

# Supporting Parents in a Post-COVID World

**The pandemic changed the employment landscape and what people want and need from their employers.**

Perhaps no group was impacted by this more than parents. Many left the workforce entirely for a period and have since returned, but with new needs and expectations.

This Meeting in a Box is designed to help you understand the challenges parents face today, the ways that companies are evolving their paid family leave policies and provide data regarding parents in the workplace.

## **What Parents Need from Employers in a Post-COVID World**

The COVID-19 pandemic has put a strain on working parents.

Parents were more likely to have quit their jobs since the pandemic started than people without children, according to research compiled by [McKinsey & Company](#) at the end of 2021. Among the reasons they left? Parents were struggling to balance working from home and managing childcare responsibilities.

As workers resigned in record numbers, companies have come under pressure to attract and retain talent. Those that don't are putting their businesses at risk and could potentially lose good employees. To thrive in a post-pandemic world, experts say companies will need to examine what parents need and why they are leaving.



## Be Flexible

What parents want most from employers is flexibility. Flexibility can take many forms — hybrid work or the ability to work from home, paid parental leave or giving workers the freedom to step away briefly from their desks for personal reasons.

“The ability to work asynchronously and take care of a sick kid when needed or take a half-day during school early release, that perk is invaluable,” says Kory Underdown, a Content Marketing Manager at cybersecurity firm DNSFilter and working mother of two children.

Underdown says the pandemic showed her that flexibility and remote work were non-negotiables.

“The other single parents in my community were struggling to figure out what to do with their kids while trying to work, or worse, they couldn’t work at all during the early part of the pandemic,” she says. “I realized that I was extremely lucky to be able to just bring my kids home and hunker down together.”

As parents’ needs change, companies need to be fluid with the types of benefits they offer to employees, says Dr. Amanda Zelechowski, Professor of Psychology and Founding Director of Clinical Training at Purdue University Northwest and co-founder of [Pandemic Parenting](#), an organization that helps parents and caregivers navigate the COVID-19 pandemic.



“What’s working for me right now may not work in three months when my kids go back to school,” she says. “Summer is quite different for parents than the school year for a variety of reasons. Maybe we have these built-in check-in points where we say, ‘this is what’s going to work for now.’ Then in three months, we’re going to check in again to see if this is still working.”

As much as companies try to build flexibility into their plans, Zelechowski says it’s important to recognize that final decisions may not work for everybody.

“How can we continue to be open to hearing that and be responsive and accommodating?” She asks. “Recognizing that things may keep changing as life circumstances change for people.”

## Listen and Learn

During the pandemic, employers expanded the benefits they offered to employees.

Emergency leave for childcare was the top change companies made to paid and unpaid leave policies, according to research from the [International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans](#). Companies also offered perks like backup emergency childcare or allowing people to work from home.

Zelechowski says before adding benefits, companies need to speak to their employees.

“A lot of companies jumped in trying to add wellness webinars, self-care or everybody gets to work from home which is great in theory,” she says. “Making these blanket decisions, rather than talking to each employee or groups of employees and getting a sense of what they think would be helpful, rather than assuming.”

Zelechowski says while individualizing services can be hard for companies making global decisions, communication between managers and their direct reports is critical to finding out exactly what employees need.

“When you can individualize and have supervisors talk with their direct reports about what can I do, how can we increase the flexibility for you, what do you need to make this work,” she says. “Get a sense of where people are and what would be helpful right now.”

## Provide Childcare Options

Childcare costs, which have always been a concern for working parents, became even more expensive during the pandemic. In some states, workers can spend nearly 30% of their income to care for a child younger than five. Parents are looking to their employers to help them manage those costs.

Seventy-three percent of parents said they would be more likely to stay at their current job if their employer began offering childcare, according to UrbanSitter, a website that connects parents to nannies and babysitters. Additionally, 80% of parents said a childcare benefit would help them decide to accept a new job.

“The pandemic highlighted for many employers how tough it is for their employees to juggle childcare and work,” says Lynn Perkins, founder and CEO of UrbanSitter. “That may be one of the good things that came out of the pandemic, is that hopefully there’ll be more employer support and subsidy support.”

Underdown says childcare assistance is a perk she would have welcomed early in her career.

“Daycare is so wildly expensive, even now I can barely afford full-time care for my kids,” she says. “Daycare assistance would have changed my life, especially in earlier years and given me a chance to grow my career sooner. I’ve dreamed of that perk for at least 10 years.”

## Promote Company Benefits

Employers are making changes to benefits like adjusting their paid-leave policies or allowing workers to have flexible schedules. But are employees fully aware of all the benefits at their disposal? Companies don’t seem to think so.

Perkins says part of the problem may be the way companies promote their benefits.

“It’s great to get the benefit, but make sure that your employees are utilizing it,” she says. “Sometimes just promoting it at the annual end-of-benefits fair doesn’t do the trick.”

Aside from highlighting benefits during onboarding and open enrollment, constant reminders can be sent to employees in emails, on the company’s intranet site or in workshops and webinars.

Elissa Sangster, CEO of the Forte Foundation, an organization focused on building women’s careers through access to business education and professional development, says it’s the responsibility of middle managers to let employees know about available benefits, especially if the managers see workers in trouble.

“HR is making really good choices about what they offer their employees, but they’re not training or passing down that information to their management and how the management can intercede whenever they see a worker who is challenged, or the manager doesn’t know how to advise that worker to seek out solutions,” she says.

## Be Supportive

Parents are experiencing burnout as they try to juggle their responsibilities at work and home. Many workers feel that senior managers value productivity more than their mental health.

Jazmyn Breanna, a single mother of a 7-year-old boy, struggled to find a work-life balance in a previous job as an event producer/live events professional. Breanna says she was a strong performer, but her employer wanted her to work even harder. The stress was compounded when she was diagnosed with two forms of Lupus.

Breanna has since left that company and now focuses on P3 Productions, a production agency she founded during the pandemic. She wishes her former employer could have offered her more support.





“Parents shouldn’t have to choose,” she says. “There shouldn’t be jobs that people can’t do because they have decided to be parents.”

John Heil, Employee Benefits Consultant at Scott’s Insurance, has this advice for employers.

“You’re paying them to be there, but they’re not being productive,” he says. “It’s probably better to pay them to not be there that day and for them to feel supported. Let them take care of what they need to take care of and then come back and do a good job.”

Providing support can be as simple as managers regularly checking on the wellbeing of employees.

“I feel so seen and supported when I have supervisors that will check in with me,” says Zelechowski. “How are you doing? What can I do to support you, what are ways you want to grow this year? How can we make that happen? Just feeling supported, valued and recognized for the things that you are trying to contribute to your organization or your company. That goes a long way. Relationships matter.”

## Show Your Commitment

Perkins says companies can demonstrate their dedication to improving the workplace for parents with what she calls a “good, better, best” plan. Initiatives can begin with adding

additional flexibility days, then helping workers access local childcare support systems. The supreme step would be offering a childcare subsidy. Perkins says it doesn’t have to be a big one.

“A subsidy to apply towards childcare and that would be either a backup care situation or a nanny or it could be funding to offset the cost of preschool and daycare,” she says. “Addressing it openly with your company and showing your company culture supports working parents, I think that goes a long way.”

Company executives shouldn’t be afraid to show employees if they are struggling to find work-life balance. Perkins says it can help employees feel valued.

“If executives can be a little more vulnerable and show that they too are struggling with and juggling these things, I think employers are going to find that their employees feel more connected and appreciated,” she says.

Heil says employers need to evolve to meet the needs of parents in a post-pandemic world.

“It’s having that mindset and that holistic approach of being paternalistic for your employees and allowing them to take care of their families and their needs,” he says. “Everybody wins when you have programs or you instill that culture in your organization.”