

Inclusive Employers

Parenting at work guide



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, there is a lot more to consider than just competitive maternity or paternity policies (that's not to say that these policies should be shelved and of course can also be reviewed and improved!).

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.

Contents

1. Why do parents need support in the workplace?

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

3. Parenting and the Equality Act

4. Societal context and parenting

5. Guidance for line managers on parenting

6. FAQs about parenting

7. Additional resources

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 listening to, understanding, and supporting parents, organisations can increase employee engagement and staff retention.

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 the workplace today, and it is something that is just not true.

Becoming a parent is a big responsibility for anyone, 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 are no longer as committed to their work or do not want to progress their careers.

“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.

Due to more organisations prioritising inclusion and offering competitive benefits, organisations will need to be more flexible, agile, and family-friendly than ever before to attract and retain their workforce. 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. Time and consideration should be given to regularly update and amend current policies with the ever-changing landscape of society, to improve the work-life balance of employees.

Examples of Policies to Review

Adoption leave is a legal right to take time off from work to support the process of adopting a child. Adoption usually refers to the legal process of becoming a non-biological parent, which may be through adopting a child, or through a surrogacy arrangement. Employees can also get paid time off to attend adoption appointments when they have been matched with a child.

Parental leave is a legal right to take time off from work to look after a child or plan for a child's welfare. This might include looking at new schools, spending more time with family, or settling in with new childcare arrangements.

Paternity leave is time off from the workplace given to a non-birthing parent after a child or children are born. Whilst in law it is called paternity leave, it is not just fathers who will be eligible for paternity leave and pay. Anyone who is the non-birthing parent can claim paternity leave, for example a woman in a same sex relationship, or a non-binary parent.

Maternity leave is time off from the workplace given to a mother or birthing parent to take care of a new-born child or children, and to take time to heal and care for themselves. Whilst in law it is called maternity leave, not everyone who may give birth identifies as a mother, e.g. non-binary people and trans men.

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.

Flexible / Hybrid working is a way of working that suits an employee's needs, for example having flexible start and finish times, or working from home. This can be officially requested by employees, and hybrid working options are becoming the norm in most industries.

In the UK there are statutory requirements that organisations have to offer, but best practice organisations recognise that parents may need more support than this. Organisations may wish to consider increasing statutory to full pay or increasing the entitlement for number of days off.

When implementing changes or new policies, what should be considered?

Statistics and data

Does the organisation know how many employees are parents/carers? Can this be monitored alongside other diversity demographics to get a deeper understanding of the workforce and the support they may need.

Integration and implementation

How does flexible working fit into the organisational strategy and culture? Do line managers know how the policies work and where discretion can be applied? Having a policy is the first step, but if it is not actively encouraged, supported, and role modelled, people will not feel able to use it.

Communication

Ensure that information and changes to policies are accessible and available on internal systems e.g. staff intranet, organisation communication channels. These should be regularly communicated throughout the year. Think of events in the inclusion calendar that relate to parenting and use this as an opportunity to signpost.

Language

Be mindful of the language used throughout policies. Ensure language throughout is gender neutral. Where terms like 'paternity' and 'maternity' need to be used due to legal requirements, caveat this and explain that not everyone who is entitled to the leave or pay within that policy will identify with the term.

Be Inclusive

Often the default when considering parental policies is to think about the experience of mothers. To be truly inclusive, parenting policies should consider the family unit as a whole with understanding that parenting can have different meanings for different people.

Does the organisation's policies and benefits support:

- Same sex/gender couples
- Trans parents
- Non-binary parents
- Fathers
- Single parents

[Back to contents](#)

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 their place and role within the workplace. Parents may wonder how different it may be when they return to work, whether technology/systems will be the same, whether their team has changed or has new members, and whether they will be able to cope balancing work and home life.

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, now having children at home can feel like starting the 'double shift' burden. So how can the new demands be balanced? 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 programs to support parents during all stages of parenting (before pregnancy or adoption, during leave and on return to work). Traditionally, coaching has been seen as a support function for senior management, however, recently 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 all managers been trained in parent support and are they aware of the policies? All managers should be actively trained, ready to help if and when required. See section 5 of this document for more detail.

Benefits

Reflect on what benefits can be offered or introduced as an organisation. Healthcare plans may allow children to be added, or the organisation could support with childcare costs.

Engage and signpost Employee Assistance Programmes and Wellbeing sites

There is so much information for parents to access through employee support programmes and online resources. Ensure that these resources cater to different family experiences as the emotional and wellbeing needs may be different depending on context.

Inclusive Spaces

Many birthing parents who return to work will be breastfeeding or chestfeeding their baby, which means they may need a space to pump milk whilst at work. Creating a quiet space where employees can have privacy and relax whilst doing so can help them feel supported. Some organisations have wellbeing rooms which can be used for this purpose and signposted to.

Inclusive Planning

Consider when team meetings or key events are planned. Try to avoid school half terms for big events, or important meetings scheduled the same time as a typical school run.

Create informative speaker events

Events which include parenting as topics and collaboration with other parenting networks or charities will show allyship and different perspectives.

Use awareness dates

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.

Remove bias in people processes

Performance reviews are crucial, but they can also become forums for bias that can inhibit the progress of parents. 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 employees involved in promotion decisions; provide reminders about how to avoid unconscious bias and designate a team member to call it out. Track outcomes to check bias.

Take an intersectional approach

Companies should acknowledge and address the unique challenges facing parents from different identities and 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.

What can Parent Networks offer?

- **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.
- **Safe space:** Through shared experience, networks offer a safe space to share feelings, predict what to expect, and create allyship.

- Knowledge pool: Increase the knowledge pool of the network by collaborating with other networks to increase the voice of that topic and support HR/comms functions.
- Supporting awareness days and informing via lunch and learns or bitesize learning.
For example:
 - A speakers panel with different lived experience, e.g. single parents, same sex couples, neurodivergent parents (there is an opportunity to deliver an intersectionality event).
 - Men talking about their experiences of paternity leave / shared parental leave
 - Fertility treatment
 - Sharing cultural family traditions

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.

[Back to contents](#)

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 direct discrimination and victimisation because of their pregnancy, or for taking/seeking to take maternity leave. Pregnancy and Maternity is one of the nine protected characteristics.

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 protection is 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.

[Back to contents](#)

4. Societal context and parenting

During the pandemic, organisations witnessed the full impact that Covid-19 had on parents and 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 can be 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 the impacts and consequences of Covid-19 are still being unravelled.

The current financial context is also continuing to have an impact on parents. Research found that 68% of parents had to turn down extra work or not apply for a particular job because they could not find affordable and flexible childcare, and 67% had considered leaving their jobs under the pressure of juggling childcare.

[Back to contents](#)

5. Guidance for line managers on parenting

It is essential to train line managers so that they can support conversations with their teams about the experience of parenting. There are some simple steps organisations can take to help equip line managers and ensure the experience is a positive one for parents within the workplace.

Managers should be kept informed on policies

At the point when an employee shares that they are 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, adding a child to health insurance or costs to help with childcare etc.

Provide guidance at 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).
- Appointments – what the company policy is for antenatal or pre-adoption 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 is important to 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 as though 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 managers 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 is worth making sure managers / employees 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 the employee, particularly in the later months and if appropriate adjust their leaving plan. Some people may find it helpful to use annual leave in addition to parental leave benefits.
- Forward planning – ensuring the line manager thinks ahead to the employee's absence and returns – before they go on leave.

During this time, the manager may feel they 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 their 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, receive internal communications, and/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, 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 this is not just about part-time options. It may be about flexing start and finish times or allowing longer lunch breaks. 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 does not miss out on key events like team away days.
- **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 new parents are ready for their return

Just as the line manager has ensured the smooth transition of their team member so far, they want to also make sure that the return part of this journey is as seamless as possible. Understanding that the 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. Try not to plan too much into this first day as it may feel overwhelming.

As mentioned earlier in the 'What can organisations do for parents returning to the workplace?' section, introducing training for line managers is vital for 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 ask 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 is 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, it is everybody's responsibility to ensure that this experience is as positive and seamless as can be.

[Back to contents](#)

6. FAQs about parenting

The questions below 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, the birthing parent can be engines of productivity. Even with multiple children, when productivity is averaged out over the course of a career, they 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 a diary then it probably won't happen. Ensure that everything is diarised; from doctors' appointments to date nights, to family time and school meetings. Even though everything is in the diary, spontaneity can and definitely will still occur – diaries are just a useful reminder, but that does not mean it is written in stone.

Are there any transferable skills that can be brought into the workplace from raising children?

Balance, patience, multi-tasking and remembering to have fun and laugh. There are plenty of others that other parents / parenting networks would also be able to share.

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

Location is key. How far is the workplace from home/school/emergency contacts? Will there be lots of 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?

Working parent guilt is real and every parent is susceptible to it. Balance is everything. Try to see work as the place where employees can be their unique selves; before and after being a parent. The workplace is one of the few places where employees remain individuals and careers are solely theirs, separate from their home life. Of course, not forgetting that all moments that parents share with their families are precious and work/life balance is extremely important for happy and engaged colleagues.

[Back to contents](#)

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/>

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>

Information on the Equality Act 2010: Pregnancy and maternity

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

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/>

Remote: Best inclusive parental leave policies
<https://remote.com/resources/research/best-inclusive-parental-leave-policies>

McKinsey: The impact of Covid-19 on mothers
<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/for-mothers-in-the-workplace-a-year-and-counting-like-no-other>

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/>

Becoming an LGBTQ+ parent – the other mother, or just “Mum” is fine
<https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk/blog/becoming-an-lgbtq-parent-the-other-mother-or-just-mum-is-fine/>

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/>

Breeze: Top benefits for working parents
<https://www.meetbreeze.com/blog/benefits-for-working-parents/>

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/>

[Back to contents](#)

