

**EI Benefits and Adoptive Parents**  
**Qualitative Survey Results**



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October 13, 2007

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### **Abstract**

Does the current Employment Insurance Benefit (EI) program offered through the Canadian Federal Government (1) meet the needs of adoptive parents regarding the physical, emotional and psychological impact following the adoption of their child(ren)? The purpose of this research is to determine what, if any, similarities there are between the adoption process and the birth process in terms of the impact physically, emotionally and psychologically on the parties involved. Further, to explore if adoptive parents feel the current Employment Insurance Benefit is meeting their needs. Do adoptive parents perceive discrimination as a factor and if changes were made to the program, how would they affect adoptive parents who are entitled to the EI Benefit program?

Approximately fifty adoptive families were contacted via email for their participation in this survey. Ten adoptive parents responded.

All of the respondents to the survey felt that based on their experience, the current Employment Benefits program did not meet their needs. In addition, every respondent felt that discrimination was a factor in the current program and that a family created through adoption was not given the validity that a biological family would have.

The results of this survey show that overall, adoptive parents feel that there is value to having an Employment Benefit program for adoptive parents that would be equal to that of the Maternity Benefits program. While there is recognition that there are fundamental differences in the process of building a family through birth or adoption, the basic needs of the parents are the same. Each is concerned with their ability to parent and the time needed to build a healthy relationship with their child. Both experience emotional, physical and psychological effects regardless of how a child arrives into the family. It was interesting to note that, those families who had experienced both birth and adoption stated that adoption was the more difficult process emotionally. It also appears that, the more intensive the needs of the child, the greater the sense of need for extra time for the parents so that they feel they can meet the needs of their child. In birth, the mother needs time to recover from the physical affects of birth for her to care properly for her biological child, in adoption there is a parallel need to have the same time to recover to care properly for their adopted child.

### **Introduction**

The Employment Insurance program presently offers adoptive parents 35 weeks of paid leave and an additional 15 weeks of unpaid leave following the adoption of a child. Mothers who give birth have their 15 weeks of leave paid for by the EI program in addition to the 35 paid parental leave. The paid maternity leave assists the mother with the physical affects following childbirth by allowing her a longer paid leave to recover from birth. (2)

Adoptive parents have fought for equality in the EI Benefit program for a number of years. There have been several legal disputes regarding such and all have unsuccessful to date. (3,4) The premise for legal action has been that adoptive parents want to have the right to access the same paid maternity leave that a parent who gives birth receives. The courts have ruled on the basis

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that adoptive mothers do not go through the same physical, emotional and psychological process as mothers who give birth and therefore are not entitled to receive the maternity benefits. However, there is research that indicates that adoptive parents experience their own unique physical, emotional and psychological affects following the adoption of their child.

Therefore, this study aims to see how the current EI Benefit program meets the needs of adoptive parents and identify some of the issues that challenge adoptive parents following the adoption of their child. We also want to determine what kind of impact an EI Benefit program for adoptive parents would have for them. Finally, do adoptive parents feel the current EI Benefit program is discriminatory?

### **Current EI Benefits Program in Canada – Does it meet the needs of adoptive parents?**

Of the ten respondents to the survey, all ten adoptive parents replied that the current EI Benefit program does not meet their needs. Of the ten, two of the respondents have given birth in addition to adopting and as such, have had the experience of accessing the Maternity Benefits program. The over-arching theme of the responses to question one of the surveys was that adoptive parents were unprepared for the stress, upheaval and emotional experiences following the placement of the child(ren) in their home. They felt that more time with a paid leave would allow them and their child(ren) time to adjust to their new circumstances. One parent declared, “There obviously hasn't been nine months of preparation emotionally with the child that's been handed to them. This initial time is critical to both child & parent.”

Half of the respondents considered the age of the child to be an important factor in the need for time to adjust. When a child who is not an infant enters the adoptive home, they come with their own personal experiences, which have an impact on the rest of the members of the family. Attachment and bonding were significant factors in this equation. If the child was in foster care prior to their arrival into the adoptive home, they may have had numerous placements either between foster homes or foster and birth homes during that period. Research shows that healthy attachment and bonding are critical elements of a successful adoption. (5) An additional consideration in the age and experiences of the child was the presence of prior abuse of the child that may lead to difficulty in adjusting and the possibility of physical and/or cognitive disabilities. One parent stated, “Physical, sexual, emotional and verbal abuse plus neglect created a lot of emotional baggage for us as first time parents to experience.” Another adoptive parent indicated that she took time off work prior to the finalization of the adoption to have visits with the child. A more flexible program that would allow access to benefits at other stages of the adoption process would have been welcome.

Most of the respondents equated their need for additional paid leave as equal to that of biological mothers. They agreed that some of the technicalities may be different but the result is the same, a child enters your life and your home.

One respondent felt that adoption “...is overlooked and sadly misunderstood by the mainstream public.”, and stated, “They can't understand something they haven't experienced, and I think the

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disparity between benefits for adoptive and birth parents is unfair and exemplifies this lack of awareness.”

### **Current EI Benefits Program in Canada – Do they discriminate against adoptive parents?**

The ten respondents were also unanimous in their opinion that they felt the current EI Benefit program discriminated against them. Of the respondents, three adoptive mothers had given birth and had accessed the Maternity Benefits program. Many reiterated the same issues as was stated in response to the first question.

An issue of importance for adoptive parents is the need to have validation as parents and that the current EI program does not facilitate this. One parent expressed her feelings of discrimination, “Yes. It implies that an adoptive mother is somehow less of a mother to her newborn infant, than a mother who has the biological connection to the child.” Another parent felt that, “It should be equivocal for all family additions-the family is the core of society, and if it is healthy, society will be moreso.”

### **Adoptive parents describe how they felt, physically, emotionally and psychologically following the adoption of their child(ren)**

There was a variety of responses describing how adoptive parents felt following the adoption of their child with stress being the predominant emotion. All of the adoptive parents expressed great concern for the adjustment period for the child to acclimatize himself/herself into the adoptive home. This underlying concern for the child’s adjustment process was a significant component to how much stress the adoptive parents experienced following the child’s arrival into their home.

One common theme was that adoptive parents all felt exhausted. A number of issues were contributing factors. They expressed anxiety about bringing the child home without knowing what all of the child’s needs would be. Some parents were aware of the prior experiences of their child, particularly if the child was in the Canadian Child Welfare system but for those who were adopting internationally, a large part of their child’s former experiences was unknown. For some of the children, orphanage life was all they have known. Being part of a family unit was not in their experience base. One adoptive parent describes her experience, “She still only sleeps 3-4 nights in her own bed through the night(we dealt with night terrors and nightmares for many, many months).” Medical issues in international adoption are also a concern for adoptive parents. Another adoptive parent states, “Our daughter also resisted eating solid food until the age of 2 due to early deprivation. She required additional support and intervention from medical professionals which required time and energy from at least one parent on a continual basis.” For children in the foster care system other issues of neglect and abuse are contributing stress factors for the adoptive parents.

The concern that the child would not attach and bond expressed as a significant stress factor. If the child(ren) were experiencing attachment difficulties he/she would reject the attempts to emotionally bond with their parents. One adoptive mother states, “The biological mother has 9

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months in which she is able to bond and the adoptive parent begins that process at birth.” The other, equally difficult source of stress related to attachment issues was that the adoptive parent might not feel bonded to the child initially. A parent emphatically describes her experience, “I felt like an imposter! Some stranger trying to impersonate this babies mother. I didn't feel connected until my son was about nine or ten months old. It was a guilt ridden struggle to mother this baby while trying to work the whole time and feeling that he was bonding with his baby sitter. I resented having to work. I was emotionally drained. I just wanted to feel like his mother and have him want me. Psychologically.... I think you can surmise that I might have been on the edge!” Another parent echoes those thoughts, “My daughter had undiagnosed lactose intolerance and as a result woke up every hour screaming in agony for the first four months she was home with us. I was a trainwreck at this time, completely and totally exhausted on all fronts as well as trying desperately during the day to get her to doctors and pediatricians and "bond" and "attach" so I would feel safer about sending her to a daycare.”

Guilt plays a role in how adoptive parents feel following the adoption of their child. This was identified by one adoptive parent who said, “I felt HUGE guilt about going back to work, as my daughter had been institutionalized and sending her into another institutional facility so soon after she was home with us was not what I wanted to do AT ALL and I had little knowledge of how this might impact her.”

The adoption process itself was a major source of stress for adoptive parents. The adoption preparation process was described by one parent, “It was a 15 month pregnancy!!” and, “...then when you finally decide that adoption is for you, you have to prove that you are acceptable, you are at the mercy of the legal system and not a few indifferent and controlling people...that usually doesn't happen in biological birth.” Adoptive parents who were adopting internationally included long travel times to go and pick up their child as difficult. One respondent had a twenty-seven hour plane ride with a fourteen-hour time difference with their five-year child came from China. Adoptive parents describe themselves as feeling inadequate yet having to deny themselves those feelings due to the adoption process where they have to prove themselves capable of parenting another person's child. A respondent replied, “As an adoptive parent there is pressure to be perfect. Afterall you were picked because you were the perfect choice for that child.”

Infertility issues were a contributing factor even following the arrival of a child into the adoptive parents' home. “Having a child was overwhelming after many many years of fertility treatments and the desire to love and raise a child.” stated an adoptive mother. Others described their journey to adoption as “exhausting” and “painful”. “You have a lot to deal with when health reasons make it impossible for you to conceive.”

There is a timeframe in adoption where the biological mother of the child may choose to rescind her decision for adoption and ask that her child to be returned. This period, called the revocation period (6), is an extremely unstable time for adoptive parents if the child is already living with them during the timeframe that a birth mother may revoke her consent to adoption. One mother states, “Emotionally and psychologically I felt extreme stress due to the possibility of losing my baby to the biological mother.”

**Would an improved Employment Benefit program for adoptive mothers be beneficial to you?**

Of the ten respondents, two said that an adoption leave program would benefit them directly; four stated that although they would not directly benefit they see a need for other adoptive families to have an improved EI program, three respondents indicated that it would not be beneficial and one response was unclear.

The respondents who said that they would not benefit from an improved Employment Benefit program indicated that they would not be considering adoption again and therefore it would no longer be relevant to their situation.

Adoptive parents who said that they would benefit from an improved Employment Benefit program expressed their desire to have equal status within the system, regarding adoption as valid, respected way of building a family that is of no less importance or need than creating a family by giving birth. “It is not second best - a child is receiving a loving home and the parents are fulfilling their dreams, just as in any biological family.” expresses one adoptive parent.

The respondents who did not plan to adopt again felt that there is a need to consider an improved EI benefit program for future adoptive parents. An adoptive parent shares, “It would not benefit me financially, since I have completed my family. However, I would feel that there was some equity for adoptive mothers and that the government had recognized that although the needs may be different for the two mothers, they are no lesser in importance.”

**Conclusion**

While this study is only a sample, and the number of participants limits the methodology, this initial stage research clearly shows that a further, in-depth study would be relevant. Suggestions for a more complete study of this topic would be to increase the number of participants and to consider a provincial comparison of Employment Insurance programs offered at a provincial level and at a public level.

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