

# The Great Collide: The Impact of Children's Mental Health On The Workforce

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## An Undercurrent of Apprehension

Spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health in the workplace has risen to a more mainstream topic. An American Psychiatric Association (APA) poll in spring 2021 found that over half of employees said their employers had become more accommodating to their mental health needs during the pandemic. And yet, the same poll showed slightly fewer employees saying they can talk openly about mental health at work. The poll also indicated that more than four in 10 employees were concerned about retaliation if they sought mental health care or took time off for their mental health.

**Why? Because stigma around mental health still exists.** [see "What is stigma?" on page 6]

That same stigma that prevents employees from seeking help casts a long shadow to include working parents who have concerns about their children's mental health. Our 2021 study of working parents, *The Great Collide: The Impact of Children's Mental Health on the Workforce*, revealed that there is also mistrust in the workplace around the topic of children's mental health.

- **65% of 3,684** American City Business Journals readers agreed that "There are stigmas around discussing a child's mental health in the workplace."
- **Just 23%** of working parents said they would be comfortable talking to Human Resources about their children's mental health. Even fewer said they would be comfortable talking to their boss or supervisor.
- **Just 58%** would trust Human Resources to keep concerns related to their child's mental health issues anonymous.

## Apprehension stems from doubt and even fear

While the world is slowly becoming more accepting and open about mental health, our conversations with working parents made it clear that it's different when it's your child — and *their* mental health is not yet a safe topic at work.

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In 2021, working parents told us:

*There's fear of judgment - of me as a parent, and as an employee.*


*There's fear that my livelihood could be impacted.*

*There's fear that my child will be labeled in the minds of anyone who knows them.*

Therefore, parents keep quiet because they think it is what they have to do to protect their ability to earn a living for their families.




**62%**  
of working parents believe that children's mental health concerns reflect parenting and home life.



Working moms expressed concern about protecting their child's privacy, both out of respect for their child, but also because they believe public knowledge of a struggle could be used against their child.

**The working parents who are in the best position to report the impact of children's mental health — those who reported having their work disrupted — shared the following about caring for their child's mental health:**

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- 50%** said an employee at their level cannot leave work without losing pay
  - 47%** said an employee at their level would face consequences (e.g., warnings, no pay) if they left early to take care of issues related to their child's mental health
  - 45%** said they could potentially lose their job if their child's mental health concerns interfered with work
  - 43%** said an employee would not be considered for promotions if their child's mental health concerns interfered with their work

## Apprehension and stigma are more prevalent on the front lines and cubicles of individual contributors than in management and executive offices.



Among 3,684 American City Business Journal Readers, Individual Contributors (66%) and Managers (67%) were more likely than owners/partners/C-suite executives (62%) to agree that there are stigmas around discussing a child’s mental health in the workplace. This difference was statistically significant.

<i>% comfortable talking about your child's mental health with:</i>	<b>Individual Contributors</b>	<b>Supervisors/ Managers</b>	<b>Directors/ Vice Presidents</b>	<b>Senior-level Executives</b>
My boss/supervisor	17%	17%	28%	29%
Human Resources at my employer	21%	19%	33%	30%

<i>% agreeing</i>	<b>Individual Contributors</b>	<b>Supervisors/ Managers</b>	<b>Directors/ Vice Presidents</b>	<b>Senior-level Executives</b>
Trust Human Resources to keep concerns anonymous	53%	62%	62%	68%
My employer is understanding of needing to take care of a child’s issues, including mental health	66%	72%	76%	86%

## In Parents' Own Words:

*"Shift workers, single parents, folks in non-managerial positions, and especially those without sufficient paid leave, get the short end of the stick here. It comes down to there being less flexibility/support for these folks. There are also too many workplaces where parents who need to take time off, work around childcare availability, etc. get judged or shamed."*

– MOLLY

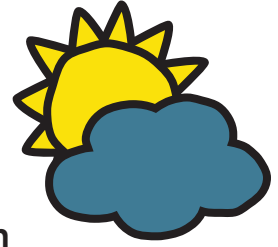
*"I believe the job position makes this more difficult. I see at my own workplace times when managers leave early or work from home (pre-COVID) and they aren't held to the same standards as other employees at a lower position when they would need the time off and they don't have the option to work from home."*

– MERCEDES

## Working parents are at a pivotal moment

Parents feel more challenged caring for their child's mental health than their physical health. Meanwhile, their children's mental health faces continuous pressures from social media, societal unrest and global threats beyond the normal challenges of growing up. Some parents may hold on to beliefs that make them feel they are more in control - such as 56% who agree that **"My child would let me know if they were having mental health challenges"** and 72% who agree that **"I would know if my child was struggling with mental health."** This may be true for some, but Mental Health America reports several reasons why children may not show or share their struggles with their parents: they're not sure how parents will react - sad, angry or disappointed; their parents have enough other things to worry about, or that their parents won't believe them or take them seriously.





## HOW EMPLOYERS CAN HELP

### 1. Highlight resources that support children's mental health

Providing such resources seems to be a signal of a family first organization, as well as a stigma-breaker. Working parents who said their company offers mental-health resources for their child, if needed, were more likely to agree that their organization had a “family first” policy and was understanding of needing to take care of a child's issues, including mental-health. They were more likely to be able to focus on achieving their goals at work, and feel energetic enough to complete all their work despite their child's mental health status. Meanwhile, working parents who said their company does not offer children's mental health resources were less likely to take time off to care for their child's mental health and were more likely to agree that they would face negative consequences (e.g., lost pay, missed promotions, or loss of job) if their child's mental health interfered with their work.

Working parents, when presented with the idea of being able to learn more about caring for their child's mental health, expected such a course would bring feelings of relief and freedom — a sign that they've faced difficulty and limitations due to stigma. Such a learning opportunity also gave rise to feelings of being equipped, empowered and ready, indicating that such resources would enable them to improve their ability to perform in their work and their role as a parent.

### 2. Articulate your position on “family-centricity” as part of your culture

Policy and culture are not always the same thing, but clear family-focused policies reinforce the perception of a “family first” culture. Working parents who agreed their organization has a “family first” policy were less likely to agree they would suffer negative consequences or loss of their job if their child's mental-health interfered with their work. They also held higher trust in Human Resources, and showed higher levels of presenteeism in their work, despite being more likely to take time off to care for their child's mental health.

Note: Since working parents in Individual Contributor positions were less likely to agree that their organization has a “family-first” policy, employers should seek to understand what these parents, in particular, would perceive as truly family first.

### 3. Embrace stigma-breaking campaigns

Share facts about adult and children's mental health, encouraging employees to care for their mental health. Equip managers to field inquiries or conversations about mental health to avoid perpetuating perceptions of stigma.

## Sources:

The *Great Collide* was completed in three waves:

1. An online qualitative discussion with 42 working parents to uncover nuances around stigma, language and parents' mindset.
2. A nationally representative quantitative survey with 1,680 working parents to learn about parents' perceptions, attitudes and behaviors related to children's mental health and their work.
3. A survey of 3,684 readers of the American City Business Journals who opted into the study to give their perspective on children's mental health and employer-based solutions. This wave included 1,581 working parents, 1,067 executives, and 1,247 human resource or benefits personnel who provided an employer perspective.



### What is stigma?

Stigma is when someone negatively views you because you have a distinguishing characteristic or personal trait that's thought to be, or actually is, a disadvantage (a negative stereotype). Unfortunately, negative attitudes and beliefs toward people who have a mental health condition are common. **Source:** Mayo Clinic

### Examples of how stigma is perpetuated include:

- Media depictions where the villain is often a character with a mental illness
- Harmful stereotypes of people with mental illness
- Treating mental health concerns as if they are something people can overcome if they just try harder" or "snap out of it"

**Source:** *Verywellmind.com*

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