

9th Annual Modern Family Index

New research shows for some parents, working at home has come at a high cost in loneliness and isolation.



Remote Possibilities

The pandemic promised to change everything for working parents, with lockdown's unvarnished view of family conflicts ushering in a hopeful new era of sensitivity for their challenges. But new research shows not all of those lessons have stuck.

While newfound hybrid and remote options have indeed brought welcome flexibility, unexpected new consequences have emerged, even as old challenges are sneaking back in.

The 9th annual Modern Family Index, commissioned by **Bright Horizons**[®] and conducted by The Harris Poll, shows employees with children continuing to struggle. Those working remotely are increasingly isolated and lonely; many working in the office are without relevant benefits or support — even as leaders angle for more employees to return. Parents working across work styles struggle to find the child care they need.



More broadly, the perception of the hybrid-work era as a panacea has proven markedly different from the reality. Even as parents covet newfound flexibility, they worry about its effect on their careers. In an unwelcome turnabout from the days of lockdown — when the realities of simultaneously working and parenting were unapologetically on display — parents once again feel compelled to hide their responsibilities, reverting to pre-pandemic concerns about children costing them professionally, and worrying that parenting might mean career penalties.

Working From Home — No Panacea, Concerns for Mental Health

Flexibility has undoubtedly provided parents with much-needed relief. In the era of hybrid work, more than a third (36%) of working parents feel at least somewhat more fulfilled at their current job than they did three years ago, with more than half (58%) calling flexible schedules a contributor. Employers benefit, too, since parents who are less fulfilled in their job are twice as likely (46% vs. 23%, respectively) as more fulfilled parents to be planning an exit in the next 12 months. Hybrid working parents also cite rewards for their families, with 89% saying the arrangement gives them more time with their children.

Yet remote work has been no panacea. Even as working parents benefit from the convenience of a home office, there's been troubling blowback in overall well-being. Many hybrid or fully-remote employees are struggling personally; they feel isolated, with some admitting to going days without setting foot outside the house.

47%

agree: "When I work from home, I only talk live with the people in my household."

41%

agree: "Sometimes I go for days without going outside when I work from home."

33%

33% agree: "I feel very isolated when working from home."

Working Without a Child Care Net

A lasting takeaway from lockdown is that working from home does not negate the need for child care. Yet **extreme child care shortages have left 40% of parents saying they don't have the child care they need**, many (41%) citing cost as a barrier. And it's leaving a mark, especially since half (50%) of these parents agree their productivity suffers when they are stressed about child care, and the vast majority (77%) feel that having child care support is important to how productively they work. Most (49%) wish their employers would do more to help, including offering help to pay for child care (43%), providing emergency child care benefits (34%), offering on-site child care (32%), or providing an FSA for child care expenses (30%).

Still, even as parents are clear on what would help, many are afraid to bring it up. More than a tenth of working parents (11%) never talk to their manager about parental obligations that they handle during the workday, and 13% are worried to mention when a child is sick. What's more, nearly half (48%) say that arranging child care feels itself like a full-time job. Perhaps that explains why emergency child care (30%), and regular every-day child care (29%) rank among the top five benefits employees long for.

Parents are also struggling to juggle competing responsibilities. While previous Modern Family Index data highlighted parents' mental loads, the arrival of the remote era has increased what might be called the physical load, with parents who work remotely or in a hybrid environment quietly shouldering the very tangible day-to-day responsibilities for their families — **81% say they handle parental obligations at home during the workday** including taking children to activities (47%), helping with homework (44%), or volunteering at school (13%). That might be owing to extreme child care shortages (See, "Working Without a Net," Page 3) and the fact that 40% of parents don't always have access to the care they need. Without dependable resources at the ready, nearly three-quarters (72%) rely on after school sports/physical activities, staying at family/friend's house, before-after-school activities, child care centers, or a nanny at home, and nearly half (48%) say arranging child care itself feels like a full-time job. Yet even as they ably juggle families with deadlines, many of these employees are afraid to speak up. A quarter (25%) of working parents who handle parental obligations at home during the workday say they rarely or never tell their manager they're doing so, and two-in-five hybrid or fully remote working parents (41%) say they at least sometimes feel they need to hide their personal obligations from colleagues.

That's perhaps because there's not enough guidance on the subject. Remote work may be permitted, but many working parents wonder, is it advisable? Often it seems that they don't know, leaving a third of those working in a hybrid environment (35%) feeling the arrangement is negatively impacting their careers, and 40% wishing their managers would give them guidance on how much they should be working from home or spending time in the office.

Even so, they see good reasons for staying silent, since most appreciate the autonomy and self-care opportunities (i.e. exercise, shower, eat lunch, nap) of working from home, and **roughly two-fifths (42%) fear that speaking up about related concerns and conflicts could result in a return to working in person.**

Activities Done During the Workday

(Among Hybrid/Remote Working Parents)



61%

do household chores
(e.g., laundry, vacuuming)



32%

spend more
time online



34%

walk dog/care
for pet

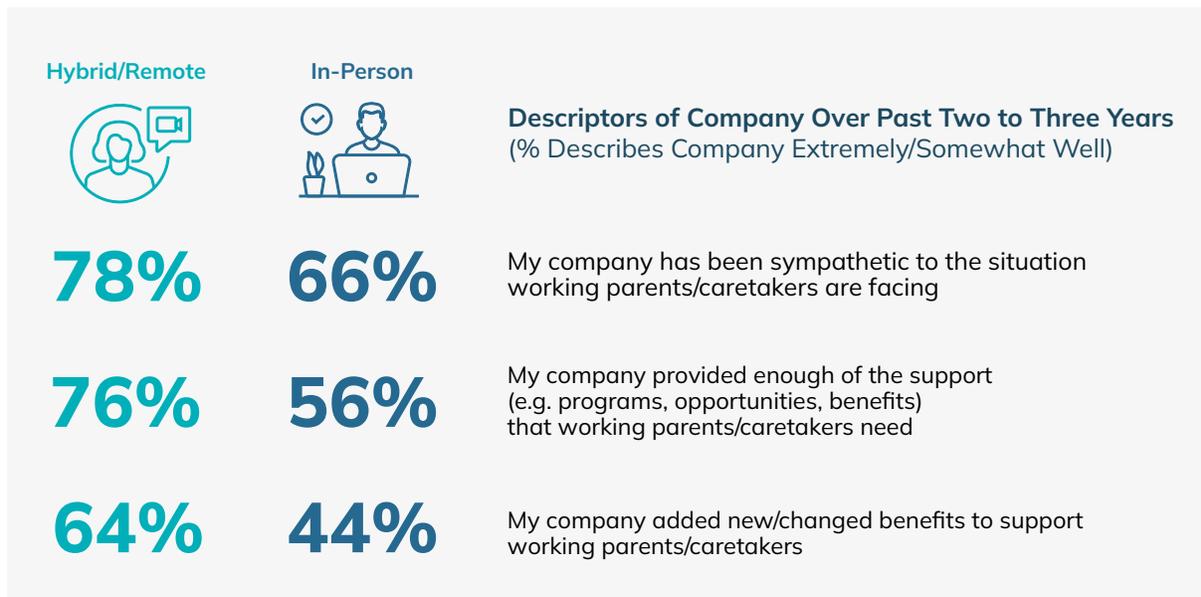


23%

go to the gym/
work out longer

Return-to-Office Gap

Still, for parents, office working continues to have some appeal. While hybrid work is here to stay, many hybrid-working parents nevertheless recognize value in being onsite: three in five (61%) say they enjoy getting dressed for the office; most (86%) like seeing their coworkers; and more than three-quarters (**79%**) **agree that they enjoy the social aspects of working in-person**. But they'll need to be better courted. Even as some employers angle to bring more employees back to the office, parent responses show a gap in support for in-office employees, with benefits more heavily weighted toward those working via hybrid or full-time remote. More than a third (34%) of parents who do work fully onsite say they do not have any benefits to help manage their personal work-life balance at all.



Missed Opportunities On Benefits

Such responses hint at a general disconnect between employers and employees on benefits. Employees are unquestionably bullish on the help they want, with parents stating they are much more likely to stay with a company that offers specific support (medical, mental health, and educational). More than a third (39%) are much more likely to stay with a company that offers every-day child care or emergency child care.

Equally of note, among the parents who feel more fulfilled at their current job than two to three years ago, fulfillment (a precursor to retention) rests on job flexibility (58%), heightened employer sensitivity to work/life balance needs (52%), and better offered benefits (38%). Yet even among those who do have benefits, there's a shortage of clarity on exactly what they have, or how these benefits work, with **nearly half of employees (49%) saying their company's benefits were never clearly defined or explained**.

For employers, it indicates an opportunity to notch up retention by both adding desired benefits, and helping people to find and fully leverage the support they have.

Millennials and Gen Z On Edge

The effects have been unique for Gen Z and Millennials.

Many of these employees likely became parents during the pandemic; **they acclimated to parenthood at a time when isolation was the norm, and when work hours and parenting time were practically indistinguishable.** Perhaps that's why younger employees grapple more with isolation than their older counterparts. Not only are they more likely than Gen X and Boomer parents who work remotely or in a hybrid environment to say they go days without going outside while remote working (49% Gen Z/Millennials vs. 31% Gen X/Baby Boomer); they are also more likely to go without speaking to anyone beyond their household (53% Gen Z/Millennials vs. 40% Gen X/Baby Boomer). Simultaneously, they are also more tuned into mental health (their own and their family's), and are more likely than Gen X and Boomers to say employers could better support them with more frequent check-ins on emotions/mental health (33% Gen Z/Millennials vs. 25% Gen X/Baby Boomer).

Yet they're unlikely to speak up. Even as they know what they need, younger Gen Z and Millennial hybrid-working parents worry more (40% vs. 28% Gen X/Baby Boomers) about how working from home will negatively affect their careers. And among those working for a company with work-life-balance benefits, Gen Z and Millennial parents are more likely than older employees to fear negative impacts of benefit use on elements such as performance evaluation (46% vs. 32%) and how they're viewed by colleagues (43% vs. 29%).



Younger Gen Z and Millennials hybrid-working parents worry more (**40% vs. 28% Gen X/Baby Boomers**) about how working from home will negatively affect their careers.

Not only are they more likely than Gen X and Boomer parents who work remotely or in a hybrid environment to say **they go days without going outside** (49% Gen Z/Millennials vs. 31% Gen X/Baby Boomer) while remote working; they are also more likely to **go without speaking to anyone beyond their household** (53% Gen Z/Millennials vs. 40% Gen X/Baby Boomer).

Dads Stuck in Stereotypes

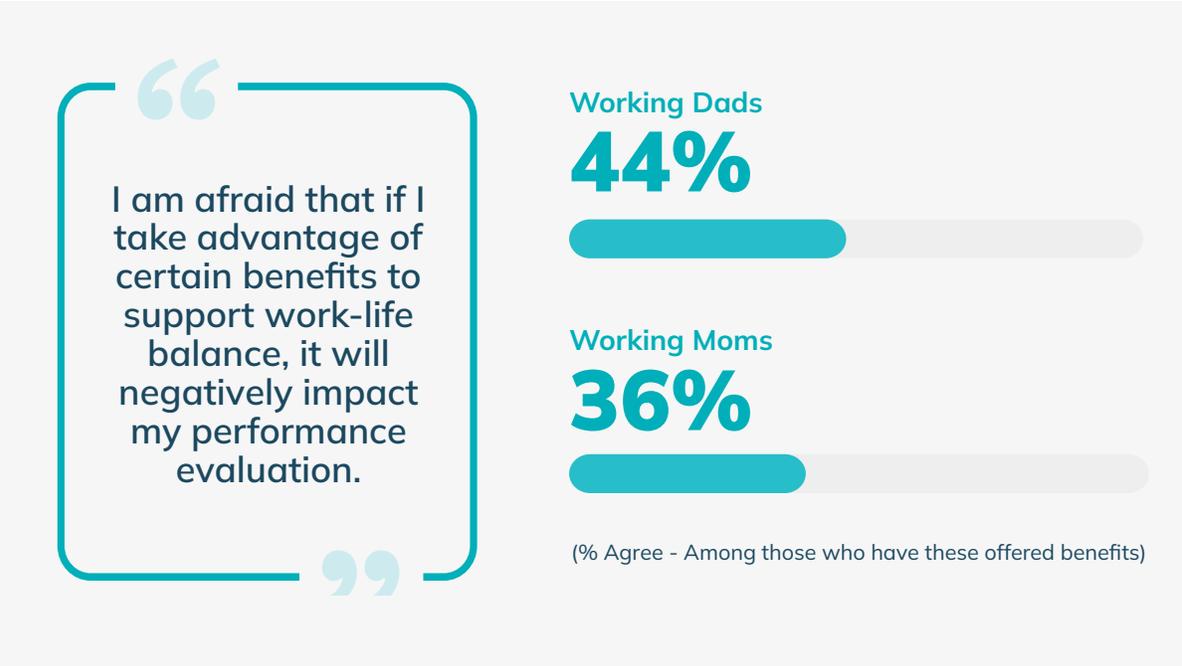
Such career worries are especially strong among working fathers.

Even after lockdown hinted at more egalitarian views of parenting responsibilities, **men in this year's Modern Family Index remain more likely than women to worry about how parenting will affect them professionally.** Years after a third of working fathers told the Modern Family Index they felt negatively judged by colleagues, today's fathers continue to feel in the crosshairs, with hybrid-working dads more likely than mothers (43% vs. 27%) to worry about the negative effect of remote working on their careers when they choose to work from home.



This despite working fathers' greater general satisfaction with benefits. Overall, working dads are more likely than working moms to feel that their company has been sympathetic to working parents (74% vs. 68%), has provided enough support (70% vs. 58%), and has added/alterd benefits (57% vs. 48%) to better respond to working caregiver challenges in the past two to three years. **Working fathers are also more likely to wish their employer would do more to support their child care needs** (52% vs. 45%).

But using those benefits comes with more of a perceived stigma, with working fathers whose company offers at least some work-life-balance benefits being more likely than mothers (44% vs. 36%) to say **using such company resources will negatively impact performance reviews.**



Frontline and Essential Workers at Risk

The pandemic elevated frontline workers to essential status, showing just how much the economy hinges on their presence. Yet their unique workstyles (71% of essential or frontline working parents work in person vs. only 45% of other parents) seem to make child care exceptionally hard to find. **Such parents are more likely than other parents to call piecing together child care a full-time job (63% vs. 48%),** and to agree it's difficult to manage work schedules around child care (44% vs. 28%).

Yet despite their importance, frontline and essential workers continue to work with little support. Relative to other parents over the last two to three years, these employees are less likely to feel that their company has been sympathetic to their situation (68% vs. 75%), less likely to say their company has added new/changed benefits to support them (49% vs. 57%), and less likely to have received mental health benefits to help manage their personal work-life balance (30% vs. 37%). And the stress and lack of support is leaving a mark, with nearly a third of these working parents (32%) saying they are likely to leave their current job in the next 12 months, and 18% reporting that they are actively looking.

The Takeaways

The pandemic put an unmistakable spotlight on the plight of working parents, with lockdown bringing their challenges literally live and on screen. Watching these employees manage jobs, remote school, and child care all at the same time, it became impossible not to see the extreme conflicts that had been there all along. Years after the first Modern Family Index showed that family meant fired, it appeared the stigma of working and parenting was, at last, ebbing.

Yet as memories of those earliest days of the pandemic fade, some of the lessons appear to be retreating as well. In the present day, **parents are once again reluctant to discuss families; they're afraid to mention sick children or child care concerns; and they worry that actually using the benefits designed to help them balance work and family life will come at a cost to their careers.** Adding to the dilemma are new worries — extreme child care shortages, the isolation of remote jobs, and the fuzzy rules about working from home that are generating anxiety about managing family responsibilities during worktime.

The hybrid work era, it turns out, is not the panacea the world may have expected. While parents are unquestionably relieved by the newfound flexibility, what's also becoming clear is that without additional support and clarification, such remote possibilities will continue to be a double-edged sword.



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Research Method

The research was conducted online in the U.S. by The Harris Poll on behalf of Bright Horizons among 2005 adults aged 18 and over who are employed with children under 18. The survey was conducted from February 23 – March 6, 2023. Data are weighted where necessary by age, gender, race/ethnicity, region, education, marital status, household size, employment status, household income, and propensity to be online to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in our surveys. The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, the sample data is accurate to within + 3.0 percentage points using a 95% confidence level. This credible interval will be wider among subsets of the surveyed population of interest. All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to other multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including, but not limited to coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments.