

How Can Businesses Support Working Parents and Carers During the Pandemic?

A CMHA Workplace Mental Health Guide

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns have posed significant challenges for the UK's 13 million working parents. Working Families, a charity that works with employers to embed flexible working practices and supports parents and carers with legal advice, reported that enquiries to their advice services have increased sixfold during the pandemic. Research carried out by the charity has also found that 61% of parents and carers said family life had become more stressful during lockdown. They describe working late into the night or getting up at 4am to work around caring responsibilities, with a blurring of boundaries between work and home that led to their feeling 'always on'. There are concerns about the effects of this on their mental health. They also described worries that, having been furloughed or having worked around their childcare responsibilities, they are now more vulnerable to redundancy or being overlooked for promotion later down the line.

Businesses have an opportunity to take practical steps to support and protect the positive mental health and wellbeing of this group during this time. The City Mental Health Alliance, the community for mentally healthy businesses, brought together CMHA members and experts from Working Families, to share what support they are offering working parents and carers in order to support their positive mental health and wellbeing. This guide captures the good practice and insights discussed in this group.

An Oxford University Study suggests levels of stress, depression and anxiety among parents and carers have increased with the pressures of the lockdowns.

The research also found this group reported problems including difficulty relaxing, being easily upset or agitated, feeling hopeless, fearful and worried; being more irritable, over-reactive and impatient.

<http://bit.ly/373iokV>

How can businesses support parents and carers?

1

Educate wider workforce

Help all employees to understand the pressure on parents and carers so that they can provide support and flexibility when necessary, including:

- Reverse mentoring to give leaders/managers the chance to hear from working parents and carers about what their day-to-day is like.
- Ask managers to take the time to understand individual circumstances of their direct reports and provide corresponding flexibility on delivery of their work. In one smaller organisation, one CEO called each parent and carer to ask what support they needed.
- Educate managers on how they should manage performance review conversations with an individual whose work has been impacted by the need to care for children.

2

Facilitate peer support

Connecting parents and carers with other colleagues who are going through a similar experience can help. This can be done by:

- Hosting storytelling sessions, where parents and carers can share their experiences and connect with and learn from others in similar situations.
- Providing a support network. For example, some business have a Parents and Carers network, which offers coffee mornings, peer support and signposts to relevant wellbeing help
- Providing a parent “buddy scheme” to connect parents with each other.

3

Mental health and wellbeing support to carers and their families

Businesses can actively support and protect the mental health and wellbeing of carers by:

- Regularly signposting to workplace mental health and wellbeing support, such as the Employee Assistance Programme and Mental Health First Aiders (or equivalent).
- Give employees access to mental health experts, who can talk to parents, carers and/or children. For example, educational psychologists to talk to parents about how to manage homeschooling, child psychologists to provide information to parents on how they can support the wellbeing of children who may be struggling. And coaches to help parents navigate any career challenges they are facing.
- Compassionate and supportive managers is important. Encourage managers to have “wellbeing check-ins” with all employees. Many businesses have provided mental health training for managers to equip them to spot signs in people who may be struggling and help them feel confident to start a conversation about mental health.

4

Flexibility in working hours and leave

Parents and caregivers should be given the flexibility to navigate their own individual work and personal circumstances:

- Encourage employees to work flexible working hours, rather than usual working day, to best suit their caring responsibilities.
- Provide additional paid leave to enable parents/carers to have breaks or fulfil caring responsibilities. e.g. give every employee one three-day weekend each month, on top of annual leave. Some businesses offer an five extra days of paid leave.
- Offer flexibility on how parental leave is used. e.g. allow parental leave to be taken in half day chunks, to help employees meet day to day responsibilities.
- Give employees the opportunity to feedback on what they need, what has been helpful and what could be better via focus groups or anonymous surveys.
- Create a “parenting and carer” timecode for employees to log time spent on carrying out caring duties. This aims to reassure people that the employer understands that employees may need to spend time on caring responsibilities during the working day.
- Encouraging teams to establish realistic working boundaries when beginning any new project or programme of work.

5

Provide education and entertainment to support the wider family

Ways in which businesses are taking active steps to support homeschooling and entertain the wider family:

- Repurpose unused laptops and tablets for employees’ children, to support their online learning.
- Provide activities for employees’ families to do including:
 - Provide education on wellbeing challenges, such as how to manage screen time. One business ran a webinar for older children on how to build healthy digital habits given so much of life is being conducted by screen.
 - Supplement education provision, by organising for other employees or outside experts to lead different sessions for children on subjects ranging from economics, to music, to art, to sport, to dance classes.
 - One business is offering a “half-term holiday club” with virtual activities and entertainers for children.
 - Activities to mark particular days for children, e.g. one business is running a virtual Pancake Day event for employees’ families.
 - Family activities that promote wellbeing, e.g. run a family mindfulness session.

Looking ahead

Businesses should be aware that challenges that may continue going into 2021 and beyond, including:

- Many parents and carers will continue to be concerned about the mental health and wellbeing of their children, even as restrictions ease.
- Emotional challenges as children and parents transition back to physical school and workplace. Children of all ages, and even some parents, may experience attachment and separation challenges once they go back to school, or social anxiety around lots of people, after spending so long social distancing. Therefore, there will need to be continued flexibility and understanding when children return to school.
- Childcare support may continue to be limited due to school hours potentially being shorter. Social distancing requirements may mean that after school clubs / family members are still not available for childcare support for many months. Meanwhile, children may need to isolate well into 2021 after positive cases within classes or nurseries. Therefore, there will be a continued impact on the lives and working patterns of parents and carers that may impact on working hours and ability to come into the office.
- Parents and carers who have been working, while also managing caring and home schooling duties for many months may be at risk of burnout.

Resources

- Visit our website to find out about becoming a CMHA member or our workplace mental health training. Or contact us on cmha@citymha.org.uk
www.citymha.org.uk
- Visit the Working Families website to find out how they can support your organisation or contact them on employers@workingfamilies.org.uk
www.workingfamilies.org.uk/employers/
- Two free guides on 'How to support your child's study with school closures and exam cancellations' are available to download here:
www.theparentsguideto.co.uk/coronavirus
- View our list of external mental health help and advice lines on our website:
www.citymha.org.uk/Footer/Help-and-advice-lines