

LeadersPlus

Career progression gaps: the next frontier

Research findings on parents' career ambitions,
and how employers can retain and support them



Contents

▷ Executive Summary	3
▷ Foreword	6
▷ Introduction	7
▷ Findings	8
▷ 1. Ambition for progression, and promotion since becoming a parent	8
▷ 2. Likelihood of progression	11
▷ 3. What's prevented specific promotions	13
▷ 4. General motivation for progression – barriers and enablers	16
▷ 5. Retention	19
▷ 6. Line managers' and employers' roles in support	21
▷ 7. Productivity and performance	24
▷ Recommendations for board members (executive and non-executive)	27
▷ Appendix	29
▷ Thank you	30



Executive summary

This research explored working parents' aspirations for progression, barriers, and what employers could do to increase opportunity, through an online survey with 878 respondents. It found that while parents have the appetite to progress into senior roles, they are currently underutilised, as jobs aren't structured to be accessible to them. By updating job requirements, proactively encouraging parents to progress and ensuring managers support them effectively, employers can tap into a key pipeline of senior staff and future leaders within their organisations, and differentiate themselves in the market.

Findings and recommendations

1 Parents are very interested in moving into more senior roles, but actual progression is less common, and people rate their prospects low despite confidence in their productivity and performance.

There's strong appetite to progress – more than half of parents would like to within the next two years (61%), and the vast majority within 5 years (86%). However actual promotions have been slower since returning to work (48% promoted), and people rate their prospects of promotion with their employer quite low, with well under half thinking this is likely (30%). Yet they don't see parenting as a barrier themselves: half (50%) feel it's made them more productive.

Recommendation: monitor progression data, flexible working data and set targets around it.

- Report on ethnicity, gender and full time/ part time pay gaps.
- Monitor progression by ethnicity, gender and full time/part time.
- Monitor the number of flexible working requests and rejections by departments.
- Give employees the right to know outcomes of pay gap reviews.
- Monitor the number of people with caring responsibilities in director level roles and above.
- Create a target for the number of people in director level roles working flexibly.
- Have a target for the number of people in director level roles working part time.
- Create action plans to address any gaps raised in reports.



2 Half of Mums think parenting is holding them back in their careers, as they don't see realistic jobs, senior parents above them, or a supportive leadership.

Parents are more optimistic where senior leaders show clear support for working parents to progress. The minority (25%) of parents who did not feel held back by having children were more likely to feel their organisation offered good opportunities for working parents to progress, and that the CEO and leadership team were supportive. More role models of working parents with children in senior roles is really important to motivation to progress (66% said extremely or very important), as people inferred what's possible for them by whether they could see senior parents working flexibly above them.

Recommendation: show what to aspire to, with realistic role models for working parents.

- Role model flexible working from the top: promote examples of progression with flexibility, and showcase senior leaders working flexibly in different set-ups with realistic workloads.
- Consider using recruitment firms with a track record in recruiting part time or flexible roles for director level appointments to increase senior representation.
- Consider investing in working parents' career development in a targeted manner to create working parents in senior roles in house.

3 People are deterred from applying for promotions because they lack flexibility, and workloads appear unfeasible. Part-time is often an explicit barrier with few senior roles being offered with this option.

Well over half (60%) of parents have decided against applying for promotion in the past, due to caring responsibilities, and 67% of mums have. The vast majority of parents who decided against applying for the role believed the workload would be unfeasible alongside their caring responsibilities (86%), and most parents (60%) thought the senior role lacked the flexibility of their current one. It was often clear from a job description alone that it was not accessible: half of these parents (50%) found the required start and finish times of the job didn't fit with caring responsibilities. Yet there was little reporting of negotiation – parents are accepting or moving on rather than driving demand, which suggests HR teams need to take the proactive role in offering this.

Recommendation: become best in class in job design, and remove grey areas around workload.

- Advertise jobs as flexible by default, and give examples of how each role could be done flexibly in the job advert, e.g. job share, core, flexible and compressed hours.
- Address workload expectations in job descriptions, by including how workload and responsibility would alter to reflect FTE 0.8, FTE 0.6 etc.
- Have a clear message from senior leadership on what workload is acceptable and what isn't to combat unspoken overwork expectations and foster a culture of setting boundaries.
- Train line managers in how to support workload effectively, including how to manage by outcomes, and how to communicate what work requires an excellent standard and what work a good enough standard.



4 Parents are concerned about a lack of flexibility around unplanned parenting issues in senior posts, which is discouraging them from stepping up. They need reassurance they can rely on informal flexibility when issues like children’s illness and transition points arise.

To increase motivation to progress, parents care just as much about getting better support with unplanned flexibility (51%) and support in transition points (47%) as they do about childcare cost (51%) and its availability (47%). While childcare isn’t directly the employer’s remit, the support with unplanned flexibility is, and can be addressed.

Recommendation: strengthen supportive policies and show leadership is parent-friendly

- Formalise support policies on child sickness and transitions e.g. starting primary school.



5 Inconsistency in support for working parents is a problem for job satisfaction, but also dampens interest in progression as it leaves parents uncertain what flexibility and support new managers or teams offer.

Inconsistent and unpredictable support was the most common problem with line managers (44% of parents), and while around half of parents (56%) would recommend their employer to other working parents, those who wouldn’t cited the lack of consistent support for working parents as the most common reason for this (for 22% of them). Managers have a really important role to play in support for working parents. However, an over-reliance on them is a symptom that the wider supportive structures and culture are lacking. Supportive line managers are much more important to parents than supportive policies in terms of what people most value in their employer (34% against 11%). This underscores the importance of culture: regardless of the policies, it’s the people implementing them who matter. But the dependency on individual line managers is problematic, due to their inconsistency. Few are helping set boundaries (22%), few are advocating for the parent (27%), and less than a third are offering opportunities to progress (32%) and there are concerns they aren’t always aware of or enabling access to supportive policies.

Recommendation: train managers in support and performance management

- Create an advisory and support panel for parents with a direct connection to the Executive.
- Train line managers on flexible working policies, with guidance on supporting flexible working parents.
- Train colleagues and implement measures that enable outcome-based line management and support unplanned flexibility.
- Train managers in objective setting for part-time staff.
- Consider outcomes-based performance measures.



Foreword

The Gender Pay Gap is really a Parent Progression Gap.

When parents have children and take time out to care for them, career progression tends to stall. This is especially true for mothers and, sadly, even more so for women from minoritised backgrounds*. Not enough mothers reaching the senior, well paid leadership roles compared to men is a root cause of the gender pay gap.

Career progression for parents is possible under the right circumstances

Realising this spurred me on to set up our award-winning social enterprise Leaders Plus to support parents to progress their careers against the odds. I'm delighted that together with our employer partners we have supported more than 500 working parents at our end to progress their careers through the Leaders Plus Fellowship and more through the Big Careers Small Children podcast. A combination of our methodology, peer support, and the support of our Senior Leader Mentors has resulted in more than 60% of individuals from the last cohort saying they have been promoted, with most working flexibly.

Employers have the keys to career progression for parents

But, the need for social change is still high - only 9 of the FTSE 100 CEOs are women at the time of writing and the picture doesn't look much better in other sectors. Despite 4 in 5 women having children by the time they are 45**, 50% of the women we surveyed said that they think having children holds back their career progression. Employers can't afford to ignore this key talent pool any longer - ethically, or financially.

93% of employers state that they've experienced hiring difficulties in the past 12 months***, increasing from 86% in 2021 and 77% in 2020.

This report shines important light on the progression of working parents, why too many find their careers stall after having children and what they look for when they change employers. This research shows that most working parents do want to progress their careers but feel prevented from doing so by the structures around them. Our report identified that while there are some important external factors such as childcare cost, most other factors enabling career progression for working parents are within the power of employers to address. I hope that senior leaders will use the data and recommendations in this report to inform their in house DEI and gender pay gap action plans.

I want to thank everyone who took half an hour between feeding toddlers and attending leadership team meetings to complete this survey. Without your support, this would not have been possible. I also want to thank all the individuals and networks who helped us share the survey including our employer partners who shared it with their staff. Thank you.

Together, let's create a world where nobody has to choose between a fulfilling, ambitious career and raising their children.

Verena Hefti MBE

CEO & Founder Leaders Plus



*The Ethnicity Motherhood Pay Penalty, Fawcett Society, June 2023 **ONS 22
 ***<https://cbi.org.uk/articles/attracting-and-retaining-talent-for-the-future-of-work/>

Introduction

While a small gender pay gap exists between men and women in their 20s, it starts to widen when women hit their 30s and have children. This ‘motherhood penalty’ makes up 80% of the gender pay gap . It is actually a career progression gap, as caring responsibilities reduce hours in the workplace and progression into more senior roles tails off. As 4 in 5 women have children by the age of 45 , this is a significant proportion of the workforce. And while flexible working is normalised as a term, many of the potential approaches haven’t taken root – only 0.3% of workers are in job-shares , for example. This parent progression gap is detrimental to individuals and the economy – but this is not something most parents want for themselves.

What’s stopping parents from continuing to progress, and what helps them? In this research we have sought to get clearer on this question, exploring what parents want to achieve in the workplace, what’s holding them back, what enables career progression for mothers, and what employers can do to ensure the workplaces addresses obstacles and provides an environment that supports progression. We chose to survey mainly mid-career professionals, to help crack the question of why we have so few carers at the top of their professions.

Research questions were compiled by the Leaders Plus parent community, and administered in an online survey which received close to 1000 responses.

The report is aimed at HR Directors, Boards and Senior Management Teams. It provides evidence and recommendations to support practical changes to enable retention, progression and productivity among parents in the workplace.

Claudia Goldin, the Nobel Prize-winning economist, describes the senior leadership posts in organisations as all too often ‘greedy jobs’: high-paying, high-pressure roles that require people to prioritise work over all other aspects of their lives. They mean one parent needs to be available at home, and most often it’s currently the woman. Her biggest question for employers is one we share: *“How can we make those ‘greedy’ jobs less demanding, without making them less productive? That’s the next frontier we’ll need to explore.”* This research shows there are some employers ahead of the curve, with C-suite Mums working flexible arrangements, in meaningful jobs, with realistic workloads. The task is now helping others along.

1. Kleven, Landais and Sogaard, *Children and gender inequality: Evidence from Denmark*. American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, vol 11, no.4, October 2019. Findings supported by studies in other jurisdictions.
2. According to [2021 Census figures published by ONS](#), 18% women aged 45 were childless.
3. [CIPD](#) reporting on ONS Labour Force Survey data, 2022



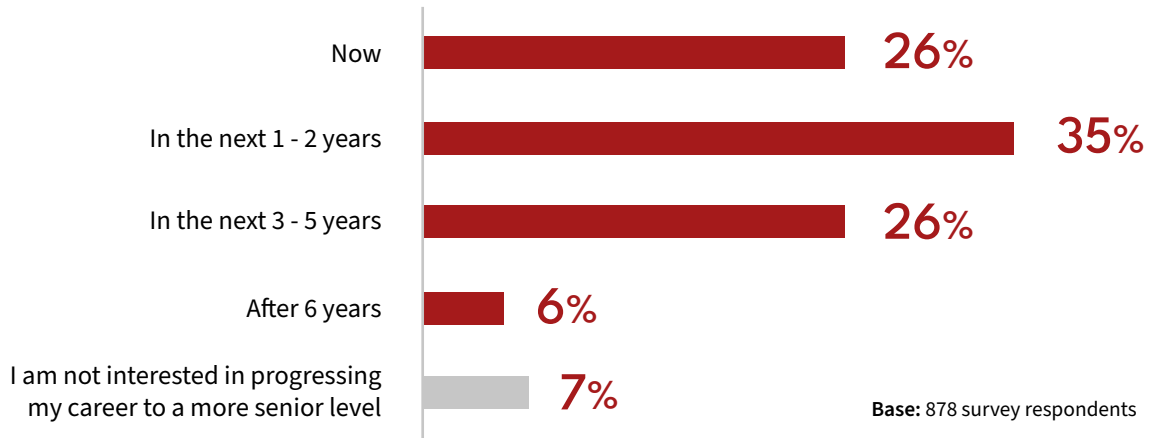
Findings

1 Ambition for progression, and promotion since becoming a parent

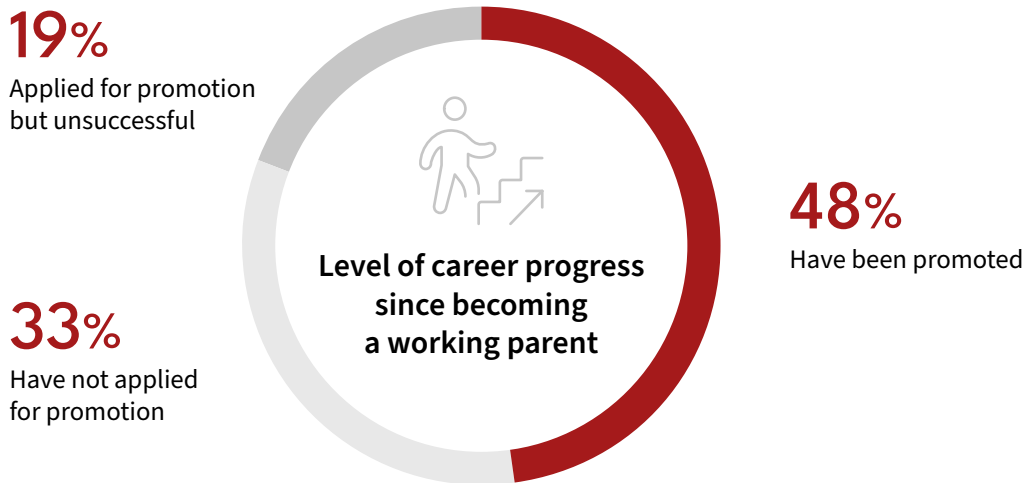
The ambition to progress to a more senior position is very clear, across parents. The vast majority want progress within the next 3-5 years (86%), and very few have no interest in it (7%). While Mums were nearly as likely as Dads to want a promotion within the next five years, less were seeking it in the next two years, with a ten percentage point difference (59% Mums against 69% Dads).



Are you interested in progressing your career to a more senior level?



In terms of actual progression, nearly half of parents (48%) have been promoted within their organisations since returning to work. However, **Dads were nearly twice as likely to have been promoted more than once since becoming a parent (5% Mums, 9% Dads), and full-timers (7%) twice as likely as part-timers (3%).** Mothers expressed frustration at the lack of progression.



“There are few women at the executive level above me and those that are invariably have no children or older children and/or are external hires. Despite international experience, 3 degrees (including a part time one completed this year), 2 women’s leadership courses, 8 years at my level and the highest possible performance and behaviour ratings in all 3 roles I’ve done at this level, I’ve been unsuccessful at getting a role at the next level up.”

Being part-time or full-time did not strongly correlate to ambition - while full-timers were 12% more likely to show interest in progressing now, the difference disappeared for interest in progressing in future years. However, there was a gap in achievement: part-timers had an 8 percentage point lower rate of actual progression than full-timers, and were more likely not to apply for promotion. Going part-time has sometimes limited people’s career progression in ways they did not expect, as it had not been evident what the implications of going part-time would be for future job prospects. While moving employers has in some cases been a solution, many parents described disappointment at having fewer options available to them.

“There were very few opportunities for promotion at my previous employer and after having my request to work part-time granted, there were none - I had not appreciated this when asking for part-time working. I have moved to a new organisation where there are more opportunities, but still think working part-time will be a hindrance. In my previous employment, someone new was employed while I was on my second maternity leave to take on part of my workload without my consultation, and was paid at a higher grade - this position was not made available to me. The transition back to work after maternity was much more challenging than I anticipated, there was no support and very unclear expectations.”

“Whilst flexible working is supported for senior roles this is still largely for full time employees. Part time 4 days a week do not have the same opportunities for more senior roles”.

Having a good standing within the organisation, alongside a culture of flexibility and progression within part-time roles is further strengthening employees’ engagement and ambition.

“I have a good reputation in my business and have worked hard over many years to establish that.”

“New remote from home job agreed with part-time hours 3 days / week on days fixed to suit me but with additional flexibility (e.g extended lunch, working late) allowed on my terms. Support from leadership for me to put boundaries on my non-working days. Value being trusted and respected enough by my employer for me to do my work in a way that works for me. Also, very important to me that I now feel paid more fairly in new job (gender pay gap a huge concern in engineering)”

However, part-time working was sometimes assumed to rule out progression or make parents uncompetitive, and Dads working part-time shared concerns that the constraints of working part-time aren’t respected.



“I take my caring responsibilities and share these equally with my wife including us both working 4 days a week. This approach to life is not respected by my organisation in terms of progression opportunities especially when men step forward.” (Dad)

“If I am willing to work full time I will be progressed.”

“Lots of competition for more senior roles. Bank is now openly saying ‘2-3 days per week in the office’ which is difficult to make work when you work key time to enable school drop/pick - it’s difficult to then get into an office for a day.”

While the pace of progression on average slows after having children, plenty of parents in senior roles progressed after having children, which shows it’s possible - **the vast majority of senior parents (88%) had applied for a new role after becoming a parent.** What has enabled the most senior respondents to get where they are and perform successfully? **More than three quarters (76%) of the most senior employees (the 3 top categories) are working full-time, compared to 65% of the more junior categories.** Hybrid working is very clearly correlated to seniority, with 95% of C-suite parents working hybrid, compared to 38% of entry-level parents.

Board level/C suite respondents most prized flexible and hybrid work - “people working flexibly or in a hybrid environment can progress to senior roles” was the thing nearly half (45%) most valued about their employer, whereas junior and managerial staff cited having a supportive line manager as most valuable.



2 Likelihood of progression

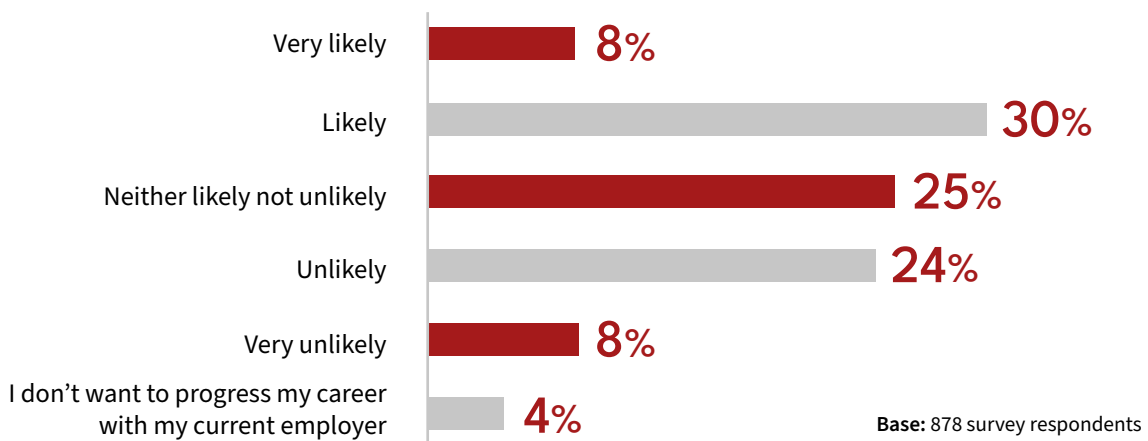
Given so many parents are motivated to progress (86%), there’s a wide gap between their interest in it and how they rate their actual prospects (only 30% think progression with their current employer is likely, and around a third (32%) think it’s actually unlikely).

The connection to parenting is made clear: **half of Mums (50%) think having children is definitely impacting negatively on their career progression chances, against 30% of Dads.**

Only a quarter of parents (25%) did not feel that parenting had held them back in their careers. What can we learn about this group? Interestingly, that they valued different things in their workplace compared to parents who did feel held back. They were four times as likely to identify the employer’s main value as being that working parents have good opportunities to progress in their careers there (9% compared to 2% of ‘held back’ parents), and three times as likely to most value that the CEO and leadership team are supportive of working parents (11% compared to 3% ‘held back’ parents). They were **significantly less likely to most value their line managers** (28% compared to 38% ‘held back’ parents).



What do you think is the likelihood of you progressing to a more senior level at your current employer



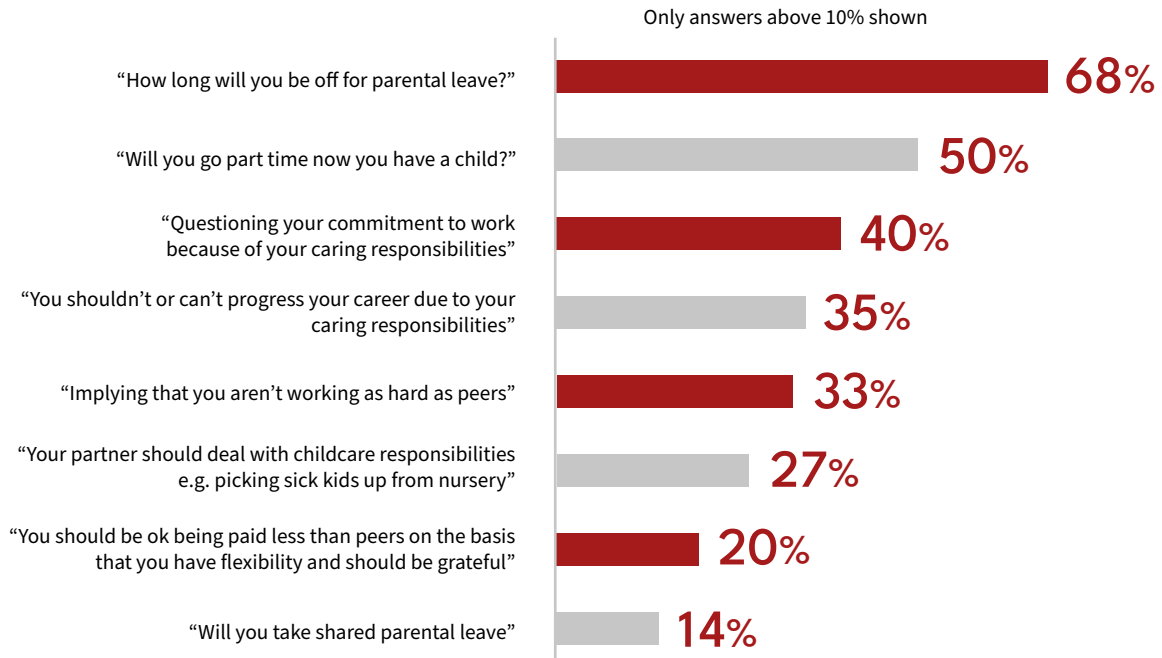
There are a lot of pre-emptive assumptions made by colleagues about how a person’s career will be affected by being a parent. More than a third (35%) of parents had received comments that they shouldn’t or can’t progress their career due to their caring responsibilities, while 40% of parents have had comments questioning their commitment to work because of caring responsibilities, and a third (33%) that they aren’t working as hard as their peers. This attitudinal backdrop is important to our understanding of what can hold people back – if colleagues and managers are not expecting parents to progress, or believing that they should, that has a powerful effect on the way decisions get made.

These comments don’t discriminate by rank, with no significant difference in what was said to senior and junior parents, but they were far more often addressed to women. Over half (54%) of Mums were asked if they would go part-time now they had a child, compared to less than a fifth of Dads (18%), and it was much more common for Mums to receive comments questioning their commitment to work because of their caring responsibilities than Dads (42% of Mums, 26% of Dads).





Have you received any of the following kinds of comments by someone at work (e.g. colleague, line manager or boss):



Base: 623 survey respondents who answered question



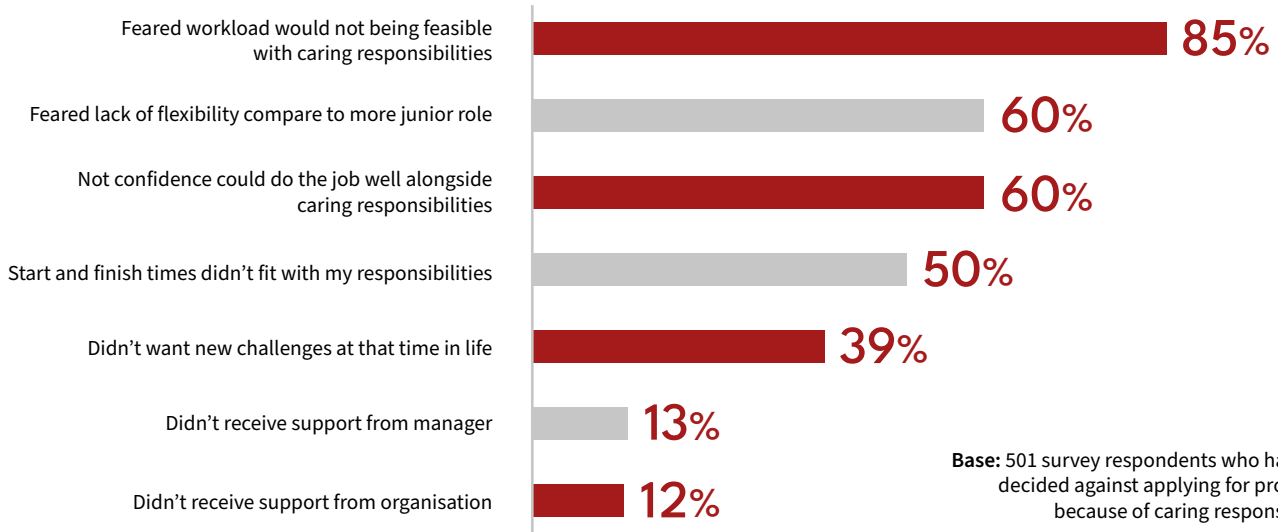
3 What’s prevented specific promotions

Well over half (60%) of parents have decided against applying for promotion in the past, due to caring responsibilities, and 67% of Mums have. Not because they wouldn’t in theory want the next step, but because they didn’t think the job on offer, as presented, could be compatible with their parenting responsibilities. This is significantly higher for Mums than Dads (67% against 43%). What deterred them in those specific instances?



Reasons for not applying for a more senior role

Only answers above 10% shown



Base: 501 survey respondents who have ever decided against applying for promotion because of caring responsibilities

The vast majority of parents who decided against applying for a senior role did so because they believed the workload would be unfeasible alongside their caring responsibilities (86%). This is a huge proportion of parents, including those considering jobs that offer flexibility.

“Organisations talk about offering flexible options but ultimately, regardless of how flexible an employer might appear (or try to be) the reality is that your workload will always be waiting for you. I used to use ‘parental leave’ to help with childcare over the school holidays, but the reality was that I took an unpaid week from work, and then worked those hours as unpaid overtime in the week before leave and the week after to catch up! These things work on paper, but the lived reality is very different.”

“In the grade I am the organisation is very supportive, but as you go senior it is more difficult. The workload is extreme and long hours are required. While there are senior leaders with children, often they have nannies / and or it doesn’t stop them working long hours, which is not something I wish to do, therefore I feel that senior roles are out of bounds for anyone, irrespective of whether they have children.”



A key finding throughout this research is the perception that flexibility disappears with seniority – most parents (60%) who didn't apply thought the senior role lacked the flexibility of their current one.

Half (50%) of the opportunities people turned down entailed start and finish times that weren't compatible with their childcare responsibilities – the lack of flexibility was a hard barrier. More generally, parents often expected part-time to rule out progression or make them uncompetitive.

“Because there are no part-time senior roles in my sector and my partner's sector doesn't offer flexibility, I have to be available for school drop offs and holidays etc.”

“I was forced to take a demotion despite having operated successfully at a senior management role for 10 years, to maintain my 3 day a week flexible working arrangement. I was explicitly told I had to choose between my grade and my hours.”

Perhaps as a result of these workload and hours issues, most parents turning down roles (60%) lacked confidence they could do a more senior job well alongside caring responsibilities.

“Pressures of the expectations of the role are too much and would not be flexible to accommodate a young family.”

“Most senior roles I looked at (or same level) were roles where you had to be on site and be there until the job was done with you for the day. I was advised recently by two recruiters that the job was not for the faint hearted. I interpreted that as it was going to be really busy and not possible to work 8-4 or 9-5 but that work would rule the hours you worked and that it would be an expectation.”

There was found to be a disconnect between what was advertised or discussed and what's implicitly expected, particularly regarding progression opportunities as a part-time worker. In many cases, job adverts made a full-time requirement clear, but in others, parents saw it more implicitly: while job adverts may state part-time is a possibility, they don't see part-time candidates getting promoted, are being told by colleagues the role is actually full-time, or don't think it's feasible in practice. People described probing the assumptions behind a job description through informal conversation and finding considerable discrepancies.

“I saw a role that was advertised as full time but the advert stated flexible working would be considered. When I asked someone in the team about applying for it, they advised me, oh no they definitely want someone full time.”

“The job specification said “frequent travel”. A few years later I met the team and asked about this and they said it was actually just a nice to have, and not necessary.”

Yet there was little reporting of negotiation. It seems parents were turning down promotions or not applying for them because they couldn't do the hours or office time required, rather than trying to negotiate on the terms of the promotion on offer and so being ruled out.

"I was offered promotion but didn't take it due to longer working hours not suiting my responsibilities as a parent of young children."

Despite disappointments, there's a conservative tendency to stay put among those who would need to leave a 'safe', flexible employer to pursue promotion. People are stemming the desire to pursue promotion if it would mean them leaving a 'safe' employer where they have flexibility. This tendency was referenced in other comments across the survey.

"I have not applied for a promotion as in my current organisation I have hit a ceiling. I have been with my company for 9 years and value my job security & flexibility so I am almost afraid to seriously consider the external job market."

Some parents felt discriminated against and assumed their identity made their prospects too low.

"It's not worth going for promotion as a black parent".

"I haven't applied for anything as automatically feel nobody wants key time working parent."

The experience of being knocked back amidst new pressures can be damaging. Back to work transitions are challenging, and it can be damaging when there's a lack of support.

"I have found my profession incredibly difficult whilst juggling a child and whilst trying to go for promotion had a burn-out. This is still affecting my career and confidence multiple years later."

The assumptions parents are making could in some cases be pre-emptive. But it's clear from the survey that employers are not offering that information to them. What sounds absent here is proactive encouragement that it is possible to do the role in a flexible way and alongside caring responsibilities.



4 General motivation for progression – barriers and enablers

Most parents think flexibility is not currently enabled in senior roles, and this is dampening their motivation to seek progression. **To increase motivation for progression, the most important factor for parents was seeing that flexible working is clearly enabled in senior roles (68%) – this came above pay and even childcare issues.** There’s huge diversity in the employer cultures being described, with no correlation to particular sectors – but many examples of highly enabling environments, where support for flexible working is giving parents confidence in their prospects.

“I’ve had positive conversations on this topic with my manager. I have potential to perform at a higher level, with the right support and flexibility around childcare.”

“Because there is flexibility, I can progress while maintaining a similar working pattern.”

“24/7 availability and gender biased perceptions make it impossible.”



It’s striking that to increase motivation to progress, parents care just as much about getting better support with unplanned flexibility (51%) and support in transition points (47%) as they do about childcare cost (51%) and its availability (47%). While childcare isn’t directly the employer’s remit, the support with unplanned flexibility is, and can be addressed. These pain points around unplanned flexibility are really important to how supported parents feel in their role, and whether that workplace environment feels conducive to progression.

For context on childcare, another recent study found 41% of parents said there is at least a six-month waiting list at the local childcare provider⁴. Most Mums are the primary care-giver, the UK has the most expensive childcare as a proportion of a mother’s earnings in the OECD⁵ and this vital social infrastructure is inadequate. Where promotions are assumed to entail more hours, including due to commutes, the benefit in pay can diminish once offset against increased childcare costs, and more childcare isn’t always easily arranged. Taken together with the loss of time with children, this can persuade against a step up.

We can distinguish between planned childcare, which formal flexible working allows, e.g. for pick-ups; and unplanned childcare, such as illness and school strikes, which parents depended on informal flexibility to manage. The unplanned events that required flexibility were weighing heavily on people’s minds in considering whether they could step up into the roles they could see. Where people associated promotion with inflexible, higher hours posts, it meant sacrificing the planned, formalised flexible working hours that enable school pick-ups, which changes work patterns. But it was also often perceived as sacrificing the informal flexibility people depend on to handle unplanned childcare issues, with anxiety there wouldn’t be enough ‘give’ to accommodate unplanned needs.

It’s hard to know whether this fear would be proven right, and the senior post-holder would struggle with work demands when children are ill. In these findings, many senior parents describe real flexibility in their roles. But if employees and their managers in an organisation cannot see people in senior roles using flexibility, then the attitude that there’s no space for it can persist, and play into the informal guidance people receive about whether a certain level is ‘right’ for them.

4. 2022 Pregnant Then Screwed and Mumsnet [survey](#) of 27,444 people.

5. [OECD](#) figures on net childcare costs



Meaning and purpose also matters – it was rated ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ important nearly as often as better support from line managers was (64% against 69%). This is all the more powerful given the range of other pressing considerations for working parents. Though this area was little explored in the survey, it may be an important aspect of retention.

More role models of working parents with children in senior roles was also important to motivation (66% said extremely or very important), as people inferred what’s possible for them by whether they could see senior parents working flexibly above them.



“I do not see female role models at more senior grades with young families like me, working mums are under-represented and the opportunity to progress on part time hours seems impossible.”

“People I see recruited into the grade above my current grade tend to be full time. Roles are advertised as full time.”

45% thought that time at work to develop yourself, e.g. focused time on professional development, networks or taking on new projects was extremely or very important to increasing motivation. This was because a culture of presenteeism and overwork was associated with promotions, and working parents report they can’t progress within it. They saw other candidates putting in ‘extra time and capacity’ to gain an advantage, which they were not in a position to do.

“I find the people in the team who have been promoted have the extra time and capacity to put their name out there and push for promotion whereas it’s everything for me to show up and do my best work while being a mother to a toddler. I haven’t had the capacity to go over and above.”

“There are limited opportunities to move to the next level, and the perception there is a culture of always being on, which is difficult to maintain.”

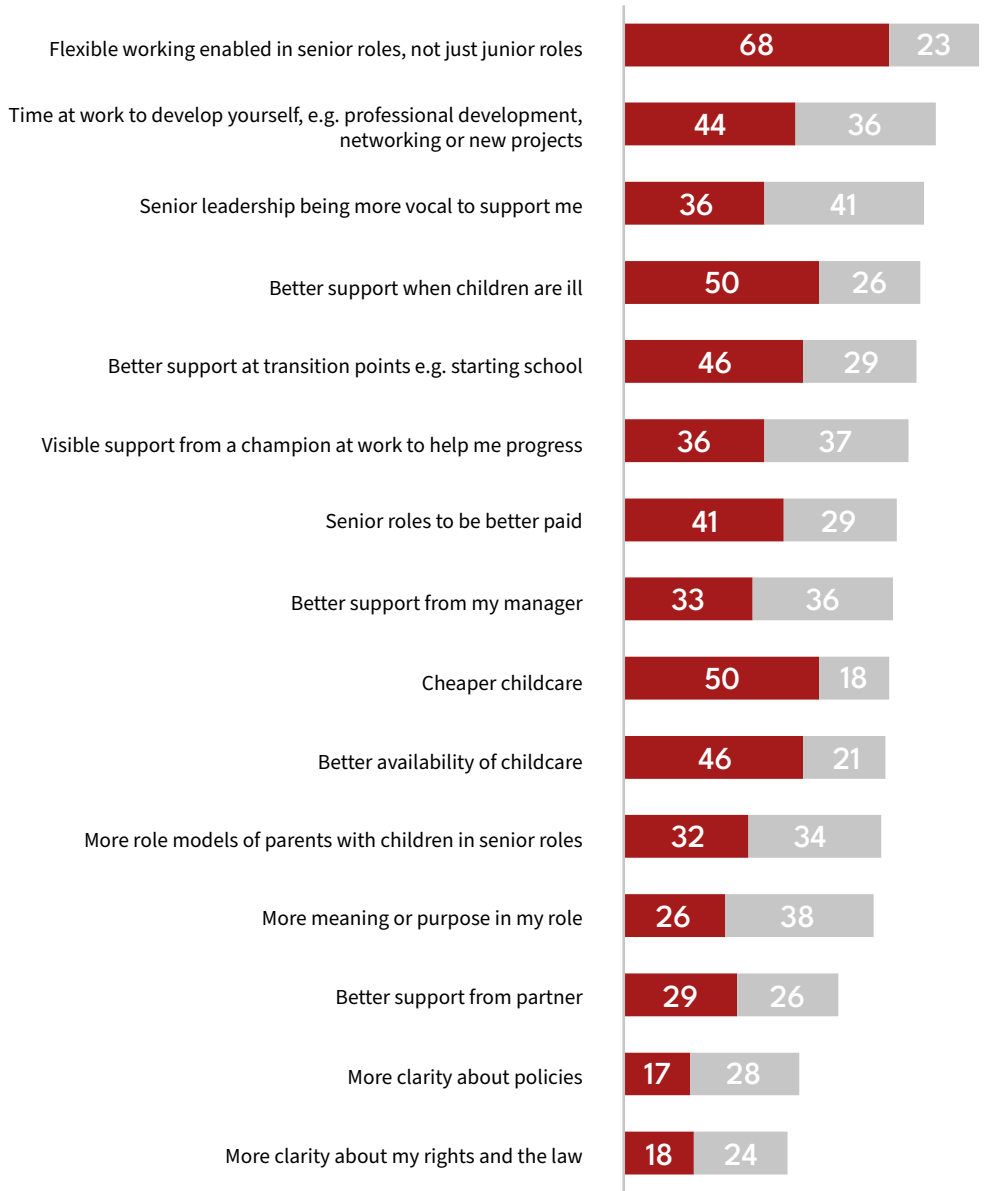
To address this, parents suggested a way of ensuring dedicated time to development in areas considered beyond the basic role.

“Set time within my working day to dedicate to set work goals to progress my organisation. At this time it is not given to me as the expectation is done in free time outside of working hours.”



What if anything would increase your motivation to progress to a more senior role as a working parent?

Extremely important Very important



Base: c 860 survey respondents who answered each item



5 Retention

Clear, concrete flexible working provision is critical to an employer’s offer, both to retain people, and to attract them in. **Nearly a quarter (24%) of parents have moved employers because of their caring role. There were many different triggers for this, but the most common situation (for 25% respondents) was leaving to find more flexibility. Similarly, when asked what they will prioritise in their next role, parents ranked flexible working as the most important factor (a third of respondents rated this #1).**

The other highly ranked priorities for the next job role were good pay and benefits, support to working parents, and reasonable working hours. This prioritisation was very similar across levels of seniority, with the only notable difference being that senior respondents were more inclined to rank the organisation’s purpose and their alignment with it as important (9% ranked in #1 or #2), compared to 3% of junior colleagues doing so.



Priorities when choosing a next employer

Average score given by respondents to each priority areas, from 7 (low) -1 (high)



While just over half of parents (56%) would recommend their employer to other working parents, for those who wouldn't, the lack of consistent support was the most common reason (22% of parents). This chimes with those parents who reported that levels of support and flexibility varied between departments and line managers, which reduced their confidence in their long-term experience and prospects at the organisation.

“Flexibility is inconsistent, meaning that depending on your line manager you may or may not be able to avail of the policies.”

Only 7% cited unsupportive managers as the reason, suggesting that support is about the sum of the organisation's parts, not managers alone. Consistent support from senior management, in policies, and from managers are a hygiene factor, not a nice-to-have.



6 Line managers' and employers' roles in support

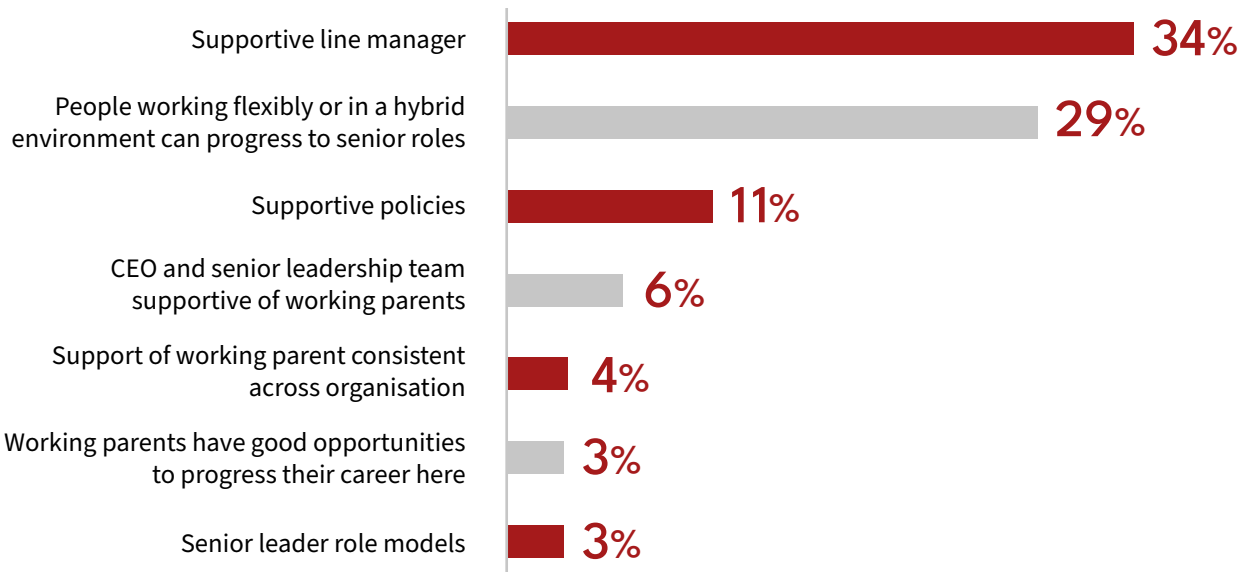
The vast majority (93%) of respondents agree that their line manager is supportive of their family responsibilities, and line managers were ranked by 34% parents as the most important thing their current employer provided that they value. This finding can be read in different ways, however, because parents could only value what they received. In light of other findings, the fact 'people working flexibly or in a hybrid environment can progress to senior roles' was only identified by 29% parents suggests that in many workplaces, this isn't provided, rather than that it wouldn't be valued.

As discussed above, the 25% of people who don't feel parenting has held them back in their careers were four times more likely to most value the employer's main value being that working parents have good opportunities to progress in their careers there, and three times more likely to most value that the CEO and leadership team are supportive of working parents. They were less likely to most value their line managers (by ten percentage points). This focus on a line manager as the most valuable aspect of work suggests a dependency on an individual which is arguably risky, and a symptom that the wider systems, structures and culture of that workplace do not bring them security or confidence.



What is the most important thing your current employer provides that you value as a working parent?

Only answers above 1% shown



Base: 789 survey respondents who answered question



Supportive and unsupportive actions taken by line managers

77% of parents experience informal flexibility from their line managers. Formal flexibility was considerably less common, but still reported by 58% of parents. However, this informal flexibility is not reliable. **Inconsistent and unpredictable support was the most common problem with line managers, reported by 44% parents.** Clearly this matters – predictable support is important to stability and confidence parents can do the job alongside their caring obligations, while a lack of consistency creates stress as parents are uncertain if they can count on support when they need it. The fact that support in difficult situations, like children’s health appointments, depends on a manager’s informal flexibility is a key problem here. As informal decisions depend on an individual’s judgements, they are inherently insecure and prone to inconsistency and unpredictability, which create stress for parents. It also increased the power dynamic with their manager, where the parent lacked control and certainty about what they could do when a child falls ill or other issues arise.



“I do think becoming a parent is a difficult balance, when your child is ill you need to look after them and to begin with I would feel guilty. I have been fortunate that my line manager (who knows me well) coached me on this. My concern is this may not be the case for all line managers.”

“I am fortunate with my current line manager who understands flexible working so I am able to balance my career and being a mom (both are important to me). I do have concerns over the inconsistent approach across departments and how this may impact my future roles/leaders. Flexible working enables me to thrive in my career as well as a mother. If it wasn’t for my line manager I would struggle to manage worklife and momlife i.e. daughter being ill.”

A remedy to this would be if line managers helped parents with more formal flexibility, but some parents are concerned their line managers aren’t always aware of or choosing to follow policies and guidelines that could benefit them.

“Employer has supportive policies but how and if line management understands that is an issue”.

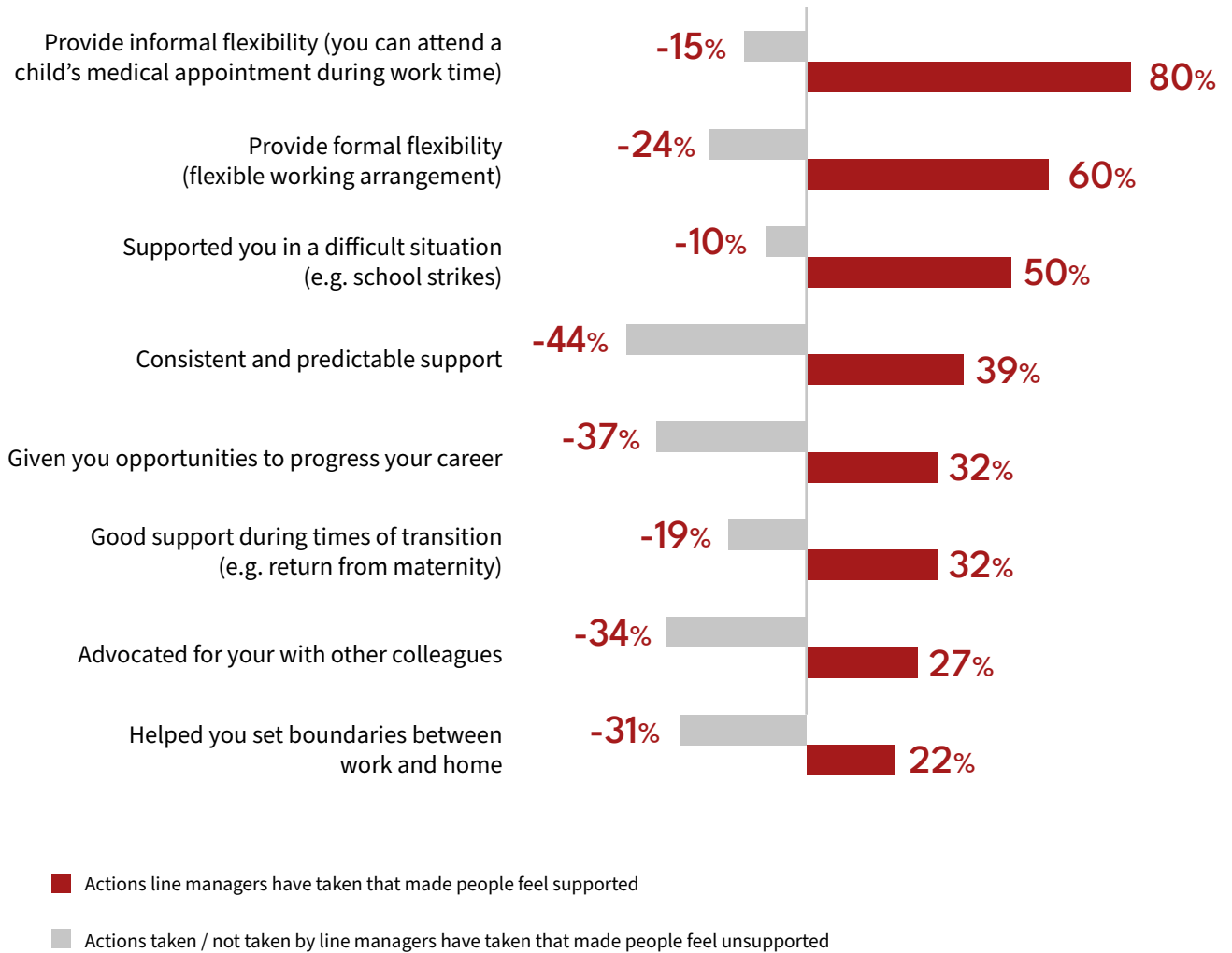
Line managers also scored fairly low on some other key supportive behaviours: only 22% parents reported line managers helped with setting boundaries, 27% that line managers advocated for them, and 32% that they offered opportunities to progress their career.

There’s a case for training managers more in how they can support working parents in these ways.





**What actions has your line manager taken that made you feel supported?
When unsupportive of your family responsibilities what actions has your
line manager taken / not taken?**



Base: 761 survey respondents who answered question



7 Productivity and performance

Parenting is seen to have had a positive impact on productivity (for 50% of parents), or been neutral (34% say it has had no impact) - just 15% say a negative impact.

“Work became purposeful. I became a provider not just a worker. It changed my outlook towards work.”

“It’s all about mindset. Because I have the freedom to manage my responsibilities, priorities and time I give more to the organisation and get more done. I genuinely feel I am more effective as an employee since having children because I get more done in less time.”

“My productivity hasn’t been impacted for my role. I have reflected on how I worked before becoming a parent and worked 45 hour weeks on average. Since becoming a parent, I am more efficient, assertive and will prioritise side of desk work without feeling guilty.”

There’s a lot more nuance behind these answers, as it’s generally not considered a zero sum game. Parents acknowledge that in the short and medium terms, both performance and overall productivity can be affected by illness, sleep deprivation, and other unpredictable demands. The notion that those things should be masked, or that people work at a constant rate of productivity may be unhelpful, and contribute to coping behaviours that lead to burnout.

“It may not have had any impact on my productivity but that has come at cost - working late hours, being exhausted at points because my child is allergic to sleep (!). it doesn’t mean that’s okay - I would very much like someone to say to me “it’s okay if for you and your family well-being that doing less at points is okay”.

Parents may also be role-modelling balanced approaches to work that colleagues without children can also benefit from.

“My productivity is fine; what would help is a more realistic and healthy approach to work and productivity in my sector in general and a move away from the idea of overwork as a positive.”

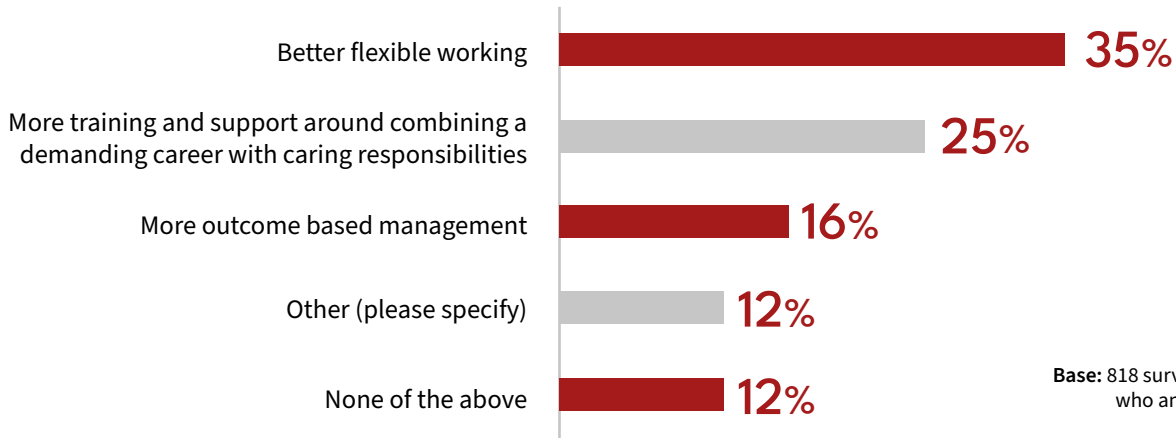
“Honestly - I deliver at work, but I used to over-deliver and I physically can’t because there aren’t enough hours in the day. I think that’s probably alright?”

To improve productivity, there are clear asks: 35% parents think more flexible working would improve productivity, and a quarter (25%) think more training and support around combining a demanding career with caring responsibilities would. Outcome-based management was also considered the most effective way, for 16% of respondents. Employers’ help with childcare provision, such as through on-site creches, was transformative for employees where it existed but very rarely mentioned.





What if anything would improve your productivity as a working parent?



Base: 818 survey respondents | who answered question

“My current role is outcomes based, and extremely flexible- I am confident I will thrive in this new role. I wish all departments were this rational.”

“[To improve productivity]: More support from the corporation to enhance your career even within flexible working and promotion within part-time opportunities”

“More senior role models that talk about transition/children’s needs/how they juggle it all so that you feel able to speak up and ask for flexibility when you need it (and still get the job done) - all without it impacting career progress opportunities.”

“More realistic expectations about what can be achieved working part-time and also less pressure to work late or get things done in own time. Before having a child, I would work long hours to ‘get ahead’, now it looks like my productivity is down because I don’t ‘go the extra mile’ i.e. work late. My job doesn’t suffer, but my career progression does as I have to give up the networking and all the extras that make a good impression.”

Becoming a parent is seen to have had an overwhelmingly positive or neutral effect on performance too: 47% believe it has been positive, and 41% suggest it has had no impact. Just 12% say it has been negative. That said, parents expressed considerable discomfort and guilt around the tugging between obligations to colleagues and parental responsibilities, when flexible working is not being fully respected and a grey area emerges. There’s some reluctance to uphold boundaries entirely by oneself: the wish that colleagues would uphold them, with tensions where they don’t; and guilt where colleagues are flexing to cover time when parents are called away. Without clear boundaries and transparency around formalised flexibility, there’s a higher chance of colleagues being caught up in grey areas where the employee’s right to flexible working has not been fully provided for, and others’ work is affected.



“My line manager and colleagues are super supportive of working parents and offer flexibility. However, in practice, it can sometimes prove challenging. For example, whilst I book time in my diary every day for school pick up (which I take as my lunch break), on multiple occasions this is ignored and ‘priority’ meetings are booked during this time by senior leaders. This can cause quite a bit of stress and also guilt - guilt that I may have to say that I can’t attend the meeting due to school pick up, or guilt that I may need to ask a friend to do the pick up at short notice. I often feel very torn. It’s a constant juggle especially when work meetings are booked at very short notice.”

The potential unfairness faced by colleagues who pick up the burdens of unplanned absences due to childcare, and how to address this in employer practice, is a fairly unexplored area that merits further research.



Recommendations for board members (executive and non-executive)



1 Monitor progression data, flexible working data and set targets around it

- ✓ Report on ethnicity, gender and full time/ part time pay gaps.
- ✓ Monitor progression by ethnicity, gender and full time/ part time.
- ✓ Monitor the number of flexible working requests and rejections by departments.
- ✓ Give employees the right to know outcomes of pay gap reviews.
- ✓ Monitor the number of people with caring responsibilities in director level roles and above.
- ✓ Create a target for the number of people in director level roles working flexibly.
- ✓ Have a target for the number of people in director level roles working part time.
- ✓ Create action plans to address any gaps raised in reports.

2 Show what to aspire to, with realistic role models for working parents

- ✓ Role model flexible working from the top: promote examples of progression with flexibility, and showcase senior leaders working flexibly in different set-ups with realistic workloads.
- ✓ Consider using recruitment firms with a track record in recruiting part time or flexible roles for director level appointments to increase senior representation.
- ✓ Consider investing in working parents' career development in a targeted manner to create working parents in senior roles in house.

Recommendations for board members (executive and non-executive)



3 Become best in class in job design, and remove grey areas around workload

- ✓ Advertise jobs as flexible by default, and give examples of how each role could be done flexibly in the job advert, e.g. job share, core, flexible and compressed hours.
- ✓ Address workload expectations in job descriptions, by including how workload and responsibility would alter to reflect FTE 0.8, FTE 0.6 etc.
- ✓ Have a clear message from senior leadership on what workload is acceptable and what isn't to combat unspoken overwork expectations and foster a culture of setting boundaries.
- ✓ Train line managers on how to support workload effectively, including how to manage by outcomes, and how to communicate what work requires an excellent standard and what work a good enough standard.
- ✓ Strengthen supportive policies and show leadership is parent-friendly.
- ✓ Formalise support policies on child sickness and transitions e.g. starting primary school.

4 Train managers in support and performance management

- ✓ Create an advisory and support panel for parents with a direct connection to the Executive.
- ✓ Train line managers on flexible working policies, with guidance on supporting flexible working parents.
- ✓ Train colleagues and implement measures that enable outcome-based line management and support unplanned flexibility.
- ✓ Train managers in objective setting for part-time staff.
- ✓ Consider outcomes-based performance measures.

Appendix

Methodology

From 21st of June 2023 until 31st of July 2023 we surveyed 878 people. The survey was distributed to the Leaders Plus community, as well as staff at the following organisations: [list of organisations who promoted it to their staff.]

Respondent profile

Leaders Plus reached out to their community of 1,000s of working parents through email and social media, calling for respondents to volunteer 15-20 minutes of their time to share their story. Several friends of Leaders Plus amplified these posts on their social networks and in their newsletters, as well as sharing internally in organisational intranets, for example.

The respondents self-identified within the following demographics.

How would you describe your gender?	%
Female (inc transgender women)	87%
Male (inc transgender men)	11%
Prefer not to say	1%
Prefer to self describe	0%

How would you describe your ethnicity:	%
Black, African, Caribbean or Black British	2%
White	77%
Prefer not to say	2%
Asian or Asian British	12%
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	4%
Other ethnic group (please specify)	3%

Do you work part or fulltime:	%
Fulltime	69%
Part-time	31%

What is your sexual orientation:	%
Heterosexual or straight	87%
Asexual	2%
Bisexual	4%
Lesbian	1%
Gay	0%
Pansexual	0%
Queer	0%
Prefer not to say	6%

Do you have a child aged 4 or under:	%
Yes (child aged 4 or under)	60%
No (children aged 5 or over)	40%

Which sector do you work in:	%
Healthcare	12%
Accounting, banking and finance	31%
Marketing, advertising and PR	3%
Education	9%
Law	2%
Charity and not for profit	17%
Energy and utilities	3%
IT	3%
Media and internet	2%
Property and construction	1%
Business consulting and management	2%
Engineering and manufacturing	3%
Retail	2%
Hospitality	0%
Recruitment and HR	2%
Creative arts and design	0%
Environment and agriculture	0%
None of the above	8%

At what level do you currently work:	%
Managerial	38%
Senior Director	3%
Senior Manager	26%
Director	8%
Board level/C-suite	2%
Entry level	2%
Junior	13%
Other (please specify)	7%

How long have you worked for your current employer:	%
Less than 1 year	11%
1-3 years	16%
3-5 years	17%
6-10 years	24%
10+ years	33%



Thanks

This research could have not been completed without the support of allies and supporters.

We thank Claire Melody from the Women's Network at King's College Hospital, Rachael Willis and Devina Mistry from the HSBC Nurture network, Tracey George from TPP Recruitment, Zoe Rowland from the Cancer Research UK Parents and Carers Network, the Leaders Plus Employer Strategic Advisory Group as well as many other friends and supporters for their detailed input into the design of the survey and for sharing the survey widely.

We would further like to thank Amanda Arrowsmith from the CIPD, Catherine Roberts from Santander, Fiona Evans from the RSPCA, Gabriel Davies from Ørsted, Jane Van Zyl from Working Families, Jemma Spencer from the National Grid, Laura Harrison from the Doubt Club, Nadia Bunyan from Global Witness, Seraphina Davey from Seedtag and Susan Mears from the Bible Society for their help with sharing the survey far and wide which resulted in an excellent response rate which created invaluable data.

A particular thank you goes to Rosie McLeod and her colleagues for their detailed and careful analysis of the data and writing up of the report.

About Leaders Plus

Leaders Plus is an award winning social enterprise set up by Verena Hefti MBE to create gender equality in senior leadership through supporting working parents. Our Leaders Plus Fellowship is a career development programme that helps parents to progress to senior careers whilst enjoying their children.



LeadersPlus

International House, 24 Holborn Viaduct, London EC1A 2BN

✉ office@leadersplus.org

📞 020 4525 2277

leadersplus.org

Company registration number: 10822450

Follow us:    

