

Inclusive Employers

Parenting at work guidance



Introduction

The role of a parent has changed significantly over the years. Previously the responsibility of caring stood firmly with women, today the title of a parent is not strictly reserved for those with biological ties.

Individuals become parents in different ways including and not exclusive to adoption, marriage, or fostering. The role of a parent is the shared support across all members of a family unit. This guide will use the terms "parenting" and "parents" to describe individuals who actively participate in raising children.

When creating a family-friendly organisation we have to consider that there is more to think about than just competitive maternity or paternity policies (not to say that this isn't a good thing to review!).

Today, the evidence for supporting parents' emotional and physical well-being is well documented and undisputed. Organisations understand that unless they can offer good support during this period, they could put themselves in the position of losing talented loyal staff.

This document provides an overview, context and awareness-raising for employers to ensure they understand how to support parents and carers within the workplace.

This guide has been written to support parents with living children. For more information on supporting parents who experience the death of their baby during pregnancy please read our [*Infertility, Fertility and Baby Loss guide*](#).

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1. Why do parents need support in the workplace?

Quite simply employees who are valued and supported are more satisfied by their roles and feel more positive about what they do. By supporting parents, organisations are helping themselves to improve staff retention.

“Studies have shown that a flexible, family-friendly workplace can motivate staff, reduce staff turnover, help attract new staff, reduce workplace stress, and generally enhance worker satisfaction and productivity.” Anu Partanen in The Nordic Theory of Everything.

It's a common misconception that employees are less focused on their careers once they become parents. This is still a widely held view in today's workplace and it's something that is just not true.

Becoming a parent is a massive responsibility for any one of us to partake, and whilst a new addition to the family, presents itself as a full-time job, it's important for an employer to not think that once their employees become parents, they do not want to progress their careers.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, organisations will need to be more flexible, agile, and family-friendly than ever before.

Here are some processes that organisations can start to look at that will help support parents in the workplace:

Review family and life policies

More than ever companies need to review their working policies. How can you adapt your current policies to improve working life? The following have specific relevance to parenting and carers:

Adoption is the act of taking something on as your own. Adoption usually refers to the legal process of becoming a non-biological parent.

Parental leave is a legal right to take time off from work to look after a child or plan for a child's welfare.

Paternity leave is time off from the workplace given to a father after a child or children are born.

Maternity leave is the entitlement given to pregnant people after 24 weeks of pregnancy. It provides time off from the workplace to take care of the new-born child or children. Pregnant people whose babies do not survive after 24 weeks are also entitled to this leave.

Shared parental leave and pay help eligible parents combine work with family life. They can share up to 50 weeks of leave and up to 37 weeks of pay and/or take their leave and pay in a more flexible way (each parent can take up to 3 blocks of leave, more if their employer allows, interspersed with periods of work).

Introduce policies not just for mothers but also for fathers, which means policies that are flexible for parents to manage. A parent policy is essential in workplaces to help more employees become more productive.

Flexible working is a way of working that suits an employee's needs, for example having flexible start and finish times, or working from home. Flexible working has become a way of life since Covid-19 where some organisations allowed their employees to work from home during the lockdown. Hybrid working options are now looking like the norm in most industries. Is this something that can be adapted to your organisation? Can workers have flexible start and finish times?

Retention. There have been many articles and discussions about the rise in employees leaving their roles and choosing to find organisations that are willing to offer them work environments where they can thrive. Competition in this area is fierce. When it comes to supporting employees, flexibility of a role is also something that organisations can look at. How many roles do you have that at present could become shared roles or condensed hours?

Consistency. Looking at the policies above and considering how well the family-friendly working and flexible policies are supported.

A good question to ask is How supported do all your staff feel when it comes to childcare?
Some things to consider:

Statistics and data: how is it being captured in these areas and can it be continued to progress in this area?

Integration: how does flexible working fit into the organisational strategy and culture? Are they embedded? Ensure that information about leave and care policies are easily accessible and available on internal systems i.e., intranet, yammer.

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2. What can organisations do for parents returning to the workplace?

When returning from parental leave, emotions can be high, which can make parents feel unsure about who they were in the workplace. Parents ask themselves how different will it be when I head back to work? Will technology be the same, will my team be the same, will I be able to cope?

Parents' response to rising demands is to put in longer hours which eventually takes its toll. Before becoming a parent there was time at home to replenish. For some, having children at home can feel like starting the 'double shift' burden. So how can we balance the demands of work with home? Not only do parents want to ensure that their children are safe, secure and happy, but they too want to ensure that they are able to thrive during this time in their lives.

By introducing the following processes organisations can help to make this transition as seamless as possible:

Coaching and mentoring

Introduce coaching and mentoring programmes to support parents during all stages of parenting (before baby, maternity leave and return to work). All workplaces sponsor coaching, it's generally a support function for senior management, however, more and more organisations are realising that coaching can be used throughout the business for all members of staff.

Leadership roles models

Ask senior leaders to step forward as role models and share their parenting experiences and give messages of support.

Introduce training for line managers

Have they all been trained in parent support and are they aware of the policies? All managers should be actively trained (please see Guidance for Line managers for more detail). Line Managers should be ready to help if and when required.

Engage and signpost your organisation's Employee Assistance Programmes and Wellbeing sites

There is so much information for parents to access here.

Create informative speaker events

Events on parenting topics and work with other networks will show allyship and different stories/voices

Use awareness dates

This will encourage you to highlight key dates to help inform all staff and educate them on parenting topics.

Introduce a 6-12 month grace period

This will allow parents to settle into their new existence.

Encourage new parents to prioritise their time and write things down

Scheduling all meetings in one place (personal and work) can be helpful to new parents. For example, sitting with a partner and deciding what family things are a priority just as you would sit with your line manager at work can help.

Take an intersectional approach

Companies should acknowledge and address the unique challenges facing parents from different social-economic backgrounds.

Introduce a Parent Network to your organisation

Parent Networks are becoming increasingly popular in the workplace and can be run by the employer at little cost to the organisation. If policies are in place to ensure the legalities for parents. Then a network dedicated to parents can provide staff with support during the emotive processes.

Remove bias in people processes

Performance reviews are crucial, but they can also become forums for bias that can inhibit the progress of mothers. To ensure that fair and objective performance criteria are tied to work output, it is important to revisit any performance markers that may either be irrelevant or misleading. For example, to do quality work and to be a good team member, is it always necessary to be accessible and to have a lightning-fast response time?

Make sure the appropriate criteria are used effectively when it comes to promotions. Consider a checklist of items for minimising bias: require unconscious-bias training for the employees involved in promotion decisions; provide reminders about how to avoid unconscious bias and designate a team member to call it out, and track outcomes to check for bias.

What can Parent Networks offer?

- 1) **Networking:** A Parent Network can help to put working parents in touch with others in similar situations and inform others who are maybe thinking about becoming parents.
- 2) **Safe space:** Through shared experience, networks offer a safe space to share how you are feeling, predict what to expect and create allyship.
- 3) **Knowledge pool:** Increase the knowledge pool of the network by collaborating with other networks to increase the voice of that topic and support the HR and Comms functions.
- 4) **Supporting awareness days and informing via lunch and learns** or bitesize learning slots.

For example:

- A speakers panel with different family makeup, i.e. single parents, same-sex parents, parents with neurodivergence abilities (there is an opportunity to deliver an intersectionality event)
- Men talking about the positives of paternity leave
- Fertility
- Family traditions what does your culture bring to the office?

Whatever benefits an employer chooses to support its working parents, offering more than the bare minimum helps to ensure the organisation retains the talent and experience that might otherwise be lost after parental leave.

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3. Parenting and the Equality Act

Even though the Equality Act does not treat being a parent or carer as a specific protected characteristic, if a parent or a carer experiences unfair treatment at work due to their childcare or caring responsibilities they may receive protection under the Equality Act.

The Equality Act 2010 protects an employee from one type of direct discrimination and victimisation because of their pregnancy, or for the taking/seeking to take maternity leave.

For example, an employer must not consider pregnancy-related illness when considering other sickness absences or in deciding about their employment. During this time, any other discrimination because of their sex would be a separate and overlapping matter which might amount to sex discrimination and/or sexual harassment.

Another example of the pregnancy and maternity protected characteristic is that when a person is pregnant or on maternity leave they must not be treated unfavourably because of pregnancy or maternity leave. That means there is no need for them to show that they have been treated less favourable than an individual who is not pregnant, just that they were in fact treated detrimentally because of their pregnancy or maternity.

For more information on Equality Act 2010: Pregnancy and maternity please refer to

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/18>

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4. Covid and parenting

During the pandemic, organisations got to see the full impact that Covid has had on parents. The Covid-19 pandemic had unprecedented impacts on families.

Many parents faced employment changes, including job loss, reduced pay, and working remotely, while simultaneously experiencing increased childcare responsibilities due to school and childcare closures. Research is needed to document the ongoing impact of these changes on parents and families.

Being a parent is the most challenging and rewarding task that anyone can ever experience, and during Covid, it became even more difficult.

Parents reported high levels of depression, anxiety, and parental burnout. In addition, many parents reported increased negative emotions, such as anger and worry, while simultaneously feeling closer to their children and offering more comfort and soothing. Differences across gender and income levels were prominent.

Implications include needing additional support (e.g., financial, caregiving) for parents and families as we continue to face the impacts and consequences of Covid-19.

You can learn more about this here: <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/for-mothers-in-the-workplace-a-year-and-counting-like-no-other>

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5. Guidance for line managers on parenting

It's essential to train your line managers so that they are able to support conversations with their teams about pregnancy and maternity. There are some simple steps you can take to help equip them and ensure the experience is a positive one for the employee, the line manager and your organisation's retention rates.

Managers should be kept informed on policies

At the point when an employee shares that they're becoming a parent they have usually had time to digest and research the topic thoroughly. No one is expecting a line manager to be an expert in this area however they should know the following headlines:

- Understanding the key policies – what are the maternity, paternity, adoption and shared parental leave policies, both from the company-specific benefits such as enhanced pay and the legal entitlements.
- Being aware of any other benefits – e.g. parent networks and the key support it offers, (such as workshops to help manage the transition) adding a child to your health insurance or childcare voucher scheme.

Provide guidance for the first meeting

At the first meeting, it is important to set the tone. The employee is likely to be feeling a little nervous so having a line manager who can confidently guide them through will be truly appreciated. It is also likely to make these conversations a lot easier. At this stage, the key things to understand are:

- Process – what is the formal process for requesting leave – i.e. what forms and when and where they are (located on the system)

- Ante-natal appointments – what the company policy is for ante-natal appointments and how time off will be managed
- Benefits – what the key benefits are and where to go if they have any questions – generally at this stage typically the employee focuses on pay, asking questions like what happens to pensions and share save schemes whilst on leave and how and when to sign up for voucher schemes, parent networks etc.

It's important to ensure that you inform the employee that they can be open, discuss any concerns and ideally plan together how and when they communicate their news to the rest of the team.

Be up to date with support offered during pregnancy

Most organisations have policies or benefits in place and simple things can go a long way in making employees feel their employer is looking out for them. These could be specific to that organisation but may include:

- Desk assessment – this can vary depending on the role and need to be managed sensitively.
- Flexible working hours – depending on the type of business, some organisations can allow a flexible start and finish work time, as to allow employees to travel during less busy peak times.
- Pregnancy parking – an increasing number of organisations with on-site parking are now offering accessible parking spaces at the later stages of pregnancy.
- Pregnancy yoga and/or massage – again many larger firms with on-site gyms are now offering pregnancy yoga classes or have massage services.

Ensure they offer continued support for the employee as they prepare to go on leave

There will be a natural tendency to focus on what tasks need to be completed before an employee goes on extended leave – for both the employee and the line manager. It's worth making sure they are also thinking about:

- Handover planning – working to create a handover plan together which includes informing key stakeholders and ensuring any interim cover has all they need.
- Final date – finding a mutual date and agreeing on how this will be communicated to the rest of the team.
- Checking in regularly – to ensure that all is well with your employee, particularly in the later months and if appropriate adjust their leaving plan. Some pregnancies for example find it helpful to use annual leave to make those final weeks shorter.
- Forward planning – ensuring the line manager thinks ahead to the employee’s absence and returns – before they go on leave.

During this time, it may feel like you should be focusing on the maternity cover and handover document, but this is also a great opportunity to have open and honest conversations about how the employee is feeling about absence from work and the return.

Line managers should be encouraged to use their judgment and discuss the following topics:

- *Contact during leave* – does the employee want to remain in contact during leave, and if so, how? Are they happy to hear about major developments in the workplace or be involved in team social activities?
- *Return date* – whilst legally there is no requirement for the employee to notify their employer until 8 weeks before they want to come back, I always encourage line managers to be ready and open to discussing it if the employee brings it up – it’s helpful on both sides.
- *Flexible working* – the same goes for flexible working and by this, I don’t just mean part-time. With very few exceptions parents need some flexibility, even if informal.
- *KIT days* – employers and employees have the option to agree to up to 10 “Keeping in Touch” days for maternity and adoption leave, and 20 for Shared Parental Leave. They can be a really effective way of ramping back up (and trialling childcare) and making sure the employee doesn’t miss out on key events like team off-sites.
- *Annual leave* – those on Maternity, Adoption and Shared Parental Leave accrue annual leave. Are both the employee and line manager happy with them returning with up to a year’s extra holiday to use or is it better to tag some or all onto their

leave?

Ensure they are ready for their return

Just as you have ensured the smooth transition for your employee so far, you want to also make sure that the return part of this journey is as seamless as possible. Understanding that your employee is not new and returning to work for most parents is a big event. To help with this part of the process it's worth encouraging line managers to:

- *Review changes* – consider anything that could be disruptive or unsettling such as an office move, new team members or structure, or new team objectives
- *Check practicalities* – is the technology and workstation equipment set up and ready? Will their emails, mobile phone and access rights have been reconnected?
- *Plan their first day/week back* – consider arranging a 121 on their first day back to talk through their re-integration and any concerns they have, introduce them to new team members and schedule catchups with key stakeholders

As mentioned earlier in the 'What can organisations do for parents returning to the workplace?' section introducing training for line managers is vital for the parents and their maternity/paternity journey to continue successfully. The training will allow line managers to learn about the parent and maternity process in an open forum where they can questions and discuss their concerns, with other managers.

Alternatively for smaller companies, having a guide for line managers to implement close to hand is also reassuring. It's important to remember that employees will always mention their line manager when discussing their experiences of becoming a parent in the workplace, by implementing some key pointers we could all ensure that this experience is a positive one.

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6. FAQs about parenting

These questions are useful for employers, as well as to share with new and prospective parents.

What is the difference between being a parent and being a carer?

Parenting is what we call the process of raising children. A process where we provide children with care and protection to support their development into adulthood.

A carer is anyone, including children and adults who look after a family member, partner or friend who needs help because of their illness, frailty, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction and cannot cope without their support.

Ultimately being a parent or carer is someone who takes responsibility for another person, supporting them with the day to day of everyday life.

Are parents less productive at work?

According to the research, before and after the child's birth mothers are engines of productivity. Even with multiple children, when productivity is averaged out over the course of a career, mothers remain more productive than their peers.

What is the biggest challenge faced by parents in the workplace?

Knowing how to cope. Having to juggle a career, be a parent and a spouse all at the same time can be challenging. When this happens generally one parent neglects themselves, which is something that parents need to stay on top of.

What can professional parents do to manage their time better?

Schedule, schedule, schedule. If it's not in your diary then it probably won't happen. Ensure that you diarise everything from doctors' appointments to date nights, to family time and school meetings. Please note that even though everything is in the diary, you can still do something spontaneous with your time.

Are there any transferable skills that raising children teaches you that you can use in the workplace?

Balance, patience, multi-tasking and remembering to have fun and laugh.

What should working parents consider before starting employment at a new company?

Location – how long will it take you to get to the job? Will you be stuck in traffic or is it a long commute? Consider the impact of adding the school drop off and pick up. Has the new company got a flexi hours policy for working parents?

Guilt. How do parents deal with it?

Stop blaming yourself. Balance is everything. Try to see work as the place where you can identify with your working self. Remember all moments that you share with your family are precious. For you to succeed as a parent you must find balance.

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7. Additional resources

Supporting your colleagues who are returning to work

<https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk/blog/supporting-your-colleagues-who-are-returning-to-work/>

Supporting parents and carers

<https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk/learning-and-development/inclusion-and-diversity-topics/understanding-difference/supporting-parents-and-carers/>

10 Top tips for parents or carers

<https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk/resource/top-tips-for-parents-or-carers/>

What is flexible working? Everything you need to know

<https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk/blog/why-flexible-working-works/>

Fertility, infertility and baby Loss

<https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk/resource/fertility-infertility-and-baby-loss/>

Inclusive mentoring programmes: ‘Rising Together’ with the Nursing and Midwifery Council

<https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk/blog/inclusive-mentoring-programmes-rising-together-with-the-nursing-and-midwifery-council/>

Parents and carers at work

<https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk/talking-inclusion-with-podcast/podcast-parents-and-carers-at-work/>

The Government guide to Statutory Maternity Pay and Leave: employer guide

<https://www.gov.uk/employers-maternity-pay-leave>

Maternity Action Organisation: Pregnant at work 2022

<https://maternityaction.org.uk/advice/pregnant-at-work/>

Working families: Working during maternity and family leave and while receiving pay

<https://workingfamilies.org.uk/articles/what-work-can-you-do-during-maternity-adoption-parental-leave/>

NHS UK: Having a baby if you are LGBTQ+

<https://www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/trying-for-a-baby/having-a-baby-if-you-are-lgbt-plus/>

First 4 adoption: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Trans (LGBT+) and thinking about adoption?

<https://www.first4adoption.org.uk/who-can-adopt-a-child/how-do-i-decide/thinking-about-adoption-lgbt/>

Employee benefits: How can employers offer more than the minimum level of support for working parents?

<https://employeebenefits.co.uk/issues/september-2015/how-can-employers-offer-more-than-the-minimum-level-of-support-for-working-parents/>

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