

When work works for parents and families, everybody wins

Seven strategies to keep work and family in balance

Brigid Schulte

Director

Better Life Lab, New America

Washington DC, USA

The stress of work–family conflict – when the demands of work spill over into family life – is on the rise (Almeida et al., 2016). Jobs have become “greedier”, requiring more intensive time, attention and effort (Gavett, 2021). The increasing stress isn’t good for anyone, especially young children. When a stressed parent returns home from a tough day at work, their elevated levels of the damaging stress hormone, cortisol, can spread like a contagion through the entire household. Even babies pick up on the tension (Almeida and Davis, 2011; Wass, 2019).

The consequences of this work culture are intensified for many by [the stress of finding or affording high-quality childcare](#) (Kashen et al., 2024). Over time, parents’ constant stress of juggling intensive work and the demanding care of young children can lead to depression, anxiety, frustration, anger, resentment, poorer sleep, and even obesity and cardiovascular disease, as [research](#) has shown (Almeida et al., 2016).

The wear of stress can also shorten parents’ fuses and lead to more arguments with partners and snapping at their children. For children, a parent’s

work–family conflict can impact their physical and mental health, and has been linked to increased levels of [emotional and behavioural problems](#) (Vahedi et al., 2020). In August 2024, US Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy deemed parental stress a [national health crisis](#) for parents and children that demands a collective response.

“Good examples and research from around the world prove that there’s a different way of working that’s better for everyone – even businesses.”

But work doesn’t have to be an endless, time-sucking slog, where professionals are expected to overwork in one job and hourly workers are expected to be “on call” and always available for any unpredictable shift, often in multiple jobs. There are a host of good examples and research from around the world proving that there’s a different way of working that’s better for everyone – even businesses.



Seven strategies to keep work and family in balance

1 Ask and listen, then act

After the birth of my second child, I asked my bosses if I could work a four-day week. They agreed, but only if I promised not to tell my colleagues: “We don’t want to open the floodgates to anyone else.” It was awkward and unfair.

Parents often worry that they will no longer be seen as a “committed” worker if they ask for flexibility. But Kathleen Christensen, co-author of a recent, [comprehensive report](#) on solving work–family conflict for the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (2024), found that employers offering transparent, flexible policies is a “strategic business imperative”. The report suggests that employers ask what workers need to combine work and care. Listen. Then act. Employers are more likely to surface creative and effective solutions, she said, if they work collaboratively with workers, rather than issuing top-down policies.

2 Take a care inventory

It may come as a shock to parents, but one [Harvard Business School survey](#) found that most employers don’t ask and don’t know what caregiving responsibilities their employees have. Meanwhile, the survey also reported that nearly *three-fourths* of all employees had some kind of care responsibility, many of whom were feeling significant stress trying to balance the demands of care with the demands of work and feeling that they couldn’t do either well (Fuller and Raman, 2019). A care inventory can help leaders better understand what parents and workers with care duties need, so that organisations can design effective policies to support them.

3 Redefine the “ideal worker”

Many workplaces around the world are still organised around the notion that “ideal workers” can devote themselves to working long hours because *someone else* is taking care of children or loved ones at home. The norm is completely at odds with how many families live, where both parents work in two-parent households, or the household is headed by a single parent. This outdated norm disadvantages

parents, particularly mothers who are still primarily responsible for the unpaid work of care and home. In fact, [one analysis](#) found that in the first 18 years of a child's life, nearly 70% of mothers in the USA will have been the primary breadwinner for their families at some point (Glass et al., 2021). In addition, research shows the long work hours leaders often reward are actually [counter-productive](#) to producing good work (Green Carmichael, 2015).

4 Streamline the work week

In 2015, Iceland began a national drive to shorten working hours without cutting pay. As part of this process, organisations thought long and hard about the way they worked, and how they as organisations could be more efficient. They dispensed with pointless meetings and low-value busywork. As a result, people now work shorter hours and are more productive during them. Also, their health, happiness and wellbeing have improved, as has gender equality. [Research](#) also shows that men are spending more time with their families (Haraldsson and Kellam, 2021). One father I spoke to for my book, *Over Work* (Schulte, 2024), called his shorter Friday hours his "sacred day" to spend with his children.

5 Embrace flexibility and schedule control

Survey after survey after survey shows that parents around the globe want flexible work options, and more control over when, where and how they work (Smith, 2024). After pandemic lockdowns forced workplaces to adopt telework, many parents reported feeling less stress as they ditched long commutes and spent more time with family. Having more control over their work schedule enables parents to better manage unexpected child illnesses or childcare disruptions. For hourly workers, more predictable schedules enable parents to plan appointments and time to play with their children.

6 Make family-supportive policies universal and automatic

Sociology professor Youngjoo Cha says parents are much more likely to use flexible work policies when they're available to everyone and framed

as supporting health and wellbeing, rather than targeted at caregivers. Instead of giving workers the "right to request" flexibility, as the law requires in some countries, [Cha](#) and [others](#) argue for "opt out" policies that make flexibility the default (Perlow and Kelly, 2014; Cha and Grady, 2024). For example, when the law firm White & Case began offering 12 weeks of paid parental leave to US employees in 2018, they ensured that workers got the time automatically. [They had to opt out if they *didn't* want it.](#) That boosted the numbers of women and men taking paid parental leave (Schulte, 2019).

7 Train managers to support parents and families

Managers often receive little or no training in management, and workplace cultures often reward longer hours rather than better performance. Psychology professor Leslie Hammer trains middle managers on how to support workers with families, such as by helping them to resolve scheduling conflicts and manage their workloads, as well as modelling healthy work-family behaviour by working a reasonable schedule themselves. "Just training managers in these basic, yet critical behaviours leads to improvements in sleep, improvements in cardiovascular disease, and less physical pain," she said. Her [research](#) also found increased employee engagement, organisational commitment and job satisfaction and performance (Ode-Dusseau et al., 2015).

So many people feel discouraged, stressed, burned out, and that work is broken (American Psychological Association, 2023). Parents can often feel as if they're coming apart at the seams trying to meet the intensifying demands of work and the needs of their children and families (Ohio State University, 2024). But there are tried-and-tested answers. It all starts with recognising that it isn't 1950 anymore, that the ideal worker is no longer a man with no care

responsibilities who can put in endless hours thinking only of work. The workforce has changed. The nature of work has changed and will continue to change rapidly. It's time for the way we think about, organise and do it to catch up with the way we live our lives. So that we can be the kind of parents we want to be, that our children deserve to have, and that everyone can benefit from.

➤ Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2025-26

References

- Almeida, D.M. and Davis, K.D. (2011) Workplace flexibility and daily stress processes in hotel employees and their children. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 638(1): 123–40. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716211415608>.
- Almeida, D.M., Davis, K.D., Lee, S., Lawson, K.M., Walter, K.N. and Moen, P. (2016) Supervisor support buffers daily psychological and physiological reactivity to work-to-family conflict. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 78(1): 165–79. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12252>.
- American Psychological Association (2023) *2023 Work in America Survey: Workplaces as engines of psychological health and well-being*. Available at: <https://www.apa.org/pubs/reports/work-in-america/2023-workplace-health-well-being> (accessed September 2024).
- Cha, Y. and Grady, R.K. (2024) Overwork and the use of paid leave and flexible work policies in U.S. workplaces. *Social Science Research* 121. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2024.103006>.
- Fuller, J.B. and Raman, M. (2019) *The Caring Company*. Boston MA: Harvard Business School. Available at: https://www.hbs.edu/managing-the-future-of-work/Documents/The_Caring_Company.pdf (accessed September 2024).
- Gavett, G. (2021) The problem with “greedy work”. *Harvard Business Review*, 28 September. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2021/09/the-problem-with-greedy-work> (accessed September 2024).
- Glass, J., Raley, R.K. and Pepin, J. (2021) Mothers are the primary earners in growing numbers of families with children. *Council on Contemporary Families*. Available at: <https://sites.utexas.edu/contemporaryfamilies/2021/11/02/breadwinning-mothers-brief-report/> (accessed September 2024).
- Green Carmichael, S. (2015) The research is clear: long hours backfire for people and for companies. *Harvard Business Review*, 19 August. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2015/08/the-research-is-clear-long-hours-backfire-for-people-and-for-companies> (accessed September 2024).
- Haraldsson, G.D. and Kellam, J. (2021) *Going Public: Iceland's journey to a shorter working week*. Reykjavik/London: Alda/ Autonomy.
- Kashen, J., Hipp, L., Pérez, N., Hogan, L. and Peeks, C. (2024) Moms are stressed. Congress can help. *The Century Foundation*, 28 August. Available at: <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/moms-are-stressed-congress-can-help/> (accessed September 2024).
- Murthy, V.H. (2024) Surgeon General: Parents are at their wits' end. We can do better. *New York Times*, 28 August. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/28/opinion/surgeon-general-stress-parents.html> (accessed September 2024).
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (2024) *Supporting Family Caregivers in STEMM: A call to action*. Washington DC: The National Academies Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17226/27416>.
- Odle-Dusseau, H.N., Hammer, L.B., Crain, T. and Bodner, T.E. (2015) The influence of family-supportive supervisor training on employee job performance and attitudes: An organizational work–family intervention. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 21(3): 296–308. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0039961>.
- Ohio State University. (2024) Study: Pressure to be “perfect” causing burnout for parents, mental health concerns for their children. *OSU College of Nursing*, 8 May. Available at: <https://nursing.osu.edu/news/2024/05/08/perfect-parent-study> (accessed September 2024).
- Perlow, L.A. and Kelly, E.L. (2014). Toward a model of work redesign for better work and better life. *Work and Occupations* 41(1): 111–34. Available at: <https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=46316> (accessed September 2024).
- Schulte, B. (2019) Make work–life balance a key performance metric. *Financial Times*, 22 July. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/0c313e88-a89a-11e9-90e9-fc4b9d9528b4> (accessed September 2024).
- Schulte, B. (2024) *Over Work: Transforming the daily grind in the quest for a better life*. New York: Henry Holt and Co.
- Smith, J. (2024) Majority of working parents say they would look for a new job if they were required to travel. *Insight*, 28 June. Available at: <https://workplaceinsight.net/majority-of-working-parents-say-they-would-look-for-a-new-job-if-they-were-required-to-travel/> (accessed September 2024).
- Vahedi, A., Krug, I. and Westrupp, E. (2020) How does parental work–family conflict impact on children's mental health? *Emerging Minds*. Available at: <https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/how-does-parental-work-family-conflict-impact-on-childrens-mental-health/> (accessed September 2024).
- Wass, S. (2019) Stress contagion. *Psychology Today*, 14 January. Available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/smarter-more-stressed/201901/stress-contagion> (accessed September 2024).