

A Better Future for Working Parents

A playbook for leaders and organizations

This playbook was born out of a collaboration between our two organizations—organizations that are invested in reshaping work for working parents. We're building a better future for caregivers in two different ways: Vivvi works with leading employers to provide flexible, affordable, and high quality child care; and Charter works with organizations to shape priorities around the future of work and catalyze workplace transformation.

For this guide, we interviewed thought leaders, working parents, and change agents; we analyzed the available data; and we researched existing case studies and best practices. The result is a comprehensive document that uncovers the state of working parents today, and that outlines strategies for organizations and leaders committed to better supporting caregivers.

We truly hope this helps you transform the way you work.

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Introduction

With students returning to classrooms and employees returning to the offices they left 17 months ago, one might assume that things are going back to normal. But as the Delta variant continues to spread, and the number of unvaccinated Americans remains high, it has become clear that we'll be living with Covid for the foreseeable future. For working parents, this reality means grappling with continued uncertainty in care schedules, with the threat of school shutdowns and child-care closures, all without the extra support of pandemic-era subsidies and paid-leave policies. This unpredictability will only compound the struggles caregivers faced in the workplace before the pandemic—a lack of flexibility, inadequate parental leave policies, a high cost of child care, and work cultures hostile to the responsibilities of caregiving.



Covid brought to the forefront these issues that have long affected caregivers in the workplace. Now is the time to make fundamental shifts in the way we work. This playbook is for leaders and organizations who want to be at the forefront of those changes and who understand that the vast majority of workplaces have never accommodated the realities of working parents—especially working mothers. In it, you'll find an overview of the current state of working parents, advice from experts and organizational leaders, and actionable strategies to address flexibility, benefits, and culture.

Key takeaways

Working parents need flexibility. The pressures of the pandemic have only increased the need for policies such as remote and hybrid work, flexible schedules, part-time positions, and job shares and returnships. For these policies to be successful, it's essential to build formalized, robust structures to give employees clarity and ensure equitable implementation.

For most caregivers, existing employer benefits don't do enough. To support parents and other caregivers, companies must provide adequate paid family leave, child-care benefits, and mental health and coaching support. At organizations that already provide these benefits, managers must provide the education and support that employees need to take full advantage of them.

Employers must create work cultures that value caregiving at every step of the employee life cycle. This means rethinking practices such as role design, manager training, and performance evaluation to support and celebrate caregiving. It also means rejecting outmoded styles of leadership that focus on output and long hours in favor of management practices that leave workers with time for themselves, their families, and their communities.

The current state of working parents

Even before March 2020, working parents struggled to balance the demands of caregiving and their careers.

“Child care has long been a drastic, unmet need for working families—driven by fundamental supply/demand imbalances, skyrocketing costs and lack of quality, flexible options aligned with how families live their lives today,” said Charles Bonello, co-founder and CEO of Vivvi. “That pain point is not and never was a cosmetic one—it represents one of the biggest hurdles to workforce participation, generational economic mobility and broad economic growth.”

With no federal provisions for paid family leave, and only **19% of employees** with access to any paid family leave, many new parents face difficult choices between losing income and taking care of their children. Those who return to work then face **mounting costs of child care**—the single biggest

line-item expense for the average family, more than housing, healthcare, and food. Nationwide, parents pay 60% of these costs out of pocket, with very little help from employers, who cover an estimated 1 to 4% of the cost.

The pandemic only heightened the challenges for caregivers. With schools and child-care centers closed for remote schooling, many parents found themselves juggling the demands of caregiving, homeschooling, and remote working. Pandemic response measures provided some support for parents, giving many workers temporary access to paid leave to care for children affected by school or child-care center closures. In spite of these policies, gaps in coverage forced many caregivers to take unpaid time to care for children. A Kaiser Family Foundation [survey](#) found that among workers who had to take time off because of school or child-care closures, 33% of full-time workers and 74% of part-time workers took unpaid leave.

This pressure has had profound consequences for workers' mental health, according to a [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study](#). It found that unpaid caregivers have suffered worse mental health throughout the pandemic

compared to non-caregivers, with 70% reporting symptoms of depression, anxiety, PTSD, and other adverse mental-health effects. Among sandwich-generation caregivers—those that care for both children and aging parents—85%

Focus on Working Moms



The lack of institutional support for caregivers has been difficult for all parents, but working mothers in particular have suffered from the increased burden of caregiving during the pandemic. New data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that during the pandemic, mothers spent an average of 8 hours a day on child care—the equivalent of a full-time job—while dads spent an average of five hours.

With increased responsibilities at home and inadequate support from employers, women have exited the workforce en masse, with the highest dropout rates among Black and Latina women. In what Vice President Kamala Harris has called a “national emergency,” almost 2.5 million women have left the labor force during the pandemic, setting women back decades. In January 2021, the labor-force participation among women was the lowest since 1988, and even as the economy recovers, mothers remain out of the workforce at higher rates than other groups since the pandemic started.

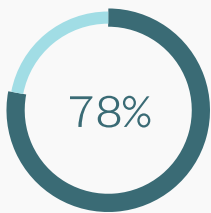
“We all know as parents, the worst thing is when your kid is sick in the morning. And the quarantine is like an expanded version of the stomach flu.”

EMILY OSTER

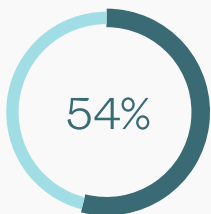
Economist and author

reported adverse mental-health symptoms, and 50% reported serious suicide ideation in the past month. These mental-health outcomes are not entirely new, however. Dr. Christin Drake, a psychiatrist, women’s mental-health expert, and clinical assistant professor at NYU Langone Health told us that the study “fits with many of the social challenges we’ve seen exacerbated by Covid, but there’s long been a mental-health crisis among parents and caregivers.”

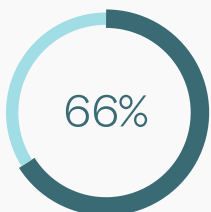
This imbalance has affected parents’ careers as well. Nearly half of working parents [said](#) they had faced discrimination at work as a result of family responsibilities during the pandemic. Managers reported even higher rates, with 54% of them experiencing such discrimination, according to a [recent survey conducted for Protocol](#).



78% of working parents have missed work over the past 6 months to care for their children, averaging 5 times



In the past month, **54% of working parents** worked outside normal hours to make up time missed caring for their children, for an average of 7 times



66% of working parents are feeling burnt out at work

SOURCE
Vivvi State of Working Parents Survey

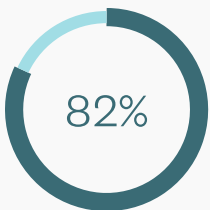
Discrimination takes many forms, such as criticism or being passed over for projects or promotions.

Vivvi's [**State of Working Parents Survey**](#), conducted by Wakefield Research, found that 68% of working parents said that they've had to take on fewer responsibilities at work because of child-care issues; and yet 66% of moms believed that speaking up about child-care struggles makes them seem like a "problem employee."

Looking ahead, parents face an uncertain future. [**School reopenings**](#) continue to vary by state and district, and ambiguity remains for the 2021-2022 school year. With the spread of the Delta variant, Covid outbreaks may lead to temporary closures of schools and day-care centers. Economist and author Emily Oster compares these disruptions to the stress of figuring out child-care arrangements when a child is out sick from school: "We all know as parents, the worst thing is when your kid is sick in the morning. And the quarantine is like an expanded version of the stomach flu." With the threat of these disruptions looming, robust support structures for parents of school-aged children become even more important.



Three out of four parents who have reported having some kind of child-care benefits said they don't meet their current needs



82% of working parents say the pandemic has made employer-provided child-care benefits more important to them

SOURCE
Vivvi State of Working Parents Survey

For families with children under five, child-care [availability](#) is often the greatest source of uncertainty. Throughout the pandemic, surveys of child-care providers have [reported](#) staffing shortages and budgetary shortfalls, which have led many centers to close or reduce staff. [One-third of child-care centers remain closed](#), affecting a greater number of Black, Latino, and Asian families than White families. As parents return to the workplace, they face reduced capacity and longer waitlists for child care as providers struggle to [regain their financial footing](#) and [recruit and retain staff members](#).

With many pandemic response policies expiring this fall, including employer tax breaks for paid family leave, lawmakers are currently debating more [long-term provisions](#) to support parents. Several ambitious legislative proposals have been introduced in Congress that could make child care more affordable, increase quality of care, invest in the child-care workforce, and expand access to paid family and medical leave, including fertility benefits and leave for miscarriage.

“I’m seeing an exacerbation of the previous situation in which this whole system of parents

“The example set by the government is that supporting families is not a priority. I think that message comes across loud and clear.”

DR. CHRISTIN DRAKE

Psychiatrist and NYU Langone Health Clinical Assistant Professor

working, mothers working has been held together by duct tape and favors. There’s been so little support for working mothers historically, and so much of it has had to come from resources that families can put together for themselves. Employers aren’t providing it, the government isn’t providing it. This is where we see the compounding effect of structural inequity,” Dr. Drake told us. “The example set by the government is that supporting families is not a priority. I think that message comes across loud and clear.”

For now, in the absence of political solutions and public investment for caregivers, many parents are looking to employers for the solution—more flexibility, more child-care support, and more empathy and understanding. And they have been clear in voicing this desire. One [survey](#) conducted



by the Marshall Plan for Moms found that over a third of working moms “felt little to no support from their employers.” “The narrative is still, people don’t want to come to work because they don’t want to work. And that is just simply not true,” Reshma Saujani, activist and founder of the Marshall Plan for Moms and Girls Who Code, told us. “We have to change that narrative and we have to offer flexibility, and we have to design it in a way that creates equality, and doesn’t exacerbate inequality.” Making these investments for caregivers can change the equation for working parents and their families, but it also makes business sense—companies that have caregiving benefits and flexible work policies see returns on their investment through recruiting, [retention](#), and [productivity](#).

Economic recovery and the caregiver industry

We asked Lauren Smith Brody, the author of [*The Fifth Trimester*](#) and founder of [The Fifth Trimester](#) consulting, about the economic recovery for parents. Here's what she told us:

“A [recent report](#) from economist [Jessica Brown](#) of the University of South Carolina demonstrates how much longer it's going to take the child-care industry to recover than every other industry. [Ninety percent of caregivers are mothers](#) themselves; 60% [of child care businesses are minority-owned](#), and of course we know that BIPOC families were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic; the industry was already a mess, with half of America living in a [child care desert](#).

“Therefore, if we go back to ‘business as usual,’ without an appropriate ramp-up for caregivers, parents will be left behind. And anyone with less-urgent caregiving needs will move ahead, creating a K-shaped, totally inequitable, recovery. With [60% of dual income families](#) relying on center-based child care, the gender wage gap would [increase by 5%](#).”



Strategies for change

As organizations return to the office, leaders have an opportunity to redefine what it means to be a caregiver in the workplace. The pandemic has helped us break unnecessarily rigid patterns of the past; the work now is to ensure that flexibility is here to stay. Parents—and their families—are counting on an overhaul of workplace policies to thrive at the office and at home. In this section, you'll find actionable strategies organized under three categories:

Flexibility: policies that will give caregivers greater control over when and where they work

Benefits: services and support companies can offer directly to employees

Culture: ways managers and leaders can build an environment that celebrates and supports caregivers in the long term

In particular, we focus on how individual managers can support broader changes. Managers who have a narrow scope of influence over organizational policy still have major influence over caregivers' experience at work. Managers often have the power to negotiate flexible schedules, dictate project assignments, educate caregivers on company benefits, and set the tone around caregiving and company culture. To build a new kind of workplace where caregivers—and workers of all kinds—can thrive, managers must learn to excel at a new style of leadership that prioritizes empathy, humility, and compassion.

Broaden your definition of who “counts” as a caregiver

While this guide is focused on working parents, many of the recommendations apply to all caregivers. It's important for organizations to expand the definition of caregiver to include all caregivers: people caring for older children with learning disabilities, aging relatives, relatives with physical or mental health needs. “When orgs realize how universal caregiving is and adjust their policies accordingly, they remove the stigma and the risk of discrimination,” Brody explains. “We all need flexibility. We all need a living wage. We all need to feel valued as whole people.”

Flexibility

Caregivers have been asking for greater flexibility for years. A [2018 Harvard Business Review survey](#) found that a third of respondents thought the structure of their workday made it difficult “to be the type of parent they want to be.” During the pandemic, parents had an even greater need for flexibility, with one [BCG study](#) finding that the average parent spent 27 more hours on care per week than before the pandemic.

PARENT PERSPECTIVE

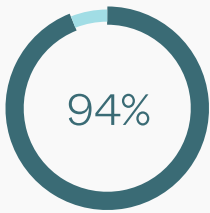
“It’s a lose-lose almost all of the time. You’re either sacrificing career growth to be with your kids more often or you’re sacrificing time at home and tabling bigger ambitions at work. And regardless of your choice to be at home or work more often I am always left with guilt that I’m not doing either as well as I should or could if I had more time or more help.”

REBECCA GROSS
Head of Partner Management at
Outbrain and mother of three

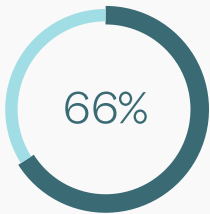
At the same time, workers and managers have shown that strategies like remote and hybrid work, asynchronous work, and flexible schedules are not only effective, but essential for caregivers attempting to meet the demands of home and work. As we move forward, workplace leaders should preserve this flexibility and combine it with other policies such as part-time schedules and job shares.

It’s important to remember that flexibility only works if it’s deliberate. People—and especially working parents—thrive when they have clear expectations within their flexibility, so be explicit about expectations.

Create systems for remote and hybrid work, and encourage working asynchronously to maintain



94% of working parents say they would benefit from flexible work arrangements



66% of parents agreed that they would benefit from an alternative schedule (no one type of schedule rose to the top)

- 39% of parents would like the ability to work any time
- 20% are interested in alternate weekly schedules outside of the Monday-Friday 9-5
- 26% would benefit from starting or ending their workdays at different times

SOURCE
Vivvi State of Working Parents Survey

flexible schedules. Caregiving responsibilities don't conform to the 9-5 workday, and rigid schedules that tie parents to the office only make juggling those responsibilities harder. Giving parents greater flexibility to determine their schedules or work remotely will help parents make the 3pm pick up or enjoy family dinner—whether that's hybrid working, restructuring the workday, or restructuring the workweek. Each of these options requires employees to work asynchronously, rather than replicating the office remotely. While that change may have a learning curve, it will benefit caregivers and improve retention. When they had remote-work options, women with child-care responsibilities were 32% less likely to report an intention to leave their jobs, according to a [Catalyst survey](#) of workers globally.

Advice for managers

—— Encourage asynchronous work by setting limited core [coordination hours](#)—windows where all employees are expected to be online for meetings and other synchronous work.

—— Move away from meetings in favor of written communication and digital collaboration tools.

“The pandemic kind of forced us to figure out some things about how we can make remote work possible. I would hope ideally that coming out of that we would have an opportunity to say, ‘Hey, I’ve shown you that I can work from home. So like, maybe it’s okay if I go home at 5pm. And then I work at home from 8pm to 10pm because I’ve been at home for the whole last year and it’s been fine.’ There’s an opportunity to make that work and to make that work better, particularly for working women.”

EMILY OSTER

Economics professor at Brown University and author of [Expecting Better](#), [Cribsheet](#), and [The Family Firm](#)

Twitter is one example of an asynchronous-first company that has promoted these strategies, with the use of Slack and document sharing taking the place of in-person or Zoom meetings. This shift maintains lines of communication while allowing working parents to make time for both focused work and caregiving responsibilities.

—— Too often flexible schedules lead to employees being on calls around the clock. But managers can help employees guard their time through daily or weekly rituals that signal the end of the workday or workweek. For Christy Johnson, co-founder of all-remote consulting firm Artemis Connection, this ritual takes the form of a Friday afternoon meeting that serves as a “bookend to the week.”

Offer part-time schedules, and support caregivers in maintaining their careers even with reduced hours.

“Many working parents are feeling burned out and starting to consider moving into contractor roles or other part-time work opportunities. Companies that formalize a part-time option that is still meaningful and intellectually challenging will likely retain more parent employees,” advises Allison Whalen, co-founder and CEO of Parentaly. Shifting to

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part-time work can help working parents juggle the responsibilities of caregiving and their jobs, but parents—especially mothers—who work part time often face unexpected challenges, from being put on the “[mommy track](#)” and experiencing [schedule creep](#) to losing benefits.

Advice for managers

—— When caregivers shift to part time, continue to give them the same kinds of projects they received when they were working full time. Their work should remain just as engaging and valuable as before.

—— Empower caregivers to express their priorities and guard their time against schedule creep. Work to create [explicit priorities and expectations](#). How many hours a week will they be online/in the office?

Which days/hours? What is the expectation around meetings and urgent tasks on days off?

——— Ensure that caregivers aren't penalized for taking part-time work with **curtailed benefits**. Making the decision to reduce hours shouldn't be a choice between health insurance/maternity leave and time for caregiving responsibilities.

Redesign roles as job shares or returnships to accommodate the schedules and responsibilities of caregivers. Restructuring existing roles as **job shares** can open up high-intensity, full-time work to caregivers who are qualified and passionate about the work but can't commit to the schedule. Similarly, **returnships** can be a lifeline for workers who have taken a career break to become a full-time caregiver. Designed as short-term positions to help individuals on-ramp after a break from work, returnships help caregivers gain experience and reskill for their reentry into the workforce.

Create systems and structures to ensure equitable access to flex arrangements. Studies have shown that when flexibility is given on an ad-hoc basis, women with caregiving responsibilities tend to be **denied requests more often** than men.

PARENT PERSPECTIVE

“Despite flexibility in my current and previous positions, I still find it difficult to successfully navigate the intricacies of building and maintaining relationships, and excelling at the job.”

SOOYUN HONG

Investment strategy analyst
at BMO Capital Markets and
mother of three



Clear, consistent policies will empower employees to take advantage of flexibility while cutting down on biases. Additionally, developing robust data-tracking systems can help leaders assess flexibility policies for biased applications.

Benefits

The United States has reached an inflection point for policies governing benefits for working parents. For the first time in years, lawmakers are seriously considering creating a national mandate for paid family leave and universal child-care benefits, including fertility benefits and [leave for miscarriage](#). To transform workplaces for all working parents, business leaders should support efforts for permanent, structural change. The post-pandemic reset is an opportunity for employers to lead the way by implementing progressive benefits policies for their own employees. Doing so will set the tone for the national conversation, and working parents can't wait.

[Offer paid family leave for all caregivers, and encourage all parents to take full advantage of their leave, especially fathers.](#) In 2019, just [19% of American workers](#) had benefits that included paid family leave—provisions that allow workers to take time off to care for a sick family member or new child. Paid family leave helps caregivers devote time to their families during key transitions without having to worry about losing their income or position. For these reasons, the benefit has been shown to be critical for [attracting and retaining workers](#).



In particular, encourage fathers to take leave. According to data from the [Department of Labor](#), of the 90% of fathers who take parental leave for the birth of a child, 70% take fewer than 10 days of leave. For Saujani, it's companies that stigmatize and penalize parental leave that should be held responsible for this low rate of use. "I think men want to take it," she says. "They want to be with their kids too. But we haven't created that corporate cultural environment."

Advice for managers

—— Be intentional about handoffs. Clear communication in advance of leave helps everyone on the team establish expectations for shifting responsibilities. It also helps managers and employees set guidelines for communication during

“Most big companies have very progressive parental leave policies, but they have to make sure they’re giving permission to dads to take leave, and promoting fathers taking full leave. From what I understand, there is still a hesitation on the part of men to take the full parental leave. ... Men are afraid to take anywhere near the full allotment of paid leave for fear of the repercussions. Women feel the current repercussions, but they take leave anyway because caregiving is still largely their responsibility.”

PAMELA STONE

Professor of Sociology at Hunter College and author of [Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home](#)

leave, if any, and helps employees feel empowered to unplug during their leave.

——— Paid leave shouldn’t mean a pay cut. Compensate employees fairly even while they are on leave. Doing so is especially important for supporting new fathers. Research has found that men are only willing to take their full amount of leave if it’s compensated at [70%-90%](#) of their previous income, due to financial concerns.

——— Be intentional about the language surrounding paid family leave. It’s for more than just new birth mothers. It’s also a critical support for fathers, for parents of any gender who adopt or foster, and for workers caring for a sick family member or themselves.

Help working parents pay for child care.

[While some companies](#) are offsetting the high cost of caregiving by providing child-care benefits, they are in the minority. Without legislative action, the pandemic-related labor shortages and center closures may only cause increased costs—more than many parents can bear. For employers, there are a range of ways to support child care,

from providing dependent care flexible spending accounts and offering child-care reimbursements to subsidizing child-care costs and opening [on-site child-care centers](#).

Because not every family's caregiving needs are the same, it's important to involve parents in designing policies. Two in five working women surveyed by Vivvi reported that working parents weren't involved at all in determining company benefits (21% of men say the same). Instead, work with a caregiving employee resource group (ERG), host a design session, or field a survey of parents to help tailor child-care benefits based on children's ages, existing child-care situations, and current gaps in care.

Providing or subsidizing backup child care is one way employers can support working parents. Meant as a supplement to existing child-care arrangements, caregivers can rely on these emergency child-care services when an unexpected gap occurs. "When child care falls through, it can be cost-prohibitive and logistically challenging for working parents to find their own backup child care," Whalen tells us. "Providing backup child care has immediate ROI on the

“Providing backup child care has immediate ROI on the business as it allows employees to continue to work, and employees feel incredibly grateful to have access to this benefit.”

ALLISON WHALEN

Co-founder and CEO of Parentaly

business as it allows employees to continue to work, and employees feel incredibly grateful to have access to this benefit.”

It’s also a benefit that is gaining traction. A fall 2020 [Willis Towers Watson survey](#) of 533 employers found that while just a third of employers surveyed already offered backup care, a comparable number of employers considered adding or planned to add the benefit. As more companies seek to attract and retain employees during the economic recovery, the trend has continued into 2021. It includes some of the country’s biggest brands, like [McDonald’s](#), which has begun piloting backup child- and elder-care programs at some franchises.

Providing flexible child-care credits or stipends is another way to help families meet their unique child-care needs. Vivvi is one organization that works with companies to provide credits that can be applied towards in-home care, after-school tutoring, in-office care, or Vivvi's campuses. Dropbox offers stipends directly to its employees, which can be used for a number of child-care options. The remote-first company [rolled out an allowance](#) of \$7,000 per year for employee wellbeing and caregiving needs. By giving families multiple options for high-quality care, both of these options give parents greater levels of flexibility and control.

Advice for managers

—— Educate employees on available child-care benefits—workers can't take full advantage of benefits they don't understand. [A 2021 Voya Financial survey](#) found that one-third of workers don't understand the benefits they're enrolled in, and two-thirds of workers want more help understanding their benefits.

Support caregivers' wellbeing through mental health benefits and access to coaching,



especially during critical transition periods.

It's essential to support caregivers in caring for themselves—as well as their families—if they are to thrive in the workplace. Because of the toll the pandemic has taken on working parents, mental health benefits are more important than ever, and many companies have started answering this call. In spring 2021, [a care.com survey](#) of 500 organizational leaders found that almost half of companies planned to expand mental health benefits. Similarly, providing professional coaching can support caregivers in their professional lives, especially during key transition moments, like a return from parental leave, a move to part time, or a change in job role.

Spotlight on Patagonia

Patagonia has long been held up as an example of a company **making work/life balance possible**. It retains about 95% of working mothers thanks to subsidized on-site child care, and a culture that supports (and celebrates!) working parents. Integrating children into the workday positively impacts the culture, says Dean Carter, Patagonia's chief human resources officer. Another positive effect: more women ascend into leadership positions.

How Patagonia supports working parents

1. On-site child care. Subsidized on-site child care on three Patagonia campuses, serving children from infancy to kindergarten. During the pandemic, they shifted to pods with family members and expanded age groups, but pre-pandemic their classrooms were for infants to two-year olds, two to three and-a-half years old, and three-and-a-half to kindergarten.

2. Culture of support for working parents. The child-care center and play yard is “at the center of our community,”

Tessa Byars told us. She works in brand and internal communications at Patagonia, and is also a mother of two children enrolled in the program. This allows parents to eat lunch with their children, make it for milestones, like first steps, and supports nursing moms to feed their children throughout the day.

3. Increased minimum wage.

Last fall, Patagonia increased its minimum wage to \$15/hour or the **MIT Living Wage**, whichever is higher, and increased the salaries of hourly workers, which included the teachers at its child-care centers.

4. Additional child-care stipend.

Patagonia offered additional child-care stipends to parents who qualify financially, but aren't in a place where there is an on-site child-care center. It also provides “precautionary pay” for employees who can't work because they're suffering from Covid, exposed to Covid, or if their child-care center or school is closed.

“It's not just that I'm dedicated to staying here because this is my child care,” says



Byars. “You have a deep appreciation for a company that meets your needs beyond just a desk and a computer. I was able to nurse both of my children on site, and travel (for work) with assistance through the program.”

Costs

Patagonia has been **transparent about how it pays for the program**. First the costs: 80% labor, 14% real estate, 4% equipment, 2% insurance. Patagonia pays for it with tuition (40%), tax abatement (21%), and increased retention and engagement of employees.

Public Policy

In addition to supporting its employees internally, Patagonia **advocates** for policies at the federal level, including paid family leave. Both company leadership and Patagonia parents have spoken to numerous government agencies.

“We think this is something that should be incentivized and supported by the government, and also businesses should offer (it),” Byars says. “We have a use case of almost 40 years to prove that it is beneficial, helps with retention, employee satisfaction, productivity, and wellbeing.”



Culture

Even with robust policies for flexibility and benefits, caregivers can't succeed unless employers build a culture that values caregiving and considers caregiving across the employee life cycle. Culture is enduring, and creating an environment that celebrates caregiving while allowing employees to have time and space for their

“There’s an uncertainty tax for mothers where you don’t know exactly what you’re entitled to, how much you may earn in the years when you are having children, what it will set you back in terms of career, or what the expectations will be when you return. That’s another area that’s compounded, multiplied for people who belong to marginalized groups, so mothers of color deal with this more than others do.”

DR. CHRISTIN DRAKE

Psychiatrist, women’s mental health expert, and clinical assistant professor at NYU Langone Health

families, friends, and communities will ensure that companies can weather any crisis with empathy and compassion for caregivers.

In thinking about shaping culture at every stage, it’s key to make the implicit explicit. Workers, especially working parents, need transparent, consistent policies to have the clarity they need to succeed. There should be no guesswork involved in understanding workplace policies and benefits, whether they relate to family leave and child-care benefits or pay, promotion, and bonuses. In this section, we focus on three key phases of the employee life cycle: recruitment, environment, and advancement, and how employers can rethink them to provide caregivers clarity and support.

RECRUITMENT

Consider caregiving obligations when designing roles. When recruiting, design roles to have the flexibility caregivers need. Doing so could have a huge impact on gender parity within an organization. When Zurich Insurance added **six words** to its job postings in 2020, applications by women for management roles jumped 20%. The words were “part-time, job share, or flexible

working,” as the company highlighted the possibility of flexible work arrangements.

Recruiting materials should also include detailed information about essential benefits that affect caregivers, like child care, paid family leave, and flexibility policies. Company overviews should go beyond listing the policies, and provide statistics on how they’re used. For example, if the organization provides paid family leave, how long does the leave cover? Is it available to caregivers of aging parents or adopted children, or just new birth parents? What percent of the full leave do employees use? Do fathers use it at the same rate as mothers? Providing answers to questions like these helps potential employees set accurate expectations and promote transparency.

ENVIRONMENT

Ensure that caregiving is visible and supported.

Encourage transparency around parenting and employee schedules. Doing so will help start conversations about caregiving and reduce the stigma on caregivers in the workplace. Employees may be reluctant to talk about their caregiving obligations unless managers lead the way.

PARENT PERSPECTIVE

“Our current parents ERG is a lifeline. But parenting during the pandemic has been hard with school closings and I worry about being able to get all of my work done.”

EMILY GOLIGOSKI
Senior director audience
research at [The Atlantic](#)
and mother of two

Advice for managers

—— Model key behaviors by using a “caregiving” status update and being transparent about your own caregiving obligations. [Future Forum’s Helen Kupp](#) suggests setting norms by making “caregiving” a standard profile status in Slack (or your company’s communication tool).

—— Show empathy and flexibility if parents lose child care. “Managers should have open and productive conversations with their direct reports about changing timelines, deadlines, and work hours if a working parent loses child care,” says Whalen, adding that “recent research shows that employees value ‘autonomous respect’ above any other benefit a company could provide.”

[Create a network of caregivers.](#) To retain working parents, it’s essential to build systems to support them through different stages of parenting. [Employee resource groups](#) (ERGs) are officially chartered networks of employees who share a common identity—like gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, caregiver—and come together around a unifying mission. Caregiver ERGs or women’s ERGs focused on caregiving can increase retention by

driving employee engagement, educating others, supporting [diverse talent pipelines](#), and helping to shape policies and benefits. The most effective ERGs create tight feedback loops among members for internal practices and compensate their leaders, a practice currently in place at [Twitter](#) and [LinkedIn](#). For more of Charter's best practices on setting up ERGs, read the Charter [briefing](#).

Advice for managers

——— Reward individual contributions to retention-driving work like ERGs, mentorship, and education. Help employees identify the skills and equip them to talk about this work and its impact (does it support retention? improve employee sentiment?) in their performance reviews and self-assessments.

Support transitions. It's also critical to support parents as they return to work from parental leave. Help new parents readjust to the rhythms of work through services like career coaching and a gradual on-ramping. For parents who spent a longer time out of the workforce, [more support may be needed](#), such as dedicated orientation, skill-building trainings, and a dedicated mentor.



Advice for managers

—— Help employees returning from family leave on-ramp by having explicit conversations about timelines and expectations. Check in often about parents' workloads and adjust accordingly.

Make sure caregivers—and employees of all kinds—have breaks. The pandemic [exacerbated](#) already long hours among knowledge workers, putting increased pressure on caregivers juggling responsibilities at home and at work. To make sure that working parents are able to meet both sets of expectations, it's essential to give them more time away from work through shorter workweeks and access to paid time off. [Multiple studies](#) have

shown that reducing the hours worked leads to improved worker wellbeing without impacting productivity or performance. Time off of work is similarly essential to maintaining workers' performance and wellbeing. Like athletes, peak performance demands cycles of rest and recovery, and breaks enable individuals to come back to work refreshed, [more productive](#), [more creative](#), often with big ideas and renewed energy.

Advice for managers

—— Empower direct reports to guard their time by being clear and consistent about scheduling and communication. Talk through expectations about when individuals are online, and when they're expected to respond.

—— Celebrate taking breaks as a [mark of intelligence and high performance](#), not laziness, and work to build "[rest ethic](#)" among direct reports.

—— When employees take time off, be intentional about handoffs. Encourage workers to set their own boundaries about communication, whether that means completely unplugging or limited messages. Facilitate the delegation of

“We had never built workforces that worked for moms. And I think Covid showed us that the structure of motherhood is breaking, if not broken, and we have to re-imagine motherhood once and for all, because America doesn’t work without its moms.”

RESHMA SAUJANI

Activist and founder of the Marshall Plan for Moms and Girls Who Code

responsibilities, and frame their absence as an opportunity for cross-training teams.

ADVANCEMENT

Recognize caregiving obligations in performance reviews. When it’s time for performance evaluations, factor in caregiving obligations and non-core work within the organization. Covid was a burden on parents who were already stretched thin, with **major implications** for both performance and the talent pipeline. **Close to half of working parents** feel their performance has decreased. At the same time, it’s not uncommon for employees from underrepresented backgrounds—such as

working mothers—to do additional labor outside of their core job function, like lending their perspectives, recruiting diverse candidates, and mentoring others. To accurately evaluate the contributions of caregivers, analyze performance ratings to check for racial, gender, workplace preference and caregiver bias, and include inclusion and retention-driving work to the performance review process and rubrics. Finally, make decisions about promotions based on long-term performance trends and the future potential of employees.

Advice for managers

——— When evaluating employees, be conscious of your own biases and address bias when you witness it in others.

——— Check for [proximity bias](#) and bias against caregivers, and educate yourself and others on the effects of these biases.

——— Educate yourself on “[maternal wall bias](#),” the discrimination that occurs when mothers are viewed as less competent or committed to their jobs. Don’t overlook mothers for promotions or top assignments because you assume they don’t have the time or interest.

Designing workplaces for working parents: Questions for leaders and organizations

FLEXIBILITY

Give individual employees greater control over their schedules and careers.

— How does your organization give working parents flexibility to set their schedules (remote and hybrid options, non-traditional hours, flex days)?

— What policies and practices do you have in place to encourage asynchronous work?

— Which roles on your team can be done part time? What kinds of projects and teams do individuals in these roles work on?

— How many hours a week do part-time workers work, and how do managers at your organization help part-time workers protect their time?

— What does the career track for part-time workers look like? Do they

have the same access to promotions and bonuses?

— Do you currently offer job shares or returnships? If not, are there roles that can be restructured for that purpose?

— Are your policies around flexibility and part-time work clear and consistent? How do they affect workers differently along axes of race, gender, disability, and other identities?

BENEFITS

Create benefits packages that meet the needs of caregivers and their families.

— What does your benefits package look like for workers at every level of your organization? Do they include paid family leave, child-care benefits, mental health benefits, and/or coaching?

— Which groups of caregivers have access to paid family leave, and how much leave do they typically take?

Pay particular attention to fathers, adoptive parents, and workers caring for parents or adult dependents.

— How does taking parental leave or family leave affect workers' careers or incomes?

— How much are parents at your organization paying for child care?

— What are parents' existing child-care arrangements, and what are the gaps in their needs?

— What happens when child-care arrangements fall through? How do managers and leaders respond?

— How are you educating employees on the benefits available to them? Do they understand what they are and how to use them?

CULTURE

Build an environment that supports and celebrates caregivers throughout their career.

— As you recruit, how do open roles accommodate caregiver needs as designed?

— Do you have detailed information and statistics about benefits and flexibility policies available for recruits?

— Is caregiving visible at your organization? Are individuals open about their caregiving responsibilities? Are leaders in the organization open about their caregiving responsibilities?

— What training do managers receive to understand and embrace caregiving responsibilities while combating caregiving bias?

— How do performance evaluations account for caregiving responsibilities? How do they evaluate non-core work that drives inclusivity and retention?

— How do pay, promotion, and bonus structures affect caregivers differently from non-caregivers? Are there caregivers at high levels of your organization?

— How do you support employees returning to work from family leave? How do you support parents returning to work from more extended time off?

— Do you have ERGs at your organization? If so, are leaders compensated? Do they have governance structures and internal policies?

— How many hours a week are your employees typically online? How often do they take time off?

Conclusion

The effects of the pandemic showed many employers what most working parents already knew: the way we work doesn't work for caregivers. As organizations look forward to returning to the workplace, avoid returning to the old ways of work. Instead, we urge leaders to build a new kind of workplace—one where working parents have the power to dictate flexible schedules and take part-time roles; can count on high quality, affordable child care and paid family leave; and work in an environment that supports, respects, and celebrates caregivers. It's up to organizational leaders and individual managers to start building that future.

About Charter

Charter is a media and services company designed to transform every workplace. We do this by equipping individuals and teams with research-backed tools and information for creating more dynamic and equitable organizations. The world of business is at an inflection point. Charter serves as a guide and vital partner to the people who want to take best advantage of this opportunity to catalyze change. Our offerings include an email newsletter, website, training program, events, workshops, and community. We are just getting started.

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Vivvi provides child care and early learning for today's families. We work with employers of all sizes to make exceptional care and learning more accessible and affordable. With trained, passionate teachers, flexible offerings and global coverage across beautiful campuses, in-home, in-office, and virtual tutoring offerings, we provide parents with peace of mind while offering employers a powerful tool for recruitment, retention and productivity.

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