



Olympic Moms Are Changing the Game and So Can You: 5 Ways Employers Can Support the Olympic Feat of Balancing Work and Family

Insights

7.26.24

The Paris 2024 Summer Olympics are officially here, and this year is full of milestones – from the Olympic debut of “breaking” (you may call it breakdancing) to equal participation rates by male and female athletes for the first time ever. Amid all the excitement, organizers have also made important changes for parent athletes. These new initiatives are especially beneficial for (and thanks to) the moms who are competing in the world’s largest sporting event while caring for their young children. In this Insight, we’ll look at what’s changing at the Games, the strength and endurance required of *all* moms in the workforce, and five ways employers can support the parents in your workforce.

A Win for Paris 2024 Parent Athletes

Some are calling it the friendliest Olympics ever for competing moms. For the first time, the Olympic and Paralympic Village will include a nursery – a private space where parent athletes can spend quality time with their young children. According to the official announcement, the area will be open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily for visitors with a guest pass and feature private breastfeeding space, safe play areas, and diaper-changing facilities. Interested athletes can use an online service to book slots in the nursery space.

The athletes’ village nursey was created by Pampers and Allyson Felix – the most decorated track and field athlete in history and a mother of two. The retired American sprinter now sits on the International Olympic Committee Athletes’ Commission and has been vocal about normalizing childcare at sporting events. Regarding this initiative, Felix said: “The systems aren’t in place for mothers whatsoever. I’m just trying to use my voice and speak up for some of these pretty basic things and try to see what we can implement.”

While this is a big step in the right direction, the progress is long overdue and somewhat lacking. For example, babies aren’t exactly known for being predictable, and their hunger demands don’t end at bedtime. The new rules still don’t allow children to stay overnight with their parents in the Olympic Village, and it appears that those who use the nursery can do so only during the preset allotted time window. The French Olympic Committee, though, has attempted to address these gaps

by providing hotel rooms for breastfeeding French athletes. The accommodations will be near the athletes' village, and nursing moms may stay overnight there with their infants.

Being a Mom in the Workforce Can Feel Like an Olympic Sport

Just like these decorated athletes, mothers in the workforce must juggle paid work and family responsibilities. In addition, birthing parents must perform this balancing act on top of significant physical and emotional changes to their health.

- **Pregnancy and lactation pushes the limits of human endurance.** What do pregnant women and elite athletes have in common? A [2019 study](#) shows that the amount of energy used by pregnant and lactating women *at rest* is near the maximum humanly possible – essentially, pregnancy is the equivalent of running a marathon every day for roughly 270 days.
- **Lack of Maternity Leave.** The United States is one of only a handful of countries (joining only Papua New Guinea and several small Pacific island nations) that does not provide paid maternity leave on a national level. While the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) grants qualifying employees up to 12 weeks of *unpaid* leave for certain reasons (such as the birth of child and bonding with the newborn child), a 2018 survey [showed](#) that only 56% of employees are eligible for FMLA – forcing many women to return to work just weeks or even days after giving birth.
- **Breastfeeding Demands.** Conservative estimates show that one year of breastfeeding takes up roughly 1,800 hours of a mother's time – that's just shy of the 1,960 hours per year a typical employee might work, assuming they work 40 hours per week and take three weeks of vacation. It can be stressful for a mother to produce enough breastmilk for her infant while she is away from them at work, and if she does not express breast milk often enough, it can cause her to experience discomfort, harm to her milk supply, and even a serious bacterial infection known as mastitis.
- **Childcare Costs and Challenges.** The astronomical costs of childcare, [if you can access it at all](#), may cause significant financial stress for families with young children or force parents – especially moms – to leave the workforce entirely. The average annual cost of childcare in the U.S. last year was \$11,582 *per child* according to this [report](#), and it's much higher in many locations. In fact, in many states the yearly cost of childcare for one child is equal to more than 13% of the median income for a married couple, and this [report](#) shows daycare and preschool costs have risen for decades at nearly twice the pace of overall inflation. Even when parents are paying the high price for childcare, those services can become unexpectedly unavailable – for example, when their child is sick or due to program closures. And the hours of operation for many schools and daycares do not align with the traditional hours of the workday.
- **The Motherhood Penalty.** Research shows that women who grow their families while they are in the workforce suffer a so-called “motherhood penalty.” For example, [this study](#) found that

mothers “suffer a penalty relative to non-mothers and men in the form of lower perceived competence and commitment, higher professional expectations, lower likelihood of hiring and promotion, and lower recommended salaries.”

Supporting Your Caregiving Employees Is Good for Business

Providing caregiving benefits to address these challenges promises a high return on investment. A [recent study by Vivvi and The Fifth Trimester](#) concluded that employer support for employees who have caregiving obligations “is not ‘bells and whistles’ but a vital pillar of profitability, with calculable ROI, that makes sense for all businesses and employees.” Below are some of the highlights from the study:

- While **67%** of those surveyed said they **considered leaving their job** in the last year, **42%** said they **stayed specifically because of their employer’s support of their caregiving**. And those numbers become even more critical when you consider, as the study noted, “the cost of losing a worker is a minimum of 33% of their salary (or as much as 213% of salary for \$100,000+ earners).”
- Survey respondents **ranked childcare support in the top three most wanted benefits in a compensation package** – even ahead of more traditional benefits such as a 401(k) plan. Job candidates are actively seeking out family benefits and growing attached to them, and parents who feel supported become champions for their companies.
- **Productivity**. Those surveyed said that their **caregiving responsibilities motivated them to be “more productive and efficient” – not less**. After all, kids are expensive, and when you are juggling heavy responsibilities outside of work you must make the most out of your time. More than half of respondents said that they would work in person more often than required (69%) and take on higher-level work (57%) – if their employer had backup or subsidized childcare.
- **Culture**. Nearly half (48%) of respondents said that “**caregiving sensitivity would have a high impact on company culture** – more than risk management, sexual harassment, and implicit bias training combined.”
- **The Bottom Line**. The case studies showed that every \$1 invested in caregiving benefits resulted in a return of \$18.93. **This means when employers provide caregiving benefits, they see a nearly 18x ROI.**

5 Ways You Can Support Your Employees Who Have Young Children

While this list is not exhaustive, here are five main areas where you can strengthen your support for employees who have caregiving responsibilities. Note that this article focuses on working parents – and especially moms and birthing parents – of young children, but many of these tips could be extended to or adjusted for employees with other types of caregiving responsibilities, including eldercare.

1. Workplace Culture

Make sure that your company's culture creates a supportive atmosphere for employees with young children. You can accomplish this through your policies and benefits, as we'll discuss more below. But from a broader perspective, your leaders and managers should be well-trained on those initiatives, and they should encourage their caregiving employees to participate. You should also encourage your managers to participate in these initiatives when applicable to set the tone for the rest of your workforce. You can also foster a positive environment by hosting family-friendly work events or simply welcoming employees to talk about their family life.

2. Parental Leave Policies

While federal and most state laws do not require employers to offer paid parental leave — and FMLA only applies under certain conditions — employers should consider implementing a parental leave policy that goes beyond what's required by law. Doing so not only benefits your employees but also increases the chances that they will return to their jobs and stick around — enabling you to decrease employee turnover, retain valuable employees, and attract new talent. And gender-neutral policies provide greater benefits to all employees and promote gender equality within your company and beyond.

3. Breastfeeding Support

Federal law requires employers to provide time and space for employees to express breast milk at work, and some state laws are even more expansive. Beyond the legal requirements, you can make your lactating employees feel supported in small but powerful ways. For example:

- **Normalize It.** By establishing and promoting a written policy that supports lactating employees, you can help those individuals feel more confident about returning to work after giving birth and more comfortable asking for support. Train your managers on these policies and how to navigate conversations.
- **Be Flexible.** Whenever possible, give your lactating employees the flexibility they need to express breast milk throughout the day. This might include shifting meeting times or permitting other adjustments to their schedules.
- **Be Thoughtful.** Beyond what is required by law, try to think through whether your lactation room is truly a comfortable and convenient space. There are often easy alternatives that lactating employees might prefer. Privacy, cleanliness, and accessibility are critical factors. For example, do you have a system in place if multiple employees require regular access to the same lactation space?
- **Ease Work Travel.** Consider partnering with breast milk shipping companies for lactating employees who need to travel for work.

4. Caregiving Benefits

Employers who offer caregiving benefits could see a high ROI and improvements in employee retention, recruitment, productivity, and workplace culture. Just a few examples of caregiving benefits you might consider offering include:

- a dependent care flexible spending account, which allows employees to use pre-tax dollars (up to the IRS maximum amount) to pay for qualifying child and dependent care expenses;
- discounts on childcare services through partnerships with local providers;
- access to backup childcare services;
- direct financial subsidies (such as monthly or annual stipends) or reimbursements to help employees pay for childcare expenses;
- on-site childcare services;
- sick days that may be used when an employee's child is sick or childcare is unexpectedly unavailable; and
- flexible schedules, remote or hybrid work options, part-time or job sharing arrangements, and [ways to support a nonlinear workforce](#).

5. Outcome-Based Work

Finally, while it might not work for all industries or positions, many modern jobs can be evaluated based on results rather than hours worked (or when those hours are worked). By valuing quality over quantity, you can set clear goals and objectives for your employees while also giving them flexibility in how they accomplish them so they can successfully juggle their work and caregiving roles.

Conclusion

As you tune in for the Games this year, consider ways you can level the playing field for your employees who have young children. We will monitor these developments and provide updates as warranted, so make sure you are subscribed to [Fisher Phillips' Insight System](#) to get the most up-to-date information direct to your inbox. If you have further questions, contact your Fisher Phillips attorney or the authors of this Insight.

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