

Just because kids are back in school, doesn't mean working parents are back to normal



We all know juggling working with parenting isn't easy; it wasn't even before the pandemic threw our lives upside down. The past year, of course, has thrown the challenges of juggling home working with home schooling into sharp focus, as we were reminded in the first lockdown by the viral video of Dr Clare Wenham's [daughter interrupting her live TV interview](#) (and the supremely professional yet still caring way that she handled it).

Arguably, if anything, for working parents the coming months will be as challenging, maybe even more so, and it is going to be imperative to be able to access wellbeing support from your employer. Here are five reasons why.

1 Home working isn't 'over'

Chancellor Rishi Sunak may [be keen to see firms crack on with reopening physical office spaces](#), but employers seem split, with some (such as [Goldman Sachs](#)) firmly pro-return with others leaning towards more permanent at-home models (for example, [British Airways](#)).

What's clear, however, is there is unlikely to be any overnight exodus out of home offices and back to the grind of daily commuting to and from city centre offices. What we're more likely to see is hybrid home/office working models that facilitate a more gradual 'suck it and see' return. With social distancing still likely to be in place for some months yet, bringing employees back into offices while keeping workspaces safe is going to be a careful, and cautious, balancing act.

This, in turn, means employees will still need home-working support from their employers – so regular 'how are you doing?' phone/video check-ins; musculoskeletal support, for example workstation assessments (if they haven't been done already) and possibly access to virtual physio; and mental health and wellbeing support, perhaps through an employee assistance programme.

It goes without saying that home working parents will be key among this cohort, and this sort of joint home office/physical office health and wellbeing support may need to be in place for some time to come.

2 Neither, in fact, may be home schooling

Yes, schools are back, but that's not to say children are going to be back in school all of the time. We're already seeing reports of schools where bubbles have had to be burst because of Covid-19 infections or positive tests and children sent home, even if only for a short period.

This means that, irrespective of where, as a working parent, you may be working when your children are in school, there will be an ongoing, periodic requirement for you to return to the home schooling/home working juggling act, often at short notice. This, again, will need to be proactively supported and managed by your employer/line manager.

3 A return to physical schooling brings its own challenges (if more familiar)

After the year we've just had, the challenges of managing the school run, afternoon school pick-up (especially for multiple children at different schools), after-school clubs, parents' evenings and so on may seem like a distant memory.

With schools back, and normality hopefully slowly returning, these are pressures working parents will be quickly reminded of. What working parents will crave in these circumstances – and, in return, be loyal to – is supportive employers prepared to build back in the flexibility and sensitivity to manage, support and accommodate these tensions.

Throughout the past year of lockdowns, there has been a huge focus on the challenges for working parents of juggling working from home with home schooling, and how employers can best support this. So, now schools are back and workplaces are poised to gradually reopen, it's all back to normal, right? Wrong. If anything, working parents are going to need *more*, not less, wellbeing support from their employers as we emerge from the pandemic.

About the author

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About WPA

WPA is a specialist not-for-profit health insurer. With a history dating back to 1901 they look after private individuals, families and all businesses from micro enterprises through to blue chip global brands.

4 Other caring responsibilities won't have gone away

Many of us will be looking forward to the day we can once again hug our elderly parents or grandparents. Sustaining a successful vaccination rollout and an emergence from the pandemic may mean grandparents can once again step up and take on some of the childcare burden from working parents.

However, this (welcome) shift may also mean working parents who have caring responsibilities for elderly dependents, and which have had to be put on pause during the pandemic, find themselves back to being stretched more thinly.

This, of course, isn't a new problem – and the term '[sandwich carers](#)' to describe this twin burden has been with us for some years now – but it will mean a time/work pressure that may have been largely absent for some in the past few months which may now return to the agenda.

Just as with schooling/working challenges, the key here is how flexible and supportive your employer is; how health and wellbeing is supported and recognised so as to ensure you are not overly burning the candle at both ends.

This needs to include recognising that caring is not a static, unchanging responsibility. Caring responsibilities can increase (for example as a dependent gets frailer) or, similarly, there may become a point (for example if a dependent goes into a nursing home or even, sadly, passes away) when a carer can, and may actively want to, up their work commitments.

5 A lot of people are exhausted, but especially working parents

This isn't solely a working parents' issue of course; a lot of workers are feeling exhausted, and not just in the NHS or among key workers.

The blurring of home and work life, the reality of [Zoom fatigue](#), the inability to get away from the home space for a whole year and simply the emotional rollercoaster of a year of public health crises (not to mention possibly bereavement) has taken its toll on many [3].

Working parents who have been navigating all of the above while also managing childcare or supporting older children may have increased demand for emotional and mental support, whether from the NHS or, increasingly, through their employer that allows them to recharge and reset.

The tension here is that, as we move into a 'recovery' period that may be intensely challenging economically, whether employers find themselves needing yet again to squeeze every drop of goodwill out of their teams just to survive, and therefore this becomes an increasingly difficult circle to square.

Employers who try to push the envelope, who fail adequately to recognise the goodwill and extra effort all employees, but especially working parents, have already put in over the past year, could find themselves coming unstuck, with health and wellbeing, especially mental ill health and burnout one potential consequence.

However, there is another, potentially more positive, side to this coin. If your employer does go the extra mile, does provide or offer that extra flexibility and support, especially around health and wellbeing, what's likely to happen?

You'll probably feel grateful and loyal, both because of what they're doing but also because you recognise that level of support may be hard to find somewhere else if you do jump ship. Working parents, let's not forget, are often a cohort of employees who will be experienced, ambitious and committed, despite their family commitments.

And let's face it, as a working parent you're also probably the best you're ever going to be in your life at time management. All of which makes you potentially highly valuable to your employer as well as vice versa.

In summary, therefore, 'good' employers are those who recognise the value, even in challenging times – in fact, especially in challenging times – of proactively supporting health and wellbeing of *all* their employees, and of their time-poor, stretched working parents in particular. Yet it is not a one-way street. An employer who gives like this may well get an equally positive return on their investment.

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