The Hidden Cost of Child Care Challenges: Uncertainty and the Mental Load on Working Parents

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New research reveals 70% of working parents feel they are "always on" because of child care related logistics and responsibilities

NEWTON, Mass.--(BUSINESS WIRE)--Nov. 5, 2026-- When reliable child care is unavailable or changes unexpectedly, working parents face more than a logistical challenge. They carry a significant cognitive load, devoting substantial mental energy to securing care, coordinating schedules, anticipating disruptions, and making difficult decisions that affect both their professional productivity and their family's well-being.

This anxiety-ridden challenge for working parents is the focus of the latest 2026 Modern Family Index (MFI) research wave, commissioned by Bright Horizons Family Solutions Inc. (NYSE: BFAM) and conducted by The Harris Poll. This new MFI research found 70% of working parents feel like they are "always on" because of child care related logistics and responsibilities.

In fact, a recent study from nonprofit Moms First echoes these findings, with 90% of surveyed parents said they have experienced a workforce disruption because of child care challenges, costing U.S. businesses as much as $70 billion annually through lost productivity, turnover, and absenteeism.

"Our research continues to show that working families carry a substantial mental load as they navigate their caregiving responsibilities, and that burden often follows them into the workplace," said Stephen Kramer, CEO of Bright Horizons. "When families do not have access to reliable, consistent child care, they often spend significant time and energy coordinating arrangements, preparing backup plans, and managing the uncertainty that comes with caregiving responsibilities. Employers have an opportunity to address these challenges, which will help build a more resilient and thriving workforce."

The MFI research revealed the following challenges working parents face:

- 91% of working parents have handled at least one child care-related task during working hours
- 82% report at least one negative impact from managing child care-related logistics, most commonly (37%) having difficulty concentrating at work and/or at home
- 87% say having at least one employer-provided benefit would likely reduce the time or mental energy they spend managing child care
- 77% say reliable child care is essential to their ability to succeed at work, including their ability to focus and remain productive

In addition,

- 66% often worry about potential disruptions to their child care plans
- 70% feel like they are "always on" because of child care-related logistics and responsibilities
- 66% feel mentally exhausted managing child care logistics

Recognizing that child care challenges can create a constant source of stress for working parents, employers like Target offer a variety of comprehensive family support solutions for their working parent employees. By offering these benefits, parents no longer need to spend significant mental energy making sure their children are cared for, safe, and supported, whether through on-site early education and care, in-home and center-based back-up care when unexpected needs arise, coverage during school breaks and holiday closures, or summer camps and school-age programs.

"Supporting working parents isn't just a family issue; it's a workforce strategy," added Kramer. "When employers provide meaningful child care resources that help reduce this burden, employees can be more present, engaged, loyal, and effective at work, enabling them to succeed both personally and professionally."

To download the latest Bright Horizons Modern Family Index, click here.

Research Methodology

This survey was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of Bright Horizons from September 22-23, 2026, among 696 employed U.S. adults ages 18 and older who are parents of kids under 18. Data were weighted where necessary by age, gender, race/ethnicity, region, education, marital status, household size, household income, and political party affiliation, to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population. Respondents are selected among those who have agreed to participate in our surveys. The sampling precision of Harris online polls is

measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. The sample data is accurate to within +/- 4.4 percentage points using a 95% confidence level. This credible interval will be wider among subsets of the surveyed population of interest. All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to other multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including, but not limited to coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments.

About Bright Horizons Family Solutions Inc.

Bright Horizons® is a leading provider of high-quality early education and child care, back-up care, and workforce education services. For 40 years, we have partnered with employers to support workforces by providing services that help working families and employees thrive personally and professionally. Bright Horizons operates approximately 1,000 early education and child care centers in the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Australia and India, and serves more than 1,450 of the world's leading employers. Bright Horizons' early education and child care centers, back-up child and elder care, and workforce education programs help employees succeed at each life and career stage. For more information, go to www.brighthorizons.com.

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