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Parental leave, made easier

MANELA SPECIAL RESEARCH · 2026 EDITION

The State of Parental Leave in Canada

Six trends reshaping how Canadian organizations plan, fund, and support the leave-and-return journey — and what People & HR leaders should do about them.

INSIDE THIS REPORT

The 2026 EI & QPIP baseline · The rise of fathers on leave · The top-up equity gap · Why the return is harder than onboarding · The financial-planning maze · Emergency leave & parental mental health · Leave as a talent strategy

INTRODUCTION

Parental leave became a boardroom issue

Parental leave used to be a form to file and a seat to backfill. In 2026 it's something bigger: a predictable, high-stakes transition that touches retention, equity, productivity, and employer brand. Roughly 4 million people currently in or entering the Canadian workforce will welcome a new child over the next decade — more than 400,000 parental-leave events every year. Your organization will almost certainly be the workplace home to many of them.

The demographic backdrop makes it urgent. Canada's total fertility rate fell to a record-low 1.25 children per woman in 2024 — officially "ultra-low" territory, below 1.30 — while the average age of mothers has climbed to 31.8. Fewer births mean every parent an organization supports, or loses, matters more. And today's parents aren't entry-level employees; they're established professionals at the core of the talent base.

1.25
Canada's fertility rate in 2024 — a record low

~80%
of mothers with children under 3 are in the workforce

92%
of new parents claim EI maternity/parental benefits

Yet the workplace experience of leave has not kept pace with its strategic weight. Across Manela's field research — 70-plus discovery conversations and focus groups with parents, People and HR leaders, benefits and total-rewards professionals– the same pattern surfaced again and again: strong intentions, generous-sounding policies, and a lived experience that still hinges on luck, an individual manager's empathy, and a benefits system most employees have to decode on their own.

This report distills that research, triangulated with peer-reviewed Canadian evidence and the current federal and Quebec benefit rules, into the six trends People leaders should be planning around now.

The 2026 baseline: what parents are actually entitled to

Before the trends, a shared reference point. Federal Employment Insurance (EI) covers most of Canada; Quebec runs its own, more generous plan (QPIP). Both are earnings-replacement programs with hard ceilings — which is exactly why employer top-ups matter so much.

Benefit (2026)	Federal EI	Quebec (QPIP)
Maternity	15 weeks · 55% · max $729/wk	18 weeks · up to 70%
Standard parental (shared)	40 weeks · 55% · max $729/wk	32 weeks · 55–70%
Extended parental (shared)	69 weeks · 33% · max $438/wk	—
Reserved for the 2nd parent	5 wks (standard) / 8 wks (extended), use-it-or-lose-it	5 paternity weeks, non-transferable
Max insurable earnings	$68,900	$103,000 (higher ceiling)

EI figures reflect the 2026 maximum insurable earnings of $68,900. QPIP's higher ceiling and replacement rates make Quebec Canada's natural experiment in what more generous leave produces — a theme running through this report.

01 Fathers are finally taking leave — and reserved weeks are why

The most striking movement in Canadian leave data is who is taking it. Outside Quebec, the share of fathers and non-birthing partners claiming parental benefits nearly tripled in five years — from 11.9% in 2017 to 31.3% in 2022 — closely tracking the 2019 introduction of EI's "use-it-or-lose-it" parental sharing weeks. Quebec, which reserved five non-transferable weeks for fathers back in 2006, tells the fuller story: uptake there climbed from 27.8% in 2005 to 92.9% by 2022.

11.9%→31.3%	92.9%	5 wks
Fathers claiming benefits outside Quebec, 2017→2022	Quebec fathers claiming benefits by 2022	Reserved "second-parent" weeks — the key design lever

The lesson is not that fathers suddenly changed their minds — it is that policy design changes behaviour. Weeks that are reserved and forfeited if unused move take-up dramatically; weeks that are merely "available to share" mostly go to mothers**. More than 85% of shareable parental claims are still made by women, and when fathers do take leave it is typically far shorter.**

> *"I don't know what the expectation would be for a male taking time off… the concerns were always there before having that first conversation about what the reaction would be."*
>
> **— A solutions engineer preparing for his first leave, Manela interviews**

And uptake is not the same as acceptance. Even in Quebec, where the policy is world-leading, Manela's research and the academic record both find that culture lags the law: fathers who take more than the reserved weeks still report flexibility stigma, pressure to stay reachable, and — in less supportive sectors like tech and gaming — demotions and missed promotions. The reserved-week design gets fathers to the starting line; manager behaviour and team norms decide whether they are penalized for it.

> **WHAT IT MEANS FOR PEOPLE LEADERS**
>
> If you want non-birthing parents to actually use leave, reserve it and make your top-up gender-neutral — then coach managers to treat a father's leave as unremarkable. Availability alone changes little; reserved, protected, culturally-normal weeks change everything.

02 The top-up gap is the new equity frontier

Government benefits replace only a slice of income and stop at a hard ceiling — in 2026, EI tops out at $729 a week. The employer top-up is what turns a statutory minimum into a livable leave. But top-ups are distributed unevenly, and the pattern itself is now an equity problem.

Employer survey data shows 58% of Canadian employers top up maternity leave, but only 33% top up parental leave — the bucket most likely to be used by fathers, adoptive parents, and non-birthing partners. In other words, many organizations have built their most generous support around the birthing parent and left everyone else on the base rate. Roughly 40% of mothers, meanwhile, report receiving no top-up at all, and smaller employers (under 500 people) frequently offer nothing.

58%	33%	3–4×
of employers top up maternity leave	top up parental leave (the non-birthing-parent gap)	salary — the typical cost to replace a lost employee

The financial case for closing the gap is favourable. Topping a $70,000 employee up to 80% of salary for 17 weeks costs on the order of $6,000 — a fraction of the three-to-four-times-salary cost of recruiting and ramping a replacement. Manela's conversations with benefits and total-rewards buyers consistently framed enhanced leave as a competitive lever rather than a cost centre.

> *"Extra parental-leave "juice" is a real competitive edge for a benefits package — the more holistic and creative offerings are exactly what's getting interesting for providers right now."*
>
> **— A total-rewards professional, Manela interviews**

One founder in the research described deliberately using generous, flexible leave to win and keep scarce senior female technical talent in a global market with no single governing policy — treating leave design as a hiring weapon, not an HR obligation.

> **WHAT IT MEANS FOR PEOPLE LEADERS**
>
> Audit your top-up for symmetry. If maternity is topped up but parental is not, you have a subtle inequity that disadvantages fathers, adoptive, and non-birthing parents — and a cheap, high-visibility retention win sitting unclaimed.

03 The return is harder than onboarding. It's also the weakest link

Organizations pour effort into the send-off and almost none into the comeback. Manela's single most consistent finding — echoed independently by returning employees and by the managers who lead them — is that coming back from leave is often harder than starting a brand-new job, yet it is treated as a non-event.

> *"One of the things we tell leaders is that it's often harder returning from a leave than onboarding for the first time. You expect "you've been here before, you've got this" — but it's really re-onboarding into a different org, and we expect them to ramp so much faster."*
>
> **— A People leader at a Canadian tech scale-up, Manela working session**

After a 12-to-18-month absence, people return to a company that has reorganized, re-tooled, and moved on — frequently into a role that has changed scope, tasks, and teammates. The returning employee is simultaneously relearning the job and rebuilding an identity around new caregiving realities. The data on how that feels is stark: in one national survey of Canadian mothers, 52% reported anxiety about returning, 49% cited "having to prove their professional worth again," 36% feared being sidelined, and a third had considered quitting over inadequate support.

49%	36%	1 in 3
feel they must "prove their worth again" on return	fear being sidelined after leave	considered quitting over poor leave support

Because there is rarely a standard, the experience is decided by the individual manager. Employees whose managers had themselves been on leave described markedly smoother, more empathetic returns; those without that luck were, as one manager put it, "thrown into the fire." The managers in Manela's session were candid about the trap on their side too — swing toward productivity and you risk burnout, early exits, and short-term disability; swing toward accommodation and you can mask real performance issues. The way out they identified was structure: deliberate recalibration conversations before leave and again on return, resetting role expectations, support needs, and ramp pace for the person who is coming back — not the one who left.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR PEOPLE LEADERS

Build a re-onboarding playbook the way you have an onboarding one: a pre-leave handoff, a staged ramp, and a structured "what does success look like now" recalibration. Don't leave the highest-risk moment in the employee lifecycle to whichever manager happens to be empathetic.

04 The financial and administrative maze is a serious stressor

The rules governing Canadian leave are genuinely hard to navigate, and the burden of decoding them falls on employees at the most overwhelmed moment of their lives. The choice between the 12-month “standard” and 18-month “extended” options is effectively irreversible and math-heavy. Top-ups are contingent on staying compliant with EI rules. And shared parental weeks are a zero-sum pool between partners that few people understand until they are inside it.

Manela repeatedly watched this play out. Employers, wary of giving benefits advice they could be liable for, send employees to Service Canada to figure out the government side themselves — so parents end up on hold with a call centre and ultimately left on their own to reconcile their company’s policy with EI. In the research, one employee cut his planned leave from four months to ten weeks only after discovering that time beyond his reserved weeks would eat directly into his partner’s entitlement. Another changed her return date entirely after realizing mid-conversation that she had misunderstood her own leave.

> *“There’s a gap in having the tools to plan the right moves at the right time. She’d actually misunderstood her leave and had to make a big change to her return date after our conversation. Variable factors plus stress equals a lot of mistakes.”*
>
> **— Field note on a returning parent, Manela research**

Notably, this is not only a lower-income problem. Even finance professionals and high earners in the research described feeling uncertain and unsupported, wanting province-specific guidance and household-level financial modelling they could not easily get from a policy PDF or an HR inbox.

> **WHAT IT MEANS FOR PEOPLE LEADERS**
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> Policy documents are not decision support. Give parents province-specific, household-level planning tools (or a partner who provides them) so the standard-versus-extended and leave-sharing decisions are modelled, not guessed — and so HR isn’t absorbing liability-laden benefit questions one email at a time.

05 Emergency leave and parental mental health expose the gaps

Standard policies assume a standard timeline. Real life doesn't cooperate — and the moments that fall outside the template are exactly where organizations reveal their true posture. Premature births, medical complications, and pregnancy loss compress the careful pre-leave plan into a single day, and the administrative machine often responds with paperwork instead of humanity.

> *"I told them I was in the hospital that night, and the message the next morning was essentially: as of today you're on leave, sign this. It felt transactional — like the first thing they thought about was how to cut me off on pay as quickly as possible."*
>
> **— An HR leader recalling her own emergency leave, Manela interviews**

The contrast that employee drew — between her own employer's reaction and her partner's firm, which simply granted two buffer weeks "to get your life in order" before discussing logistics — captures the whole opportunity. The monetary cost of a humane emergency protocol is small; the loyalty (or resentment) it generates is not.

Mental health belongs in the same conversation. Roughly 8% of Canadian mothers experience significant postpartum depressive symptoms that persist through the first year — higher in some regions, reaching over 10% in the Territories — and low social support is one of the strongest and most modifiable predictors. That is a workplace-relevant fact: the return-to-work window overlaps directly with the period of highest mental-health risk, and connection is protective.

~8%	12 mo	#1
of Canadian mothers face postpartum depressive symptoms	PPD symptoms often persist across the first year	low social support: a top modifiable risk factor

WHAT IT MEANS FOR PEOPLE LEADERS

Write the non-standard cases into your policy before you need them: a humane emergency-leave protocol with a paid buffer, and a return process that assumes mental-health load rather than ignoring it. How you handle the hardest 5% of leaves is what your workforce remembers.

06 Leave is shifting from HR compliance to talent strategy

The final trend is a reframing. Parental leave is moving out of the compliance column and into the talent-strategy column — and, increasingly, it is being used as one of the few “universally acceptable” entry points for diversity and inclusion work at a moment when more explicit programs face backlash. Supporting parents reads as pro-family and pro-business at once, which makes it unusually durable.

The evidence base supports the strategic framing. Canadian research on the 2001 leave expansion found longer paid leave improved children’s cognitive scores and health outcomes. Quebec’s more generous QPIP is associated with measurably higher fertility — on the order of 17% to 46% more births depending on the mother’s education level — a striking signal that leave design influences whether people feel able to start or grow a family at all. For employers competing for a shrinking, aging talent pool, family support is becoming a differentiator, not a perk.

> *“Parental leave isn’t just an HR process — it’s a strategic lever for attracting, keeping, and supporting high-value employees. We used generous leave intentionally as a competitive advantage.”*
>
> **— A founder and advisor, Manela interviews**

A note of realism from the research: retention alone is a fragile pitch in a year of restructuring, and the further a decision-maker sits from this life stage, the weaker the emotional pull. The organizations getting it right pair the human story with hard numbers — ramp time, regrettable attrition among returning parents, and engagement — so the business case survives contact with a skeptical CFO.

> **WHAT IT MEANS FOR PEOPLE LEADERS**
>
> Position family support as talent strategy and instrument it. Track return-to-work retention, time-to-full-productivity, and parent eNPS so leave stops being an unmeasured cost and becomes a defensible investment with a number attached.

THE PLAYBOOK

Six moves for People leaders in 2026

01 **Equalize and simplify your top-up.** Close the maternity-vs-parental gap so non-birthing parents aren't disadvantaged, and state the top-up in plain language tied to EI/QPIP rules.

02 **Reserve leave for the second parent.** Mirror the "use-it-or-lose-it" design that tripled father uptake — and coach managers to treat it as normal.

03 **Build a re-onboarding playbook.** Treat the return like a role change: pre-leave handoff, staged ramp, and a structured recalibration of expectations on both sides.

04 **Give decision support, not PDFs.** Provide province-specific, household-level planning for the standard-vs-extended and leave-sharing choices — and keep liability-heavy benefit questions off individual managers' desks.

05 **Humanize the hard cases.** Pre-write an emergency-leave protocol with a paid buffer, and design the return window around postpartum mental-health load.

06 **Measure it.** Track return-to-work retention, time-to-productivity, and parent engagement so leave becomes an investment with a number, not an unmeasured cost.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

This report is built on Manela Special Research: more than 70 discovery conversations with parents, People and HR leaders, benefits and total-rewards professionals, investors, and ecosystem partners; a ten-person employee interview series and a people-leader working session conducted with a Canadian technology scale-up; and a review of peer-reviewed Canadian studies alongside current federal EI and Quebec QPIP rules. Interview participants are anonymized and quotes are lightly edited for clarity.

Manela helps organizations and parents turn leave from a stressful maze into a clear, well-supported journey — with financial planning, benefits clarity, and return-to-work support in one place.

Parental leave, made easier. Learn more at **manela.ca**

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