



ENVISIONING A FEDERAL FAMILY-FORMATION POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR CANADA

**Increasing Opportunity for Partnership and
Raising Children**

Peter Jon Mitchell
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Executive Summary

Family life is both deeply personal and relevant to wider society. The state of our families influences the stability of our communities. Though Canadians value family life, they are forming families later in the life cycle compared to the past. The reasons for this shift are complex, but public policy can play a role in increasing the opportunity for Canadians who desire to partner or marry, and raise children, to do so. The federal government has long supported families through a variety of policy approaches, yet families are rarely considered a distinct public-policy area.

This paper proposes the first phase of a federal family-formation policy framework. The approach focuses on increasing knowledge to better inform policy development and removing barriers to family formation and growth. The proposed framework will shape the agenda for further policy research and exploration at Cardus.

The paper also considers the place of family in the larger public-policy landscape, briefly reviews the history of federal support for families, and establishes guiding principles for developing a federal family-formation policy approach in Canada.

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Introduction

There are few things held more closely to heart than family.¹ Yet evidence suggests that many Canadians are struggling to achieve the family life that they desire. Can public policy remove barriers to partnership and childbearing for those Canadians who desire to form these families? What are the appropriate and effective actions that the federal government can take to create better opportunities for family formation?

Historically, the federal government has provided supports to families, though these benefits and programs have not typically been created and implemented as part of one coherent, overall strategy. This paper proposes one possible federal framework for enhancing opportunities for Canadians to build their desired family lives. The paper sets the agenda for further research and exploration of policies to best help Canadians form families.

Challenges Facing Canadian Families

Decades of census data show that Canadian families are shrinking and more Canadians are living alone. The average age at first marriage is increasing, as is the average age for bearing children. The national total fertility rate hit a historic low of 1.4 in 2020, well below the replacement level of 2.1 births per woman over a lifetime. Statistics Canada analysis suggests that the pandemic could result in a ripple effect, as many Canadians delayed having children.²

These demographic trends have been decades in the making, with complex factors contributing to the challenge of partnering and having children. Public policy is one response among many, but a coordinated and coherent federal family policy could improve opportunities for Canadians seeking to partner and form families.

1 For the purpose of this paper, we broadly adopt the Statistics Canada definition of “census family,” acknowledging the limitations of a definition designed for the purpose of enumeration of family members within the same household. Family members need not be co-residing for the purposes of policymaking. Statistics Canada defines a census family as a “married couple and the children, if any, of either and/or both spouses; a couple living common law and the children, if any, of either and/or both partners; or a parent of any marital status in a one-parent family with at least one child living in the same dwelling and that child or those children. All members of a particular census family live in the same dwelling. Children may be biological or adopted children regardless of their age or marital status as long as they live in the dwelling and do not have their own married spouse, common-law partner or child living in the dwelling. Grandchildren living with their grandparent(s) but with no parents present also constitute a census family.” See Statistics Canada, “Census Family,” March 13, 2023, <https://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p3Var.pl?Function=Unit&Id=32746>.

2 A. Fostik and N. Galbraith, “Changes in Fertility Intentions in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Statistics Canada, December 2021, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2021001/article/00041-eng.htm>.

The State of Family Policy

Canadian policymakers and journalists rarely approach family as a distinct policy area. Lydia Miljan, a political scientist at the University of Windsor, states that family policy is treated in this nation as a “minor backwater” in policy discussions.³ Veteran American policy analyst Theodora Ooms takes an even more pessimistic view, calling family policy the “unwanted stepchild of social policy.”⁴

Family policy in Canada may have “backwater” status, but there have been many programs developed over the last several decades that have contributed to it, piecemeal as it is. The federal government recently enhanced cash benefits for families, expanded parental leave, and introduced a big-budget childcare plan. The challenge is not the lack of policy but the absence of a coordinated strategy and unifying objective. Miljan writes,

Generally speaking, family policy in Canada may be characterized as an uncoordinated hodgepodge of policies, based on assumptions that are not always clearly recognized or even consistent, and delivered by an assortment of institutions including not only agencies of all three levels of government but also privately run organizations like provincial Children’s Aid Societies, Big Brothers Big Sisters, family planning clinics, and so on.⁵

All three levels of government and Indigenous communities have a significant stake in creating family policy. Any one level of government is responsible for diverse family-oriented files that do not necessarily share the same goals and objectives and may have overlap with other levels of government. In some cases, policy prescriptions work at cross purposes. There are significant questions and competing assumptions about families that complicate this area for policymakers.

Families are a deeply personal part of the human experience. As Miljan notes, family policy touches on our “most deeply cherished and least questioned beliefs.”⁶ Family issues connect to the emotional core, and perspectives on family policy embody cultural and social assumptions and aspirations. Policy expert Richard Reeves of the Brookings Institution remarks with tongue in cheek, “Sex, love, marriage, child-rearing; these are intimate, emotional, personal, and complex issues. By comparison to family policy, foreign policy is a breeze.”⁷

3 L. Miljan, *Public Policy in Canada: An Introduction*, 7th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 237.

4 T. Ooms, “The Evolution of Family Policy: Lessons Learned, Challenges, and Hopes for the Future,” *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 11, no. 1 (2019): 19, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12316>.

5 Miljan, *Public Policy in Canada*, 256.

6 Miljan, *Public Policy in Canada*, 235.

7 R.V. Reeves, “Where’s the Glue? Policies to Close the Family Gap,” Brookings Institution, March 4, 2019, 217, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/wheres-the-glue-policies-to-close-the-family-gap-2/>.

Competing Visions of Family Life

Miljan claims that the federal government lacks a clear vision of family and struggles with the tension between family autonomy and social responsibility to families and their members.⁸ Competing concepts and visions for family life clash in the public square. As Ooms argues, no single interest speaks for *the family*, and policymakers often navigate between opposing interests.

As an example, Ooms points to the rise of the children's advocacy movement that has presented both parallel and conflicting interests within family policy.⁹ Some family advocates are suspicious of state intervention in family decision-making, while others encourage the state to challenge entrenched social roles and systems within family life.

Social policy often reflects assumptions about society and casts a vision for how it should function. Sociologist Kevin McQuillan, writing over fifteen years ago, maintained that Canadian family policy was largely developed in the shadow of the baby boom, assuming that fertility and population growth would provide a steady funding stream for social programs. McQuillan also argues that family policy assumed a two-parent, single-earner family model.¹⁰ Ken Boessenkool, who has conducted research with the C.D. Howe Institute, has argued that tax policy has shifted in the opposite direction, increasingly discriminating against single-earner families.¹¹ Recent policy developments are no less rooted in assumptions about modern families and society. For example, the federal national daycare plan adopts assumptions about Canadian families and their relation to the paid workforce. The program largely benefits urban-dwelling families with two parents in the labour force full-time, working weekdays during regular business hours. The program is far less accommodating to families falling outside these parameters.

A Seat at the (Dinner) Table?

What is the appropriate role of the state in family life? A family is a social institution that forms its members and acts in the family's collective interest. Individuals may negotiate their interests within the family unit, such as their participation in paid work and unpaid care work, but these decisions are often made in consideration of the family as a whole. At the same time, family functioning has an important impact on community and society. The state has an interest in family stability, but what role should it have in intra-family decision-making? As some researchers have

8 Miljan, *Public Policy in Canada*, 256.

9 Ooms, "The Evolution of Family Policy," 21.

10 K. McQuillan, "Conclusion: Family Change and the Challenge for Social Policy," in *Canada's Changing Families: Implications for Individuals and Society*, eds. K. McQuillan and Z.R. Ravanera (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 295.

11 K. Boessenkool, "Putting Tax Policy in Its Place: How Social Policy Took Over the Tax Treatment of the Family," in *It Takes Two: The Family in Law and Finance*, eds. D.W. Allen and J. Richards (Toronto: C.D. Howe Institute, 1999), 161.

noted, governments often inhibit their own ability to create cohesive family policy by directing measures toward individual family members rather than toward the family as a whole, creating competing interests within family units.¹²

In short, family policy operates within a tension between individual responsibility and collective interest in families. Professors Patrick Dolan, Nevenka Zegarac, and Jelena Arsic argue that the state leverages incentives and constraints to influence family behaviour.¹³ For example, paternity leave incentivizes fathers to increase their time with infant children, strengthening important familial bonds. Another goal of paternity leave is to shift the division of unpaid care within families to further gender equality.¹⁴ Society may have an interest in both of these goals, but questions remain regarding the role of the state in intra-family decision-making.

The competing assumptions about families and the role of the state in family life are perhaps nowhere more evident than in policymaking directly affecting children. What responsibilities does the state have toward children, and how should the state understand the role and authority of parents?

Political scientist Jane Jenson and co-author Caroline Beauvais identify two paradigms that illustrate this tension and encapsulate family policymaking in Canada. They refer to the first approach as the *family responsibility paradigm*. This approach considers parents or other family members as the primary authority for child well-being. Under this paradigm, the direct involvement of the state in family life is usually reserved for situations in which parents and family struggle to ensure the well-being of children. Policy levers maximize flexibility, deferring to the family for decision-making regarding labour-force participation and non-parent childcare.¹⁵ Public investments in children flow through parents. Policymakers frequently use tax deductions and subsidies under this paradigm.¹⁶

Jensen and Beauvais label the second approach *investing in children paradigm*. This model emphasizes services and programs that come around children and their families. The approach emphasizes early intervention to increase future well-being. While parents are an important component, the approach relies on the expertise of state and civil-society actors to deliver services. Policy levers tend to nudge parents toward workforce participation and particular forms of non-parental care.

12 P. Dolan, N. Zegarac, and J. Arsic, “Family Support as a Right of the Child,” *Social Work and Social Sciences Review* 21, no. 2 (2019): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1921/swssr.v21i2.1417>.

13 Dolan, Zegarac, and Arsic, “Family Support,” 11.

14 A. Doucet, S. Mathieu, and L. McKay, “Redesign Parental Leave System to Enhance Gender Equality,” *Policy Options*, October 27, 2020, <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/october-2020/redesign-parental-leave-system-to-enhance-gender-equality/>.

15 For a defence of this position see K. Boessenkool, “Policy Forum: Kids Are Not Boats,” *Canadian Tax Journal* 63, no. 4 (2015): 1001–10.

16 C. Beauvais and J. Jenson, “Two Policy Paradigms: Family Responsibility and Investing in Children,” Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2001, 3–4, https://www.academia.edu/20627482/Two_policy_paradigms_Family_responsibility_and_investing_in_children.

Policymakers favour programs that include publicly provided and regulated childcare and early-learning environments.

Jensen and Beauvais argue that the investing-in-children paradigm emerged over time and was widely embraced during the 1990s. At that time some provinces created new ministries focused on children and families. Some provinces implemented action plans such as Alberta's Focus on Children reforms and Nova Scotia's Child and Youth Action Committee.¹⁷

The Canadian public-policy landscape features a mix of these two paradigms. For example, the education system is increasingly burdened with the responsibility to deliver more services directly to children beyond the curriculum. Educators are frequently asked to be social first-responders. Nearly a decade ago, provincial governments reacted to a perceived bullying crisis by introducing legislation that in some jurisdictions compelled school administrators to police student relationships beyond the confines of the school yard.¹⁸

Other policy areas work directly with parents and families. The family-centred practice approach views parents as senior partners along with service professionals.¹⁹ This approach helps children by coming alongside parents and strengthening them in their natural role.

Our approach at Cardus to family policy views parents and family as the primary caregiving community around children, with the authority and obligation to ensure the well-being of children. We favour the family-responsibility paradigm. Flexible policies associated with the family-responsibility paradigm provide the greatest latitude for families to ensure the well-being of their children. Institutions can best help children by working with kids' natural caregivers.

Unfortunately, some families are unable to meet their obligations toward children, and the state must intervene for the well-being of these children and parents. In these circumstances, government and its supporting institutions have the heavy responsibility of determining the best interest of the child.

Our framework prioritizes federal policy but acknowledges the interplay between federal and provincial or territorial jurisdictions. The provinces and territories have a significant role in family policy, and future work could expand the framework to address this role.

17 Beauvais and Jensen, "Two Policy Paradigms," 16.

18 P.J. Mitchell, "The Limits of Anti-Bullying Legislation: A Cross-Canada Assessment of What Legislation Can—and Can't—Do," Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, May 2012, <https://www.imfcanada.org/sites/default/files/IMFCPublicationMay2012FINAL-WEB.pdf>.

19 B. Trute and D. Hiebert-Murphy, eds., *Partnering with Parents: Family-Centred Practice in Children's Services* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

Federal public policy can contribute to an increase in opportunity for family formation, but other social institutions also make valuable contributions. This proposal focuses on federal policy; social institutions such as faith communities, local associations, and other civil-society actors could be considered in future work.

Federal Family-Policy Overview

Historically, the federal government has used a variety of approaches to supporting families. Policy tools include targeted and universal contributions to families, tax credits and deductions, and transfers to the provinces to fund early-childhood programs. Although the approaches have varied, the federal government has long supported families with children. The brief chronology below reviews the various programs and approaches that the federal government has initiated.

- **1918** Child Tax Exemption is introduced.
- 1945** Family Allowance program starts (so-called “baby bonus”). Maintained until 1992.
- 1971** Child Care Expense Deduction subsidizes regulated (formal) and unregulated (informal) childcare.
- 1971** Fifteen weeks of maternity benefits are introduced in an amendment to the *Unemployment Insurance Act*.
- 1973** Family Allowance is made taxable at the marginal tax rate of the higher-income parent and is indexed to inflation. The Allowance is no longer universal but becomes targeted beginning in 1974.
- 1970s–90s** Federal cash transfers to families decrease because benefits are geared to income and not fully indexed to the cost of living.
- 1988** The non-refundable Child Tax Credit replaces the Child Tax Exemption.
- 1988–96** Quebec adopts a baby bonus, offering larger payments at higher birth orders.
- 1992** Federal Goods and Services Tax Credit (refundable) is introduced one year after the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax.
- **1993** The Child Tax Benefit and the Working Income Supplement replace the Family Allowance and the refundable and non-refundable Child Tax Credit.

- 1997** Quebec's baby bonus is replaced with a subsidized childcare system.
- 1997** Family Supplement (income tested) is added to Employment Insurance.
- 1998** The Child Tax Benefit is renamed the Canada Child Tax Benefit, and the National Child Benefit Supplement replaces the Working Income Supplement.
- 2000** Early Childhood Development Agreements are signed between the federal and provincial governments to fund early learning and childcare.
- 2001** Paid parental-benefit reform increases shared paid time from ten to thirty-five weeks, reduces qualifying work hours from 700 to 600 hours, and eliminates one of the two-week waiting periods for benefits.
- 2006** Universal Child Care Benefit is introduced and provides \$100 per month per child under the age of six.
- 2006** Quebec Parental Insurance Plan comes into effect.
- 2007** The non-refundable Child Tax Credit is reintroduced.
- 2014** Family taxation allows married couples with different marginal tax rates to transfer up to \$50,000 to the lower-income spouse, to generate benefits of up to \$2,000. Cancelled in 2016.
- 2016** The Canada Child Benefit, a tax-free, per-child, targeted-to-income benefit adjusted to inflation, replaces the Canada Child Tax Benefit, National Child Benefit Supplement, and Universal Child Care Benefit.
- 2017** Parental benefits offer the option of up to eighteen months' paid leave at a lower payout rate.
- 2021** Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care agreements with the provinces aim to lower the cost of regulated care to \$10 a day by 2026.

Source: Adapted from Cardus, "A Positive Vision for Child Care Policy Across Canada," 2019, <https://www.cardus.ca/research/family/reports/positive-vision-for-child-care-policy-across-canada/>.

Guiding Principles

How should governments best support families? The following principles guide our approach to this question at Cardus.

Families

- **Families perform a unique function.** Families are a core institution and building block of society. The state and other institutions of civil society cannot replicate the role of the family. Families offer a unique counterbalance to the perspectives offered by other civil-society actors and the state.
- **Families function as units.** As social institutions, families are cooperative and organic units and not merely a collection of individuals with diverging or competing interests. Likewise, family members do not surrender their individual identities but are shaped by their familial commitment and work toward the good of the family unit. As a result, individuals flourish when families are stable and healthy.
- **Families are an integral part of healthy communities.** Families are important contributors to their communities and thrive in supportive communities.
- **Families are unique.** Canadian families have varied backgrounds, values, needs, and desires. Compassionate family policy strives to strengthen all families and acknowledges the strengths and vulnerabilities of diverse family structures.
- **Families are the first society.** Families are the primary and optimal social institution for the nurturing and development of children. Secondary social institutions contribute to this task. For a minority of children, families are unhealthy and unsafe, requiring state intervention.

Public Policy

- **Governments have an interest in stable families.** The state has an interest in the benefits that arise from stable, healthy families, particularly concerning children. The government has a supporting role in family life.
- **Public policy is most effective when considering the family as a whole.** Public policy best helps families and children by working with the natural strengths that families possess as a functioning unit.
- **Public policy can prioritize flexibility.** Flexible approaches respect diverse family backgrounds, values, needs, and desires, and recognize that families' needs change over time.

- **Governments benefit from growing families.** Families promote the development of social capital through familial bonds and bridging family members with other individuals and social institutions. The production of social capital contributes to a healthy citizenry.
- **Public policy can remove some barriers to family formation.** Some barriers preventing young adults from transitioning into family life can be eased through public-policy provisions. At the very least, governments can remove policy provisions such as marriage penalties that discourage the formation of stable partnerships.
- **Governments have a limited role in the intimate decisions of family life.** Governments can support families and remove barriers to achieving stable family life, but they must not replace the unique functions of intra-family decision-making nor coerce it.

A Framework for Canadian Family-Formation Policy

While there are many complex factors influencing family formation, our framework provides a structure for considering how family policy can reduce barriers to family formation. We present below a basic outline for the first phase of our family-policy framework. This framework will serve as a guide for future policy research at Cardus.

Our approach recognizes that government action within family life should be measured. Many aspects of family formation are culturally influenced. As Richard V. Reeves and Christopher Pulliam write, “It is important to be humble about the limits of public policy.”²⁰

While families face challenges throughout the life course, the framework focuses on forming partnerships, with an emphasis on marriage, and growing young families. These transitions are critical points in establishing family stability.

We emphasize marriage because of its relative stability and the correlations with positive outcomes for adults and children.²¹ Marriage may not appeal to everyone, but family policy can reduce barriers for those who wish to pursue this family form.

20 R.V. Reeves and C. Pulliam, “Middle Class Marriage Is Declining, and Likely Deepening Inequality,” Brookings Institution, March 11, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/middle-class-marriage-is-declining-and-likely-deepening-inequality/>.

21 B. Wilcox, “Marriage Makes Our Children Richer—Here’s Why,” *The Atlantic*, October 29, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/10/marriage-makes-our-children-richer-heres-why/280930/>; S. Martinuk, “Marriage Is Good for Your Health,” Cardus, 2016, <https://www.cardus.ca/research/family/reports/marriage-is-good-for-your-health/>; K. Anderson Moore, S.M. Jekielek, and C. Emig, “Marriage from a Child’s Perspective: How Does Family Structure Affect Children, and What Can Be Done About It?,” *Child Trends*, 2002, <https://cms.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2002/06/MarriageRB602.pdf>; Witherspoon Institute, *Marriage and the Public Good: Ten Principles* (Princeton: Witherspoon Institute, 2008).

The framework focuses on two broad actions that set the foundation for building a robust family-formation policy. First, knowledge-gathering and dissemination are important for the development of good family policy. Sharing knowledge can better inform adults who seek to start and grow their families.

Second, reducing barriers to marriage and partnership, and to childbearing and childrearing, can increase opportunity to achieve the family life that many Canadians desire. Some unintended barriers are embedded in government policies and programs. Identifying and reducing these barriers are an early-stage initiative in developing more effective family policy.

Objective: Increasing Opportunity for Partnerships, with an Emphasis on Marriage, and Raising Children

Canadians are entering family life at later life stages than in the past, and our recent research shows that Canadian women are having fewer children than they would like.²² Complex factors delay family formation and inhibit intended fertility. These factors are often beyond the scope of appropriate government action. Yet public policy can increase opportunity, often by reducing barriers to family formation. The objective of our policy framework is to leverage public policy to increase opportunity for Canadians who desire to form partnerships and marriages, and to raise children.

Forming Partnerships, with an Emphasis on Marriage

Increase Knowledge

- **Reinstate national marriage- and divorce-rate data.** Statistics Canada initiated a pilot project to publish national marriage- and divorce-rate data in 2022, after a decade's hiatus. How can this initiative and future family-related data collection enhance effective public policymaking?
- **Recognize the role of family structure in policies addressing economic inequality.** Family structure is an important variable when considering issues such as economic inequality. How might family-structure data be applied to policymaking aimed at addressing income inequality?

22 L. Stone, "She's (Not) Having a Baby: Why Half of Canadian Women Are Falling Short of Their Fertility Desires," Cardus, 2023, <https://www.cardus.ca/research/family/reports/she-s-not-having-a-baby/>.

Reduce Barriers

- **Reduce disincentives to marriage within federal policy.** Benefits based on household income can act as a marriage penalty, disincentivizing marriage and partnership unintentionally. Where are the barriers to marriage within federal benefit programs and tax policy, and how can these barriers be reduced?
- **Support family units within the tax code.** Families function as economic units. What models of taxation could assist families with issues of affordability?

Growing Young Families

Increase Knowledge

- **Support longitudinal data collection on children and youth.** The former National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth measured child development and well-being over time. What data-collection tools could be supported to enhance effective public policymaking?
- **Encourage parental education.** Some provinces and territories offer support to parents through parental education programs, such as the Triple P Parenting Program in Prince Edward Island or programming offered by EarlyON Child and Family Centres in Ontario. Is there an appropriate role for the federal government to support parents in seeking these services?

Reduce Barriers

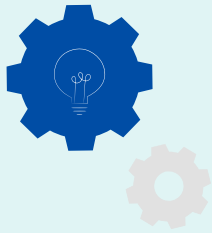
- **Improve support for adoption.** How can federal adoption benefits be enhanced to better facilitate adoption?
- **Re-imagine child benefits.** How can supports such as the Canada Child Benefit be improved to help families with young children?
- **Reform paid parental benefits.** Not all employed parents are able to access paid parental benefits. How can paid parental benefits be reformed to better serve families?



Conclusion

Canadian families are forming later in the life cycle, and many parents are having fewer children than they desire. Complex factors contribute to this trend, but family policy can have an appropriate role in increasing the opportunity for Canadians who desire to form partnerships and marriages, and to raise children, to do so. We favour the family-responsibility paradigm that works with families' natural strengths. Policy should optimize flexibility to meet diverse and changing needs as well as intra-family decision-making. The federal government can support families by reducing barriers that constrain growing families.

The first phase of our family-policy framework at Cardus gives priority to increasing knowledgeable policymaking through increasing data collection and dissemination to policymakers and the public. The framework also prioritizes removing barriers that inhibit family formation and growth. The framework will support further research projects at Cardus.



FAMILY-FORMATION POLICY FRAMEWORK OVERVIEW



OBJECTIVE

Increase opportunity for partnerships, with an emphasis on marriage, and on raising children

PRINCIPLES

- Think whole-family
- Optimize flexibility
- Reduce barriers
- Respect intra-family decisions
- Prioritize family stability

GOALS	INCREASE KNOWLEDGE	REDUCE BARRIERS
1 FORMING PARTNERSHIPS, WITH AN EMPHASIS ON MARRIAGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinstate national marriage- and divorce-rate data • Recognize the role of family structure in policies addressing economic inequality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce marriage disincentives within federal policy • Support family units within the tax code
2 GROWING YOUNG FAMILIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support longitudinal data collection on children and youth • Encourage parental education and support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve support for adoption • Re-imagine child benefits • Reform paid parental benefits



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