



WHAT DO WORKING PARENTS REALLY NEED IN 2021?



ParentingPoint

LATEST RESEARCH
FEBRUARY 2021

THE PRIMARY OBJECTIVE
OF THIS RESEARCH WAS
TO GATHER INSIGHTS
AND IDEAS FROM
WORKING PARENTS ON
THE SUPPORT THEY
MOST NEED TO FLOURISH
ACROSS WORK AND LIFE.

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" I HAD ABSOLUTELY NO IDEA
WHAT TO EXPECT. NO ONE TELLS
YOU ANYTHING ABOUT GOING
BACK TO WORK, JUST ABOUT
BEING A PARENT.... "



Overview

Whether returning from maternity leave to a now virtual workplace, or navigating simultaneous home schooling and remote working, 2020 presented numerous unique challenges for working parents. It also shone a spotlight on existing challenges that have faced working parents for years, highlighted by a greater visibility into people's home lives.

According to data published by the Office for National Statistics in March 2020¹, there are 4.6 million households in the UK with dependent children aged under 16 years where all parents in the household are working. National lockdowns and other Covid-19 restrictions have required many families to rapidly adjust their work-life patterns; whether re-creating a work environment in the family home, fitting family time around additional shift work for key workers, or balancing work commitments and childcare needs. The levels of personal and professional change undertaken by working parents was and continues to be significant.

Even in 'normal' times, research shows that conflicting energy, time and behavioural demands impact men and women's job satisfaction, family satisfaction and life satisfaction². Work-family conflict has also been reported as one of the most significant physical and psychological workplace stressors³.

Several of these working parent challenges have intensified in recent months. In many cases, the impact of conflicting work-life demands has been especially felt among women. Research conducted by University College London and the Institute for Fiscal Studies⁴ found that women spent twice as much time as men on home-schooling in lockdown, and the Office for National Statistics⁵ reported that women have spent more time on unpaid work and less time on paid work because of Covid-19⁵.

This raises additional emotional wellbeing concerns, as well as questions relating to the future diversity of talent in the workplace.

As conflicting work and family demands will continue to challenge working parents throughout this year and beyond, identifying and implementing proactive, practical and emotional support within organisations should be a vital part of people strategies in 2021.

What you'll find in this report

This report provides guidance for organisations on how to provide the right individual, team and organisational support to working parents in 2021 and beyond.

It offers **insight into the common hopes, fears, challenges and opportunities shared by working parents**. The primary objective of the underlying research was to gather feedback from working parents on the support they most need to flourish across work and life.

In total, 40 working parents completed a short research survey. The survey was open to all working parents in the UK and as such the data is indicative of the broad and on-going support needs at different stages of the working parenthood journey, across different industry sectors.

Based on these shared real-life experiences, we have recommended specific individual, team and organisational level changes and actions that will effectively support the success and wellbeing of working parents today and into the future.

This research was conducted during September – November 2020.

WORKING PARENT HOPES



We asked parents to share their greatest hopes about their future return to work.

[Before and during maternity/paternity leave.]

What we heard was...

Find a healthy work-life balance

The most shared hope was the desire to find a work-life balance that supported personal and professional effectiveness, as well as enjoyment.

“Hoped to strike a balance between family life and personal/individual career development without compromising too much on either.”

Maintain & build a fulfilling career

The second most shared hope was the desire to deliver in their role and continue progressing their career on returning to work.

“... to be as successful in my career as before maternity.”

“... I would like to be promoted while working part time when I return from maternity leave with my second child.”

Retain a sense of self identity

Finally, parents consistently shared the hope of retaining a sense of personal and professional identity.

“Greatest hopes were I would be a good mum. But I also wanted to retain my identity as a person (which work has been a huge part of).”

WORKING PARENT FEARS



We asked parents to share their greatest fears about their future return to work.

[Before and during maternity/paternity leave.]

What we heard was...

An unhealthy work-life balance

The most shared fear was directly connected to parents' greatest hope – the inability to achieve an effective and enjoyable work-life balance. This theme was apparent from both a practical and emotional perspective.

“Would I be able to give work the concentration and dedication it deserves while still meeting the needs of my young baby?”

“Greatest fears included not being able to negotiate a balance between working and parenting on return to work – would I end up being bad at both?”

Unrealistic work demands & inflexibility

Related to the most shared fear, parents commonly commented on concerns over unrealistic work demands and inflexibility. Again, these practical challenges were having an emotional impact on how parents felt about their future return.

“What if my child is ill or there's a problem with childcare? Will work be flexible or will my boss get annoyed?”

Loss of self-belief & identity

Many parents talked about concerns relating to a loss of workplace confidence and fear of not keeping up on their return to work.

“I also worry about my foggy mind and not being as good as I once was.”

Impact on career progression

Parents also shared fears relating to future career progression and development on return to work, impacting self-confidence and belief.

“... I knew I wanted to work part time after having my son and wondered how much that would affect my promotion and career prospects.”

Impact of change on children

Another commonly shared theme was the anticipated emotional strain of separation on the parent, along with the uncertainty of the impact of this change on their children.

“ Struggling myself with not being with him as much as during mat leave, worrying about how he’s doing, whether he feels the miss of being with his mum/dad. ”

Being viewed differently

In addition to fears relating to a loss of self-identity, parents also shared concerns about how others in the workplace would view them on their return.

“ Will my colleagues/seniors view me differently now that I have another major priority in my life? ”

Being forgotten/replaced

Related to the fear of being viewed differently was the worry of being forgotten or replaced whilst out of the workplace.

“ Would I be replaceable? Would they find my maternity cover or stepped-up team prove more valuable or better ROI than me? ”

Financial impact

The financial impact of returning to work after having a child was also commented on.

“ Being able to cope with childcare. Both practically and financially. ”

WHAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE



We asked parents to describe their positive experiences of returning to work and the support/resources that helped them most.

What we heard was...

At an organisational level

Healthy work-life balance culture

The feedback suggests that a positive organisational culture makes the greatest difference to the performance and wellbeing of working parents. Shared examples of a positive culture in practice were:

- Having flexible working role modelled by senior colleagues
- Opportunities for a phased return
- Home working
- Readily available support services for working parents
- Personal development and support for working parents, and their managers/teams
- Transparent policies supporting the balance of work and childcare needs

“... I created a family network at work where every parent returning was offered a buddy and we had regular forums to talk about all elements of family.”

Comments also highlighted the benefits of a healthy work-life balance culture for the wider employee population, not just working parents.

“I worked for a forward thinking company who value family life as contributing a whole lot to the way someone performs at work. I was afforded flexible working patterns that worked for me and provided work was completed when I committed to doing it, they continued to support this working style. Ensuring a good (and genuine) work life balance was incredibly important to the company's overall ethos. Senior members of the team left at 5pm to attend yoga or other extra curricular hobbies and so this demonstrated to others that this was an important part of their work life balance.”

At a team level

Supportive manager

Parents felt that having an understanding and supportive manager made their return to work following leave much easier, with continued support helping to maintain self-confidence and belief.

“ My manager was very accommodating and understanding that new parents have more important priorities and therefore I might not be able to give as much in terms of time when initially returning to work but understood that... in time this would happen again. Very refreshing to have this support. ”

Supportive team

Having wider team support was also recognised as a benefit when returning to work. One point that appeared to make the difference was a team's ability to connect and resonate with the challenges faced – looking beyond parenting where necessary for these similarities.

“ I'm now in a team of young people, I'm still the only parent, but most have pets. So they share the same challenges of sickness, vet visits etc. It's more bonding to share that element of all of us having responsibilities. ”

At an individual level

Support network outside of work

Being part of a community outside of work – with friends and other working parents – was valued highly. This informal support network provides opportunities to share experiences and learn from others.

“ Speaking to friends who are currently going through the juggle or who have been recently to understand my fears are normal and talk through practical tips on juggling that can work. ”

Personal development for parents

Parents who accessed personal development opportunities – such as working parent workshops and maternity/paternity coaching – shared benefits such as developing strategies and frameworks for dealing with differing work-life pressures, setting boundaries to manage feelings of guilt and re-building workplace confidence.

“ My company provides a maternity coaching service that I had with both of my children and I found it really useful with regards to transitioning back to work and thinking about not just being a mum but having a career. ”

Online resources – podcasts, blogs & social media

There were also several online resources accessed by parents to support the transition back to work and ongoing work-life balancing act – from podcasts to online forums and blogs.

“ I have also utilised a number of “mummy” podcasts. ”

Confidence in childcare

Feeling happy and confident about childcare also made a difference for parents.

“ The anticipation was worse than the reality. Once I had solid childcare in place that had me feeling comfortable the transition wasn't too bad. ”

WHAT'S STILL MISSING



We asked parents to describe their challenging experiences of returning to work and the support/resources that were missing.

What we heard was...

At an organisational level

Lack of supportive organisational culture

Many parents felt that their organisational culture did not provide an environment where they could flourish fully. This impacted their sense of value and motivation. Even when policies were in place offering support such as flexible working and phased returns, parents shared that the reality often felt quite different.

There was also a perception that part time work is valued less by organisations, particularly if it's the father reducing hours to provide childcare.

“Acknowledgment from companies that this is a transition. (For men and women).”

“In my industry there is a complete lack of working mothers at the top which makes it intimidating to return.”

“I was never denied the small amount of flexibility that I asked for, but I didn't feel confident that it was OK.”

The feedback also highlighted that it's often the little things that make a big difference in supporting returners, like not having IT set up properly, or a contract still showing full time versus part time hours. As well as a lack of clarity and signposting towards relevant policies and support resources available.

“... silly things like not having the IT ready, my contract was still showing full time hours instead of part time.”

“A comprehensive guide from my organisation on policy connected with child sickness etc. so you know what to do in that situation.”

At a team level

Need for manager & team training

The feedback suggests that there is a need to increase awareness and address unhelpful attitudes/behaviours at a manager and team level to ensure the right support is available for working parents.

“At work, I think employers should take steps to reassure new parents that absence/flexibility in the early years is perfectly fine... it would be good if any manager who has a team member returning from maternity went through some kind of training on the importance of flexibility and support.”

“I think a real gap is helping the colleagues of those returning to understand what the parent might be going through to be a bit more understanding.”

At an individual level

More support through change

The transition to become a working parent is a significant personal and professional change with on-going challenges as this role and identity evolves (e.g. managing home and work commitments during school holidays). What's more, many parents return to a workplace that looks quite different to the one they left, with new leaders, team members, clients and projects.

Offering the right level of support and development will ensure working parents can successfully navigate through these different changes.

“I was also returning to a new boss/new account/new office. I felt very alone initially despite working for the company for nearly a decade.”

“The second time, I'd returned after a restructure. There was a lot of ambiguity, and I'd gone into a new role. That was hard going through two changes at the same time, at the time when most people had gone through the transition.”

More emotional support for working parents

The emotional strain of balancing work and family life was apparent in many comments, whether about the return to work following leave or the on-going juggling act.

Parents referenced feeling:

- Tired and stressed caring for a poorly child whilst trying to prove oneself at work
- Physical and emotional exhaustion impacting concentration levels
- The impact of sleep deprivation
- Guilty at not doing their best at home or at work

Providing the right emotional support will benefit both the performance and – importantly – wellbeing of working parents.

“It was exhausting trying to balance childcare and working full time and like many this really impacted my mental health and productivity.”

More support transitioning to part time

Parents also shared that the specific transition from full to part time working was not as easy as anticipated. Challenges included feeling tired and exhausted from the work-home balancing act, whilst trying to fit five days of work into three.

Working with parents to support this change in work pattern would be beneficial, including guidance on setting clear boundaries for self and others.

“I didn't realise how tired I would be and how much that would affect my energy levels at work and my brain capacity for what is quite a brain challenging job. Also working 3 days a week was far more challenging than I thought it would be. Days off with my son were amazing but I found it so hard to fit my work in doing 3 days a week.”

Additional support resources

Parents expressed a need for greater clarity on childcare options, guidance on how to manage personal financial changes and transparency regarding their rights on return. There is an opportunity for organisations to review the wider resources they provide to support broader return to work needs.

“And the other thing that would have been helpful was a step by step simple guide to childcare options and the differences between each.”

CONCLUSIONS AND ACTIONS



The survey feedback highlighted several practical challenges facing working parents today, such as:

- Managing a high-demand workload within reduced hours
- Balancing work and childcare needs – e.g. nursery and school pick ups
- Responding to the unexpected – e.g. child sick days
- Promotion prospects on part time hours
- Financial challenges

The survey feedback also highlighted several emotional challenges, such as:

- Emotional reactions to change – self and child
- Anxiety of balancing and performing in work and home lives
- Impact on self-identity and loss of professional confidence
- Concerns over being viewed differently or replaced – feeling lonely
- Questioning professional value and strengths – impacting perceived ability and motivation towards career development

Based on these feedback responses, we have provided conclusions and recommended actions to address these challenges at an organisational, team and individual level.

At an organisational level

The importance of a supportive organisational culture with a healthy work-life balance was clear in the feedback provided by parents.

Ensuring that the attitudes and behaviours displayed across the organisation truly reflect the values and policies in place will help to build a genuinely supportive culture for working parents, as will proactively promoting role models of flexible working. This in turn will create a sense of shared values and identity with wider benefits for all employees. Understanding the attitudes and behaviours across the organisation that are helping or hindering the demonstration of these values and policies currently is a good starting point.

Providing greater clarity of the policies and processes in place to support working parents, and ensuring ease of access to available resources, will support this.

Practical solutions such as active working parent groups to allow for the sharing of experiences and peer support/learning across the organisation are also worth exploring.

At a team level

Aligning attitudes and behaviours to organisational values and policies may require some additional training and support at the manager and team level.

This development should increase awareness and understanding of the practical and emotional challenges facing working parents. For example, recognising that a returner is experiencing a significant personal and professional change, adjusting to new childcare arrangements as well as re-engaging in their professional role. Or that an individual who has always held themselves to high standards at work may put pressure on themselves to do the same across all areas of life, and as such may require support to best manage this balance.

Equipping line managers with the skills to provide an appropriate level of practical and emotional support would be beneficial. For example, how to have open and constructive conversations about flexible working requirements to ensure that the needs of both the individual and the business are met. As well as how to best support and encourage the continued professional development of a working parent.

Helping colleagues to connect and resonate with the challenges faced – looking beyond parenting where necessary for these similarities – would also develop team-level empathy and trust.

It may be that broader emotional intelligence and diversity and inclusion training would also bring wider team and organisational performance and wellbeing benefits.

At an individual level

The feedback from parents showed an appetite and need for personal development and objective support, such as training and coaching, to boost both performance and wellbeing.

“Someone to talk to confidentially, build confidence, talk through career goals and plan for the first few return to work weeks.”

We have identified five key development areas that relate to the themes of support through change, emotional support and support in the transition to part time working.

Strategies to find work-life balance

With a focus on topics such as handling conflicting priorities, time management, and finding an emotional balance across two important life areas.

“I think anything that helps parents to mentally/psychologically balance their work and home life would be good... It's a tough thing to deal with mentally.”

Strategies to build self-confidence & belief

With a focus on topics such as feeling empowered through change, having difficult conversations with confidence and setting meaningful work and life goals.

“Professionally, my confidence vanished. And, over a year on, I don't think it's where it once was.”

Strategies for managing guilt

With a focus on topics such as managing anxieties, building personal resilience and defining clear boundaries for self and others.

“From day one I had a lot of guilt which was like an ever-present stress weighing gently on my mind. I felt guilty about leaving the baby in nursery, particularly in the early weeks when baby was upset at drop-off. And I felt guilt about leaving work early to get back home in time to pick him up. I was paranoid that I had to prove that my new role as a parent wouldn't impact my work in any way.”

“Every single parent I have spoken to about returning to work has expressed the same anxieties about taking time off due to child illness and the general need to leave early to collect the child. Could you coach parents to be more confident in managing expectations up front with their employer so that they can remove that anxiety and focus on doing a good job?”

Strategies for self-compassion & appreciation

With a focus on topics such as appreciating and developing existing strengths to achieve meaningful work and life goals.

“Better articulation and appreciation of the skills we acquire as parents that can help us at work, and do help us even if we don't realise it. Such as negotiation, empathy, assertiveness, juggling.”

“How to practise self-compassion! Valuing their work and impact-shifting perspective of what success looks and feels like.”

Support communities for working parents

The feedback also highlighted an opportunity to create wider support communities for working parents. This would offer the chance to share and hear a broad range of experiences from other working parents, providing practical advice and normalising challenges and feelings.

“ I would like to have access to hear about challenges, experiences and examples of others and how they dealt with it and hoped it would work. I think it would raise more of my fears and hopes that I don't necessarily realise that I have. ”

“ I think more full and honest accounts from working parents which take in the whole spectrum of how it feels to come back to work – then you might just want to take it a month, 6 months at a time and think that your balance may change over time and it might take you quite a while to feel your way back to being ok with work and home. ”

References

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- 4 Andrew, A. et al. (May, 2020). How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown? Institute for Fiscal Studies: [How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown? – Institute For Fiscal Studies – IFS](#)
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Parenting Point would like to thank all of the parents who gave their time to share personal experiences and valuable insights into what working parents really need.

This research was conducted by Jayne Ruff – Chartered Occupational Psychologist and Founder of Parenting Point.

Parenting Point exists to give everyone the self-belief that they can flourish as a parent and a professional by positively aligning both worlds. We help parents find their meaningful and fulfilling work-life balance through practical, psychology-based workshops and coaching. We work with organisations to create positive and inclusive performance cultures that support and encourage the growth of working parents.

For further information on this research, or how Parenting Point can support working parents in your organisation, please contact jayne@parenting-point.com



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