

Build a Workplace Where Working Parents Thrive



Working parents: the key to gender diversity

75% of mothers
and **90%** of
fathers in the UK
are employed

The rise of the dual-earner household in which both parents work full or part-time is so widespread today that families where only one parent works are now the exception and not the rule.

For many employees, becoming a parent is one of the most rewarding, and most challenging, life transitions they'll ever experience. According to the Office for National Statistics, three in four parents in dual-parent families are now both in work. That means a significant proportion of today's workforce is balancing the demands of their job with the realities of raising a family.

When organisations recognise this and offer meaningful support, the benefits are felt on both sides. Parents feel valued, understood, and able to thrive at work as well as at home. In turn, employers build loyalty, attract great talent, and strengthen their reputation as a place where people can build long-term careers.

Some organisations are already leading the way, embedding parental support as a core part of their inclusion strategies. But we know not every organisation has the specialist knowledge or resources to design the right approach from scratch.

This guide is here to help. Drawing on our experience of working with employers across sectors, it sets out what “good” looks like when it comes to supporting working parents, and how you can build a strategy that works for your people and your business.

Because when organisations back their working parents, everyone benefits: families, workplaces, and society as a whole.

Emma Spitz | Head of Working Parent Solutions at ECC

Women's careers are impacted most by parenthood

The impact of parenthood on careers is starkly divided along gender lines. In the UK, around **75%** of mothers are in the workforce, yet only **29%** go on to sustain a full-time career. By contrast, just **2%** of fathers reduce their hours after having children, and the vast majority (around **90%**) maintain full-time work.

This imbalance feeds into the well-documented “motherhood penalty”, where women’s earnings and career progression are significantly curtailed while men’s remain largely unaffected. It is one of the key drivers of the persistent gender pay gap.

Boundaried workers

Parenthood often turns talented professionals into what we call Boundaried Workers. These are employees with additional responsibilities and constraints that limit their time, flexibility, and mobility. These boundaries do not diminish capability or ambition, but they do mean that parents face a constant mismatch between personal responsibilities and workplace expectations.

In cultures that prize “always-on” availability, long hours, and geographic mobility, Boundaried Workers, particularly women, are penalised. They are overlooked for stretch opportunities, promotions, and leadership roles despite their skills and performance.



The leaky leadership pipeline

The effect on organisations is profound. A wide talent pool gradually shrinks as parents disengage or leave when support is lacking. For employers hoping to build a strong internal pipeline of leaders, the transition to parenthood becomes a make-or-break moment.

Research shows a year-on-year increase of women leaving jobs at the director level, highlighting a pinch point in retention between mid-management and senior leadership. Without intervention, organisations lose precisely the talent they have invested in developing.



The inflection point

Part of retaining this talent lies in recognising that parents are continuously evaluating whether staying is “worth it.” The first 24 months after returning from parental leave are particularly critical: a period where parents are trialling how to be both successful at work and present at home.

When organisations provide the right support at this stage, through flexibility, equitable leave, and visible career pathways, parents are far more likely to stay, remain ambitious, and keep pursuing leadership roles. Without it, they disengage, step back, or step out altogether.



Key actions for employers

Supporting working parents isn't a one-size-fits-all exercise. The sector you operate in, the types of roles you offer, and the geographies you cover will all shape your approach. But in our experience, organisations that successfully embed meaningful, lasting support for parents tend to follow five essential steps:

01 Get the change-makers on board

Assign a Board-Level Sponsor: Real change requires visible leadership. While HR may manage parental policies day to day, having an executive sponsor at board level ensures working parent initiatives remain a strategic priority, not just an HR issue. This sponsorship signals commitment from the very top and secures continued buy-in across the organisation.

Work with the Line Managers: Supporting parents isn't just about policies, it's about how those policies come to life day to day. Managers play a critical role in easing the transition to parenthood, welcoming parents back, and ensuring they feel valued in their roles. Coaching equips managers with the skills to understand the parenthood experience, keep working parents engaged in their careers, and open up honest conversations. By involving managers directly in the coaching process, organisations build empathy, strengthen support, and drive the systemic changes needed to create a truly parent-friendly workplace.



Helen Ilsley, Head of Business Development & PTC at ECC

"Any HR or People leader worth their salt knows that offering strong parental policies is now a baseline for attracting and retaining talent. The real differentiator is whether those policies are tied to the organisation's strategic agenda. They can't be treated as a perk or a concession; they need to signal that working parents are wanted and valued. Crucially, policy can't stand alone; it has to be backed by culture. When done well, it becomes a genuine competitive advantage, helping organisations tap into new talent pools and enabling parents not just to survive at work, but to thrive."

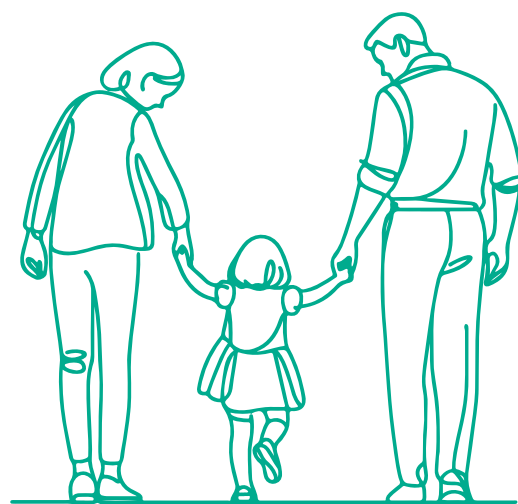
02 Assess where your organisation is right now

Improvement begins with honest reflection.

To build a clear baseline, ask:

- What percentage of women return after their first and second child, and do they keep the same hours?
- What happens to their careers post-return? Do they progress on the same track?
- How does pay and promotion data compare for men and women?
- What's the uptake of shared or extended parental leave, and why?
- How many roles are advertised as flexible from the outset?
- Do men feel comfortable requesting flexible working?
- What's the gender breakdown in management and leadership, and how do salaries compare?

Whether you're an SME or an HR, Talent, or ED&I leader in a large organisation, the starting point is the same: being able to answer and act on these key questions. Doing so gives you a clearer picture of progression, retention, and attraction, and ensures you're tracking the metrics that matter most.



03 Understand what support you provide now and how that needs to change

Next, map what you currently offer against the real needs of parents at different stages:

- **Planning for Parenthood** – Is your policy information clear and accessible, or do employees have to dig for it?
- **Expecting a Child** – Do your policies cover adoption, surrogacy, same-sex parents, and fertility treatment?
- **Parental Leave** – How well do you support parents in planning and managing leave?
- **Return to Work** – What provisions exist to ease re-entry, from phased returns to coaching support?
- **Crunch Points** – Do you recognise challenges like starting school or teenage years?
- **Fathers & Secondary Caregivers** – How are they supported to take an equal role in caregiving?



Emma Spitz, Chief Client Officer and
Head of Working Parents at ECC

“Foster open conversations with expectant and new mothers and their managers, to enable them to be honest about what they want to do on their return, and what they believe the challenges could be. Then review what is and isn’t working as they transition back into the organisation”.

04 Build your action plan

Based on your insights, create a comprehensive package of support. This could include:

- **Enhanced Parental Leave** – Go beyond the statutory minimum; equal paid leave for all genders is a game-changer for retention and equity.
- **Flexible Working** – Offer more than flexible hours, embed flexible job design and role-sharing at all levels.
- **Parent-Focused Benefits** – From lactation rooms and emergency childcare to family health cover and on-site crèches, these benefits make a tangible difference.
- **Support Networks** – Employee resource groups or parent networks build community and reduce isolation.
- **Education & Resources** – Provide online tools and guidance for parents and managers navigating key stages.
- **Parental Transition Coaching** – Help parents and managers prepare for the realities of leave, return, and career progression.

05 Implement your plan and measure its impact

With leadership backing and employee input, roll out your action plan. Success depends on:

- **Clear Communication** – Make sure employees understand what's changing, why it matters, and how to access support.
- **Manager Enablement** – Train and coach managers to apply policies fairly, set realistic expectations, and actively support parents' progression.
- **Culture Change** – Embed new norms into everyday practices, from meeting scheduling to deadline setting.
- **Measurement & Accountability** – Track uptake, retention, progression, and employee feedback. Monitor gaps, celebrate wins, and refine where needed.

The business case for action

The number of organisations positioning themselves as leading employers for working parents has grown significantly in recent years. But becoming one yourself doesn't happen by accident. It requires visible commitment and buy-in from senior leaders, as well as the ability to show why family-friendly policies are not only good for employees but are also good for business.

To help you build momentum internally, the following pages provide practical guidance on:

- **Framing the business case** – linking parental support to productivity, retention, and talent attraction.
- **Engaging senior leaders** – demonstrating how these policies align with organisational strategy and values.
- **Mobilising champions** – securing advocates at the board and manager level who can amplify your case.

Parent-friendly workplaces are good for everyone

Working parents make up a huge part of the workforce, meaning most organisations already depend on them to power their business. The real question isn't whether to support them, but how well. Ignoring this comes at a high price: Gallup estimates replacing a leader costs **200%** of **their salary**, technical professionals **80%**, and frontline staff **40%**. With retention challenges already emerging, failing to back working parents isn't just short-sighted, it's expensive.

Talent attraction & retention

Replacing an employee costs **6–9 months** salary. Yet **47%** of dissatisfied mothers say they'll quit within a year.

- Enhanced parental leave, flexible work, and childcare support keep experienced staff and give you an edge in recruitment.

Driving gender equity

Childcare-related breaks fuel the UK's **13.1%** gender pay gap.

- Equal parental leave reduces the burden on women, normalises dads as caregivers, and keeps more women rising into senior roles.

The business case for action

Productivity & wellbeing

Stress and burnout cost UK businesses **£28 billion** every year. Supported parents are happier, more loyal, and more productive.

- Flexibility matters: **48%** of employees say flexible work boosts their wellbeing.
- **31%** who were not aware of the right to request flexible working said they had not applied for a job because flex wasn't specified in the advert.
- **68%** of parents said they're likely to stay in their job because they won't be able to get the flexibility elsewhere.

Reputation & brand

Family-friendly employers don't just keep talent, they attract it.

- **69%** of working parents say jobs offering flexibility are more desirable. Recognition as a top employer strengthens brand and trust.

Long-term growth

Losing mid-career parents creates a leadership "leaky pipeline." Supporting them builds stronger future leaders.

- Around half of part-time workers in the EU would go full-time if flexible work were available, unlocking hidden capacity and growth.



What next?

Congratulations, by reading this guide you've already taken the most important first step toward creating a family-friendly workplace. Now it's time to put ideas into action. Here are some practical next steps:

Share this guide with senior leaders so they can see why supporting working parents isn't just the right thing to do, it's a smart business investment.

Explore Work, Family and You to better understand the real challenges families face and the kind of support that makes the biggest difference. Circulate it within your organisation to spark informed conversations.

Tell your story. Once you've implemented your plan, we'd love to hear about it. Share your progress with us and we may feature your organisation on Work, Family and You.

Get in touch. If you'd like tailored advice or a sounding board as you shape your plans, our team is here to help, just reach out.

About ECC

ECC has over 25 years' experience helping employers support working parents as they progress through the different stages of parenthood.

We also help employers remove the barriers that contribute to women's careers flat lining; barriers that are now understood to contribute to the gender pay gap.

We work nationally, internationally and virtually, tailoring content through our understanding of local markets.

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