

Parental Leave Policy: Best Practices

Introduction

As workplaces evolve, so do the expectations around parental responsibilities. Traditional models that prioritise maternity leave while offering minimal or no paternity support are being increasingly challenged. Today, organisations across the globe—and particularly within the social impact sector—are reimagining parental leave policies to promote gender equality, shared caregiving, and support for all family structures.

This document highlights best practices for designing and implementing progressive, inclusive, and contextually relevant parental leave policies that align with India’s legal frameworks, global benchmarks, and DEI values.

1. Policy Design: Principles & Foundations

Be Inclusive of All Family Structures

- Design your policy to support single parents, same-sex couples, transgender employees, and non-birthing parents.
- Use *gender-neutral terminology*
 - e.g., instead of using maternity, use “birthing parent” , “primary caregiver”
 - Instead of paternity/adoption, you can use “non-birthing parent” leave.
 - Instead of mother/father, use parent/partner/care-giver.
 - Decisions of co-parenting or parenting beyond marriage.

Go Beyond Legal Minimums

- Indian law mandates 26 weeks of maternity leave but does not mandate paternity or adoption leave. Best-in-class employers offer paid leave to all parental roles, including:
 - Paternity/ non-birthing parent leave (min. 15 days)
 - Adoption & surrogacy leave (min. 12-16 weeks)
 - Foster care leave (min. 2-4 weeks)
 - IVF-related absences, Newborn intensive care (NICU), miscarriages, still birth or infant loss during pregnancy (4-6 weeks depending on medical recommendation or complications).
 - Leaves/breaks or Flexible support for Parents to transitioning children (any emotional transition related to gender identity, teenage related transitions, etc.) for their emotional and physical wellbeing due to hormonal changes, developmental needs, academic needs, etc.
 - Leaves/breaks or Flexible support for Parents to Children with disabilities

(Visible and invisible).

- Providing return-to-work support: phased hours, extended care giving responsibilities for legal process, medical follow-ups, hybrid options, mentorship, etc.
- These are the minimums - best practices go significantly beyond these.

Support All Paths to Parenthood

- Include adoption, surrogacy, foster care, and IVF-related absences in the policy.
- Define eligibility clearly but with empathy and flexibility.

Include Pet Parent Leave

- Recognize emotional labor and responsibility around pet adoption, especially for individuals or child-free couples.
- Acknowledge the value of care-based culture in your organization.

2. Implementation Best Practices

Communicate Proactively & Transparently

- Provide a detailed *Parental Leave Handbook* during onboarding.
- Normalize discussions around leave without guilt or fear of negative consequences.

Provide Step-by-Step Guidance

- Outline the application process, documentation needed, notice period, and contact points (HR, reporting manager).
- Ensure accessible formats (visuals, translated content) for all employees.

Create a Leave Calendar or Dashboard

- Help employees and managers plan transitions by offering visibility into upcoming leaves and backfilling needs.

3. Support Before, During & After Leave

Pre-Leave Transition Planning

- Support employees in handing off responsibilities, planning coverage, and maintaining continuity.
- Encourage managers to have empathetic conversations before the employee's leave starts.

Stay in Touch - Gently

- Keep communication optional during leave (only for voluntary updates).
- Offer a “*keep-in-touch*” program for those who wish to stay in the loop on key org changes or events.

Return-to-Work Support

- Offer:
 - Phased return (reduced hours, flexible schedules)
 - Remote or hybrid options
 - Lactation rooms and childcare support (if in-office)
 - Mentoring or coaching to support reintegration and career progression

4. Cultural Integration & DEI Alignment

Train Managers and Teams

- Conduct sensitivity training for managers to ensure non-judgmental and supportive environments.
- Educate teams on how to avoid unconscious bias when colleagues apply for and return from parental leave.

Track & Measure Impact

- Maintain anonymized data on:
 - Parental leave uptake by gender and employee level
 - Return-to-work rates
 - Career progression post-leave
- Use data to improve equity and close any retention gaps.

Normalize Parenthood in the Workplace

- Celebrate new additions (babies or pets) publicly and respectfully.
- Create employee resource groups or peer communities for new parents.

5. Policy Maintenance & Innovation

Review Annually

- Update policy based on:
 - Changes in law (e.g., Maternity Benefit Act)
 - Feedback from employees
 - Global best practices

Benchmark Against the Sector

- Compare your policy to other social impact organizations, INGOs, and inclusive

workplaces across geographies.

Co-create with Employees

- Engage your team when reviewing the policy: surveys, focus groups, or cross-functional DEI committees.

Conclusion

Organizations in the impact sector have an opportunity to reflect their external values within their own workplaces. A thoughtful and inclusive parental leave policy not only supports employee well-being, retention, and productivity but also reinforces that people and families are genuinely valued.