



**STATEMENT OF MATTHEW MELMED
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ZERO TO THREE**

**SUBMITTED TO THE
COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR AND PENSIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
UNITED STATES SENATE**

**HEARING ON WRITING THE NEXT CHAPTER OF THE FAMILY AND
MEDICAL LEAVE ACT – BUILDING ON A FIFTEEN YEAR HISTORY
OF SUPPORT FOR WORKERS**

February 13, 2008

Chairman Dodd and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Matthew Melmed. For the past 13 years I have been the Executive Director of ZERO TO THREE, a national non-profit organization that has worked to advance the healthy development of America's babies and toddlers for 30 years. I would like to start by thanking the Subcommittee for its interest in building upon the successes of the groundbreaking 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act. I would also like to thank the Subcommittee for providing me the opportunity to discuss the critical importance of paid family leave for our nation's youngest families, those with newborns, infants and toddlers.

THE IMPORTANCE OF UNHURRIED TIME IN THE FIRST YEAR OF LIFE

Science has significantly enhanced what we know about the needs of infants and toddlers, underscoring the fact that experiences and relationships in the earliest years of life play a critical role in a child's ability to grow up healthy and ready to learn. We know that infancy and toddlerhood are times of intense intellectual engagement.¹ During this time – a remarkable 36 months – the brain undergoes its most dramatic development, and children acquire the ability to think, speak, learn, and reason. The early years establish the foundation upon which later learning and development are built. If experiences in those early years are harmful, stressful, or traumatic, the effects of such experiences become more difficult, not to mention more expensive, to remediate over time if they are not addressed early in life.

Research demonstrates that forming secure attachments to a few caring and responsive adults is a primary developmental milestone for babies in the first year of life. During the earliest days and months, children learn about the world through their own actions and their caregiver's reactions.



They are learning about who they are, how to feel about themselves and what they can expect from those who care for them. Such basic capacities as the ability to feel trust and to experience intimacy and cooperation with others develop from the earliest moments of life.

According to the groundbreaking report released by the National Academies of Science, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, a young child's parents structure the experience and shape the environment within which early development unfolds.² Early relationships are important for all infants and toddlers, but they are particularly important for those living in lower-income families because they can help serve as a buffer against the multiple risk factors these children may face. These early attachments are critical because a positive early relationship, especially with a parent, reduces a young child's fear in novel or challenging situations, thereby enabling her to explore with confidence and to manage stress, while at the same time, strengthening a young child's sense of competence and efficacy.³ Early attachments also set the stage for other relationships and play an important role in shaping the systems that underlie children's reactivity to stressful situations.⁴

All infants need ample time with their parents at the very beginning of their lives to form these critical relationships. The better parents know their children, the more readily they will recognize even the most subtle cues that indicate what the children need to promote their healthy growth and development. For example, early on infants are learning to regulate their eating and sleeping patterns and their emotions. If parents can recognize and respond to their baby's cues, they will be able to soothe the baby, respond to his or her cues, and make the baby feel safe and secure in his or her new world. Trust and emotional security enable a baby to explore with confidence and communicate with others – critical characteristics that impact early learning and later school readiness.

In addition to building secure and healthy early attachments, unhurried time at home with a newborn allows parents the time they need to facilitate breastfeeding and ensure that their children receive the immunizations necessary to lower infant mortality and reduce the occurrence and length of childhood illnesses. Paid leave also reduces economic anxiety by providing job security and consistent income during a time in which it is essential for parents to focus on their new families rather than worrying about how to make ends meet. Time at home also benefits employers by reducing staff turnover and the subsequent training and hiring costs associated with new staff.

FAMILY AND MEDICAL LEAVE

The 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act allows employees to take up to twelve weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave to care for newborns, newly adopted and foster children, and seriously ill family members, including themselves. Of the more than 60 million Americans who have taken time off from work under the FMLA since it was enacted 15 years ago,⁵ 18 percent did so to take care of a new child.⁶ Although FMLA has had great success, far too many workers are still unable to take leave. More than 3 in 4 eligible employees (78%) reported that they could not afford to take the leave that they needed because it was unpaid.⁷ Furthermore, since the law only applies to employers with at least 50 employees, a full 40 percent of the workforce is currently not covered by the federal law.⁸



Recent surveys show that the vast majority of Americans support paid leave programs:

- Nearly nine in ten (89%) parents of young children and 84% of all adults support expanding disability or unemployment insurance to help families afford to take time off from work to care for a newborn, a newly adopted child, or a seriously ill family member.
- Nearly all working women (93%) report that paid sick days are an important benefit. In a list of ten employment benefits, only health insurance was ranked higher than paid leave.⁹

In light of this overwhelming support, action should be taken at the state and federal level to enact legislation to allow parents (biological, foster, or adoptive) on leave to collect unemployment insurance or state disability insurance to enable them to spend time with their infants in the first year of life.

WHAT ARE STATES DOING TO SUPPORT PAID FAMILY LEAVE?

A few states have existing paid family leave laws. For example, California has the country's most comprehensive paid family and medical leave insurance program. Over 13 million workers can receive partial wages (55-60% of wages) to take up to 6 weeks of leave a year to care for a newborn, newly adopted or foster child, or to care for a seriously ill family member, and up to 50 weeks of leave a year to recover from their own serious illness, including pregnancy- or birth-related disability.¹⁰ According to a recent report by the National Partnership for Women and Families, significant developments and victories have been made in other states in 2006 state legislative sessions. Highlights include:

- In 2006, paid leave bills were introduced in at least 21 states.
- In Arizona, Washington, and Wyoming, state employees can now donate accumulated annual leave and/or sick leave to other employees who need time off to care for family members.
- In Tennessee, legislation passed allowing state employees with children enrolled in schools to take off up to one day a month from work to participate in their children's school activities.

CONCLUSION

Paid family leave is an issue that states continue to grapple with as more mothers with very young children enter the workforce – currently, 59 percent of mothers with children under the age of three work.¹¹ Each day an estimated 5.7 million children under the age of three spend some or all of their day being cared for by someone other than their parents.¹² Before heading back to the workplace, parents need time to bond with their babies and enable them to form the all-important attachments that will help give them a good start in life.



I urge the Subcommittee to consider the very unique needs of our nation's youngest families as you explore ways in which to improve the Family and Medical Leave Act.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to our nation's infants, toddlers and their families.

¹ Shonkoff, Jack and Phillips, Deborah. 2000. *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ National Partnership for Women and Families. 2007. *Family and Medical Leave Act*.

http://www.nationalpartnership.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ourwork_fmlla_FamilyandMedicalLeave (accessed February 11, 2008).

⁶ U.S. Department of Labor. 2000. *Balancing the needs of family and employers: Family and medical leave survey*. Washington, DC.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ National Partnership for Women and Families. 2007. *Where families matter: State progress toward valuing America's families*. http://www.nationalpartnership.org/site/DocServer/Final_2006_Round_Up.pdf?docID=2161 (accessed February 11, 2008).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2006. *Women in the labor force: A databook*. Table 5. <http://www.bls.gov/cps/wlf-table5-2006.pdf> (accessed February 12, 2008).

¹² U.S. Department of Education. 2006. *National household education surveys program of 2005: Initial results of the 2005 NHES early childhood program participation survey*. Table 1. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2006075> (accessed February 11, 2008).