

## **Working Parents Post Pandemic: Reimagining Remote Work after COVID-19**

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Over the last few months, multiple articles in the mainstream press have discussed the benefits and pitfalls of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic and what our post-pandemic work life may look like.<sup>1,2,3</sup> However, many of these articles omit vital points relating to families, productivity, working conditions before the pandemic, and work-life balance as an essential social determinant of health.

The pandemic has prompted many Americans to more deeply examine the relationship between their time, work, and health. This brief discusses considerations for working parents as the country emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic and workers face calls to return to the office. It is time to have a reasonable discussion about working from home and the future of work-life balance.

### **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- Working families faced significant challenges prior to COVID-19.
- Working parents faced significant stress working from home while schools were closed during the pandemic. However, as children return to school, working parents may see benefits to working remotely.
- As society emerges from the pandemic, public health professionals should advocate work-life balance as a key social determinant of health.
- In the absence of effective policies, such as universal childcare, employers should make allowances that benefit workers and their families.

### **Working Families Struggled Even Before COVID-19**

Even before the pandemic, working families had it rough. According to Pew Research from 2015,<sup>4</sup> almost half of U.S. households included two working parents. Over half of those parents indicated that balancing work and home life was difficult, and 4 in 10 mothers stated they *always* felt rushed. In a 2018 study,<sup>5</sup> 70% of parents affirmed they sometimes felt too busy to enjoy life.

Countless articles in the mainstream press all told the same story. Activities like eating family meals together<sup>6</sup> were in decline. In fact, more Americans were eating meals alone or in vehicles than ever before. There were increasing concerns about using screen time to occupy children<sup>7</sup> and relationships between partners being strained due to time spent working.<sup>8</sup>

Research shows a strong link between work-family conflicts, guilt, negative health behaviors, and stress.<sup>9</sup> Parenthood and work often come into conflict, particularly for women and single parents.<sup>10</sup>

Having to choose between meeting a deadline and attending a child's soccer game or being frowned upon for having to miss work to care for a sick child, creates many no-win situations, resulting in physical stress, burnout, depression, and anxiety. In short, work-life balance is an essential social determinant of health.

In a country that lacks reasonable accommodations for public childcare (whereby public schooling is the major source of free childcare for working parents), how we reimagine post-pandemic labor is essential. This historic moment offers an opportunity to reduce work-family conflict stressors that fall unevenly on women and single parents. To allow such a moment to slip away would be a disservice to the American family.

### **Remote Work will Look Different Post-Pandemic**

Post-pandemic work life will not be the same as pandemic work life. This fact is essential to understand since the stress that working parents endured while working from home will ease as children return to their out-of-home activities. While research<sup>11</sup> suggests working from home during school closures has been a particularly difficult experience for parents, these conditions will likely change when schools return to regular operation.

With schools opening and daycare services resuming, working from home looks vastly different when parents no longer need to monitor the education and activities of their school-age children. There will also be less need to fill time, as children's lessons, sports, and extracurricular activities resume. In short, as children return to school and to their activities, parents working from home will become more productive. Thus, the challenges and exhaustion that parents experienced during the pandemic will dissipate without requiring parents to return to daily office-based work environments unless they choose to.

Any household with working parents and multiple children involved in various extra-curricular activities is familiar with the daily logistical nightmare of transporting everyone to where they need to be on time. Without the need for a daily commute, coordinating daily schedules becomes more manageable and less labor- and resource-intensive. Transporting and coordinating the movement of children from school to lessons, sports practices, and friends' houses becomes easier. More importantly, single working mothers, who experience this challenge even more acutely, will have an easier time negotiating the daily scheduling terrain.

Remote work will allow the daily operation of households to be far more conducive to meeting the needs of each family member while, in turn, freeing up more time for scheduling and completing work activities by allowing parents to have control over their work schedules.

### **Opportunities for New Ways of Working**

Working from home does not need to mean working in isolation, nor does working from home mean less collaboration, as some have suggested.<sup>12</sup> The chief rationales for returning to the office include collaboration, office culture, creativity, and connection.<sup>13</sup> Yet none of these reasons need be restricted to the office. Any public space, park, front porch, picnic table, or coffee shop will do. In fact, many of these spaces are likely to be more conducive to creativity and connection than austere commercial boardrooms and hives of cubicles.

Endless Zoom meetings do not have to be the future either. Local team members can meet regularly, out in the community. One salient point used to justify returning to the office is the fact that workers get a fair amount of human contact and friendship through the workplaces. Yet, again, these relationships do not require the office in order to foster them. Imagine having a weekly Tuesday coffee meeting with your work mates on the sunporch, where work projects, custom coffee blends, and one's personal life are the topics of conversation. This is a much richer vision than the so-called "water cooler" networking opportunities of the past.<sup>14</sup>

Remote work may not even mean working from home every day. Instead, our conceptualization of post-pandemic work must involve a shift in the gravitational center of work, from an office-centric idea to a decentralized work lifestyle that is untethered to any specific geography. Employees should be allowed to come and go as needed. Teams can also do collaborative work on projects that require teamwork at the office, in a public place, or at someone's home—the options are limitless. Collaboration and efficient resource allocation need not suffer at all in such a shift. In fact, when workers and teams are given more flexibility, they have far more opportunities to work together in ways that fit everyone's needs.

To be sure, not every job lends itself to remote work. However, under such a post-pandemic reality that would allow those who can work from home to do so, those who need to commute for work - for example, to provide direct care and services for clients, teach, or conduct in-person trade-related work (e.g., plumbing, electrical, construction, farming) - can all do so under less crowded and less stressful conditions. Think of how vastly different cities would be if most workers were not required to commute in the morning and rush home in the evening. Such a shift would potentially benefit the environment, relieve overstressed transportation networks, and improve public health more broadly.

### **Placing Employee Welfare First in a Post-Pandemic World**

In the not-too-distant past, policymakers hypothesized that American corporations could serve as the country's major social institutions instead of the welfare state adopted throughout much of Europe after World War II.<sup>15</sup> However, in the past forty years, government policies that [protect private profit over public interests](#) have allowed major corporations to shift responsibility from the welfare of employees to the interest of shareholders. Many of the current social, political, and economic problems in America today can be traced back to this shift.<sup>5</sup> And while shareholder value and profit have increased exponentially, that value has not trickled down into most American households and should not be how we measure societal success or well-being.

For public health experts, work-life balance, the nature of work, and how we spend our time in our post-pandemic world should be priorities in their discussions about social determinants of health. The productive activities that we engage in everyday to meet our needs and ensure our material security are a mundane subject, yet our labor activities are central to our daily experiences and to our health. *How* we work is as important as *what* we do to make a living. Health, family, and market productivity must be woven into our discussions of public health and health policy, particularly in the months ahead. Time is a precious resource that is essential to families. Time saved through remote work can be used for the care and nurturing of families and is an investment in public health. The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted many Americans to reconsider what is important and meaningful in their lives. Public health professionals should do the same by capitalizing on this opportunity to promote and support a decentralized future of work that will directly benefit working families.

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## **Acknowledgments**

The author would like to thank Nicole Ripogle and Shannon Monnat for edits on previous drafts.

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