

# Coronavirus is making Corporate America realize that child care isn't someone else's problem <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Frances Brooks Taplett is like legions of working mothers everywhere fretting about the fall as many school districts contemplate a remote or hybrid schedule.

She does not relish the impossible task of juggling two kids at home — ages 5 and 9 — and a demanding full-time job. Nor did she want her colleagues to.

As chief people officer of the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard, Taplett is in a position to ensure that support for employees with children goes beyond simply letting them work from home. That's why the Broad not only increased child-care subsidies to employees during the pandemic but also set up a backup care center over the summer that could accommodate older children.

Now Taplett is thinking about what more can be done to help working parents as they face an unpredictable academic year.

"How do you bring your best self to work?" posited Taplett. "It's not when you are trying to educate two children at home simultaneously in between Zoom calls."

Back to school is among the happiest times of year for parents — but not in 2020. There are no good choices: Is it even safe to send kids to school? Will moms and dads lose their sanity if kids stay home? What about the parents, many of whom are low-wage workers, who simply can't work from home? Who watches their kids?

Corporate America, for the most part, has made child care someone else's problem. But in the COVID-19 era, some employers are realizing the outsize role they can play in helping parents, whether it's offering flexible schedules, increasing child-care subsidies, even finding sitters and tutors. And these solutions could end up outlasting the pandemic, much like working from home may become more of the norm after the disease dissipates.

"This will change how employers, including us, think about child care as a support system, and we will need to decide what our approach will be," said Matt Badger, a senior vice president in human resources at Mass General Brigham, the state's largest employer with about 78,000 workers.

Stephen Kramer, chief executive of child-care provider Bright Horizons, said many employers are crafting plans for additional coverage as it becomes increasingly clear the school year will be far from normal.

Bright Horizons is working with clients to, in effect, create alternative classrooms at the work site, allowing both parents and children to get outside the confines of home. These are being set up either within existing on-site child-care centers or at a new locations elsewhere. These programs will provide supervision while children attend virtual classes.

And with large numbers of day care centers still unable to reopen, Bright Horizons has also been fielding an influx of requests from companies to find in-home child care for their workers.

"I've been really impressed with how progressive many of our clients have been," Kramer said. "They recognize the need is so incredibly great."

But investing in child care is also good for the bottom line. Even as the country experiences historically high unemployment rates, companies are increasing child-care benefits to maintain productivity and to retain talent—especially women, because the bulk of caregiving falls on them.

A recent survey of working parents by Care.com found that 66 percent indicated that juggling child care and a job made them less productive at work. If school and/or day care do not fully reopen after the summer, 73 percent said they may have to make major changes at work, while 15 percent said they may leave the workforce altogether.

Care.com, a Waltham company that runs an online platform that connects families with caregivers, has seen the number of corporate

accounts increase by 50 percent since mid-March. Employees through corporate memberships use Care.com to find sitters, nannies, and tutors.

“The reality of it is when employees are forced to choose between their work and their families, everyone loses,” said Alyssa Johnson, vice president of global client management at Care.com.

Not all employers can afford to provide additional benefits because the pandemic has decimated their businesses and they’re in survival mode. Some companies believe they’ve done enough just by allowing parents with young children to continue to work remotely, while other employers want to do more but don’t know what else to offer because situations are fluid. The organizations that have led on child care tend to be in a talent war for highly-skilled workers.

For low-wage workers, there aren’t a lot of workarounds. Major retailers, including Stop & Shop, Wegmans, and CVS, are offering flexible schedules such as allowing staff to work later in the morning or on weekends so they can help their children with online learning.

For Mass General Brigham, the state’s largest hospital network, meeting the child-care needs of employees has been critical since so many can’t do their jobs remotely — from cafeteria workers and care attendants, to nurses and surgeons.

In the spring, the company, previously known as Partners HealthCare, expanded backup child-care options, flexible schedules, and remote work. It also bumped up child-care subsidies and introduced a grant program that provides up to \$1,000 to lower wage workers to deal with hardship caused by COVID-19.

Now, Mass General Brigham is using a recent employee survey to help guide it on accommodating working parents heading into the school year. The survey found the top employee concern was educational support for their children. So, the hospital network is exploring another set of benefits, such as providing virtual tutors and coordinating learning pods where families share a tutor.

“One size does not fit all,” said Badger, the Mass General Brigham HR executive. “There are different needs for every employee.”

Boston Scientific, the Marlborough medical device company with 35,000 employees around the world, had already increased child-care subsidies and offered flexible schedules. But Wendy Carruthers, Boston Scientific’s senior vice president of human resources, said the moment calls for the company to be “much more agile and iterative than we have been in the past.”

Among the new strategies: working with Care.com to help employees in the same town find a nanny to share or help with creating learning pods, and setting up an internal volunteer network to provide online tutoring for employees’ children.

And to help on the social front, Boston Scientific is expanding a pen-pal-type pilot from the spring that paired about 200 children of employees from around the world on Zoom.

“It’s a bright spot in a kid’s day to do something like that,” said Carruthers.

At the Broad, where there are 4,500 people based in Cambridge, Taplett, the chief people officer, is still figuring out how best to support working parents with schedules likely to be in a constant state of flux. She likens it to bracing for “a very long winter with many snow days.”

For Broad employees, Taplett wants to create what she calls “a menu of options depending on the need.”

“This isn’t ending,” she added. “We can’t leave parents to solve this on their own.”

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