

10th Annual Modern Family Index

The New Working Parent

Research shows a widening chasm between what parents want and what workplaces are providing.



How has the experience of working and parenting evolved in ten years?

A new study shows the **biggest change may well be to parents themselves.**

The 10th annual Modern Family Index, commissioned by **Bright Horizons®** and conducted by the Harris Poll, shows a decided shift in the way working parents think. While these employees have always longed for increased support from employers, in 2024, **they're no longer content to wait on the sidelines for change to happen.** Ten years after our first Modern Family Index found employees with children afraid that merely talking about families could get them fired, today's parents are feeling freer to be candid; they're forthright about what they need; and they're prioritizing companies that provide it. A full 70% say working for a company that offers benefits to support work/life balance is non-negotiable. Two thirds (66%) of those who are planning to have more children in the future say they would consider waiting to grow their families until they're at a company with better familial/family planning benefits.

Yet progress is lagging behind. Even as employer acceptance of family responsibilities has improved, tangible support has not. **Many employees with children (40%) feel the workplace has gotten worse for working parents in the last decade,** with less than a third of parents saying their employer helps them with the cost of child care.

For employers, it paints of a picture of a newly emboldened generation of parents — rising leaders who are not merely clear eyed about the conflicts between jobs and families, but who are also taking a firm stand on what it will take for employers to keep them.

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of working parents say working for a company that offers benefits to support work/life balance is non-negotiable.

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Unafraid to put family first

To be sure, **some workplace evolution has been for the better**. In present day, parents appear less compelled to hide that they have families, with 78% saying they feel parents are more comfortable than they used to be speaking up with their employer about related responsibilities.

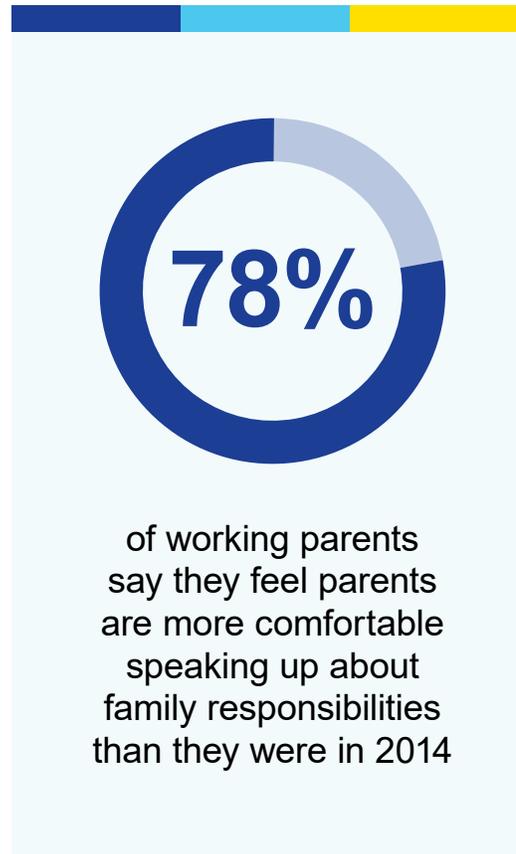
And in 2024, despite prioritizing families just as much as they did in 2014 (77% vs. 76%), parents are less likely than they were in 2014 to report they would be nervous to tell their bosses they needed to miss a work event for a family commitment (24% vs. 39%), and roughly half as likely to be afraid to say they either wanted to reduce hours (22% vs. 43%) or work remotely (21% vs. 43%).

There have also been some practical improvements. More than half of working parents (52%) say job flexibility has improved, with similar numbers saying they have more flexible parental leave (55%), and are now able to work flexible hours that fit their families (50%). The work-from-home era has offered additional solace. Among those enjoying hybrid and remote work, 88% say it makes managing family responsibilities easier, 81% say it helps them better manage time overall, and 83% say it makes them feel less stressed and more productive.

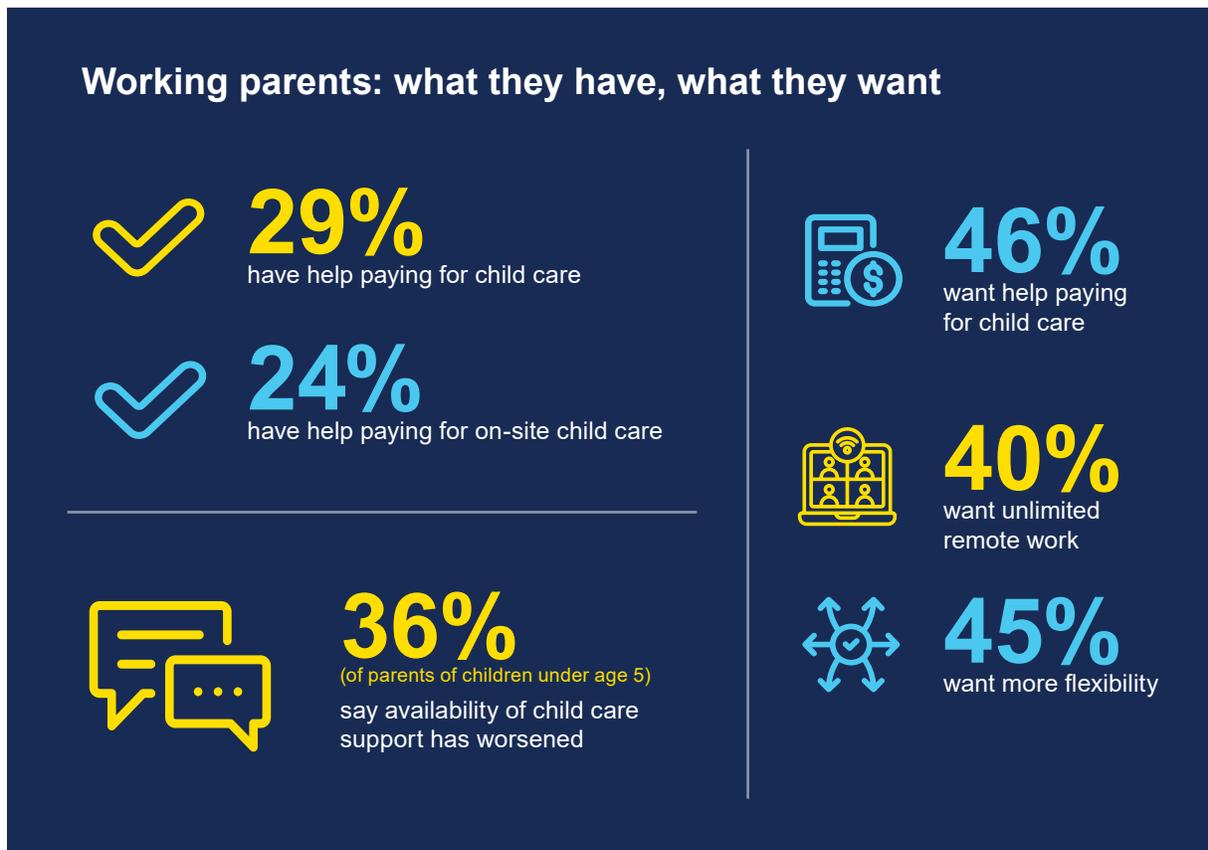
A continuing tug-of-war

Yet it hasn't all been smooth sailing, with **working parents still very much dealing with conflict from the push-pull on all sides**. Many (34%) feel they're working too many hours; 63% worry they're unable to give their all to their families; 58% report they're not giving 100% of themselves at work; and 43% feel stressed because they are not being paid well enough for the work they're doing.

And even as the workplace tries to adjust philosophically, practical parent support remains hard to come by. While nearly half of respondents (46%) put help paying for child care atop their wish lists of helpful benefits/supports — even above unlimited remote work (40%) and more flexible work hours (45%) — less than a third (29%) actually have such assistance. And in an era where employers are eager to see employees back at the office, less than a quarter of parents (24%) say their company is helping to pay for on-site child care. Even amid widely reported child care shortages, more than a third of parents with children under age 5 (36%) report that the availability of child care supports has gotten worse over the course of their career.



The situation is most concerning for the large number of parents — more than a third (35%) — who have very little/not much support outside of work for their roles as employee, parent, and caretaker. These **employees not only lack help from personal resources such as family; they're also the least likely to get assistance at work**, such as mental health benefits (59% vs. 70%), more flexible parental leave (46% vs. 60%), and flexible work hours (37% vs. 58%). As a result, these employees are more likely than supported colleagues (42% vs. 33%) to feel stress from unexpected child care issues or emergencies, and more likely (57% vs. 37%) to say their mental health in the workplace has declined post-parenthood. Such issues appear even to affect careers, with these employees more likely (28% vs. 20%) than those who have support to say they are stressed by the lack of a path toward professional growth.



Additionally, while some of the workplace edges have softened, old philosophical issues continue to hang on. **Ten years of MFI data show parents historically worried about negative bias, many feeling their professional status diminished by parenthood in the eyes of colleagues and supervisors.**

Worries may have ebbed in 2024, but they haven't disappeared. Though parents are considerably less likely than their 2014 counterparts to say they fear family responsibilities will cost them a raise (29% vs. 39%), a promotion (26% vs. 37%), or their job (28% vs. 43%), even those with work/life balance benefits are still concerned, with many reporting fears that using family benefits will result in judgment from colleagues (40%) or negative impacts on their performance evaluation (41%).

Spotlight on demographics

The struggle to successfully manage a career and a family crosses industries, roles, and demographics. But **ongoing pressures for two key groups continue to create challenges both for the parents themselves**, as well as for the people who employ them.

An ongoing issue for dads

Women still unquestionably bear the brunt of the caregiving load. But ongoing MFI data show working fathers are feeling similar pressures.

Sixty-one percent of working fathers report negative feelings about balancing children and jobs. Many say working and parenting (25%) and the level of child care supports (21%) have gotten worse over the course of their career.

What's more, in 2024, dads report that they are stressed by their family obligations.

- ▶ **34%** are stressed by unexpected child care issues or emergencies during the day
- ▶ **24%** have faked being sick to meet a family obligation
- ▶ **21%** have admitted to lying to their boss about family obligations that get in the way of their work

Frontlines in the crosshairs

Frontline workers saw their profile rise during the pandemic, elevated to “essential worker” status during the height of lockdown. While they continue to be critical resources, **unforgiving schedules make these employees among the most susceptible to the challenges of family care, yet the least likely to say they have adequate benefits** — even as shortages spiral into a crisis of empty positions.

Despite their recognized importance, frontline employees are more likely to be dissatisfied with benefits, and are more likely to say the quality of what's being offered (30% vs. 23%), the level of available child care supports (27% vs. 20%), and the flexibility of their schedule (24% vs. 14%) has not only failed to improve, but has actually gotten worse over the course of their career.

For parents, child care is #1

The line between work and personal life has long been blurred, but never more so than since COVID brought the two crashing into each other. Perhaps **that's why the current generation of parents feels empowered to be open about all challenges related to parenting** (including adoption, IVF, and surrogacy) and emboldened to ask for the benefits they need. Still, given current pressure points, it's no surprise that assistance **paying for child care (46%) and having onsite child care (43%)** topped even unlimited remote work (40%) as the benefit/support respondents think would be the most helpful for working parents/caretakers.

But practical support is in short supply

In 2024, employees still feel that branding themselves as parents comes with consequences, so much that many whose company offers at least some work-life balance benefits feel using supportive benefits will negatively impact performance reviews (41%) or result in negative judgment from colleagues (40%). But fear isn't the only reason work-life benefits go unused. **More than a third (39%) of working parents whose company offers these benefits don't have a clear understanding of what benefits they have**, indicating an opportunity for employers to up both their offerings and communicate better with their people.

They feel attention to their situation is going unrecognized. Four years after the impacts of family challenges on frontlines became clear, these employees are more likely than non-frontline workers to say the overall working-parent experience has gotten worse not just over the course of their career (32% vs. 22%) but even just over the last decade (45% vs. 31%).

The future: tempered optimism, a blueprint for employers

The data should sound alarm bells for employers. **The very employees who are having children today represent the pipeline of future leaders, and their priorities are clear.**

Yet the same data present clues to what would help. In contrast to their 2014 counterparts, today's parents seem more optimistic about the future of working and parenting. Forty-four percent anticipate the workplace will get better for working parents over the next decade. Many envision specific improvements, including newfound schedule flexibility (65%), better quality benefits (57%), more sensitivity to work/life balance needs (44%), and more child care supports (35%).

That signals opportunity for employers. Because within that optimism is a blueprint for talent strategy. Those who deliver on it have the chance to cement their cultures as family friendly, establishing themselves as a magnet for today's employees — and positioning their organizations as places the next generation can (and will want to) build careers.

Research Method

The research was conducted online in the U.S. by The Harris Poll on behalf of Bright Horizons among 2,004 adults aged 18 and over who are employed with children under 18. The survey was conducted from January 25 – February 2, 2024.

Data are weighted where necessary by age by gender, race/ethnicity, region, education, marital status, household size, employment, household income, and smoking status to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in our surveys. The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, the sample data is accurate to within + 3.1 percentage points using a 95% confidence level. This credible interval will be wider among subsets of the surveyed population of interest.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to other multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including, but not limited to coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments.



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