

The HR Leader's Checklist for Supporting Parents Returning to the Workplace



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Strategies to prevent attrition, retain talent, and support working families as they return to the workplace

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The pandemic has profoundly impacted working parents

When offices closed for lockdowns in March 2020, HR Leaders moved swiftly to find ways to support their employees as operations went remote. Some hard lessons were learned, but the transition showed us a new way of working is possible, and many employees are welcoming the changes. However, during the course of the pandemic, employees faced record high **rates of anxiety and depression** — especially working parents, who had to take on significant amounts of child care responsibilities with reduced access to resources. Consequently, working parents (and mothers in particular) are leaving the workforce at record rates, and even the most successful organizations are witnessing attrition due to expanded caretaking responsibilities.

As many organizations prepare to return to the office, it's an excellent opportunity to reevaluate your policies and benefits to ensure you're providing working parents in your organization with the resources they need to thrive in the post-lockdown world. With so much uncertainty around the virus, vaccines, and facilities reopening, returning to the workplace will challenge your employees and your business in new ways.

We put together this checklist to help you evaluate your benefits and policies before you open the doors to your office. [Click here to jump to the checklist.](#)

Working parents faced unique challenges while working from home

At the beginning of the pandemic, very few of us could have predicted how long of a haul it would be. Working parents couldn't have anticipated having to educate their children for an entire school year, all while maintaining their productivity at work. Many working parents were suddenly on their own: helpful services like daycare centers, team sports, and after school programs, closed with no clear path to reopen, and access to relatives and close friends was suddenly restricted.

Managing their children's remote learning was a task that few were adequately prepared for. Children, like their parents, struggled to cope with the changes, creating a feedback loop of stress in many households. Parents simply had to make do in survival mode, adjusting to life from home alongside their children and families. Consequently, many parents reported **unprecedented levels of burnout, anxiety, and stress.**

These increased caregiving responsibilities severely impacted working families in a multitude of ways:

40%

of working parents **had to change their employment situation to care for children at home**

47%

of working parents felt their employers **didn't understand the strain caused by childcare responsibilities** during COVID

52%

of **working parents with children under 12** found childcare difficult during the pandemic

9.8M

working mothers are facing burnout, skewing heavily towards women of color and single mothers

Lockdowns instantaneously disrupted the support structure for many families, resulting in significant financial and emotional burdens. These difficulties were magnified for women of color and single parents, who, even before the pandemic, faced a multitude of caregiving challenges due to discrimination and systemic racism.

Employers struggled to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances

It's hard to understate the chaos and uncertainty felt by employers in the early days of COVID. Sending employees home and expecting them to remain productive while the world was seemingly falling apart was a difficult decision for HR leaders to make. People teams created new programs to engage employees as best they could amid the uphill battle to make the reality seem less grim. At the same time, they had to figure out how to support their employees when traditional benefits packages were no longer relevant: what did it matter if your gym membership was discounted if gyms were closed? How could sick leave adjust to an unknown disease with potentially deadly side effects?

Additionally, HR teams mobilized to support working parents. Working from home was a difficult adjustment for many: meetings proliferated, expectations for productivity remained high, and economic disaster loomed for many small and medium sized businesses. Parents, who had to juggle work and family life from the same desk, hardly knew what to ask for from their people leaders — besides more time in the day, of course. The stress from within the home, from the world outside, and from work itself, rapidly reached a critical mass for parents.

Many of us are anxious about a hasty return to normalcy

Fortunately the confusion and chaos surrounding the pandemic is beginning to subside, as many of us adjust to the new normal. As vaccination numbers grow week-over-week, HR leaders around the country are planning the inevitable return to the workplace. Headlines abound about going back to the office and ending WFH, but both employers and employees are feeling palpable anxiety.

Employers are concerned about attrition, productivity loss, and uncertainty about re-openings and closings. Because full-time remote work has **indelibly changed the workplace**, people have more choice and flexibility than ever before in their employment, making retention that much more difficult. On the flip side, employees are concerned about unclear vaccine effectiveness and side effects, uncertainty regarding the services they need to be productive (e.g., daycare or commuting), and above all else, going back to the way things were: one in three remote workers **would rather quit than return to the office full-time**.

Many of these issues are amplified for working parents, who are simultaneously concerned with their own return to work, as well as their families going back to school, work, or daycare. That's not to say that they don't want to return — many are excited to see their coworkers and leave the house again — but they want to feel safe and supported as they transition back to the office. Moreover, many want to retain the

flexibility that working from home provides, especially when it comes to keeping those precious few hours of peace that many parents lose to carpooling and commuting.

Alleviating this anxiety is going to take work. Employers and employees alike need to trust one another to ease the transition back. It's a brave new world in some respects, but there's little room for error when people's lives and livelihoods are on the line. So how can employers best prepare working parents among their teams for a return to the workplace? What practical steps can your people team take to retain talented employees with children, and attract new ones as the world settles into the "the new normal"? Follow the checklist below.

The Checklist

Take practical steps to protect working parents

The scariest part of reentering the post-COVID world is the uncertainty. Each state and municipality has had different experiences with COVID, and while your employees were working from home, they might be completely unaware of what the rules actually say. Make sure you're covering your bases when it comes to local laws, sick leave, and hygiene. Although infection may not be the only worry about returning to the office, it's the reason we all went home in the first place.



Create and/or refine your hygiene and sanitization plan

Before you welcome folks back to the office, ensure your hygiene and sanitation protocols are up-to-date. Make sure these protocols are distributed to employees so the expectations are unequivocally clear about mask wearing, hand washing, and social distancing. Provide masks and sanitizing products to employees in the office. Further, make sure these expectations are clearly communicated to employees so they know what to expect when returning.

You should also consider providing guidance on vaccination, including information regarding appointments, verified information and educational resources, and time off for vaccine-related side effects. Encourage a culture of rule following from the top-down: leadership should set the example when it comes to hygiene to promote compliance. And, be sure to keep up with [CDC](#) and [OSHA](#) guidance regarding masks, vaccines, and sanitization as well.



Pay attention to school reopenings

Remote learning has been one of the biggest challenges for parents this past year. Many working parents rely on schools to look after their children while at work, so they can't reliably make plans to return to the office until school is fully back in session. Stay on top of school reopenings, vaccination requirements, and the like, to help plan your reopening schedule — and bear in mind that reopenings can vary from district to district.

Requiring parents to return to the office before schools are fully in-person can potentially create negative outcomes. For distributed teams, consider implementing a hybrid schedule until schools have fully reopened.



Communicate expectations clearly to ease the transition

In the time we've spent home, parents and their families have rebuilt routines to adapt to the circumstances. Returning to the office stands to break those routines, which can be hard not just on parents but on their children as well. When making plans to return to the office, make sure expectations are clearly communicated with enough lead time to create predictable outcomes.

The transition period will be the hardest time for families — kids especially will need to readjust to different routines and structures than they were used to. The best way you can support parents in this regard is to create a predictable schedule of events with clearly outlined expectations.

Ensure your benefits are accessible, inclusive, and well understood

Benefits are top of mind for working parents as they plot their return to the workplace. If they do get sick, they need to know how they can support themselves and their families — and likewise what you can do to help. However, it's no secret that many employees are confused by or unaware of the full extent of their benefits: according to a 2019 study by League, **63% of employees** are unaware of how to fully leverage their employer-provided benefits. Returning to the workplace provides your team with an opportunity to evaluate gaps in your benefits plans, particularly when it comes to inclusivity and accessibility.



Talk to parents in your organization

It may seem simple, but opening and maintaining a dialogue with parents in your organization is crucial to supporting them through the transition back to the office. What worked last year may no longer apply: keep generating data points to ensure you're aware of what support parents really need. Consider running surveys, hosting a focus group, or reaching out to parents individually to identify gaps in your benefits and solutions.

Opening the dialogue can help parents feel comfortable sharing what type of support they need the most, whether it's more flexibility at work, treatment-specific benefits, or mental health resources. Personalizing benefits as much as you can helps address the real problems in your organization are facing



Consider the user experience

Inclusive benefits also need to be accessible to different groups of people within your organization. Take a tip from the design folks and think deeply on the user experience of an employee:

- Are benefits straightforward and easy to access?
- Are offerings consolidated or spread across different providers and in different locations?
- How do engagement numbers compare among different benefits?
- Is the language advertising each benefit accessible and easy to understand?
- Are your benefits equitable across all office and employee locations?

Accessibility is as important as inclusivity — if working parents can't easily identify, discover, or make use of benefits specific to their needs, the benefits won't be able to make a difference.



Emphasize diversity and inclusion in your offerings

The social movements of 2020 placed a renewed emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion in the business world. There are ample links [**between diversity and financial performance**](#), and job-seekers (especially millennials) consistently cite diversity as one of the most important factors when weighing offers.

However, diversity and inclusion goes beyond hiring — benefits need to reflect and support a diverse workforce.

Consider how you're supporting underrepresented or underserved groups like women of color and LGBTQIA+ community members, especially as it relates to the parenting journey. Are employees able to access benefits regardless of their location, background, gender identity, or sexual orientation? For example, delineations between primary and secondary caregivers often don't reflect the realities of LGBTQIA+ families, or fertility care that requires a diagnosis of infertility inherently excludes same-sex couples seeking IVF. Inclusive care is comprehensive care, after all.

Modernize your family care and maternity care benefits

As working parents return to the workplace, it's more important than ever to think about how you're supporting them through their parenting journey, whether they're trying to conceive, considering surrogacy, or raising children. It's important that your benefits meet parents where they are: access to care, quality of care, and continuity of care all significantly impact productivity for working parents.



Add new childcare support benefits

Expanded childcare responsibilities contributed to the sharp rise in burnout, turnover, and attrition among working parents throughout the pandemic. Although the world is starting to reopen, those responsibilities haven't yet diminished, and they likely never will.

Daycare, summer camps, and even backup babysitters have limited availability, and even in normal times can be prohibitively expensive. Add or expand your offerings to working parents **that assist them with childcare**, including reimbursements for babysitters, educational resources, and even mental health resources.



Expand access to telehealth and on-demand care

The pandemic sparked explosive growth in telehealth around the country, paving the way for accessible and affordable virtual-first healthcare. For working parents, this means they could easily access appointments for simple questions and prescriptions for themselves or their children, reducing the strain on their schedules and also on their psyche.

Maven's Parenting & Pediatrics program, for example, can provide working parents with 24/7 access to on-demand appointments with providers with an average waiting time of one hour.



Implement flexible work arrangements

Flexible schedules are **among the most commonly offered benefits** to help new parents readjust to work after parental leave, but expanded childcare needs made it an absolute necessity for working parents during the pandemic. As life returns to normal, however, consider implementing flexible arrangements permanently.

Providing parents with the flexibility to set their working hours as needed can ease the burden of planning schedules and likewise prevent them from having to reduce their hours or leave their roles entirely. Further, embedding flexibility into our company culture helps everyone win, parents or not.

Support the mental health of working parents

The pandemic **negatively impacted mental health and hygiene across the board**, but working parents especially struggled to cope with burnout, anxiety, and depression. Returning to the workplace without support will only amplify these issues, as working parents face a new set of challenges in the post-pandemic world. Supporting their mental health is mission critical to keeping working parents productive and retaining them in your organization.



Adjust expectations in the early days

Readjusting to the workplace will be challenging for all, and especially for working parents. Commuting, interacting with coworkers, and even adjusting sleeping schedules will be a tough pill to swallow.

Many mothers **feel guilt returning to the workplace** after maternity leave — after spending a year or more with their children every day, parents may feel guilty going back to the office. Instruct people leaders to exercise empathy and adjust expectations as working parents return to the workplace.



Evaluate your company culture from the top-down

Company culture plays a huge role in the employee experience, from how they feel about their work to how they feel about themselves. Evaluate the messaging and behavior from executive leadership down to people leaders, to identify areas for improvement, especially as it relates to working styles and engagement.

If working parents are experiencing difficulties with mental health, or are slow to engage with or adopt new benefits, leadership can set a strong example to encourage improvements. This includes engendering positive attitudes towards taking leave, partaking in self-care activities, and asking for help when needed.



Provide resources that tangibly support mental health

Supporting mental health requires resources that can both educate those in need and comfort them as they seek help. Stigma surrounding mental health treatment affects millions in the workplace annually — a 2019 study by the American Psychiatric Association found that about half of American workers are **concerned about discussing mental health issues in the workplace**.

Providing resources for working parents can help combat the stigma while tangibly improving their mental health. Common mental health resources:

- Access to telehealth providers
- Educational content, webinars, and events
- Trainings for managers and people leaders

Easing the transition back to the office

Supporting, retaining, and attracting working parents in your organization requires empathy, above all else. Becoming a parent is a dream for many of us, regardless of what our path to parenthood looks like, but raising a family shouldn't come at the cost of a career. HR Leaders can help ease the transition back to the workplace — and indeed back to normal — by dialing up their support for parents.

Women's health, especially as it relates to maternity and parenting, is often a misunderstood and underrepresented aspect of most benefits offerings. It's no coincidence that the [Best Workplaces for Parents](#) offer comprehensive support for parents. For example:

68%

offer flexible work hours in the transition back to full-time

78%

offer flexible work hours in the transition back to full-time

80 days

Many offer up to 80 days of paid maternity leave

The results are improved performance, engagement, and loyalty — the crown jewels of a successful people operations strategy. It's clear that supporting parents as they transition back to the office, in a manner similar to their transition back from parental leave, can have a significant impact on retention.



Maven offers comprehensive, whole-person care for working parents throughout their parenting journey. With 24/7 access to on-demand providers, parents can receive the care, content, and resources they need to make healthy choices for their families and careers. To find out how Maven can help support working parents in your organization, request a demo today.

[Request a demo](#)