

Q&A from Jennifer Liston-Smith's session

**Practical wellbeing strategies to
empower working parents and carers**

Bright Horizons

Reba Employee Wellbeing Congress 2022

1. How do you help employers help employees manage the cost of childcare?

- As mentioned in the session, one of the key options is through the workplace nursery exemption which can cover an onsite nursery or an offsite setting (such as one of Bright Horizons' community nurseries) where the employer makes a commitment to underwriting at least 10% of the places. When the employees pay for those places, they do so out of salary sacrifice, meaning tax & NI savings for the employee and the employer.
- Back-up Care (more on this under Q2) also helps with the cost of childcare particularly when care is needed at short notice or during summer holidays, using summer camps for example.

2. Can you expand on what you mean by back-up care please?

- Back-up care means care that works to fill gaps in usual arrangement and often at short notice, for example childcare when a school is closed for an InSeT day; a childminder or nanny is on holiday or ill; or a toddler is mildly unwell and can't attend a nursery but is fine to be looked after at home by a back-up care nanny, perhaps while the parent works in the next room to attend an online meeting they don't want to miss.
- It is also filling gaps where – for example – an employee who is due to work remotely on a given day needs to attend a workplace for a gathering and therefore can't do the school pickup so a back-up care nanny or childminder might be able to step in for that part of the day.
- Back-up childcare can also cover school holidays and, as mentioned in the session, even be expanded to provide access to virtual tutoring.
- For adult and eldercare, back-up care can help a loved one for example with discharge from a hospital to help get set up at home before ongoing care support can be put in place.
- Employees can also use back-up care for themselves, in the event of, for example, an accident or illness needing more support at home at short notice.

3. Do children & older people feel OK about having someone they don't know turning up to look after them?

- This is a good question which we're often asked.
- Firstly, it is not always an unknown person. Back-up care is also used to enable take up of a spare place in a regular nursery on a different day. For example, if an employee usually works Monday to Thursday but wants to attend a team-building or client event on the Friday, they might be able to get a back-up care place in their usual nursery if there is capacity. Many of our non-Bright Horizons back-up care settings are on our register because they were initially recommended by parents who wanted their regular choice to be on our list in case needed. As long as they fit our high standards, they can be added to our network.
- Secondly, where the carer is unknown, we have very rigorous standards, going far beyond DBS checks (though obviously including those). The childcarers and adult carers in our network are people who are especially skilled and experienced at forming rapport quickly.
- We also have a registration process (which client employees are encouraged to fill out in advance to speed up booking on the day). This outlines special interests, specially valued toys a child likes, with names, and where important supplies are kept so the carer can 'hit the ground running' which feedback suggests they do, often coming up with new activities that parents praise for how well they fitted their child.
- The registration process naturally also covers any special needs, so the carers can be well-matched and tuned in from the outset.
- Families do often request the same back-up carer once they are familiar.
- In a situation where the employee is not sure the child – or adult – will settle (or are not so sure themselves about leaving their loved one with a new carer for the first time) it's perfectly possible for the employee to be in the next room working online while the carer pays attention to the child or adult. In this way, the employee can feel reassured that they are to hand if needed.

4. How do employees bridge the childcare gap that school holidays create?

- Employers can provide access to holiday clubs as a part of back-up care which – as well as in-person camps can also include online camps for older children covering, for example, coding, leadership or public speaking. This is a significant help in dealing with the mismatch of annual leave and the school holidays.
- As to how employees otherwise bridge the gap, there's usually a lot of juggling. Some approaches we're aware of are below.
- If the family has two parents, sometimes, they will take it in turns to take some time off with the children, as well as time altogether. For example, by each taking 2 weeks in a staggered way, they can cover 3 weeks of care with one crossover week of family holiday.
- Some draw on relatives. Many do not live near relatives these days though we have often heard of a parent flying in from Greece, India or the US for part of the summer. Some families go to visit relatives and leave children to stay longer, then return for them.
- Some parents have trusted networks where they will exchange care while each takes a holiday ('I'll have them each day this week while on A/L, you do next week'). This does require a high level of mutual confidence so we are simply pointing to this happening rather than recommending it as such.
- Some pay a known school teacher for private tuition during the summer if this is of interest to the teacher.
- Others have relied on a trusted Uni student in their networks to look after children who are old enough simply to need 'watching' and who might benefit from extra tuition in maths, language or whatever (again there are risks / insurance issues here so we are passing this on anecdotally rather than advocating for it)
- Some negotiate term-time working though this is rare and depends on being in a sector / organisational culture where it's possible to release or replace a role during the summer for example.

5. You mentioned subsidised back up care, can you explain a bit about who subsidises this?

- Back-up care is usually subsidised by the employer. Many of our clients fund something between 6 to 12 days of care. Some fund 20 or more.
- Some clients make the sessions per dependant to give more choice than per employee (for example, an individual may feel they have to hold back from using back-up eldercare as they are saving up their days in case of a childcare emergency).
- For the employer, the cost of care is justified by making up for lost productivity or absence if the employee cannot otherwise find care at short notice.
- For many, it is also seen as an investment as it has measurable impact on Loyalty, Engagement, Wellbeing and other factors such as easing the return from parental leave. Our [Work+Family Snapshot](#) research has more on these impacts.

6. Any thoughts on gender balance re caring?

- Yes! Lots of thoughts and experience on this 😊
- As mentioned in the session, we need to see parenting as less of a gendered activity. Men (and women) are increasingly making clear that they want and expect fathers to be able to take parental leave, work flexibly and parent loudly in the sense of speaking up about their work-life fit requirements.
- What can employers and line managers do to help?
- Employers and managers can make sure to take a gender-inclusive approach and avoid outdated assumptions about who provides care and who needs flexible working.
- Employers have an important role to play in promoting and supporting shared or equal parental leave, and in paying ongoing attention to the gender pay gap.
- One recent idea was the [#EndSalaryHistory](#) campaign which called on employers, when hiring, to ask only about salary expectations and to match remuneration to the skills of the role, rather than relying on asking about previous salary. Resorting to salary history as a gauge for future salary entrenches lower pay for many women (as well as several minority groups) leading to women being more likely to deprioritise their careers in the face of family care needs.
- Managers, particularly male managers can make a visible contribution by talking openly about their own care commitments, whether childcare or eldercare, demonstrating that it's possible to succeed at work and deliver in their role while also valuing family life and playing a full, hands-on role.
- Employers can also take practical steps such as putting in place Back-Up Care (which cuts down on last minute care stresses) and the Parental Leave Toolkit which guides managers and new parents (of any gender) through the parent transition from before leave to following return. This has been demonstrated to help both parents and managers feel better equipped to keep careers on track. Bright Horizons' service user feedback for 2021 showed that people taking part in our parental leave programmes, were 47% more confident than before in 'Being equipped for the influential conversations you need to have with various stakeholders'; 55% higher than before in 'Having confidence in how you approach this area' and had a 46% increase in 'Practical know-how and skills relevant to this area' (Bright Horizons Service user feedback 2021). All of this helps to avoid accidentally falling onto a 'mummy track' in career terms while also encouraging the working parent to be intentional about their own wellbeing and their values.
- What can society in general do to help?
 - We need to listen well to the dads as well as mums who have been pushing back for some years on stereotypes that perpetuate unequal divisions of care at home. There are great books, such as James Millar's '[Dads Don't Babysit](#)'. If you'd like to read more about modern fatherhood and its importance for gender equality, my blog for International Men's Day in 2021 can be found [here](#). There really is a lot of rethinking we can do to avoid assumptions that tie people into roles they have not consciously chosen.

7. 7% increase in childcare concern. Do we know why? Cost?

- This was the increase for men: it was up from 69% to 74% a 5 percentage point rise or 7% up proportionately on last year. The figure for women (nobody identified as other than male or female) was only a 1 percentage point rise.
- So this is mainly a question as to why it has risen up the agenda for men in our survey population. My guess would be that the pandemic can led more men into hands-on care than previously and that – as a family – they have all agreed it would be positive for some elements of this to continue, after lockdown. So, childcare has become more of a concern for men as it's more in awareness when planning working life.