

The Ultimate Test of “Work + Family”: A Year Without Child Care

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Jennifer Sabatini Fraone

Director of Corporate Partnerships at Boston College Center for Work & Family

Each day it seems, a host of articles are published about school and day care closures, how parents will be able to manage their jobs while caring for and facilitating the learning for their children, and the long-term impact of all of this on women’s careers. There is an endless stream of thoughtful commentary examining the issue from different perspectives - employers, community, school systems and parents.

As the pandemic spread and the quarantine began, parents who were fortunate to have job flexibility were somehow getting through day by day working from home, caring for their children, monitoring their schooling, and putting in endless days to get it all done.

A few months soon became a full summer without camps and child care for many. Now, as we expected schools to open, we face a very uncertain school year, with daycare options still scarce and many school systems opting for a virtual or hybrid approach. Families now face the complex questions and personal decisions about how to deal with this conundrum. Low income families, those experiencing job loss, and those designated as essential workers face even more daunting challenges.

Women have long struggled with the question “Can I have both a career and a family?”. It is this dilemma that drew me to the work of the [Boston College Center for Work & Family](#) 15 years ago as a young mom and MBA student. The pandemic is only exacerbating the issues and making the question a constant refrain in the lives of working mothers.

In the early phases of the pandemic, I tried hard to focus on the several silver linings of this unprecedented time that might have some long-term beneficial effects on families.

1. Dads stepping up at home: Our ten+ years of research on fathers have revealed that the majority of dads want to spend more time with their families and desire to be an equal caregiving partner. During the pandemic, men are observing first-hand all that is involved with caring for their families and while working from home have been doing more to share caregiving responsibilities. Men indicate that they would like to continue to be more involved as they begin to return to work.
2. Increased flexibility at work: Even organizations that have been resistant to offering flexible and remote work have, by necessity, come to realize that there are many benefits to enabling their employees to work virtually. Despite circumstances that are far from ideal, including working and caregiving in the same space, people are getting the job done from home. A recent survey of our corporate partners indicated that remote work will be more prevalent going forward, data that is corroborated by research conducted by other scholars and think tanks. On average, our employer partners reported that 23% of employees were working remotely in some capacity prior to COVID-19 and 80% have been working remotely since COVID-19. 60% of employers we surveyed expect an increase in remote working for the foreseeable future.

While these are encouraging signs and offer some help for working mothers, they are nowhere near enough relief as the impact of the pandemic continues. Many will continue to struggle with making it all work, while others may find their situation untenable and leave the workforce all together.

Seeing the toll this is taking on their employees and their mental health, progressive employers are offering creative solutions to help. Companies in our [BC Workforce Roundtable](#) are developing new supports to help parents through these difficult times. Examples include additional leave and time off availability, virtual camps, babysitting co-ops within the organization, resource and referral programs, and expanded back-up care. However, more substantial action is needed if we truly want to support the fragile child care system. Support at the federal level has been proposed and will hopefully gain traction).

From our post at BCCWF, we are working to collect information and facilitate discussions on this topic with our corporate partners, to help them understand the trends and discuss possible solutions to best support their employees. We are hosting an event next week featuring CEO of Child Care Aware of America, Lynette Fraga, Ph.D.

Thirty years after our Center was founded, we face the ultimate test of the work we have been doing to support the possibilities for working women and men: to have a career that allows us to do meaningful work, to share our talents for the greater good, AND to be the engaged parents we want to be. The effects of the pandemic will impact our lives in many ways...time will tell whether the vital contributions of working parents will be diminished by voluntary departures and whether employers will see their employees as “whole persons,” valuing and supporting them in their multiple roles, including that of caregiver.

