

Families with School-Age Children

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Summary

Most working parents face a common dilemma—how to care for their children when they are not in school but the parents are at work. In this article Kathleen Christensen, Barbara Schneider, and Donnell Butler describe the predictable and unpredictable scheduling demands school-age children place on working couples and single working parents.

The authors assess the potential capacity of schools to help meet the needs of working families through changes in school schedules and after-school programs and conclude that the flexibility parents need to balance family-work responsibilities probably cannot be found in the school setting. They argue that workplaces are better able than schools to offer the flexibility that working parents need to attend to basic needs of their children, as well as to engage in activities that enhance their children's academic performance and emotional and social well-being.

Two types of flexible work practices seem especially well suited to parents who work: flextime arrangements that allow parents to coordinate their work schedules with their children's school schedules, and policies that allow workers to take short periods of time off—a few hours or a day or two—to attend a parent-teacher conference, for example, or care for a child who has suddenly fallen ill. Many companies that have instituted such policies have benefited through employees' greater job satisfaction and employee retention.

Yet despite these measured benefits to employers, workplaces often fall short of being family friendly. Many employers do not offer such policies or offer them only to employees at certain levels or in certain types of jobs. Flexible work practices are almost nonexistent for low-income workers, who are least able to afford alternative child care and may need flexibility the most.

Moreover the authors find that even employees in firms with flexible practices such as telecommuting may be reluctant to take advantage of them, because the workplace culture explicitly or implicitly stigmatizes or penalizes employees for choosing these work arrangements. The authors conclude by making a case for creating a workplace culture that supports flexibility. Such a culture, they argue, would enable working parents to better meet the responsibilities of their jobs as they care for and build strong relationships with their children.

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More than half of all children under age eighteen now live in households with two employed parents or an employed single parent.¹ For many of these households, parenting has grown increasingly complicated, with the structure and demands of the workplace often colliding with parents' basic responsibilities for supervision and involvement in their children's lives. The collision is most noticeable where the relatively rigid schedules governing when and where work is to be done conflict not only with equally rigid school schedules but also with children's needs, both predictable and unpredictable. Parents whose work schedules do not coincide with their school-age children's schedules must arrange for the predictable—transporting their children to and from school and finding care for them during the gap between the end of the school day and the end of the workday and during school vacations. Parents must also be prepared for the unpredictable—an emergency such as a child's sudden illness that requires them either to leave work to care for the child or to find someone quickly who can provide that care.

This article examines the scheduling challenges working families with school-age children face and the ways flexibility at school and at parents' workplaces might help parents meet the needs of their children and fulfill their responsibilities to their employer. Seeing little likelihood that changes in school schedules can provide sufficient flexibility to aid parents, we argue not only that the necessary flexibility is best offered in the parents' workplaces but that a supportive workplace culture needs to be developed for flexibility practices to reach their full potential. We conclude by identifying several employers

with well-designed flexibility practices that genuinely serve both working parents and their employers.

Parent Roles in Their Children's Lives: Supervision and Involvement

Full-time jobs that require rigid start and end times or that entail early morning and evening meetings or overnight travel can encroach on the time available to parents to supervise and be involved in their children's lives.² Parents must either provide child care for the times when they cannot be present or alter their work schedules so they can be at home at the same time their school-age children are. For those in low-paying jobs, the added constraint of limited resources makes child-care arrangements even more complicated and problematic.³

Supervision, a primary responsibility of parenting, includes those activities parents undertake to ensure that their children's basic physical and safety needs are met. Being late to pick up a child at school, for example, can have grave safety consequences, especially if the school closes and no adults are on the premises. The degree of supervision to keep school-age children safe varies depending on the chronological age of the child and the location of the school and home. At a minimum, parents have to ensure that someone is available to take care of children's meals and transportation needs before and after the school day. Some older children can manage these responsibilities on their own, but someone should still check on their whereabouts before and after school, on how they spend their weekends and with whom, and on how they are handling their nutritional needs.

The structure of the workplace constrains the ability of working parents to attend to these basic supervisory responsibilities.⁴ For those

in autonomous jobs, communicating with children during the day is not a problem; however, in many kinds of jobs, employees are prohibited from making personal calls or their communications are monitored. Moreover, the nature of some jobs severely curtails opportunities to attend to the basic needs of children, such as leaving work early to take a child to a pediatric appointment.⁵

Involvement represents those parental activities that directly relate to children's academic, social, and emotional well-being. Parents provide the most direct and salient role models for their children's academic and social development. One of the most important factors in children's school success is how actively involved their parents are in their education.⁶ Overwhelming evidence from decades of research shows that the actions parents take with their children—from reading to them to attending school meetings to helping them with homework—can enhance their motivation to learn, raise their educational expectations, and improve their performance.⁷ This confidence in the value of parental engagement has prompted federal legislators to include specific guidance in the latest reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act on the activities parents may undertake to assist their children's education.⁸ States have also responded by developing websites showing how parents can become involved in their children's learning.⁹

The press for more parental involvement in education activities is related in part to the evolving societal view of what now constitutes “good parenting.” The term “helicopter parents” captures this theme of paying close attention to one's child even through young adulthood.¹⁰ Concerned that their children might lose out in the schooling game, parents (primarily those in the middle and upper

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classes) are heavily engaged, perhaps overly so, in “cultivating” their children for successful adult lives.¹¹ But even parents who do not “hover” over their school-age children face a scheduler's dilemma of organizing and shuffling transportation for play dates, team practices, arts and music lessons, and tutoring sessions.¹²

Much like supervision, parents' involvement with their children can be determined in part by work schedules. How parents cope with the demands of supervision and involvement depends on the predictability of the situation. But even in the most predictable situations, the structure of the workplace can take a toll on parents' abilities to provide adequate supervision and involvement.

Predictable Supervision

One of the most predictable responsibilities of parents is to ensure that their children attend school. (Although the number of students being home schooled is growing, their parents' supervisory responsibilities are considerably different from the ones described here.) Most states require that children start school by age five and remain in school until age eighteen. In 2010 approximately 55.9 million children were enrolled in public and private schools in the United States.¹³ The number of days in the school year and the

number of instructional hours per day that children are expected to attend are mandated by each state (or local school districts in the seven states with no formal policy). Most states require a minimum of 180 days; however, several states require fewer than 175 days.¹⁴ These laws apply to both public and private schools.

A 180-day school year leaves at least 185 days in the year when parents have to manage their children's full day care. Weekends can be especially troublesome for parents who have to work on those days. But even parents who do not work on weekends still have to make arrangements for their children's care on at least 81 weekdays during the year when their children are not scheduled to be in school—holidays, school vacations, and summer breaks. Among industrialized countries, the United States has one of the shortest school years, with two and a half months for summer vacation.¹⁵

Although school holidays and vacations are predictable, they are not always convenient for working parents, who may not be able to take a day off when schools close on a Monday for Washington's Birthday, Columbus Day, or Veteran's Day or for ten days around Christmas. Moreover, teacher professional days, mandated by states or union contracts, can add up to another five to ten full or half-days a year when school is closed and working parents must arrange care for their children.¹⁶

More recently, schools facing budgetary constraints and pressure to increase or maintain the number of instructional hours have altered their school calendar, which typically starts in September and ends in June. Some schools have moved to year-round schedules with more breaks during the year.¹⁷ Several

news stories have suggested that more breaks make it even more difficult for parents to juggle their schedules and supervise their children.¹⁸ Some schools have moved to a four-day school week, which presents problems for parents working standard shifts who now have to find child care for one full day during the workweek.¹⁹

A typical school day rarely coincides with a typical workday. A U.S. Department of Labor report estimates that only "64 percent of a fulltime worker's standard work schedule is covered by the hours children are typically in school."²⁰ The commute to and from work can lengthen that coverage gap. Typically, students are dismissed from school between 2:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m., while most full-time employed parents leave work sometime between 5:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m., leaving a gap between school and work of roughly fifteen to twenty-five hours a week.²¹ These numbers can be even more daunting for a parent who works long hours or mandatory overtime.

The proportion of time that working parents spend directly with their school-age children on their care and educational activities seems somewhat limited. Parents with standard thirty-five-hour workweeks spend on average slightly under six hours a week, including weekends, providing direct care for their children aged six through seventeen.²²

Women are more likely to spend more time (a little more than seven hours) compared with men, who spend about four hours a week. Most direct care is related to physical needs, such as feeding (one-and-a-half hours a week), followed by education-related activities, such as helping with homework (fifty minutes a week).

What is important to underscore about these hours is that they are averaged across a wide

spectrum of age groups, and certainly older children are on their own for much more time than younger children. Nevertheless, the total amount of time working parents spend with their children on school days, either in direct care or just being together, seems relatively small.

School-age children, on average, are alone without adult supervision before and after school for nearly fourteen hours a week, or nearly three hours a day.²³ The number of children in kindergarten through eighth grade left alone after school rose from 14.3 million (25 percent) in 2004 to 15.1 million (26 percent) in 2009.²⁴ Children with regularly scheduled non-self-care arrangements spend an average of nearly five hours a week before school and nine hours a week after school in such care. Generally younger children are more likely to be in the care of a nonrelative or center before and after school, whereas older children are more likely to care for themselves. Black children are more likely than any other racial or ethnic group to receive nonparental care before school and to care for themselves. Regularly scheduled nonrelative before- and after-school care appears related to household income, with families earning more than \$25,000 more likely to use center or school-based care.

A nationally representative parent study, conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, examined the before- and after-school care of kindergarteners through eighth graders and found that about one-fifth of these children were in regularly scheduled nonparental arrangements before school at least once a month, and about half were in such arrangements after school.²⁵ Children not in nonparental care arrangements were in their parents' care. A later NCES study looked just at after-school arrangements and

found that 40 percent of children in eighth grade or under were in formal nonparental care arrangements at least once a week. The three most commonly used after-school arrangements were center- or school-based care (20 percent of all kindergarteners through eighth graders), care by a relative (15 percent), and self-care (12 percent); some children were in more than one arrangement.²⁶

Single-parent households and households where mothers work full time are likely to have nonparental care arrangements for their children before and after school. Children of mothers who work full time are more likely to have before-school arrangements (31 percent of all mothers working full time) than children of mothers who work part time (12 percent) or who are not employed (9 percent). The patterns for after-school care are similar. Although most children of working mothers participate in one after-school care arrangement on a regular basis, almost a third of working mothers (32 percent) piece together different arrangements to cover the hours when they cannot provide supervision.²⁷

Children who care for themselves or who receive care from a relative are more likely to be cared for in their own home than somewhere else. Most relatives who provide care are grandmothers of the children (52 percent) or siblings (21 percent). Public schools provide the majority of center- or school-based care (55 percent); the remainder is provided by private schools and care centers outside the school. Surprisingly, parents report no statistically significant differences among the types of activities children engage in before and after school regardless of the kind of care arrangement. Homework is the most frequent activity in all types of care, followed by television watching (with the

exception of center- or school-based care), and then outdoor and indoor play.²⁸

As children mature, the activities they engage in change. Eighth graders are more likely to participate in sports, academic pursuits, and community service activities than children in kindergarten through fifth grade. Most of these activities are sponsored by the children's schools. Parents often count on organized after-school programs to bridge the gap in supervision and enrichment for their children between the end of the school day and the time parents return home from work.

After-School Programs

In the past two decades, private foundation and government funding has resulted in a significant increase in the number of after-school programs, defined as programs that provide enriching activities for children in a safe space after the school day ends.

Afterschool Alliance, a coalition of public, private, and nonprofit groups dedicated to raising awareness and expanding resources for after-school programs, estimates that the number of school-age children participating in these programs rose from 6.5 million (11 percent) in 2004 to 8.4 million (15 percent) in 2009.²⁹ In addition to helping fill the gap between the end of the school day and the end of the workday, these programs are often credited with reducing crime and drug use and otherwise keeping kids out of trouble, and with increasing student academic achievement.³⁰ The strength of these claims is limited, however, because most after-school program evaluations have serious methodological limitations related to selection bias, accurate counts of the actual number of after-school participation hours per student, the types of activities engaged in, and program attrition.³¹

Barriers to children's participation in after-school programs include access, program costs, and age-appropriateness of offerings.³² Many children lack transportation to programs that are located away from their school. According to one survey, 38 percent of parents of kindergarten children through eighth graders who are not in an after-school program would enroll them if a program were available in their community.³³ On average, after-school programs cost \$67 a week per child, and 52 percent of parents report cost as being a barrier to enrollment.³⁴ Additionally, after-school programs often fit the developmental trajectory of a specific age range. This issue is particularly challenging for preteens who have lost interest in after-school programs aimed at younger elementary school students but are not yet developmentally ready for activities targeted to older adolescents.

Other extracurricular activities that can take place on weekends and in summers and that can be sponsored by organizations other than schools include sports, clubs, and lessons. Nationally, nearly 60 percent of children aged six through seventeen participated in at least one extracurricular activity in 2000, with older children participating more frequently (37 percent for those aged twelve through seventeen; 31 percent for those aged six through eleven).³⁵ Younger children were more likely to participate in lessons after school or on the weekends, whereas older children were more likely to participate in sports.

Out-of-school activities have been shown to positively influence adolescents' social, educational, civic, and physical development.³⁶ Selection of these activities appears to be affected not only by the interests of adolescents and their peers but also by parents' work schedules, family resources, and the

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offerings in surrounding communities.³⁷ Transportation is always a concern especially if the child needs to be driven to the program when the parents are at work.³⁸ Less is known about how parents cope, both at work and emotionally, with arranging for such activities.³⁹ One notable study of 936 full-time employed dual-earner couples with a school-age child found that working parents' concerns about their children's after-school arrangements were associated with job disruptions such as being distracted or drained of energy at work, making on-the-job errors, turning down requests for overtime or travel, and missing deadlines or meetings. Although we are unaware of any definitive studies on the issue, parental stress related to after-school arrangements appears to have an impact not only on parents and their children but also on employers in the form of untold losses in productivity.

Reorganizing School Schedules to Accommodate Working Parents

Because schools are places where children are likely to receive adequate supervisory care and because some school-based after-school programs have been instrumental in improving children's performance, one frequent suggestion is to reorganize the formal school day to more closely match parents' work schedules either by extending the school day or lengthening the school year.

Seemingly reasonable solutions on their face, these proposals may not garner much support among parents or their children. A recent poll conducted by Heather Boushey and funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and *Time* surveyed 3,500 adults, who were asked what changes were necessary for working parents to balance their job or business, their marriage, and their children. Fifty-one percent of respondents said that their own workplaces should be more flexible, while only 11 percent suggested lengthening school hours or the school year.⁴⁰

Why so little apparent interest in changing the length of the school day? One reason may be the roughly 3.5 million teachers working in schools in the United States. The majority of them are women, more than 70 percent of them are married, and some of them are likely to have children in school.⁴¹ Historically, women chose this occupation in part because the workday corresponded to their own children's school schedule.⁴² A recent study found that most teachers chose the profession because of the flexibility it gave them with their families.⁴³ It seems reasonable to assume that the current school schedule is compatible with family needs for a considerable number of teachers. Parents who are self-employed or who work shifts also may find the current school day compatible with their work schedules.

Lengthening the school year is typically proposed as a way to raise academic achievement, not as a solution to problems of family-work balance. Whether a longer school year would in fact raise achievement is questionable. The quality of the research evidence is uneven, and even the most rigorous studies show that four-day school weeks and year-round schooling have little effect on student performance.⁴⁴ Empirical evidence of the

consequences of changing the school schedule on the family-work balance is limited, and the issue clearly suggests a direction for future research.

Another proposal for addressing the needs of working parents and children is to increase access to after-school programs. This option may be desirable for primary school children, but whether it has much appeal for families with middle or high school children is unknown. Little research examines whether parents and their children aged twelve to eighteen, regardless of their discretionary resources, would actively support and participate in after-school programs if they were more widely available. In the current climate of intense parenting, many families may have neither the time nor the interest in having their children participate in after-school or community-based programs that extend the formal school day because their children are already overscheduled in fee-for-service tutoring or academic engagement programs.⁴⁵ Lack of interest is also likely among families with limited economic resources, because they rely on their teenagers to help with after-school care of younger children or to work after school to contribute to household expenses. In addition, adolescence is marked by independence and separation, so the appeal of after-school programs may be limited for many of today's teenagers, especially if friends or other sources of entertainment are beckoning.

Regardless of the extent of parental demand for after-school programs, the suppliers—which often include U.S. public elementary and secondary schools—are experiencing severe economic cutbacks, with teachers being dismissed and programs being discontinued out of concern for costs. Current resources barely cover formal school programs

for most children. In public schools across the country, parents are making donations to keep art and music classes and libraries operational. In many schools students have to pay a fee to participate in after-school sports. Given the current economic climate and the public cries to cut public spending, even for education, it seems unrealistic to expect changes in the school schedule or significant additions to after-school programs that would help parents balance their work-family responsibilities.

Unpredictable Supervision

From time to time all parents must cope with unpredictable situations involving their children. By their very definition, unpredictable situations can occur on any given day and fall outside prearranged care; it is in these situations where workplace flexibility is most salient.⁴⁶ The most common example is a child who falls ill and needs direct personal care. On average, a child is likely to miss three to five days a school year because of illness or injury.⁴⁷ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that 20–25 percent of all children under age eighteen will sustain a severe injury that entails medical attention, missed school, or bed rest.⁴⁸ The financial and emotional costs of children's illnesses on working parents have not been well researched; however, a recent study found that at least 25 percent of surveyed households in Pennsylvania reported lost vacation or sick time during an unexpected week-long school closing resulting from an influenza outbreak.⁴⁹ Unforeseeable weather-related events such as storms may require parents either to keep their child at home or pick their child up early at school. Threats of severe weather-related events such as hurricanes and tornadoes can evoke fear and worry on the part of parents, leading them to take unexpected time off from work to ensure their children are safe.

Living in high-risk neighborhoods troubled by social disorganization, limited social networks, and insufficient community-based resources, such as public recreational programs, can create additional challenges for working parents who themselves are likely to have limited household resources.⁵⁰ For example, the local tax revenue base for low-income neighborhoods often impedes the establishment and sustainability of adequate out-of-school programs for youth.⁵¹ Parents with limited resources are more likely to rely on in-home management to protect their child from the dangers of their surroundings.⁵² The stress on parents in these situations is also exacerbated because of heightened concern that something life threatening could unexpectedly happen to their child in the neighborhood or in their home. Both at work and while commuting, these working parents spend countless hours worrying that their child is safe and has not been caught up in a violent assault, home invasion, or random shooting.⁵³

For families in more advantaged neighborhoods, the events, predictable and unpredictable, of everyday life requiring parent supervision are often more manageable, in part because parents may be able to afford more care for their children. These parents are also more likely to have social networks they can rely on to look after their children.⁵⁴ The concept of reciprocity in strong social networks can be especially helpful for working parents as they juggle arrangements for car pools, sports events, and unexpected early dismissals from school. Working parents, even those with economic resources, do not necessarily form neighborhood social networks on their own but rely on their children to do so for them.⁵⁵ Furthermore, social networks that parents form at work do not necessarily transfer to their neighborhood

lives, especially when most workplaces are on average fifteen miles away from their homes.⁵⁶ Most working parents travel an extra five to six miles a day dropping off and picking up their children.⁵⁷ Depending on family and friends for unpredictable, and in some cases even for predictable, events is often problematic for working parents; thus making even small improvements to workplace flexibility will be substantially beneficial to these parents and their children.

Discretionary Action: Involvement and Enrichment

While parental supervision entails meeting the physical and safety needs of the child, parental involvement covers those activities that parents undertake to enhance their child's academic performance and emotional and social well-being. Involvement is voluntary on the part of the parent and can be predictable; examples are setting aside time for the parent to help with homework, arranging summer school or camps, visiting prospective colleges, and being accessible through text messages or calls. Being involved with the school can help parents learn how best to help their children with homework, what school-related topics to discuss at home, and the importance of high educational expectations. But involvement requires time and resources that are generally related to household income and family priorities. Most middle- and upper-income parents realize the importance of navigating the U.S. educational system by selecting the best schools possible and the right teachers and by emphasizing to their children the consequences of mediocre test score performance. Given the complexity of the educational system, securing advantages for one's children requires parents not only to engage with the school but also to know teachers and school policies.⁵⁸ Low-wage workers, even those who place a priority

on being involved with their children's education, are unlikely to have the financial resources or flexible work schedules needed to help ensure their children's success in school.

Parental involvement can have an element of unpredictability about it, when, for example, a child is diagnosed with a special learning need and requires tutoring, or when a child needs extra help with a homework assignment. Such instances can create additional pressure and stress on both the child and the working parent. Being able to help with homework, be engaged with the school, and troubleshoot academic problems requires time, which is in short supply for many working parents, who have little to no flexibility to alter their schedules so they can be home when their children are home or at school to advocate for their children's best interests.

Low-wage workers face multiple problems when interfacing with the school. First, many of these parents believe that they can trust the school to take care of their children, and that their own personal involvement is less important in their children's education than that of the teacher.⁵⁹ Second, because of their work situations parents may be unable to visit the school for teacher conferences or other activities that would support their children's educational success.⁶⁰ The school staff may view parents who are not at school as uncaring or uninterested.⁶¹ Lack of flexible work situations can make it difficult for parents to build social relationships and acquire informational material that parents who frequently visit the school and interact with teachers can more easily obtain.

A synthesis of empirical experimental studies of welfare-to-work programs by Lisa Gennetian and her colleagues suggests that,

when mothers become employed full time, adolescents show poorer school performance, including a higher rate of grade repetition and greater use of special education services.⁶² Adolescents with younger siblings had the most negative effects. Not only were these children more likely to have poor school performance, they also were more likely to be suspended or expelled from or drop out of school.

With millions of children needing care at predictable times before and after school, flexibility in start and end times for work could greatly reduce the parental stress of finding alternative care arrangements.

One of the possible explanations for these results is that low-income parents, especially those who are single, are likely to have little control over scheduling their work hours and are less likely to have access to flexible work arrangements than do professional employees.⁶³ These types of work conditions are likely to interfere with parents' abilities to be involved with their children's education, as well as to supervise their children.

Workplace Flexibility as an Intervention

According to Labor Department statistics, more than one-fifth of all working women have school-age children.⁶⁴ As that proportion has increased in the past few decades,

working parents have begun to look to the workplace for the flexibility they need to meet their parental responsibilities.

Although workplace flexibility is generally perceived as valuable for both the employer and employee,⁶⁵ designing and implementing flexibility that can meet working parents' needs present considerable challenges. In general, two types of flexibility are particularly relevant for working parents: flexible work arrangements that allow employees more control over when and where they work on a daily basis; and formal and informal time-off policies that allow for short-term time off (STO). Flexible work arrangements include flextime (allowing variability in the start and end times for the workday); compressed workweeks; and various forms of reduced hours, including part-time, job sharing, and part-year work. Some flextime programs also allow employees to bank hours, that is, to work longer hours, which they may later "draw out" for a variety of purposes, including providing care for their children during school breaks (predictable) or when they fall ill (unpredictable). Parents report that banking hours is one of the most preferred options for allowing greater workplace flexibility with respect to scheduling.⁶⁶

With millions of children needing care at predictable times before and after school, flexibility in start and end times for work could greatly reduce the parental stress of finding alternative care arrangements. Making flexible the start and end times of the workday could involve a formal policy or an accepted informal practice that also benefits employers in the form of increased employee job satisfaction, engagement, and retention.⁶⁷ Daily flextime practices that enable employees to vary when they start and end their workdays, as well as the ability to take time

off during the day if needed, can relieve the stress of unexpected events involving their children.

Many companies find that flexibility benefits the company as well as the parents. Kraft Foods, for example, experienced increased worker satisfaction and retention after it set up a program that allowed its hourly plant workers to swap shifts, take single-day vacations, and request job-sharing arrangements. Similarly, Texas Instruments implemented a workplace flexibility policy that allows most, but not all, employees to meet their personal needs by adjusting their work schedule or telecommuting. The company specifically highlighted the policy as a way for employees to cope with doctor's appointments, sick children, or late-night conference calls. As a result, Texas Instruments saw improvements in employee retention rates, stress levels, and job effectiveness. Moreover, the company found that team members temporarily assumed some of the work tasks of those taking time off, which broadened and diversified employee skills.⁶⁸

KPMG LLP, an audit, tax, and advisory firm, adopted an Alternative Work Arrangement program, which provides flextime and flexplace options that employees who are parents of school-age children now use regularly. These options include reduced hours, starting the workday early and ending it at the end of the school day, and "logging off" after school and then logging back on from home in the evening. During the current recession, KPMG has leveraged its need to cut costs with employees' desire for greater work flexibility and more time off, particularly during the summer months. The company now offers a sabbatical program that provides partially paid leave of four to twelve weeks. Employees receive 20 percent

of their regular salary during their time away and may use accrued personal time off to offset the pay differential. More than 450 people had signed up for the program between April 2010, when the program launched, and the end of 2010. Recognizing that employees may run short of their own accrued personal time off during a family crisis, KPMG has also established a “shared leave bank” that lets employees donate hours to help out colleagues in need of additional personal time off when faced with a medical crisis in their family.⁶⁹

Where employers do not provide formal flexibility, there is evidence that some employees arrange for it informally. Recent research at an automotive parts plant found that unionized, hourly workers negotiated informal agreements among themselves to cover for workers who wanted time off to see their children in a ball game or to attend a school event. The workers also share an understanding that reporting such activities to the supervisor is problematic, and an informal sanctioning mechanism has made the workplace uncomfortable for those employees who do not go along with the practice.⁷⁰ The researchers concluded that while informal flexibility created a sense of camaraderie among employees, it would not be sustainable if unexpected work conditions occurred.

Telecommuting

One type of flexibility that can be useful to working parents is telecommuting—working from home. Despite the increased use of computers that allow for instant messaging, Internet calls, and video conferencing, however, telecommuting does not seem to be gaining momentum. The U.S. government was an early adopter of telecommuting, but relatively few workers took advantage of the program. Currently, the federal government

lags behind the private sector in this option, with a smaller percentage of federal employees than private employees telecommuting.⁷¹ One reason, found even among high-wage workers in the private sector, is that those who telecommute are often perceived as being less committed to their work than those employees who work in the office. One nationally representative sample of college-educated women and men found that women are the more stigmatized when they telecommute. Four of ten women sampled report having difficulties with co-workers’ behavior toward them when taking advantage of this option.⁷²

Even though telecommuting has not been as popular as other forms of flexibility, well-designed programs can suit the needs of employers and employees. 1-800 CONTACTS, the world’s largest contact lens retailer, attributes its strong business performance in large part to its flexibility. The company’s technology allows its call-center staff to handle even the most complex orders at home; those who work in-house may choose their own schedules. As a result, almost half of the call-center employees work from home, and the company has more than 225 different work schedules. Its use of flexible work arrangements has not only benefited its employees but also yielded positive business outcomes; the company’s employee turnover rates are below one-third of the national average for the call-center industry.⁷³ And in 2007 J. D. Power & Associates, a global marketing information services company, awarded 1-800 CONTACTS its highest service rating ever for a call center.

While telecommuting can work well when well designed, what seems most problematic about it is that working parents are already using computers at home and on the

weekends for spillover work from their workdays, thereby blurring the boundaries between work and family. Parents have been estimated to work about 160 extra hours a year, counting the hours worked early in the morning, late in the evening, and over the weekend. This is time that parents are often not compensated for; when asked why they are working, the answer is often to keep up with work-related responsibilities.⁷⁴ These long work hours take a toll; parents are often emotionally drained, stressed, and resentful of the intrusion of work into family life.⁷⁵ For parents, working extra hours on the job at home can hurt their relationships with their children.⁷⁶ Although physically present, they may be distracted and pay little close attention to their children or education-related activities.

Workplace flexibility is critical for working parents trying to ensure the safety and health of their children.

Short-Term Time Off

Employers can also provide flexibility in the form of paid time off, which allows employees to take a limited number of days off in a year for personal or family reasons, including caring for a sick child, without losing pay or having to use vacation days. Currently, employers provide STO through a variety of employer-sponsored benefit packages and government regulations. However, access to STO varies between and within organizations depending on the company's size and function, workers' occupations, and employment status.⁷⁷ Most firms employing more than five

hundred workers provide paid holiday leave, paid bereavement leave, short-term disability, paid vacation, and paid sick days. These types of short leaves tend to be disproportionately available to full-time but not part-time employees and to those working in large firms.⁷⁸ Firms with fewer than five hundred employees rarely provide such benefits. In their studies of employers and employees in large and small firms, Ellen Galinsky and her colleagues found that more than 60 percent of employers permit all or most of their employees to take time off for important family or personal needs.⁷⁹ Approximately 31 percent of employees say it is "not hard at all" to take time off during the workday for personal or family reasons without a loss of pay. Conversely, 37 percent of employees report that taking time off for personal reasons is somewhat hard or very hard.⁸⁰

The value of STO is obvious: workers periodically need time away from work to help resolve conflicts that can occur because there are not enough persons and resources to cover the unexpected events and needs that arise in everyday life. On the employer side, STO benefits are commonly perceived as relatively low cost and an incentive for higher productivity, and as a contributing factor to a healthier workforce. However, employers express concerns that employees could overuse the benefit, creating an undesirable work ethic, reducing morale, and becoming a drain on resources.

Culture of Flexibility

Even in firms where different forms of workplace flexibility are available, some employees are reluctant to take advantage of these benefits. In a 2003 nationally representative study of 3,504 workers, only 30 percent of employees at companies with advertised workplace flexibility options felt "strongly"

that they could use these options without jeopardizing their chances for job or career advancement.⁸¹ This finding was consistent across levels of income and workplace sizes. In difficult economic times, employees are particularly worried about using flexibility options because they are afraid of being fired or laid off if they do not appear completely dedicated to their jobs.⁸²

These flexible work arrangements are relatively economically neutral for the employers: workers typically put in the same number of hours but on different schedules. Nonetheless, workers who are hesitant to use minimal flexibility benefits may be even less likely to avail themselves of other options such as part-time work and job sharing that they perceive as being costly to their employers and therefore more likely to place their jobs at risk.⁸³ However, these are the very options that are critical when parents require more intensive interaction with their children.

Flexibility practices are likely to become workplace standards only if work cultures develop that support flexibility and minimize the stigma of using it. First Tennessee Bank developed such a culture, educating its managers to “market” the company’s flex options to employees placing an emphasis on “family.” Within five years more than 60 percent of employees used some sort of flexibility, and the bank reports saving over \$3 million in turnover costs.⁸⁴

Conclusion

Workplace flexibility is critical for working parents trying to ensure the safety and health of their children. No one wants a primary school child left unattended in the school yard waiting for a parent. The issues around involvement with one’s child are more ephemeral because the degree of

engagement is to some extent a matter of choice. High parental involvement can make a difference in children’s achievement and behavior, but parents have to have the time as well as the motivation to become involved with their children. The problem is not work per se but rather how much time working families have to spend together as a family and how that time is spent.

For low-wage workers these problems multiply exponentially. Most of these workers hold jobs that have fluctuating hours or overnight shifts and few benefits, such as paid sick or vacation days. The need to stay home and care for a sick child can translate into a day without pay or even the loss of one’s job. Expanded workplace flexibility for these workers could help them to meet the educational needs of their children.

Some of the most valuable workplace options for all parents of school-age children are having time off to care for their children when holidays, weather, illness, or emergencies keep them from school. Other helpful options include allowing workers to change their starting and quitting times periodically (or, even better, daily), allowing employees to work from home or off-site occasionally, and enabling them to job-share or work part time without loss of benefits and with the ability to return to full time when needed.

Some research shows positive results for employees and their employers when workers have more control over their work schedules. A quasi-experimental study of work groups in Best Buy, a large U.S. retail firm, found that workers with a say in their work schedule had lower commuting times, more and higher-quality sleep, more energy, less work-family conflict, and lower absenteeism than those in the control groups.⁸⁵ However, in workplaces

that employ primarily low-wage workers, opportunities for changing work conditions remain limited.

It is the culture of the workplace that really makes a difference. Creating a workplace flexibility culture is not something that can occur over a short-term basis. Workplace flexibility requires both employers and employees to find a common ground for discourse and to craft consensus-based solutions that benefit all parties. There has to be a common purpose, dialogue, and dedication to change. If flexibility options are not widely

viewed as acceptable business practices, they are unlikely to be used—even though workplace flexibility appears to be the solution that most working parents desire to meet the needs of their jobs and their families and to build healthy, strong relationships with their children.⁸⁶ As more and more mothers and fathers work, it becomes critical to find more appropriate workplace flexibility practices that are better suited for families with children, especially if society hopes to continue to see engaged workers who have strong family relationships with their children.

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