

Heimir Hilmarsson

Heimir Hilmarsson, former chairman of Equal Parenting Iceland (Foreldrajafrétti). Heimir is a father of five children and a grandfather of one. Heimir has been a board member of Equal Parenting Iceland since 2004 and served as chairman for three periods with short breaks between 2010 to 2019. Equal Parenting Iceland was founded in 1997 under the name Union of Responsible fathers (Félag Ábyrgra feðra). In 2006 the current chairman of Responsible fathers defined a new Icelandic word to describe our cause, foreldrajafrétti, which means parents equality. A year later we changed the name of our organization to Foreldrajafrétti, Equal Parenting Iceland, mainly to bring down barriers for women to join us. Even though women have always been a big part of our organization, the name was considered a barrier.

Heimir is a social worker and worked in child protection services until 2020 then he had to retire because of health issues. While studying social work Heimir did research on parents that do not share residency and their duties to provide for their children and welfare support to families with children, and another one on the experience of fathers who do not share a legal residence with their children.

Equal Parenting Iceland (Foreldrajafrétti) on Paternity Leave

Our organization, Equal Parenting Iceland, Foreldrajafrétti, was founded in 1997 as a union of responsible fathers. This is probably the same year as when an Icelandic father went to court demanding a parental leave from the state. In 1998 the Supreme court in Iceland ruled that the state had a duty to grant fathers the same right to parental leave as mothers. Even though this ruling is a factor in the legislation of special parental leave for each parent, I don't think the legislation on paternity leave was thought of as father's right. When paternity leave was first introduced in Iceland in 2000, the two golden goals were clear. The goals were to:

1. to ensure the child's togetherness with both father and mother.
2. to enable both women and men to reconcile family and work life.

These two goals are clear, and they cannot be separated. We are talking about the children's right to be cared for by both parents and the women's right for equal payments on the labor market. The challenge was how do we get fathers to take on the upbringing of children and household responsibilities? This is still the challenge, even though we know what is needed. Fathers are ready to participate if it doesn't hurt the financial situation of the family. And mothers are willing to allow them if the paternity leave is non-transferable. And we also know what happens if fathers take as much parental leave as mothers. If mothers are less burdened of upbringing of children and household responsibilities, they will have more opportunities on the labor market.

Why do children naturally have two parents?

When talking about separated parental leave for each parent, it could be quite useful to consider, why do children naturally have two parents? Two years ago, my five children faced the reality that one of their parents was diagnosed with a life-threatening cancer. Having a parent with a life-threatening illness is a great burden on any child. Two of my youngest children are at the youngest stage of primary school. It is probably no coincidence that children naturally have two parents. Children need parents for a very long time and many unforeseen things can happen during that time. Children need more than food, clothing, and housing to survive. They need to feel safe and have a secure relationship with their parents. Children form a secure bond with their parents when parents are present for their children

and meet their needs in daily life. Child support payments from an absent parent can never replace the presence and care of a parent. The first weeks, months and years of a child's life are a very important time for a child to form these secure attachments that they will benefit from for the rest of their lives.

"Attachment is a deep and enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another person across time and space" (Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby, 1969).

Having a secure attachment with two parents can be compared with a boat having two harbor ropes securing it in a harbor. Nobody would leave a boat in a harbor with only one rope, not even in a safe harbor. I can just imagine the strain on children who face the fact that their only safe harbor is in mortal danger. For children, having a secure attachment with two parents can be crucial for their emotional security.

Money spent on children's emotional security is money wisely spent. Strong children become strong adults paying back to the society.

Paternal leave as equal parenting factor

The independent and non-transferable right for both parents to paternal leave is probably one of the biggest steps in the Icelandic legislation to ensure children the care of both parents from early age. It came to a surprise to the Icelandic government how prepared fathers were to take on the role assigned to them by the introduction of a special paternal leave in 2001.

We can assume that the paternal leave alone is a big factor in changed attitudes towards shared parenting today. Shared parenting when parents do not live together is considered much more acceptable today than before paternal leave in 2001. Shared parenting after divorce is even the obvious choice today.

This is happening even though the Icelandic legislation on children and parents who do not live together doesn't really favor shared parenting.

The large number of parents who choose to take care of their children equally after divorce can probably be traced largely to the effects of existence and usages of paternal leave.

Paternal leave as pay equality

The independent and non-transferable right to parental leave is probably also one of the biggest steps taken in Iceland to increase gender equality when it comes to integrating family and work life. It is undisputed that the paternal leave has led to more participation of fathers in the care of their children than before, and this gives women more space to reconcile family and work life.

It was interesting to see how much the gender pay gap decreased during the years when paternal leave was implemented from 2001 to 2003. According to an Icelandic wage survey, the gender pay gap was 15.3% the year before paternal leave. Fathers got one month of paternal leave in 2001, and another in 2002 and the third month in 2003. The gender pay gap narrowed steadily those years and down to 12.3% in the year 2003. Hopefully the pay gap

will decrease even more now when the paternity leave has reached 4,5 months non-transferable.

What about parents not living together?

When parents are not living together, they are divided into completely different categories (A and B parents) where B parents have limited rights to influence the upbringing of their children, they have limited rights to support their children directly, they are obligated to financially support another household, their own household is not recognized as a household with children, and they are not recognized as parents in public information.

Children born outside of marriage or cohabitation are just as precious and valuable as other children. We shouldn't discriminate them by excluding one of their parents. In Iceland we had very degrading names to identify those children born outside of marriage. Today one third of all children born in Iceland are born outside of marriage and cohabitation. These children are still degraded by law, they are born into sole custody of their mother, cutting the father out without any reason at all, just because their parents don't live together. In Norway children are born into joint custody, regardless of marriage or living arrangement. Which is a step in the right direction. Children should have two legal guardians if possible. Two legal custodial parents if possible. No parent should be regarded as non-custodial parent without a valid reason. Such valid reasons can be found in severe child protection cases.

Parental leave when parents are not living together. The parent's right to parental leave depends on the child's custody. So non-residential parents having shared custody can take parental leave. But the actual parenting time can hugely be influenced by the residential parent.

Most non-residential parents of children younger than two years old don't have joint custody, just because they don't live with the mother. Their right to parental leave depends on the consent of the custodial parent about parenting time during the leave period or a conclusion of a lawful authority about parenting time during the leave period. It is a long process to have a lawful authority to take a decision about parenting time, and there for non-custodial parents are dependent on the consent of the custodial parent.

As good as the legislation about parental leave is, we need to give all children two equal guardians at birth, two equal custodial parents at birth regardless of the parent's living arrangements.