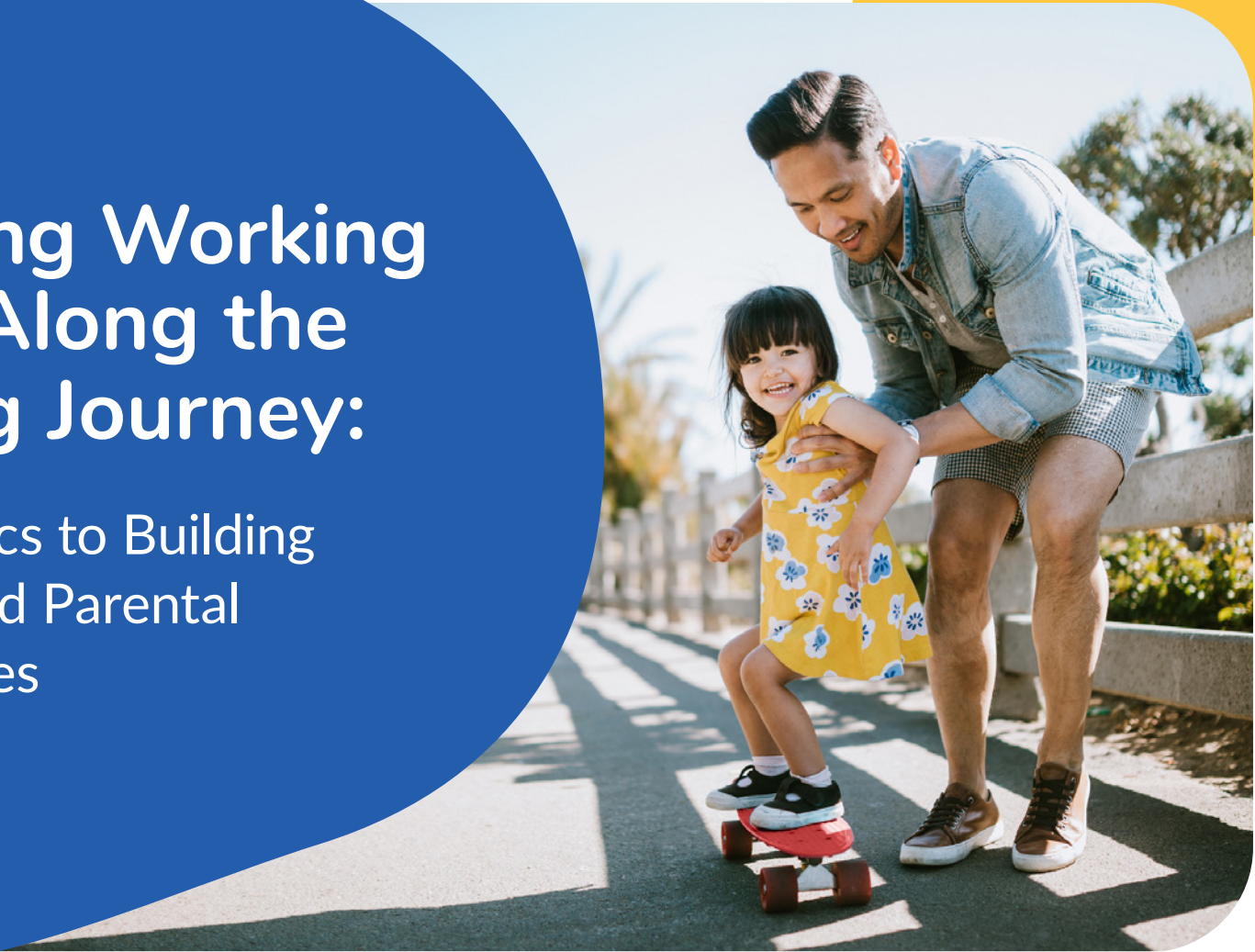


Supporting Working Parents Along the Parenting Journey:

4 Critical Tactics to Building Future-Forward Parental Benefits Policies



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When offices abruptly shut down amid the COVID-19 pandemic, working parents – and the myriad daily challenges of managing kids and a career – were suddenly thrust into the spotlight.

The reality is that for many organizations, supporting working parents has been a focus for years. Studies from the past few years show that employees were already asking employers to provide greater flexibility and better support their need to balance work and home obligations. According to a 2019 FlexJobs survey¹, 69% of respondents said that flexible work options were one of the “most important factors” they consider when evaluating a job prospect, while 73% considered “work-life balance” a top priority.

Even though the need to provide workplace parental benefits was already gaining attention before COVID-19 entered the

picture, the pandemic accelerated its urgency. As working parents made a sudden shift to remote work at the same time that schools closed down, many challenges emerged, and they often differed across the parenting journey. Parents with young children struggled with childcare as many facilities closed or restricted their capacity. Parents of school-aged children suddenly found themselves needing to take charge of their children’s remote learning. No matter the age of their kids, parents found themselves grappling, more than ever, with the idea that success at work and success at home are mutually exclusive.² The impact is startling, with over 700,000 working parents leaving the workforce in 2020.³

The impact on working mothers has been even more substantial. **Mothers cut their work hours at a much higher rate than fathers during the pandemic, and many more women than men left the workforce altogether.**⁴



This is a disturbing trend for any employer committed to creating a diverse workplace with equitable opportunities for men and women to advance their careers, and experts say it may take years to make back gains in equity within the job market.⁵

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Erin Leviant
Real Estate and Workplace
Event Manager, Twitter

As we emerge from the pandemic, employers are already seeing a hot, competitive talent market,⁶ with parents of minor children comprising one-third of the workforce.⁷ In this landscape, equitable, robust parental benefits will no longer be optional for employers seeking to attract and retain parents, and that these benefits need to address the different challenges along the parenting journey, which are not one-size-fits-all.

The good news is that innovative HR leaders have an opportunity to be future-forward, establishing parental benefits policies in their organizations that truly help employees manage home life as well as work life. Doing so will help them emerge with stronger workforces: they will be able to attract and retain top talent, improve workforce engagement, and be known for providing best-in-class benefits. Erin Leviant, Real Estate and Workplace Event Manager at Twitter, is one human resources professional who envisions just that in the future.

“I think we’ll see more benefits that support flexibility for parents,” she said, “and that further normalize the reality of parents having to balance additional commitments.”



The Business Case for Holistic Parental Benefits

The business imperative is clear. Employers who want to succeed in a competitive hiring market need to challenge themselves to think of more holistic ways to support working parents along their journeys, and those who don't adapt fast enough to the changing needs of working parents risk losing out to the competition.

One reason for this is the shifting talent landscape. Despite the pandemic, the competition for top talent is stiff, and data shows that workers are categorically re-evaluating what they want from work and life in 2021, seeking more flexibility, purpose, and balance.⁸





Supporting parents is also critical for employee retention. Working parents who do not feel supported in their current work environments will look for other roles. Experts are already predicting a wave of workers seeking out new opportunities over the next 3-12 months,⁹ adding a fight to retain in addition to the fight to attract.

And finally, it's critical to keep in mind the positive impact parents have in the workplace, particularly moms. For example, female employees with mom colleagues report having a 23% more positive overall workplace experience than those without mom colleagues, and female employees with colleagues and managers who are moms report being 40% more likely to stay at their current employers next year than those who lack mom managers or mom colleagues.¹⁰

Simply put, employers can't afford to ignore the demands of today's employees to be treated as whole human beings with concerns and obligations that often overlap their work time. Working parents are especially eager to be part of organizations that show they care about those needs, and likely to steer clear of those that don't.

Four Steps for Supporting Working Parents

More parental support is necessary, and the question isn't "whether" but "how". Here are four strategies innovative HR leaders can put into action now to ensure their organizations offer best-in-class support for working parents across the parenting journey long into the future.



1

Reevaluate your current benefits package

Don't assume that what you already offer is enough. Instead, take a step back to assess how well your existing benefits program is meeting the needs of working parents and their families. There's no better way to find out than to ask the employees themselves.

Mary Beth Ferrante, founder and managing partner of WRK/360, a change management and advisory firm focused on creating company cultures that care, said she is a fan of regular pulse surveys, along with occasional deep-dive focus groups, to gauge employee satisfaction. To get the most from this feedback, she recommended employers tap an outside consultant to lead the discussions rather than someone from the organization's HR staff. "It allows for more vulnerability, more openness, and more discovery," said Ferrante, whose company specializes in developing workplace cultures that support parents and other caregivers.



**“The number
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flexibility.”**

Mary Beth Ferrante
Founder and Managing Partner,
WRK/36P

At Agios Pharmaceuticals in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the HR team uses surveys, parent focus groups and an HR inbox for suggestions to gather employee feedback, said Alison O’Toole, Associate Manager, HR Operations.

Leviant noted that Twitter also uses surveys as a tool for evaluating its employee benefits. “We conduct regular surveys of Tweeps,” she said. “For parents in particular, we’ve been hosting listening sessions, and we conducted a special survey so they could tell us directly what they need for support.”

If your assessment reveals room for improvement in your benefits package, use your employee feedback to come up with creative ways to provide benefits that respond directly to the needs they express. For working parents, the desire for more flexibility in where, when and how they do their jobs usually tops the list.

“The number one thing parents mention in almost every survey I’ve come across is flexibility,” Ferrante said. “The majority of employees across all levels, including executives and more junior employees, want some sort of hybrid or flexible policy.”



But there are more items on the parental benefits wish list, Ferrante said. Tutoring and family access to mental healthcare are important, she said, as are concierge services that link parents to help with everything from planning birthday parties and finding summer camps for their children to educating older kids about career opportunities.

Backup childcare is another important benefit. For example, Agios provides subsidized backup childcare to its employees as a benefit. If an employee's regular daycare provider becomes unavailable, they can select from a list of area daycare facilities or use their backup care allowance to hire an in-home caregiver.

By offering such benefits, "employees will feel that their pain points regarding their child's care are heard, and that their employer knows the importance of making sure their children's needs are met," said O'Toole.

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Alison O'Toole
Associate manager, HR Operations,
AgiosMPharmaceuticals



2

Level the career advancement playing field

Equitable access should be built into your benefits policy – for example, providing leave for both mothers and fathers to care for newborn or newly adopted children and having a uniform way to handle job assignments when they return. But in addition to the wording of the official policy, there's another aspect of equity to address: how workplace cultures often treat mothers and fathers (or, more broadly, caregivers and non-caregivers) differently. Those disparities sometimes have a negative impact on the career progression of the parent bearing the greatest responsibility for childcare. Even today, that's typically the mother, Ferrante said.

“This is shifting, but we still see that this predominantly falls on the mother, especially in a heterosexual relationship,” Ferrante said. “There is still that gender bias.”



The bias can show up in the form of different assumptions employers make about mothers' and fathers' availability and loyalty to the job. As Ferrante explained, the traditional view of the ideal mother as one who is always available to her child sometimes clashes with the traditional view of the ideal employee who is available to the employer 24/7. As a result, women sometimes face extra pressure to prove themselves when they return to work from maternity leave, miss the cut for a bonus or have a request for flexible hours denied, she said.

An equitable system of parental support in the workplace will help level the career advancement playing field for men and women.

In contrast to the “maternal wall” of career barriers working mothers often face, working fathers sometimes benefit from what Ferrante and other experts call the “fatherhood bonus.” Ferrante said she witnessed this firsthand when the couple had their first daughter and her husband immediately received a raise.

“There is still this idea that men’s role is to be the provider, so we see that bump in their pay, she said, “whereas mothers take a hit with every child.” In fact, women get a 4% pay cut for each child they have, compared to men who get a 6% pay increase on average.¹¹

An equitable system of parental support in the workplace will help level the career advancement playing field for men and women. The most effective support systems provide equal, adequate and accessible leave time for all caregivers at every stage of their journey, Ferrante advised. They also focus on eliminating the cultural biases that can hold back the career progression of working mothers and contribute to their dropping out of the workforce. Expanding parental benefits not only gives working mothers a better chance to advance their careers, it also creates an attractive workplace for both male and female employees — including nonparents — who value balancing work life and family life and working for an employer who supports that goal.



3

Offer benefits that acknowledge parenting is a journey

Creating a fully supportive parental benefits program requires touching every stage of parenting. That means extending the program beyond a few weeks of maternity or paternity leave and providing some assistance with daycare for parents of small children. As essential as those types of programs are to employers competing for top talent in the recruitment market, they are not enough. It's time for organizations to provide specific benefits that help with the different categories of challenges that emerge along the parenting journey.



“We need to make sure that whatever season of life our employees are in, they are able to have support from Agios to put their best foot forward both personally and professionally.”

Alison O’Toole
Associate Manager, HR Operations,
Agios Pharmaceuticals

Parents of children ages 5-18 tend to get less attention than those with younger children when employers are designing their benefits programs. But a number of employers have begun to address that gap, which the pandemic-related shift to working and learning from home helped to spotlight. For example, some have leveraged employee resource groups for parents of school-aged kids and programs to help them save for college. Twitter’s long-standing @TwitterParents ERG has hosted webinars with psychologists, and company executives regularly host virtual storytelling sessions, Leviant said. Meanwhile, Agios staged a virtual Bring Your Kid to Work Day during the pandemic, distributing age-appropriate information and activity packs for employees’ children.

O’Toole said, beyond it being simply the right thing to do, Agios has a business incentive to assist working parents throughout their parenting journey.

“We need to make sure that whatever season of life our employees are in, they are able to have support from Agios to put their best foot forward at both personally and professionally,” she said.




4

Address the unique needs of parents who balance work from home with childcare

Even as we emerge from the pandemic, many working parents will continue to do at least some work from home while caring for children for all or part of the workday. Finding time to complete work projects and attend virtual meetings, while also supervising the school lessons and playtime of children who are in the next room (or popping into a video shot) can be exhausting. Employers can ease the stress of employees juggling these roles by offering them access to a variety of educational materials and tools for their children. The possibilities include providing funds for enrolling children in online courses, subsidizing tutoring services and distributing activity sheets to keep young kids occupied.





Agios and Twitter have partnered with Outschool, an innovative education platform that offers more than 100,000 interactive online classes, from academic subjects like English, social studies, science and foreign languages to fun favorites including video gaming, music, art and dance.

At Agios, each participating employee receives \$100 a month to pay for Outschool classes. The benefit has become so popular since Agios launched it in the fall of 2020 that the company has extended budgeting into 2021, O'Toole said.

Twitter incorporated Outschool into an internal program called Camp Twitter, a resource offering a variety of live and on-demand classes and activities for kids.

“While the Camp Twitter benefit was initially designed to meet the needs of parents while schools were closed in 2020, we are now finding that Outschool is a useful resource to bridge the gap between what schools have been able to offer and the evolving needs of each family’s unique situation,” Leviant said.

In addition to programs like Outschool and Camp Twitter, the company has used its famous social media platform to

help its working parent employees connect with one another. During Parents Week in July 2020, the @TwitterParents ERG launched #WatchUsWingIt so parents could post videos of everyday moments with their kids at home.

“The premise was, no matter who you are – parent, caregiver, ally – the pressure to put on a perfect show for your coworkers, kids, spouse or family is a daily juggling act,” Leviant said. “It’s impossible to feel like you’re succeeding on all fronts. Rather than strive for an A+ report card, #WatchUsWingIt celebrates what it takes to barely make the curve.”

It’s an example of what Ferrante calls parenting out loud: sharing stories about the kids, talking about plans to pick them up from school and doing other things to normalize parenting among coworkers.

Parents who are working from home with children present can appreciate knowing that others like them are struggling with the same balancing act. They also are sure to welcome employee support that helps them keep their children engaged with fun and educational activities so they can get work done.



Key Takeaways

- Best-in-class parental benefits are not one-size-fits-all and need to address different challenges along the parenting journey, including the school years from ages 5-18 that many benefits programs overlook.
- Working parents expect employers to offer scheduling flexibility and help with their children's care and education needs – and they may move on if organizations don't provide those benefits.
- The pandemic experience exposed many of the pain points of working parents and led more employers to implement new benefits to help them cope.
- Workplace parental benefits enable employees to be more focused and productive in their work, knowing that their employer is assisting them with tools to provide for their children's needs.
- Supporting working parents is a business imperative for employers. No organization can afford to miss out on the contributions this group of employees can make to its success.



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Outschool

Outschool for Employers helps companies attract, support, and retain working moms and caregivers by offering a unique benefit that acknowledges the unique journey of parenting, increases productivity, and lowers stress. Outschool's 100,000+ online, small-group classes for ages 3-18 give parents time to focus on work and on themselves knowing their kids are exploring their passions and learning from expert, vetted, teachers, in a safe, high-quality online learning environment. To learn more about how Outschool partners with HR leaders, visit outschool.com/for-employers.

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