

## Who Cares for the Sick Kids?

### Parents' Access to Paid Time to Care for a Sick Child

KRISTIN SMITH AND ANDREW SCHAEFER

#### Introduction

Everyone gets sick—especially children. Beyond the day-to-day cold and flu, a growing number of children are also chronically ill, and even healthy children have preventive and acute health care needs.<sup>1</sup> Because children are unable to care for themselves, parents play a critical role in providing care but also providing the support necessary for health care professionals to care for them.<sup>2</sup> In 2006, only 29 percent of children aged 5–17 did not miss any school days to illness that year. About one-half of these children missed between one and five school days.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, employed parents take off an average of four days each year to care for their sick children.<sup>4</sup> For the 52 percent of employed parents who lack access to at least five paid sick days to care for their children, a child's illness forces a difficult decision: stay home and care for their child (and lose wages or possibly their job) or send their sick child to day care or school and put the health of their child and others at risk.

Some employed parents may use their own paid sick days or vacation days when their child is sick. However, workers who lack sufficient paid sick days are also more likely to lack other forms of paid time off, such as vacation days.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, many workers believe that taking unpaid sick time places their job in jeopardy or will hurt their prospects for promotion.<sup>6</sup> Paid sick days provide job protection to workers and a steady paycheck when they need to care for a sick child.<sup>7</sup>

Increasingly, both fathers and mothers are affected by lack of access to paid time to care for children. Although mothers typically shoulder a larger responsibility for the care of children, fathers are clearly doing more today than in the past.<sup>8</sup> Fathers' time spent caring for children has increased from an average of 2.3 hours per week in 1975 to 4.9 hours per week in 1999.<sup>9</sup> This increased responsibility at home translates into a greater sense of work-family conflict. The proportion of men reporting some or a lot of work-life conflict rose from 34 percent in 1975 to 45 percent in 2008.<sup>10</sup> Having paid sick days that allow for the care of a sick child may allay some of this stress.

#### Key Findings

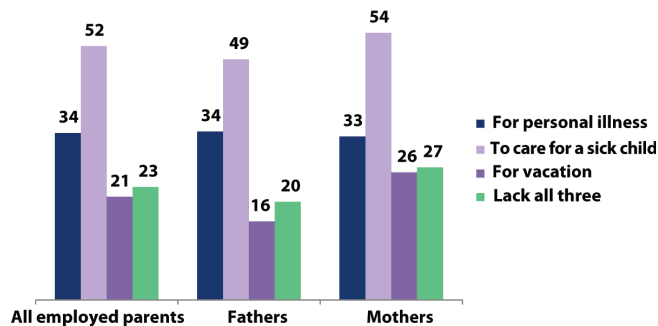
- In 2008, more than one-half—52 percent—of employed parents lacked access to at least five paid sick days to care for a sick child; lower-earning parents had the least access.
- Although employed mothers and fathers have similar access to paid sick days to care for their sick children, mothers more often miss work to care for a sick child.
- Employed parents with paid sick days to care for a sick child are 1.9 times more likely to be very satisfied with their job than those without this access.
- Being able to earn paid sick days to care for a sick child also reduces work-family conflict for employed parents.

This brief analyzes employed parents' access to five or more paid sick days annually to care for a sick child in 2008.<sup>11</sup> We use data from the 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce (NSCW) collected by the Families and Work Institute. The NSCW surveys the American workforce about every five years on a range of workforce issues. The 2008 data are the most recent available in this series. We analyze differences in access between employed mothers and fathers by demographic and work-related characteristics. Paid sick days, like other job benefits, may be prorated by the number of hours worked per week, which may diminish the chance for part-time workers to receive at least five paid sick days annually.

## Unequal Access to Paid Sick Days to Care for a Sick Child

Figure 1 shows that 34 percent of employed parents lack access to at least five paid sick days per year for personal illness, but far more—52 percent—lack access to the same amount of paid time to care for a sick child. Access to paid vacation days is more prevalent, but nearly one-quarter of employed parents do not have access to any of these three types of paid time off (paid sick days for personal illness, to care for a sick child, or paid vacation days). While similar proportions of mothers and fathers have access to paid sick days to care for sick children, mothers are less likely to have paid vacation days than fathers.

**FIGURE 1. PERCENT OF EMPLOYED PARENTS LACKING ACCESS TO VARIOUS FORMS OF PAID LEAVE, 2008**



Note: Includes all wage and salaried workers 18 years and older with children under 18.  
Source: The 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce (NSCW) data.

Job characteristics and employer type also influence access to paid sick time. Employed parents with higher education levels are more likely to have access to paid sick days to take care of a child (see Table 1). Compared with those with a bachelor's degree, more than twice as many employed parents with just a high school degree lack access to paid sick days to care for their child (29 percent compared with 62 percent, respectively). The pattern holds true for fathers and mothers. Likewise, access to these paid sick days increases with earnings for both fathers and mothers, leaving those with the fewest resources contemplating the financial costs associated with missing a day's pay.

Table 1 also shows differences by class of worker and hours worked. Private-sector workers are more likely than those working in the government sector to lack access to paid sick days. While similar patterns hold true for fathers and mothers, mothers in the private sector (64 percent) are more likely than fathers (54 percent) to lack access to paid sick days to care for a child. In addition, parents employed in part-time jobs lack such access to a greater extent than those who work full-time. While the differences are not surprising given that

paid sick days tend to be prorated based on hours spent working, nearly one-half of parents employed in full-time jobs lack access to at least five paid sick days to care for a sick child. Comparisons between mothers and fathers within full- and part-time status, however, reveal no differences.

**TABLE 1. PERCENT OF EMPLOYED PARENTS LACKING AT LEAST FIVE PAID SICK DAYS ANNUALLY TO CARE FOR A SICK CHILD BY SELECT CHARACTERISTICS, 2008**

	All employed parents	Employed fathers	Employed mothers
<b>Lack access to:</b>			
<b>Paid sick days to care for children</b>	52	49	54
<b>Education</b>			
High school or less	62	59	66
Some college	55	50	58
Bachelor's degree	39	41	38
More than bachelor's	29	28	32
<b>Hourly wage</b>			
\$10.00 or less	63	57	67
\$10.01 to \$20.00	57	63	52
More than \$20.00	44	41	47
<b>Class of worker</b>			
Private sector	59	54	64
Government sector	33	33	32
Nonprofit sector	47	44	48
<b>Weekly work hours</b>			
Full-time <sup>1</sup>	48	48	49
Part-time	70	63	71

<sup>1</sup> Full-time includes those working 35 or more hours per week.

Note: Includes all wage and salaried workers 18 years and older with children under 18.  
Source: The 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce (NSCW) data.

## Who Stays Home From Work With a Sick Child?

We find that mothers report greater responsibility in caring for children than fathers. Fully, 74 percent of employed mothers report staying home from work when their child is sick, while 40 percent of employed fathers state the same (see Table 2). Nearly one-half of these parents who miss work when their child is sick do not have paid sick days to compensate. The lack of access is similar among employed mothers (50 percent) and fathers (46 percent) who state they miss work to care for a sick child. Among employed parents, then, we see inequality in who stays home with a sick child but equivalent problems with access to workplace policies that enable the care of sick children. But because mothers outnumber fathers in taking responsibility for that care, more mothers experience the repercussions of lacking access to paid sick days.

One strategy about half of married couples use to help manage their overall work and family responsibilities is to have one parent, typically the mother, cut back the time

**TABLE 2. RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE CARE OF A SICK CHILD AMONG MARRIED EMPLOYED PARENTS, 2008**

	Married employed parents	
	Fathers	Mothers
<b>Who stays home from work when a child is sick</b>		
Respondent	40	74
Spouse	41	16
It depends	19	10

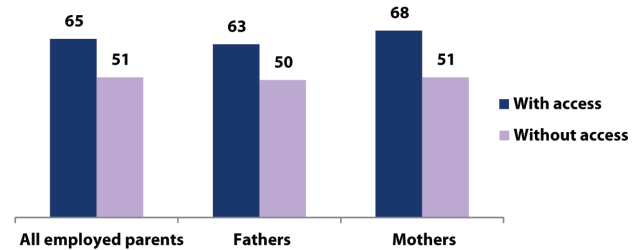
Note: Includes all wage and salaried workers 18 years and older with children under 18. Source: The 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce (NSCW) data.

they spend in the paid workforce. The parent employed less than full-time would in theory have more time to care for a sick child. Even though part-time jobs do offer more flexibility,<sup>12</sup> approximately three-fourths of married mothers who work part-time still miss work when their child is sick, and only 29 percent have access to paid sick days for that child.<sup>13</sup>

Families with two full-time working parents also face challenges when their child is sick or needs to go to the doctor for a routine health visit. Among married mothers employed full-time who have a spouse also working full-time, 73 percent miss work when their child is sick. Only 60 percent have access to five or more paid sick days to care for a sick child. This demonstrates a real gap between access and potential need for paid time to care for a sick child. In contrast, 40 percent of full-time working fathers with a full-time working spouse miss work to care for a sick child, and 50 percent have access to five or more paid sick days to care for a sick child.

## Paid Sick Days Benefit Employers

Replacing workers is costly to employers. For salaried workers, the cost of turnover is 150 percent of the employee's annual salary.<sup>14</sup> Studies on the cost of turnover among hourly workers report annual rates that range from 30 percent to 60 percent of their annual salary.<sup>15</sup> It is no wonder then that high turnover and job retention are seen as critical issues among employers. Although there may be some short-term costs for employers, paid sick days to care for sick children can increase job satisfaction and reduce work family conflict among working parents—and thus reduce turnover. Research shows a strong connection between job satisfaction and less work-family conflict and job retention, lowered absenteeism, higher morale, and greater employee loyalty.<sup>16</sup> In 2008, 65 percent of employed parents with access to paid sick days to care for children stated they were very satisfied with their job compared with only 51 percent of those without access to paid sick days (see Figure 2).<sup>17</sup> This same pattern is evident for both employed mothers and fathers.

**FIGURE 2. PERCENT OF EMPLOYED PARENTS WHO REPORT THEY ARE VERY SATISFIED WITH THEIR JOB BY HAVING PAID SICK DAYS TO CARE FOR A SICK CHILD, 2008**

Note: Includes all wage and salaried workers 18 years and older with children under 18. Source: The 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce (NSCW) data.

Because characteristics predicting job satisfaction are closely related to one another, we analyzed the independent effects of various characteristics on the likelihood of being very satisfied with one's job using multivariate regression models. Our analysis allows us to statistically control for each of the other factors, thus pinpointing the singular effect of a particular characteristic on job satisfaction. We find that regardless of worker and job characteristics, such as age, race, ethnicity, education, marital status, gender, type of employer, and hours worked per week, having paid sick days specifically to care for sick children increases job satisfaction among employed parents. Employed parents with paid sick days to care for sick children are 1.9 times more likely to be very satisfied with their job than those without this access. We also analyzed work-family conflict and found that having paid sick days to care for a sick child reduced work-family conflict, controlling for worker and job characteristics.<sup>18</sup> Given the link between content employees and workplace productivity and reduced turnover, it is in employers' interest to promote policies that increase job satisfaction and reduce work-family conflict.

## Conclusion

Roughly one-half of employed parents lack access to paid sick days to care for a sick child. Yet, all children need parents to care for them when they are sick and to take them to doctor's appointments. Since the majority of children miss at least one day of school each year, access to these paid sick days is critical for employed parents. Although employed mothers and fathers have similar access to paid sick days to care for a sick child, mothers more often miss work to care for a sick child, and thus more mothers experience the repercussions of lack of access to paid sick days. Access to paid sick days to care for a sick child is not evenly distributed, with lower access among parents with lower education levels, lower earnings, and among parents who work in the private sector.

Further, employed parents with access to paid sick days to care for their children report greater job satisfaction and less work-family conflict. Since higher job satisfaction and lower work-family conflict are related to job retention, employers would do well to consider policies such as paid sick days for the care of sick children. To that end, Congress has reintroduced the Healthy Families Act, which would require employers with fifteen or more employees to provide their full-time workers with up to seven paid days per year, with a prorated amount for part-time workers.

All employed parents must manage work and caregiving responsibilities. Workplace policies, such as being able to earn paid sick days to care for a sick child, play a large role in this balancing act, and ultimately influence the ability of parents to meet the health needs of their children and to remain and advance in their job. Children's health and public health should not suffer just because of the conditions of the job a parent holds.

## Data Used

This policy brief uses data on paid sick days and work and family characteristics from the 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce data collected by the Families and Work Institute. Comparisons presented in the text are statistically significant at the 0.05 level. All estimates are weighted to account for sampling bias in race, gender, age, and educational attainment. The access to paid sick days to care for sick children measure refers to access to at least five paid sick days annually, rather than any access. Respondents were asked the following question: "Are you allowed to take at least five days off per year to care for a sick child without losing pay, without using vacation days, and without having to make up some other reason for your absence?"

## ENDNOTES

1. Mark Schuster, Paul Chung, and Katherine Vestal, "Children with Health Issues," *Future of Children*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2011): 91-116; American Academy of Pediatrics, *Bright Futures*, "Recommendations for Preventive Pediatric Health Care" (Elk Grove Village, IL, 2008); Pamela L. Owens et al., "Annual Report on Health Care for Children and Youth in the United States," *Ambulatory Pediatrics*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2008): 219-40.
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3. B. Bloom and R. A. Cohen, "Summary Health Statistics for U.S. Children: National Health Interview Survey 2006," *Vital Health Statistics*, vol. 10, no. 234 (2007).
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5. Kristin Smith and Andrew Schaefer, "Rural Workers Have Less Access to Paid Sick Days," *Issue Brief* 32 (Durham, NH: Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire, 2011).
6. Tom Smith, "Paid Sick Days: A Basic Labor Standard for the 21st Century" (Washington, DC: National Opinion Research Center and Public Welfare Foundation, 2008).
7. We use the term "paid sick days" instead of "paid sick leave" because the latter term is often used to refer to longer periods of paid time off, such as those provided under California's paid family and medical leave.
8. Suzanne Bianchi, John Robinson, and Melissa Milkie, *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007).
9. Liana Sayer, Phillip Cohen, and Lynne Casper, "Women, Men and Work," *The American People: Census 2000 series* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation & Population Reference Bureau, 2004).
10. Ellen Gallinsky, Kerstin Aumann, and James T. Bond, "Times are Changing: Gender and Generation at Work and at Home" (New York: Families and Work Institute, 2011).
11. The NSCW asks respondents two questions about access to paid sick days: one regarding access to five or more paid sick days for personal illness and a second question about access to at least five paid days off to care for a sick child per year. For this reason, our measure of access to paid sick days refers to access to at least five paid sick days annually. Estimates presented in this brief may be lower than other estimates portraying any access to paid sick days.
12. Christopher Higgins, Linda Duxbury, and Karen Lea Johnson, "Part-Time Work For Women: Does it Really Help Balance Work and Family?" *Human Resource Management*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2000): 17-32.

13. Too few married fathers work part-time hours in the NCWS data set (only 29) to include statistics on the percent missing work to care for a sick child and their access to paid sick days to care for a sick child.

14. Multistate Working Families Consortium, “Family Values at Work: It’s About Time” (Multistate Working Families Consortium, 2007).

15. Joan Williams and Penelope Huang, *Improving Work-Life Fit in Hourly Jobs: An Underutilized Cost Cutting Strategy in a Globalized World* (Center for WorkLife Law, UC Hastings College of the Law, 2011), retrieved June 3, 2012, from <http://www.worklifelaw.org/pubs/ImprovingWork-LifeFit.pdf>; Lisa Disselkamp, *No boundaries: How to use time and labor management technology to win the race for profits and productivity* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2009); The Sasha Corporation, *Compilation of Turnover Cost Studies: \$8.00 per hour employee in the U.S.A.*, retrieved June 3, 2012, from <http://www.sashacorp.com/turnframe.html>.

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17. In 2008, 58 percent of employed parents stated they were very satisfied with their job.

18. Multivariate models are available from the authors upon request.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kristin Smith is a family demographer at the Carsey Institute and research assistant professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire ([kristin.smith@unh.edu](mailto:kristin.smith@unh.edu)).

Andrew Schaefer is a research assistant at the Carsey Institute ([apq62@wildcats.unh.edu](mailto:apq62@wildcats.unh.edu)).

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Huddleston Hall  
73 Main Street  
Durham, NH 03824

(603) 862-2821

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