



# Child Care & Work

How a lack of accessible, affordable child care impacts a mom's ability to work



# Importance of the present research

Arguably the most notable feature of the present research is the ability to establish a direct link between drivers of managing child care and key work outcomes such as productivity, retention (loyalty) and the ability to be promoted. More specifically, we see that the Employer Flexibility driver most strongly impacts not only mom's ability to balance work and home, but also the likelihood wherein she sees herself being: (1) promoted in the future, (2) more productive in work and (3) the likelihood that she envisions herself staying at her current employer.

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Simply put, when organizations provide parents with the flexibility in work to navigate their child care realities, and when coworkers and managers are understanding of unique needs for flexibility due to child care, employee productivity, loyalty and promotability increases.

Werklabs also sees that the present work establishes a link between the ability to access child care and employee productivity. As a result, there is a strong research-backed business case to be made for how providing greater access to child care through governmental programs and policy developments serves to fundamentally positively impact our economy as the productivity of not only moms, but all parents, increases in their respective workplaces.



# Linking child care factors to key work outcomes

## Personal Factors

Child Care Accessibility  
Cost Trade-offs  
Community Support  
Family Support  
In-home Support  
After-school Support

## Employer Factors

Employer Flexibility  
Employer Benefits  
Financial Support  
Work Preferences  
Competitive Policies



## Work-Life Integration Index



Promotion

Loyalty

Productivity



**SCORE** - Importance ranking on a 100 point scale



**IMPACT** - The expected effect of a 1-point change in score on the next-level outcome

Impacts are additive.



# Welcome

We are pleased to present the results of our report, *Child Care & Work*. This research focuses on child care-related factors that have the greatest impact on the ability of moms to feel successful at home and work, ultimately impacting workplace outcomes, such as loyalty, retention and productivity.

We chose to focus specifically on child care factors that personally and professionally impact moms. In doing so, we are able to identify how often under-explored topics such as child care accessibility or local family support have a discernible impact on the ability of moms to balance demands of work and home. Our research highlights how today's child care realities impact the work experiences of moms and, in turn, the productivity of organizations. We also explore how other workplace factors, such as employer flexibility, positively impact feelings of success in order to provide corporations with actionable solutions to support and retain moms as they navigate difficult child care realities.

To uncover the most important drivers, we surveyed more than 2,000 working mothers from diverse backgrounds – some currently in the workforce and others not—and asked them to rate their experiences with child care. We combined qualitative interviews with a survey instrument to surface themes that might otherwise go undetected. Our ultimate goal is to understand, and help make recommendations for the improvement of, concerns and needs that have the greatest impact on workplace productivity, loyalty and longevity.

Thank you for your attention to this important topic.

Sincerely,

Pam Cohen, PhD  
Chief Research & Analytics Officer  
Werklabs & The Mom Project





# Demographics

Werklabs' child care questionnaire was completed by more than 2,000 moms with the sample drawn from The Mom Project talent community with majority (86%) being currently employed.



Of those identifying as parents, they most frequently reported having two to three children (59%) at home, followed by one child (36%). Parents most often shared they have children between 2 to 5 years of age (29%) and 5 to 8 years of age (22%).



62% indicate they live in a suburban area, while 27% reside in an urban location and 10% report living in a rural location.



# Methodology

Werklabs' child care research combined rigorous qualitative interviews and quantitative survey design and data collection. To begin, one-on-one interviews were conducted with a sample of moms from The Mom Project talent community. These interviews employed a semi-structured approach and asked participants to respond to open-ended questions regarding their experiences with child care, such as stressors and support, within the selected topic area without unnecessarily restricting the conversation.

Following interviews, a line-by-line coding of interview transcripts occurred to unearth key themes from conversations. Based on these qualitative findings, Werklabs constructed a child care questionnaire that presented a wide variety of child care questions to respondents, who were asked to rate on a 10-point scale their experience with each.

An analysis based on Grounded Theory was performed to evaluate the measurement model and assess which questionnaire items best “fit together” to define predictors of work-life integration, or more specifically the extent to which child care considerations impact moms' ability to feel successful (1) at home and (2) at work. There were no preconceived notions of what characteristics were likely to emerge given the topic; the data came together and themes emerged to create the full story. Once groupings were tested, a label was applied to describe the concept or theme. In an average study, 8 to 12 themes (or predictors) are formed. In this case, 11 predictors of workplace investment were identified. These 11 drivers can further be broken down into one of two categories: (1) Personal Factors or (2) Employer Factors.

In doing so, Werklabs not only establishes causal relationships between how personal and employer support factors for child care directly impact feelings of achievement at home and work, but also how these drivers impact moms' perceived likelihood of productivity, ability to be promoted and loyalty to an organization.





# Introduction

With working parents comprising approximately  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the workforce, child care is an essential part of our employment infrastructure. And yet, the burden of navigating the complex child care system falls squarely on parents with little outside support or guidance. The pandemic only further pushed families to carry the heavy load of navigating child care and work, and many parents surveyed by Werklabs express frustration that they have, yet again, been left behind.

Without affordable child care, millions of parents are faced with a tough choice of choosing career over their children—if that even was an option. Many have no choice.





## Child care deserts are burdensome on moms

Some of the moms interviewed and surveyed by Werklabs mention that they are located in a child care desert, struggling to find any child care or noting that waitlists for local daycares were 3+ years. This sentiment shared by moms in our interviews is true in communities across the country, with 51% of all U.S. residents living in a child care desert, according to the [Center for American Progress](#).

With the cost of child care skyrocketing, many moms say that either themselves or their partner have moved to part-time work, or stopped working entirely, to reduce the cost. In fact, 35% of those surveyed by Werklabs say they or a partner have stepped away from the workforce specifically due to the high cost of child care.





### **What is a child care desert?**

A child care desert is defined as only one available child care spot for every three children in need of care. In child care deserts, the labor force participation rate of moms with young children is 3 percentage points lower than in other areas. Choosing a child care provider is a complex decision for families, which is made even more difficult by a lack of options. Even with federal aid, an estimated one third of child care centers have closed since the onset of the pandemic. What was already a complex issue pre-pandemic has only further become a source of stress for households across the US.

### **Why does child care matter for organizations?**

Simply put, child care deserts mean fewer moms in the workforce. Werklabs' research highlights the very real consequences of child care deserts. In our interviews with parents, some moms say staffing shortages have caused child care centers in their areas to reduce operating hours or shut down altogether. For parents who have been able to secure child care, many feel they cannot rely on their child care center to remain open or continue operating at full capacity. Particularly in places where child care options are already scarce, the effects of these changes can be devastating for working families.

When women step away from the workforce to care for children, it can have a lasting impact toward their long term career opportunities, helping to contribute to the gender wage gap and limiting their ability to move into higher-level leadership roles.

According to estimates from Barron's and Harvard Business Review, closing schools for COVID-19 may end up costing approximately \$700 billion in lost revenue and productivity, or 3.5% of GDP. Even prior to the pandemic, inadequate child care cost working parents \$37 billion annually in lost income and \$13 billion a year in lost productivity. In effect, lack of affordable child care is a business issue.



# The child care realities

The pandemic shed light on a decades-long child care crisis facing families across the country. When schools and daycare centers shut down, women carried the burden. The loss of child care is more than just the loss of paycheck and career advancement; it can mean a lost sense of self.

For all parents, but moms in particular, work and home life are impacted by child care realities. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that employed fathers remained more likely to work full time than employed mothers in 2021—95.5% compared with 79.6%. A lack of affordable, quality child care has kept talented women out of work.

Werklabs' Child Care Report highlights how personal and employer support factors converge to ultimately impact moms' feelings of success in their personal and professional lives.

**Personal factors** tend to be drivers of child care experiences that occur outside the realm of work, such as the cost of child care or family support for child care. **Employer factors** are drivers that employers exercise control over, but still have an impact on work-life integration, such as flexibility and benefits.



# Factors Impacting Moms' Feelings of Success



## Personal Factors

### Strongest Driver & Indicators

Child Care Accessibility

- 1 Ease of finding child care that meets a family's needs
- 2 Availability of quality child care centers for the region
- 3 Accessibility of conveniently located child care



## Employer Factors

### Strongest Driver & Indicators

Employer Flexibility

- 1 Flexibility in work to navigate their child care realities
- 2 Co-workers' understanding of the unique need for flexibility due to child care
- 3 Manager's understanding of the unique need for flexibility due to child care





# Personal Factors

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Personal factors tend to be drivers of child care experiences that occur outside the realm of work, such as the cost of child care or family support for child care. Those drivers are (1) Child Care Accessibility, (2) Cost Trade-offs, (3) Emotional Support, (4) Community Support, (5) Family Support, (6) In-home Support, and (7) After-School Support.





# Child Care Accessibility

*“While we have access location-wise, we have been on three waiting lists for our daughter to attend an early education/child care facility for over two years.”*

- Interviewed participant



According to survey results, only 39% of moms report that they find it somewhat easy to find care that meets their family’s needs.

The ability to access quality, affordable, and local child care that meets their family’s needs is a key driver impacting the work-life balance of moms. Long waitlists are a common complaint, with many interviewed participants reporting year-long lists for child care centers in their community for infant care. Worse yet, some mothers report joining waitlists mere months after they find out they are pregnant, forcing them to anticipate their child care needs long before they truly understand those realities themselves. For these moms, signing up early is the only way to remain competitive and guarantee a spot for their child so that they may return to work. As a result, families may “settle” for the only child care option available to them, rather than choose a program that best fits the needs of their family.





# Cost Trade-offs

*“I need help 5 days a week but can only afford 2 days, so I am forced to juggle work with time when I’m with my son and it really is hard and terrible.”*

- Interviewed participant

The cost of child care is unsustainable. With limited federal resources available to offset the costs, most families find themselves grappling with the high cost of child care, forcing many families to make difficult tradeoffs. For many of those interviewed and surveyed, the cost of child care is the largest expense in their family budget, with many saying that they or their partner have moved to part-time work, or stopped working entirely, to reduce that cost.

Of all the personal child care drivers determined by Werklabs’ child care questionnaire, **Cost Trade-offs is the only one to have a negative impact on work-life integration.** That is, the more moms reduce their work, or even consider reducing their work, because of the high cost of child care, the less satisfied they are, personally and professionally.



35% of respondents say they or a partner have stepped away from the workforce specifically due to the high cost of child care.

The negative relationship between Cost Trade-offs and Work-Life Integration indicates that respondents want to keep working in their present capacity; the more they reduce their work, or even consider reducing their work, because of the high cost of child care, the less satisfied they are, professionally and personally.





## Emotional Support

*“Raising children during a pandemic has been extremely lonely.”*

- Interviewed participant

Emotional support can come from many places—a partner, parents, friends, child care providers, therapists—but it requires a true understanding of the real challenges facing working parents today. Respondents express concerns that since times are tough for everyone, it leaves little room for opportunity to turn emotional support into practical help. Furthermore, many say they do not have people geographically close enough to provide that support, and that the pandemic has made it more difficult to establish new connections.





# Community Support

*“It’s hard to find people who get it unless they are like-minded and in the same phase of life.”*

- Interviewed participant

The Community Support driver represents the emotional support a respondent gets from friends and extended family, beyond parents and siblings. Overall, this support for managing child care needs has the fourth-highest impact on work-life integration, higher even than the emotional and hands-on support provided by immediate family. Strong community connections not only give children a sense of belonging, they also empower parents to feel confident and supported in their lives, which leads to happier families overall.



Moms report feeling, on average, more **emotionally supported** by friends (45%) than their extended family (34%). Emotional support is most often felt through friends with similar aged children, who are managing similar, difficult child care realities.







## Family Support

*“I think everyone is stretched too thin. My parents, siblings, and close friends all work or have similar child care struggles.”*

- Interviewed participant

The Family Support driver captures both the emotional support respondents receive from immediate family, and the practical support they get when family (and friends) are able to assist with providing child care. This form of support has a smaller impact on work-life integration than emotional and community support.

Women share their own hesitations with even reaching out to family for assistance, worried it may be seen as a burden to their families, many of whom are similarly stretched thin balancing the demands of work and home life.





# In-home Support

*“Together [my nanny and I] carry the burden of managing the household. I love her and she has been with us since my daughter was two months old. But I pay a high price for that level of help.”*

- Interviewed participant

The In-home Support driver reflects the degree to which respondents rely on in-home care to meet their child care needs. Though fewer respondents report a reliance on in-home child care overall, in part due to its typically higher cost, this driver’s impact represents the increase in work-life integration that would occur if parents were more able to utilize in-home care. Aside from the convenience of having in-home support, moms share how they view in-home caregivers as partners in their parenting journey, allowing them to regain confidence in themselves as mothers and feel less guilt in managing it all.





# After School Support

*“After school child care is available, but it is limited due to severe understaffing.”*

- Interviewed participant

The After School Support driver reflects the degree to which respondents rely on after-school programs to meet their child care needs. This driver had the smallest impact on work-life integration.

This speaks to the concern that lack of child care options isn't just impacting early childhood, with moms of school-aged kids expressing defeat when it comes to ways to keep their kids entertained after the final school bell rings. For parents who need it, access to after-school programs has been particularly difficult during the pandemic.





# Employer Factors

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Employer factors are drivers that employers exercise control over, but still have an impact on work-life integration, such as flexibility and benefits. Those drivers are (1) Employer Flexibility, (2) Competitive Policies, (3) Financial Support, (4) Employer Benefits, and (5) Work Preferences.





# Employer Flexibility

*“I am thankful to have my supervisor understand and share the same values of a flexible work schedule with me. Unfortunately, he is the exception amongst our organization’s leadership.”*

- Interviewed participant



Respondents feel their **organizational leadership (53%)** is less understanding of unique flexibility needs than their **managers (67%)** or **coworkers (65%)**.



65% of respondents rate that, on average, they have a good deal of flexibility in work to navigate child care realities.

Employer Flexibility is the number one driver of work-life integration, among all personal and employer factors. This driver represents personal flexibility, an understanding of flexibility needs by others in the workplace, and the specific flexibility offerings an employer provides.

While having a partner with work flexibility makes it much easier to navigate child care, many report that the bulk of child care responsibilities continues to fall on moms. Even with flexibility, work-life integration can be difficult to achieve, as workloads don't adjust accordingly. Manager and organization understanding of flexibility needs is critical for working parents. Though it doesn't solve all problems, flexibility is becoming a job requirement for many as it is the only way they have found to manage a seemingly impossible child care reality. It can be a must-have for a new position, or a reason to stay in a current job that might otherwise be less than ideal in other areas of growth and development.





## Organizational Understanding

Organizations may claim to understand the realities of child care needs, but that doesn't always translate into actual supportive policies or actions, leaving many employees feeling disheartened. Many report that an understood need for flexibility can be in conflict with the need to get the work done. There is a sense that the level of understanding within an organization varies according to how many other parents are in the organization at all levels, but especially among leadership. Furthermore, parents report that understanding and support is highly dependent on individual managers, who may be more or less understanding than the organization as a whole.





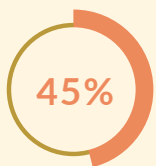
# Competitive Policies

*“I did not have paid leave or any PTO when my kids were born. The burnout that resulted is why I left that company.”*

- Interviewed participant



59% of respondents report their organization’s PTO policy is competitive.



45% report that their company’s paid family-leave benefits are somewhat competitive.

The Competitive Policies driver is determined by the extent that an employer’s PTO policies and paid family leave benefits are competitive with other organizations. This driver has the second-highest impact of the employer factors on work-life integration.





# Financial Support

*“Subsidizing child care would’ve helped me get back in the workforce faster.”*

- Interviewed participant

The Financial Support driver represents the extent to which an organization financially supports an employee’s child care costs. This driver had the lowest score overall, indicating that relatively few respondents are receiving financial assistance for child care costs from their employer. As reported by the [Council of Economic Advisers](#), the high cost of child care comes at a time when families can least afford it. The [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#) defines child care as “affordable” when it does not exceed 7% of a family’s income, yet data from the [Center for American Progress](#) show that, on average, parents would need to spend at least 18% of their annual income to find child care that meets the minimum licensing requirements.

Any increase in this support would lead to a greater work-life integration for parents.







# Employer Benefits

*“My workplace has good benefits for new parents. I would love to [see] the support of parents evolve beyond just the initial phase of welcoming a child into your family.”*

- Interviewed participant

The Employer Benefits driver is the highest scoring of all the drivers. Among these contributing items, an ability to take short breaks from work and a higher level of manager understanding are the two most important components of the Employer Benefits driver. Respondents rate benefits as very critical to their feelings of being supported at work.

Aside from actual benefits, trusting an employee to do their work well is one of the strongest ways that colleagues, managers and leadership can show their support for working parents. Many respondents, however, feel unsupported, because their organization does not offer benefits to address child care needs and responsibilities. In addition, workload realities can make it difficult to actually use available benefits.





# Work Preferences

*“I would not even consider a job that doesn’t offer at least a hybrid option...It is a must have requirement, even more than pay.”*

- Interviewed participant



75% of respondents would prefer working remotely 4 days a week.



66% of respondents would prefer working remotely 2-3 days a week.

The Work Preferences driver captures respondents’ preferences for working in a hybrid environment. An increased preference for working remotely 2-4 days a week leads to a higher work-life integration.



# Conclusion

For better or worse, the COVID-19 pandemic shed light on the child care crisis decades in the making. When schools and daycare centers shut down, women carried much of the load in figuring out how to manage the juggle of work and caretaking, or if they had to walk away from their job altogether.

From Werklabs research, we know that moms are carrying the burden of child care. We chose to focus specifically on child care factors that impact moms personally and professionally. In doing so, we are able to identify how often unexplored topics such as child care accessibility or local family support have a discernible impact on the ability of moms to balance demands of work and home. This research highlights how today's child care realities impact the work experiences of moms and, in turn, the productivity of organizations. And clearly, employer factors, such as employer flexibility, positively impact feelings of success in order to provide corporations with actionable solutions to support and retain moms as they navigate difficult child care realities.



**Want to learn  
more?**

Visit us at [Werklabs.com](https://www.werklabs.com)

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