



# Vitality

An EFAP Newsletter for Human Resource and Occupational Health Professionals, Program Administrators, Supervisors, and Key Personnel



## How to Support Employees with Children Attending School

It is essential to understand the unique challenges that parents, guardians, and primary caregivers face when it comes to children attending school. With the wide array of potential stressors within daily life and responsibilities at home, these challenges may impact their ability to be effective in the workplace from time to time. As a manager or supervisor, there are ways to help support those employees, minimizing their stress and anxieties at home and in the workplace so that they can be active, engaged and productive employees.

Parents and persons who provide care to children have unique stressors. The challenges faced when it comes to balancing work and personal life can be tremendous, regardless of the child's age or education level. Organizations can take steps to help employees be successful both in their home and work-life. By understanding these unique challenges, and the impacts those issues can have on their ability to work, organizations can come up with strategies, policies, or programs to assist in overcoming these everyday stressors.

### Today's workplace

Workplaces have changed drastically over the last 40 years with the majority of families having both parents or primary caregiver(s) working. In Canada, 69 percent of families with at least one child under the age of 16 are dual income families. This is up 36% since 1976, with almost three quarters of families having parents working full-time hours (40 hours per week).<sup>1</sup>

A national study on work-life balance indicated that over three-quarters of Canadians are working over 45 hours a week, which is up 50 percent compared to two decades ago. To make things even more challenging, only 23 percent of working Canadians are highly satisfied with life, half of what was reported back in 1991.<sup>2</sup>



With employees working longer hours and some organizations moving towards standard hours based on occupation or industry (i.e. healthcare or automotive sectors), employees are beginning to have less work satisfaction. To alleviate employee stress and scheduling conflicts, some employers have implemented various work life balance initiatives including the introduction of flex time. As a manager, the added flexibility helps to improve your employee's quality of life and supports a balanced approach to work and home life demands.

### **Challenges faced with children in school**

There are various challenges that arise when it comes to supporting children during their educational and formative years. Often, these challenges can manifest as stressors that can impact an employee's ability to be an effective worker. Understanding those stressors can help you empathize with their challenges, and provide practical advice, helping them to be more successful in both their personal and work-life.

#### **Anxiety and stress.**

There are often anxieties and pressures associated with employees who have children in school. From elementary to post-secondary, the fear and worry for their child never ends. In the younger years, employees with children may be pre-occupied with concerns as to whether their child is getting the proper education, if they are being bullied, and are they performing at the same level as their classmates. The stresses and worry when a child reaches high school can be attributed to making the grade, or encouraging and getting them to excel in their learning so they can get into the best suited post-secondary institution. Added to these pressures are the conversations surrounding sex education and puberty. In post-secondary, employees often worry about their finances and the ability to afford sending their child to school. Safety, and the necessary support systems, and how they will manage being away from home consume daily thoughts. These stressors and anxiety are often brought into the workplace, placing a strain on attention to detail, reducing focus and in some instances, impacting working relationships and overall health.

#### **Fatigue.**

When children are present in one's life, their job doesn't end when they get home from work. There are meals to prepare, cleaning of the home, helping with homework, and putting them to bed, to name a few. What's missing from the list and most important, is a mental break and quality time to share in the day's experience. No matter the age, it's

a full-time job from morning to night that requires parents to always be "on". With increased fatigue, this can affect the employee's ability to make decisions, to do complex planning, and decreases their ability to manage stress and anxiety. These challenges may impact on-going productivity from time to time and could impact performance if left unchecked.

#### **Guilt.**

It can be challenging to balance work and family expectations. When an employee isn't able to perform at the capacity they know they can, there is often a feeling of guilt associated with it. When a child starts school, it can often be challenging to adapt to these new responsibilities of now having to help with school work and/or projects, adding to the level of work the employee has to do after the business day ends. There is an added level of expectation at home to support a child in being successful, no matter what level of education. The employee can feel guilt that they aren't a good employee, and their peers may judge them for making their child a priority. There can also be guilty feelings for what is happening at home, and they may feel they are not a good parent or partner to their spouse. No matter what the situation, the feeling of guilt can cause employees to feel depressed, anxious, and stressed out.

#### **Supports you can give**

There are many ways that managers or supervisors can help those who have children feel less stressed and more supported by their work community.

#### **Provide flexibility.**

This may not work for every company; however, it is worth saying that providing flexibility in scheduling can help when dealing with issues at home. Flexibility can help to lower stress for the entire family unit, and encourages greater employee productivity and performance in the workplace. Work flexibility does not reduce or diminish the employee's obligations, but creates an environment where balance is more easily obtained.

### Building community within your department.

Often the solution to supporting those with children attending school starts from the beginning. How does your company celebrate family accomplishments? Celebrating the achievements of an individual's child in school, sports, or life can help create an environment of community. As a manager or supervisor, congratulating and getting to know your co-worker's families demonstrates that you believe they are a part of not only the company but the workplace community. This can help retain your workforce, and make employees feel like they work for an employer that cares.

### Company workplace-balance policy.

Every company has busy periods when a positive work-life balance isn't always possible. The challenge is when the busy period becomes the expectation. Often, employees begin to burn themselves out and struggle to spend time with their children. Creating a workplace or departmental workplace-balance policy that identifies key areas of support for employees helps ensure your employees can manage their lives outside of work. Some companies have seen successes by simply not allowing people to email each other after working hours. They encourage employees to turn off and spend time with family. As a manager or supervisor, speak to employees about their workload, encourage them to take time with their family, and work to triage the demands on your team to ensure individual employees aren't feeling overwhelmed.

### Be empathetic.

It can be difficult for people to speak about their family challenges. As a manager or supervisor, it is important to lead with empathy and work to support employees in being successful. When an employee comes to you about a family

issue, lend an ear to listen, and let them know that you are there for them if they need any support when it comes to managing their workload. Merely speaking to an employee when you see they may be stressed or upset may help to uncover what is going on in their life, and makes the employee feel that their workplace cares for them.

### Understand company supports and resources.

When it comes to supporting employees with children, your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) or extended benefits program may have benefits available. Programs and services like family or child counselling, extracurricular programming, daycare finders, family coaching programs, family support groups, or community agencies often exist. Understand what benefits your company and community offers for individuals with children attending school.

If we could impart a single take away from this article, being an empathetic manager or supervisor is key to running a healthier, more engaged and successful department. Your employees will have higher morale, will be more productive, and in turn will be more loyal to you and the organization.

#### References:

1. Statistics Canada. (2015, November 27). Employment patterns of families with children. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2015001/article/14202-eng.htm>
2. Canada's work-life balance more off-kilter than ever. (2018, May 09). Retrieved from <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/canadas-work-life-balance-more-off-kilter-than-ever/article4673216/>

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