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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Eerola, P., Närvi, J., & Lammi-Taskula, J. (2022). Can fathers' leave take-up dismantle gendered parental responsibilities? Evidence from Finland. *JFR - Journal of Family Research*, 34(3), 958-982. <https://doi.org/10.20377/jfr-723>

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## Can fathers' leave take-up dismantle gendered parental responsibilities? Evidence from Finland<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

**Objective:** This article reports on the associations of fathers' leave take-up with parents' care responsibilities when their child is around four years old.

**Background:** In families with small children women continue to do more parental care work than men. Several studies, however, have suggested that fathers who take up parental leave also take more responsibility for childcare.

**Method:** We applied logistic regression analysis to Finnish survey data collected in 2019 from the mothers and fathers of four-year-old children to find out whether father's take-up and length of leave is related to fathers taking equal or more responsibility for different dimensions of parental responsibilities, including hands-on care, interacting with the child, community responsibility and mental labour.

**Results:** Our descriptive analysis showed that in families with two working parents, parents shared some hands-on care tasks more equally if the father had taken more than three weeks of leave. When only the father was in paid employment, his take-up of leave was associated with taking the child to or from daycare.

**Conclusion:** We conclude that while father's individual leave has unfulfilled potential in dismantling gendered parental care responsibilities, its effects might differ across different dimensions of parental responsibilities.

**Key words:** parental leave; fatherhood; gendered parenting; gender equality; division of labour; childcare; survey

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1 All three authors contributed equally to this work and thus share first authorship of the article.



## 1. Introduction

Becoming parents is an important moment for the gendered division of labour between women and men. Young childless couples usually share unpaid housework relatively equally, but once they have a child, unpaid care work and household chores quite often become the mother's responsibility. (Fox 2009; Rose et al. 2014). Previous research has highlighted the gendered character of parental care in western societies (Eerola et al. 2021; Miller 2017). Studies in different policy contexts, however, suggest that fathers who take more parental leave are also more active in different aspects of care, implying that leave policies are an effective way to enhance fathers' participation in childcare (Almqvist & Duvander 2014; Bünning 2015; Duvander & Johansson 2019; Evertson et al. 2018; Hagqvist et al. 2017).

In most western societies during the last couple of decades, fathers' leave rights have been extended in furtherance of the aims of promoting the father-child relationship, women's labour force participation and gender equality (Koslowski et al. 2019). This has also been the case in Finland, where a leave quota for fathers was introduced in 2003 and later extended in 2010. The leave scheme introduced in 2013 – and in force during the present data collection period – provided fathers with “use it or lose it” paternity leave (9 weeks) and sharable parental leave (26 weeks) along with an income-related benefit, and childcare leave (up to the child's third birthday) with a flat-rate benefit (Eerola et al. 2019; Miettinen et al. 2020).

Although fathers' take-up of their ear-marked, non-transferable leave quota has increased during the 2000s, Finnish fathers continue to take leave considerably less often than their Nordic peers in Sweden, Norway and Iceland (Eydal et al. 2015; Miettinen et al. 2020). More specifically, Finnish fathers take up only ten per cent of all the parental leave entitlements for parents, including paternity leave, while mothers mainly take the sharable leave (Miettinen et al. 2020). Nearly 60% of all the care work in families with children under age six is performed by mothers (Miettinen & Rotkirch 2012). Although the amount of time Finnish fathers spend with their children and in childcare has increased since the late 1980s, so too has that of mothers, and thus gendered patterns of care have not markedly changed (Ylikännö et al. 2015).

This study explored whether fathers' leave take-up can dismantle the gendered division of labour in childcare. Here, father's leave refers to all the types of childcare-related leave taken by a father. Our research question was: *Is fathers' take-up and length of leave associated with a more equal sharing of different dimensions of parental responsibilities between parents later on?*

We used survey data collected in 2019 in Finland from the mothers and fathers of four-year-old children living with a different-sex partner. The data include retrospective information on the leave take-up of both parents and information on how different childcare-related tasks and responsibilities were shared between the parents at the time of the survey. Our analysis is therefore descriptive in nature, as we focus on the associations between leave use and the division of care work, and not on causal relationships.

## 2. Conceptualising parental responsibilities

Since the 1970s, several conceptualisations of parental responsibilities have been proposed, initially in psychological research but later also in sociology (Doucet 2017; Eerola 2014; Lamb et al. 1987). These conceptualisations from different fields highlight how parental responsibilities consist of not only diverse concrete hands-on caring tasks but also other dimensions of care, such as meeting the child's emotional needs, interacting with and being available for the child, and providing for the child (Doucet 2017; Lamb et al. 1987). Although 'indirect care' such as scheduling and planning was also mentioned in some of the earlier psychologically oriented research (e.g., Lamb et al. 1987), aspects of emotional and of mental labour in particular have been discussed mainly in the more recent sociological literature on parental responsibilities (see, e.g., Doucet 2015; Lynch 2007; Miller 2017; Offer 2014; Walzer 1996). While these responsibilities, which are often invisible or hidden, can be articulated through routine caregiving tasks, they also involve more comprehensive processes and can be characterised as a 'care map' constantly carried in the carer's mind, that includes noticing unmet needs, making sure that these needs are met, and observing and evaluating the result (see Doucet 2015; Lynch 2007).

One of the more recent conceptualisations of parental responsibilities is that proposed by Andrea Doucet (2015), in which, in addition to hands-on care-related tasks, parental responsibilities include emotional, community and moral responsibilities. Emotional responsibility entails skills and practices of attentiveness and responsiveness, such as worrying or offering emotional support for the child, whereas community responsibilities mean connecting children with social institutions such as day care, with kin and other networks, or with community venues and activities through, e.g., hobbies. These types of responsibilities can also be conceptualised as mental or cognitive labour, which refers to all kinds of anticipating and planning as well as the managing, coordinating, and monitoring of childcare and family life (Damingier 2019; Offer 2014). Moral responsibility, in turn, entails (gendered) expectations and norms about how mothers and fathers should act as parents (Doucet 2015).

In this article, we understand care as a fundamental and complex human activity and hence, based on previous research and the conceptualisations outlined above, focus on four different dimensions of parental responsibility: interaction with the child, including playing and doing things together; hands-on childcare; community responsibilities such as communicating with daycare services or supporting the child's friendships; and mental labour, that is, planning on behalf of and making decisions concerning the child. Our aim was to find out whether fathers' leave take-up has different consequences for the sharing of different dimensions of parental responsibility.

We acknowledge that the dimensions examined here represent only a limited range of parental responsibilities. Furthermore, they do not simply represent either routine hands-on care work or mental labour, but rather include aspects of both (see Damingier 2019). While daily childcare can be classified as consisting mostly of concrete hands-on tasks that have to be done physically, it also entails cognitive aspects of anticipating and monitoring and emotional aspects of worrying, loving, caring and bonding. Playing with the child would entail both physically doing things together and being in emotional contact with the child. In turn, making decisions or being responsible for communicating with daycare

services, for example, would probably include not only a substantial proportion of mental labour but also concrete tasks such as applying for a place in daycare or attending a parents' evening at the daycare centre. Nevertheless, the dimensions of responsibilities examined in this study offer a lens through which the associations of father's leave take-up and parental responsibilities can be examined.

### **3. Is fathers' take-up of leave associated with an equal division of care work? Lessons from previous research**

A wide body of research in diverse cultural and family policy contexts has demonstrated that women and men often adopt conventional gender roles in the transition to parenthood (see, e.g., Fox 2009; Grunow & Evertsson 2016; Rose et al. 2014;). It has been argued that long individual leave periods, especially when taken by mothers, reinforce the traditional division of labour between parents (see Hook, 2010; Lammi-Taskula 2007). The traditional gendered division of labour between parents living in a different-sex relationship has been explained by the fact that women often have fewer financial resources, and thus less power to negotiate a more equitable arrangement; by time availability, with mothers outside the labour market or in part-time work being able to do a larger share of unpaid household and care work; and by gendered cultural ideas and expectations concerning motherhood and fatherhood (e.g., Baxter 1992; Bianchi et al. 2000; Coltrane 2000; Vogler 1998).

Previous research has suggested, however, that fathers' leave-taking can contribute to their long-term involvement in childcare and consequently break the gendered patterns of parenting. Several studies from countries with differing leave policies suggest that fathers' take-up of parental leave is associated with their taking more responsibility at home, spending more time and being more emotionally involved in childcare, being more engaged with the child, and working fewer hours overtime in paid employment (see Almqvist & Duvander 2014; Brandth & Gíslason 2011; Bünning 2015; Duvander & Jans 2009; Haas & Hwang 2008; Huerta et al. 2014; Lidbeck & Bernhardsson 2021; Nepomnyaschy and Waldfogel 2007; Romero-Balsas 2015; Schober 2014; Tanaka and Waldfogel 2007). Couples who took shared parental leave more equally also reported increased understanding of each other's everyday life (Almqvist et al. 2011; Duvander et al. 2017).

It seems, however, that to enhance gender equality between the spouses and change the traditional patterns of care, fathers' individual leave needs to last longer than just a week or two (Almqvist & Duvander, 2014; Bünning 2015; Evertsson et al. 2018; Hosking et al. 2010; Miller 2011; Reimer & Pfau-Effinger 2020). For example, Bünning (2015), in her study based on German household panel data, argues that fathers who take simultaneous leave with their partners are likely to remain their child's secondary caregiver and mothers' assistant, whereas fathers on individual leave must learn to take full responsibility for both childcare and domestic duties.

Results from a recent Swedish survey showed that in the case where leave was equally shared (each parent taking 40% to 60% of the total amount of leave), both mothers and

fathers reported higher coparenting quality at 18 months after childbirth than parents who did not share leave equally. In the same study, the mothers sharing leave equally reported higher satisfaction with their partner's involvement in care than those who were not sharing leave equally. Sharing leave was also positively associated with both parents' subjective ratings of their work-family balance. That is, parents who shared leave equally were more satisfied with their work-family balance. (Lidbeck & Bernhardtsson 2021)

Another Swedish survey showed that in cases where the father had taken at least two months of solo leave, childcare was more equally shared after both parents had returned to work (Evertsson et al. 2018). Moreover, the longer the father's parental leave had been, the larger the share of childcare he subsequently performed. Fathers' take-up of leave was also associated with a closer relationship with the child, as after the father's individual leave had ended the child tended to turn to both parents equally when in need of comfort.

Recently, an international qualitative research project on fathers' solo leave in diverse leave policy contexts reported some cross-national commonalities in the implications of father's individual leave for his involvement in care. The results, based on interview data from 10 European countries, Japan and the province of Quebec, Canada, showed that the outcomes of caring for the child independently, i.e., without the mother's presence, included learning to take responsibility alone, being preoccupied and absorbed with the child, shaping daily life around the child's routines, enjoying increased physical contact with the child, sympathising with the mother's stress, learning to balance care and housework, and experiencing the time on leave as fulfilling and joyful (Wall & O'Brien 2017).

In the UK context, both the interviewed mothers and fathers described the father as having increased confidence and competence in taking care of the baby and a stronger father-child bond as the primary consequences of the father's individual leave (O'Brien & Twamley 2017). Similar results were reported in Switzerland (Valarino 2017), where the interviewed fathers described how having an individual parental leave period enabled them, independently from the mother, to acquire and develop their parenting skills, to feel confident as fathers, and to develop a close, affectionate, and intimate relationship with their child.

Previous research has described how fathers taking leave also do a larger share of housework post-leave than other fathers (Almqvist & Duvander 2014; Boye 2008; Haas & Hwang 2008; Kotsadam & Finseraas 2011). For example, a Swedish mixed-method study combining survey and interviews found that parents shared both childcare and household work more equally after leave, especially in cases where the father had taken long individual leave (Almqvist & Duvander 2014). Researchers argue, however, that the link between sharing leave and sharing housework is more indirect than the link between sharing leave and sharing childcare (Almqvist & Duvander 2014). The argument is supported, for example, by a German panel study on the consequences of fathers' take-up of leave: the time fathers spent in childcare increased even after only a short period of leave whereas the time fathers spent on housework increased with longer and/or solo leave (Bünning 2015).

In sum, many studies have found positive associations of fathers' leave take-up with their active participation in childcare and a closer father-child relationship. Less, however,

is known about how father's leave take-up is related to community responsibilities and mental labour.

Based on the results of previous studies, we expected fathers' take-up of long leave to be positively associated with the sharing of hands-on care and with a close father-child relationship and interaction. In other words, we expected fathers who had taken long leave to subsequently be undertaking a bigger share of parental responsibility for hands-on care and to be having a closer relationship with the child.

The association of fathers' leave with community responsibilities and mental labour on child-related issues has been less studied. In our study, we predicted two possible outcomes: on the one hand, mental labour such as planning and organising may be closely related to practical childcare tasks, meaning that the parent on leave – be it the mother or the father – needs to learn to take responsibility for both (Wall & O'Brien 2017). On the other hand, as mental labour is strongly related to motherhood (Daminger 2019), even several months of leave taken by the father may not be enough to change this situation.

#### **4. Parental leave policy and gendered division of labour in Finland**

Finland, like the other Nordic countries, has been characterised by social policy researchers as a dual-earner welfare state (Leira 2002). Finland has a long history of supporting shared and equal parenthood, including policies promoting women's participation in the labour force and encouraging fathers to take greater responsibility for childcare from the onset of parenthood (Eydal et al. 2015; Lammi-Taskula 2017).

The Finnish leave design in force during our data collection period<sup>2</sup> comprised three types of leave with high compensation for loss of earnings: maternity leave, paternity leave, and parental leave (Miettinen et al. 2020; 2021). A pregnant mother could start her 18-week maternity leave 5 to 8 weeks before her due date. Following the maternity leave, 26 weeks of parental leave could be shared between the two parents in any way they wished. Paternity leave comprised 9 weeks, of which 3 weeks could be taken simultaneously with the mother's leave. The remaining six weeks of paternity leave could be taken after the parental leave period and were intended to be used as fathers' independent solo leave, comparable to a fathers' quota of parental leave. All 9 weeks of paternity leave had to be taken before the child's second birthday. Paid compensation for maternity, parental and paternity leave was on average 70% of prenatal earned income. Parents who had not been employed or had very low annual earnings received a minimum flat-rate allowance (approximately €726 per month in 2021). In total, leave with income-related benefit covered the period from the last month of pregnancy to approximately 10 months after childbirth. Thereafter, parents could choose either childcare leave with a flat-rate home care allowance (HCA, €342,95 per month in 2021) or state-subsidised early childhood education and care services. Childcare leave had to be

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<sup>2</sup> Reformed leave legislation, including gender neutral terminology, equal quotas for each parent and greater flexibility in practice will come into force in August 2022.

taken before the child's third birthday. A supplement for siblings and a means-tested supplement for low-income families were also available to HCA.

The majority of fathers take from one day to three weeks (mean 15 days) of paternity leave, usually simultaneously with the mother's maternity leave. This type of leave, which was taken by 69 percent of all the fathers of children born in 2016 has remained at roughly the same level or a little above for the past two decades (Miettinen et al. 2020; Miettinen & Saarikallio-Torp 2020). It has thus been argued that a paternity leave of few weeks has become a cultural norm for Finnish fathers (Eerola 2015; Lammi-Taskula 2017). While the proportion of fathers taking individual paternity leave has risen gradually during the two decades since the introduction of the father's quota, it continues to be taken by less than half of fathers (around 45 %; mean 31 days). In total, fathers continue to take only ten per cent of all the parental leave, including paternity leave, available to parents; sharable parental leave as well as childcare leave is mainly taken by mothers (Miettinen et al. 2021). Individual leave is more likely to be taken by fathers over age 30, high earners, fathers whose partners are high earners, and the fathers of first-borns (Lammi-Taskula et al. 2017; Miettinen & Saarikallio-Torp 2020; Närvi 2018).

Since the late 1980s, the amount of time spent in childcare by Finnish fathers has increased by over 60% (Miettinen & Rotkirch 2012). However, as the amount of time spent in childcare by women has also increased, women continue to spend more time in childcare than their partners: for example, according to the Time Use Survey 2009–2010 (Statistics Finland 2021; Ylikännö et al. 2015), the mothers of children aged 0–6 years spent more than two hours daily and fathers less than one hour daily in childcare. Women also still shoulder the overall responsibility for routine household chores such as cooking and laundry. Playing with children is, however, the activity most commonly reported by the parents of young children as equally shared (Attila et al. 2019).

Due to the continuing predominance of women in early childcare, the labour force participation of mothers with under three-year-old children remains far behind that of fathers. However, the labour force participation, mostly in full-time employment, of mothers whose youngest child has turned three, and especially of mothers of school-aged children over age seven, almost matches that of fathers (Statistics Finland 2021).

## 5. Research design

### 5.1 Data

The present data form part of the dataset gathered for the multidisciplinary research project *Finnish Childcare Policies: Inequality in Focus* (2015–2021) on the childcare arrangements of Finnish parents, funded by the Strategic Research Council of the Academy of Finland (grant number SA314317). In 2019, parents of four-year-old children were invited to respond to an online/postal survey on their childcare solutions and the motivations behind their choices, their views on national childcare policies and services, and their family's wellbeing. Altogether, 4 072 mothers and 3 692 fathers were included in a purposive sample representing different municipalities from all over the country. We



received 1 289 replies from mothers (32 % response rate) and 581 replies from fathers (16 %). The respondents came mainly from urban, higher educated, and middle-class backgrounds, while blue-collar workers, young parents and the lower educated were underrepresented. Over 90 per cent of the respondents were married or cohabiting. One in four respondents had only one child, more than half had two children, one in six had three, and less than one in ten had four or more children. All the respondents were their children's legal guardians (Sulkanen et al. 2020).

For the purposes of the analysis, different-sex parents living together with their four-year-old child and the child's other parent (mothers  $n = 1\ 103$ , fathers  $n = 551$ ) were selected from the data. As couples' labour market participation can be reflected in how much time each parent has available for unpaid labour at home (Bianchi et al. 2000), the analysis was conducted separately for three groups of parents: 1) mothers ( $n = 770$ ), and 2) fathers ( $n = 392$ ) who reported at the time of the survey that both parents were either in paid employment or full-time students, and 3) mothers ( $n = 249$ ) who reported that the child's father was in paid employment or a full-time student but that she herself was not.<sup>3</sup> Other groups, such as fathers in paid employment with a non-working spouse and working mothers with a non-working spouse were too small to be analysed separately.

## 5.2 Variables

Among a wide range of themes on parents' childcare arrangements, experiences, and wellbeing, the survey included one item on the division of parental responsibilities between the parents. The question concerned eight areas, used in our analysis as dependent variables, that to various degrees represented different dimensions of parental responsibilities. The respondents were asked which of the parents, during the past six months, had been responsible for the following: *social interaction*, including playing and doing things with the child; *hands-on care*, including routine daily childcare such as washing, dressing, and preparing meals; care of the child when sick such as caring for the child at home, accompanying the child to the doctor's or to the hospital; taking the child to or from daycare; and taking the child to hobbies; *community responsibilities*, including communicating with daycare services through such means as attending parents' evenings or discussions on early childhood education and care; and supporting the child's friendships such as contact with other parents and arranging meetings; and *mental labour*, including making decisions concerning the child or planning on behalf of the child. These variables on the division of labour between parents were self-reported on a five-point scale from the mother being always responsible to the father being always responsible for the task in question. The parents' responses were recoded into three-category ordinal variable (mother more often or always, both parents equally, father more often or always) and into

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3 We included full-time students in the category of working parents, because both groups have less time available for unpaid household work and childcare compared to parents who are not working or studying. For the sake of readability, we refer to this category as 'working mothers/fathers' throughout the text, including tables, although this group includes a minority of full-time students (9.0 % of the mothers and 3.7 % of their spouses, 3.9 % of the fathers and 7.7 % of their spouses).

dichotomous variables (mother more often or always = 0, both parents equally or father more often or always = 1).

The main independent variable was the father's prior take-up of paternity, parental and/or care leave with a child who was four years old at the time of the survey. Leave take-up was measured with a four-category ordinal variable determined in accordance with the Finnish leave scheme (see section on Finnish context): no leave (reference category), 1–3 weeks of leave (an amount corresponding to the paternity leave that fathers can take at the same time as the mother, usually at childbirth), 4–9 weeks of leave (an amount corresponding to leave that, on top of the previously mentioned leave, also includes the individual leave quota for fathers) and three months or more of leave (which would include, on top of the leave ear-marked for fathers, either parental leave or childcare leave to be shared according to the parents' wishes).<sup>4</sup> These categories were also used because previous research has shown that father's individual leave for periods longer than just one or two weeks is of critical importance for the division of care responsibilities between parents (Almqvist & Duvander, 2014; Bünning 2015; Evertson et al. 2018; Hosking et al. 2010; Miller 2011; Reimer & Pfau-Effinger 2020).

Independent variables also included mothers' take-up of childcare leave after sharable parental leave (none, 1–6 months, 7–12 months, 13 months or more (ref.))<sup>5</sup> and the respondent's opinion on whether the parental leave quota for fathers should be increased to encourage more fathers to take leave (disagrees (ref.), neither agrees nor disagrees, agrees). Control variables included the respondent's age (< 35 (ref.), 35–39, 40 or older), meaning mother's age in the mothers' data and father's age in the fathers' data, the age of the other parent being unavailable, number of children under 18 years old in the household (1, 2, 3 or more (ref.)), mother's education (tertiary degree or lower (ref.)), father's education (tertiary degree or lower (ref.)), household net income (0–2 500 (ref.), 2 501–5 000, more than 5 000 euros per month); and the size of the municipality of residence (the capital Helsinki, other large municipalities with at least 100 000 inhabitants, small municipalities with less than 100 000 inhabitants (ref.)). All the variables, including age and income, were based on the respondents' survey responses.

### 5.3 Methods

First, parents' responses on the division of the different dimensions of parental responsibilities were calculated as frequencies to identify areas in which parents either more or less often shared responsibilities. We also compared mothers' and fathers' responses and working mothers' and non-working mothers' responses.

4 Information on the specific type of leave (paternity leave, parental leave, childcare leave) were not included in the data. However, the length of leave can be considered as indicating which type of leave was most probably taken by the father.

5 At the time of the survey, parental leave ended when the child was approximately 9-11 months old, depending on whether the father used some of his quota on the top of parental leave. After parental leave, some childcare leave was taken in nine out of ten families, almost always by the mother (Miettinen & al. 2020). 'No childcare leave' thus roughly means that the child was not older than one year when the leave ended, '1-6 months' means that the child was not older than 1,5 years, '7-12 months' means not older than two years, and '13 months or more' means two years or older.

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Second, to examine the role of fathers' leave take-up in the more equal sharing of parental responsibilities, logistic regression analysis was performed for each of the eight dummy variables representing the dimensions of parental responsibilities. We present the full models including all the independent and control variables. The analyses were conducted separately for mothers and fathers, and for working mothers and non-working mothers. We compared the results between the different responsibilities as well as between the different groups of respondents. All analyses were conducted using SPSS 26.

## 6. Results

### 6.1 *The division of parental responsibilities between mothers and fathers*

While the parents reported sharing many of the responsibilities rather equally, it was also common for mothers to take a larger share or the main responsibility (Table 1). The responsibilities most commonly shared equally were making decisions and planning for the child and playing and doing things with the child. Mothers' main responsibility was most commonly reported for community responsibilities such as supporting the child's friendships or communicating with daycare. Hands-on care, including routine daily care and care of the child when sick, were also quite commonly carried out by the mother, as was making decisions and planning for the child, although it was still more common to report equal division of responsibility for these tasks. Fathers were rarely reported to be mostly or mainly responsible for any of the tasks, except those of taking the child to day care or to hobbies. Mothers more typically than fathers reported the mother being responsible for nearly all of the different tasks, while fathers more typically than mothers reported sharing or the father taking the main responsibility for some of the tasks.

Table 2, which presents mothers' views only, shows that differences in the division of responsibilities between parents were also associated with the mother's participation in the labour market. Mothers who were not in paid work more typically reported taking the main responsibility for tasks related to the routine daily care of their four-year-old, caring for the child when sick, taking the child to daycare, and playing with the child, whereas mothers who were in paid employment more typically reported sharing these tasks with the father. Because of the differences found between the mothers' and fathers' responses and those related to the mother's labour market status, we continued by analysing the associations of fathers' take-up of leave with the division of parental responsibilities in these groups of parents separately.

*Table 1: Mothers' and fathers' views on the division of responsibilities for different tasks in families with two working parents (%)*

		Mother more often/always	Both equally	Father more often/always	Total (n)	p*
Playing with the child	Mothers	27	59	15	100 (763)	,421
	Fathers	24	59	17	100 (387)	
Daily care (e.g., washing, dressing, meals)	Mothers	39	55	7	100 (766)	,002
	Fathers	28	62	9	100 (388)	
Care of the sick child	Mothers	40	51	10	100 (746)	,286
	Fathers	35	53	12	100 (375)	
Taking the child to/from daycare	Mothers	27	55	18	100 (754)	,006
	Fathers	21	53	26	100 (382)	
Taking the child to hobbies	Mothers	32	47	21	100 (590)	,000
	Fathers	19	51	30	100 (335)	
Communication with daycare	Mothers	54	40	7	100 (753)	,000
	Fathers	37	50	12	100 (383)	
Supporting friendships	Mothers	72	19	9	100 (745)	,000
	Fathers	64	32	5	100 (376)	
Making decisions and planning for the child	Mothers	48	49	3	100 (764)	,000
	Fathers	30	68	2	100 (388)	

Note: \* The value for p is the result of a  $\chi^2$  test and reports the statistical difference in the distribution between the mothers' and the fathers' answers.

*Table 2: Mothers' views on the division of responsibilities for different tasks in families with two working parents or with a working father and a non-working mother (%)*

		Mother more often/always	Both equally	Father more often/always	Total (n)	p*
Playing with the child	In paid work	27	59	15	100 (763)	,000
	Not in paid work	51	39	10	100 (244)	
Daily care (e.g., washing, dressing, meals)	In paid work	39	55	7	100 (766)	,000
	Not in paid work	61	35	4	100 (245)	
Care of the sick child	In paid work	40	51	10	100 (746)	,000
	Not in paid work	74	24	3	100 (238)	
Taking the child to/from daycare	In paid work	27	55	18	100 (754)	,000
	Not in paid work	48	35	17	100 (203)	
Taking the child to hobbies	In paid work	32	47	21	100 (590)	,084
	Not in paid work	41	40	20	100 (190)	
Communication with daycare	In paid work	54	40	7	100 (753)	,005
	Not in paid work	66	28	6	100 (202)	
Supporting friendships	In paid work	72	19	9	100 (745)	,202
	Not in paid work	74	21	5	100 (239)	
Making decisions and planning for the child	In paid work	48	49	3	100 (764)	,671
	Not in paid work	46	52	2	100 (245)	

Note: \* The value for p is the result of a  $\chi^2$  test and reports the statistical difference in the distribution between the answers of the mothers who were or were not in paid work.

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## 6.2 *The role of fathers' leave take-up in the sharing of parental responsibilities*

The descriptive results showed that fathers' main responsibility in the different care-related tasks was quite rare. Hence, for the logistic regression analysis, we combined the categories of sharing the task in question equally between parents and the father being mostly or always responsible for the task.

In the mothers' data for families with both parents in paid work (Table 3), the models for routine daily childcare, care of the sick child, taking the child to daycare or to hobbies, and communicating with daycare services proved statistically significant.

Father's take-up of longer leave increased the odds of the parents sharing routine daily childcare and care of the sick child as well as the odds of sharing responsibility for taking the child to hobbies. Mothers whose spouse had taken at least three months of leave were more likely to report that the father took an equal or even the main responsibility for tasks related to the routine daily care of the four-year-old child such as washing, dressing and meals, caring for the child when sick at home or accompanying the child to the doctor's or to the hospital. If the father had taken at least a month (four weeks) of leave, mothers were also more likely to report that he was involved in taking the child to hobbies together with or instead of her.

In contrast, in the full model with all the independent variables, father's leave take-up was not associated with taking the child to day care or parents' communication with day care services. The full models for playing and doing things with the child, supporting the child's friendships, or making decisions concerning the child were not statistically significant.

In sum, according to the mothers' answers, fathers' leave take-up was associated with some of the tasks related to hands-on care but not with playing and doing things together with the child or with community responsibilities or mental labour, such as being responsible for communication with daycare services, making decisions or planning for the child.

In the fathers' data in families with both parents in paid work (Table 4), only the models for taking the child to or from day care and supporting the child's friendships proved statistically significant. However, father's take-up (or length) of leave was not associated with either of these responsibilities.

In the mothers' data in families where the father was in paid work, but the mother was not (Table 5), only the models for taking the child to or from day care and making decisions concerning the child were statistically significant. Father's length of leave take-up proved to be significant in the former: mothers whose spouse had taken four to nine weeks of leave – an amount corresponding to the father's individual parental leave quota – were more likely to report that the parents shared, or the father took the main responsibility for taking the child to day care. Making decisions concerning the child was not statistically significantly associated with father's leave take-up.

Table 3: Father's shared or main responsibility for different tasks (ref. mother's main responsibility) in families with two working parents, mothers' data (Odds Ratios)

	Daily care							
	Playing with the child	Daily care (e.g. washing, dressing, meals)	Caring of the sick child	Taking the child to/daycare	Taking the child to/from child to hobbies	Communication with daycare	Supporting friendships	Making decisions and planning
<b>Father's leave (ref. no leave)</b>								
1-3 weeks	1,148	,917	,724	,941	1,752	1,125	1,104	,894
4-9 weeks	1,409	1,358	1,544	1,000	2,517**	1,068	1,198	,888
3 months or more	1,622	2,249**	1,948*	1,381	2,416**	1,521	1,824*	,915
<b>Mother's childcare leave (ref. 13 months or more)</b>								
none (only parental leave)	1,068	1,209	,997	,854	1,516	1,238	2,081**	1,231
1-6 months	1,077	1,363	1,016	1,450	1,408	,888	1,738*	1,164
7-12 months	,705	1,298	1,024	1,196	1,248	,993	1,385	,901
<b>Mother's (respondent's) age (ref. &lt; 35)</b>								
35-39	,895	,759	1,125	1,021	1,100	1,073	,972	1,312
≥ 40	,715	,538**	,953	,913	1,234	1,068	1,005	1,364
<b>Number of children (ref. ≥ 3)</b>								
1	1,203	,994	1,119	1,055	1,295	1,690*	,918	,976
2	1,491	1,280	,795	1,074	1,124	1,093	,989	1,363
<b>Mother's education (ref. lower)</b>								
tertiary degree	,640	,592*	,882	1,359	,317**	,889	1,000	1,038
<b>Father's education (ref. lower)</b>								
tertiary degree	1,540*	1,759**	1,117	1,414	2,517***	1,482*	1,010	1,620**
<b>Household income, €/month (ref. 0-2500)</b>								
2501-5000	1,121	,976	1,075	1,289	1,383	,924	,977	1,011
> 5000	1,355	1,225	1,204	1,634	,937	,967	,758	,975
<b>Size of municipality (ref. small municipalities [<math>&lt; 100\,000</math>])</b>								
Helsinki	1,531	1,383	1,449	1,815*	2,565**	2,150**	1,607	1,150
large municipalities ( $\geq 100\,000$ )	1,306	1,179	,926	1,594*	1,177	1,322	1,172	1,298
<b>Mother's (respondent's) opinion on increasing fathers' leave quota (ref. disagrees)</b>								
neither disagrees nor agrees	1,597	1,085	1,404	1,043	1,020	1,678*	1,349	,883
agrees	1,399	1,098	1,330	1,528	,924	1,720*	1,326	1,119
Constant	2,611	1,570	1,521	2,022	2,540	,788	,350	,854
n	691	693	674	683	534	680	676	691
Sig.	,081	,000	,002	,000	,000	,000	,124	,166
R <sup>2</sup>	,056	,088	,077	,094	,133	,097	,053	,045

Note: \*\*\* p < ,001, \*\* p < ,01, \* p < ,05

Table 4: Father's shared or main responsibility for different tasks (ref. mother's main responsibility) in families with two working parents, fathers' data (Odds Ratios)

	Daily care							
	Playing with the child	(e.g. washing, dressing, meals)	Caring of the sick child	Taking the child to/daycare	Taking the child to/hobbies	Communication with daycare	Supporting friendships	Making decisions and planning
<b>Father's leave (ref. no leave)</b>								
1-3 weeks	,714	2,224	,755	1,166	1,006	,796	1,219	1,243
4-9 weeks	,980	1,507	,844	1,666	1,171	1,456	,939	,941
3 months or more	,970	1,755	1,869	1,879	1,053	1,921	1,627	1,253
<b>Mother's childcare leave (ref. 13 months or more)</b>								
none (only parental leave)	2,067*	1,291	,773	1,432	1,528	,863	,981	,756
1-6 months	1,974	1,102	,749	1,749	,738	1,091	,623	,916
7-12 months	1,519	1,308	1,113	,735	,778	,964	1,201	1,078
<b>Fathers' (respondent's) age (ref. &lt; 35)</b>								
35-39	,597	,699	,986	,324*	,615	,820	,919	,991
≥ 40	,424*	,469*	1,047	,217**	,565	,843	,851	,931
<b>Number of children (ref. ≥ 3)</b>								
1	,752	,777	1,093	,659	1,338	1,527	,954	,865
2	1,108	,833	,624	,582	1,187	1,278	,613	1,218
<b>Mother's education (ref. lower)</b>								
tertiary degree	1,002	,490*	,546	2,091*	1,078	1,116	1,438	,667
<b>Father's education (ref. lower)</b>								
tertiary degree	,872	1,177	,964	1,541	1,570	,943	,728	1,072
<b>Household income, €/month (ref. 0-2500)</b>								
2501-5000	,304	1,495	1,519	1,535	2,526	1,339	436	1,104
> 5000	,457	2,786*	1,634	1,857	2,288	1,531	,314*	1,260
<b>Size of municipality (ref. small municipalities [<math>&lt; 100\,000</math>])</b>								
Helsinki	1,656	1,337	1,749	2,749*	1,167	1,885	1,913	1,004
large municipalities ( $\geq 100\,000$ )	1,125	1,110	1,486	1,589	1,008	1,466	1,098	1,007
<b>Fathers' (respondent's) opinion on increasing fathers' leave quota (ref. disagrees)</b>								
neither disagrees nor agrees	1,348	1,251	1,476	1,920	,997	1,160	2,231	,924
agrees	1,251	1,443	1,720	1,737	1,280	,871	1,127	,817
Constant	4,856	2,720	1,844	2,795	2,934	1,417	,692	2,577
n	350	351	338	346	304	347	341	351
Sig.	,160	,361	,122	,000	,894	,408	,049	,995
R <sup>2</sup>	,099	,077	,098	,185	,057	,072	,112	,025

Note \*\*\* p < .001, \*\* p < .01, \* p < .05

Table 5: Father's shared or main responsibility for different tasks (ref. mother's main responsibility) in families with a working father and non-working mother, mothers' data (Odds Ratios)

	Daily care							
	Playing with the child	(e.g. washing, dressing, meals)	Caring of the sick child	Taking the child to/from daycare	Taking the hobbies			
	child	meals)	child	daycare	hobbies			
				with daycare	Communication with daycare			
					friendships			
					planning			
<b>Father's leave (ref. no leave)</b>								
1-3 weeks	1,087	,928	,457	1,838	1,412	,921	,673	,873
4-9 weeks	1,161	,926	1,053	2,933*	1,944	1,136	1,147	1,867
3 months or more	,591	,679	2,135	2,169	,762	,691	1,013	,552
<b>Mother's childcare leave (ref. 13 months or more)</b>								
none (only parental leave)	1,449	1,718	1,112	2,248	1,083	2,363	1,595	1,868
1-6 months	1,232	1,894	,888	2,459	3,706**	3,263*	,776	2,486*
7-12 months	1,803	2,250	1,029	1,440	6,093**	1,264	1,148	1,594
<b>Mother's (respondent's) age (ref. &lt; 35)</b>								
35-39	,586	,753	,272**	,900	,934	2,009	,908	,473*
≥ 40	,531	,869	,272	1,022	,737	3,064	,805	,727
<b>Number of children (ref. ≥ 3)</b>								
1	1,461	3,674*	3,247	1,563	1,040	1,739	4,487*	3,686*
2	1,471	2,274*	1,072	,879	,575	,914	1,277	,765
<b>Mother's education (ref. lower)</b>								
tertiary degree	,862	,584	1,904	1,808	1,117	,406	1,079	,949
<b>Father's education (ref. lower)</b>								
tertiary degree	2,022*	1,953	,931	3,216**	1,116	2,010	2,065	,794
<b>Household income, €/month (ref. 0-2500)</b>								
2501-5000	,706	1,008	,630	,336*	,691	,751	1,110	,660
> 5000	1,033	1,368	1,053	,932	,833	,379	,450	,214*
<b>Size of municipality (ref. small municipalities [<math>&lt; 100\ 000</math>])</b>								
Helsinki	,780	,573	,602	,669	1,307	,763	,374*	,431*
large municipalities ( $\geq 100\ 000$ )	,706	,766	,626	1,261	,940	,778	,509	,628
<b>Mother's (respondent's) opinion on increasing fathers' leave quota (ref. disagrees)</b>								
neither disagrees nor agrees	1,088	2,233	,790	1,330	1,094	,667	,789	,984
agrees	1,987	2,605*	1,072	,805	,835	1,045	1,062	,872
Constant	,909	,792	,372	1,399	1,758	,690	,291	1,275
n	220	221	215	183	173	182	215	221
Sig.	,216	,058	,050	,002	,069	,187	,366	,002
R <sup>2</sup>	,129	,162	,182	,259	,198	,167	,128	,225

Note\*\*\*: p < ,001, \*\*: p < ,01, \* p < ,05



## 7. Conclusions and discussion

In this study, using survey data from both mothers and fathers, we analysed the associations of the division of parental responsibilities between the parents of a four-year-old child with fathers' take-up and length of leave. The mothers' data showed that in families with two working parents, fathers and mothers shared some of the tasks related to hands-on care more equally if the father had previously taken more than three weeks of leave. This result is in line with previous findings. However, contrary to our expectations, playing with the child, which could be interpreted as an indicator of a close father-child relationship, was not associated with fathers' take-up of leave. Moreover, responsibilities involving more or mostly mental labour, such as making decisions for the child, or community responsibilities, including communicating with day care services or supporting the child's friendships, were not associated with the father's take-up of leave.

Based on the mothers' data, it seems that fathers' leave periods longer than the few weeks of leave usually taken when the child is born and when the child's mother is on leave herself are associated with a more equal sharing of childcare responsibilities between working parents later on. This was especially true for routine daily care tasks, such as washing, dressing and meals, or taking care of the child when sick, that were quite often the mother's responsibility. Given that parental leave is first and foremost about hands-on childcare, longer leave periods taken independently by the father give him the possibility to develop his own childcare skills and practices (Wall & O'Brien 2017).

Playing and doing things together with the child, however, was one of the responsibilities that the parents most typically reported sharing. It may be that a task related to the father-child relationship and bonding with the child has become an important part of contemporary involved and responsible fatherhood (Eerola 2015; Eerola 2014) that does not require a more profound change in gender equality in other areas of parenthood such as care or housework. However, tasks more clearly involving dimensions of mental labour might have been expected to be shared more equally by leave-taking fathers, especially those taking longer independent leave and who have had the opportunity not only to develop their skills in hands-on care but also to take more comprehensive responsibility for the child's wellbeing. A possible explanation for the lack of an association of fathers' leave with these responsibilities could be that communication with daycare services or supporting the child's friendships – two of the variables that we classified as community responsibility and that also include the cognitive dimensions of anticipating needs and weighting different options – are responsibilities that are negotiated not between parents alone but also with other social actors and institutions embedded in a cultural context that emphasises the role of the mother as the primary carer. In addition, the tasks included in the survey that could be understood as representing the more cognitive end of the continuum of responsibilities were rather limited; a more detailed list of tasks could reveal potential associations with fathers' length of leave take-up. Further research could devise more nuanced ways of measuring the different dimensions of parental responsibilities and their associations with leave take-up by fathers.

When the mother was at home, usually taking care of a younger child, and only the father was in paid work, his former take-up of leave was less significant with respect to the

parents' care responsibilities. The mothers in these situations commonly reported taking the main responsibility for childcare. The division of labour in parental responsibilities in these cases was probably based on time-availability (Bianchi et al. 2000), as the parent staying at home has, at least temporarily, more time for care, play and other tasks than the parent in paid work, irrespective of whether the latter previously took parental leave. Nevertheless, even working fathers with a spouse at home were more likely to share responsibility for taking the four-year-old to or from day care if they had taken a month or two of leave. Based on their personal experience of independent full-time care responsibility, these fathers might better understand the importance for the stay-at-home mother's well-being, especially if she is on leave taking care of a new baby, of more equal sharing in childcare. Taking the (older) child to or from day care might enable the mother to get some rest and to plan the day's schedule with fewer interruptions. It could also be a practical responsibility to be taken by the father on his way to or from work. Of the different tasks studied here, taking the child to daycare or to hobbies were those in which fathers most commonly took equal or main responsibility.

Although fathers' leave take-up was associated with more equal sharing of childcare between parents in the mothers' data, this was not the case in the fathers' data. In fact, no association was found, and most models turned out not to be statistically significant. There are several possible explanations. First, the size of the fathers' data might not be adequate for multivariate statistical analysis and thus for statistically significant results. Second, the response rate was significantly lower for fathers than mothers, leading to potential selection bias among the fathers who responded to the survey. For example, fathers who had taken longer leave responded more frequently (Sulkanen et al. 2020). It is also likely that the responding fathers, irrespective of whether they took leave, were more engaged with their child, more interested in matters concerning the child and thus more willing to participate in the study altogether than non-responding fathers. This indicates that there might be fewer differences in these respects between the fathers in the sample who took and those who did not take leave compared to the fathers in the general population. This selection effect for fathers may also partially explain why the fathers and mothers seemed to tell two different stories about their division of child-related responsibilities, each emphasising their own share. On the other hand, a similar difference between men's and women's reports on the household division of labour has also been found in other studies (Attila et al. 2019; Geist 2013; Press & Townsley 1998). Hence, owing to these limitations, we are unable to draw any firm conclusions based on the fathers' data.

Another limitation of our study was that although the results confirm the association between fathers' leave take-up and the parental division of childcare responsibilities found in many earlier studies (e.g., Duvander & Jans 2009; Haas & Hwang 2008; Nepomnyaschy & Waldfogel 2007; Tanaka & Waldfogel 2007), they do not allow conclusions to be drawn on causality. It is possible that fathers who are willing to share care responsibilities later on are self-selected users of parental leave simply because they are more ready than other fathers to take (more) leave. This explanation cannot be excluded in our study. At the same time, it is likely that when taking leave independently and for a longer period, fathers – even those who were pro-gender equality and willing to share childcare and household labour with their spouse before taking leave – learn and develop caring skills which make

it easier for them to take responsibility for different care tasks after their leave has ended. This mechanism has especially been shown in qualitative studies (Evertsson et al. 2018; O'Brien & Wall 2017), although Bünning (2015), for example, using longitudinal panel data, found a causal positive relationship with no evidence of a possible selection effect between fathers' leave take-up and their involvement in childcare. Both causal and selective mechanisms may also function simultaneously and mutually reinforce each other.

Despite these limitations and based on our findings, we conclude that, if long enough, a period of independent parental leave taken by fathers could later result in or at least support a more equal sharing of childcare responsibilities and thus help dismantle gendered care practices between parents. Fathers' actual leave take-up is clearly associated with the possibilities offered by leave policies. For example, a substantial body of research has shown that fathers mainly use the ear-marked leave quotas that carry higher compensation (Haas & Rostgaard 2011). We would argue that a long enough father's quota could not only increase leave take-up but also promote equal parenthood later in the child's life. A longer leave quota for fathers would also reflect as well as foster wider cultural understanding about the advantages of caring fatherhood (Pfau-Effinger 2005; Valarino 2019). Policies with ear-marked leave for fathers can, on the one hand, shape attitudes and cultural ideas about fatherhood by signalling the importance of involved fatherhood and shared parenthood. On the other hand, presuming that some 'unused potential for care' exists among fathers, quotas can strengthen their sense of entitlement and remove the obstacles to taking leave among fathers who are keen to share care for their children equally in their family's daily life.

### Data availability statement

The data will be made publicly available on later date in the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (<https://www.fsd.tuni.fi/en/>). For more information, please contact Petteri Eerola ([j.petteri.eerola@jyu.fi](mailto:j.petteri.eerola@jyu.fi)).

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## Information in German

### Deutscher Titel

Kann Elternzeitnutzung durch Väter die geschlechtsspezifische Verteilung von Kinderbetreuungsaufgaben aufbrechen?

### Zusammenfassung

**Fragestellung:** Dieser Artikel untersucht den Zusammenhang zwischen der Elternzeitnutzung von Vätern und der Verteilung der Betreuungsaufgaben zwischen den Eltern, wenn das Kind circa vier Jahre alt ist.

**Hintergrund:** In Familien mit kleinen Kindern erledigen Frauen nach wie vor mehr Betreuungsarbeit als Männer. Allerdings legen mehrere Studien nahe, dass Väter, die Elternzeit nehmen, auch mehr Verantwortung in der Kinderbetreuung übernehmen.

**Methode:** Anhand finnischer Befragungsdaten von Müttern und Vätern mit vierjährigen Kindern aus dem Jahr 2019 und logistischer Regressionsmodelle wurde untersucht, ob die Nutzung von Elternzeit durch Väter und deren Dauer im Zusammenhang damit steht, dass Väter die Hälfte oder einen noch größeren Anteil verschiedener Arten elterlicher Aufgaben übernehmen, inklusive praktischer Betreuungsaufgaben, Interaktion mit dem Kind, soziale Aufgaben und geistige Arbeit.

**Ergebnisse:** Die deskriptiven Analysen zeigten, dass Eltern in Doppelverdiener-Familien einige der praktischen Betreuungsaufgaben gleichmäßiger aufteilten, wenn der Vater mehr als drei Wochen Elternzeit genommen hatte. War nur der Vater erwerbstätig, zeigte sich ein Zusammenhang zwischen seiner Elternzeitnutzung und dem Bringen des Kindes zur Tagesstätte.

**Schlussfolgerung:** Während die individuelle Elternzeit von Vätern ungenutztes Potenzial birgt, die geschlechtsspezifische Verteilung von Kinderbetreuungsaufgaben aufzubrechen, könnten die Effekte je nach Art der Aufgabe variieren.

**Schlagwörter:** Elternzeit, Vaterschaft, geschlechtsspezifische Kindererziehung, Gleichberechtigung der Geschlechter, Arbeitsteilung, Kinderbetreuung, Umfrage

JFR – Journal of Family Research, 2022, vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 958–982.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.20377/jfr-723>

Submitted: May 12, 2021

Accepted: April 04, 2021

Published online: April 28, 2022

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