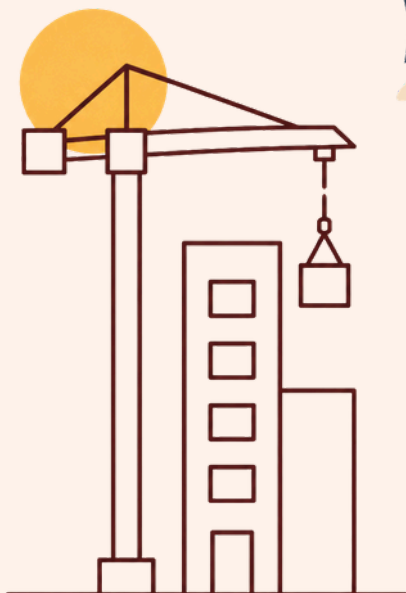


DESIGNING A NEW WAY TO WORK AND PARENT



Through the **voices of working parents and managers**, this paper explores how fathers are showing up differently, how families are navigating parental leave and return, and how workplaces can better support the way parents **want to work and care**.

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THE STARTING POINT

And You helps organizations turn research into practical solutions that strengthen culture, equip managers and help attract and retain great people.

Work With Us

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It is no surprise that **COVID-19 changed the way we work**. Pre-pandemic only 5–7% of paid workdays in the US were worked from home, then reaching a peak of nearly 60% in spring 2020, that figure remains around 25% as of 2025; evidence that the shift has endured well beyond lockdowns (1,2). The research also shows that the demand for flexibility has not been satisfied: **desired WFH rates exceed actual rates** across every major demographic group, with some of the largest gaps among women and workers with young children (2).

Work is not the only thing that has changed. The way **families divide care and earning responsibilities** has been shifting for generations. In 1970, only 49% of couples with children under 18 were dual-income; by 2016, that figure had risen to 66%. Over the same period, **fathers became substantially more involved in childcare**, tripling the time they spent caring for their children from 2.5 hours per week in 1965 to 8 hours in 2016. Yet the shift remains incomplete. Mothers still spend considerably more time on childcare, 14 hours per week compared with 8 for fathers, and **greater participation does not necessarily mean fathers feel they are doing enough**. In 2017, 63% of fathers said they spent too little time with their children, compared with only 35% of mothers (3).

Policy is beginning to reflect that changing role. Today, 35 of 38 OECD countries provide paid leave reserved for fathers, yet dedicated **paternity leave averages only 2.4 weeks** and uptake is only at 26% as of 2023. Workplace culture, financial considerations and policy design all influence whether fathers actually use the leave available to them (4). Together, these shifts are **redefining what it means to work and parent**, and raising new questions about whether workplaces are keeping pace.

To explore these questions, we gathered perspectives from parents and managers from around the globe through surveys and interviews. Our survey was structured in three parts, and respondents could answer any section for which they were eligible:



Part I

Fathers and non-birthing parents shared their experiences of **becoming a parent and navigating work and care**, including how parenthood affected their roles, priorities and identity, and the support they found—or would have found—most helpful.



Part II

Parents **employed when their child was born** shared details of the leave they took, their experiences returning to work, and the flexibility and challenges they encountered along the way.



Part III

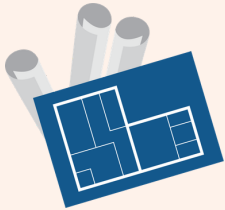
Managers who have **led employees through parental leave** shared insights on current practices, the challenges they face, and what could help them better support working parents.

References & Abbreviations: OECD, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; EFH, Work from Home. 1. Aksoy CG et al. Hoover Institution, 2025. "The Global Persistence of Work from Home." 2. Buckman S et al. 2025. Measuring Work from Home. 3. Pew Research Center, 2019. "For Father's Day, 8 Facts About American Dads." 4. OECD, 2025. "Paid Leave for Fathers: Policy, Practice and Reform."

This research builds on our 2025 study, The Untold Story of Postpartum at Work, which explored women's experiences of postpartum and return to work, see page 13 for more.

THE PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN

Working parenthood is changing. Families are **redefining how they divide work and care**, but workplace structures have not always evolved at the same pace.



MAIN THEMES

1 Building a Broader Role

Fathers are not simply inheriting a model of fatherhood. They are building a broader role through parenting differently, wanting meaningful involvement in care, and investing in the preparation and support to do it well. Their responses point to active engagement in fatherhood itself, not simply a redistribution of responsibilities.

Explore Part I:

- *Parenting Differently*, page 5
- *Invested in the Role*, page 6

2 Leave Is One Moment of a Much Longer Transition

Leave policy alone did not determine the experience. Formal return support was uncommon, and the challenges parents described extended across workload, career, family responsibilities and their changing priorities. Where parental leave and return worked well, flexibility and individual adaptation often filled the gap.

Explore Part II:

- *Able to Step Away*, page 7
- *Back to Work, Not Back to Before*, page 8

3 Clear Structure, Individual Support

Managers generally felt confident supporting parental transitions, but also wanted clear responsibilities and timelines; a shared foundation so they can maintain consistency while adapting to each employee, role and family.

Explore Part III:

- *Without a Blueprint*, page 9
- *Back to Work, Not Back to Before*, page 10
- *Off the Script*, page 11

Supporting working parents is no longer about designing the perfect parental leave policy or defining a new "normal." There is **no single model of working parenthood to design for**.

The opportunity for organizations is to create structures that can adapt to different families, roles and choices—while giving managers enough clarity to provide consistency in practice.

That means moving beyond policies alone. Thoughtful planning before leave, genuine workload adaptation, clear communication and supported reintegration can allow parents to step away, return and continue contributing without forcing their family into a predefined model.

Families are redesigning how they work and care. The workplace needs to be designed to adapt with them.

MEET THE DESIGNERS

In Spring 2026, parents and managers across the US, Europe and beyond shared their experiences through an anonymous online survey exploring parenthood and work. Respondents completed each of the three sections for which they were eligible, see page 1.

ALL RESPONDENTS



Part I

Fathers
n=25



Part II

Working Parents
n=41



Part III

Managers
n=18

Geography



38% Switzerland



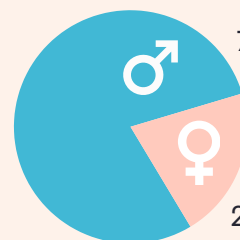
23% US



28% European Union

11% Other

Gender

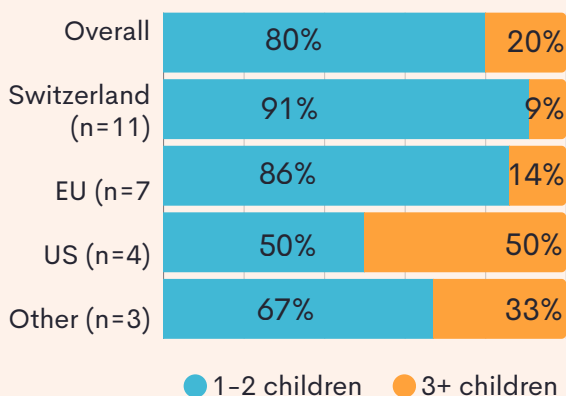


Part I

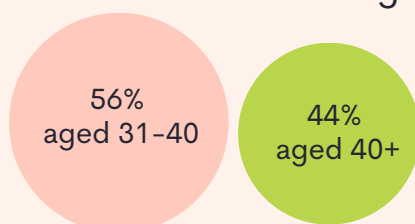
FATHERS

n= 25

Number of Children



Age



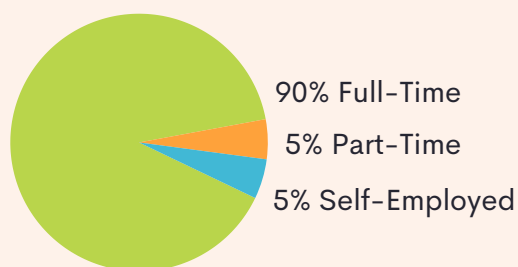
Part II

WORKING PARENTS

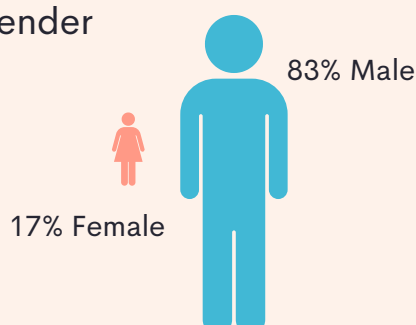
n= 41



Type of Employment



Gender



FROM PLANS TO PRACTICE

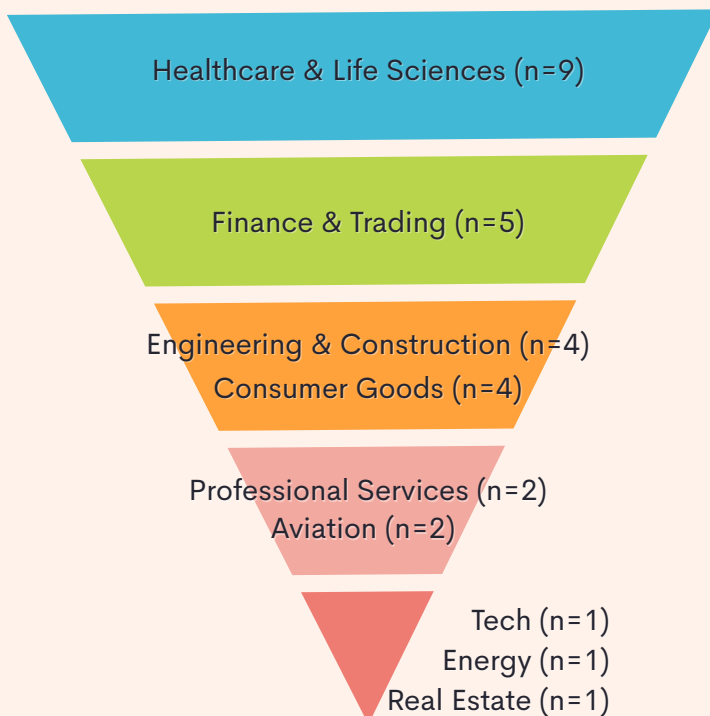
Alongside the anonymous survey, we conducted one-to-one interviews with 11 parents and managers to explore their experience in greater depth. The demographics below bring together Part III survey respondents and interview participants, reflecting perspectives across industries, company sizes and geographies.



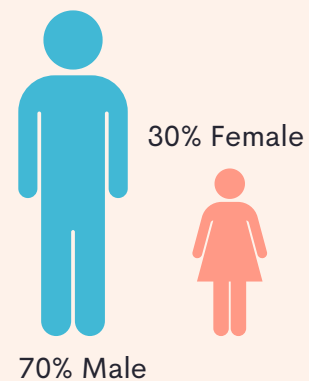
Part III MANAGERS

n = 29 (18 survey + 11 one-on-one interviews)

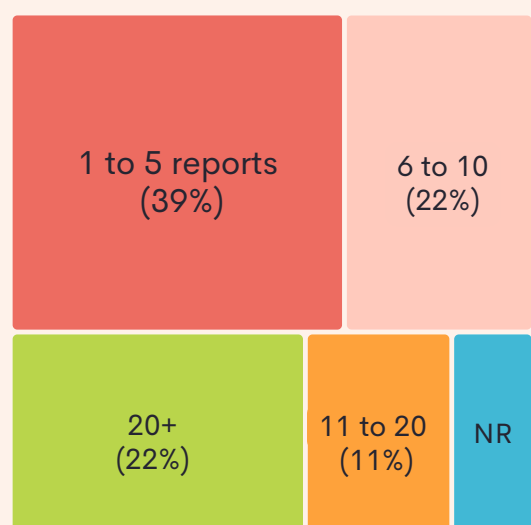
Industry *n* = 29



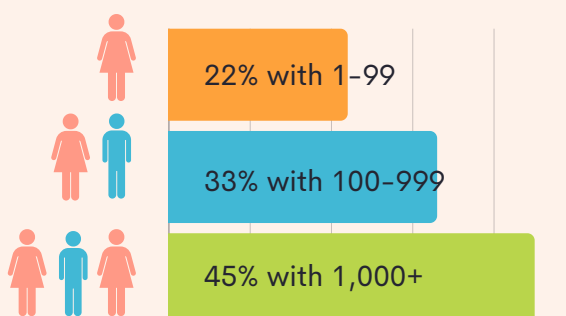
Gender *n* = 29



Direct Reports *n* = 18



Company Size *n* = 18





Part I

PARENTING DIFFERENTLY

Fathers are **not simply stepping into the roles** they saw growing up. Most are parenting differently from how they were raised, while also feeling satisfied with the role they have created. Their responses suggest that fatherhood is broadening: **caregiving is increasingly part of how fathers see their role**, without necessarily displacing other responsibilities.

REDEFINING THE ROLE

Doing things differently appears to be largely positive. The majority of fathers (84%) are **parenting differently** from how they were raised and nearly three in four (72%) are **satisfied with their role** as a father today. And while roles and expectations are evolving, only 8% described them as unclear or unspoken.

Satisfaction remained high among fathers parenting differently:
15 of 21 (71%) were satisfied with their role today.



Overall, 52% felt encouraged to be actively involved in caregiving, and 28% wished they could take a more active role.

52%
were encouraged
to care

28%
want a more
active role

Fatherhood is expanding and fathers were **largely comfortable with how they contribute at home and financially**. Importantly, where they wanted change, the strongest desire was not to step back, but **to care more**.

Free text response to, "What is one thing that would have made your experience of becoming a parent easier?"

"...**fewer people interfering** in my parenting because they assume that as a man, I know less about how to parent."

- Father of 1-2 children, Switzerland

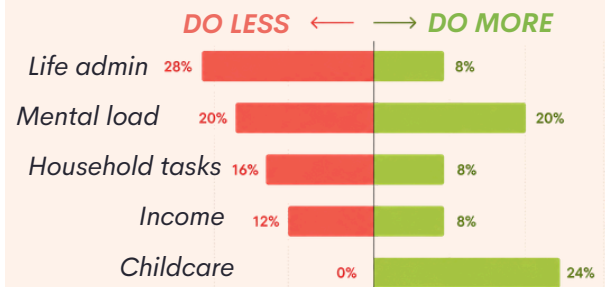
"Learn earlier to **give yourself a break**."

- Father 1-2 children, US

WITH A DESIRE TO CARE

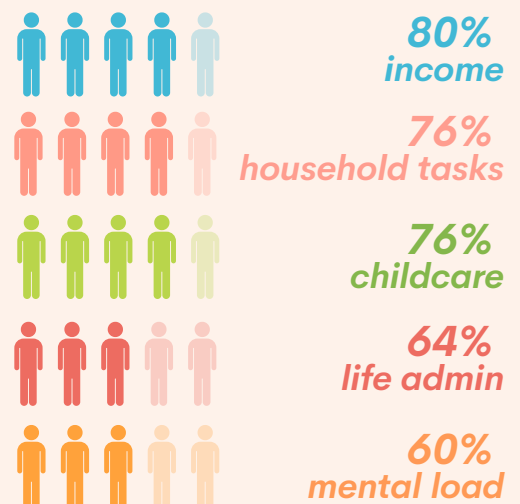
Fathers want an active role in caregiving. Across the five domains, **childcare was the area where fathers were most likely to want greater involvement**. Nearly one in four fathers (24%) wanted to do more, and not a single father wanted to do less.

For each area, how would you ideally like your level of contribution to change?



Most fathers were **comfortable with their current contribution** across roles: 76% felt their contribution to childcare and household tasks was about right, and 80% were satisfied with their financial contribution.

Percentage of fathers who found a "good balance now" by domain

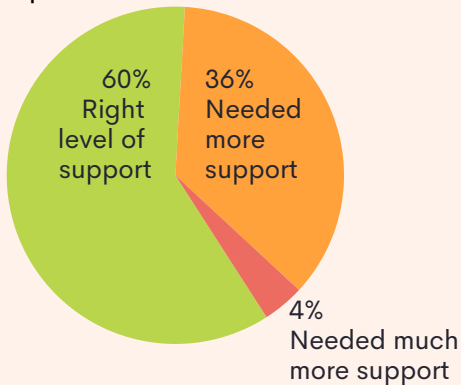




Part I

INVESTED IN THE ROLE

Most fathers **felt adequately supported**, but the experience was far from universal, with 40% of fathers reporting that they could have used more support when they became a parent.



Fathers want to be active, capable caregivers—and are **willing to prepare** for the role. They value **understanding, concrete help** and useful information.

"More thorough training on **couple dynamics post parenting** and practical tools to **share house and parenting care**."

- Father of 1-2 children, EU

"Help recognizing that the feeling that **my identity was shifting was normal** and manageable."

- Father of 3+ children, US

"Having **other dads** who were into the same approach to parenting."

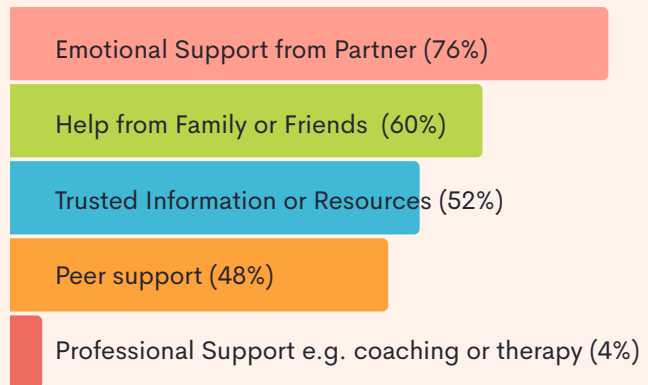
- Father of 1-2 children, Switzerland

Fathers' desire to take an active role in care was matched by a **desire to feel prepared** for it. Most felt adequately supported, but that **support came largely from their inner circle**: partners, family and friends. When asked what could have made becoming a parent easier, practical support and preparation stood out, pointing to the importance fathers place on **feeling capable and confident** as caregivers.

WHO FATHERS TURN TO

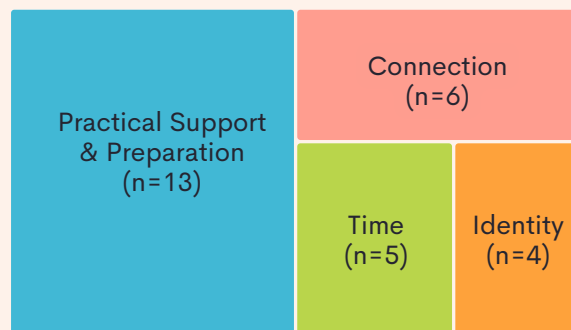
Support was **predominantly informal**. Partners were the most common source, followed by family and friends. **Nearly half valued peer support**, while professional support was rarely part of fathers' experience.

What types of support did you access or find helpful when you became a parent?



Alongside requests for information and hands-on help, fathers **reflected on their changing identity** and role as parents, suggesting an investment not just in participating in care, but in **doing it well and being recognized** as caregivers in their own right.

Free text response to, "What is one thing that would have made your experience of becoming a parent easier?"



Practical Support: Childcare, housework, family help

Connection: Partner, family, peers, emotional support

Time: Parental leave, paid time off, more time

Identity: Identity shift, recognition, parenting competence

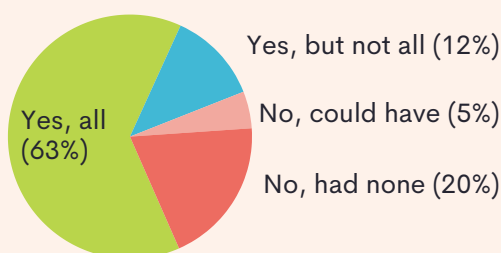


Part II

ABLE TO STEP AWAY

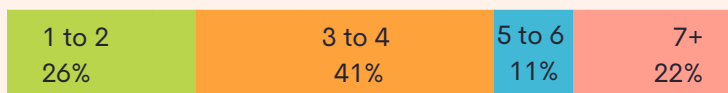
Most parents took parental leave when it was available, and once away, **boundaries with work were largely respected**. Fathers' leave was typically short, however, and for those who did not take everything available, **workload and career concerns**, not finances, were the main drivers. The challenge appeared **less about permission to disconnect**, and more about how long parents felt able to step away, and what awaited them on return.

Most respondents **took parental leave when it was available**. 63% of parents took the full leave offered, while a small but significant proportion (17%) did not take all the leave available. One in five reported that their employer offered no parental leave, yet nearly all of these respondents were over 40 years old, suggesting a reflection of earlier workplace policies.



Even when fathers took leave, time away from work was typically short. The **median was 4 weeks**, with two-thirds (67%) of fathers taking four weeks or less and more than three-quarters (78%) back at work within six weeks.

How long was your total leave (in weeks)?



CONNECTED, BY CHOICE

Leave generally meant being able to step away. While almost half (48%) occasionally checked messages or emails, 42% fully disconnected and **very few remained regularly involved**. Notably, no respondent felt expected to stay connected, suggesting that when leave was taken, boundaries around work were largely respected.

During your leave, how connected did you feel to work, and what shaped that?



0% felt expected to stay connected

WHEN LEAVE WAS LEFT ON THE TABLE

For the small group of fathers who did not take all the leave available to them, **workload and the impact on their team** dominated their reasons for returning sooner. Career concerns also featured, while notably, no father cited financial consideration.

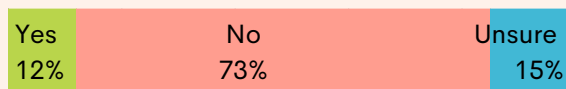
Among fathers who took less than the leave available or did not take available leave (n=7); multiple responses permitted.



Leave was generally taken when available and **boundaries with work were largely respected**.

While most respondents felt their **career progression had not been affected by taking leave**, more than one in four either felt it had (12%) or were unsure (15%).

Do you feel your career progression was affected by taking parental leave?



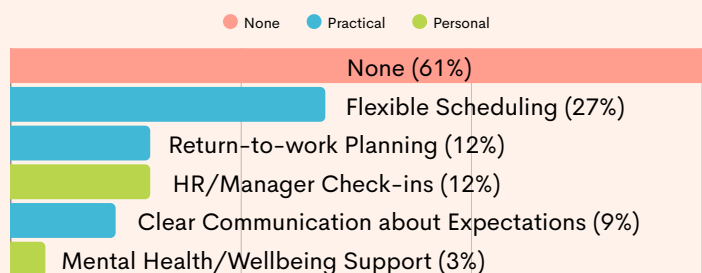


Part II

BACK TO WORK, NOT BACK TO BEFORE

Three in five respondents reported receiving no workplace support during or after leave. When offered, workplace measures **focused more on making work manageable** than on helping employees navigate the transition.

Were you offered any of the following during or after your leave?



FLEXIBILITY FILLED THE GAP

Where parents described a more supported return, it was often **shaped by flexibility and individual adaptation**, from flexible hours and gradual returns to understanding managers and reduced travel.

"No specific program but managers/leaders in my group **understand family** and we can work flexibly."

- Mother of 1-2 children in the EU

Returning to work was not simply the reverse of stepping away. **Formal support was limited**, and where return worked well, it was often shaped by flexibility and supportive managers. The **challenges were both personal and practical**: parents were catching up at work and simultaneously figuring out how work now fit into a life that had changed.

The most common challenge was not leave itself, but integrating work and family afterwards. **Almost one-third of respondents** described challenges around new routines, **competing responsibilities, supporting a partner** or being separated from their child.

Free-text responses on leave & return to work challenges, categorized by theme.



Formal **return support was uncommon**. When return worked well, it was often because someone **made room for adaptation**—through the work itself or how it was managed.

"That my **opinion towards work shifted** very quickly and I didn't know how to manage that shift."

- Father of 3+ children, US

"Feeling like I had to **rebuild credibility**."

- Father of 1-2 children, EU

"Learning how to **stay relevant** while working 3 days/week but **be present enough** for both work and baby."

- Mother of 1-2 children, Switzerland

FINDING A NEW FIT

The challenge of returning was rarely just work. Parents were **re-engaging professionally** while simultaneously renegotiating **how work fit alongside new** responsibilities, routines and relationships at home.



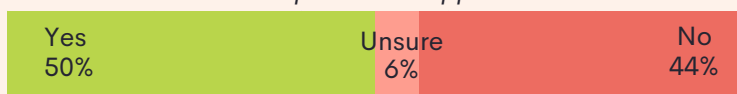
Part III

WITHOUT A BLUEPRINT

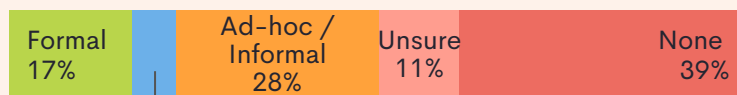
Managers play a critical role in how parental transitions are experienced at work. They **translate policy into practice, respond to individual needs**, manage the wider team and lead employees through leave and return. Yet the guidance and resources available to them varied considerably.

Clear structure for managers was far from universal. Only half reported having a parental leave policy outlining **how managers should support employees**, while 39% had no manager-specific resources available. Formal training was particularly uncommon, reported by just 17%.

Does your company have a parental leave policy that outlines what is offered to employees and how managers are expected to support them?



What resources are available for managers in your company to handle parental leave transitions?



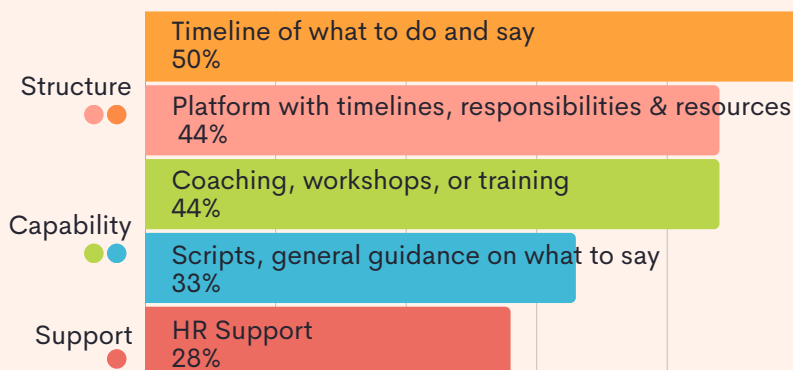
Access to consultants/specialists (6%)

Managers felt confident, but they **still wanted scaffolding**: structure and support to help them plan, communicate and adapt.

WHAT WOULD HELP

Managers did not point to a single solution. They wanted support for both **what to do and how to do it well**: clear timelines and structured tools alongside training to boost their skills, and HR support.

Which of the following would help you?



YET, CONFIDENT

Despite the lack of resources, managers generally felt very **confident supporting employees** through leave and return, with 71% rating their confidence 4 or 5 out of 5.

How confident are you supporting an employee through parental leave and return to work?

4.1/5 ★★★★★

But confidence did not remove the challenges managers faced: **managing the work and supporting the person**.

Ranked response to, "What are your biggest challenges supporting employees through parental transitions?"



Asked what they would **do differently next time**, managers described adapting workload, planning earlier, bringing in support and communicating more.

What's one thing you would handle differently next time?



"Be clearer about how the **workload would shift** away from them and back when they return."

- Father of 3+ kids with a team of 20+, US



Part III

BUILT TO FLEX

Managers told us through the survey that they wanted **more structure**; our interviews revealed why. They were navigating different employees, roles and circumstances while still needing to plan the work, support the individual and keep teams moving.

Managers are expected to support the individual while also **managing the workload and a wider team**. The interviews suggest that doing both requires a **balance**: enough consistency to plan and lead the transition, with confidence and enough flexibility to adapt along the way.



The goal is not to prescribe every interaction, but rather to give managers the **scaffolding to make good decisions** without having to design each transition from scratch.

"You need flexibility because teams are structured differently, but... it would be helpful to have **some sort of safety net**: here is the bare minimum of what should happen before someone goes on leave."

– Mother & Manager, US

"It would have ... sounded weird if I had **taken the actual** four months off."

– Father & Manager, Switzerland

Eleven in-depth interviews were conducted with parents and managers across the US, Switzerland and other international contexts. Participants often brought both perspectives: seven were parent-managers, three were parents, and one was a manager.

A SOLID FOUNDATION

Managers did not want a rigid process. They wanted a **clearer starting point**. The circumstances differed by employee, role and team, but managers repeatedly pointed to the same practical needs: **earlier planning, clearer workload decisions, better communication** and somewhere to turn for support.

Policy creates **permission on paper**. Managers help determine whether employees feel able to use it.

Good Leave Starts Before Leave

Coverage, priorities and expectations need to be addressed before an employee steps away. **Return should be anticipated** just as much as leave is, with ongoing opportunities to revisit and revise plans.

Consistency ≠ Sameness

Managers valued clarity on what was expected of them. Responsibilities, timelines, tasks and written policies provided a shared starting point, while leaving room to respond to the employee, role and family. When **conversation are standardised**, managers can make the **answers individualised**.

Make Permission Visible

Policies establish what employees are entitled to; managers and leaders influence what feels possible in practice. It starts with open conversations and empathy, **but visible role-modelling** can make taking leave and adapting on return feel normal rather than exceptional.

Conversations
Responsibilities
Timelines
Boundaries
Processes



Standardise

Answers
Arrangements
Workload
Communication
Return



Individualise

OFF THE SCRIPT

In each of our 1:1 interviews, we asked one final question: "What's the **one piece of advice** you'd give to a new parent or manager on parental leave?" Across very different experiences, much of the advice came back to a few simple things: take the time, ask for help, talk openly, plan ahead—and make the support on paper real in practice.

TO PARENTS: TAKE ALL THE TIME

"Take the leave that you can take, because those are **special days**, so don't miss that."

– Father with a team of 80+, Life Sciences

"I am very replaceable in my job at [Company]. I am **not replaceable in my job at home**."

– Mother, Technology

"**Enjoy the ride**, even the complicated parts, because it doesn't last ... Take as much leave as you can, and really maximize it."

– Father, Consumer Goods

"You can never spend **enough time** with your kids"

– Father & Manager, Finance

GIVE YOURSELF GRACE

"With your first, **you just don't know anything about leave, being a parent, or any of it**. So I would say give yourself grace."

– Mother, Real Estate

ASK FOR HELP

"Don't be afraid to ask for help... you're **not supposed to do it all**."

– Mother, Entrepreneur in Cosmetics

"Be open... **talk about what you're going through**. Don't feel as if you need to have everything figured out."

– Father & Manager, Finance

TO MANAGERS:

"Ask. Listen ... give people a space where they can feel **safe in sharing**."

– Father & Manager, Finance

"Managers should **ensure leave** isn't merely not stigmatized, but is **actually encouraged**."

– Manager, Med Tech

"Put things in writing. **Be clear about what is allowed and what is not**. This is an area where tensions can arise, because people are very touchy about these topics."

– Father & Manager, Finance

"Employees feel supported when the coverage is strong enough that **managers don't need to contact** them during leave."

– Father & Manager, Pharmaceuticals



FOR MOMS

"Becoming a mother made me more patient, but **also less tolerant of bullshit**."

– Mother, Entrepreneur in Cosmetics



FOR DADS

"Fathers especially need time to bond with their children ... **Long paternity leaves are essential for building a less chauvinist, patriarchal world**—one where men are gentler and kinder."

– Father & Manager, Business Management

THE DESIGN BRIEF

The message from our research is clear: Fathers want to play an **active role at home**, and increasingly want their working lives to reflect it. But offering leave is only the beginning. **How managers translate policy into individual support** can shape the transition that follows. Here's a practical checklist to make changes in your workplace today.



Before Leave

- Schedule a pre-leave planning meeting. Cover leave dates, priorities, workload, handover and return timing.
- Create a written coverage plan. List what will pause, what will continue, who owns each responsibility and who handles urgent issues.
- Agree a communication plan in writing that includes the frequency, channel and type of information communicated.
- Give managers a standard pre-leave conversation guide so the basics don't depend on who the manager is.



During Leave

- Follow the communication agreement.
- Nominate one person to manage coverage questions so work does not quietly flow back to the employee on leave.
- Protect access to leave. Leaders should take their own parental leave and visibly use flexibility rather than only endorsing it in policy.
- Give managers an HR contact for all leave & return transition questions.
- Prepare a return-to-work brief before the employee returns, compiling key team, project and organizational updates, decisions and changes so they can get up to speed without working through months of emails.

After Return

- Hold a return-to-work meeting in the first week. Review the brief together, clarify priorities and agree what needs attention now, later, or not at all.
- Use a 4 to 6 week adaptation period. Adjust workload, hours, travel and WFH as possible; do not expect full capacity on day one.
- Match workload to working time. If someone returns at 60%, 80% or reduced days, reduce the work accordingly, and keep in mind a gradual return.
- Schedule a check-in 3 to 4 weeks later. Revisit workload, WFH and hours alongside childcare realities, and discuss whether parenthood has changed their priorities, career goals or how they want to work..



Keep it Working

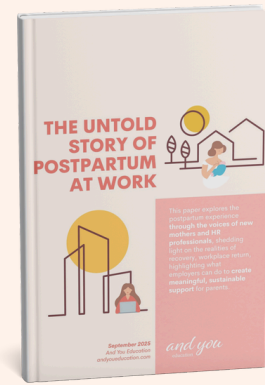
- Don't make career decisions based on leave. Keep employees in conversations about projects, development and progression; ask before assuming their ambitions or availability have changed.
- Give every manager the same core transition tools: a timeline, pre-leave conversation guide, coverage-plan template, communication agreement and return checklist.
- Review the transition at 3 months. Ask the employee what worked, what didn't and what would have helped, and feed that back into the process.
- Track leave uptake by gender. If fathers are entitled to leave but aren't taking it, investigate what is getting in the way.



PLAYING YOUR PART

From our 2025 Research

Women want to return to work with confidence, health, and support—but the **structures around them too often fall short**. HR leaders, too, recognize both the gaps and the opportunity to do better. Here's a practical checklist to make changes in your workplace, today.



Before Leave

- Provide clear, written guidelines on maternity and parental leave policies.
- Hold a pre-leave planning conversation to discuss workload handover, coverage, return timelines, and working preferences.
- Offer employees the choice to outline how (and if) they'd like to stay connected during leave.
- Train managers on what to say (and what not to say) before leave — with a focus on being empathetic listeners

During Leave

- Maintain optional (employee-led) touchpoints—updates about team news, invitations to social events, or check-ins.
- Ensure benefits, healthcare access, and HR resources are clear and accessible.
- Respect boundaries: never pressure employees to return early or engage beyond what they've requested.

Return-to-Work Transition

- Offer phased return options (e.g. reduced hours, part-time, or remote work) for a 4–6 week adaptation period.
- Hold structured return-to-work meetings — once upon return and again a few weeks later — to revisit workload, expectations, and support needs.
- Ensure practical accommodations such as private lactation spaces, flexible pumping schedules, and childcare-friendly meeting times.
- Provide access to coaching or peer mentoring to help parents navigate the transition with confidence.

Ongoing Support

- Schedule regular manager check-ins that prioritize wellbeing and recognize the skills, strengths, and perspectives employees bring after becoming parents — rather than focusing solely on performance metrics.
- Normalize open conversations about parenthood and mental health so they're part of everyday team culture, not hidden topics.
- Gather 1:1 feedback from employees returning from leave to understand their experience and use it to review and refine policies annually.
- Track outcomes over time — retention, promotion, and engagement of new parents — alongside direct feedback, to measure impact and ensure policies evolve with employee needs.

Beyond the Transition

- Pair returning parents with a “buddy” who has been through the transition.
- Create a resource hub with trusted materials on postpartum recovery, childcare, and workplace rights.
- Encourage leaders to model family-friendly behaviors (leaving on time, not emailing in the evening, respecting boundaries).

Want the research behind the recommendations?

Read *The Untold Story of Postpartum at Work*

AND YOU EDUCATION

We turn insight into action, partnering with organizations to equip HR with the tools and support they need to help employees navigate leave and return successfully. The result is stronger workplace – one where employees feel valued and able to stay and grow.



Hi, I'm Erica—a neuroscientist, medical writer, mother of 3, and founder of And You.

I founded And You to bring science and real human experience into the way workplaces are designed.

Together with a multidisciplinary team of experts, we turn evidence into practical solutions that help organizations navigate life transitions, equip managers and create cultures where people want to stay and grow.

LET'S DESIGN WHAT'S NEXT

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WHAT WE OFFER



PLAY, Parental Leave And You: An end-to-end SaaS platform that brings parental leave and return into one structured workflow, guiding employees, managers and HR through clear timelines, responsibilities, conversations and resources.



Coaching & Wellbeing: 1:1 coaching and wellbeing sessions that support health, manage stress, strengthen focus and prevent burnout as employees navigate life and work transitions.



Workshops & Educational Seminars: Interactive, science-led learning for employees and leaders on parenthood, workplace transitions, menopause, healthy aging and cognitive performance.

Parenthood changes how people think about time, responsibility and **the role work plays in their lives.**

Organizations that respond well **don't have to choose** between individual flexibility and business performance.

With the right structure, they can retain experienced employees, strengthen manager capability, **protect team continuity** and build a culture that attracts talent.

The opportunity isn't simply to offer better benefits. **It's to design a workplace people want to stay in.**

