

Elevating the Needs of Today's Working Parents

May 2022

Working parents have always experienced unique, additional responsibilities to juggle along with their duties at the workplace: caregiving, housework, meal preparation, logistics, and emotional labor, among others. While the COVID-19 pandemic upended nearly all aspects of social, work and home life, it presented parents with their own set of challenges connected to school closures, virtual schooling, access to childcare, and disruptions in extra-curricular activities.

Some working parents found themselves shifting to remote work while juggling virtual schooling during their workday and becoming a 24-hour caregiver; others who had to report to work in person faced the conundrum of lack of childcare. Yet another group of working parents left the workforce altogether during the pandemic due to layoffs or lack of access to, or inability to afford, childcare.

In the spring of 2022, Goodwill Industries of Southern Piedmont and Charlotte Works conducted a survey of working parents in the greater Charlotte region to understand how working parents are participating in the labor force today. The survey inquired about what matters most to them in terms of returning to the workforce and workplace satisfaction, and what employers can do to attract, retain, and support working parents.

This brief synthesizes recent research on working parents since the start of the pandemic, aiming to understand the challenges they face, the shifting needs of working caregivers, and the research on what employers can do to help working parents.

Working Parents

In her 1989 book “The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home”¹ Arlie Russell Hochschild coined the term “Second Shift” to refer to the second part of working parents’ days when return home from their job to a second job inside the home: caring for the children, doing housework, preparing meals, assisting in homework. While that research is over 30 years old, the findings indicated this phenomenon occurred much more often for working mothers than working fathers, and that remains true today.

Recent evidence suggests that working mothers are still shouldering more of the responsibilities of the “second shift” than working fathers. During the pandemic, mothers are more than three times as likely to be responsible for caregiving and housework compared to fathers,² and mothers are 1.5 times more likely to spend an additional three or more hours a day on the “second shift” during the pandemic. This additional time spent on housework and caregiving was even greater for single mothers: 10% more single mothers than mothers overall indicated spending additional three or more hours a day over the same time-period.³

According to a Pew Research Center survey of working parents in February 2022⁴, working mothers were more likely to indicate that childcare responsibilities have been difficult compared to working fathers (58% vs. 43%). Most working parents (57%) indicated their jobs could not be done from home;⁵ of those with the option, 72% indicated they were working from home all or most of the time. Among teleworkers,

¹ Hochschild, A. R., & Machung, A. (1989). *The second shift: working parents and the revolution at home*. New York, N.Y.: Viking.

² <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/for-mothers-in-the-workplace-a-year-and-counting-like-no-other>

³ <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/for-mothers-in-the-workplace-a-year-and-counting-like-no-other>

⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/02/23/many-working-parents-with-young-children-say-finding-backup-care-would-be-very-difficult/>

⁵ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/26/a-rising-share-of-working-parents-in-the-u-s-say-its-been-difficult-to-handle-child-care-during-the-pandemic/>

moms were more than twice as likely as dads (36% vs 16%) to say they have a lot more childcare responsibilities while working from home.

For working parents of children under six who rely on outside help, the majority (81%) said it would be difficult for them to find backup childcare.⁶ This is inclusive of parents in fully remote, in-person, or hybrid work settings. Further, this survey was conducted well into the 2022 school year when nearly all schools had returned to in-person instruction, suggesting that the precariousness of childcare remains an underlying current that exists regardless of classroom instruction or virtual schooling.

Childcare

Early in the pandemic when the stay-at-home orders went into effect, researchers at Columbia University found that more than 2/3 of all childcare centers in the US were closed;⁷ further, their analysis found that 1/3 of childcare centers remained closed a year later in April 2021. Even though most centers have been able to return to in-person operations, outbreaks or exposures to COVID-19 have forced childcare facilities to manage through sporadic closures and/or reduced capacity. According to the National Database of Child Care Closures⁸ in February 2022 in the US, 24% of childcare centers in North Carolina were operating at 50% capacity, and 47% of all childcare centers were operating at 75% capacity (the most recently available data in the database at time of publishing).

An analysis of the cost of center-based childcare in the US and annual wage data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics found that the cost of childcare has risen nearly 41% during the pandemic, and U.S. workers spend an average 20% of their household income on childcare.⁹ That 2022 analysis also broke down percentage of average

⁶ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/02/23/many-working-parents-with-young-children-say-finding-backup-care-would-be-very-difficult/>

⁷ Lee EK, Parolin Z. The Care Burden during COVID-19: A National Database of Child Care Closures in the United States. *Socius*. January 2021. doi:10.1177/237802312111032028

⁸ <https://osf.io/6k7qx/>

⁹ <https://www.lendingtree.com/debt-consolidation/child-care-costs-study/#annualcostspikeperchildforcenterbasedcareprovidersamidcoronaviruspandemic?ccontent=TnL5HPStwNw>

wages needed to cover childcare costs by state, and North Carolinians spend, on average, between 17% and 20% of their wages (depending on the age of the child) on childcare. That makes North Carolina the state with the second largest increase in toddler care center costs during the pandemic: a 30.6% increase.

Returning to work

According to the Bureau of Labor statistics, two-fifths of the 83 million families in the United States (nearly 33 million families) included children under the age of 18 in 2021.¹⁰ In 89% of those families with children, at least one parent was employed. However, this masks some of the phenomena within two-parent households and between families with other marital statuses.¹¹ Among married couple households, 62% of families had both parents employed and 96.5% had at least one parent employed. This stands in stark contrast to families with other marital statuses: 71% of mothers in families maintained by mothers with other marital statuses were employed, compared to nearly 82% employment rate of fathers in families maintained by fathers with other marital statuses.¹²

Thus, single mothers are much more likely to be unemployed than single fathers, and children in both father- and mother-maintained single parent households were much more likely to have a parent who was not employed than 2 parent households. Further, the labor force participation rate¹³ for all mothers with children (regardless of marital status) was 71% compared to the labor force participation rate of all fathers with children (regardless of marital status) was 92.5%.¹⁴ Moreover, differences arise when looking at labor force participation of mothers by the age of their children: mothers with

&s1=TnL5HPStwNw&s2=TnL5HPStwNw-DDon56pPkDwcDy0y3wB40w&ranMID=41202&ranEAID=TnL5HPStwNw&ranSiteID=TnL5HPStwNw-DDon56pPkDwcDy0y3wB40w&PUBSID=2116208&PUBNAME=Skimlinks.com

¹⁰ <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/famee.pdf>

¹¹ "other marital status" refers to persons who are never married; widowed; divorced; separated; and married, spouse absent

¹² <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/famee.pdf>

¹³ The percent of the population working or looking for work

¹⁴ <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/famee.pdf>

children under 6 had a labor force participation rate of roughly 65.5% compared to mothers with children ages 6-17 at 75.5%¹⁵. In short, mothers are less likely to be in the labor force than fathers; single mothers are less likely to be in the labor force than single fathers; and mothers with younger children are less likely to participate in the labor force than mothers with older children.

Economists label short dips and spikes in economic indicators as V-shaped.¹⁶ The terminology gets its name from the data activity plotted on a line graph, and refers to a sharp decline in economic indicators followed by a relatively fast and strong rebound. V-shaped employment patterns for mothers are not new: mothers take leave or stop working often during the times that students are not in school (i.e. the summer) because of the aforementioned reasons (e.g. cost of childcare). However, we generally see those labor market patterns bounce back with the regularity of the “V-shape” year over year. The pandemic caused many mothers to leave the labor market in relatively predictable ways, but they are not returning in the ways that economists regularly predict.¹⁷ The pandemic has made this “V” more elongated than previously recognized.

This exacerbates the gender pay gap and refers to what some researchers have coined “the Motherhood Pay Gap”.¹⁸ This has negative, long-term effects on individuals, families, employers, and the larger society. Promotion and advancement are stalled when/if an employee must take an extended leave of absence; earnings are likewise stalled; primary caregivers often do not even know how to explain gaps in their resume that are solely the result of having to provide care for their children, elderly family members, partners—and/or a combination of.

¹⁵ <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/famee.pdf>

¹⁶ Yu, Zhen, Yuankun Li, and Xubin Xie. "Long-term trade impact of epidemic outbreaks: Is it V-shaped?." *Economic Analysis and Policy* 71 (2021): 16-40.

¹⁷ <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/03/moms-work-and-the-pandemic.html>

¹⁸ Grimshaw, Damian, and Jill Rubery. "The motherhood pay gap: A review of the issues, theory and international evidence." (2015). [https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/the-motherhood-pay-gap-a-review-of-the-issues-theory-and-international-evidence\(029c55cb-1a95-43e2-be6d-efbadfdcf2c4\).html](https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/the-motherhood-pay-gap-a-review-of-the-issues-theory-and-international-evidence(029c55cb-1a95-43e2-be6d-efbadfdcf2c4).html)

Supporting Working Parents

In the 2022 Goodwill and Charlotte Works¹⁹ Working Parents Survey, 96.2% of respondents indicated that health and wellbeing was what the factor that mattered most for working parents. It is incumbent on employers to ensure their workforce feels safe and protected from COVID-19 and other deleterious health and safety concerns, but there is another level of safety that both encompasses health and physical safety and goes beyond: psychological safety.

Jordan Sannito of the Campbell Institute at the National Safety Council has recently compiled research on the concept of psychological safety in the workplace.²⁰ Psychological safety is “not just about risk, but about social support and actions”. For a working parent to feel psychologically safe at work there must be more done by employers and leadership than simply managing the risk of becoming ill. It is important they consider and create policies, practices and a culture that supports the needs of working parents.

In many ways this starts with creating an environment where working parents, particularly mothers, feel safe to speak up about these concerns. And not just safe in terms of voicing their concerns, but a space where their concerns are heard, considered, and acted on by leadership. Acknowledging and respecting the needs and concerns of workers is paramount. Further, this provides the space for workers to feel psychologically safe and set the stage for leadership to be able to craft or change policies and practices that support the needs of their workforce.

¹⁹ *Link to the slide deck*

²⁰ https://www.thecampbellinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Campbell-Institute_Research-Outlook_-_Psychological-Safety-and-EHS.pdf

Flexibility

Working parents have indicated their need for flexibility in the workplace.^{21,22} One such policy that provides a great deal of flexibility is maximizing remote work (to the degree possible, dependent on the job/industry). This not only provides support for working parents juggling myriad different responsibilities, but this also serves the employer by retaining valuable talent. In the 2022 Goodwill Charlotte Works working Parents Survey²³ 94% of caretakers said they would consider switching industries for a remote position. Being flexible with remote work policies can be the difference between a working parent being able to effectively support their family and ultimately in their decision to remain at their current job.

Another policy employers should consider that would support working parents is to allow employees to flex their work hours to the extent practicable. This could be the difference between a parent having to pay for after-school childcare or being able to pick their children up from school and complete the rest of their work later in the afternoon or after the kids are asleep.

In their 2021 report “Married to the job no more: Craving flexibility, parents are quitting to get it”,²⁴ McKinsey challenges companies to embrace “radical flexibility”. This concept goes beyond extra paid time off for caregivers or relaxing remote work restrictions. Listening to employee needs may result in giving parents a free-floating day a week that can be taken off whenever it is needed, no questions asked. Or allowing employees to shift to a less demanding role at certain times when they may have to provide care or attend to the demands of the family and dependents, while knowing that can transition

²¹ <https://blog.dol.gov/2022/05/03/working-moms-need-access-to-leave-and-job-flexibility>

²² Kim, Jaeseung. "Workplace flexibility and parent-child interactions among working parents in the US." *Social Indicators Research* 151.2 (2020): 427-469.

²³ [Link to slide deck](#)

²⁴ <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/married-to-the-job-no-more-craving-flexibility-parents-are-quitting-to-get-it>

back into their previous role at the agreed upon time without fear of backlash or retribution for negative job performance or loyalty.

This starts with creating a culture where workers feel safe to speak up and their concerns and leadership truly listens and acts in a supportive and inclusive manner. McKinsey research finds that “inclusive organizations have a competitive advantage in attracting and retaining talent, among other positive business factors”.²⁵ This not only provides support for working parents and thus their ability to provide care for their families, but increases loyalty, satisfaction, and overall job performance.

Working parents, especially mothers exiting the workforce due to caregiving needs and lack of flexibility or support from their employer amounts to brain drain. Having to exit the workforce, even briefly, can cause negative, long-term effects for working parents: gaps in work history can be major inhibitors for trying to re-enter the workforce and may discourage parents from attempting to go back to work after leaving.

It is important the employers and leadership are supportive and not just tolerant to the needs of working parents. This includes creating a safe climate, listening to their needs and concerns, and creating policies that can allow for flexibility. To that end, also being understanding of parents who are returning to the workforce after brief departures to care for their families and not viewing all gaps in work history as a negative mark on someone's ability to perform well in their role.

It is imperative that employers and leadership go beyond simply adopting more family-friendly policies and flexible work settings. To truly provide a supportive work environment where working parents, and all employees, feel psychologically safe in the workplace and know their unique needs and concerns are being heard and valued by leadership. Intentionally creating a company culture that is safe and supportive, crafting policies that safeguard and promote the health and well-being of employees and families, and listening to the needs of working parents will create a sense of belonging

²⁵ <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/married-to-the-job-no-more-craving-flexibility-parents-are-quitting-to-get-it>

by employees and strengthen the company for long term growth and overall satisfaction.