



HOW TO SUPPORT WORKING PARENTS OF NEURODIVERGENT CHILDREN

A step-by-step guide for retaining your top talent



INTRODUCTION

Being a working parent today is not for the faint of heart. Between the demands of work and life, plenty of uncertainty about the future, and concerns about their children's health, well-being, and development, it's no wonder two-thirds are burned out.¹

Yet for parents of children who are considered neurodivergent—a term used to describe those who have autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, and other conditions—the challenges can seem insurmountable.

Amidst a national shortage of behavioral therapists and mental health providers, finding the right care and treatment can take several months and is often costly. Plus, the myriad of tasks related to healthcare, insurance, school, and caregiving is a significant burden for these parents who have higher rates of absenteeism and presenteeism and are more likely to take a leave of absence or leave the workforce altogether.^{2 3}

As a result of high levels of chronic stress, these parents also experience poor physical and mental health at a higher rate than non-caregivers⁴ and have higher rates of ER and hospital utilization⁵—expenditures that compound already-high healthcare costs they have for their children.

INTRODUCTION

Unfortunately, only about 50%⁶ of parents say their employers know they're caregivers, likely because they choose not to disclose their situations. They may fear they'll be viewed as not completely invested in their roles, and as a result, worry they'll be passed up for promotions or be laid off.

As organizations continually prioritize their DE&I strategies and look for new ways to attract and retain top talent, increase employee engagement, and cope with rising healthcare costs, many have responded with expanded mental benefits and coverage,⁷ Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), and family-friendly benefits.⁸

Yet for parents of neurodivergent children, it's simply not enough.

Organizations must take steps to understand the unique needs of this particular population of working parents, create an inclusive workplace culture, and invest in innovative benefits solutions that help their employees and their businesses thrive.

Only 1 in 4 employers say their benefits effectively support working parents.⁹

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WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY?

Neurodiversity is a term that has become popular in recent years but it was actually coined over two decades ago by sociologist Judy Singer¹⁰ to describe biological differences in the brain.

Neurodiversity is the idea that there's no "right" way to think, learn or behave.¹¹ People can perceive and respond to the world in various ways and differences should be embraced and encouraged.¹²

An estimated 15-20% of the global population¹³ is neurodiverse. Neurodiversity is found among all races, ethnicities, cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, and life experiences. Although it's not a medical term or a diagnosis, several conditions fall under the neurodiversity umbrella including, but not limited to:

- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Dyscalculia
- Dysgraphia
- Dyslexia
- Dyspraxia
- Tourette syndrome

1 in 6 children in the U.S. have a developmental disability.¹⁴

25% of mothers of children with autism had taken a leave of absence from their jobs to care for a child with autism and **23%** had not taken a promotion for the same reason.¹⁵



STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES OF NEURODIVERGENT CHILDREN

Children who are neurodivergent typically have a wide range of strengths, skills, abilities, and talents that allow them to stand out from their neurotypical peers.

These include:

3D Mechanical skills

Cognitive control

Concentration

Creativity

Empathy

Energy

Fine detail processing

Innovative thinking

Intuition

Memory

Observational skills

Passion

Verbal skills

Visual thinking



THE PRESSURES OF CARING FOR A NEURODIVERGENT CHILD

The time parents spend caring for neurodivergent children is equivalent to an additional part-time job with extra layers of stress.

Lack of specialized care

Parents spend countless hours devoted not only to taking their children to doctors and therapy appointments, but also to research, scheduling, coordinating, planning, and communications. They also spend time dealing with insurance companies to have services covered and manage claims and billing.

Despite the demand for care, however, the significant shortage of providers has led to care gaps. In fact, less than 1% of families have access to specialized providers such as Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs).¹⁶

Without adequate support, parents are left to search for information, teach skills, and manage their children's behaviors on their own.

In addition, while childcare is a challenge for most families today, compared to parents of neurotypical children, a larger percentage of parents¹⁷ with neurodivergent children have at least some difficulty finding care.

Only 20% of working parents feel comfortable talking to their boss about their child's mental health.¹⁸

THE PRESSURES OF CARING FOR A NEURODIVERGENT CHILD

Extra Support At School

Parents of neurodivergent children also spend a considerable amount of time communicating with teachers and support specialists, coordinating school and independent testing and evaluations, and attending Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings.

Not only is the extra work time-consuming, but navigating special education is often confusing. Parents may not understand their legal rights, know what to ask for, and how the process works. For parents who have English as a second language, the process can be even more difficult.

Additionally, parents spend extra time supporting their children's academic and social needs and may have to work with providers and school medical staff to ensure care plans are in place. The additional responsibilities are a heavy burden for parents to shoulder, and something employers often aren't aware of.

95% of parents of children with intellectual or developmental disabilities say they go to work late, leave early, or take time off during the day.³

High Stress and Mental Health

Families with neurodivergent children often have a higher prevalence of mental health issues. Neurodivergent traits can lead—to or be associated with—mental health issues.¹⁹ At the same time, siblings of neurodivergent children may also struggle with anxiety, depression, and social-emotional issues.²⁰

For working parents, the increased mental load and stress, and lack of time that comes with caring for a child who is neurodivergent can negatively affect their mental health and well-being and put undue strain on their personal relationships.

Caregivers are **2.4x** more likely to experience anxiety or depression if their children have developmental disorders.²¹

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A WORKING PARENT OF A NEURODIVERGENT CHILD

Most parents are stressed out and overwhelmed, but for those who have kids with developmental disabilities, there's little downtime or reprieve from the demands they face each day.

6am

- Start a work project and pack lunches.
- Search for child's clothes to avoid triggering sensory issues.
- Put out breakfast and give child daily medication so they can focus at school.
- Deal with tantrum about missing shoes, uncomfortable jacket, etc.
- Rush to get everyone ready and out the door on time.

9am

- Arrive to work feeling frazzled and late for a meeting already in progress.

10am

- Take a call from the school nurse about child complaining about a stomach ache for the third week in a row.



A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A WORKING PARENT OF A NEURODIVERGENT CHILD

12pm

- Spend lunch break on the phone with health insurance about a denied medical claim.
- Make appointment with new occupational therapist for child.

2pm

- Email school to schedule meeting to review and revise child's IEP and advocate for additional services.

3pm

- Leave work early to bring child to neurologist after waiting 9 months for an appointment.

5pm

- Rush home to cook dinner and help child with homework.

7pm

- Spend 30-60 minutes trying to get child ready for bed and wind down after having a meltdown.

8pm

- Wrap up a work project and answer emails.
- Research ways to handle child's behavior, and look for new therapies and specialists.
- Pay medical bills.

10pm

- Crash on the couch.

67% of employers say caregiving drives the most mental health issues.¹⁶



THE BOTTOM LINE IMPACT

Today's employers are faced with significant workforce challenges including a lack of talent, skills shortages, poor engagement, and high turnover, but the impact of parents who care for neurodivergent children may be more significant and less obvious.

High healthcare costs

Employer healthcare costs continue to rise,²² but for those with parents who are caregivers to neurodivergent children, the costs can be even higher.

- Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy costs \$40,000-\$60,000 per child, per year.²³
- Caregivers have 2X as many emergency room visits than non-caregivers.¹⁶

Poor productivity

With everything they have to do for their children on any given day, combined with high levels of stress and worry, it's no surprise that productivity takes a hit.

- 80% of employees admit caregiving affects their productivity.²
- 60% of parents of children with disabilities make workplace accommodations such as taking days off to attend appointments or school meetings.²



THE BOTTOM LINE IMPACT

High turnover

Parents of neurodivergent children are more likely to resign from their roles and the time and cost it takes for employers to replace them are significant.

- 39% of parents of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities quit their jobs.³

U.S. businesses lose \$1 Trillion a year in voluntary turnover.²⁴

Caregiver absenteeism costs the U.S. economy a whopping **\$25B** in lost productivity every year.²⁵



HOW TO SUPPORT EMPLOYEES WITH NEURODIVERGENT CHILDREN

For companies looking to attract and retain top talent, control healthcare spend, and improve employee engagement, providing the right resources and support for working parents of neurodivergent children is critical.

Identify the need

Employees may not disclose their challenges at home so conducting an anonymous survey to determine the number of employees who need support can help to clarify the need at hand.

Create awareness

Employee benefits is often a fragmented system, so helping employees know where to turn for support is important. Develop communications about benefits offerings including mental health coverage, point solution partners, and other resources available that can connect them with support.

Foster an inclusive work environment

Parents should feel that the workplace is a safe space where they can disclose their challenges, get support, and bring their whole selves. Therefore, make supporting parents of neurodiverse children part of your organization's overall DEI strategy.



HOW TO SUPPORT EMPLOYEES WITH NEURODIVERGENT CHILDREN

Managers should have frequent check-ins with parents to ensure they are able to achieve their goals, meet expectations, and are provided with the support they need. Establishing Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) can also help to promote psychological safety, resource sharing, and reduce feelings of workplace loneliness. Also, consider assigning a champion from leadership who is invested in understanding the needs of —and providing support for— parents who have neurodivergent children.

Allow flexible work options

When employees are offered flexible work 87% take it and for parents of neurodivergent children, it's critical.²⁶

Invest in innovative benefits solutions

Mental health and telehealth benefits are among the most important benefits organizations can offer their employees today, but for parents of neurodivergent children, it's important to also look to new, innovative solutions to attract and retain top talent. In fact, for many of these working parents, assessing family benefits is the top priority when deciding whether or not to accept a position at an organization.

Benefit solutions should support employees, their children, and caregivers. By utilizing a single platform, parents can access education and trainings on social and emotional learning, parenting skills, mental health, foundational skills, and more.

Additionally, companies should look to solutions that provide unparalleled access to Board Certified Behavior Analyst® (BCBA) for live behavioral health support and parent coaching. This unique type of support closes care gaps and allows parents to bring their best selves to home and the workplace.

CONCLUSION

Parents of neurodivergent children have a unique set of challenges that differ from those who have neurotypical children. The chronic stress they experience has a direct impact on their mental and physical health, productivity, and work performance, and increases healthcare spend and costs for an organization.

While expanded mental health, EAP, and family-friendly benefits provide value and have their place in the healthcare ecosystem, innovative benefit solutions designed for these parents fill the gap where other solutions fall short. When parents and their families are informed and supported in a way that addresses their needs, organizations have an engaged, productive, and happier workforce.

How RethinkCare Can Help Your Organization

The [RethinkCare platform](#) provides evidence-based tools, e-learning, and clinical support for working parents, caregivers, and their families, including those with neurodivergent children that lead to proven outcomes for employers. 83% say they can better address their child's needs. If you'd like to learn more about how RethinkCare can support your business, [request a demo](#).

About RethinkCare

RethinkCare is the leading global behavioral and mental health platform from RethinkFirst supporting neurodiversity in the workplace and at home. We offer a digital experience and on-demand clinical consulting to empower employees across their parenting, personal, and professional needs. Hundreds of enterprise organizations, including 30 Fortune 100 companies, rely on RethinkCare's solutions supporting members in over 120 countries.

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