compensation all playing crucial roles in fostering positive outcomes.

Table 1 shows the research articles discussing the impact of maternity leave on child development.

Table 1

Selected Articles for Narrative Review

No.	Author(s)/ Year	Country	Participants	Measurement/Source of Data (if secondary data used)	Findings
1	Cools et al. (2015)	Norway	Varying sample sizes (observations) up to 25,991 families for different analyses	Norwegian administrative registers, children's final exam scores from lower secondary school	Children's school performance improves as a result of fathers taking paternity leave, particularly in families where the father has higher education than the mother.
2	Gaston et al. (2015)	Canada	728 parents of kindergarten children and the children's senior kindergarten teachers	Early Development Instrument, Kindergarten Parent Survey	Parental care during the first year of life was associated with better child development on some, but not all, developmental variables among children.
3	Grandahl et al. (2020)	Sweden	813 couples	Questionnaire	Longer parental leave for the first 24 months was associated with longer duration of breastfeeding.
4	Houmark et al. (2024)	Denmark	Detailed number not provided; study utilizes a large, population-based sample of Danish elementary school children from the Danish Well-Being Survey (DWS)	Danish Well-Being Survey (DWS)	Longer leave increases adolescent conscientiousness, emotional stability, and well-being, and reduces school absenteeism. The effects are strongest for children of mothers who would have taken short leave in the absence of the reform. For this group, longer leave also increases school grades and reduces the risk of getting a psychiatric diagnosis.

Table 1 (Continued)

Selected Articles for Narrative Review

No.	Author(s)/ Year	Country	Participants	Measurement/Source of Data (if secondary data used)	Findings
5	Huerta et al. (2014)	Australia, Denmark, United Kingdom, United States	Approximately 3,000 children in couple-parent families, whose father were in paid work at birth (Australia); 3,372 children (Denmark); exact sample size with complete outcome variable data for analysis is not explicitly reported (United Kingdom & United States)	4 cohort studies: Growing Up in Australia, the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC); the Danish Longitudinal Survey of Children (DALSC); the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) of the United Kingdom; and, the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS) of the United States	Fathers' leave, father's involvement and child development are related. Fathers who take leave, especially those taking two weeks or more, are more likely to carry out childcare related activities when children are young. Children with highly involved fathers tend to perform better in terms of cognitive test scores. Evidence on the association between fathers' involvement and behavioural outcomes was however weak.
6	Kozak et al. (2021)	United States	328 children	Questionnaire, The Brief Infant-toddler Social Emotional Assessment (BITSEA), The Parent Report of Children's Abilities-Revised (PARCA-R)	Paid leave was associated with better language outcomes, regardless of socioeconomic status. Paid leave was correlated with fewer children behavior problems for mothers with lower levels of educational attainment.
7	Petts et al. (2019)	United States	1319 largely socioeconomically disadvantaged families	Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCW) (Wave 1-5)	Leave-taking, and particularly 2 weeks or more of leave, is positively associated with children's perceptions of fathers' involvement, father-child closeness, and father-child communication.

Table 1 (Continued)

Selected Articles for Narrative Review

No.	Author(s)/ Year	Country	Participants	Measurement/Source of Data (if secondary data used)	Findings
8	Plotka and Busch-Rossnagel (2018)	United States	3,850 working mother-child dyads	Interview, observation, Nursing Child Assessment Teaching Scale, Toddler Attachment Sort-45 (TAS-45)	The length of maternity leave was directly linked to the quality of mother-child interactions and indirectly linked to attachment security.
9	Tsibu and Oppong Frimpong (2023)	Ghana	121 working mothers	Questionnaire	There's a linear relationship between maternity leave and exclusive breastfeeding, mother-child bond relationship, and mothers' recuperation. However, the three-month maternity leave granted to nursing mothers at the University of Education, Winneba was found not to be enough to enable them take good care of their infants and support the six-month exclusive breastfeeding.
10	Yeung and Li (2022)	Singapore	3,895 children's primary caregivers (PCGs)	Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study (SG LEADS)	A 2-week or longer paternity leave is significantly associated with lower family conflicts, mothers' parenting aggravation, higher marital satisfaction, fathers' involvement, and closer father-child relations. Paternity leave-taking, mediated through positive family dynamics, is significantly associated with lower behavior problems in children.

Discussion

This study aimed to shed light on the impact of implementing parental leave policies on child development. Earlier research by Huebener (2016), in a review spanning 2008–2016, indicated a relatively small effect of parental leave policies on child development. Nonetheless, Huebener (2016) indicated that these findings could not yet serve as a definitive basis for conclusions, given the nascent state of empirical research in this field at that time. Subsequently, the contemporary studies examined in this review significantly enrich our understanding, offering deeper insights into how the design of parental leave policies concretely influences child development.

The emerged themes show how scientific discourse fundamentally shifts the focus from work-family life and labor market outcomes as the primary lens for evaluating parental leave policies (Amerijckx & Humblet, 2013), to child-centric outcomes. This directly fills the void of understanding how parental leave policies directly shape the health, development, and well-being of children. By looking at its impact on child development, the review adopts a more comprehensive and holistic perspective on how early parental care, facilitated by leave, contributes to a child's foundational growth. The deliberate inclusion of paternity leave and father's involvement acknowledges that child well-being is not solely dependent on the mother but is a product of the entire family environment, thus providing a more complete picture of parental leave's influence. This allows for a richer understanding of how policies can support both parents in contributing to child development.

This child-centric and holistic perspective inherently aligns seamlessly with global commitments, particularly the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasize holistic child development and well-being (SDG 3). This alignment is crucial because the significant impact of these global commitments on maternal and child health can be directly advanced through national laws and policies. For instance, Heymann et al. (2017), in their literature review on how paid leave and related policies may support improvements across various SDG outcomes, found a direct correlation with positive results like reduced infant mortality, higher immunization rates, and increased exclusive breastfeeding practices. These findings are consistent with the present review's observations, which similarly underscore maternity leave's critical role in infant care and breastfeeding activities; one of the key research themes.

This section will delve deeper into each of the aforementioned research themes. Beyond these direct impacts of leave policies, it will also address the intricate interplay of societal expectations and cultural influences on parental leave utilization patterns. Finally, by examining the specific context in Indonesia, this section aims to provide an up-to-date overview of the policy landscape and demonstrate how insights from a unique developing country setting can critically address existing cross-national research gaps regarding policy effectiveness and utilization.

The Role in Infant Care and Breastfeeding Activity

Maternity leave is associated with extended time at home, reduced work engagement, recovery from postpartum physical stress, and focused childcare (Kebede et al., 2020). The maternity

leave period is expected to enhance maternal and infant care, facilitating maternal recovery and promoting exclusive breastfeeding, which is challenging to maintain during active employment (Tsibu & Oppong Frimpong, 2023).

In this regard, maternal full-time employment is a determinant of the occurrence of exclusive breastfeeding before the age of six months. This underscores the necessity of enacting supportive workplace policies for childcare and breastfeeding to mitigate disparities in infant nutrition and maternal career factors (Amer & Kateeb, 2023). The National Socio-Economic Survey by Statistics Indonesia (BPS) revealed that the rate of exclusive breastfeeding among Indonesian working mothers was 69.48% (Santika, 2024). Furthermore, based on data from Statistics Indonesia, the percentage of babies under six months old in Indonesia who received exclusive breastfeeding was 73.97% in 2023 (Annur, 2024).

Returning to work is a significant factor contributing to the disruption of breastfeeding. The return of parents to the workplace in the United States correlates with a decline in exclusive breastfeeding rates, which decrease by approximately 25% within the first week of life, 50% at three months, and 70% at six months (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022).

The utilization of maternity leave rights by mothers has been linked to the duration of breastfeeding post-delivery (Hawkins et al., 2007). Findings from the study by Tsibu and Oppong Frimpong (2023) indicated that a three-month maternity leave period appeared to foster exclusive breastfeeding, although this association was not statistically significant ($p = 0.207$). Consequently, this suggests that the current duration of maternity leave is insufficient to promote the six-month exclusive breastfeeding advocated by the World Health Organization (WHO), the Global Motherhood Alliance (GMA), and other health practitioners. Since the return of mothers to the workforce is the main cause of early cessation of breastfeeding, there is an urgency to implement a maternity leave policy to strengthen global policies on exclusive breastfeeding for at least six months, especially for vulnerable groups and women (Kebede et al., 2020).

Globally, longer maternity leave duration is positively correlated with increased breastfeeding activity (Steurer, 2017). A study by Grandahl et al. (2020) in Sweden found that the duration of maternity leave was associated with exclusive breastfeeding, while partners' leave correlated with partial breastfeeding duration. Crucially, the cumulative parental leave taken by both parents within the child's first two years was positively linked to both exclusive and partial breastfeeding during the first year. This relationship held true even after adjusting for background factors, indicating that longer total parental leave generally facilitates extended breastfeeding.

Maternity leave rights have conferred multiple advantages. According to studies, the use of maternity leave rights by many married and highly educated mothers leads to significant increases in infant weight and reductions in child mortality rates (Bartick et al., 2016; Binns et al., 2016; Friedman & Zeiger, 2005; Rossin, 2011). This may result from optimal breastfeeding during that period. Numerous studies have also demonstrated that breastfeeding decreases the risk of multiple diseases (Tsibu & Oppong Frimpong, 2023).

The Role in Mother-Child Bond and Interaction

The study by Tsibu and Oppong Frimpong (2023) on mothers who work in University of Education Winneba indicated that a three-month maternity leave period appeared to foster the mother-child bond; however, this association lacked statistical significance ($p = 0.845$). This implies that the current duration of maternity leave is inadequate to facilitate optimal mother-child attachment.

Reinforcing the critical role of duration, studies have shown that extended maternity leave periods are instrumental in promoting attachment security by influencing the quality of the mother-child bond (Plotka & Busch-Rossnagel, 2018). In their research, Plotka and Busch-Rossnagel (2018) used a longitudinal design and nationally representative sample data from the US Government's Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) to reach their conclusions. Data were gathered when the children were 9 months and 2 years old. Participants' length or duration of maternity leave ranged from 1 to 52 weeks.

The study found that the length of maternity leave has a direct and significant impact on the quality of mother-child interactions while also having an indirect effect on attachment. Maternity leave also offers mothers the chance to engage meaningfully with their babies and to understand their cues exhibited by their offspring (Plotka & Busch-Rossnagel, 2018). Shorter maternity leave rights have been associated with mothers' decreased sensitivity to their babies (Clark et al., 1997). In addition, quality interactions play a significant role in mediating the formation of attachment (Plotka & Busch-Rossnagel, 2018).

Moreover, several studies have demonstrated that infants who are breastfed for a minimum of six months exhibit greater attachment security (Linde et al., 2020). The duration of exclusive breastfeeding is one of the important points in the bond formation between mother and baby (Tsibu & Oppong Frimpong, 2023). Breastfeeding directly from the mother's chest entails skin-to-skin contact, which can stimulate the release of oxytocin—a hormone linked to comfort, emotional bonding, and stress reduction for both mothers and infants. This process enhances the sensations experienced by the baby through full body contact and the mother's heartbeat (Uvnäs-Moberg et al., 2015; Whitelaw & Sleath, 1985).

The quality of parent-child interactions is crucial for the child's social and emotional development. Through these interactions, infants acquire skills to cope with frustration, accept delays and disappointments, engage independently with their environment, and cooperate with others (Sroufe, 2000).

The Role in Child Development in a Broader Context

Research by Gaston et al. (2015) on children aged 5-6 revealed that children whose mothers utilized parental leave rights for 6 to 12 months and received care from parents exhibited superior development in kindergarten compared to peers whose mothers did not utilize such rights or who received alternative care. On the other hand, mothers who returned to full-time work within 12 weeks post-childbirth are more likely to report higher levels of externalizing behavior in their children when their children are 4 years old (Berger et al., 2005).

Children at 12 and 24 months with high maternal interaction exhibit elevated self-regulation at age 36 and demonstrate improved social competence. In contrast, children with poor parent-child relationships tend to have diminished self-regulation, thereby increasing their susceptibility to social, emotional, and cognitive developmental issues (Raikes et al., 2007).

The effects of taking parental leave on children's development are even demonstrated in adolescence, as shown in the results of a study by Houmark et al. (2024). The study examined the causal effects of longer parental leave on children's socio-emotional skills and well-being in relation to the implementation of parental leave policy changes in Denmark in 2002. The changes encompassed the introduction of 24 weeks of fully paid leave and 52 weeks of 60% paid leave, to 46 weeks paid and 14 weeks unpaid leave. The increased duration was set to be shared freely by both fathers and mothers, however, based on the data obtained, only mothers showed an increase in leave-taking from 8.3 months to 9.7 months on average, so this study focused on leave taken by mothers.

The data used were obtained from the Danish Well-Being Survey, an annual survey of Danish school children from Grade 0 to 9. Houmark et al. (2024) found that longer leave increased children's conscientiousness, emotional stability and well-being in adolescence, more specifically in children in Grade 7 and 8. Furthermore, the longer leave also reduced school absenteeism based on teacher reports, as well as certain psychiatric disorders at age 10 and 15, as assessed by psychiatric hospital records.

The Importance of Father's Involvement

Child development is not only the responsibility of the mother but also requires the involvement of the father, both physically and psychologically. Control, concern, warmth, involvement, and responsibility are all components of a father's involvement in parenting (Prastiyani, 2017). Father's psychological presence is demonstrated through the child's ability to experience psychological accessibility and proximity to him (Krampe & Newton, 2006).

So far, mothers have always been the primary caregivers for their children. However, as time passes, fathers appear to be more involved in childrearing. One of the causes for this shift is the increased participation of mothers in the labor force (Huerta et al., 2014). Women's participation in the workforce has expanded dramatically and become increasingly dominant in recent decades (Andreassi & Thompson, 2008). According to data released by the US Department of Labor, the number of working mothers in the US in 2023 was 21,926, a 0.2% increase over the previous year, with 76.2% coming from families where the mother was the primary caregiver or sole breadwinner (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). This condition triggers conflict between work responsibilities and family needs globally, emphasizing the need to address this issue in the ever-expanding industrial era.

Paternity Leave and Father's Involvement

In contemporary society, with most families comprising dual earners, each partner needs to establish a balance between work and family responsibilities. The establishment of parental leave policies aims to enhance gender equality both at home and in the workplace while also seeking to strengthen

father-child relationships and improve child well-being. Parental leave policies significantly influence parental behavior, particularly during the critical event of childbirth. Engaging in childcare from birth promotes father-child bonding (Tanaka & Waldfogel, 2007).

Paternity leave policies vary by country. In nations lacking formal parental leave, fathers take different forms of leave to spend time with their children during the first month of birth (Huerta et al., 2014). Experts deem that paternity leave regulations, particularly for male employees, are inadequate since they do not allow enough time to support the father's participation in childcare (Shabrina & Indriati, 2023).

The correlation between paternity leave policies and the role of fathers is demonstrated through research by Huerta et al. (2014). Using longitudinal data from four OECD countries, i.e., Australia, Denmark, the UK, and the US, the study's findings indicated a positive and significant relationship between paternal leave and paternal involvement with childrearing. Compared to fathers who did not take leave at the time of their child's birth, those who took extended leave (two weeks or more) are more engaged in childcare activities. The results were uniform in all the countries examined.

Changing diapers, bathing the child, and putting the child to bed are among the activities that most fathers perform during the first year. In general, despite the fact that reported activities vary across countries, Denmark has the highest proportion of father involvement when the infant is less than one year old, while the UK has the lowest proportion (Huerta et al., 2014). This is consistent with the findings of other studies, which have demonstrated that fathers who take a leave for two weeks or more following the birth of their child are more engaged in childcare nine months later ((Nepomnyaschy & Waldfogel, 2007). Additionally, fathers who utilize leave at the time of their child's birth tend to be more involved in their child's daily life when their child is 2-to-3 years old (Huerta et al., 2014).

Based on a survey of 3,099 fathers and 1,646 mothers in several Nordic nations, including Denmark, undertaken by the Nordic Council of Ministers (Cederstrom, 2019), fathers who take longer paternity leave are more likely to seek parenting knowledge from partners and friends. They are also more satisfied with their involvement, as they feel more competent, confident, and at ease spending time with their children.

Satisfaction with father's involvement is experienced not only by fathers but also by their children. Empirical evidence further supports this, with a study by Petts et al. (2019) indicating that taking paternity leave, particularly for durations of two weeks or more in the U.S. context, was positively associated with the quality of the father-child relationship. More precisely, findings suggested that longer paternity leave periods (two weeks or more) contributed to improved satisfaction among 9-year-old children concerning their fathers' involvement and to better father-child communication, partially by enhancing parental relationship satisfaction and, to a lesser extent, influencing fathers' engagement and identities.

Impact of Father's Involvement on Child Development

Having fathers take longer paternity leave also helps reduce children's behavioral difficulties. According to Yeung and Li (2022), extending paternity leave has been shown to considerably reduce

children's behavioral problems through the mediation impact of family dynamics. Taking paternity leave for two weeks or longer affects children's externalizing and internalizing behaviors. Using paternity leave rights can boost social capital (closer father-child interactions and attachment) by enhancing family cohesion, which minimizes children's behavioral issues.

Furthermore, research by Cools et al. (2015) indicates that when fathers utilize their paternity leave entitlement, children's academic performance improves, particularly in households where the father possesses a higher educational level than the mother. Although these effects are not precisely quantified, they strongly suggest that paternity leave prompts a reallocation of childcare responsibilities from mothers to fathers within the home. The underlying causality is not a straightforward consequence of a mere four-week paternal presence at home directly impacting children's educational attainment 15 years later. Instead, drawing from Becker's framework and the objectives of Norwegian policy, even a brief paternity leave period can shape the dynamics of domestic roles, wherein minor adjustments to initial comparative advantages foster more significant long-term benefits.

Numerous studies have implied that paternal engagement in direct caregiving correlates with reduced externalizing behaviors, enhanced cognitive skills, and elevated socio-emotional competence in children (Diniz et al., 2021). A systematic review by Nafisah et al. (2023) pointed out that paternal involvement mitigates children's problematic behaviors, encompassing external issues like aggression and hyperactivity, as well as internal issues, e.g., anxiety, depression, fear, social withdrawal, and somatization disorders. Research conducted in Indonesia by Septiani and Nasution (2017) demonstrated that paternal engagement influences children's emotional self-regulation abilities by 56%.

Conversely, the absence of a father's presence during the early development of children can adversely affect their future outcomes. Research undertaken by McLanahan et al. (2013) revealed that the lack of a paternal figure during childhood correlates with the emergence of risky behaviors in adolescence, including smoking and early pregnancy. A longitudinal study carried out by Culpin et al. (2022) found that the lack of a father figure from birth to the age of 5 is associated with a heightened risk of depression during adolescence and early adulthood. The higher prevalence of such impact in girls than in boys is noteworthy. The lack of a paternal figure in childhood can also adversely affect the cognitive development of children. A systematic review conducted by Rollè et al. (2019) disclosed that children with disengaged fathers tend to exhibit lower cognitive scores compared to their peers whose fathers actively participated in their development.

The Beneficial Impact of Paid Leave: Economic Factors Influencing Parental Leave Utilization

According to research by Huerta et al. (2014) conducted in four OECD nations, fathers who take parental leave typically come from more advantageous backgrounds, e.g., having higher income levels. Compared to fathers from other nations, Danish fathers use the most extended parental leave, with 90% availing themselves of their rights for two weeks or more. In Denmark, the parental leave policy is a form of benefit and social service financed by state taxation, in alignment with the country's

pro-welfare ideals (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2025). The Danish government continues to offer remuneration to parents on leave, with a maximum of 32 weeks shared between spouses, in addition to a distinct three weeks of paid leave exclusive for fathers, which cannot be transferred to mothers (OECD, 2011).

In a literature review by Amerijckx and Humblet (2013), the impact of parental income on children was analyzed through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory, specifically within the ecosystem category, revealing that economic factors, such as employment status and parental work schedules, substantially impact children's well-being. Berrigan et al. (2020) also found that financial factors determine the duration of leave taken by fathers and mothers. The findings of this study were even consistent among new parents of socio-economic advantage. Among other findings, the study by Kozak et al. (2021) revealed that toddlers of mothers who received some form of compensation during their maternity leave exhibited significantly higher language scores.

Further investigating the implications of paid leave, the same study subsequently explored the moderating role of socioeconomic status (SES) on its relationship with socioemotional outcomes. The study showed that significant association between paid leave and reduced BITSEA problem scores (level of potential risk for social and emotional developmental problems) was observed exclusively among mothers with a high school education or less. This suggests that, despite potential disparities in access to paid family leave for mothers from lower SES households, its availability is linked to beneficial language and socioemotional developmental outcomes for their children (Kozak et al., 2021).

Gender Norms and Cultural Factors Influencing Parental Leave Utilization

Based on research by Huerta et al. (2014), fathers in the UK utilize their parental leave rights the least, taking the fewest number of days off. Based on a national survey, only 25% of fathers in the UK take more than 10 days of leave. Research conducted by Gheyoh Ndzi and Holmes (2023) on British fathers indicated that, in addition to being influenced by financial issues, fathers' decisions to take leave are also influenced by traditional gender norms regarding the division of parental tasks and responsibilities. Numerous studies on childcare and leave policies have found that attitudes towards family and work life, as well as orientations regarding gender equality, significantly affect fathers' utilization of their parental leave rights (Duvander, 2014; Kangas & Rostgaard, 2007). Male employees who voluntarily utilize their paternity leave may be perceived as less masculine and less dedicated to their jobs (Tharp & Parks-Stamm, 2020). Research conducted in Sweden identified that male employees frequently do not utilize parental leave due to conflicting messages regarding its use. This phenomenon is attributed to a reward system that prioritizes length of service, which subsequently affects decisions related to the distribution of childcare responsibilities and the maintenance of economic stability (Haas et al., 2002).

Additionally, the norm of men as strong individual breadwinners as well as workplace and masculinity norms have been identified as factors that discourage men from utilizing their parental leave rights (Bueno & Oh, 2021; Tharp & Parks-Stamm, 2020). The likelihood of fathers utilizing extended paid leave periods is also influenced by their positive attitudes toward fatherhood (Petts

et al., 2019).

These factors eventually lead to more mothers using parental leave and taking longer absences than fathers (Armenia & Gerstel, 2006). This pattern has persisted even as more women have entered the labor force, and dual-income families have become more widespread in society (Toossi, 2002). Since financial issues are cited as a major barrier for men to use their paternity leave, paid leave may enable men to fulfill their breadwinner obligations, which is projected to enhance men's usage of parental leave (Tharp & Parks-Stamm, 2020).

Furthermore, mandating men to utilize leave rights can mitigate adverse reactions and transform conventional gender norms (Tharp & Parks-Stamm, 2020). Cross-sectional data from nine European nations demonstrate that policies promoting paternity leave for fathers influence attitudes about gender equality over time (Omidakhsh et al., 2020). Based on research by Brandth and Kvande (2018), paternal leave policies exclusive to fathers, which cannot be transferred to partners, significantly enhance male employees' utilization of paternity leave, rising from under 3% in the 1990s to 90% in recent years.

The Current Status of Parental Leave in Indonesia

As of now, there has been no empirical research investigating the long-term effects of parental leave use in Indonesia, by either fathers or mothers, on child development. Previously, Indonesian legislation stipulated a paternity leave duration of three days. Moreover, although research conducted in Bantul, Yogyakarta, indicated that this duration lacked significant impact, the policy facilitated some relief for husbands, alleviating familial burdens. This included enhancing interactions with their wives, which positively influenced exclusive breastfeeding, fostering a sense of comfort for wives as challenging tasks were shared, and enabling intensive father-infant interactions through direct contact (Lukman & Hastasari, 2020).

Indonesian Context

Conversely, the "fatherless" phenomenon, namely the lack of paternal involvement, has emerged as a prominent topic in Indonesia in recent years. In fact, there is a campaign entitled "Indonesia Darurat Ayah [Indonesia's Father Emergency]," which aims to bring fathers back to the home and be involved in the child-rearing process. This phenomenon arises from the robust patriarchal society prevalent in Indonesia (Ashari, 2018).

The traditional gender norms that dictate the allocation of parental duties and responsibilities within a culture can be mitigated by relevant parental leave policies (Gheyoh Ndzi & Holmes, 2023). In Indonesia, Law No. 4 of 2024 concerning the welfare of mothers and children in the first thousand days of life (2024), Article 6, Section 2a, stipulates that husbands are granted the right to take leave to support their wives during childbirth for a duration of two days, extendable to a maximum of three days thereafter, or as mutually agreed upon. The duration of maternity leave entitlement for fathers, as stipulated by Indonesian regulations, is notably brief in contrast to that of mothers.

Referring to the results of previous studies on the impact of paternity leave in various countries;

it is necessary to increase the duration of paternity leave so that fathers can participate in caring for their newborn children optimally. Further research is needed to examine the prevalence of fathers taking parental leave and the influencing factors, how fathers' awareness and perceptions of the policy are, and how it impacts child development.

Meanwhile, the maternity leave is regulated in Article 4, Section 3a, which delineates that every working mother is entitled to a minimum of three months of maternity leave, with the possibility of an extension for an additional three months under specific circumstances, with necessary medical notes. Many working mothers find the current maternity leave allocation insufficient, feeling that returning to work too early poses challenges. They emphasize that their young children still require exclusive breastfeeding and attentive care during this critical developmental period, highlighting the need for more supportive policies that address the needs of both mothers and their infants. Not to mention the demands of household chores that remain amid caring for a baby, even though the mothers have just given birth, which makes mothers physically and mentally exhausted (Mailoa, 2022).

Furthermore, an interesting context of parental childcare in Indonesia is the role of extended family, such as grandparents, aunts, and so on. This is common in Indonesia due to its deep-rooted collectivist culture. According to Schmeekle and Sprecher (2003), the concept of extended family is common in collective cultures where each member is interdependent and shares tasks and responsibilities, including in raising children. Ekawati et al. (2024) also highlighted the prevalence of communal living arrangements in Indonesia, where people share a house with extended relatives, naturally positions extended family members, such as grandparents, regardless of their official family role or status, as caregivers. This expectation is embedded within the shared household structure, reinforcing the caregiving responsibilities of extended family members. This cultural context stands out as a significant factor for study, especially in contrast to individualistic societies examined in previous research. By examining these dynamics, we can clearly illuminate the challenges and experiences of working parents, particularly in relation to the effectiveness of parental leave policies.

Cross-National Research Gaps

The Indonesian legal and cultural nuances significantly encourage the need for empirical research on the impact of parental leave policies on child development and well-being in the Indonesian context. Structured, in-depth research is required to ascertain whether the duration of leave significantly influences child development in terms of physical, psychological, and cognitive health. Crucially, a significant research gap exists as no empirical studies have thus far investigated the long-term effects of parental leave use (by both fathers and mothers) on child development in Indonesia. This is particularly salient given that most existing empirical studies originate from developed countries with distinct social policy systems and cultural contexts. Research is needed on the implementation and effectiveness of parental leave in developing countries with different cultural and social systems, thus highlighting Indonesia's potential to fill this knowledge void.

Furthermore, the particularly brief paternity leave duration in Indonesia, combined with the emerging "fatherless" phenomenon—a lack of paternal involvement—highlights the critical

need to investigate how parental leave policies might mitigate these challenges and foster greater paternal engagement. An additional crucial dimension unique to Indonesia is the prominent role of extended family, such as grandparents, in childcare due to its deep-rooted collectivist culture, which contrasts sharply with the individualistic societal contexts prevalent in most existing parental leave research. Therefore, comprehensive research is imperative to understand the implementation and true effectiveness of parental leave in a developing country like Indonesia, with its distinct cultural and social systems.

Limitation

Unlike systematic reviews, which mandate rigorous protocols for article identification and selection, this study did not follow a systematic approach. Consequently, the process of article collection was more flexible and may not have encompassed all relevant available literature, potentially leading to selection bias.

Furthermore, the number of articles reviewed in this study is relatively limited. This constrained number of articles can impact the depth and breadth of the analysis, as well as the validity of the conclusions drawn. With limited data, generalizing the findings becomes more challenging and may not fully represent the complete landscape of the topic under investigation. Therefore, the results of this study should be viewed as an initial exploration or a general overview, rather than as comprehensive definitive evidence.

Conclusion

The studies reviewed consistently show that parental leave, taken by both fathers and mothers, has a significant positive impact on child development and the quality of the parent-child relationship. Maternity leave allows mothers to provide optimal care for their babies, and exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months is critical for infant health and can strengthen the emotional relationship between mother and child. It provides mothers with the opportunity to build more meaningful interactions with their children and understand their children's signals of need, which contributes to the formation of healthy attachments. Maternal use of leave has also been shown to improve early childhood development, which is apparent when children are in a school environment.

Meanwhile, increased father's involvement through the use of paternity leave also plays an important role in early childcare through preschool age. This has resulted in more harmonious family dynamics and contributed to a decline in child behavior problems. In fact, the benefits of parental leave have long-lasting effects into adolescence, such as increased emotional stability, conscientiousness, psychological well-being, academic performance, and reduced rates of school absenteeism and psychiatric disorders.

Overall, an inclusive and lengthy parental leave policy provides substantial benefits not only in strengthening parent-child bonds, but also in fostering children's long-term socio-emotional development. Nevertheless, there are undoubtedly obstacles to the implementation of adequate

parental leave policies, particularly in terms of the adequacy of leave duration and compensation. Consequently, it is crucial for policymakers to prioritize the implementation of inclusive policies for parents to ensure that they can provide the highest quality care for their children. Thus, the implementation of adequate maternity leave policies is not only a significant investment in the welfare of children and families, but also a critical step in the development of national welfare.

Recommendation

Various factors, including the economic welfare of the family and the development of the child, must be taken into account when establishing parental leave policies for both mothers and fathers. The objective of optimal policy implementation is to enhance parenting quality on the growth and development of children.

Optimizing the paternity leave policy can be done by revising the duration of paternity leave from 2-3 days to a minimum of 14 working days with full pay, and setting it as a non-transferable right (cannot be transferred to the mother). This can increase the involvement of fathers in childcare from the early days, mitigating the “Indonesia’s Father Emergency” phenomenon. Meanwhile, for mothers, optimization can be done by increasing maternity leave from 3 months to 6 months of paid leave, with flexibility in the timing of leave before and after childbirth.

It is also anticipated that the implementation of family policies that promote family welfare and child development will foster a shift in gender norms toward greater equality by increasing fathers’ awareness of parenthood and encouraging active participation. The government needs to integrate public awareness campaigns to encourage the transformation of gender norms, for example in the form of promoting the role of fathers in childcare and parenting through mass media. This will reduce the stigmas related to masculinity that inhibit the use of paternity leave and shift the perception that parenting is mothers’ sole responsibility.

Finally, to encourage the private sector to be an active partner in supporting family welfare, the government can provide fiscal incentives or national awards for companies that provide parental leave above the minimum standard and offer flexible work policies and lactation rooms for mothers. To develop research-based policies that are appropriate to the Indonesian socio-cultural context and enhance psychological understanding that policies are part of the ecosystem for child development, more cross-sectional and longitudinal empirical research is required to examine the effects of parental leave policies on child development and welfare in various legal and cultural contexts. The government and academic institutions should conduct longitudinal research in Indonesia to measure the impact of parental leave on child development, by examining the relationship between the duration and quality of parental leave and aspects of child development (emotional, cognitive, social) from infancy to adolescence. In addition, the patterns of leave use by fathers and mothers, as well as the influence of the extended family structure in the context of parenting in Indonesia’s collective culture, can also be examined.

Furthermore, to explore the sociocultural and economic roots of fathers’ low participation in parental leave and childcare, an exploratory study of fathers’ perceptions of paternity leave in

Indonesia is needed. Research could focus on fathers' perceptions, barriers and motivations for using leave, and how gender norms influence their decisions. Future researchers can also conduct qualitative studies to explore how working mothers cope with emotional transitions before, during and after their leave; and their strategies for balancing their roles. The results of these studies are expected to provide policy insights that are more sensitive to the psychological conditions of mothers.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

Orcid ID

Nurinas Dzakiyah Firman  <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8484-111X>

Luthfia Ayu Rizky Hermawan  <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9450-8369>

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