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Babies and Bosses: OECD Recommendations to Help Families Balance Work and Family Life

Juggling work and family commitments is a major challenge for both parents and governments. Families looking for a work-life balance are deciding whether to have children, when, how many, and who looks after them – and whether to work full- or part-time. Governments potentially can promote family-friendly policies for numerous reasons: reduce poverty and promote child development and family well-being, underpin economic growth, and bolster pension systems.

An OECD series – **Babies and Bosses** – reviews policies in OECD countries to support parents in their choices of work and childcare options and recommends a range of measures to improve results. After two reports covering Australia, Denmark and the Netherlands, and Austria, Japan and Ireland, a third report in the series has just been published covering New Zealand, Portugal, and Switzerland. A fourth issue on Canada, Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom is being prepared for publication in 2005.

The Issues

Declining fertility rates are a concern in most countries, particularly in Japan, where birth rates are dropping as more people put jobs before childbearing. In Switzerland, as many as 40% of women at age 40 with university degrees are childless. Strong economies and manageable pensions systems depend on both higher fertility rates and higher employment rates.

Many governments are investing in family-friendly policies which have societal benefits for the next generation. Support for working mothers will reduce the poverty which impacts negatively on child development and support for pre-school care outside the home can better prepare children for formal schooling.

Pay gaps still affect the relative earnings of men and women. Even in families where both parents work, men typically earn 33-66% more than women, so it is usually mothers who take time off to look after children. In most countries, fathers work more than men without children while mothers spend less time in paid employment than other women.

The Policy Options

Babies and Bosses advocates providing a continuum of support for working families with infants and children in their early school years. This will allow parents to plan their careers and employers to have some assurance that employees will return to work after child-related absences.

Policies contributing to gender equity and child development include: low effective tax rates which ensure that being in work is financially rewarding for all parents; and public investment in child- and out-of-school-hours care to make it easier for mothers to take paid jobs.

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Workplaces can do more to provide flexible working schedules, including part-time employment, to help parents to stay in the workforce and balance the requirements of the job with their children's day-to-day needs. With declining populations, family-friendly policies at the workplace make good business sense because they increase workforce motivation and improve productivity and profitability.

Country notes on New Zealand, Portugal and Switzerland will be available on the OECD website www.oecd.org/media

The report "**Babies and Bosses: Reconciling Work and Family Life - New Zealand, Portugal and Switzerland**", under embargo until Thursday 28 October, is available to journalists from the OECD Media Relations Division (tel 33 1 4524 9700 or news.contact@oecd.org). For further information journalists are invited to contact Willem Adema, Project Manager of the OECD family-friendly policy reviews (Tel. (33) 1 4524 1557 or willem.adema@oecd.org) or Mark Pearson (Tel. 33 1 4524 9269 or mark.pearson@oecd.org).

For further information on family friendly policy, see www.oecd.org/els/social/familyfriendly