

Seven ways employers can support working parents during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak

Children around the world need support from their parents right now. And parents need support from their employers.

The consequences of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak are being felt around the world. For many children, this means having to cope with disrupted education, family illness and loss of household income – things that disproportionately affect girls and boys from the poorest families.

By giving working parents the time and support they need to care for their children, workplace family-friendly policies – like paid parental leave, paid sick leave, flexible work arrangements and access to affordable, quality childcare – help reduce the burden on children.

Here are seven ways employers can support parents working to care for themselves, their children and their families during the COVID-19 outbreak:

1. Assess whether current workplace policies effectively support families.

Are existing policies supportive enough for families? Start by identifying the most pressing needs of working parents. Specific focus should be placed on vulnerable groups, such as temporary, informal, migrant, pregnant or nursing workers, workers with disabilities and those who lack access to benefits like paid sick leave.

2. Grant flexible work arrangements.

Flexible work arrangements give workers freedom over when and where they fulfil their job responsibilities. Because the needs of working parents can vary greatly, different types of flexible work arrangements support parents to care for their children and families. Flexible work arrangements include teleworking, compressing the work week or ensuring protected long-term leave so that workers can care for relatives who are sick, elderly or live with disabilities.

3. Support parents with safe, accessible and affordable quality childcare options.

As school and childcare closures become widespread, many working parents are faced with limited or no childcare options. Some may even be compelled to leave younger children with limited supervision, which can compromise their safety. Employers can support these parents in numerous ways, including through childcare referral systems (where childcare remains available and safe), subsidies and flexible work arrangements.

4. Promote good hygiene in and out of the workplace.

For parents who perform essential on-site duties, employers can protect them by maintaining clean and hygienic workplaces, and providing handwashing stations with running water and soap, or alcohol-based hand rubs where washing facilities are not readily available. Working mothers should be supported to continue breastfeeding in clean and comfortable breastfeeding facilities. Employers can also help protect all workers – including those who work remotely – by sharing key messages on prevention measures, travel guidance and ways to talk to their children about the virus.

5. Provide workers with guidance on how to seek medical support.

Employers can help direct workers who may be experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 to medical providers and services. For example, employers can clearly communicate addresses and phone numbers of local hospitals, health authorities and emergency hotlines. They can also provide workers with guidance for safe transport to health-care providers.

6. Help workers and their families cope with stress.

Workplaces should provide special support for workers who feel anxious, confused or scared during the COVID-19 outbreak. They can also support working parents who are helping their children cope with anxiety and fear. Employers should ensure that only information from reliable sources is shared, and that all workers have access to psychosocial services. They should also give working parents the time and resources they need to comfort and care for their children. This includes providing helpful tools that encourage talk, play and other forms of stimulation that children need from caregivers.

7. Reduce financial burdens should workers or their family members fall ill with COVID-19.

Reducing the potential financial burdens of the COVID-19 outbreak for working parents is critical. Support measures can include employment protection, paid sick leave and economic transfers like child benefits and subsidies for health expenditures. Vulnerable groups such as low-income and informal workers should be provided with particular support.

Crucially, employers must ensure that family-friendly policies apply to all workers, regardless of their gender or employment status (whether they are an employee or a contract worker, for example). Promoting a culture in which workers feel comfortable using policies without fear of discrimination or retaliation is key. Especially for women, who in many places assume more care responsibilities than men, measures should be taken to ensure working mothers are not penalized for their decisions. By adopting and expanding family-friendly policies, employers have a central role to play in supporting the well-being of working parents and their children.