

# 6 Ways Legal Employers Can Help Pandemic-Weary Parents

By **Meredith Kahan** (March 3, 2021, 5:30 PM EST)

I watch out the car window as the medical assistants push their cart of swabs and tubes from car to car, their eyes barely visible under the face shields and masks, and in head-to-toe yellow paper gowns.

Each of my kids is sitting in the back seat wearing pajamas and clutching an iPad, the bribe I levied to get them in the car at 6:30 a.m. to go get tested for COVID-19. Having been through this drill before, I know we could be sitting in this parking spot waiting for our turn for an hour or longer.

My laptop is sitting open; in a strange way, it feels like this is the right time to try to write an article about working and parenting in the age of COVID-19. Glancing at my children's reflection in the rearview mirror, this moment feels like the pandemic paradigm.

While I am praying that the results for our family are negative and that we stay safe and healthy, I also know that my preschooler's exposure means a mandatory two-week quarantine lies bleakly ahead. My mind is already racing to figure out which important meetings will require "iPad babysitting" for my very boisterous four-year-old and which meetings will just suffer from interruption.

Of course, even when my younger child is physically in preschool, my meetings and concentration are no stranger to interruption. My 10-year-old participates in full-time virtual school, bounding up and down the stairs about a hundred times each day, asking me for snacks (so many snacks!), practicing his clarinet, and requiring technical assistance from the help desk. (Note: I am the help desk.)

I am thankful that my law firm has continued to work remotely throughout the pandemic



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and has actively encouraged us to stay home. Yet, like a never-ending game of whack-a-mole, for every burden being at home eases, there is another problem it creates.

I'm grateful that I don't have to take time off work to care for my children, but I cringe each time little voices make their way into the background of my work calls. I feel safer that I don't have to expose myself to the virus in a corporate office setting, but it breaks my heart when I tell my kids to leave my home office so I can finish a time-sensitive document. When I prioritize going for a bike ride with my kids during the day, I must work after I put them to bed at night.

One day, my little one wants me to read him "Curious George Makes Pancakes" at 10:58 a.m. His big blue eyes fill with hurt when I say no because I have an 11 a.m. call. I feel like I'm telling him he is less important than my job. There is a painful lump in my throat as I dial in and do my best to focus on the meeting.

Every day is a series of competing obligations, personal and professional all jumbled together, that leave me feeling like I have not quite lived up to the expectations that I set for myself or that I let someone else down.

In my experience, my firm has been supportive of my need to attend to my children during the balancing act that is the pandemic. Much of the pressure and stress regarding my job is self-inflicted. But even organizations that are supportive of working parents can take steps to do better.

Working parents are at a crossroads. Many are ready to throw in the towel and many already have, with women's departures outnumbering men's by significant margins. According to the U.S. [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)' January jobs report, 275,000 women left the workforce in January this year, compared with 71,000 men.

As a recruiting professional, I am acutely aware that it would be short-sighted of legal employers to risk losing such a large and crucial segment of their workforce. So that begs the question, what can employers do?

### **1. Create a group.**

A natural first step is to create a working parents group to provide assistance to employees through initiatives, information and support mechanisms.

Iterations vary, but committees, affinity groups and resource groups have become the norm at many organizations. Achieving the goals above will require the same organizational support required for any other program: human capital, time, money and executive-level encouragement.

Whether the group is created by the human resources department, is an offshoot of an already established committee, or is authorized through executive leadership, creating a group signals to working parents that the organization recognizes their need for support and a willingness to help.

But even in organizations that are hesitant to create an affinity group or are too small to support such a group, there are still connections to be made; hosting a working parents lunch group discussion, virtual or otherwise, or using an online chat mechanism through apps like WhatsApp and Slack could be a wonderful start.

A successful group for working parents can be defined in an infinite number of ways, big and small: one that offers a renewed feeling of control following a program on time management; one that brings relief through financial assistance for online tutoring; or one that creates a sense of community after a conversation with a colleague.

If a formal committee is being assembled to lead the group, try to include a variety of perspectives — women and men, single parents, parents of children with special needs, stepparents. Also bear in mind that the pandemic has been hitting Black and Hispanic communities disproportionately hard, and it's important to involve those voices as well.

## **2. Focus on professional staff and attorneys alike.**

The difficulty of parenting in a pandemic is universal, though the specific challenges are unique.

As the financial engines of a law firm or the focus of a legal services organization or government agency, attorneys often come first. However, the issue of parenting touches many other employees in an organization and support should be provided to all parents, no matter the job title.

Specific thought should be given to the unique challenges each group faces.

Attorneys may be more prone to feeling stressed about a billable hour requirement, and staying up all hours of the night to get work done. On the other hand, hourly staff may not have the luxury of working after hours given the nature of their work — and labor laws — and feel an inordinate amount of stress if they need to leave their desk to fix their child a snack. (Again, so many snacks!)

To provide support to staff, ensure that they are included in any working parents group formed.

Moreover, put clear guidelines in place for remote work. Unlike exempt employees, many hourly staff never worked remotely prior to the pandemic, and may suffer from anxiety about whether it's appropriate to step away to pick up a child from the bus.

Protocols should not only be made clear to the employees, but to supervisors as well to ensure that everyone is working from the same set of expectations.

## **3. Create spaces for sharing and listening. Problem-solving isn't always the goal.**

Lawyers try to solve problems — it's in their very nature and a marker of success. In this instance, however, part of the problem can be eased by not solving it.

Allowing parents to share their experiences is an extremely cathartic, effective and easy step for legal organizations to take. It is also a great way for colleagues to create relationships and cultivate a sense community.

At my firm, we planned a series of town halls with no agenda. In one meeting we spent 20 minutes brainstorming about how to handle Halloween in a pandemic. In another, I listened as a staff member and a lawyer commiserated about the painful toll remote school was taking on their children with special needs. At a time when we are isolated, a personal connection, even if over Zoom, can be a game changer.

Sharing can — and should — take other forms as well. For example, as my firm is in the process of rolling out a cellphone app for firmwide communication, we requested a special section for posts by working parents to provide another outlet for real-time sharing. Whether it's using email, newsletters, social media, blogs or any other form of communication, working parents find solace in knowing that there are others muddling through this same messy reality.

#### **4. Be open about expectations.**

Metrics, expectations and evaluations can be some of the most stress-inducing aspects of any job. If the organization will be taking into account the pandemic and adjusting goals, share this information as soon as possible.

On the other hand, if the bottom line will not change, consider giving employees the opportunity to provide context around their performance through a self-evaluation process that specifically asks about challenges faced during the pandemic.

This approach has little to no disadvantage to an employer but can provide some small relief for a working parent fearing an inaccurate perception that may play out in evaluations, promotions or their future at the organization.

For example, without the context that an employee is also a single father caring for a kindergartner in remote school all day, a supervisor might perceive frequently unanswered phone calls or emails that do not get a response until 8 p.m. as a lack of dedication to the job. But sharing these challenges through a self-evaluation or similar means will not only fill in the blanks for management but also provide some comfort to the employee.

#### **5. Tap preexisting resources.**

Many organizations already have infrastructure in place that can lend itself to providing support for working parents. Do an intake of what benefits your organization offers and highlight them to make sure parents are aware of them. Look to what other internal resource groups are doing at your organization and share those programs if pertinent.

Along those lines, make sure to open conversations up around mental health. This is a mental health crisis. If your organization has a wellness committee, it can partner with the working parent committee to circulate resources tailored to both parents and children.

If no applicable resources are currently available, create a list of free ones. During the pandemic there has been a proliferation of free resources, such as tutoring for children, counseling, parenting courses, online educational materials and more.

If there is a budget to invest in tailored support for working parents, prioritize what is important to the parents at your organization and even consider using a survey to gather that information directly.

#### **6. Normalize children — and dogs, cats and spouses.**

For the first six months of working from home during the pandemic, I started every sentence to my children with "Shhhhh." I was a mute button aficionado; I moved faster than the speed of sound and could hit mute before anyone else heard my older child screaming at the younger one for touching his Nintendo Switch.

As the months at home crawled by, I found that with certain audiences I didn't worry quite so much about whether my son ambled up to the screen to see who was on it. What changed? The normalization of things that are, in fact, quite normal, even in a very abnormal time.

Cats, dogs, in-laws, spouses and, yes, kids cannot be expected to stay in one space — the size of which varies by family — and not speak for an eight-hour work day. Recognizing this and normalizing it — ideally from the top down by management — is the first step to letting parents breathe a little easier.

I watch the hospital-gown-clad medical assistants shuffle to the window of the car parked next to ours. I wonder if they have kids and imagine what their list of worries might be: passing the virus to their children, caring for ailing parents, a spouse who was laid off.

It's a reminder that this pandemic has infinite rippling effects and that you don't know what lies under anyone else's masks. But even an appreciation of the big picture doesn't assuage my stress and guilt and my sheer and utter exhaustion.

Perhaps the most important lesson of all is that we cannot let ground that is gained supporting parents during the COVID-19 crisis erode once life returns to normal. Many parents have been hiding the stress of balancing work and kids behind a mask for many years.

We are all eager to put the coronavirus behind us, but don't let your working parents committee be relegated to the rearview mirror. Parents will return to a world of ballet recitals and baseball games, clarinet concerts and, yes, even good old stomach bugs and bronchitis. Understanding and flexibility around the tightrope that working parents tread daily will ultimately create more dedicated and fulfilled employees.

As I twist around in my car seat, the kids look up.

"What?" my 10-year-old asks.

"Nothing. I love you."

He looks back at me and I see a half smile. "Oh, OK."

The metal cart clangs over the uneven pavement as it wheels our way. I switch my happy mommy voice on and brightly announce, "Alright kiddos, it's our turn now! It's going to be uncomfortable, but it will be done before you know it."

I shut my computer and roll down my window.

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