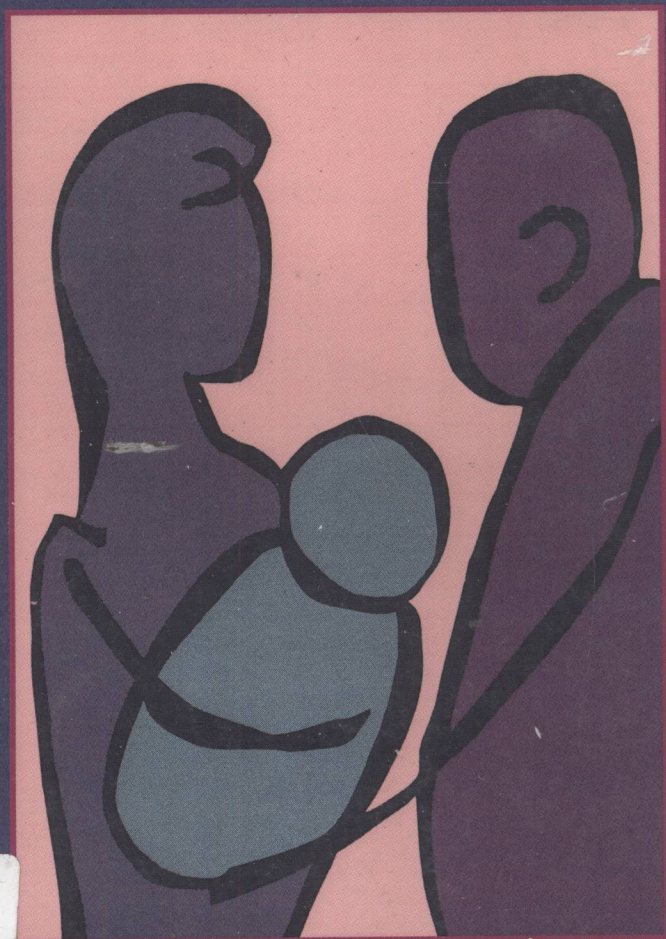


# Equal Parenthood and Social Policy



A Study  
of Parental Leave  
in Sweden

**Linda Haas**



D753.281  
H 112

**EQUAL PARENTHOOD  
AND SOCIAL POLICY**

*A Study of Parental Leave in Sweden*

**LINDA HAAS**



**State University of New York Press**



E2009001691

Figures 3.1–3.3 have been reproduced with permission from the National Social Insurance Office in Stockholm.

Published by  
State University of New York Press, Albany

©1992 State University of New York

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

*No part of this book may be used or reproduced  
in any manner whatsoever without written permission  
except in the case of brief quotations embodied in  
critical articles and reviews.*

For information, address the State University of New York Press,  
State University Plaza, Albany, NY 12246

Production by Bernadine Dawes  
Marketing by Bernadette LaManna

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Haas, Linda.

Equal parenthood and social policy : a study of parental leave in  
Sweden / Linda Haas.

p. cm. — (SUNY series, issues in child care)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7914-0957-0 (acid-free paper) : \$59.50. — ISBN

0-7914-0958-9 (pbk. : acid-free paper) : \$19.95

1. Parental leave—Sweden. I. Title. II. Series: SUNY series in  
issues in child care.

HD6065.5.S8H33 1992

331.25'763—dc20

91-3433

CIP

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

EQUAL PARENTHOOD  
AND  
SOCIAL POLICY

9 n34 034  
DEN NEW TEXT  
\$ DEVISON BOOKSTORE

**SUNY Series, Issues in Child Care**  
**Marian S. Blum, EDITOR**

---

---

## Preface

This book was written because of three separate yet inter-related concerns.

Employment and parenthood are difficult roles to combine. There is no scientific evidence that human beings are biologically or psychologically unable to combine working and nurturing. Instead, social arrangements make it difficult. As more women enter the labor force, increasing numbers are faced with conflict between employment and family roles. More often than not, one has to give precedence to the other. *Can new social arrangements be developed which integrate these two important activities?*

Historically, women and men have been socially assigned different tasks and responsibilities. Since industrialization, women have been in charge of home maintenance and nurturing while men have been associated with earning income. Women's entrance into the labor force has only slightly modified these distinctions. With the division of labor by sex, women and their activities (especially nurturing) are less socially valued, and women have less opportunities for economic independence and self-fulfillment outside the home. Men's chances for self-realization in the occupational world are limited by pressures to achieve, while their chances for a more reasonable balance between family and work is also curtailed. *Can new social arrangements be instituted which call for a more equal sharing of employment and nurturing by men and women?*

Economic pressures on families have led to an increasing number of children having both parents in the labor market and to the growth of day care. There is evidence that having two employed parents is generally good for children, if the alternative care they receive is of sufficient quality. Most of the findings,

however, are based on preschool-aged children and older. We know little about how babies less than one year old fare when both parents are employed and need to rely upon a child care provider. We do know that parent-child attachment takes time; some professionals suggest babies need at least four months home with at least one parent in order for emotional security and attachment to occur. We also know that parents often suffer anguish and guilt at leaving their children too soon. *Can new social arrangements be instituted which value children more and recognize the need for babies to be with parents, without parents' sacrificing economically and occupationally?*

These are the questions which motivated me to write this book. My search for answers led me to Sweden, the only society in the world which has officially struggled with these questions for a considerable period of time. Through social policy, Sweden has attempted to put into place new social arrangements which recognize children's needs for parental care but call for men and women to share equally employment and parenting responsibilities.

This book focuses on one particular social program designed to bring about this new social order, parental leave. Swedish parents are entitled to 15 months of leave with pay and job security at the time of child birth or adoption, to be used to care for their new babies. Both men and women are allowed and encouraged to use these benefits. I analyze the development of the parental leave program and its success in achieving the goal of equal parenthood.

I believe it is very useful to look at other societies for insight into the social arrangements that can promote social change. This is particularly necessary in the case of studying the issue of combining employment and parenthood, since the United States lags far behind other industrial societies in considering the problem and proposing solutions. On the other hand, I try to be cautious about generalizing the findings about Sweden to other social settings, since I realize how unique each society is.

I also believe it is useful to study a society at the closest quarters possible, and not make judgments from a distance. Numerous visits to Sweden over an extended period of time, supportive Swedish colleagues, and an understanding of the

Swedish language have all helped me gain an insider's insight into the society. On the other hand, I believe I have maintained the outsider's critical perspective, due to my background and training as a sociologist and because I am not Swedish in origin.

Lastly, this study was motivated by an interest in trying to combine the perspectives from a number of disciplines, instead of relying upon only one. Accordingly, I have attempted to interweave theoretical perspectives, research findings, and methodological techniques from a number of academic fields, including anthropology, history, psychology, political science and sociology, in order to gain a richer, in-depth view on the subject matter.



## *Acknowledgments*

Several people provided important encouragement and assistance to me while I was researching this topic and writing this book. Ain Haas, Philip Hwang, Karin Sandqvist, and Joseph Pleck all spent a great deal of time helping me with this project, and I am most grateful for their support. Others who gave useful aid included Joan Aldous, Julia Brannen, Barbro Dunér, Jane Hood, Monica Widstedt Höeg, Michael Lamb, Ann-Sofie Ohlander, Eva Pramsten, Barbara Risman, Graeme Russell, and Lena Nilsson Schönnesson. I appreciate the cooperation of officials at the Gothenburg social insurance office (Försäkringskassan), including Sune Börjesson, Gunnar Carlsson, Elsie Ericsson, and Sven Gustafsson. Thanks are also extended to the couples who allowed me to interview them at length about parental leave. Finally, I greatly appreciate grants from the American-Scandinavian Foundation and Indiana University, which made this research possible.

## *Contents*

<b>Preface .....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Acknowledgments .....</b>	<b>xi</b>
<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. History and Development of Parental Leave         in Sweden .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3. Participation of Swedish Fathers in         Parental Leave .....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>4. Determinants of Fathers' Participation         in Parental Leave .....</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>5. Daddies and Mommies at Home:         Parents' Experiences with Parental Leave .....</b>	<b>129</b>
<b>6. Consequences of Fathers Taking Parental         Leave for Gender Equality in the Family .....</b>	<b>153</b>
<b>7. Implications for the United States .....</b>	<b>187</b>
<b>8. Conclusion: Equal Parenthood and Social         Policy .....</b>	<b>217</b>
<b>Appendix A: Methodology of the Study .....</b>	<b>231</b>
<b>Appendix B: Questionnaire and Interview Protocols .....</b>	<b>239</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>265</b>
<b>Index .....</b>	<b>289</b>

## INTRODUCTION

In every known society, women have had primary responsibility for the physical care and emotional well-being of small children. There are individual instances where men have become primary caretakers of children, usually in the absence of mothers, but in no society is it generally the case that men and women are equally responsible for child care. Anthropological studies of preindustrial societies have not uncovered any societies where equal parenthood is practiced (Katz and Konner, 1981). Studies of fathers in various industrial societies—including Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the Soviet Union, and the United States—have also documented that women continue to serve as the primary parent (Booth and Edwards, 1980; Bozhkov and Golofast, 1988; Day and Mackey, 1989; Haas, 1982; Horna and Lupri, 1987; Hwang, 1987; Mackey, 1986; Moss and Brannen, 1987; New and Benigni, 1987; Nickel and Kocher, 1987; Parseval and Hurstel, 1987; Russell, 1982, 1987; Russell and Radin, 1983; Sandqvist, 1987a, Ve, 1989).

Women's primary responsibility for child care takes several forms. Mothers have been found to spend more "solo time" with children, which means that they are home alone with the child more often (Katsh, 1981; LaRossa, 1988). Even when both parents are home, mothers have been found to make themselves more available to children and to spend more time in direct interaction (Bronstein, 1984). Gender differences are also evident in *how* time with children is spent. Mothers tend to be more involved in physical caretaking tasks while fathers are generally more actively involved in play and stimulating activities (Bronstein, 1984; Easterbrooks and Goldberg, 1984; Jones, 1985; Katsh, 1981; Sandqvist, 1987a). Not surprisingly, women

are more likely than men to define child care as work, while men tend to regard it as leisure (Shaw, 1988).

There is also evidence that women typically are the ones most *responsible* for the care of small children. This takes several forms. Despite the cliché of “wait till your father gets home,” women have been found to be more involved than fathers in the administration of discipline (Condran and Bode, 1982). When men participate in specific child care tasks, women are usually the ones who have delegated or assigned those tasks to them (Branson, Anderson, and Leslie, 1987; Kotelchuk, 1976; LaRossa, 1988). Women have been found to make more of the decisions in regard to children (Condran and Bode, 1982). Mothers have been described as the “psychic parents” who keep in their minds all the details having to do with children. One person described psychic parenting and the delegation pattern that often occurs in the following way:

Yes, dad will take Mary to the dentist. But it was mom who (1) remembered that Mary needed to go to the dentist, (2) made the appointment, (3) wrote the note to get Mary excused from school and reminded her to take it to school, (4) saw that Mary brushed her teeth and wore one of her least disreputable pair of jeans . . . (5) reminded dad to take Mary the morning of the appointment, (6) paid the bill when it came in the mail, and (7) posted the next six month appointment on the family calendar afterwards. (cited in Benokraitis, 1985:253)

Not surprisingly, given their greater involvement in and responsibility for many aspects of child care, women exhibit greater absorption in the parenting role than men. Ehrensaft (1985) states, “Women *are* parents, while men *do* parenting.” Women limit their outside activities more in order to be able to do child care; this particularly occurs for employment. Women often pick jobs combinable with child care responsibilities, are the ones who take an extended time off after childbirth to care for infants, work fewer hours, and stay home from work when children are sick (Hiller and Philliber, 1986). Recent research studies show that fathers in postindustrial societies are beginning to spend considerable time with their children and often rank the fatherhood role equal to, or greater in importance

than, the employee role (Barnett and Baruch, 1987; Booth and Edwards, 1980; Cohen, 1987; Gilbert, 1985; Haas, 1988; Lamb et al., 1985; Mackey, 1986; Nock and Kingston, 1988; Pleck, 1983). Nevertheless, there is little dispute that couples practicing "equal parenthood" are few.

## THE IMPACT OF BIOLOGY

Women's responsibility for young children is a cultural universal. Because women are everywhere more involved in the care of small children than men are, it has often been assumed that the reason must lie in biology. If parenting behavior had strong biological bases, it would presumably be virtually impossible to alter the *status quo*. What does research suggest about the impact of biology on parenting behavior?

### *A Maternal Instinct?*

Scientists generally reject the notion that there is such a thing as a maternal instinct, whereby mothers are uniquely more capable of caring for children because of some hormonal changes occurring at childbirth or some genetic predisposition. Research on primates reveals that the ability to nurture is dependent on prior learning and the experience of having been nurtured oneself (Oakley, 1974). Studies of individuals with hormonal and genetic abnormalities allow an investigation into the particular effects of feminizing hormones or genes. Reviewing this research, Chodorow (1978:29) states:

There is no evidence to show that female hormones or chromosomes make a difference in human maternalness, and there is substantial evidence that nonbiological mothers, children, and men can parent just as adequately as biological mothers and can feel just as nurturant.

Studies on humans as well as animals show that it is infants themselves, rather than any special set of hormones, which activate nurturing behavior in females and males alike (Chodorow, 1978).

In further support of the idea that there is no such thing as a maternal instinct, studies involving newborns and infants in hospital, laboratory, and home settings have uncovered no evidence that men are innately less qualified than women to care for infants. Research shows that fathers can respond as appropriately as mothers to infants' signals for assistance and, when given the opportunity, spend about the same amount of time as mothers talking, teaching, soothing, and showing affection (Belsky, 1979; Field, 1978; Hwang, 1985; Jones, 1985; Lamb, 1981; Lamb et al., 1985; Parke and Tinsley, 1981; Yogman, 1984). Observational studies of parent-child interaction in public places in fifteen different societies also showed that "men responded to children in a basic similar way [as] women" (Mackey, 1986:168).

If biology was an overwhelming determinant of parenting behavior, it would seem likely that we would find worldwide that only mothers performed child care. Evidence from preindustrial societies, however, shows that 40% of the primary care of infants is performed by people other than mothers (usually siblings) (Newland, 1980; Weisner and Gallimore, 1977). Analysis of data on a world sample of 186 societies (provided by Barry and Paxson, 1971) shows that only in 2% of societies are mothers the ones who exclusively or almost exclusively care for infants; in no society was it the case that mothers were the exclusive or almost exclusive caretakers in early childhood.

### *Children's Need for Mothers*

More contemporary arguments concerning the necessity of a gender-based division of labor for parenting rest on the idea that children naturally thrive best when their mothers devote considerable time to care for them. This idea appears to be a fairly recent social invention.

In preindustrial times, little concern was shown for developing children's personalities, intelligence, and individuality. Mothers, like fathers, were too occupied with activities related to economic survival to pay much attention to small children. Writing about preindustrial colonial America, Margolis (1985:18) states:

The mother-child relationship was enmeshed in the myriad of daily tasks women performed for their families' survival. They kept house, tended gardens, raised poultry and cattle, churned milk into butter and cream, butchered livestock, tanned skins, pickled and preserved food, made candles, buttons, soap, beer and cider, gathered and produced medicinal herbs, and spun and wove wool and cotton for family clothes. The wives of farmers, merchants, and artisans . . . often helped in their husbands' businesses as well.

Even if parents had had time to spare from productive activities to spend with small children, cultural ideology (at least in North America and Western Europe) would have discouraged them from being too attentive and nurturant. Mintz and Kellogg (1988:14) maintain that in colonial America "childhood was a much less secure and shorter stage of life than it is today." Infant mortality was high and children were expected to take their place in the world of work soon after they were weaned. Religious doctrines also depicted small children as being born with guilt and sin. In order to break down a child's will, parents were encouraged not to be indulgent (Margolis, 1985; Mintz and Kellogg, 1988).

Since industrialization, however, the status of children has dramatically changed. They are now regarded as being in great need of more than the physical necessities of life. The new market economy which emerged with industrialization, as well as dissemination of findings from research studies on child development, seem responsible for these significant changes in attitudes toward children.

The new economy required a well-educated, self-disciplined, and stable workforce. Childhood came to be viewed as a crucial time period in the formation of adult character; children were regarded as needing protection, education, and special nurturing in order to realize their full potential as individuals—and, consequently, as workers (Frykman and Löfgren, 1987; Glenn, 1986; Margolis, 1985). Women were seen as the ideal ones to do this special nurturing. They had been more involved than fathers in child care previously, and their characters were seen as uniquely qualifying them to do this special nurturing—they were regarded as inherently more moral, pure, and tender (Bosanquet,

1906; Rotundo, 1987). In place of women's former productive activities, women were now admonished to pay increasing attention to the quality of the home environment, the nurturance of the marital relationship, and most particularly children. The joys of motherhood were exalted; motherhood began to represent "the greatest achievement of a woman's life, the sole true means of self-realization" (Oakley, 1974:186).

As mothers took even more control of child care and domestic work, fathers were freed to pursue the new opportunities for paid employment outside the home (Bosanquet, 1906). Masculinity became defined in terms of men's levels of ambition and achievement outside the home, and the economic dependence of mothers and children on fathers became taken for granted. The "father as breadwinner" ideal had emerged (Demos, 1982; Pleck, 1987; Rotundo, 1985).

A new belief system, the "doctrine of separate spheres," had thus taken hold, whereby men were presumed to belong to the public sphere and women to the domestic sphere. This belief system reinforced the familial division of labor which made motherhood women's primary vocation and made child care more women's responsibility, while men's parenting role was defined mainly in economic terms.

In the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, the idea that full-time mothering was essential to children's proper development became more entrenched through the writings of childrearing experts (Margolis, 1985). These experts made false assumptions regarding children's innate needs, according to Oakley (1974). One assumption was that "children need mothers rather than any other kind of caretaker . . . a mystical connection binds child to mother and to mother alone." Another assumption was that "children need to be reared in the context of a one-to-one relationship" (Oakley, 1974: 203-204). Much of the evidence put forth for these assumptions descended from studies of the negative effects of institutionalization on infants (usually war orphans). From these studies, comparisons were made between institutionalized care and maternal care, with maternal care being considered not only better, but the one that all children innately needed (Oakley, 1974).

It was not until fairly recently that such findings were reconsidered. Institutionalized infants often lack adequately stim-



ulating activity, as well as the opportunity to form emotionally secure relationships with caretakers; these do seem to be prerequisites for children's healthy development. On the other hand, these early studies did not test whether mothers were the only ones capable of satisfying these needs for children. Contemporary studies actually show that babies are capable of establishing intimate relationships with more than one primary caretaker, are interested in contact with both parents, and are likely to attach themselves strongly to both parents once attachment behaviors begin at about the age of six months (Clarke-Stewart, 1978; Hwang, 1985; Jalmert, 1983; Lamb, 1981; Nettelbladt, 1984).

### *Breastfeeding*

Probably the only real, established biological difference between the sexes which is relevant to the division of labor for child care is women's unique ability to breastfeed. However, it is not at all clear that breastfeeding leads inevitably to a division of labor for child care between men and women, even in preindustrial societies where frequent childbearing and longterm nursing are often inevitable and necessary for group survival. At one time, anthropologists (e.g., Brown, 1970) presumed that constant childbearing and breastfeeding would lead to a strict division of labor in preindustrial societies. Pregnant and breastfeeding women were assumed to be unable to perform work which was far from home, was dangerous, or could not be interrupted. Consequently, men were obligated to take on such work (e.g., hunting large animals), which in turn made them unavailable for child care. More recently, feminist anthropologists (e.g., Friedl, 1975) have disputed this notion, using field data indicating that pregnancy and breastfeeding do not limit women's mobility or engagement in risky activities as much as commonly thought. These findings cast further doubt on the biological necessity for the division of labor for child care.

It seems even less likely that breastfeeding is a major barrier to men's participation in child care in societies where the work men do is not very dangerous or performed very far from home. In industrial societies, there are further reasons why breastfeeding would not be a major obstacle to child care shar-