



nsw commission for
children & young people

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why **children** need at least **months paid** parental leave

Still forming the brain at birth

New research shows greater critical sensitivity of infants' brains in the first years of life, than previously understood.

At birth, a baby's brain is less than one quarter of its adult size.

While born with over 100 billion brain cells, many of the vital connections between the cells that help the brain grow occur during the first three years.

They form the foundation for the brain's wiring - how a child controls their emotions, communicates, solves problems, thinks logically and reacts to the world.

What happens, or doesn't, in these first years has a major impact on healthy brain development and long-term mental and physical health.

Early care = Early learning foundations

A baby's relationships and the type of care it receives in their first few years play a crucial role in how the connections in the brain are made.

When involved in loving and continuous one to

one interactions with their parents, the brain connections are strengthened.

The best interactions between infant and parents for healthy brain development are continuous, consistent and back-and-forth. They help baby and carer to connect and understand each other, and the infant begins to attach meanings and associations to being touched and talked to.

For instance, when a baby smiles at its mother she leans over and kisses the baby, who then grabs her cheek, each interaction building upon the next. When the infant points and says "buh", its mother responds with "Do you want the ball?".

The nonverbal basis for language emerges and encourages the child with each interaction.

But when an infant is rarely noticed, touched or talked to, it lowers their ability to withstand stress, to learn, to control emotions and develop into healthy adults.

We only have a small window of opportunity to 'get it right'

At the end of six months, models of brain development show that the sensitive period for the lower level motor and sensory systems of the brain are beginning to close.

Between 6-12 months the next major systems of the brain involving language, social skills and reflective thinking are developing, based on the foundations of the earlier period.

Language development at this early stage is essential - children who begin school with low language skills are more likely to continue having difficulties with reading and writing throughout their childhood.

If an infant's relationship with their parents is inconsistent or unstable they will not receive the ongoing responsive interactions required for the healthy development of these capacities.

Parents learn to be better parents the more time they spend with their infants.

The repeated interactions parents have with their children help them to learn and so become better at responding to their baby's needs and identifying problems.

Infants need these continuous interactions not only in their first 14 weeks or six months of life, but for a minimum of 12 months and perhaps longer.

When parents are in prolonged employment during their children's early years of life, the opportunities to learn these parenting skills can be affected.

Parents a better investment than formal childcare for babies

Children's healthy brain development benefits most from being looked after by a parent, or very small number of constant caregivers, well attuned to the child's cues.

Continuity of carers in the early years cannot be assured in formal childcare. The status of childcare and remuneration of childcare workers would need to be considerably improved to reduce staff turnover so that

continuity of relationships with children in their care could be better assured.

While good quality childcare can provide benefits for children over the age of three, studies suggest entering early and spending long hours in formal childcare can increase later behavioural problems such as aggression.

It is more cost effective and developmentally advantageous, to provide parents with paid leave rather than increasing formal childcare subsidies.

Why parental leave needs to be paid

We need to find ways to better support parents to stay at home during the first year of their child's life, to provide these continuous one to one interactions that infants need with their parents for healthy brain development.

However, parents will only take leave from work to spend time at home with their infants during these critical first few years, if they can afford it.

Studies show that family income level impacts most on the length of parental leave parents take. The lower a family's income the less likely a parent can take up leave.

Lump sum maternity payments are not enough to promote the continuous interactions children need with their parents in their first few years. These payments do not guarantee that parents can take sufficient leave from work.

Leaving paid parental leave to the market place largely advantages middle and higher income earners who have the bargaining power to negotiate.

For this reason a universal paid parental leave scheme that covers a period of at least 12 months is essential, for the wellbeing of baby, parents and society.

