United States ranks lowest in overall policies to help parents support children

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Improved, inequalities in children's health lessen between advantaged and disadvantaged families."

A significant gap exists between the well-being of children from richer and poorer families, and the research found that children's self-rated health improves as federally mandated work flexibility and paid leave become more generous.

Cash transfers such as policies subsidizing child care and providing income support are important in fighting hunger and homelessness in individual families, Andersson noted.

"But cash transfers only give money," he said. "Paid parental leave and work flexibility gives parents time plus money—and that seems to be the key combination to combating inequalities in children's health across developed nations."

But parents at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum often work jobs which do not entitle them to schedule flexibility or time off to spend with their children, and they may not be able to negotiate those benefits with employers.

"Sadly, it's often not even a matter of negotiation," Andersson said. "Employers do not offer benefits—or if they do, these benefits are quite limited. Not surprisingly, advantaged families tend to be attached to higher-quality jobs where benefits are available regardless of federal mandate."

Researchers analyzed data about work-family policies, cash transfer mandates and self-reported child well-being in countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, an intergovernmental organization.

The data included how generous each country was with paid vacation and sick leave, vacation, work flexibility, maternity leave and child care, including cash transfers made to families with children.
Researchers also examined data from health surveys of school-aged children ages 11, 13 and 15 to determine whether there were links to psychological health complaints, life satisfaction levels and health. The information was gathered in the Health Behavior in School-Aged Children, a World Health Organization cross-national survey.

Children were asked whether they had their own bedroom, whether their family owned a vehicle, whether they owned a computer or computers and how many times, if any, they had traveled with their family on a holiday in the past year.

Children also answered questions about how often they had felt "low" or experienced "irritability or bad temper" within the past six months, how satisfied they were with their lives and how they rated their health.

"Traditionally, the U.S. has placed burdens for establishing work-family accommodation on employers and individual businesses," Andersson said. "If the U.S. could switch course by mandating work-family benefits regardless of employer, findings suggest that children in this country would show some of the largest health gains across all OECD countries."

He noted that the research also is significant for children's futures, as those starting off in disadvantaged circumstances are at a high risk of having socioeconomic setbacks over many years.