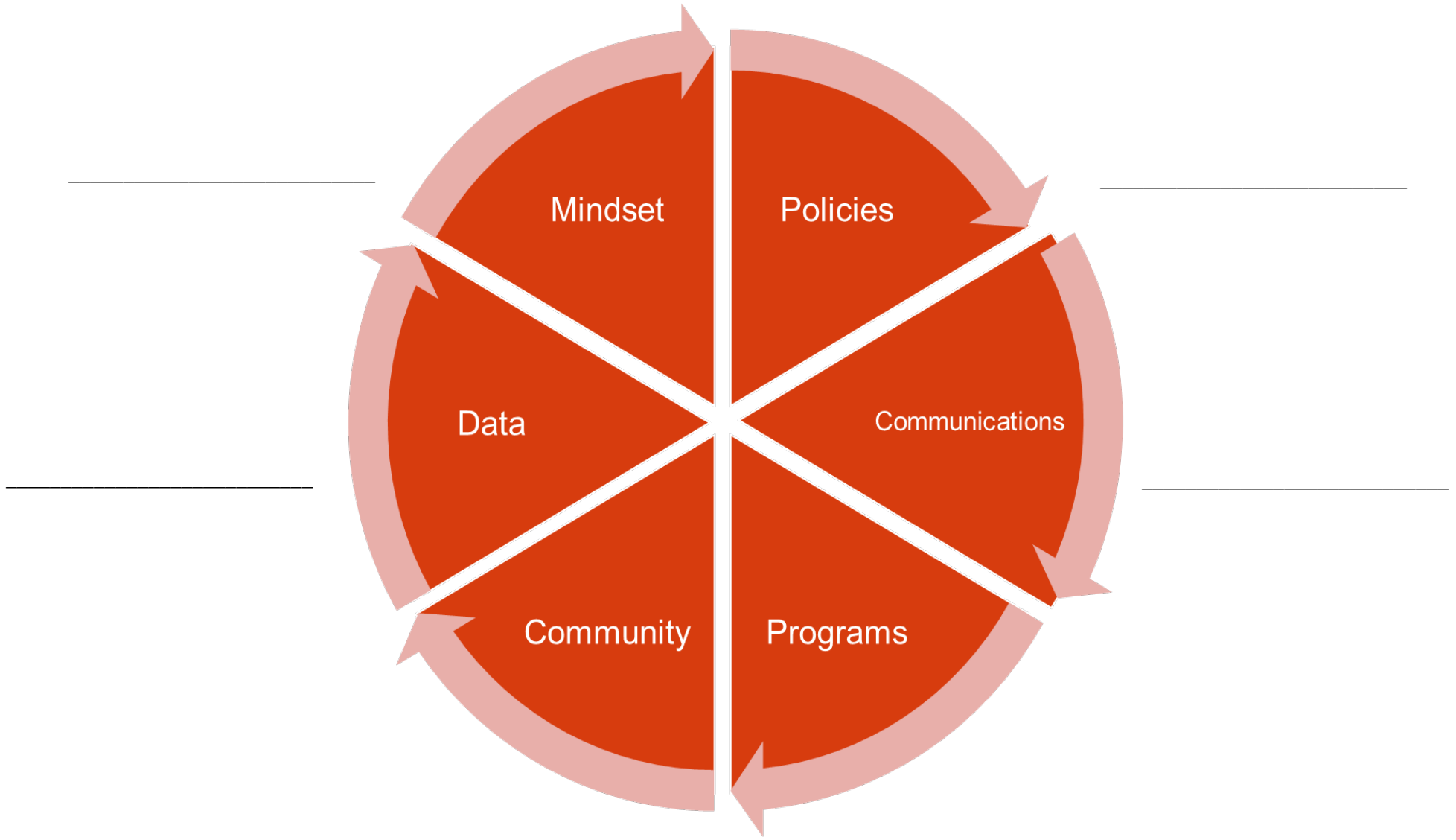


**Benefits, Policies, and Procedures:
The Spectrum of Support Firms Can Provide to Working Parents**

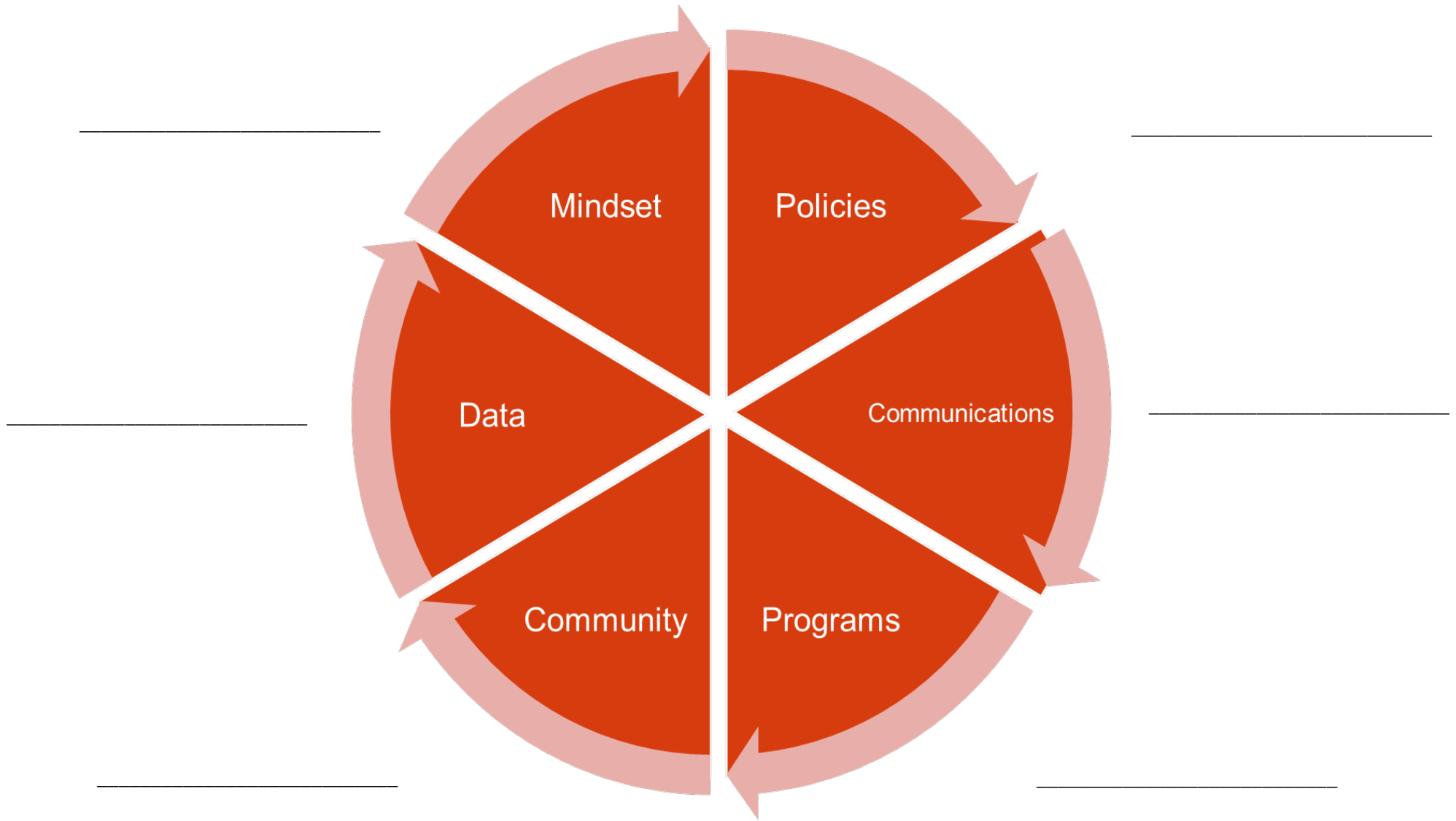
2025 NALP Annual Education Conference: Lori Mihalich-Levin, Julie Tran, & Josh Troy



Identify an example for each of the support categories.

Benefits, Policies, and Procedures: The Spectrum of Support Firms Can Provide to Working Parents

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Create your ideal law firm/organization by identifying support initiatives in each category.



Post-Pandemic Mom and Dad, **ARE WE THERE YET**

By Lori Mihalich-Levin



Did you know that at least 10% of all childcare positions disappeared permanently because of the pandemic?

If you've ever ridden in a car with a child in the back seat who is old enough to talk, you're familiar with their age-old query: "Are we there yet?!" If you're wondering how your working parent colleagues are holding up now that we're out of lockdown and "post-pandemic," you'll find many asking that same question about our own lives. Yes, things are decidedly better than when we had to homeschool our children

while simultaneously working full-time jobs. In many respects, though, there still seems to be no end in sight to many long-standing, systemic problems that affect working parents.

First, it's important to remember there were not great systems in place to support working parents prior to the pandemic's arrival on the scene. For example, even pre-pandemic,

the U.S. faced a nationwide shortage of affordable, accessible childcare options. My own children are now 10- and 12-years-old, so they were born well before Covid. My own daycare search in the District of Columbia involved (paying to get on) about eight wait lists, lobbying them extensively, and ultimately getting a spot in each center... between one and four years after putting my name on the list!

Even pre-pandemic, we lived in a culture with a well-documented "motherhood penalty" and engrained biases against caregiving fathers. Women – particularly those with children in dual-career couples – have been historically under-represented in the legal profession, especially in law firms. The law firm model of career progression and often massive workload increases around the time of partner promotion was not designed

around considerations of typical family building timelines. School hours do not coincide with the traditional workday. I could go on.

The pandemic's arrival exacerbated these already-existing systemic problems. In 2021, we all heard about the "she-cession" that occurred, when millions of women, many of them mothers, were pushed out of the workforce when they bore the brunt of the physical and mental load of caring for families. Daycares closed in droves, and the employment numbers for women still haven't recovered.

Now that we are more than three years past that fateful Friday the 13th of March 2020, some things are more "business as usual." Schools and after-school programs have reopened. Family and community help is available again. Sports, activities, and playdates are helping our children regain friendships and social skills.

The effects of the pandemic on parents linger on, though. Did you know that at least 10% of all childcare positions disappeared permanently because of the pandemic? Or that given this shortage, the cost of childcare has increased 41% since the pandemic? Or that the CDC has declared a teen mental health crisis? Or strep throat, flu, Covid, and RSV

outbreaks in schools across the country are requiring parents to stay home with their children or find alternative care?

So, if you "still" see your parent colleagues stressed and scrambling, there are good reasons why. Ongoing compassion is a necessity for working parents, who continue to live in a very broken system.

Removing Both Obvious and Hidden Roadblocks

If a road trip is bumpy, exhausting, and arduous, there are at least two ways to make it smoother. First, we can remove the obstacles that block our paths, so we don't spend as much time and energy navigating around the things that slow us down. Second, we can build faster, smoother roads to our destinations. Let's talk first about getting rid of the boulders on the road, blocking working parents' paths to success and well-being.

Here are three of those obstacles:

Boulder #1: Lack of Awareness of Working Parent Concerns

Are the leaders in your organization aware of working parents' current pressure points?



Are they sensitive to these concerns when addressing their colleagues? You may hope the answer is yes. I'm here to suggest, however, that this may not be true, and to offer you a case in point.

In the early days of the pandemic, when I was a partner at a global law firm, I attended a firm-wide call to discuss how we were navigating the realities of lockdown. One of the first things the leader hosting the call said was, "Now that we all have more time to work because we're not commuting..." With that phrase, he lost me for the rest of the presentation. I was sitting in my kitchen with my 8- and 10-year-olds, doing a complicated dance of who-gets-to-work-when with my husband, and I was just told that "we all had more time." Awareness matters. Messaging matters.

Another "lack of awareness" boulder that is worth removing is around data. Do you know how many parents and caregivers work in your organization? Do you know how long parental leave your new mom colleagues actually take? How about your new dad colleagues? How many parents have been promoted within your organization this past year? How many have left? At what life stage did they leave?

One firm I worked with studied its parental leave data, only to find there had been a significant decline in the paternity leave dads took over a three-year period. They couldn't work to identify or address the cultural issues behind this leave-taking decline, though, if they hadn't known it existed. Knowing your data can show you which rocks are blocking your path.

Boulder #2: Assumptions About Working Parents

As humans, we all come to situations with assumptions and biases based on our own personal life experiences. Though normal, making certain assumptions on autopilot can be harmful to our colleagues.

Here's an example:

One morning, Mark, a partner at a large firm, approaches Jenna, a mid-level associate in his group, about a project with a tight turn-around that will require her to work a few consecutive upcoming weekends. He's excited and thinks it's a good stretch assignment for her. When Mark stops by her office to ask her if she wants this opportunity, though, she doesn't seem to him to be anywhere near as excited as he is about it. She asks if she

can get back to him with an answer later in the day.

Mark walks away questioning Jenna's commitment to her role and to the group's clients. He is also upset that his efforts to mentor her and give her a challenging new project have fallen flat. Rather than wait until later in the day, he told Jenna not to worry about getting back to him, and that he'd find someone else to do the assignment.

Jenna, meanwhile, very much wanted to take on this project. She has two children under the age of three, however, and her husband was about to go out of town for the next two weeks on a business trip. Jenna didn't want to mention her childcare concerns as the reason for her hesitation, though, because she didn't want Mark to judge her because of her caregiving responsibilities. She was asking to get back to him in a few hours, simply to see if she could rearrange her schedule and find childcare coverage so that she could take this assignment. She loves her work, wants to advance and keep learning, and is committed to moving pieces around in her personal life to take on exciting projects like this one. She just needed a few hours to figure out

a plan. Now she feels like she let Mark – and her team – down. She also worries about whether Mark will ever offer her work again.

The assumptions Mark made about Jenna's enthusiasm and commitment led to a distressing – but all-too-common – outcome. Imagine, instead, what might have happened if the work culture at this firm was such that assignments were regularly offered with a timeline for consideration. What if Mark had said the following: "I have a great new project for you that will involve significant weekend work. I know you might need to rearrange some things to make this happen. Can you let me know by first thing tomorrow morning whether you can take it on?" A simple language shift can make all the difference in situations like this.

Whether it's assuming a new mother won't want to travel, or that a new father won't be taking more than a week of parental leave, acting on assumptions around working parents' goals and desires can cripple the confidence and careers of talented colleagues. Identifying the assumptions we are making, and then brainstorming creative solutions, can help us identify ways to push this second boulder out of the way.

Boulder #3: Buried Resources

A third (though far from final) boulder in the path of working parent success and wellness is a communication obstacle. Your organization may have amazing programs and policies in place to support working parents. Yet, it's a bit like that question, "if a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?" Are your programs, policies, and supports really that amazing, if your working parent colleagues don't even know they exist?

I'll share once again from my own experience. I was a lateral hire into a firm, and like any new team member, I was trying to find my footing. As I worked to get integrated into the firm, my young children were, as kids are, quite prone to getting sick at daycare and school. When they did fall ill, my husband and I struggled with juggling our respective jobs and care for sick children.

Eighteen months into my tenure at the firm, I discovered something amazing: the firm offered 20 days per year of completely subsidized back-up childcare, including both center-based and in-home options! From that point forward, this benefit revolutionized my ability to work and provide care for my children when schedules went awry. It took

a year and a half to discover that this benefit was available to me, though.

When it comes to providing information about your working parent supports, my advice is to share the details early and often. Be sure the information is provided to all new hires. Circulate it via any working parent or caregiver affinity group your organization may have. Schedule regular conversations that anyone in the organization can join, to share professional development and benefit resources for working parents. Be sure your intranet page about these supports is up to date and that information about the programs is easy to locate and to understand. Also, if you work at a law firm, make basic information about parental policies, and supports public on your firm's internet page, so that law students can evaluate your commitments and avoid asking uncomfortable questions they feel may stigmatize them during an interview process.

Finally, be sure to engage a cross-functional road-clearing crew in removing this barrier. Coordinate with your HR and communications colleagues and leaders in other divisions of your organization to be sure information is consistent and shared widely.



Re-Paving Roads to Success for Working Parents



Once we've cleared some of the obstacles for working parents, we can consider newer, easier-to-navigate paths we might build instead.

Re-Paving Option #1: Programs and Policies

Creating a newly paved, smooth road for working parents starts with a fresh look at your organization's existing policies and programs.

On the policy side, particularly with respect to parental leave and flexibility policies, I'd urge you to work with organizations like the

Diversity & Flexibility Alliance to benchmark your policies and update language. Best practices in support of working parents include offering the same parental bonding leave to everyone, regardless of their position at the firm or how they arrived at parenthood and eliminating any reference to the outdated notions of "primary" and "secondary" caregivers in your policies.

Implement ramp-up policies for new parents returning from leave that apply automatically to ensure that flexible options are offered on a gender-neutral basis. Review your lactation support policies and ensure that your organization is complying with the new requirements of the PUMP Act. Having wonderful parental leave, flexibility, and caregiver policies in place is important, but

having them on the books is the equivalent of only paving half the road. To pave the other half, adopt programs that actively support parents during major life transitions, whether that's welcoming a new baby to the family or navigating the back-to-school season each fall.

These supports can come via courses, coaching, workshops, and webinars. Curious what topics working parents find most helpful? A survey of Mindful Return alumni who were beyond the parental leave and return stage voted for these four: self-care, time management, community building (including the division of household labor with a partner) and working parent career management. Other helpful topics include managing the world of screens with your children, talking about race with kids, teaching mindfulness at home, and navigating school (including college) admissions processes. If you don't have much programming in place yet, now is the perfect time to start.

Finally, integrate parental perspectives into your leadership's decisions around hybrid work and return-to-office initiatives. Being in the office may have a differential impact on your parent colleagues, and these concerns should be noted as policies are being developed.

Re-Paving Option #2: Providing Tools for Meaningful Connection

Nothing makes for a smoother ride down a challenging path than hearing someone else say, "I'm in this with you." My own feelings of isolation in new parenthood prompted me to commit my career to helping others not feel so alone on their working parent journeys. I wish I were an outlier, but so many new parents I meet feel like they are the only ones struggling. Anything you can do to help working parents in your organization to find one another will increase their sense of support and well-being.

As a serial founder of working parent groups and a big believer in their effectiveness in driving engagement, a sense of belonging, and even business development, my first strong recommendation is to start a working parent or caregiver affinity group (also referred to as an Employee Resource Group or ERG) at your organization. Open the group to all working parents, regardless of title or role, and work toward policies that provide billable credit for timekeepers who lead these groups. Also ensure that the group has both male and female leadership from the outset, to encourage both mothers and fathers to join.

To avoid re-creating the wheel when I was founding one of these groups at a firm, I started gathering the leaders of working parent groups across the country into a resource-sharing community. What began as a dozen of us has now grown to 280+ leaders of groups from all different industries, sectors, and geographies. We call ourselves the Working Parent Group Network (WPGN), and we host a listserv to share ideas and monthly Zoom calls to discuss topics relevant to running our groups. Please join us (www.mindfulreturn.com/wp gn) if you are leading such a group or are looking for tools and resources to get one off the ground.

In addition to affinity groups, working parent mentoring programs are also powerful tools for connecting parents to one another. These programs can be designed, for example, to pair expecting parents with parents who have already gone through the leave-and-return process. In one mentoring program I was involved with, I was paired with a new parent in my practice group, and the program's coordinators sent me calendar invitations that reminded me when to check in. Such reminders could also include suggestions of topics that may be appropriate for the mentor-mentee pair to touch base on.

We call ourselves the Working Parent Group Network (WPGN), and we host a listserv to share ideas and monthly Zoom calls.

Be respectful of working parent needs and constraints as your organization makes plans that encourage connection in this new hybrid world, too. Remember that happy hour can be a challenging time of day for parents with young children, and consider planning inclusive, family-friendly events.

Re-Paving Option #3: Hosting Training for Managers and Leaders

Though we may wish that how managers in our organizations behave toward working parents was simply common sense, in many cases, managers need resources, education, and tools to be the best advocates they can be for the parents on their teams. In the world of parental leave, we often talk about “winning the manager lottery.” Why? Because how well a manager supports a direct report through their parental leave and return is the single-most important determinant of whether that individual will stay or leave the organization.

In many instances partners, counsel, and managers are already receiving training on topics like unconscious bias, evaluation processes, and mentorship. Does your manager training program include conversations

about how to support working parents on the team, though? Managers can — and should — be taught about assumptions they may be making (see Boulder #2 above), creative staffing options, language they can use to normalize topics like paternity leave and lactation, and even the neuroscience research around brain plasticity and new parenthood. Having a team member go on parental leave or need to manage childcare crises can be stressful for managers, and knowing they have resources and tools can help managers feel more supported and engaged in the organization, too.

Are We There Yet??

Though the ride is still a bumpy one for many working parents in the legal sector, I firmly believe that clearing the obstacles identified above and paving new paths both in programs and cultures will get us closer to wherever “there” is. According to psychologist Christine Runyan, we have all lived through a “species-level trauma” over the past several years, and we are still feeling Covid’s repercussions. As we collectively explore new ways of working post-pandemic, we can also create and implement new ways to help working parents feel more supported,

particularly in institutions that weren’t originally designed with them in mind.

“When will then be now?” Dark Helmet asks Colonel Sandurz in the movie *Spaceballs*. With consistent work and a true commitment to ensuring a better world for working parents, my hope is that the answer, just like in the movie, will be “Soon.” +



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the Parents at Work Podcast. She is also the Co-Chair of the DC Chapter of Postpartum Support International and a health care lawyer in private practice.

RESOURCES

- Brigid Schulte: “[Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time.](#)”
- Jasmine Kelland: “[Caregiving Fathers in the Workplace: Organisational Experiences and the Fatherhood Forfeit.](#)”
- Liz Elting: “[The She-Cession by the Numbers.](#)”
- Dana Goldstein: “[Why you can’t find childcare: 100,000 workers are missing.](#)”
- Jane Their: “[The cost of childcare has risen by 41% during the pandemic with families spending up to 20% of their salaries.](#)”
- Sarah Moniuszko: “[Teen mental health is in crisis, study shows. What can parents do?](#)”
- Abha Bhattarai: “[RSV, covid, and flu are keeping kids out of school – and parents out of work.](#)”
- Christine Runyan: “[What’s Happening in Our Nervous Systems?](#)”

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