

# 7<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL MODERN FAMILY INDEX

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New Data Shows the Pandemic is Making the Mental Load a Family Affair



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## FAMILIES ON OVERLOAD

It's been a year since COVID-19 swept the world – a year that has taken a major toll on working families. Worries about job security, school shutdowns, and children's remote learning have piled the pressure on parents – people who were already struggling to balance families with jobs even before the pandemic.

This year's Modern Family Index, commissioned by **Bright Horizons**<sup>®</sup> and conducted by Kelton Global, explores the impact of the tumultuous year, not just on parents, but on all members of the family. For working mothers and fathers, the stress and the mental loads are bigger than ever. Yet it's not only parents who are struggling. In the era of COVID, children are managing their own mental loads, burdened by decidedly grown-up worries about social distancing, remote learning, and fear of illness, creating concerns for parents about the impacts on their children's social skills, cognitive development, and what this year will mean for their childhoods.



## HOME LIFE UPENDED

COVID-19 has accelerated major changes in working parents' personal and professional lives, transforming how they work, take care of the home, and raise children. The pandemic pushed roughly half (49%) of all working parents or their spouses/partners into work-from-home arrangements, and added substantially to what were already full plates. Three in four (75%) employed mothers and fathers report increased child care responsibilities; more than half with young children (ages 0-5) feel more responsible for their children's development (55%); and nearly as many with school-age children (ages 3-17) are playing a larger role in supporting their schoolwork (51%). As if that's not enough, nearly half are both taking care of their children's daily needs (49%) and entertaining their children (48%).

Hunkering down at home has also added to the weight of family responsibilities. More than four in five working parents (82%) are managing growing household chores, including cooking more meals for their family (58%), cleaning their house more frequently (58%), doing the family laundry (50%), and taking out the trash (43%) more often.

## WEIGHED DOWN BY THE MENTAL LOAD

The mental load was a force before COVID; the pandemic has only made it bigger – and more concerning. Nine in ten parents are worried about their own (91%) and their spouse/partner's (91%) mental load. They're also worried about the impact their mental load is having on the health of their family, with close to three in ten (28%) admitting that concerns about their family dynamic outweigh anything else.

Children's new routines are further straining these employees, heaping on new responsibilities, and compounding the already-stressful situation. Amid child care and school closures, more than two in five working parents (42%) say they are forced to act as stand-in teachers for their children; 41% say that their whole family is missing the schedule and structure that school and/or child care typically provides. Further, roughly a third say that it is stressful to provide or even find more educational (33%) and developmental (30%) opportunities for their home-bound children.

**50%**  
**of parents**

say concerns about both their **children's mental load and mental health** have grown in the last year



# CHILDHOOD REDEFINED

## School Progress in Jeopardy, Sharing the Mental Load

Working parents say child care and school closures are stealing children's precious developmental support, with the majority agreeing their children are missing out on the social aspects of school or child care (60%). Additional worries include too much screen time (60%), a lack of extracurricular activities (53%), and physical inactivity (48%). About one in four (24%) also believe their children are becoming more withdrawn or introverted.

This is raising additional fears about developmental issues. Working parents are worried their children are off-track and at-risk for falling behind. They're worried about progress, with seven in ten (69%) at least somewhat concerned that their children will not be able to meet key developmental milestones, and one in three (33%) of this group admitting they are extremely concerned. Topping the list of parent developmental worries are social and emotional milestones (76%), followed by communication (70%), cognitive (68%), and physical (64%) milestones .

And there are yet more concerns about children's academic performance. Among working parents with school-age children learning from home, three in ten (30%) say that their children are falling behind academically. Three in four with high school students (74%) are very concerned their children will not be prepared for the college admissions process; and one in four (25%) believe their children are already behind in college prep.

**76% of parents**  
are worried about their **children's**  
**social and emotional milestones**



## A Generation Forever Changed: Real Fears About the Pandemic's Lasting Legacy

If working parents are concerned about their own mental health and mental load, they're even more concerned for their children. Half of them say concerns about their children's mental load (50%) and mental health (50%) have grown since last year. More than one in four (26%) say their children's mental health is what concerns them the most, above all else. Perhaps that's not surprising, given what else is on working parents' minds. About four in five (79%) worry about their children's view of what a healthy childhood should be. Many express equal concern about their children's confidence and self-esteem (71%) and their waning interest in activities outside the house (73%).

Without child care or in-person schooling, these parents are predicting negative consequences for their children. About two in three believe the pandemic will compromise their children's social and emotional development (67%) and academic progress (63%). Half predict that children's communication (56%), cognitive (54%), and physical/biological (50%) development will be negatively impacted.

And they aren't just worried about short-term effects. Many parents expecting negative impacts worry that the scars of the pandemic will be long-lasting. In particular, they're worried about long-term negative effects on academic progress (43%), social and emotional development (42%), and communication development (39%).

Parents are worried about **long-term consequences** for their children:

Academic progress

**43%**

Social and emotional development

**42%**



**79%**  
**of parents**

worry about their children's **view of what a healthy childhood should be**



## New Parents Without a “Village”

Going it alone has proven **especially difficult for parents of infants**. Perhaps that’s because new parents are uniquely dependent on their “village.” And indeed, parents of children ages 0 to 2 feel more **disconnected from friends** (45%) than parents of toddlers (36%), elementary/middle school children (34%), or high schoolers (39%). Without child care or in-person learning, parents of infants **miss exchanging advice** with other parents (37%); they **long for a sense of community** (42%); and they struggle more than parents of school-age children to **entertain their children** (41% versus 30%) and **provide developmental opportunities** (40% versus 29%).

The **absence of a support system** even has parents of infants questioning their ability to take care of families and colleagues, leaving them more likely than parents of school-age children to say that they are faltering as parents (33% versus 28%), as spouses/partners (33% versus 27%), and at work (30% versus 24%).

## Isolation Taking Its Toll on Parents, Too

Yet the challenges aren’t limited to these families’ youngest members. The same isolation that is affecting children is also weighing on working parents, with many feeling disconnected from friends (38%) and extended families (32%). As they struggle to be present both at home and at work, nearly one in five feel disconnected from their work life (19%) and their spouse/partner’s life (18%). Fourteen percent even feel disconnected from their children’s lives.

And for today’s working parents, the absence of school and child care has been more than just a practical loss. More than one in three (35%) say they are missing the sense of community and support these networks used to provide. They are also longing to connect and socialize with other parents (35%) and miss exchanging advice with these peers (28%).

However, despite the concern for themselves, working parents are significantly more focused on what is missing for their children. Parents without child care or in-person schooling yearn for their children to be able to connect and socialize with peers (66%), engage in developmental activities/curriculum (60%), and get the community and support they received from attending school or child care (43%).



## New Challenges, Longing for Some “Old” Normal

What do parents want for the future? Moving forward, their number-one concern is their children’s happiness and well-being (45%). These worries outrank even health considerations, such as the fear that they (38%) or a family member (38%) will get sick. On par with physical health are worries about their family’s mental load and mental health, with one-third or more of working parents worried about their own (38%), their children’s (37%), and their spouse/partner’s (35%) mental load.

Moving forward, most are focused on getting their children back in school and with their friends. As they look to turn the page on the pandemic, working parents are in near-universal agreement that in-person school (90%) and interacting and collaborating with friends (93%) are important for their children’s return to “normal” life.

Likewise, more than nine in ten working parents believe it will be important for their children to socialize with friends without concerns about getting sick (93%); they also believe it’s important for their children to have the chance to resume activities, like sports, outside the home (91%).

Perhaps above all, parents say these worries far outrank “normal” options for themselves, such as re-opened workplaces (86%) or the ability to socialize with other parents without fear of getting sick (84%).

## A Disproportionate Impact on Women

Not everything about pandemic life is different – survey data shows **women are still bearing the brunt of their family’s mental load.**

Working moms are taking on more of the increased household chores than working dads (85% vs. 79%); they’re cooking more (67% vs. 48%), cleaning more (63% vs. 53%), doing laundry more (59% vs. 40%), and taking out more trash (49% vs. 35%). This falls in line with pre-pandemic data from our 2017 Modern Family Index, in which 86% of working moms said they handled all family and household responsibilities, and in which breadwinning mothers were nearly twice as likely as breadwinning fathers (71% vs. 38%) to say they were **making sure all family responsibilities were handled.**

Working moms are also saddled with **more of their children’s pandemic-related challenges.** Facing lost child care or school closures, they are more likely than working dads to find it stressful to provide educational opportunities for their children (36% vs. 29%) and to report that their family misses the schedule and structure that school and/or child care once provided (44% vs. 37%).

Looking towards the future, **working moms are significantly more concerned than working dads** about their children’s happiness and well-being (52% vs. 38%), potentially getting sick (48% vs. 28%), and even getting their families sick (42% vs. 33%). Likewise, they are also significantly more likely to be concerned with their own (44% vs. 30%), their spouse/partner’s (38% vs. 32%), and their children’s (41% vs. 32%) mental loads.

## Working Parents Speak: What They Need to Move On

There is some good news. Most parents say employers have played a positive role during the pandemic, with four in five saying their employers have understood their needs (81%), been sympathetic to their situation (80%), and – perhaps most importantly – provided both the right kind of (78%) and enough (78%) support.

But it's not universal. Working moms are less likely than working dads to feel so positively, with only 77% of working moms describing their employer as understanding, versus 85% of working dads.

It's also not consistent across racial lines. In a year marked by calls for equity, racial disparities remain. White parents (82%) were more likely than Black (72%) or Hispanic (77%) parents to call their employers sympathetic to working parents' situation; white parents were also more likely to say their employers provided enough (82%) and the right kind of (81%) support, versus 74% and 74% of Hispanic parents, 69% and 67% of Black parents.

Yet all have a wish list for what comes next. Six in ten working parents (58%) who began to work remotely at the beginning of the pandemic would now prefer to continue to do so. Half of working parents (50%) hope to see their employers offer flexible work hours; nearly as many (45%) want their companies to allow employees to work remotely in emergency scenarios, such as when a child gets sick. A similar number (41%) would like their employer to allow employees to work remotely as often as they want.

And after a monumental year of going it alone, working parents have especially high expectations around child care. Nearly half (46%) of working parents hope their employer will provide some form of child care or emergency child care, and more than one in four are looking for their employer to offer academic (27%) and college preparation (26%) tutoring or resources that will benefit their children.

This pandemic has certainly left its mark on the world, changing how people live, work, and connect. The path forward is uncertain; and even as life "normalizes," workplaces need to recognize that their working-parent employees will continue to face challenges. Employees are looking for employers to meet them where they are, and provide more meaningful benefits that allow them to support their families and be productive at work. Gone are the days when foosball tables and on-site gyms topped the list of most-wanted perks. These days, parents want real family support. In the future, employers who provide those supports will reap the benefits of a workforce that is engaged, productive, and loyal.

**46%**

**of working parents** hope their employer will provide some form of **child care or emergency child care**.

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### ABOUT THE BRIGHT HORIZONS MODERN FAMILY INDEX

The Modern Family Index is an internet-based survey conducted by Kelton Global from February 2 to February 12, 2021. The sample consisted of 2,083 working parents aged 18+, with children under the age of 18 at home. The survey was conducted online and has a margin of error of +/- 2.2%.

\*Note: Please refer to the survey as the Bright Horizons Modern Family Index.



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