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Remote Work Among US Nonprofit Organizations: Qualitative Experiences of Working Parents
in the Post-COVID Era

By

EMILY SEARL
DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This research aims to understand how and why some parents in the US nonprofit sector worked remotely in the post-pandemic era. Based on interviews conducted with forty-eight mothers, twenty-two fathers, and one nonbinary parent, I analyze the daily routines and feelings of parents who worked at home. I address three specific research questions: 1) How do remote work arrangements in the post-COVID-19 era have both positive and negative impacts for organizations and for employees within the nonprofit sector? 2) In what ways do the remote work arrangements of parents shape their households' divisions of childcare and related labor in the post-pandemic context? 3) How, if at all, do parents use their work flexibility to adhere to or challenge dominant US parenting norms? I use the nonprofit sector as a case study to illustrate the ways in which organization-level variation in remote work shaped parents' experiences. I also argue that parents learned to leverage their flexibility over time to fulfill both their job and family responsibilities. Lastly, I find that although most in this sample felt that working at home was a necessity for being a good parent, their work arrangements did not resolve the difficulties that they faced. Flexibility relieved some immediate pressure that parents faced, but without changing the underlying circumstances that made it so challenging to be a working parent in the first place. Overall, this study reveals that parent work arrangements cannot address the policy failures of the US federal government to support parents.

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CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH METHODS

Introduction

COVID-19 catalyzed a rapid increase in remote work, and the prevalence of these work arrangements remains higher than before the pandemic (Pabilonia and Redmond 2024; US BLS 2025). Remote work is a form of flexible work, or employment that provides people with some control over when and where they do their jobs. In the post-pandemic era, not only are rates of flexible work higher than before COVID-19, but public awareness and positive perceptions of these arrangements have also risen (Chung 2022). Employees, particularly those in white-collar jobs, increasingly expect some degree of flexibility (Chung 2022; Waldrep, Fritz, and Glass 2024). In this research, I focus specifically on parents who have either entirely remote or hybrid work arrangements, rather than other forms of work flexibility¹.

During the pandemic, about half of US parents found themselves abruptly working at home while simultaneously providing childcare due to mandated school and childcare facility closures (Petts and Carlson 2024). Parents navigated intense caregiving burdens while working at home, and mothers were often disproportionately responsible for additional childcare (Dunatchik et al. 2021; Lyttelton, Zang, and Musick 2022; Mullins, Scutelnicu, and Charbonneau 2022). There are many unanswered questions about how the pandemic experiences of parents translate to the post-pandemic era. Namely, how do parents working at home think and feel about remote work in relation to their employment, household, and childcare responsibilities beyond the context of the COVID-19 pandemic? The need for qualitative research that centers the perspectives of parents with these work arrangements in the post-pandemic era guides this project.

¹ *Teleworking*, *remote work*, and *working at home* are all commonly used terms that are defined as work arrangements where the employee works outside the office, often at home (Savić 2020). *Remote work* has the additional implication that the employee could live far away from their employer's office (Savić 2020). Given these minor distinctions, I primarily use the terms remote work and working at home. *Hybrid work* refers to those who work partially in-person, often at their organization's office, and partially remotely.

Beyond extending pandemic-era research, this research situates parental work arrangements within the prevailing crisis working parents in the US are facing. Namely, the dismal lack of support provided to working parents by the US federal government. Aside from the glaring absence of parental leave, there is no political will to address the on-going childcare crisis in the US (Sabu 2025). As a result of this hostile context, family resources such as income, kin support, or flexible work can have amplified importance for employed US parents. The proliferation of remote work in the post COVID-19 era presents an opportunity to further explore the effects of work flexibility among US parents.

This is a study of how and why some parents in the US nonprofit sector worked remotely in the post-pandemic era. The contributions of this project are threefold. First, I use the nonprofit sector as a case study to illustrate the organization-level variation in remote work and how this shaped parents' experiences. Second, I explain how parents learned to manage their flexibility over time and used it to fulfill both their job and family obligations. Third, I explore why many felt that flexibility was vital for being a good working parent. Despite most feeling that working at home was a necessity; their work arrangements did not resolve the difficulties that working parents faced. Rather, flexibility provided a band-aid for a broken limb, relieving some immediate pressure but without changing the underlying circumstances that made it so challenging to be a working parent in the first place. This dissertation overall reveals that parent work arrangements cannot address what is ultimately a failure of the US federal government to support these and all other parents with comprehensive policies.

The nonprofit sector is a useful and underexplored case for studying remote work because these organizations often have family-friendly missions, cultures, and policies that shape the implementation of flexible work. Nonprofits are also often resource constrained. This can motivate organizational leaders to allow remote work because it can increase employee retention and recruitment without incurring major costs. All participants in this research worked in the nonprofit sector, and their insights shed light on a sector that is poised to allow for flexible work. By focusing on this sector, I also address recent calls for employee-centered scholarship on nonprofits and the long-term impacts of COVID-19 (Holgersson &

Hvenmark 2023; Kuenzi et al. 2021). My analysis answers these calls by capturing results related to parents employed in this sector as well as a detailed analysis of the benefits and challenges of remote work for nonprofit organizations and employees.

In this chapter, I will introduce my research questions, the relevant academic literature, and describe the methods and the data used for this project. Based on interviews conducted with forty-eight mothers, twenty-two fathers, and one nonbinary parent, I explored the daily routines of parents who worked at home and how they felt about their work arrangements as both parents and employees.

In this research, I address three central research questions:

- 1) How do remote work arrangements in the post-COVID-19 era have both positive and negative impacts for organizations and for employees within the nonprofit sector?
- 2) In what ways do the remote work arrangements of parents shape their households' divisions of childcare and related labor in the post-pandemic context?
- 3) How, if at all, do parents use their work flexibility to adhere to or challenge dominant US parenting norms?

To analyze these questions, I draw on multiple areas of scholarship, including literature about prominent intensive parenting norms in the US and how exhausting and stressful these expectations can be for parents (Diniz, Brandão, and Veríssimo 2023; Minnotte 2023; Venard et al. 2024). These parenting norms emphasize the importance of deliberately spending immense time and energy on child-rearing (Minnotte 2023). Closely related to parenting norms is how two-parent households divide responsibilities. My sample is predominantly made up of two-parent households (94%), though this was not a specific eligibility requirement for interviewees. The gendered division of household and childcare labor tends to place inequitable burdens on mothers, sometimes despite parents' egalitarian gender attitudes (Damingier 2020; Dominguez-Folgueras 2022; Ross-Plourde and Lachance-Grzela 2025). Parents often draw on gendered notions of what tasks men and women are naturally apt at to explain unequal division of labor or refer to structural constraints, such as work hours, that result in them having different availability to do household chores and childcare (Damingier 2020; Martínez Echagüe 2025).

In addition to parenting demands, ideal worker norms expect workers to give their jobs undivided attention and devotion (Kossek, Perrigino, and Rock 2021). This can induce a “flexibility paradox,” where ideal worker pressures push those with more work flexibility to actually spend excessive time and effort on their jobs rather than achieving increased work-life balance as is often anecdotally expected (Chung 2022; Parry 2025; Kossek, Perrigino, and Lautsch 2023). Yet remote work has also been found to have potential benefits for employees, and many parents express an interest in obtaining or maintaining these work arrangements (Allen et al. 2013; Charalampous et al. 2019; Waldrep et al. 2024). The organization-level impacts of these work arrangements in the nonprofit sector, such as effects on recruitment and retention, are largely unclear but organizational effects of remote work are presumed to be intertwined with employee experiences (Bal and Izak 2021; Hvenmark 2023; Kuenzi et al. 2021). These areas of literature point to the underexplored nuances of how and why parents at nonprofits work remotely in the post-pandemic era.

Thus, this research provides critical insights into areas of life that are central for many people: work and family. Sometimes labeled as “greedy” institutions (Cox 2016; de Laat 2025), work and family each demand immense time and energy, and the ensuing work-family conflicts have been the subject of innumerable studies. To this vast literature, I add specific findings related to the benefits and challenges of these work arrangements for parents in the post-pandemic era. These include results about the long-term implications of these work arrangements, as opposed to temporary COVID-era work arrangements, for the gendered division of household labor and the interplay of this mode of work with intensive parenting norms. Additionally, I generate new contributions about the impacts of implementing remote work arrangements for nonprofits and how the organizations are affected by employee experiences. Lastly, I contribute nuance to the notion of the flexibility paradox, or the idea that workers with flexibility tend to double down on ideal worker norms. I find that parents in the post-pandemic era actively learn to reduce and manage instances of overwork and other challenges over time, illustrating a process of developing self-management and sustainable remote work habits.

The broad contribution of this research is to provide a greater understanding of remote working parents' experiences with this new normal of work and family arrangements. In a country where working parents can rely on extremely limited national policies or programs, it is important to understand how flexible work arrangements, such as working at home, impact them. My research speaks to issues of US family and employment policy (or lack thereof) by describing how parents utilize remote work in lieu of sick leave, parental leave, and to offset the difficulties of childcare in the US. The results of this project indicate that, given the lack of federal family and employment policy, remote work arrangements operate as an inequitable finger in the dam of the crushing demands and expectations placed upon the shoulders of US working parents. In the following sections, I delve into the relevant literature further and explain my research methods. At the end of this chapter, I provide a brief overview of the central findings for each of the remaining chapters.

Background

To situate my research within existing scholarship, I begin by describing the broad, societal ideas of parenting in the US. These normative expectations shaped how parents in this research felt about themselves and informed how they divided household and childcare labor. Next, I turn to literature centered on the challenges facing employed parents and how flexible work arrangements, such as remote work, can be impactful for working parents. I cover prior literature from before, during, and after COVID-19, as the pandemic had a substantial influence on the prevalence and experiences of remote work among parents. Lastly, I describe the nature of US nonprofits and why these organizations are well-suited for research about parents working at home in the post-COVID-19 era.

US Parenting Norms

Normative ideas about what makes someone a good parent in the US are largely informed by gendered notions of what makes someone a good mother or a good father. In the subsections below, I introduce the specific literature related to these gendered parenting norms. First, I begin with the general concept of intensive parenting because this idea underscores many of the gendered ideas related to motherhood and fatherhood in the US. Intensive parenting is a gender-neutral iteration of the concept of

intensive mothering (Hays 1996; Faircloth 2023a). Similar in content to concerted cultivation (Lareau 2011; Minnotte 2023), intensive parenting has evolved beyond mother-centric norms to become a more generalized set of expectations that parents will devote immense time, energy, and economic resources to child-rearing (Faircloth 2023a; Scheibling and Milkie 2023).

Intensive parenting norms call for parents to intentionally spend time with children and to actively foster children's learning, hobbies, and extracurricular activities. The goal of this approach is to help children develop into successful adults who maintain or surpass their family of origin's class status (Faircloth 2023a). The logic of these norms assumes that providing children with education, cultivation, and opportunities will result in a successful career and life trajectory. The origins of this approach are rooted in the white, middle-class experience where it is assumed that children live in a two-parent household, where ample economic resources are available. Intensive parenting has become idealized across demographic groups (Forbes, Donovan, and Lamar 2020; Randles 2021), in part because white, middle-class norms have historically become the yardstick against which other parents are measured (Dow 2019; Minnotte 2023). Additionally, the institutions that parents regularly interact with (i.e., healthcare, education, government) widely accept and even encourage these norms, resulting in pressure on parents to abide by shared ideas of good parenting (Dow 2019; Lareau 2011; Minnotte 2023).

But intensive parenting norms are not implemented universally among US parents. For instance, some mothers, across demographic groups, selectively adopt aspects of intensive parenting such as spending a lot of time interacting with children (Lankes 2022). Among non-white and lower income parents, intensive norms can be less feasible because of a lack of economic resources (Randles 2021) and may be misaligned with parent preferences (Dow 2019; Minnotte 2023). For example, some Black middle-class mothers modified intensive parenting by seeking out extracurricular activities that were developmentally beneficial *and* that facilitated their children's connections to other Black children (Dow 2019). Similarly, some low-income racial/ethnic minority parents incorporate intensive norms into their parenting while also adapting to their lived experiences. Such as when some formerly incarcerated Black

mothers (Banks 2022) and low-income Black fathers (Randles 2020) framed their parenting abilities positively based on “being present” and spending time developing supportive relationships with their children. In a separate study, Randles (2021) identified an intensive parenting parallel among low-income Latina and Black mothers’ who felt like good mothers based on their extensive physical, emotional, and mental labor to provide basic needs such as diapers for their children. While the exact nature of parenting varies somewhat across demographic groups, core aspects of intensive parenting are widely accepted (Forbes et al. 2020) and are adapted to varying degrees among many US parents.

As the name suggests, this child-rearing approach is centered on being both time and resource intensive. While the term intensive may seem analogous to overbearing or harmful, it refers to the immense amount of effort that parents expend on child-rearing, not whether this strategy is inherently negative or positive for children. These norms can be so rigorous that parents today who enact intensive parenting report more stress than parents in prior decades (Nomaguchi and Milkie 2020). Notably, much of the literature related to intensive parenting approaches has focused specifically on mothers. Indeed, one foundational idea of intensive mothering was that certain aspects of child-rearing could only be accomplished by mothers because of their natural childcare skills compared to fathers or other caregivers (Hays 1996). I find that parents in this sample used their work flexibility to adhere to intensive parenting norms, particularly norms around intentionally spending lots of time with children and being available to meet the needs of their children. Most fathers and some mothers felt that working at home improved their parenting and this resulted in them feeling more positively about being working parents.

The Pressures of Motherhood

Mothers today and historically have been presumed to be their children’s primary parents; a task made more demanding as expectations of parenting have intensified over time (Hays 1996; Milkie, Pepin, and Denny 2016). Mothering norms, like intensive parenting, posit that the more time and energy that women devote to child-rearing, the better off their children will be in the future, a view that is especially pervasive among educated middle- and upper-class mothers (Dillaway and Paré 2008; Minnotte 2023).

This notion is core to ideas of being a good mother and incites perceived opposition between stay-at-home mothers and working mothers over who adheres best to these practices (Dillaway and Paré 2008; Douglas and Michaels 2005; Milkie et al. 2016; Odenweller et al. 2020). As a result, stay-at-home mothers are often viewed as providing a more child-centric and subsequently beneficial upbringing to their children compared to employed counterparts because working presumably takes mothers away from children (Douglas and Michaels 2005; Wolf 2010). This framing emphasizes the individual choices of mothers to either stay at home or be employed over acknowledging the immense pressures exerted on mothers to live up to these norms. This also ignores the broader problems with work and family conditions in the US, such as the lack of affordable high-quality childcare, that exacerbate the perceived importance of mothering practices (Milkie et al. 2016; Wolf 2010).

Mothers face enormous social pressures to raise their children correctly because the choices they make are seen as leading directly to child outcomes (Schmidt et al. 2023). Women often attempt to perfectly achieve mothering by always seeking to make the right decisions, consulting experts religiously, and devoting immense energy and time to their children (Minnotte 2023). Indeed, widely shared norms expect that mothers will have a comprehensive understanding of a child's needs, that they will try to optimize the child's physical and cognitive development, and that women will align employment with mothering responsibilities (Schmidt et al. 2023). This laundry list of expectations illustrates the physical, emotional, and mental energy required to adhere to mothering norms. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these vast expectations also help to explain why so many women, across racial/ethnic groups and income levels, experience distress, guilt, and feel negatively about their mothering (Montano et al. 2023; Sutherland 2010). The pressures they face, and the emotional strain associated with it, is reported across racial/ethnic groups and income levels and throughout the lifespans of mothers (Smith 2022; Gunderson and Barrett 2017).

Rising global economic inequality has both increased the pressure for US mothers to ensure their child's upward mobility through intensive child-rearing and the importance of maternal labor force

participation for family financial stability (Minnotte 2023). Working mothers commonly feel stressed and overwhelmed as a result of trying to appease the needs of their children, their workplaces, and themselves (Lamprianidou et al. 2025; Smith 2022; Venard et al. 2024). They tend to see the stressors of being a working mother as their individual responsibility to solve using any strategies they can (Collins 2019). In the US, they seldom anticipate substantial assistance from male co-parents or government programs or policies (Collins 2019). Among middle-class mothers in the US, they often use financial resources to relieve strain, for example, by outsourcing household chores (Collins 2019). While mothers are assumed to be the primary caregivers of children in many instances, the trajectory of fatherhood norms has prompted intensive parenting to become somewhat more of a shared endeavor between mothers and fathers than in prior decades (Faircloth 2023a; Scheibling and Milkie 2023).

New Fatherhood

Modern expectations of fathers remain connected to 19th century ideas that men were distant breadwinners who left the home during the day to earn a wage while mothers cared for children at home (Faircloth 2023b; Davies and Frink 2014; Pleck 1987). By the post-World War II era, good fathers were not only financial providers but also acted as gender role models of masculinity for their children (Pleck 1987). Today, expectations of fathers have shifted further to incorporate more tangible caregiving, emphasizing the importance of being involved with children and providing emotional care (Diniz et al. 2023; Faircloth 2023b; Pleck 2010). Ideas of fatherhood have evolved alongside the emerging recognition that employed mothers often retain responsibility for most childcare and household responsibilities (Faircloth 2023b; Hochschild and Machung 2012). This has further pushed working fathers to take on more aspects of the second shift of parenting responsibilities and to have a more equitable division between employed parents (Faircloth 2023b; Hochschild and Machung 2012; Diniz et al. 2023; Pleck 2010).

Today, dominant fatherhood norms emphasize being a financial provider while also being present and available to children through involvement in their daily routines and care (Faircloth 2023b; Offer and

Kaplan 2021). Pleck (2010) argues that contemporary father ideals contain three main components. These include both actions and emotions associated with fathering, such as engaging with children in activities and being warm and responsive to children's needs (Pleck 2010). Modern fathers are also expected to have some awareness or knowledge of children's needs and routines (Pleck 2010). Notably, this third component refers to fathers becoming more adept in the daily care of their children, a domain that has historically been reserved for mothers (Davis et al. 2022; Minnotte 2023; Schmidt et al. 2023). While fathers have overall increased the time that they spend with children compared to prior decades (Milkie et al. 2025), responsibility for irregular child needs such as medical appointments (Heffernan et al. 2025) and other areas of child expertise still largely reside with mothers (Schmidt et al. 2023).

Notions of new fatherhood have been adopted among men of various racial/ethnic and income levels in the US to varying degrees. Middle-class fathers embrace these ideas more readily than their lower-income counterparts, who sometimes continue to emphasize breadwinning over involvement with children (Lareau 2011; Gillies 2009). Fathers who believe in the importance of breadwinning tend to spend less time with children than those who buy into the importance of new fatherhood tenets (Offer and Kaplan 2021). As noted previously, some non-white, low-income fathers invoke particular aspects of new fatherhood norms in order to conceive of themselves as good fathers because they prioritize spending time with their children even when they struggle to provide financially (Randles 2020). Some of these same men also use these ideas to contrast themselves with their own fathers, who may have been largely absent from their childhoods or who typified a distant breadwinner approach (Randles 2020). Importantly, the crux of new fatherhood norms emphasizes both increased involvement in childcare *and* fathers' abilities to financially provide for their families, generating pressures for men to accomplish both.

Division of Household and Childcare Labor

As discussed above, since the 19th century widespread parenting norms have assumed that women are naturally well-suited to care for a household and children and that men should work outside the home and be financial providers (Davies and Frink 2014). Despite these prevailing norms, mothers

have a long history of working outside the home, particularly low-income and non-white women (Nakano Glenn 2010; Thornton Dill 1998). As more white women joined the workforce in the post-World War II era and as female education opportunities have increased overall, dual-income households have become increasingly common, and many modern families now rely on two incomes (Davies and Frink 2014; Leonce 2020). In 2023, two-parent households (either married or cohabiting) made up almost 83% of all US families (US Census Bureau 2023), and dual-income households accounted for over half of two-parent households in 2024 (66.5% among married parents, 61.5% among cohabitating parents) (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2025). As dual-income households have become more widespread, so has the acknowledgement of the second shift or the idea that working mothers have similar employment obligations as their male co-parents but often retain responsibility for household and childcare labor (Hochschild and Machung 2012; Ross-Plourde and Lachance-Grzela 2025). As described above, as notions of fatherhood have shifted to emphasizing involvement with child-rearing, employed fathers have been increasingly expected to take on aspects of the second shift (Diniz et al. 2023; Faircloth 2023b; Pleck 2010).

US men, on average, spend more time on household chores and childcare than they have historically, but women often remain primarily responsible for these and for the cognitive load (Barigozzi et al. 2025; Ross-Plourde and Lachance-Grzela 2025; Weeks, Kowalewska, and Ruppanner 2025). The cognitive load, also known as the mental load, is the planning, preparation, and decision-making that is required to maintain a house and raise children (Daminger 2019). While the sharing of physical, tangible household and childcare tasks has increased between mothers and fathers over time, cognitive labor has largely remained the purview of mothers (Weeks et al. 2025). There is some evidence of growing preference for equally sharing parenting responsibilities, but the extent of the support for egalitarianism in the US remains unclear (Dernberger et al. 2020; Offer and Kaplan 2021; Pedulla and Thébaud 2015).

Importantly, even when parents do hold egalitarian preferences for the division of household and childcare labor, they do not often actually enact these views (Daminger 2020; Martínez Echagüe 2025).

Explanations of the differences between parent preferences and actual approaches to sharing these responsibilities tend to fall into two broad categories: gendered ideas and structural explanations. Some parents who state they would prefer an equal division explain that their continued inequality in tasks is a result of women being naturally apt at cooking, cleaning, or caring for children (Calarco et al. 2021; Daminger 2020). Men are often viewed as lacking these capabilities and requiring instruction from women on how to do these tasks, so enacting equality would take time and effort on the part of both parents (Faircloth 2023b; Martínez Echagüe 2025). These gendered assumptions can make achieving equality feel effort-intensive, even to parents who state they would prefer an equal divide (Martínez Echagüe 2025). Instead, parents often take the path of least resistance by continuing to unequally divide tasks and refer to gendered skills of men and women when justifying why women do the bulk of this labor (Damingier 2020; Martínez Echagüe 2025).

There are also structural constraints that may prevent parents from dividing responsibilities as they would prefer to. Time availability perspective posits that differing job demands between parents, such as work hours and intensity of job responsibilities, can create different opportunities for doing childcare and household labor (Damingier 2020; Carlson 2021; Koster et al. 2022). Other aspects of employment can also constrain parents' abilities to divide tasks, such as the degree of work flexibility to which each parent has access (Chung and Van der Horst 2018; Gerstel and Clawson 2014). Notably, these structural constraints provide parents with a non-gendered way of explaining an unequal divide of tasks that doesn't contradict their stated preferences for equality (Damingier 2020). Taken together, these explanations suggest that unequal divisions of tasks among parents with preferences for egalitarianism may be a result of both structural constraints that limit parent availability and gendered ideas about what skills women and men naturally possess. Additionally, parents can feel immense pressure to live up to exactly egalitarian divisions of tasks and the massive demands of intensive parenting norms, creating a sense that equality is extremely difficult to achieve (Faircloth 2021; Martínez Echagüe 2025).

Working Parents

Work and family both command immense time and energy from parents, and these competing demands can often create conflict (Cox 2016; de Laat 2025). As previously described, good parents are expected to devote immense time and energy to raising children (Faircloth 2023a; Scheibling and Milkie 2023). These expectations directly conflict with ideal worker norms that assert that good workers should be singularly dedicated to their employers and, accordingly, should devote all their time and energy to their jobs (Acker 1990; Davies and Frink 2014; Kossek et al. 2021). When employees deviate from these norms, they can be perceived as not fully committed or loyal and subsequently as being undeserving or underperforming workers (Howcroft et al. 2025; Minnotte and Minnotte 2021; Neely 2020). Individuals can also feel an inherent pressure to work hard and prove their devotion to a job because satisfaction and a sense of self can become linked with adhering to ideal worker norms (Chung 2022; Drumm et al. 2025; Zanhour and Sumpter 2024).

These norms, and the general organization of full-time employment, assume that employees do not have *any* competing responsibilities (Acker 1990; Davies and Frink 2014). This is in part because of prevailing elements of the gendered parenting norms, that men should work outside the home and that women should run the household and tend to children, also known as separate spheres (Davies and Frink 2014). As mentioned previously, this arrangement has historically only been feasible for white, middle- and upper-class families. Today, dual-income households are increasingly common in the US (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2025; Leonce 2020; Minnotte and Minnotte 2021). Yet the epitome of an ideal worker today remains closely tied to the notion that they will have no major family responsibilities that would take time and attention away from work. Given the norms of intensive parenting and being an ideal worker, working parents are in a difficult Catch-22 wherein adhering to norms of working and parenting both require immense efforts and undivided time and attention.

Parents can face numerous employment challenges because they have substantial family responsibilities. Women can face hiring penalties when attempting to rejoin the labor force after having

children and may experience difficulties receiving promotions when they are employed (Correll et al. 2007; Dill and Frech 2019). Both mothers and fathers who have taken time out of the labor force to raise children are sometimes perceived as being less committed, reliable, or deserving of a job than those who do not have family-related gaps in their employment histories (Weisshaar, 2018). Once hired, ideal worker norms can push parents to try to make their commitments to work explicit, sometimes by overworking or spending excessive amounts of time on their jobs (Chung 2022; de Laat 2025). The pressure of proving themselves in the workplace can be amplified by continuous connectivity to work through personal devices because this can create norms of 24/7 responsiveness to work messages (Gerstel and Clawson 2018; Oillier-Malaterre, Jacobs, and Rothbard 2019). As a result of trying to be both good parents and good workers, employed parents, and particularly mothers, often experience strain, guilt, and stress (Nomaguchi and Milkie 2020; Pertiwi 2025). Desires and efforts to successfully adhere to both sets of norms can lead to exhaustion among parents (de Laat 2025).

Flexible Work Arrangements & Parenting

Flexible work arrangements, often related to adjusting the timing and location of work, are increasingly available in the US since the COVID-19 pandemic and particularly in occupations related to management, administration, or other professional types of jobs (Aksoy et al. 2025; Shifrin and Michel 2022). However, there have also been demands among some workplaces for employees to return to the office at least part-time if not full-time, in some cases leading to employee turnover (Dijcke, Gunsilius, and Wright 2024). Having access to work flexibility can be an opportunity for parents to intensify their work commitments, family responsibilities, or potentially both. Flexibility stigma, or being punished or perceived as a lesser employee for desiring work flexibility, can keep parents, particularly men, from feeling comfortable using flexible work policies (Gerstel and Clawson 2018). When parents do have work flexibility, scholarly evidence regarding how they use it is mixed. In some US and international examples, mothers with flexibility have increased their time and efforts on family responsibilities while fathers have utilized it for increased work efforts (Chung and Booker 2023; Gerstel and Clawson 2014). Other research from the US and abroad indicates that men sometimes use flexibility to increase their childcare

responsibilities and women to allocate more time to work (de Laat 2025; Ewald and Hogg 2022; Ryan, Churchill, and Ruppanner 2025).

In some cases, mothers and fathers with flexibility have been found to work excessive hours and even tend to overwork or overproduce. This may be in part to combat any flexibility stigma that they encounter or anticipate (Chung 2022; de Laat 2025; Ewald and Hogg 2022). The seemingly contradictory use of individual work flexibility to do even more work has been labeled by scholars as the flexibility paradox (Chung 2022), or the tendency to use flexibility to overwork. This apparent paradoxical use of flexibility is well-documented in studies of work flexibility, including among parents who work at home (Chung and Van der Horst 2018; de Laat 2025; Parry 2025). Some have posited that this is a gendered paradox wherein remote working fathers lean further into work obligations and mothers towards parenting responsibilities or vice versa (Chung 2022; Ryan, Churchill, and Ruppanner 2025). Similarly, de Laat (2025) argues that both mothers and fathers use work flexibility to strive towards dual devotions or the simultaneous pursuit of ideal worker and intensive parenting norms, but ultimately, this leads to overwork and exhaustion. Whether this paradox operates in a gendered way remains somewhat unclear because much of the scholarship above indicates that parents of any gender identity may use work flexibility to allocate increased effort and time to either or both family and work responsibilities.

Remote Work Among Parents: Pre COVID-19

The literature on remote work is quickly expanding but has often consisted of demographic analyses and estimates of the prevalence of these work arrangements (Lyttelton et al. 2022; Shockley et al. 2021). Work and family are assumed to be physically, temporally, and mentally distinct areas of life, and so scholars have often focused on how people, including parents, navigate these boundaries when working at home (Nippert-Eng 2008; Ollier-Malaterre, Jacobs, and Rothbard 2019; Otonkorpi-Lehtoranta et al. 2022; Shirmohammadi et al. 2023). Remote workers often tend to lean towards either preferring to integrate or segment their boundaries between work and family (Cobb et al. 2025; Reinke, Niederkrome, and Ohly 2023) and usually have strategies that they employ to carry out these preferences (Borghouts et

al. 2022; Reinke et al. 2023). While existing literature sheds light on the typical experiences of remote workers, it remains underexplored how working parents arrive at their boundary preferences and how they develop the strategies that they use when working at home. I find that parents working at home learn over time how to manage their work flexibility. They established preferences for integration/segmentation after learning from their remote work experiences and they devised strategies and habits to suit them, their families, and their jobs.

Additionally, studies of remote work have most often focused on the experiences of either employees *or* organizations and have often siloed the positive and negative impacts of these work arrangements (Bal and Izak 2021). For example, Chung (2022) focuses on the employee experience and refers to the job demands- resources model (Demerouti et al. 2001) when describing work arrangements as a flexibility resource that can relieve job stress. Similarly, de Laat (2025) describes remote work as akin to money, childcare arrangements, or kinship assistance, in that parents can use flexibility to mitigate both work and family demands. Among research focused on the positive impacts of these work arrangements for individuals, some scholars have found that those working at home can experience reduced work-life conflict and enhanced well-being (Allen et al. 2013; Charalampous et al. 2019). Others have found that remote workers can struggle with overwork and boundary management (Beigi, Shirmohammadi, and Stewart 2018; Kossek et al. 2023). Although these examples identify the varied individual level impacts of working at home, many working parents continue to be interested in this mode of work, indicating that their motivations and the potential positive impacts are not fully understood by current scholarship (Moller, Ruppanner, and Yavorsky 2024; Pew Research Center 2023).

Research about the non-productivity related organizational benefits and challenges of implementing these work arrangements is the focus of this research and is generally lacking in existing literature (Bal and Izak 2021) with several important exceptions from the COVID-19 era (Kohont and Ignjatović 2022; Stavora et al 2023). Existing literature related to organization productivity and remote work is abundant and generally indicates that working at home can have some positive impacts on

workplace efficiency and performance, though this varies somewhat by organization (Hackney et al 2022; Mutiganda et al. 2022). Moving beyond productivity, employees are assumed to benefit from working at home, and so workplaces may subsequently gain benefits by reducing turnover and enhancing employee performance (Bal and Izak 2021; Carlson et al. 2010; Harrop, Jiang, and Overall 2025). Indeed, a pre-pandemic review of scholarship found positive, small relationship between remote work arrangements and organizational outcomes such as securing retention, strengthening employee commitment and improving performance (Harker Martin and MacDonnell 2012). However, existing findings are mixed on the extent to which employees benefit from these work arrangements and in what organizational contexts those benefits occur. It also remains unclear whether pre-pandemic findings on this topic will hold in the post-pandemic era. Additionally, the specific pathways through which implementing remote work arrangements results in organizational benefits or challenges remain largely unexplored.

Remote Work Among Parents: During and After COVID-19

Many parents working at home during COVID-19 had to work while also caring for children because of mandated school and childcare facility closures. About half of partnered US mothers and fathers transitioned to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic (Petts and Carlson 2024). These parents reported intense exhaustion and stress during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the strain of providing childcare while trying to maintain work productivity (Mullins et al. 2022). Overall, the pandemic highlighted how, under strenuous circumstances, many US families expected remote working mothers to do the additional domestic labor associated with children being home. Some fathers working at home initially increased their time spent on childcare compared to pre-pandemic levels (Carlson 2021; Petts et al. 2023; Shockley et al. 2021). However, as the pandemic dragged on, mothers overall did more household and childcare labor (Calarco et al. 2021; Carlson and Petts 2022; Dunatchik et al. 2021; Lyttelton et al. 2022). Mothers working at home during COVID-19 also dealt with more child-related work interruptions than fathers, a pattern that was particularly dominant in households where parents held traditional gender views that childcare is the purview of women (Lyttelton et al. 2022; Pabilonia and Vernon 2023; Parry 2025; Shockley et al. 2021).

Throughout pandemic-era research, the interplay of parent time availability and gender beliefs was used by scholars to explain how parents navigated this stressful time. Among some parents who held egalitarian preferences about the household division of labor, the first few months of the pandemic saw an increase in men's childcare responsibilities (Carlson et al. 2024; Shockley et al. 2021). Yet these findings did not hold among men with traditional attitudes about how to divide childcare (Carlson et al. 2024) or among men who returned to working in-person, where their availability was presumably diminished, and accordingly, their shares of these tasks went down (Carlson and Petts 2022). Additionally, there is some evidence that as the pandemic persisted over time, some parents' gender attitudes shifted to become more traditional and they viewed household and childcare as the responsibility of women (Carlson and Petts 2022; Mize, Kaufman, and Petts 2021). Possibly, the prolonged strain of the pandemic and the shifting availability of fathers as their work arrangements changed over time, resulted in a snap back to more traditional beliefs about how to divide household and childcare labor.

Post-pandemic, access to these work arrangements overall has remained higher than before COVID-19 (Pabilonia and Redmond 2024). Notably, most parents who worked at home during the pandemic continue to work remotely at least occasionally, indicating the staying power of these work arrangements (Petts and Carlson 2024). Indeed, some parents have stated that they prefer to keep working at home indefinitely, citing both increased job satisfaction and greater schedule control as driving motivators (Waldrep et al. 2024). Importantly, childcare facilities and schools are open in the post-pandemic era. Recent findings indicate that now that schools are open, working at home can reduce stress among parents (Fan and Moen 2024). However, parents continue to contend with the ongoing childcare crisis in the US, namely, the dire lack of affordable, high-quality childcare options (Belfield 2023; Hanson and Bobrowski 2024; Herbst 2023; Lee and Parolin 2021). While the chaos and strain that the pandemic created among working parents is evident from the research described above, in the post-pandemic era, there are open questions regarding parenting and flexible work arrangements. Namely, how are divisions of household and childcare labor affected by parents' work arrangements post-pandemic? And, in the

post-pandemic context, what are the positive and negative impacts of working at home for parents? How do these contribute to their interest in continuing to work remotely?

The US Nonprofit Sector

Although nonprofits make up a relatively small share of the overall US employment sector, 6.5% as of 2022 (Gallagher 2023), the sector has continued to grow over the last 15 years (Newhouse et al. 2023; Salamon & Newhouse 2019). As of 2022, the nonprofit sector had a predominantly white (68.6%) and female workforce (66.1%) (Gallagher 2023). Additionally, management and other professional occupations make up most jobs in this sector (70.1%), and many workers hold a bachelor's degree or higher (64.6%) (Gallagher 2023). Employees with these types of jobs and with high levels of education have higher access to remote work arrangements than those with less education or those who work in service-oriented positions (Borkowski and Kaynas 2025). These factors indicate the potential for depth and breadth in remote work experiences among nonprofit employees. My research also responds directly to calls for critical research on the significance of gender within nonprofits and on the long-term impacts of COVID-19 in this area of employment (Kuenzi et al. 2021; Holgersson & Hvenmark 2023). Kuenzi et al. (2021) specifically call for research that centers the perspective of nonprofit workers to illuminate how they think of their current and future work in nonprofits. Beyond these factors, nonprofits present a compelling case for the study of post-pandemic remote work among parents, both because of common organizational constraints and the mission-guided nature of this sector.

Private sector organizations try to survive in competitive markets while ideally making a profit, and government entities aim to provide public services but typically with guaranteed funding and continuity. Uniquely, nonprofits seek to achieve stated missions, usually providing or supplementing a public good or service, while also needing to ensure organizational longevity (Gee et al. 2023; Moore 2000). Nonprofits are highly dependent on receiving funding via government grants and private donations. This creates consistent financial uncertainty that can make it difficult to grow or maintain a workforce, and these organizations are not always able to offer competitive salaries or internal

advancement opportunities (Gee et al. 2023). When nonprofits have noncompetitive pay and limited internal advancement, this can make it particularly difficult to retain workers, leading to regular turnover that incites a loss of institutional knowledge and requires resource intensive rehiring processes (Parker 2018; Slatten et al. 2021). As a result of these constraints, many nonprofits may be highly motivated to introduce employee benefits such as remote work because these work arrangements have the potential to improve recruitment and retention without requiring the kind of financial investment needed to offer more competitive pay. Offering remote work could strategically improve workforce outlooks among nonprofit organizations that lack the ability to retain and recruit employees through financial pathways.

Most nonprofits are also centered on a mission or core values and purposes that drive leadership decision-making, policies, and workplace culture (Chapman et al. 2023). These organizations may be particularly apt to adopt practices and policies that are viewed by key stakeholders, namely employees and donors, as aligned with core missions and values (Akingbola 2013; Gee et al. 2023). It is possible that remote work could be viewed as a family-friendly policy given the plethora of parents interested in having these work arrangements (Moller, Ruppanner, and Yavorsky 2024; Pew Research Center 2023). Thus, remote work arrangements could provide the leaders at nonprofits with an opportunity to display their commitments to missions that are often oriented to health and education (Gallagher 2023), and may be seen as indirectly related to family because of the overlap with topics concerning parents and children. As a result, employees at nonprofits may experience policies and workplace culture that are centered around morality-based missions and values. This may provide crucial insights into how other sectors could approach the implementation of these work arrangements.

Methods & Analysis

Study Procedures

To locate participants, I conducted several waves of recruitment. Initially, I distributed recruitment information to my professional networks within the nonprofit sector. I included information about myself and the research and asked them to forward the information to anyone who may be eligible.

I included a template email to facilitate forwarding the information on my behalf. I started recruitment efforts in November-December 2023, a time when there are many school closures and disrupted schedules for working parents. Because of this, I paused recruitment until January 2024, when parents were more likely to be available for a voluntary interview. Once I recruited the first wave of participants through my professional networks, I began to rely on snowball sampling or word-of-mouth referrals to recruit additional parents. This was a very effective strategy, as many parents were willing to personally endorse my research and share my information. Some participants were also eager to share my recruitment information on various platforms (e.g., parent-specific Slack channels at their organization, LinkedIn).

Most of this snowball sampling resulted in the recruitment of parents who were not coworkers of other participants. However, I interviewed multiple employees at 11 of the 35 nonprofits where participants worked. When comparing the interviews of coworkers, they frequently shared very similar information about the policies and workplace cultures of their nonprofits. Thus, interviewing coworkers added value by confirming the general impressions that employees had and, in some cases, provided more minor details related to the nature of remote work at that organization. But overall, having access to multiple employees did not seem to skew the depth of information that I gathered about these 11 organizations compared to the others represented in this sample. Rather, the differences between interviewees were more often related to the overall composition of their organizations (i.e., whether it was a fully remote organization or one with some in-person employees) and the gendered experiences of mothers and fathers. For example, a father that I interviewed recruited his wife to participate in the research because she worked at the same nonprofit organization as him. These two interviews were conducted separately but offered a rare opportunity to compare the responses of spouses and of coworkers. Their responses were closely aligned overall, but each shared unique gendered insights about being a remote working parent, findings that are primarily discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

While snowball sampling was effective at recruiting parents, the number of fathers who signed up to participate was consistently fewer than that of mothers. This may be in part due to the gendered nature

of the non-profit sector. In 2022, 66.1% of nonprofit sector employees were women (compared to 56.6% in government and 44.7% in the private sector) (Gallagher 2023). Additionally, although I conducted fewer interviews with fathers, more fathers than mothers either did not show up for their interview or needed to reschedule because of schedule conflicts. This was a rare occurrence among mothers who signed up. I began targeted recruitment of fathers after I had conducted over 40 interviews with mothers. At that time, I felt that I was reaching a saturation point with participants who were mothers. To do targeted recruitment of fathers, I tailored the messaging in my recruitment information and emphasized to participants that I was especially interested in speaking with fathers. This approach eventually led to my obtaining 22 father interviews.

The interviews took place over Zoom, an application that participants were familiar with because they worked at home and used Zoom regularly. When signing up, parents could choose from a wide variety of dates and times of day via Calendly, an online calendar application that can be linked to Zoom. I utilized Calendly because it is well-known and has several helpful features, such as automatic reminder emails and automatic time zone adjustments. I offered 60-minute time slots throughout the weekdays and weekends to maximize signups. Most interviews were conducted during weekday hours. Parents often had tightly scheduled days, and so our interviews were often limited to the 60-minute time slot that they had selected (avg. 57 minutes) because they had work or family obligations immediately following our interview. I had to be judicious in how the interview time was utilized and flexible with the needs of parents. In all interviews, I strived to at least complete the core questions of the interview guide (Appendix A).

The interview guide contained about 20 questions, and 14 of these questions I considered ‘core’ or essential questions to ask every participant. Throughout the interviewing process, I adjusted the guide as needed to accommodate unanticipated topics or questions that I realized were relevant to ask about. By having core questions and then supplementary follow-up and probing questions, I was able to make strategic choices about what additional questions to ask based on time remaining and what participants

had shared thus far. For example, many parents had a lot to say about the way that working remotely had influenced their childcare arrangements. Yet for some parents, this topic wasn't as salient because their children were in full-time childcare regardless of their work arrangements. Similarly, many parents felt strongly about the remote work policies (or lack thereof) and workplace cultures at their nonprofits, while other parents did not find these impactful and did not have very many details to explain. I tailored my follow-up questions to the topics that parents told me were important about their experiences. This approach helped build rapport and made parents feel more comfortable and heard. I believe, and several participants told me, that feeling listened to and having a positive interview experience was part of what prompted many to help me recruit additional parents. This approach also lent itself to the purpose of my research, which is to understand how parents experienced this new normal of post-COVID-19 remote work arrangements in the nonprofit sector and how they felt about this experience. A flexible interview structure helped communicate to parents that the topics that were most salient to them were also important to me and a worthy focus for research.

I did not experience many technical issues conducting the interviews over Zoom because participants were well-versed in how to do video conferencing. In fact, participants were so comfortable using Zoom that I sometimes gleaned observational insights based on what participants were doing during our interviews. I interviewed parents while they were preparing meals, pumping breastmilk, helping children with homework, dropping their children off at school, or casually supervising their children who were in the background of our Zoom calls. Many parents described facing a multitude of home and child-related interruptions when working at home. While parents were explaining these interruptions to me, it was not uncommon for a child's voice to drift into our Zoom call from somewhere in the blurred-out background of participants' screens. Often, children were asking for a snack or needed help with something, prompting some parents to laugh exasperatedly as if to say, "See what I mean?" Somewhat regularly, I could also hear the various "pings" of Slack and Microsoft Teams messages on participants' computers while we were speaking. Rarely, participants paused our conversations to reply to work-related

messages. I described these instances in my interview notes because these observations provided me with additional context about how participants experienced a typical remote workday.

Sample Description

My recruitment efforts resulted in semi-structured interviews with 71 parents who worked remotely at nonprofit organizations across the US. While charitable, religious, and political organizations can all legally be considered nonprofits in the US (IRS 2025), this research is focused on organizations that are qualified for tax purposes as not-for-profit [also known as 501(c)(3)] and that are oriented towards providing some kind of public good or service. Participants were employed at 35 different nonprofits with various missions, none of which were primarily religious or political organizations. Snowball sampling was crucial for recruitment of participants, and for 11 out of the 35 nonprofits represented in this sample, this strategy led to my interviewing multiple employees of the same organization (ranging from 2 to 16 coworkers). I completed 73 interviews but retained only 71 for the analysis because I was unable to confirm in two cases if the parent was working for a nonprofit at the time of our interview, a requirement for participation². Table 1 describes the individual and household characteristics of participants.

Table 1. Sample Demographics

Individual Level Characteristics (n=71)			
Men	31%	Sexual identity	
Women	67.6%	Straight	85.9%
Nonbinary	1.4%	Queer/LGBTQ+	12.7%
Mean age	40 (r, 33-53)	Decline to share	1.4%
Race/Ethnicity		Education level	
White	61.9%	High School	1.4%
Asian	12.7%	Some college	1.4%
Black	8.5%	Bachelor's	26.8%
Latinx	7%	Graduate degree	70.4%
Multi-racial	8.5%	Work Arrangements	
Other	1.4%	Fully Remote	75%

² In one case, the participant was unsure of if they were employed with a nonprofit organization or with an organization that was closely partnered with a nonprofit. In the second case, the participant had previously worked at a nonprofit but was not forthcoming about the recency or current status of that employment.

Median income group	\$100,000-130,000	Hybrid	25%
Household Level Characteristics (n=71)			
One child	38%	Dual-income households	88.7%
Two children	50.7%	Single-income households (one stay-at-home parent)	5.6%
Three children	11.3%	Single-income households (no co-parent)	5.6%
Median income group	More than \$130,000		
Work Arrangements of Dual-Income Households (n=63)			
Both parents fully remote	31.7%	Both parents hybrid	12.7%
Co-parent in-person & Participant fully remote	22.2%	Co-parent hybrid & Participant fully remote	20.6%
Co-parent in-person & Participant hybrid	11.2%	Co-parent fully remote & Participant hybrid	1.6%

Note: Data obtained from participant responses to a series of demographic questions asked at the end of each interview. N=71 (48 mothers, 22 fathers, 1 nonbinary parent)

Among the 71 interviews, 22 were with fathers, 48 with mothers, and one interview was with a nonbinary parent. Parents ranged in age from 33 to 53, with most falling into what is considered the Millennial Generation (83.1%). The remaining parents are considered part of Generation X (16.9%). In the US nonprofit sector, about 65% of employees have at least a bachelor's degree, and about 33% have a master's degree or higher (Gallagher 2023). Most parents held at least a bachelor's degree (97%), and many had an advanced graduate degree (70.4%), thus this sample was more highly educated than the average in this sector of employment. The median annual income range for participants was \$100,000-\$130,000. Even assuming the low end of this range, this is almost double the approximate median income for nonprofit workers in 2022 (about \$53,000, Gallagher 2023). The majority of parents identified as straight (85.9%), and about 13% identified as part of the queer community. White parents were the largest racial/ethnic group (61.9%), followed by Asian parents (12.8%), Black parents (8.5%), Multiracial parents (8.5%), Latinx parents (7%), and those who identified as another racial/ethnic group (1.4%). This representation is somewhat similar to the nonprofit sector, where about 69% of employees are white, 6% are Asian, 12% are Black, and 10% are Latinx (Gallagher 2023).

Most participants had entirely remote jobs (75%) while the remaining 25% had hybrid jobs, meaning they spent some time working at home and some time working in an office. The US Census does not currently clearly distinguish between fully remote and hybrid work arrangements, but in 2023, about 13.8% of all US workers “usually” worked at home (Burrows, Burd, and Ismail 2025). This indicates the continued prevalence of these arrangements compared to before COVID-19, when about 6% of US workers usually worked at home (Burrows, Burd, and Ismail 2025). Compared to in-person counterparts, more US remote workers in 2023 were white, and fewer were below the poverty line (Burrows, Burd, and Ismail 2025). These national data coincide with the demographics of this sample, where most participants were white and brought in annual incomes higher than the sector median.

At the household level, most parents were part of dual-income households (88.7%), while some parents had no co-parent (5.6%) or a co-parent who was not currently working (5.6%). Given the relatively high individual incomes of participants, most had an annual household income of \$130,000 or more (92%). The overall US median household income in 2023 was about \$81,000, but among households where at least one earner held a bachelor’s degree, it was about \$127,000 (Guzman & Kollar, 2024). US Census data also indicates that remote workers have higher median earnings than overall workers in large US metropolitan areas (Burrows, Burd, and Ismail 2025). Participants for this research spanned 26 US states, with a concentration in the Western (41%) and Northeastern regions (28%), where there are more large metro areas. I recruited fewer participants from the Midwest (11%) and the Southern regions (20%). Overall, these sample demographics tentatively support the national data indicating that remote workers, particularly in proximity to large metro areas, may be financially advantaged compared to their in-person counterparts.

To be eligible for the research, parents had to have at least one child under the age of 18. Half of the parents had two children at the time of the interview. Over a third of parents had one child (38%), and some had three children (12%). Additionally, about 8% of the participants were pregnant or described planning to have additional children at the time of the interview. Because childcare was a major concern

among parents, I grouped their children's ages based approximately on the ages required for childcare and school. Among the children of interviewees, the largest group was roughly pre-school age, between 1 and 5 years old (47.2%). I group children under the age of one separately (6.5%) because parents had often recently been on parental leave and were managing an intense period of child-rearing. The second largest group was those that were elementary school age, about 6-10 years old (29.3%). Some parents had children who were 11 years old or older and who were in late elementary, middle, high school, or beyond K-12 (17%). I discuss child age in relation to childcare primarily in Chapter 4.

Data Analysis

To analyze the interview transcripts, I developed a "living codebook," or a set of files meant to facilitate and document the analytical process (Reyes, Bogumil, and Welch 2024). This living codebook is made up of multiple files, including a standard codebook with definitions of each code, analytic memos that summarize findings across codes, and a log documenting the steps taken during the analysis and writing. The codebook included both deductive codes based on the central research questions for the project and inductive codes that arose during the interviewing process or while reviewing my interview notes. Some codes also emerged later in the coding process and were added to the codebook and then applied to all transcripts.

To begin the coding process, I indexed the transcripts, following Deterding and Waters (2021). Indexing is the process of using broad codes that reflect interview questions or general themes to begin segmenting the data. I used the six broad sections of the codebook as index categories to subdivide the data into more easily coded segments. I coded passages from each transcript into different and sometimes multiple index categories. For example, a passage where a participant discussed both their organization's policies related to remote work hours and how these hours shaped their usual drop-off and pick-up routines for their children's school would be indexed under "Family" and "Remote Work in NPOs."

After the indexing was completed, I used the more detailed parent and child codes in each section of the codebook to do a more fine-grained analysis of the indexed passages (Kalpokas and Redivojevic

2022). As I completed the first round of coding for each section of the codebook, I did what Lim (2025) describes as axial coding, or organizing the codes to begin identifying categories and dimensions across codes that could make up broader themes or findings. This led to a series of iterative coding cycles where I identified connections between codes, sometimes combined coding results, created additional codes, or deleted codes that were repetitive or irrelevant. After applying these changes to the codes throughout all transcripts, I created summary files where the results of coding were documented. In these files, I described in bullet points or brief paragraphs what the main findings were for each code. Particularly expressive quotes were identified as both examples and counterexamples of the findings for that code. These summaries helped me begin to form coherent themes across codes. In some cases, I compared the results of a code by different groups of participants (i.e., fathers compared to mothers, participants with spouses who had a fully remote job compared to those with spouses who worked in-person, etc.). Comparing results to define both the distinctions and similarities between participants.

Lastly, following Lim (2025), I clarified and refined emerging themes by writing analytic memos that summarized the interrelated codes and that formed the basic arguments of my research findings. The analytic memos formed the basis for writing up the findings of this research project. In some cases, the original sections of the codebook did not align exactly with how the themes evolved (e.g., some codes originally within the “Gender & Remote Work” section of the codebook ended up supporting themes related to codes in the “Remote Work in NPOs” section). Similarly, when organizing the findings and arguments of each chapter, I sometimes split up content in analytic memos among different chapters based on where the memo information was most relevant to the finalized arguments of the chapter. These changes represent the evolution of my interpretation of the interview data over time and how these data contribute to the literature that I described in the prior section.

Conclusions & Summary

This research is centered on how and why, in the post-pandemic era, parents work remotely in the nonprofit sector. I describe the variation in how nonprofit organizations structure remote work (Chapter 2)

and how employees learn over time to manage the challenges that they face when working at home (Chapter 3). I also analyze why almost all mothers and fathers in this sample felt so strongly that this mode of work was beneficial for their families (Chapter 4) and for them as parents (Chapter 5). Below, I elaborate briefly on my central findings.

Chapter 2 illustrates how nonprofits sought to leverage remote work towards organizational growth and employee satisfaction, but how, in practice, nonprofit leaders frequently provoked employee concerns related to transparent policies and tenable norms. Following Bal and Izak (2021), I aim to elucidate the positive and negative impacts that these work arrangements can have for *both* organizations and employed parents. Nonprofits often benefited to some degree from introducing remote work arrangements, but the policies and norms that leadership chose to develop led to wide variation in workers' experiences. Offering remote work enhanced employed parents' perceptions that leaders were authentically committed to family-related organizational missions. This mode of work also enabled more competitive employee recruitment and retention while also reducing the need for costly office space. However, some employees, particularly those at nonprofits with both remote and in-person workers, were critical of what they felt was inept and incomplete policy development. In contrast, workers at primarily remote organizations often praised the systematic procedures their leaders had instituted. Workplace culture and normative practices, such as those related to communication systems, work hours and responsiveness, and management strategies, varied between nonprofits and impacted employee satisfaction depending on the nature of the practices.

Chapter 3 contributes post-pandemic nuance to both the flexibility paradox (Chung 2022), which posits that work flexibility enables overworking, and to the idea that remote working parents self-exploit because of competing and overly demanding devotions to work and family (de Laat 2025). I find that remote working parents were conscious of their blurred work-life boundaries and tendencies to overwork. The combination of COVID-19 era experiences and competing work and family demands did lead to self-exploitation in some instances, such as the common practice of continuing to work while their children

were home sick. However, parents described these challenges as trade-offs or compromises that were well worth navigating because of the family-related benefits they gained (described in chapters 4 and 5). Furthermore, parents did not accept these trade-offs as unavoidable consequences of work flexibility. They actively learned over time how to manage and minimize overwork and self-exploitation by developing strategies and structures to support themselves. While parents did not eliminate these challenges, their descriptions illuminated the learning process that remote workers self-initiated over time to make this mode of work feel more sustainable. Parents felt that the challenges of working remotely were largely manageable, and they considered the family-related benefits that they gained to be significant. As a result, they almost universally preferred to remain remote in the future.

Chapter 4 describes how the flexibility of working remotely allowed most parents to integrate household and family tasks into their workdays, albeit with some gender differences. For most parents, working at home eased the conflict between working full-time and navigating expensive childcare and extensive household responsibilities. I find that although fathers often took on tangible childcare and household chores while working at home, mothers retained responsibility for the cognitive load of managing a household and children. I also explore how the specific work arrangements of parents contributed to the overall division of household labor, given that most parents desired an equal sharing of tasks. When some parents explained their continued unequal divisions, where mothers often did more than fathers, they often referenced the differences in work flexibility between them and their co-parents. These unequal shares of tasks were sometimes framed as equitable, if unsatisfactory, based on co-parent availability. However, when both parents worked remotely, participants often, but not always, felt satisfied that they had an equitable or even equal division of tasks. While remote work offered relief to parents in respect to managing family obligations, whether it resulted in more equal sharing of tasks largely depended on the work flexibility of each co-parent in a household.

In Chapter 5, I argue that remote work helped many parents adhere to intensive parenting approaches. Most mothers and fathers felt that their work flexibility improved their abilities to maximize

time and effort spent on child-rearing, key tenets of intensive parenting. Many felt more satisfied with their parenting because of their increased flexibility. As a result, some felt reliant on their remote work arrangements in ways that were akin to the golden handcuffs of high-paid jobs. Fathers specifically used their flexibility to lean into new fatherhood ideals that stressed the importance of daily involvement with children. Some even emphasized feeling that they were able to “have it all” as a remote working father, an idea rarely mentioned among men. Mothers overall utilized their work flexibility in similar ways, but distinctions emerged between two groups who *felt* differently about how their flexibility impacted their mothering. Some mothers felt that work flexibility allowed them to maintain the status quo of being an employed mother. They emphasized the practical advantages of remote work and that flexibility reduced their daily stress. Other mothers felt that remote work wasn’t merely stress-reducing but that it enabled them to achieve a form of mothering akin to being a stay-at-home mother. These women believed that working at home made them better mothers because it allowed their children to have a more beneficial child-centered upbringing that mothers thought that was incompatible with them in-person work.

I conclude with a summary of my contributions, outline the various limitations and directions for future research, and to describe the policy implications of these findings.

CHAPTER 2: POST_COVID REMOTE WORK AMONG NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

Introduction

Forms of work flexibility, such as remote work arrangements, are understood to have a myriad of impacts on employees and organizations. Yet these effects are often considered separately, and sometimes hypothetically, rather than examining the interplay of these perspectives through real world cases. Several studies from organizational literature, mostly quantitative, have theorized that flexible work arrangements may deliver firm-level value because employees are assumed to have positive experiences with these arrangements (Allen et al. 2013; Bal and Izak 2021). If employees benefit from flexible work arrangements, firms that offer these arrangements may have a competitive edge compared to peers because of reduced turnover and enhanced worker performance (Allen et al. 2013; Bal and Izak 2021; Harker Martin and MacDonnell 2012). However, several COVID-era findings indicate that the pandemic induced remote work invoked organization wide challenges related to trust and communication (Kohont and Ignjatović 2022; Stavrova et al. 2023). I argue that a comprehensive study of post-pandemic remote work requires interrogation at both the organizational and employee levels and attention to both the positive and negative impacts of these arrangements.

I focus here on nonprofits because these organizations are highly motivated to introduce cost-effective employee benefits that have the potential to improve recruitment and retention. Additionally, the core missions and values of nonprofits guide leadership decisions, policies, and norms such as those related to remote work (Gee et al. 2023; US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2024a). Nonprofits rely heavily on employee engagement and personal values alignment with organizational goals (Chapman et al. 2023; Gee et al. 2023). Thus, nonprofits are a useful case study for understanding both the employee and organizational benefits and challenges of flexible work arrangements.

Scholars have identified a plethora of employee-centric effects of working at home, including the possibility of enhanced well-being and reduced work-life conflict (Allen et al, 2013; Charalampous et al. 2019). There is also potential for employees to face challenges when working at home, such as

overworking and blurred boundaries between work and personal life (Beigi et al. 2018; Kossek et al. 2023). These employee work-life topics are discussed primarily in Chapter 3. The importance of workplace context, specifically policies and norms, remains largely underexplored in research about employees working at home. Notable exceptions have highlighted the importance of supportive supervisors for shaping remote workers' experiences (Butlewski et al. 2024; Capone et al. 2024; Harunavamwe and Ward 2022). I directly address recent calls from scholars (Bal and Izak 2021; Charalampous et al. 2019; Kossek et al. 2025) to qualitatively investigate how the implementation of flexible work may provide benefits and challenges in nonprofits for employees and organizations, as well as the intersections between these perspectives.

In this chapter, I illustrate how some nonprofits sought to leverage flexible work in the post-pandemic era and its impact on the organizations and employees. My sample of interviewees lends itself to understanding both the experiences of those in management or leadership positions (52%) and employees with no direct reports or management responsibilities (48%). From the perspective of both organizational leaders and employees, remote arrangements improved recruitment and retention. Workers also saw the implementation of flexible work arrangements as a way for organizations to solidify an authentic commitment to family-friendly missions and values. These employee-level benefits added value to the organizations, as did the reduced need for costly office space. However, I also find that employees' experiences varied greatly depending on workplace policies and norms. For example, employees reported different challenges related to work arrangements when the nonprofit was fully remote versus when the nonprofit had mixed-arrangements (i.e., some hybrid, in-person, and fully remote workers). Additionally, organizations varied in the extent to which leadership developed transparent policies and tenable norms related to flexible work. While many nonprofits and employees benefited from remote work in various ways, some also exemplified the potential for negative impacts of these work arrangements at both the organization and worker levels.

These findings contribute to recent calls for scholarship to link organization-centric and employee-focused literatures on remote work arrangements while also elucidating the overlapping positive and negative impacts of these arrangements at both levels. Specifically, I address:

- 1) How, if at all, does remote work contribute to the overall missions of nonprofits and to sustaining these organizations via employee recruitment and retention?
- 2) What policies and procedures are involved in implementing remote work arrangements at a nonprofit organization, and what are the subsequent effects of these for workers?
- 3) What norms and elements of workplace culture are developed at nonprofit organizations because of remote work? How do workers feel about these norms?

Remote Work in the Nonprofit Sector

Nonprofit employees are expected to try to fulfill the missions of their organizations. In turn, workers also expected leaders to be authentic to organizational purposes and values. Because employee engagement is significant for nonprofit longevity, aligning policies and decision-making with the mission and values is a vital objective among leadership (Chapman et al. 2023; Gee et al. 2023). Failing to follow through on stated values calls into question the authenticity of a nonprofit, and critiques from key stakeholders (e.g., employees, volunteers, and donors) can quickly shutter an organization (Akingbola 2013; Gee et al. 2023). According to employed parents, when nonprofits implemented remote work arrangements, this displayed alignment with organizational values to support working parents and families. Aside from shoring up trust and support among employed parents, remote work arrangements also addressed common sector problems related to recruitment and retention. Offering this mode of work to potential and current employees provided an enticing benefit that required little additional financial investment on the part of the organizations. These arrangements safeguarded commitment among current workers, encouraged potential workers to join the organization, and helped to solidify an authentic commitment to family-friendly values.

Employed Parents: “Your life outside of work is equally important”

Participants often described their organization’s mission and values as related to the health, education, and well-being of children and families. Because of this orientation towards supporting families, workers often felt that their nonprofits also sought to support employed parents. Melanie, a mother with a fully remote job, stated, “I’m very thankful that I’m at an agency that says, ‘The health of them [our staff] and whoever is in their household is an important piece of how we work.’” Some workers felt that when implementing remote work arrangements, their nonprofits had genuinely considered the needs of employed parents. Lila, a mother with a hybrid job, explained that her organization had designed hybrid work arrangements with particular attention to the needs of working parents:

We were keeping in mind that a lot of people on our team have children who they need to somehow get to and from school. Or they have other dependents in their lives that they are caring for. So we wanted to make sure that we had some flexibility in that [hybrid work policy]. And that no one felt that their family's needs were unable to be met. Because... if you are stressed and burnt out trying to figure out how to meet your family's needs, then you're not able to give 100% to your profession either.

When nonprofits were able to successfully ally work arrangements with the concerns of employees, workers such as Lila felt that the values of the organization were being upheld.

By allowing remote work, working parents felt that their employer authentically cared about them, their families, and the overarching goals of the nonprofit. Fiona, a mother who worked fully remotely, explained that her organization uniquely valued and supported employed parents:

My organization is mission-driven around supporting parents. I think most of us, especially moms, don't think of our parenting experience as relevant professional experience that makes us better at our jobs. A lot of people that I know tend to feel like they have to kind of hide their family lives in order to seem professional. And so, I feel really fortunate to work in a place where my parenting experience is also valued professionally, and it’s recognized as a sort of useful experience to bring to the table. And also, that we are all aligned on supporting parents and making sure that parents feel that they have the kind of resources and help that they need.

These sentiments of values alignment are important in the nonprofit sector, where legitimacy and investment of employees, volunteers, and donors are paramount to long-term organization success (Akingbola 2013; Wang 2022). Among working parents, feeling as if their nonprofits were invested in

supporting working parents legitimized their organizations commitments to family-friendly missions and values. Ross, a father with a hybrid job, explained,

This place is very much, and this comes down from the leadership, it's very much family and life-focused in the sense that we've had leadership tell us, our work is important, but it's not life or death. So, your family, your life outside of work, is equally important.

Employees' sense that their organizations valued them as parents was enhanced when nonprofits took actions that were interpreted as being supportive of working parents. Offering flexible work arrangements helped parents feel supported and boosted their approval of leadership decision-making, factors that can positively impact employee commitment to an organization in the nonprofit sector (Prysmakova and Lallatin 2023).

Thus, organizational morale benefited from developing practices that appeased both the mission and employees. Benjamin, a father with a fully remote job, explained, "They [leadership] actually follow through on the values that they say the organization holds and continue to refine those values in an open and honest way." Many nonprofit employees are motivated by altruism and intrinsic interest in organizational missions (Gee et al. 2023). As a result, the sentiments expressed by Benjamin and others in this sample are significant for understanding the specific ways in which nonprofits can derive benefits by enacting stated values. Parents noted a general atmosphere of support from colleagues that made them feel secure when working at home. Madelyn, a fully remote mother, stated, "It is a pretty accepting work culture. I've been in many meetings with people where their kids are there in the background. (laughs) Waving, maybe even crying, and trying to get their [parents'] attention. And I've never seen any sort of toxicity around that." The general aura of support verified for many that their colleagues were staunchly supportive of employed parents. As Sara, a mother with a fully remote job, stated, "If you're not introducing your kids [on a Zoom call], you're introducing your pets, and so it's totally fine." Within organizations predicated on supporting working parents and in the post-pandemic context, mothers and fathers in this sample often felt supported both in word and practice by their nonprofits. In this way,

employees benefited from the implementation of remote work, and organizations derived benefits because of the strengthened commitment of these workers.

However, when nonprofit leadership implemented flexible work practices that appeared to contrast with core values, workers were quick to critique these decisions. Some participants grappled with the idea that while they and their organizations may value the idea of equality, not every employee could work at home depending on the nature of their job. Nick, a white father who worked fully remotely, explained, “There are certain kinds of jobs that are more conducive to working from home, and certain kinds of jobs that are not. And there tends to be a divide in the compensation associated with those jobs and then who does those jobs in ways that are correlated with race and national origin.” Nick cautiously explained this difference to me and appeared uncomfortable with the notion that working at home generated even more inequality between him and nonwhite coworkers. Many nonprofit employees felt highly connected to the mission and values of their organization, which often emphasized equality. The apparent disconnect between employee work arrangements and these values could be disconcerting for participants such as Nick. As Nick alluded to, remote work is most commonly available to workers in “white-collar” professional and management positions. These jobs are most often held by white workers and those with higher levels of education (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2024b; Pabilonia and Redmond 2024; Yavorksy, Qian, and Sargent 2022).

Notably, Nick emphasized that not only were some colleagues not allowed to work at home, but these same coworkers also tended to be lower on organizational pay scales than their remote counterparts. Consequently, some participants, such as Nick, felt doubly privileged because they made more money and were allowed to work at home. Although not every employee could work fully remotely, some participants hoped that their organizational leaders would revise the implementation of flexible work to be more equitable. Tessa, a mother who worked fully remotely, explained,

I think that allowing our site-based staff to work remotely for a certain amount of time would be a nice improvement. Some of those roles are already lower on our pay structure. So, they're already getting paid less, and it feels icky that they also have to commute. And I feel like for roles that

have to commute, they should get financial commuter benefits. Since that's something I don't have to pay for anymore. Like gas is expensive, parking is expensive, transit is expensive.

While many expressed concerns related to equitable implementation of remote work, Tessa was one of the only participants to suggest that nonprofits explore ways to “compensate” in-person workers. While perhaps not seriously eroding her commitment to the organization at the time of our interview, it remains unclear how inequitable implementation of flexible work may have long-term negative impacts for nonprofits. Because of heavy reliance on employee engagement (Gee et al. 2023), nonprofits that center equity may eventually be forced to reckon with differences in mode of work among employees.

Recruitment: “I don't think she would have applied had I not put hybrid in the title”

Nonprofits compete for the same pool of potential employees as government and for-profit organizations, but with typically lower capacity to offer competitive pay and internal advancement (Gee et al. 2023; Slatten et al. 2021). Several participants who were involved with recruitment at their organizations recognized that offering flexible work arrangements could significantly widen the geographic pool of potential employees. Kathryn, a mother who worked fully remotely, explained,

We either find the people who are really dedicated and mission-focused, and we love them the most. Or we find people who are living in communities that maybe [the local jobs] just don't pay as well. We're able to recruit in areas that have a lower cost of living, and then our salaries are competitive. [With] our salary, trying to attract somebody in a bigger city [with a higher cost of living] would never happen. So, it's [remote work] given us a lot of opportunities to find folks where our salary will go a lot further. Because we can't compete with corporate.

Allowing flexible work arrangements provided a compelling opportunity for organizations to expand beyond the usual pool of candidates who lived within commuting distance of an office. Beth, a mother with a fully remote job, exemplified the situation described by Kathryn. Beth lived in a relatively low-cost-of-living area while working for a nonprofit based in a large city. She explained,

There are no jobs around here that would be a good fit for me. There really aren't opportunities around here. If I want to stay in the nonprofit sector and work for a generally well-respected, larger nonprofit, I'm looking at LA, New York, Chicago, and DC. I don't want to live in any of those places. I work for a nonprofit, I can't afford to live in any of those places. So, this [fully remote job] allows me to live in a place that I can afford, near family and friends, and do work that I love.

Beth highlighted the importance of location flexibility for some nonprofit workers. This geographic widening of recruitment acted as both a benefit to the organization and to workers.

Many participants mentioned that coordinating work with colleagues across time zones meant more deliberate planning for meetings and aligning work schedules. But overall, most saw this geographic flexibility as useful for recruitment and minimally challenging. Jack, a fully remote working father, stated, “Being able to hire from anywhere [geographically] allows us to get better talent. It allows for better diversity [within the organization].” These simultaneous priorities, improving talent and diversity, were also emphasized by Vincent, a father who worked fully remotely, explained the shift towards countrywide recruitment in the post-pandemic era:

The talent opportunity was certainly the leading reason [for shifting towards fully remote operations]. As a subset within that, it's allowed us to recruit a more diverse staff than we would have been able to within our geography of who could come to the office. That's been helpful and important.

By allowing for remote work, nonprofits could improve recruitment without making additional financial investments in salaries. This strategy also had lateral benefits of providing job opportunities to a more diverse population of workers and subsequently increasing diversity within the organization. For many current employees, increased co-worker diversity was seen as a net positive result of implementing flexible work arrangements.

Among several interviewees who had been recently hired, they recalled how important work arrangements had been in their job search. Maura, a mother with a fully remote job, explained, “Part of the reason that I left [my previous job] was because it wasn't flexible enough. It just felt like that was my next move professionally, to find fully remote work.” Similarly, Madelyn had advocated for a hybrid work arrangement when she joined her current organization. She described flexibility as a prerequisite when seeking a new job:

My son was two at the time [that I was hired and] that [hybrid work arrangement] was a non-negotiable for me. I knew that if I was going to continue to work full-time, there had to be flexibility. So, while I was nervous [to ask for a hybrid arrangement], I also knew that it was incredibly important, and I wouldn't feel comfortable picking a job if there wasn't that flexibility.

Among recruiters in this sample, several noted that in the post-pandemic era, it had become more common to encounter candidates such as Maura or Madelyn, those who were unwilling to consider fully in-person work. Paige, a mother with a hybrid job, explained she had previously worked in a role assisting nonprofits with filling open positions. In that job, she had often urged organizations to consider offering flexible work. Paige stated,

We would encourage clients to really consider, could it be remote? Could it be hybrid? And the number of candidates that we would get for the remote positions compared to in-person. (laughs) There were people [looking for jobs] that were just like, 'yeah, I don't want to have to go into an office at all, or every day.' So, I think that's just sort of the expectation [among job candidates]. I definitely didn't meet anybody who was like, 'I'm trying to go in [to the office] five days a week.' I think hybrid is sort of the new normal.

Because of limited ability to offer competitive pay or other benefits, some nonprofit recruiters, such as Paige, felt that offering flexible work was a viable means of locating candidates. These findings partially address open questions from nonprofit scholars such as Kuenzi et al. (2021) by specifying that some employees in this sector anticipate work flexibility becoming a normative job benefit moving forward.

Despite initial success with recruiting based on work flexibility, several participants lamented that leaders at their nonprofits seemed reluctant to formalize work arrangements as part of the job benefits that were advertised to potential employees. Grace is a mother with a fully remote job who had a prominent role in her organization's hiring process. She stated,

Some folks are just looking for a remote role. And so, as I'm recruiting, if the role isn't remote, they just move on. I don't have any trouble pushing a hiring manager about whether a role *has* to be done in person...Like whatever it [the work arrangements of a position] is, we are going to build it in as a benefit, naming it at the outset so folks don't have to wonder, 'What's in it if I choose this [job]?'

Grace felt that the job listings at her organization were often nonspecific about the mode of work and that this scared away candidates who wanted work flexibility to be a guaranteed benefit of their job. Similarly, Anna, a mother with a hybrid job, stated,

We're really never going to be able to compete with corporate [salaries]. So why don't we actually package it [remote work] as a benefit. Define it. Then you can really package it as a benefit to stay competitive. I wasn't getting good candidates when I was hiring [for a grant writer]. So, I asked to redo the job description and put hybrid in it. And that's how I caught who I have now. She's great. And I don't think she would have applied had I not put hybrid in the title. Because she would have thought, 'I'm not commuting an hour to work [every day].'

Anna and Grace believed that if flexible work was going to be allowed, then it should be leveraged to the full extent possible during the employee recruitment process. While nonprofits have historically relied on attracting employees who are motivated by organizational missions (Akingbola 2013), these results indicate that allowing remote work can be an effective strategy for widening the pool of potential candidates and improving employee recruitment.

Yet as Grace and Anna explained, flexible work arrangements could not be fully leveraged to recruit new employees when descriptions were too vague or noncommittal. Anna explained that a formal policy defining the mode of work was overdue and would be useful for the hiring process:

When I offered my grant writer the job, I was like ‘you can mostly work remote.’ And she said the same thing I would have said. Not knowing the company, she was like, ‘well what does that mean?’ Like, who knows. I’m trying to sell her on taking this job. But at any point, because there’s no policy, she could be told she has to come in [to the office] five days a week. Let’s just name it. Just put it out there to be competitive.

Anna felt that potential employees were understandably skeptical about work flexibility that was not grounded in organizational policy. She felt that her nonprofit lacked the transparent work arrangement policy that was needed to make employee recruitment more competitive. I discuss remote work policies in more depth in a later section.

Retention: “I’m not sure I would still be here if I wasn’t working remotely”

Retaining high-quality employees is historically a fraught process at nonprofits, often limited by the ability to offer competitive pay increases and upward mobility (Akingbola 2013; Slatten et al. 2021). In the post-pandemic era, flexible work arrangements partially addressed long-standing retention issues among nonprofits. Tom, a father with a fully remote job, explained that several of his coworkers had kept their jobs when they moved to new locations, rather than finding new employment. He stated, “I would say that perhaps the only good outcome of COVID is that it kind of opened this [remote work] as a possibility for a lot of people. I feel really grateful that our senior leadership recognized that this [mode of work] was actually a good recruiting tool and a good retention tool.” Before working at home, Tom’s colleagues would have been required to leave the organization when they relocated. Working remotely

helped his coworkers avoid the strenuous job search process. His organization also benefited from saving the time and effort associated with hiring new employees.

Several parents shared similar examples to Tom, that they had been able to maintain employment through life stages that historically required finding a new job. Tessa, a mother with a fully remote job, explained that she had relocated across the country while maintaining her job: “It [working remotely] allowed me to move my family close to my [extended] family. It keeps people who've made choices like I have [employed at the organization]. A lot of people moved during COVID.” By retaining workers through out-of-state moves, nonprofits also benefited by maintaining the institutional knowledge and expertise of long-standing employees such as Tessa. This finding aligns with pre-pandemic literature indicating that remote work can boost organization retention of workers (Harker Martin and MacDonnell 2012) and contributes new details on the specific life transitions, such as moving out of state, through which this mode of work can help sustain employee commitments.

For women specifically, the implications of being able to retain employment through life transitions are important for understanding the potential employee benefits of work flexibility. For example, Anna explained that her female colleague, a long-time employee of their organization, had temporarily moved out of state to accommodate her husband’s career. In order to retain her, organizational leaders had granted her a temporary remote work arrangement. Anna explained,

Her husband got relocated. And he was the breadwinner. And I think had they not afforded her that opportunity [to work remotely], she may have left the agency. So, she was gone for six months, doing virtual meetings. And now she's back, and it's all good.

These findings add to prior results that maternal labor force participation is supported by opportunities to work at home (Song 2025). Given that the nonprofit sector is female dominated (Uchida 2025), offering these work arrangements may be particularly helpful for supporting employed mothers to continue working. Lea, a mother who worked fully remotely, explained that her family had moved twice in recent years so that her husband could take different jobs. She explained, “I'm very lucky that I had a fully remote job, so I just stayed employed. It was great.” Several other mothers echoed Lea’s experience and

had maintained employment through life transitions that, before working at home, would have necessitated finding a new job or exiting the labor force.

Aside from making it possible to retain employees who relocated, working at home operated as a highly valued benefit that helped maintain working parents' commitments to staying at their organizations. Many parents explained that their salary alone was neither competitive nor adequate to justify continuing their employment in this sector. Beth explained that working at home helped to offset other challenges of working in the nonprofit sector:

In a nonprofit, you're already making less than you would in the, as my son calls it, profit jobs. Like, Daddy has a profit job. (laughs) You're already giving up a lot by doing nonprofit work. You're sometimes putting in more hours than you would otherwise [in a different sector of employment]. So, the advantage of getting to work remotely is wonderful.

Remote work as a retention tool may be particularly appealing to resource-constrained nonprofits because there are no major inherent costs associated with implementing these work arrangements. Unlike tangible benefits related to pay increases or improved healthcare, work arrangements offer intangible flexibility to employees. This was highly valuable to employees while simultaneously being relatively inexpensive for organizations to enact. Anna was candid about the importance of her work arrangements in maintaining her employment at her nonprofit:

If they ever took it [remote work] away, I'd leave. Because I don't make enough money where I'm at, and I stay because of it. And if they took it away, I'm out. I'll go work for the corporate side in the office. If they're going to force me to be in the office [at the nonprofit], I'll go make more money somewhere else [in the for-profit sector] in the office.

Several participants such as Anna explained that if they were required to start working in person full time, that they would likely leave their nonprofit jobs and pursue in person jobs at for-profit organizations, where they could at least expect a higher salary to offset their reluctance to work in person. This indicates that remote work arrangements can become an important factor that nonprofit workers consider when thinking about their future career trajectories and whether to remain within the sector.

Some nonprofits have historically tried to provide employees with generous non-salary benefits, such as unlimited time off, to compensate for limited ability to offer competitive pay (Akingbola 2013). My findings illustrate that flexible work arrangements can become an important non-salary benefit to

workers once they have experienced this mode of work. Kim worked fully remotely in a leadership role at her organization. She explained: “There's so much that we don't have, and that's not possible for us. So many resource constraints. But one resource constraint we don't have is how we structure how we do the work.” Indeed, many participants valued their mode of work so highly that they had remained in the nonprofit sector because of their work arrangements. Similar to Anna, Karen, a mother with a fully remote job, questioned whether she would still be working at her nonprofit if not for her job flexibility: “I'm not sure I would still be here if I weren't working remotely. I don't think I could do what I need to do here at home *and* be in an office all day. I don't see that. So, the flexibility of it, definitely has played a part in still being here.” These findings identify work flexibility as a potentially effective strategy for improving tenure at nonprofits in the post-pandemic era. In Chapters 4 and 5, I discuss further why parents saw so much value in their work arrangements.

Remote Work Policies

Workers described a wide variety of experiences with remote work policies. Policy provides structure and guidelines across job positions, which is useful for understanding how these work arrangements are implemented in nonprofits. Workplace policies can also provide employees with a standard that they can use to evaluate their individual work experiences. Some workers in this sample stated that there was a distinct lack of established work arrangement policy at their nonprofit. In lieu of standardized policies, some participants explained that informal norms, such as those established by their manager, were more influential for their work experiences. When interrogating the challenges and benefits of remote work arrangements, existing literature has often focused on supervisor support rather than on formal organizational policy. Yet policy, particularly related to support with technology, can positively support those working at home (Ng, Lit, and Cheung 2022). Of the relevant policies described, some participants explained that their nonprofit had rules to designate their mode of work, or to determine who was allowed to work remotely or not. They also described procedures related to allotting physical office space, providing supply stipends, and iterations of return-to-office (RTO) initiatives.

Designating Mode of Work: “We haven't figured it out yet”

The single most defining organizational feature that shaped a worker's experience was whether their nonprofit operated fully remotely or had mixed-work arrangements. About 37% of participants worked at nonprofits that were entirely remote. The other 63% worked at nonprofits that had in-person, hybrid, and fully remote employees. Workers at fully remote organizations described very straightforward work arrangement policies. Joellen explained,

Because we've been remote [as an organization] for almost twenty years, we have great policies and practices. We are awesome at working remotely, and a lot of that is because things are documented. We have core business hours between ten and four. But other than that, you can pick your schedule.

These nonprofits were implementing a single form of work arrangements, and this made it simple to create workplace-wide policies, such as the core business hours that Joellen described. Because working at home was the default work arrangement, there was no process in place for designating a mode of work. Luke stated, “I mean, everyone's remote so... I'm sure there's something in the handbook about ‘you need to work this many hours a day and use this kind of technology’ But I don't know of any others [policies].” As Luke referenced, these nonprofits usually had several policies related to how workers were expected to operate. Many fully remote organizations had a 32-40-hour workweek, with core hours of operations varying by worker time zone. Some nonprofits required parents to have childcare during work hours. Several also limited the number of days per year that an employee could work out of the country or away from their primary residence. These generally clear-cut policies helped workers feel confident that the parameters of their remote jobs were both well-established and permanent.

Workers at fully remote nonprofits generally expressed that they felt entrusted to do their jobs independently. This sense of trust often stemmed in part from the transparent policies described above, but also from feeling trusted by their supervisors. Nolan, a father at a fully remote organization, stated,

I'm sure they have policies. They have very, very dense policies for lots of things. But I think with my manager, you get the work done and you do what you're supposed to do. And you are moving the ball forward. That really is what it comes down to. It's a pretty trusting adult environment, I would say.

Workers who feel trusted by their organization, as Nolan articulated, are often more satisfied than those who feel micromanaged (Alkhateri et al. 2018; Ohemeng, Darko, and Amoako-Asiedu 2020). In a nonprofit context, these feelings can promote intrinsic motivation to continue carrying out the goals and mission of the organization (Gee et al. 2023). Many workers at fully remote workplaces expressed similar sentiments to Nolan, that they were trusted to accomplish their jobs at home with few specific policies in place. Stephanie, a fully remote working mother, explained, “I feel like there aren't rules about remote working other than get your work done.” Workers generally felt satisfied or indifferent to the mode of work-related policies at these nonprofits. They often emphasized that more important than any particular policy was that they were treated as autonomous and responsible employees.

Mixed-arrangement organizations, those that had both remote and in-person workers, faced a more complicated policy task because each employee needed to have an assigned mode of work. Some nonprofits did not clearly designate mode of work when advertising for open positions, creating uncertainty in the recruitment process. In many cases, the mode of work was determined through a formalized process where job responsibilities were reviewed, and then leadership decided whether positions were eligible for fully remote work, hybrid work, or were required to be in-person. Often, this process was informed by the mode of work that a position had during COVID (e.g., a job that was fully remote during COVID may become permanently fully remote post-COVID). At some organizations, employee and manager input was used to determine the mode of work for the employee’s job. Andrew, a father with a fully remote job, explained the mode of work designations that his workplace had created:

So remote local are people that lived within a certain radius of one of the offices and could get to the [office] space. I relinquished my office when I became remote distant. I could go in and rent a desk if I wanted to. I don't think there was a ton of pushback around that [system of designating jobs and offices]. Obviously, there were some inequities that were negotiated around who was designated as remote eligible. But overall, I think it went fairly smoothly. They were pretty flexible around who was eligible to go remote.

In Andrew’s office, the formation of a labor union had co-occurred with the work mode designation process. This had led to heightened tensions around which jobs were eligible to work at home because mode of work had become embroiled in the general labor union contract negotiations. Tension between

co-workers who were able to work remotely and those who were not was described by several interviewees, including Andrew, who worked at mixed-arrangement nonprofits.

Perceptions of fairness and equity between colleagues at mixed-arrangement organizations contributed to inter-organizational tension. Employees working in administrative, management, and leadership roles were often eligible to work at home, as is the case across occupations and employment sectors in the US (Borkowski and Kaynas 2025). Direct service workers, who often earn lower salaries than managerial or administrative employees, were often ineligible to work remotely because of the in-person nature of their job responsibilities. Brian, a father with a hybrid job, explained, “There are certain positions expected to be in [office], because a client needs to know that they can come to the office. So, there's a minority of roles that are required to show up in person.”

At some nonprofits, the concerns regarding equity and designating modes of work had led leadership to delay the development of any policy. Lily, a mother with a hybrid job, shared,

Our workplace is currently reviewing what we want a standard policy to be for work from home that feels equitable. Because there are certain jobs that can [work at home], and there are certain jobs that can't. So, trying to find the right policy that is fair and flexible, while also being able to open [the office] in the mornings... We haven't figured it out yet.

Implementing remote work arrangements introduced strain at some mixed-arrangement nonprofits. This was in part because of the notion that some employees were receiving a benefit that others were not, because some were allowed to work at home and others couldn't. This idea directly contradicted organizational values of equity. Nonprofit stakeholders, such as employees and donors, expect leadership decision-making to be informed by shared values (Akingbola 2013; Gee et al. 2023). Additionally, nonprofit employee motivations are often contingent on values alignment with the overall organization (Akingbola 2013; Gee et al. 2023). Because of this, fully remote nonprofits largely benefited from being able to consistently offer workers flexible arrangements. In contrast, mixed-arrangement nonprofits could face internal conflicts because employees labeled differences in mode of work as inequitable treatment of workers.

In some mixed-arrangement nonprofits, leadership sought to reduce these conflicts by asking remote workers to come into the office more often. Emily, a mother with a hybrid job, explained,

I think that the struggle in our particular field is recognizing that not all jobs are created equal. But my job is fully remote. So, I think part of my frustration is that we're being moved to in-person because they want it to be fairer to all staff. But I'm like, I can work remotely. Like, not all positions are the same.

Emily understood that leaders at her nonprofit wanted to make work arrangements “fairer” between all employees. Several remote workers commented that their in-person colleagues seemed resentful of their access to flexible work arrangements and that this had made them feel uncomfortable. Yet Emily, and others in similar situations, disliked having their work flexibility limited by those in leadership because of the constraints of their coworkers’ jobs. At the same time, some participants wanted their in-person counterparts to receive some kind of benefit to make up for not being allowed to work at home. As noted in the section on retention, one participant suggested that their nonprofit should offer a commute stipend to compensate in-person workers for being unable to work at home. Overall, mixed-arrangement nonprofits experienced a kind of split incentive to implement flexible work arrangements. Among employees who could work remotely, working at home was highly motivating and valuable. But being unable to offer all employees access to remote work could incite inter-organizational tension.

Some leaders at mixed-arrangement nonprofits generated additional employee discontent by failing to adapt their mode of work policies to the post-COVID-19 context. At some organizations, the existing policies had been developed haphazardly during the height of the pandemic and had never been revisited. Paige, a mother with a hybrid job, lamented, “There just doesn't seem to *be* a strategy. In talking to other people, they seem to have good setups where everybody's in the office two days a week or whatever.” Developing post-pandemic policy was important to workers because, without it, there could be confusion about the permanency of work arrangements, and even a basic understanding of which jobs at the nonprofit had different modes of work. Arielle, a mother with a hybrid job, stated, “They don't [have remote work policies]. (laughs) Our last handbook was from 2018, so at this point, it's really out of date.

Yeah, there's nothing formal.” The lack of a formal policy was stressful for workers who felt that, because a policy was not established, at any moment their work arrangements may be changed.

Lack of policy regarding work arrangements could also leave open the possibility of strong worker resistance to any changes in their informal work arrangements. For example, Anna, a mother with a hybrid job, explained that after COVID-19, several of her coworkers had refused to attend in-person meetings. They had demanded two weeks’ notice of any in-person meetings so that they could secure childcare for their children, who were often home while they worked. These employees had argued that there was no policy requirement for them to come into the office. Anna explained, “We actually created a policy that when you're working from home, you have to have childcare. And you have to be able to change to in-person meetings if requested, those kinds of things.” Compared to fully remote organizations, mixed-arrangement nonprofits faced a plethora of potential policy pitfalls that could invoke employee discontent, dissent and inter-workplace conflict.

Physical Space & Supplies: “What kind of real estate do nonprofits need”

Nonprofits have historically sought to minimize overhead costs, including physical office space, to avoid criticism of mismanaging financial resources (Mitchell and Calabrese 2019; Berrett 2022). Minimizing these types of costs is important because irking donors and alienating employees through the perceived misuse of funds can be detrimental to organizational survival (Berrett 2022; Gee et al. 2023). As a result of allowing employees, whether all or some, to work at home, many nonprofits were able to reduce or eliminate office space. This was often viewed as a win-win; nonprofits reduced overhead expenses, and employees were happy to work at home. Adrian, a father with a hybrid job, explained that in his opinion, nonprofit leaders should think critically and creatively about the space needs of remote workers:

What kind of real estate do nonprofits need? I was just talking with a grantee partner who currently has eight or ten thousand square feet. Their lease, thankfully, is up. They are going to go down to like two thousand square feet, and then [also have] access to a [large] meeting space. So, it’s just being able to think about what our staff will need, and how do we support that? Does everybody need their own desk?

As Adrian explained, when nonprofits implemented flexible work arrangements, the physical space needs of the organization often changed. Out of the thirteen fully remote organizations represented in this research through employee interviews, ten no longer had any physical office space. Vincent, a father with a fully remote job, stated, “COVID pushed us all out [of the office]. We had no real reason for being in-person. And so, we've kept the mailing address. (laughs) But there's no office at which people get together frequently.” As Vincent indicated, the pandemic was the impetus among some nonprofits to reduce or eliminate office space. Stephanie explained, “I am fully remote with an organization that used to have an office pre-pandemic and now is really at the point where we have a couple of co-working spaces in places where we have a bundle of employees.” Three fully remote nonprofits, such as Stephanie’s, continued to provide employees with access to co-working spaces.

In contrast, several mixed-arrangement nonprofits had maintained office spaces that employees felt were unnecessarily large. Among those who described surplus space, some employees questioned whether generous office space was a legitimate use of funds. Courtney, a mother with a hybrid job, explained,

I think office space, just the cost of it, is tricky. I think if nobody is chomping at the bit to be in an office, it's an expense that can be cut if the work can be done elsewhere. We have a lot of partner agencies that have communal spaces that they allow us to use at no cost.

Workers at mixed-arrangement organizations frequently questioned whether physical offices were a justifiable use of limited financial resources. Within this sector, there can be harsh ramifications for leaders who are viewed as mismanaging funds (Chapman et al. 2023). Workers can be very critical of decisions that are seen as misaligned with values and goals, creating high stakes for leaders to utilize funds in ways that agree with stated values (Gee et al. 2023; Chapman et al. 2023). The sense among some employees that their large office spaces were desolate also contributed to their feelings that offices were not an appropriate use of funds. Mia, a fully remote working mother, explained,

We have this big building. It's worth a lot of money. And even before the pandemic, it was like a ghost town when you went there. I've worked at my job for twelve years now, so I remember when it was so fun to go in [to the office]. It felt so energizing to go there. And then, the couple of years before the pandemic were just different. There were very few people in the office.

For Mia and others, working at a deserted office was a discouraging environment. Melanie, a mother with a fully remote job, went into her organization's office occasionally. She stated, "When I go in, maybe 30% of the offices are filled with people. It's pretty amazing just how sparse it is." Retaining underutilized office space was both viewed as a drain on financial resources and was demotivating for workers.

Alternatively, some employees described their mixed-arrangement organizations as suffering from a dire lack of space. While those in mostly empty offices could feel demoralized because they were surrounded by empty desks, those in overcrowded offices felt less productive in cramped spaces. For some participants, these difficulties with their physical offices felt like classic nonprofit issues related to funding constraints for basic supplies and space. Arielle, a mother with a hybrid job, described her office space as challenging:

Our office is actually really a small space, it's really annoying (laughs) and difficult. I ask my whole team to be in-person on Mondays. We have a team meeting. I've established that so that the rest of the week can be flexible. Because I recognized pretty quickly the limitations of our office. I can't even begin, it's like the whole nonprofit world of like bad internet, no cubicles.

Arielle used the power of her managerial role to limit the amount of time that she and her team worked in less-than-ideal conditions. Other hybrid workers simply had to contend with the physical limits of their office. Workers in these situations felt that their nonprofit should provide adequate space and equipment if they were going to be asked to work in-person regularly.

The desire for adequate space and equipment among employees at mixed-arrangement nonprofits was sometimes related to the lack of transparent office space procedures. Some participants felt that it was difficult to balance employee preferences with the logistical limits of office spaces. Alice had recently taken a leadership position and explained,

If we could somehow afford [large] space just once a week, that would be the day everybody would come in [to the office]. We put people on a Monday/Wednesday, Tuesday/Thursday schedule because that's the easiest to manage, and you get the most benefit in terms of stretching the space out. But we have a number of people that I really need to be in [the office on] Tuesday/Wednesday. But the more you do that, the less efficient the space sharing gets.

In answer to these difficulties, Alice had introduced a desk "hoteling" system where workers signed up for desks as needed and were supposed to relinquish their usual desk space when working at home.

However, employees resisted using the new system. Alice stated, “My staff would like to have the flexibility to work from home but not have the inconveniences of sharing [office] space...People are very reluctant to give up their space. But I walk around the office, and it’s clear they are not there.”

Alice felt that it was unrealistic for hybrid employees to maintain a permanent workspace. Conversely, hybrid workers described those in leadership as unwilling to resolve space limitations either by expanding in-person space or increasing the number of days that they worked at home.

Related to allotting office space was providing remote employees with work supplies. In this sample, 10 mixed-arrangement and 3 fully remote organizations provided a supply stipend to those working at home. The amount and disbursement of these stipends varied widely. Some workers received a monthly stipend (\$35-100), several received an annual stipend (\$100-250), and others were given a one-time reimbursement of supply costs when they first began working at home. Some workers felt that these funds illustrated an authentic commitment to supporting remote employees. When nonprofits did not provide a stipend, some participants felt that they were unfairly expected to provide their own supplies while organizations saved money by reducing office space. Vincent stated,

If you're remote [as an organization then] you are saving a lot of money on office space. And yes, you're happy to have those savings, and that's great. But you should support your remote staff in the minimal things that are required for them to be effective. Like, a hundred dollars for internet and phone. Or whatever it is. Don't just run away with all the savings. Return some of it to your staff who still have to do the work in all these different places now.

Workers' desires for organizations to pass on savings were in keeping with the purpose of the sector: to be not-for-profit (Gee et al. 2023). For their nonprofits to retain excess funds generated from reduced office space was viewed as a “corporate” deviation from the values of their organizations by some participants.

Return-to-Office Mandates: “I don’t want to commute for no reason”

Return-to-office (RTO) mandates have been a focus of post-pandemic popular media (Korn 2025; Royle 2025; Sharma 2025; Guynn 2025). In this sample, these directives were relatively rare. Five of the thirty-five organizations represented here issued some form of RTO order. RTO mandates generated immense stress among the workers. The idea of being forced to work in-person or of having their mode of work change unexpectedly was intimidating for parents. Most had come to rely heavily on working at

home to facilitate their family-related responsibilities, topics discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. Among the nonprofits that issued an RTO directive, only two had created mechanisms or formal policies through which organizations could force compliance. The other three RTO examples were framed as voluntary pleas from leaders that ultimately resulted in little day-to-day change for employees.

Despite generally preferring to work at home, several participants emphasized that they would be willing to return to the office if given a meaningful reason to do so *and* ample advance notice of any changes to their work arrangements. Mia, a mother with a fully remote job, had recently learned that leaders at her organization wanted employees who lived within a certain radius of their physical office to shift from fully remote to hybrid work. Mia explained that she worked with colleagues around the country and that no one else on her team was asked to return to the office:

At first, we were just hearing that the company wants everybody to be in [the office] two or three days a week. And there was this huge push that everybody needs to be back in the office. And that was very stressful for me. Our daycare is right next door to my apartment building. So, going to the office, I would be losing like two hours a day with my daughter [because of commuting]. And there's nobody that I work with [who is] in person. There's no real value in being in person. So, I was not very happy about that.

Ultimately, because her manager lived elsewhere and there was no meaningful reason for her to work at the office, Mia was not required to do so. Mia explained that she was not inherently opposed to working at her organization's office: "I do think people are craving connection. I wish that I had an office where I could go, like once a week, and I could meaningfully connect with colleagues. But that doesn't exist here. I don't want to commute for no reason."

Mia's situation was not unique; many nonprofits had allowed employees to move away from organizational offices during COVID-19. Of the nonprofits represented in this sample, several had specifically recruited employees from around the country. As a result, some nonprofits issued RTO directives differently depending on where employees lived. Paige, a mother with a hybrid job, explained, "Say person A and person B basically have the same job. One of them happens to live locally, and one happened to move away during the pandemic. Now, one of them is expected to come in the office a few days a week, and one is not." This felt unfair to both employees and several participants who worked as

managers. Some in management positions explained that it was not only difficult to justify an RTO order for only *some* of their employees, but also that they didn't see the value of doing so. Jack, who worked fully remotely and managed a team of employees, explained:

Our organization tried to have people go back [into the office]. And it never really picked up because they didn't require it. I would be fine with going back [into the office], but not every day. Three days at the most. But there's no one there who's on my team. So, is that worth it to deal with the commute and the lack of flexibility?

These examples highlighted a main point of conflict regarding RTO mandates. Some workers were not inherently against returning to the office. But they were irritated and stressed by being arbitrarily forced to change their mode of work without any apparent gains in coworker collaboration.

Notably, in several RTO examples from this sample, it was those in leadership positions at nonprofits who personally preferred to work in-person and used their clout to shift the organization to this mode of work. Paige explained that the CEO of her nonprofit had taken a somewhat voluntary and unclear approach to issuing an RTO order:

There was an email that went out, and not to be sulky about it, but it was very kind of passive. It was like, 'hey, it'd be super awesome if you want to come to the office, we'd love to see you.' There was no clear direction. It was just a suggestion. But like 'hey, if it's not doable for you, then don't come in.' And basically, nobody changed their behavior.

Workers in these situations felt resentful that their mode of work may be shifted because of the whims of organization leaders. The voluntary nature of these communications also left employees wondering how to stay in the good graces of leadership without unnecessarily upending their work arrangements. Similar to Paige, Ross, a father with a hybrid job, explained that one leader at his organization preferred to work in-person, and because they were "a big person on that policy," this person had used their sway to revise the work arrangement policy from three days of remote work per week to two. These experiences echo research that has identified organizational leaders, outside the nonprofit sector, as personally preferring to work in-person and making key decisions based on these preferences rather than on the needs of the organization or employees (Ding and Ma 2024; Westover 2024).

Some workers had experienced an RTO mandate executed through a formal policy. Several of these employees felt that these RTO policies would have been a more positive experience if the organizations had centered the perspectives of workers more. Emily, a mother with a hybrid job, explained,

I think that they did a bad job of rolling out the policy. I think that people need to be given time to restructure their [life and family] structure. I would have preferred there to be sort of a poll of like, how could this [return to office] look for you? And instead, it was sort of just rolled out as like, ‘everybody do this.’ Since it was rolled out, we have sent out a survey to staff to sort of get opinions on improvements that people would like to see. It'd be really nice if we had like actual desks. And when people came in, they had a working mouse and a working keyboard.”

Similar to the examples above, Emily stated that one of the leaders at her nonprofit preferred to work in-person and that this had likely led to the RTO mandate. In addition to the abrupt shift and general unprepared state of the office, Emily felt that the policy design was rooted in a lack of trust in workers. She recalled a conversation she had with someone in a leadership position:

What's funny to me about these policies is when I asked about it, they were like, ‘well most people are doing between two and three [days in the office]. So, let's just keep it [the policy] at three. Because if we move it to two, people will do one.’ I just think it's sort of funny logic. You're assuming people are not going to adhere to a policy. So, you're making it stricter than what you actually want?

Despite the assumptions of leaders at Emily’s organization that workers would not observe the exact RTO requirements, Emily felt too nervous not to adhere to the policy because she did not want to get into trouble. From her perspective, this RTO mandate had been a missed opportunity to design a policy that considered the preferences and opinions of workers. In a sector that relies on the intrinsic motivation and commitment of employees, policies of this sort are likely to invoke employee mistrust and irritation.

Norms of Remote Work

While the policies of an organization (or lack thereof) are significant in shaping employee experience, workplace culture and norms can be similarly influential. Shared attitudes among workers, taken-for-granted ways of socializing, and informal behaviors can heavily shape day-to-day employment experiences (Ashforth, Sluss, and Saks 2007; Belias and Koustelios 2014; Houle et al. 2025). Among remote workers at nonprofit organizations, cultures and norms were substantially impacted by their modes

of work. These norms shaped whether employees felt a sense of belonging and support in their nonprofits. When those in leadership positions proactively provided regular and varied forms of interpersonal opportunities for employees, remote workers felt most supported. Norms that encouraged inter-employee communication in multiple and frequent forms led workers to feel connected to each other and to the overarching purpose of their nonprofits. Cultivating a remote workplace where workers felt supported resulted in benefits for workers and for organizations. Failing to do so prompted employees to criticize the intentionality and care that their leaders had for them and led to feelings of disconnect and disillusionment with the missions of their nonprofits.

Communication: “People want that same feeling, but they don't want to come in the office”

Most workers in this sample primarily communicated virtually with colleagues through platforms such as Slack or by attending virtual Zoom meetings. Many workers commented on the loss of casual, unplanned contact with their colleagues when working at home. Emma, a mother who worked fully remotely, explained, “I think the biggest barrier people have faced, going from in-person to virtual, is that there's no water cooler talk type of stuff. We were such a collaborative organization [when working in-person]. But now that we're all working remote, you don't have that.” This loss of social connection and support among remote colleagues can lead to feelings of isolation and stress (Asatiani and Norstrom 2023; Collins, Hislop, and Cartwright 2016; Lal, Dwivedi, and Haag 2023). Participants felt that it was sometimes challenging and time-intensive to maintain positive collaboration when working remotely. Marian explained that social interactions could easily become a low priority when working at home:

The nature of remote work makes it easier to push interpersonal dynamics under the rug. Or say, I'll get to that tomorrow. Which means never, because you're not in front of the person. And so, you have this barrier [when working remotely]. When you are not forced to be in front of each other all the time, you're not forced to identify productive ways to manage tensions [between coworkers].

Marian and several other participants felt that the ability to avoid conflict when working at home ultimately led to deterioration of relationships between colleagues and, over time, workplace culture. Despite these challenges, Marian and many others still felt strongly that this was their preferred mode of employment.

Prior research has documented that employees highly value the flexibility of remote work even when it comes at some social cost (Lal et al. 2023). Lea, a mother who worked fully remotely, explained,

I do think we have suffered from a lack of feeling connected to coworkers beyond your department. We used to have a fair amount of meetings. And those have fallen by the wayside [since starting to work at home], and part of me doesn't care. But something is lost, for sure. The feeling of community, a feeling of being connected to all the departments, has definitely taken a big hit.

Many participants similarly felt caught between appreciating their mode of work while simultaneously wishing for a stronger workplace culture. Pre-COVID research has found that maintaining a sense of belonging and purpose is pivotal to retaining nonprofit worker commitment in the face of limited pay raises or advancement opportunities (Akingbola 2013). Therefore, a reduction in communication and subsequently the loss of organizational culture may pose a concern for nonprofits if employees begin to feel isolated from the organization. But whose responsibility is it to cultivate a sense of workplace and collaboration in remote environments? Workers at fully remote organizations sometimes felt that the onus should be with nonprofit leadership to specifically support the culture of a remote workplace. Sydney, a fully remote working mother, stated, “I just feel like we haven’t intentionally created tools and resources and [meeting] spaces to say, how do we do this [remote work] well?” When workers felt that their nonprofit did not have the structures in place to support workplace culture, they could feel disconnected from colleagues and subsequently from the overall purpose of the organization.

Meanwhile, those at mixed-work arrangement nonprofits had more regular opportunities to interact with colleagues and build in person camaraderie. However, Alice explained that hybrid workers at her nonprofit seemed unsure of how to foster connections with each other:

People want to have the same feeling that they used to have when we were in the office five days a week. People want that same feeling, but they don't want to come to the office. Some of the feedback we got [from colleagues] was that we need to have more potlucks. And it's like, well, people could organize themselves to have potlucks, that's how we used to do it. I think the bonds have gotten so thin that people are looking to the organization to schedule things as opposed to feeling like they could schedule something with each other.

Alice felt that employees needed to generate connections with each other, but that her coworkers had lost their sense of ownership of these relationships during the pandemic lockdown. In some mixed-

arrangement organizations, participants did feel empowered to independently connect with coworkers. When their organizations didn't specifically provide these opportunities, they carved out time to pursue social interactions on their own. Paige, a mother with a hybrid job, shared,

I spent a lot of time meeting with people. And they're people that, unless I reached out to them, I might not have had a reason to know them. Now that I do know them, I think about them when I'm collaborating on a project. But nobody [made me do that], I mean, my boss said it would be great [for me] to meet people, but I just did that on my own.

As Paige noted, bolstering her connections with colleagues increased her ability to effectively collaborate. This suggests that while social bonds can weaken within nonprofits that implement remote work, when employees or organization leaders proactively initiate coworker points of connection, the isolating impacts of working at home can be reduced.

Several workers did feel that their organizations provided plentiful opportunities to connect with colleagues. This happened in the form of casual discussions at the beginning and end of meetings, having regular all-staff meetings, and general encouragement for employee connection. Some participants had regularly scheduled "coffee chats" or casual Zoom meetings with coworkers. Others were part of affinity groups (e.g., an LGBTQ+ group, a parent group, groups for various racial/ethnic identities, etc.) that met during work hours and had rotating discussion topics. Similarly, some workers joined Slack channels based on shared interests (e.g., pets, parenting, running, books, cooking, board games, etc.). These communication channels bolstered overall workplace culture and shaped how employees felt about their organization. Kristina, a fully remote working mother, explained,

When I was interviewing [for my current job], I was like, 'What do y'all do to, like, help remote workers feel engaged?' Because part of the reason I left my old job was that I just didn't feel connected enough to not look for something better. And here, some of the work is not thrilling. But I like the people I work with. And I get to meet people through these groups and activities. And so, I think that helps to build a sense of belonging to the company that is beyond just being a worker bee.

When nonprofits took an active approach to fostering inter-colleague connections, workers such as Kristina felt an increased sense of belonging and connection that subsequently could help improve or maintain overall organizational culture.

Everyday communication norms could also promote a sense of connection among coworkers. For instance, having one's camera on or off during virtual meetings was frequently mentioned as part of the technological norms of a nonprofit. As Angie, a mother with a fully remote job stated, "We're a camera-on organization." Visually seeing coworkers on-camera at virtual meetings felt more gratifying for many participants than having audio-only meetings. Kim, a mother with a fully remote job, shared, "It is much easier for me to engage with the camera on than with the camera off. I think it would be challenging for me personally if I had somebody on the team who found that draining [to be on camera]. I know that there are people who do." Many workers felt similarly to Kim, but as she indicated, camera protocol could be somewhat divisive. Some participants favored being able to have their cameras off when meeting with colleagues. Andrew, a father with a fully remote job, explained, "They [organizational leaders] tried to mandate cameras being on, and there was a lot of pushback around that."

Most participants explained that in addition to virtual meetings, they also used multiple platforms to communicate with colleagues. Andrew went on to state, "We used to have Slack. Our organization transitioned us to Microsoft Teams, which a lot of us are still salty about. And we use that for general chat. Longer, more in-depth stuff, we do over email. And then quick questions, we [still] tend to do over Slack. And sometimes we just hop on Zoom." Many workers had inherent preferences or dislikes for certain platforms, such as for Slack over Microsoft Teams. As illustrated in Andrew's explanation and in prior findings (Gohoungodji, N'Dri, and Matos 2023; Singh et al. 2022), information sharing in a remote workplace could be complex.

The intricacy of communications in a remote workplace can lead employees to experience "technostress," or exhaustion stemming from pervasive technology use, that can be detrimental to well-being (Gemmano et al. 2023; Ollier-Malaterre et al. 2019; Singh et al. 2022). The sheer volume of virtual meetings and the number of communication channels that participants had to manage could be overwhelming. Justin, a father with a fully remote job, explained,

When do you email someone, versus when do you use Slack, versus when do you text somebody? We continue to see really wide variation in how people use those things. We have this blurry line where people are using Slack for work, but there are also people putting up pictures of their kids

and their dogs. It's hard because sometimes I don't really feel like putting up pictures and commenting on my friend's cats at work. But does that mean that I'm not participating in the work discourse? That I'm not communicating with my colleagues? There were conversations about that, but no resolution.

Justin was frustrated by the lack of clear communication norms at his nonprofit, in part because virtual communication was the only kind possible when working fully remotely, so he felt pressured to participate. In some cases, worker complaints about excess communication and meetings became an opportunity to adjust norms. Some nonprofits had tried to normalize certain time blocks as off limits for internal meetings. Jenna, a mother who worked fully remotely, explained, “So Monday mornings are supposed to be work blocks with no meetings, and that's when you get some work done, supposedly. (laughs) And then Monday afternoons are full of meetings.” Some workers felt grateful for these initiatives because leaders had responded to their complaints about excessive time spent in meetings and because they had more concentrated work times.

Management: “Nobody is paying attention to seat time”

Managers play a prominent role in implementing workplace norms, and positive, constructive management tends to result in higher employee well-being and job satisfaction and can reduce intentions to leave an organization compared to passive and negative supervision tactics (Ding, Ren, and Lin 2024; Robert and Vandenberghe 2022; Sungailė et al. 2024). Many participants stated that their managers shaped their everyday experiences. Jeff, a father with a fully remote job, explained, “I think at least half of work culture is greatly influenced by who your manager is. And I've been fortunate that every manager I've ever had cared about me. Other people don't feel as supported by their manager.” Active and positive management, as described by Jeff, can help employees feel aligned and committed to overall organization goals (Pianese, Errichiello, and da Cunha 2023).

About half of participants were in management or leadership positions (52%). Many felt that their roles as managers could help make up for the lack of adequate work arrangement-related policy and culture at their organizations. Remote managers often seek to fill these gaps by supporting the social climate of a team, establishing goals for individual employees, and promoting coworker collaboration

(Bell, McAlpine, and Hill 2023; Gohoungodji et al. 2023). Some supervisors had learned appropriate management strategies for employees who worked at home largely through trial and error. Mark, a father who worked fully remotely, explained, “I’ve had to get clearer on expectations around how time is managed and how to use your time. I’ve had folks struggle to meet outcomes or with the level of ambiguity and flexibility in our work. So, I’ve attempted to help with structure.” Remote leaders often develop personalized approaches based on employee preferences and the challenges that individuals face (Ding, Ren, and Lin 2024; Pianese et al. 2023). This can require managers to be more proactive than when they worked in-person and can be time-intensive.

Many participants felt that given the lack of regular face-to-face interaction, trust was the basis of a good relationship between an employee and a supervisor in a remote context. When working at home, relationship building and trust are important for employee satisfaction and for overall team function because these can help reduce isolation and miscommunication among remote workers (Asatiani and Norstrom 2023; Bell et al. 2023; Gohoungodji et al. 2023; Pianese et al. 2023). When participants felt trusted to operate independently, they also felt more valued by their managers. Maura, a mother with a fully remote job, stated, “It [working at home] feels a little more respectful, in the sense that it’s not micromanage-y. We can really focus on just the work and our deliverables.” Many participants felt that their supervisors were more focused on tangible outputs and responsibilities rather than the exact number of hours completed or when those hours occurred. From the managerial perspective, several participants explained that they wanted their employees to enjoy the flexibility of their work arrangements. So, if job performance was adequate, closely tracking them was not necessary. Kim was a mother with a fully remote management job. She explained,

My general feeling is to trust people to work where and when they want. I think one of my mantras as a manager, and I hope one of our team mantras, is use your flexibility. I don’t miss any school events. That’s important to me...One of my colleagues, every time she takes a kid to a doctor’s appointment or goes to volunteer in their class, she always feels like she needs to make up the time. I’m always telling her that it’s really not necessary. Like our job is to get the job done. And nobody’s paying attention to seat time.

Many managers, such as Kim, felt that if their team performance was sufficient, then employees should be allowed to utilize the flexibility of their mode of work. Generating such an environment within their teams provided benefits for nonprofits because employees felt trusted and supported, reaffirming attachments to the organization (Pianese et al. 2023; Gohoungodji et al. 2023).

The extent to which participants, who were all parents, felt supported by their organizations was influenced by whether they felt their managers were family-friendly or not. Many referred to whether their managers were parents themselves when describing their work experiences. Paige, a mother with a hybrid job, explained, “My boss is very flexible. Not that people aren't flexible if they're not parents, but she *is* also a parent. Her kids are the same age as mine. And that has been really nice because she's in the same boat [as me].” Many working parents felt an inherent camaraderie with managers who were also parents. Tessa, a mother with a fully remote job, stated of her manager, “She just sort of gets it. I don’t have to do as much over-explaining.” Positive management experiences could lead employees to feel that their nonprofit, in general, held family-friendly values. Adam, a father with a fully remote job, explained, “My boss respects the evening time. He has his own children and family. I've had a very family-friendly experience working with our organization.” Supporting employed parents with management strategies that respected their parenting status helped mothers and fathers feel secure in using their flexibility, both to accomplish their jobs but also as needed for their families.

At mixed-arrangement organizations, managers had to navigate potential differences in modes of work between employees that they managed while ensuring overall team function. These supervisors also had to contend with the physical limitations of office space, as discussed previously. Because of limited space and the need to coordinate when workers were in the office, some managers had designated a day of the week for their team to be in-person, as described by Arielle in the prior section. She further explained, “I want at least one day a week where everyone has facetime together. I realized that we do need at least one solid anchor team meeting and time together. I've noticed it’s important for them to [work in-person together] just to feel connected to the organization.” From her perspective, having regular

in-person collaborations reinforced positive camaraderie among Arielle's employees and helped to reify their connections to the overall mission of the nonprofit.

Supervisors at fully remote organizations did not have the option to regularly gather employees in person and had few opportunities for spontaneous interactions with supervisees. To compensate for this, these managers saw regularly scheduled meetings as vital touchpoints for their teams. Beth, a mother with a fully remote job, explained,

What I have learned as I've led several teams in remote work is that meetings are actually really important. So, my direct reports meet with each other, and we meet all together, and they meet with me individually. When we meet as a full team, we spend a good deal of time doing team-building exercises. So, it could be research, or it could be our organizational goals for the year. I go through 'where does our team fit in here, and how do each of you contribute.'

Beth noted that her goals with these meetings included both supporting interactions between her employees and reinforcing how the work that they did was connected to the overarching mission of the nonprofit. This kind of connection building speaks to several worker concerns from the prior section, that it could be difficult to build and maintain bonds with coworkers in a remote environment. Similarly to Beth, Emma, a mother with a fully remote job, stated,

I really try to hold sacred the one-on-one weekly check-ins with each person that I directly manage. Not only for relationship building, but also for authentic connection. But also, to have insight into the quality of their work, what they're doing, or do they have questions, or giving feedback.

These proactive management strategies not only improve team function but also bolster employees' social connections and alignment with the organization (Gohoungodji et al. 2023; Pianese et al. 2023; Svensson and Wiksell 2021). This reinforces the idea that while employee isolation is possible in remote workplace, management strategies such as these can potentially reduce isolation and even increase a sense of belonging and connectedness among employees.

While many managers noted the successes of their supervisees, a minority had experienced performance issues with employees who worked at home. Kathryn, a mother with a hybrid job, had found it challenging to help one of her teams meet required deadlines. She explained,

I have had some doubts about the productivity of some of that team, to be perfectly honest. And that's the first time I've had that experience with any remote team. Every other remote team I've

had, we've been in constant contact, and we're in a ton of meetings together. I don't have a ton of contact with this team naturally. So, I have to more specifically do outreach to them to make sure that they are staying on task. But that's not my natural tendency.

The contrast of this experience with her other, more productive teams highlighted the importance of regular interactions between supervisors and remote employees. At mixed-arrangement organizations, some managers felt that there was a misguided tendency among leaders to revert to in-person work when an employee who worked at home struggled. Arielle explained, “There have been times where we've had a poor performer on the team, someone not doing their job, some project not moving forward. And there's this impulse to be like, ‘they just need to work in the office more.’ Well, that's not the solution necessarily.” Instead, managers more often sought to improve employee performance through intentional communication and development of a clearer structure, as Mark referenced at the beginning of this subsection. According to most managers, deliberate supervisor support was most effective for creating a more positive remote employee performance.

Hours & Responsiveness: “That’s not working remotely, that’s adult babysitting”

The exact amount and timing of work hours varied for participants because they often had some degree of autonomy over their schedule. Closely related were norms of responsiveness, or how attentive employees were expected to be to messages and requests. As previously described, participants sometimes felt overwhelmed when trying to keep up with multiple high-volume information channels. These feelings of pressure are informed by ideal worker norms that emphasize having strong commitments to employers and prioritizing these commitments, something that can be demonstrated by responding quickly to messages (Kossek et al. 2021; Davies and Frink 2014; Minnotte and Minnotte 2021). Norms about work hours and responsiveness were also influenced by the communication and management norms as well as any formal policies that nonprofits had regarding hours and communication.

At some organizations, there were clear policies for hours (e.g., 9 am to 5 pm in their respective time zones), while other participants described long-established informal norms around typical working

hours. Some organizations had formalized policy or informal norms regarding “core hours” when all employees were expected to be responsive, often from 10 am to 3 pm or similar hours. Many employees were expected to consistently update their digital calendars so that colleagues could easily reach them. Within these common parameters, participants often described being able to easily shift what hours of the day they worked and being able to create schedules that functioned well for them. Scott, a father with a fully remote job, stated, “My organization trusts people to do their work. And it's more important that people are doing their work than, like, ‘Hey, you need to be logged in from X time to X time.’” As parents, many felt this flexibility was invaluable in facilitating their family routines and the needs of their children.

Yet some employees were still subject to responsiveness norms that emphasized quickly replying to any requests or messages. Abiding by these norms enabled workers to both prove their commitments to their jobs and helped justify the continuation of their flexibility by showing that they could maintain adequate job performances while working at home. Tessa, a mother with a fully remote job, explained, “I'm really expected to be able to respond to things. So, if I'm running errands with my kids or doing [school] drop-off, I still have my phone with Teams on it so I can respond quickly. So, I think being present is very much like the norm.”

Participants subject to these norms of quick responsiveness sometimes felt frustrated by the seeming lack of trust in remote workers. Grace, a mother with a fully remote job, explained that several managers at her nonprofit had regularly micromanaged employees working at home, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic. She stated, “I talked to a staff member who was being told they needed to send a Teams message when they were walking away from their computer. And that's a red flag for me. That's not working remotely, that's adult babysitting.” When nonprofits did not have clear policies around hours or responsiveness, a culture of 24/7 responsiveness often developed. For participants, this could be an exhausting standard to try to maintain. This could also erode trust between colleagues because if someone did not respond quickly, then it may be assumed that they weren't actively working.

When organizations sought to normalize more limited responsiveness, participants sometimes felt that they could curb 24/7 responsiveness tendencies. Kerry, a mother with a fully remote job, explained,

There's definitely a lot of respect for people setting their own schedule or setting their work hours. But I have people that I work with across the organization who send emails late at night or [who] work in the evening. And I think they have the total right to do that. But I think that they don't have the expectation that they're going to get a response. I think that's kind of an unspoken thing that if you send emails at 9 pm, I'm not going to respond to you until 8 o'clock in the morning.

Notably, Kerry felt confident that she was not expected to reply to late messages, and as a result, she did not feel the need to monitor messages late in the evening. But employees often felt compelled to monitor work messages when they did not feel secure enough to ignore these messages. They sometimes felt pressured to respond merely by receiving message notifications, even after reassurance from supervisors that they were not expected to reply. Alice explained that as a manager, she had come to recognize that even just receiving messages outside of normal hours evoked stress among her employees. She explained,

We had a whole discussion with the supervisors. They were like, 'well I'll email them [employees] and tell them, don't worry about it, or don't read it until the next day.' And I was like, 'look that was my thought too. But people get a certain feeling when it [work notifications] pings.' Like when they see it. And even if they don't read it, or they read it but don't respond, it's still a thing now that is there. So, we're really trying to encourage people to move away from the 'I'm going email you, but you don't have to work late.' We're really trying to push people to use Schedule Send. And really try to confine communications to work hours.

From a management perspective, it was easy to tell employees to ignore any communications received outside of work hours. However, receiving these communications could be stressful and distracting for employees, regardless, illustrating the impacts of technostress and ideal worker norms that encourage responsiveness (Gemmano et al. 2023; Minnotte and Minnotte 2021). Alice's nonprofit was trying to enforce a norm of not sending communication outside of typical hours, but they had stopped short of creating a formal policy. This example highlights the potential limitations of encouraging behavior via workplace norms versus the potential impact of a formal policy that removes the guesswork and pressure on the part of employees in these situations.

Conclusion

This chapter has elucidated the various positive and negative impacts of remote work arrangements both for nonprofits and employees. As proposed by scholars and identified in pre-pandemic literature, nonprofits appeared to gain benefits organizationally from the employee-level impacts of remote work arrangements (Allen et al. 2013; Bal and Izak 2021; Carlson et al. 2010; Hacker Martin and MacDonnell 2012). Namely, employee alignment and attachment to organizations were strengthened by allowing flexible arrangements. This included both securing commitments among current employees and improving prospects for recruiting new workers. Beyond the initial allowance of flexible work, fully remote nonprofits and their employees arguably benefited more clearly than those with mixed-work arrangements. In reference to workplace policies and norms related to working at home, employees at fully remote organizations largely emphasized the positive impacts of their arrangements. Those at mixed-arrangement organizations expressed a mixture of positive and negative sentiments. These worker-centered findings are an initial exploration of the post-pandemic impacts of remote work in nonprofits and indicate the continued importance of work flexibility to employees who are thinking about their future trajectories in the sector (Kuenzi et al. 2021; Holgersson & Hvenmark 2023).

However, the nature of remote work in the nonprofit sector is far from settled and many employees, primarily those at mixed-arrangement organizations, indicated ongoing concerns about work flexibility policies and norms within their nonprofits. Nonprofits are often beholden to employee commitment and feelings of alignment, so what bodes negatively for employees is likely to generate organizational challenges (Chapman et al. 2023; Gee et al. 2023). Over time, leaders may find that implementation of flexible arrangements is not enough to secure organizational benefits. Addressing negative employee sentiments with responsive policies and norms may be required to reap the full potential benefits of flexible arrangements at both the organization and employee levels. This chapter has shed light on how nonprofits have implemented remote work. In the following chapters, I focus further on how participants experienced these arrangements as employees.

CHAPTER 3: FLEXIBILITY TRADE-OFFS: REMOTE WORK AMONG US PARENTS

Introduction

Boundary blurriness or a lack of separation between work and family can be a negative and stressful experience among parents who work at home (Gemmano et al. 2023; Kangas, Pensar, and Rousi 2023; Karjalainen 2023). This is in part because work and family are assumed to be physically, temporally, and mentally distinct areas of life (Nippert-Eng 2008) and good workers are expected to be singularly devoted to their jobs (Davies and Frink 2014; Kossek et al. 2021). Chung (2022) and others have found that when parents have flexible work arrangements, such as remote work, they tend to engage further in ideal worker norms. This can lead to parents who work at home overworking or spending more time and effort on job responsibilities than they otherwise would have (Chung and Van der Horst 2018; Parry 2025; de Laat 2025). This flexibility paradox is well documented, yet the nuanced motivations among remote working parents who overwork and their own perspectives on this topic remain unclear. The notion of self-exploitation among remote working parents is closely related to the flexibility paradox (de Laat 2025). Some parents may push themselves to try to have it all by simultaneously adhering to normative ideas of being a good worker and a good parent when working at home (de Laat 2025). Because both sets of norms demand enormous time and effort from parents, this can lead to exhausting, overly strenuous routines (de Laat 2025).

In this chapter, I focus on how parents who worked at home negotiated between the demands of their jobs and families. I contribute post-pandemic nuance to both the flexibility paradox (Chung 2022) and to the idea that remote working parents self-exploit because of competing devotions to their job and family (de Laat 2025). I find that parents were aware of their tendencies to overwork and of the difficulties of boundaries being blurred between employment and family. Despite these challenges, most were also staunchly in favor of maintaining their remote work arrangements. Parents anticipated facing challenges in any mode of work, and they evaluated the difficulties of working at home in this context. They felt as if the compromises, or trade-offs, of working at home were worth the family-related benefits they gained. Parents also did not passively accept the challenges of working at home. Over time, they

developed strategies and structures to mitigate these challenges, and taking these actions helped remote work feel more sustainable for many parents. As a result, the “flexibility trade-offs” were acceptable for most parents, and the vast majority aspired to continue working at home. While they acknowledged the difficulties of remote work, parents simultaneously felt that the downsides were manageable and modest compared to the family-related gains that they experienced.

How parents acclimate to working remotely, particularly when they have worked at home for several years or more, has been underexplored in prior research. Much of the literature has focused on cross-sectional measures of how remote workers integrate or segment their job and family boundaries (Cobb et al. 2025; Reinke et al. 2023) or their personal preferences and motivations when working at home (Borghouts et al. 2022). These findings provide important context on these topics, but do not capture the dynamic nature of learning to work remotely or the agency of workers to shape their own experiences. My findings highlight how parents holistically evaluate and actively approach the challenges of working at home. I explore the following research questions:

- 1) How do parents describe and feel about the challenges they face as remote workers in the post-pandemic era?
- 2) How, if at all, do parents seek to mitigate the challenges of working at home?
- 3) And how do parents' efforts to manage these challenges contribute to their feelings about their work arrangements?

Boundaries Between Work and Family

In this section, I describe what parents readily acknowledged and dissected as flexibility trade-offs, or the challenges they navigated while working at home. Parents had to manage time-related boundaries between work and family, spatial borders or the physical space and objects surrounding them at home, mental boundaries, as well as relational boundaries or interpersonal interactions (Nippert-Eng 2008; Ollier-Malaterre et al. 2019; Otonkorpi-Lehtoranta et al. 2022; Shirmohammadi et al. 2023). Parents often felt obligated to stretch the limits of their personal capacities and boundary preferences by caring for sick children while also working at home, a prevalent example of self-exploitation in this

sample. These trade-offs, or the challenges of this mode of work, consistently pushed parents to negotiate between commitments to their families and their jobs (de Laat 2025). In the latter half of this chapter, I will describe how parents largely saw these trade-offs as well worth managing to reap the benefits of working remotely.

Physical & Mental Boundaries: “There’s something about being in your damn house all the time”

One of the most prominent trade-offs discussed by participants was the long-term experience of blurred boundaries between family and work. Parents often commented on the connection between their physical and mental boundaries when working at home. For mothers and fathers, this blurring flowed in both directions between work and family. They described the daily stress of having overflowing laundry baskets sitting nearby while they participated in virtual meetings. Work obligations could also feel constantly within reach. Parents often felt compelled to respond to work messages while feeding their children breakfast and some had gotten into the habit of logging on to work after eating dinner. Some even wished for a return to commuting (at least occasionally) so that they could have clearer physical and mental transitions between family and work. The experience of navigating physical and mental boundaries varied by parents’ physical living spaces and, to some degree, by parent gender.

The configuration of living space had a daily impact on the physical and mental boundaries of remote working parents. Some parents mitigated the potential for blurred boundaries by taking advantage of the physical layout of their space. Those who had a dedicated workspace in a separate room of their home rejoiced at being able to close a door and physically separate themselves from the rest of their home. This physical divide allowed for more mental separation between their job and family responsibilities. By entering or leaving their home offices, parents could physically signal the beginning and end of a workday, and this allowed for more mental separation between jobs and family. Meanwhile, parents who lived in small spaces and those who worked in communal areas of their homes struggled with the visual reminders of their competing work and family obligations. This could make it more difficult to mentally immerse themselves in their work.

More mothers than fathers described feeling bothered by the lack of a clear spatial boundary when working from home. Mia, a mother with a fully remote job, shared,

Because we live in an apartment, I'm working from my living room. So, I never get a break from the mental load of parenthood. There's laundry I could be doing, there's dishes in the sink, and there's toys next to me that should be cleaned up. I think that's hard. When you're physically somewhere else, you don't think about that stuff as much.

Women more often than men noted being disturbed while trying to work by reminders of chores. This aligns with pandemic-era findings that mothers may be more apt to notice and comment on the household tasks surrounding them while working at home (Karjalainen 2023; Otonkorpi-Lehtoranta et al. 2022).

Joellen, a fully remote mother, explained,

If my house is messy, it's really hard to work. Then that creates this friction of like, 'Oh, my God, all the things that need to be done.' Or just the constant reminders of like, 'Oh, my God! Laundry hasn't been done in days.'

Mothers may have noticed these tasks more often than fathers because of their tendency to remain responsible for the cognitive load, or the planning and preparation of household labor, when working from home. Notably, mothers did not necessarily neglect their job responsibilities to attend to these household needs. But they did feel stressed by these visual reminders and said that they had difficulty concentrating when unfinished household tasks were physically near their workspaces, challenges that fathers in this sample did not often state.

Instead, a few fathers described deliberately avoiding household chores as a strategy to create separation between jobs and family. Jasper, a father with a hybrid job, described the differences between how he and his female co-parent, who also worked remotely, approached working at home:

During the workday, I generally won't do house stuff. I mean, I'll throw in a load of laundry once in a while. But I try not to get too distracted by cleaning, deep cleaning, or anything like that. However, my partner does. She'll write a report, and then she'll go and do the dishes and stuff. But I think that's just part of her own anxiety about things being left out or not being super clean.

Jasper's comments show a distinctly different attitude about the simultaneous demands of family and work than those of the mothers above. While Jasper noticed things that needed to be done around his home, these did not seem to distress him in the ways described by Joellen and Mia. This indicates that he

may not have felt responsible for this labor in the same way that his female partner or Joellen and Mia did. Similarly, Luke, a father with a fully remote job, stated,

I *could* probably do some of those things during the day. But for me, it's hard to shift my attention back and forth. I'm focused on work stuff, and now I need to go do some random thing, and then go do [more] work stuff. It's just hard for me to get in and out of all those things. So, it's easier for me to just keep them separate.

Luke and Jasper both explained their avoidance of household chores as a personal preference, indicating both their personal preferences for boundary management, but also a potentially gendered distinction in how physical household responsibilities could mentally weigh on remote working mothers versus fathers. Many mothers saw attending to at least some household needs as inevitable when working at home because of their proximity to such tasks. However, Jasper and Luke were in the minority in that most fathers working at home did not entirely avoid doing household chores during their workday. In fact, most mothers and fathers described doing laundry, preparing meals, cleaning the dishes, running brief errands, and completing light cleaning while working at home. Many felt that the time they could make incremental progress on household chores throughout their workday in ways that were akin to taking a break at an in-person office. How they learned to negotiate between making progress on their personal to-do lists while maintaining their work obligations is discussed in a later section.

In general, both fathers and mothers working at home commented on the struggle of toggling mentally between job and family needs during the day. Several described it as jarring to be pulled into family life while doing their jobs or vice versa. Nolan, a father with a fully remote job, explained, “If I’m with my kids, I don’t want to be answering emails, and I don’t want to be working. If I’m working, I want to be doing my job. I want to be fully invested in whatever I’m doing at that time.” The blurring of mental boundaries could make it difficult for parents to feel like they were succeeding at either working or parenting. As Lily, a mother with a hybrid job stated, “My attention’s fifty-fifty all the time. I feel intense guilt that every parent does, that I’m not doing good enough at my job, and I’m not paying enough attention to my kid.” Lily and Nolan both indicate that these difficulties with mental boundaries flowed in both directions, sometimes making it more difficult to do their jobs or to be a parent.

Many parents in this sample saw their competing devotions to their jobs and their families as a tug-of-war for their attention and time when working at home. This complicates the notion of the flexibility paradox or the idea that parents mostly use flexibility to meet job demands (Chung 2022) and more so aligns with de Laat's (2025) notion of dual devotions that remote working parents pursue both ideal worker and parenting norms. Their easily permeable physical and mental boundaries meant that parents working at home could feel pulled in either or both directions. Joe, a father with a fully remote job, stated,

I think there's something about just being in your damn house all the time. This transition of, now I'm at work, and when I get up from the chair, I'm not at work anymore...I think physical space matters. So that blurriness is uncomfortable sometimes. It can feel like you're not able to let go of work. Or, on some days, it can make it feel like you can't really engage at work. Like you're more in your home space than you are in your workspace.

Many parents felt similarly to Joe that these boundaries were a two-way street. Sometimes the demands of family life encroached on parents' abilities to attend to their jobs. At other times, their jobs felt omnipresent because their workspaces were always within reach.

These findings add new nuance to the literature that has primarily focused on how job demands can overtake family time and space (Chung 2022; de Laat 2025). There were some gender differences between mothers and fathers regarding the extent to which they commented on household chores as visually distracting. This aligns with prior literature, which has posited that mothers and fathers navigate boundaries in distinctly different ways (Karjalainen 2023; Otonkorpi-Lehtoranta et al. 2022). Yet, overall, parents similarly saw the blurriness of their mental and physical boundaries as difficult to manage both in relation to their work and family responsibilities.

Overworking: "I am doing more than I would have done in an office"

Another significant trade-off or concession related to parent work arrangements was the common experience of overworking or working excessively. The flexibility paradox posits that parents working at home overwork because they have increased abilities to do so as a result of their work flexibility (Chung 2022). Employment norms assume that good workers will prioritize their work over other commitments

and illustrate their devotion to employers (Kossek et al. 2021). Many parents in this sample did feel a sense of obligation and loyalty to their organization, but I find that their motivations to overwork went beyond adhering to good worker norms.

In the nonprofit sector, there is widespread pressure among employees to achieve organizational missions through tireless devotion to work (Dupret and Pultz 2021). As discussed in the prior chapter, many employees were motivated by the mission and values of their nonprofit. Subsequently, when working at home, they feared failing to support these goals if they did not work hard enough. I also find that parents were highly motivated to overwork to ensure that their remote work arrangements could remain in place. For some, their work arrangements were contingent on having adequate or even above average job performance. Others felt so grateful to have flexible arrangements that they translated these feelings of gratitude and reliance on these arrangements into extra effort and time spent on their jobs. All these motivations contributed to parents' experiences and explanations of overworking.

When asked directly about the challenges of working at home as a parent, many described overworking, but few overtly labeled these experiences with this term. Instead, they explained it in relation to their own personal struggles to detach from their jobs and their natural tendencies to want to prove themselves. Benjamin explained that he felt internally driven to accomplish as much as possible when working remotely:

I don't feel like I am discouraged from taking breaks, [but] I feel like I am advantaged by not doing so. For better or worse...I don't feel as though I couldn't take time away from the keyboard if I wanted to; I just rarely find myself wanting to. There's also the advantage that if I get more done, I feel like I have accomplished more with my day. And I'm less likely to feel the need, real or otherwise, to return [later], to do more [work] after [work] hours.

Many parents, such as Benjamin, internalized their overwork experiences as related to their personal work ethics and desires to succeed. Yet these personal views were heavily informed by shared norms of what it meant to be a good worker. Benjamin even briefly acknowledged that his “need” to work in the evenings may or may not be a real necessity, acknowledging that this self-imposed pressure was not necessarily connected to the actual expectations of his job.

Indeed, parents rarely described instances of falling behind on their job responsibilities. Instead, they seemed to feel that because they worked at home, they *could* always be working. This speaks to the flexibility paradox (Chung 2022) because their increased flexibility enabled parents to feel as if they *could*, and therefore *should*, work more. Joellen, a fully remote mother, explained that she regularly worked in the evenings:

It's anywhere from just answering a couple of emails to like, I really didn't get work done today because I've been in meetings all day. Then it could be like two hours [of work being done at night]. But I also have to go to bed so I can be up for the next day. I would say not more than two hours [of work at night], unless it's a really big push at work. At least two nights a week. If we're being honest about how much work I need to do, it should be every night.

Joellen described feeling the need to work late every evening because so much of her work time was taken up with meetings rather than making progress on her work tasks. However, she did not report having any conflict or tension with her supervisor or colleagues about her job performance. It remained unclear exactly how much she “needed” to spend excess time on her job or not. But the pressure that she and other parents felt to do as much work as possible was evident.

Beyond the flexibility paradox explanations of overwork, some parents in this sample also felt motivated to do excess work so that they could maintain their flexible work arrangements. Some described the longevity of their work arrangements as being contingent on having an average or better work performance. This was more common among employees at hybrid organizations than those at fully remote nonprofits. Working at home could easily lead to overworking because of the perceived need to prove themselves to maintain their work arrangements. Kathryn, a mother with a hybrid job, was determined to prove her worthiness as a way to retain her work arrangements:

Even though I have flexibility [of working remotely] I still hold myself to this standard of, I am going to work really hard and make sure that you know that I am doing everything I possibly can to succeed in this role. And [I will] continue to appreciate the flexibility that you give me, [because] it's the only way I can function [as a working parent].

For many parents such as Kathryn, their work flexibility felt like a necessity. This was in part because flexibility could reduce feelings of overwhelm among parents. Feeling overwhelmed or overburdened is both common and damaging for working parents, creating a sense of failure and continuous stress (Ren et

al. 2024; Kavitha et al. 2022; Forbes, Lamar, and Bornstein 2021; Hubert and Aujoulat 2018). Among some parents their mode of work felt like a requirement to function because it helped manage and lower their daily stress associated. Feeling that they needed to have work flexibility made them highly motivated to prove their dedication to employers.

Among parents who felt a heavy reliance on their mode of work, some felt that overproducing was simply a by-product of gaining so much flexibility. For instance, Megan, a mother with a fully remote job, felt both reliant on her work arrangements and conflicted about the extent to which she overworked:

I try to convince myself that I have a great work from home [arrangement] because I take care of the kids. But I almost overcompensate in my work. I feel like I do more than I ever did when I went into the office. I'm overproducing. And when I say over, I am doing more than I would have done in an office setting. But I convinced myself it's okay, because I'm home, and I get to do all these other things.

Megan and others felt that they needed remote work arrangements as employed parents. Because of this perceived need, parents often viewed the flexibility paradox as more of a flexibility trade-off. This parent-centered perspective reveals additional, complicated motivations to overwork among remote workers. In other words, their continued need for flexibility drove parents to overwork when working at home.

Because they viewed overwork as an individual problem, most parents felt it was up to them to manage this challenge. However, some parents acknowledged that their excess work was performative and that their organizations could play a larger role in helping remote workers handle these pressures. Kayleigh, a mother with a fully remote job, wished her nonprofit had clearer expectations for employees working at home:

I call myself a recovering workaholic. That's just a part of my nature. There have been times when I've worked myself even harder to prove that I'm doing the work. Working late at night on stuff, just trying to prove something. But I think if there were more structures and systems in place, like expectations for how we [should] work [remotely], I feel like I wouldn't have had to go through that time of trying to prove that I'm doing work.

Some nonprofits implemented clear policies about responsiveness and work hours, while others had few guardrails. In Kayleigh's opinion, nonprofits could curb the inherent expectation of overwork by creating

more transparent expectations. Other parents acknowledged that constant responsiveness did not often impact job performance. Fiona, a mother with a fully remote job, stated,

Most of the time, if I didn't respond to a Slack in the evening, it would actually be fine... I don't necessarily think that I feel like a responsibility to be available, but there's a little bit of that sense of like, I just need to make sure that I don't have any *important* Slack messages. Even though I know that most of the time it could wait.

Despite widespread descriptions of overwork, most parents in this sample felt that these struggles were their individual problem to solve. Parents often attributed their desire to do excessive work as being related to their own insecurities or imperfect boundaries. This created the impression that it was not only their fault that they overworked but also that it was their responsibility to unlearn these habits. But because these experiences are influenced by good worker norms, some scholars have taken a stance similar to Kayleigh and have advocated for organizations to support employees with boundary management and overwork challenges (Kangas et al. 2023)

Caring for Sick Children: “Trying to focus and watch your child is a new level of hell”

Parenting norms, generally anticipate parents either being at home with children, where they will be fully attuned to children's needs, or being at work, where they are physically separated from child-rearing. Likewise, ideal worker norms and workplace policies assume employees will give their undivided attention to their jobs and do not account for parenting and work taking place in the same space. Yet very often, parents working at home experienced various instances of simultaneous job and family demands. This section centers on how parents grappled with the useful but challenging ability to work remotely while their sick children were at home. This incredibly common scenario may seem straightforward given that these parents had managed their jobs and caregiving simultaneously during the COVID-19 lockdowns. However, their pandemic experiences did not inherently change how difficult it was to have sick children at home while parents worked. These experiences had set a difficult precedent, if parents technically *could* juggle these responsibilities, they should continue doing so.

Parents often felt pressured to continue working when their children were home sick, in part because of workplace norms. Mothers and fathers frequently referred to how their colleagues and

supervisors handled ill children when explaining their own approach. Because the norm was often to “power through” when sick children were home, parents felt compelled to follow suit even when these situations were exhausting and stressful. Jenna, a mother with a fully remote job, lamented,

If they were sick and we were all working out of the home, it would be like, ‘oh sorry, I can't come into work today. I have a sick kid.’ I feel like that would be respected, and you would get time at home with your sick kid. And you wouldn't feel so pulled to do it all. I haven't seen anybody at my work be like, ‘my kids are sick I'm off today.’ It's always, ‘my kids are sick, I won't be as responsive.’

In the absence of a clear organizational policy, which many nonprofits lacked, workplace norms emerged that encouraged simultaneous work and caregiving for ill children. Vincent felt that dealing with his children being sick was complicated by his and his co-parent's work arrangements:

I think it creates a sort of ongoing mental fatigue of trying to figure it out when the kids are sick. And I think that's just working and parenting, whether you're remote or not. But if I were in person, it creates some very black and white decisions. Like someone has to call out [of work] today, who's it going to be? With both of us being remote, it's much more complex to figure it out. It's both an opportunity and a weight to carry.

As Vincent and Jenna both expressed, handling sick children when working in-person could be a relatively straightforward situation. It was not possible to watch ill children if you worked in-person. For remote working parents, this same situation forced ideal worker norms and parenting norms into direct conflict. Both sets of norms demanded full and undivided attention.

Few organizations provided clear policies to support parents caregiving for sick children and in some cases, parents felt incentivized to push their personal capacities to conserve paid time off (PTO). When parents had limited amounts of PTO, some felt that their work arrangements provided an opportunity to avoid using precious PTO on caring for sick children in favor of conserving it for leisurely use. While it may not be anyone's first choice to try to balance their jobs with caring for sick children, some parents wanted to strategically avoid using PTO when possible. Vincent explained,

I wouldn't want to use my vacation time because [having] the option of leveraging the remoteness [of my work] to figure out a way to not use the vacation time is just much more [appealing]. My partner's paid out for vacation time she doesn't use, so that's an incentive. So, the incentives [to use PTO or not] are balanced differently [when working at home].

Rather than he or his partner using their PTO to care for their sick children, Vincent was more interested in either using their time off for a family vacation or alternatively, cashing out his partner's unused PTO. Notably, Vincent went on to explain that his organization had created a specific five-day-per-year sick time policy to address the issue of remote workers being reluctant to use paid time off:

We realized people were trying to work through being sick because they didn't want to use their one bundle of PTO for being sick. Because instead of it being a black and white [decision] like, are you healthy enough to go to the office or not, it was this much mushier [decision making process]. Like, 'oh I can still make some meetings.' So, we gave people sick time which they can also use as caregivers...And folks have used it.

Vicent's organization attempted to deal with the mushiness of this decision-making process by allocating additional time off for parents to potentially provide care to ill children. Similarly, a few parents in this sample had access to unlimited paid time off, which they utilized to various degrees when children were sick.

Because of their COVID-19 experiences, parents were accustomed, if not comfortable, with both working and watching their children. When it came to the logistics of having children home sick while they did their jobs, parents described various strategies. Some tried to align their children's naps with important meetings; others reduced their workload for the day as much as possible in anticipation of their child's needs. Chris, a fully remote father, stated, "If a kid is sick, most of the time they'll just stay home, and we'll work around them. Because it was so normal for so many years to just have at least one kid in the house all the time [during COVID]." Parents recalled that the pandemic lockdown had been a negative experience. But it had also somewhat desensitized them to the stresses of simultaneously working and caregiving. Mark, a fully remote father, explained,

The impact of taking a day [off of work] feels like more of a headache than trying to do both [work and childcare]...I also think that it's probably a little bit of a learned habit from COVID times. There were entire weeks where school would be closed, because one kid had a positive COVID test. I just had to do both, there was no other option. So, I think probably it's a bit of a learned assumption on my end now [to balance childcare and working].

Parents such as Chris and Mark felt that the pandemic had normalized children being home while they worked. These prior experiences appeared to mostly normalize the stress of these situations, rather than making it less strenuous to work while providing childcare. Kayleigh, a mother with a fully remote job,

explained, “I feel more pressure [when working at home] to try to balance those two things [work and childcare]. I feel like I have no excuse not to get stuff done. (laughs) Even though it's been like a really hard week with a sick, teething child.” In the post-pandemic era, working and caring for children at the same time has generally not become any easier for mothers and fathers. Nevertheless, because of their prior experiences, parents had somewhat normalized this form of self-exploitation that stretched their personal capacities.

However, having sick children at home while they worked was also viewed more positively by some parents. For several parents who had previously worked in-person, they felt that working at home reduces conflicts between children frequently being ill and them being viewed as reliable workers. Denise, a mother with a fully remote job, recalled that at her previous in-person job, her colleagues had been frustrated by her missing work when her young daughter was sick. She explained, “Because I'm remote, at least while my daughter is napping [when home sick], I can still get a lot of work done. So, I might request a half day [off], but it doesn't mean the whole day is lost. The flexibility of that has been very nice compared to what I had before.” Parents of young children, such as Denise, frequently stated the difficulty of managing their children’s minor but frequent illnesses. Working at home while caring for a young, sick child was difficult, but it helped parents avoid drawing negative attention from colleagues. These parents often felt that their attention was necessarily divided on these days and that they would inevitably be stressed and exhausted as a result. At the same time, being able to watch their children rather than frequently miss work was an imperfect solution that they were grateful to have, despite these challenges.

Among parents whose co-parents were also remote employees, there were opportunities to share the burden of caregiving for ill children. However, sharing this caregiving didn’t necessarily resolve all the challenges of multitasking when a sick child was home. Tom and his female co-parent both worked fully remotely. He explained,

I think the fact that our office is our house, there's sort of an underlying feeling of like, well, if our daughter is home sick, but she's sleeping, then we can work. Or if she's home sick, one of us can hang out with her, and the other one can work. I think because there's not a physical separation between home and work, there's sort of a mental challenge to that.

For Tom and other parents, it could be difficult to feel that their attention was divided throughout their workday when children were home sick and they needed caregiving and attention sporadically. In some households where both parents were remotely employed, mothers felt that they were expected to take on the care of sick children more often than their male co-parent, echoing pandemic-era results (Lyttelton et al. 2022; Parry 2025). Fiona, who worked fully remotely, as did her male co-parent, explained,

If one of our kids is home sick, my husband is also available; he also works from home. He does not tend to take the same amount of the burden of having a kid on a Zoom call or trying to split his attention [that I do]. That's not to say that he doesn't; he does some of that. But he tends to have more phone calls throughout his day, and his calls tend to be more client-facing. He doesn't have the same kind of flexibility that I do. If I were in an office, I wouldn't have to negotiate that. It would just be a given that I'm either taking the day off to come home and be with my kid, or I'm at work and someone else is dealing with it.

Like Jenna and Vincent at the beginning of this section, Fiona referenced the idea that working at home created ambiguous situations for parents compared to an in-person job. Although both she and her husband worked at home, Fiona was more often the parent who had to navigate sharing her time and attention between work and caregiving when their child was home sick. Similar, to Tom, she explained that it was draining and difficult to be an active participant in her work Zoom meetings while also keeping an eye on her sick child.

Learning to Work Remotely

Parents generally felt that the positives of their work arrangements outweighed the negatives. However, they also developed habits and strategies to mitigate the challenges they faced. By taking actions to reduce overworking and to clarify their job and family boundaries, parents felt that these downsides could be managed and minimized. Remote employees organize their job tasks and utilize various strategies to do so, such as restricting work messages at certain times of day or having a method to prioritize job tasks (Reinke et al. 2023). To this literature, I add that there is a distinct long-term process by which remote workers self-reflect and experiment with self-management strategies. Parents in this

sample taught themselves *how* to work at home and developed a personalized approach that was optimized based on their job and family responsibilities.

About half of the parents interviewed (55%) had regularly worked remotely before the pandemic. Pre-pandemic estimates of US remote workers range from 6% (US Census Bureau 2022) to as high as 32% (Brynjolfsson et al. 2025). This wide range is due in part to a lack of standardization in how remote work is defined and wide variation in how it is measured (Brynjolfsson et al. 2025; Ropponen 2025). About 35% of parents in this sample started regularly working at home when the pandemic began in 2020. The remaining 10% began working at home after the COVID-19 lockdown, with some having less than a year of experience at the time of our interview and others as much as three years. Notably, about 35% of this sample had five years or more of experience with this work arrangement at the time of our interviews. Longitudinal measures of work arrangements are scarce (Ropponen 2025), so it is unclear how this compares with remote work across the US. The majority of participants had worked at home long enough to reflect thoughtfully on how their approach to being a remote worker had changed over time.

Most participants, regardless of their specific remote work tenure, described a trial-and-error process through which they developed habits that suited them, their jobs, and their families. Many parents specifically sought to limit, or in some cases take advantage of, blurred boundaries between work and family. Some also took steps to minimize overwork to make remote work feel more sustainable over time as they acclimated to their work arrangements. Parents illustrated their agency to manage tendencies to overwork and the dual, competing demands of work and family. For most, the flexibility trade-offs ultimately worked out in their favor because of the strategies and structures that they developed and the family-related benefits of remote work.

Lessons Learned: “Some of it is just trial and error”

Workers described learning to work at home as a process that required personal exploration and experimentation. Most had gone through a process of developing routines, a physical workspace set-up,

and other structures to manage the challenges of working at home. Over time, parents became accustomed to this mode of work, and they learned what strategies suited them personally. Colin, a father with a fully remote job, explained,

I've been working remotely for almost four years now. I feel like I've got pretty good routines set up. But it was definitely challenging at the outset to not just see my work computer over there all the time and come back to it. It definitely puts more onus on you as the individual to make sure that you have an environment that you can thrive in [when working at home]. And it gets a little bit more complicated because it's not like home is home and work is work. It's like everything is kind of smushed together.

As Colin noted, the physically isolated nature of working at home meant that both discovering the challenges to this mode of work and how to mitigate these was largely on employees as individuals to navigate. Most participants described this as a trial-and-error process that required time and effort. This learning period, in which remote workers adjust and develop a specific set of routines and skills, has been underexplored in prior literature. Previous scholars have described how remote employees ultimately manage boundaries between work and family rather than the process through which those strategies are discovered (Härtel, Hüttemann, and Müller 2023; Haun, Rimmel, and Haun 2022; Reinke et al. 2023). Here, I illustrate how workers discovered their boundary preferences over time and that they learned to manage, though not entirely erase, the challenges of remote work through their initiatives to develop supportive habits.

Parents often stated that they developed an approach to remote work that suited them and their families by experimenting with different strategies, routines, and schedules. This period of trial-and-error has not been captured in prior literature that has often focused on categorizing workers on a spectrum of integration to separation of job and family boundaries (Härtel et al. 2023; Haun et al. 2022). I find that this initial process of experimenting with personal preferences illuminates how workers come to lean towards either integration or separation of boundaries. This learning process also highlights the agency of workers to manipulate their mode of work to fit them and their families. For example, Alex, a mother with a fully remote job, explained,

I found that if I started doing house stuff [during the workday], it kind of quickly ballooned. And so sure, move the wash to the dryer. But I probably don't fold the clothes until after work. I kind of figured out which sorts of tasks I could handle for the equivalent of walking to the water cooler. I think some people during the pandemic got kind of caught up in, how do you balance all the house stuff [when working at home]...But I have my routine. And I know that at the end of the day, I'll do a quick lap [around the house]. I'll pick up all the toys. I'll pick up all the books. I'll do the dishes.

Alex stated that her routine was not an innate preference; she arrived at this by learning what tasks she could reasonably do during her workday. This adds nuance to the literature on boundary management that largely assumes that employees have innate and static preferences for boundaries between work and family (Härtel et al. 2023; Haun et al. 2022; Reinke et al. 2023; Rosengren, Bäcklander, and Palm 2024).

Among hybrid workers, this experimentation included manipulating their work arrangement schedules. Parents who worked both at home and in an office sought to maximize their efficiency and time throughout the workweek to accomplish both their work and family obligations. Arielle, a mother with a hybrid job, explained,

I like the Tuesday and Friday [work from home schedule]. Because I like [having a remote workday at] the beginning of the week and then at the end of the week. I also found that I didn't love Mondays [working] at home. When I had Mondays and Fridays at home, it got hard to have a clean break on Monday morning from the weekend. And I have two tiny children. I'm like, 'oh, my god, everything is a mess, and I kinda wanna finish that laundry I didn't do.' It's hard to move out of home time into work. And so, I really found that I liked getting into the office on Mondays. But then I also know that on Tuesday I'll be home, so I can catch up on some things if I need to.

Arielle highlighted that it was only by trying out different iterations of her schedule that she realized what functioned best for herself and her job responsibilities. Notably, she referred to these as simultaneous goals that she balanced by manipulating her schedule. This illustrates how developing an individualized approach to remote work helps parents meet their needs in both realms. Arielle and Alex both demonstrated that employees could feel empowered to manage these demands by developing routines and schedules that suited them.

Parents often framed learning to work remotely as being related to developing their personal selves, often their self-discipline. Some felt that certain personalities or types of people were better suited

to working at home because of the need to self-manage. Meg had worked at home for about five years and felt strongly that for some people this mode of work could be very beneficial. She explained,

It gives an ease [to life]. *If* you're good at time management. Not everybody is good at time management. (laughs) But if you are good at time management and you have the discipline to do a thing quickly, then [you can] get back to what you need to do [for work]. Some people get pulled into a rabbit hole, and now they want to clean the whole house. You can't do that. You can't clean your whole house. You can put in a load of laundry.

As Meg insinuated, whether employees could manage themselves was largely seen as an individual problem. Participants rarely expected their managers or organizations to support them in developing habits and routines. As briefly described in the section on overworking, some parents felt as if these experiences were a result of their own poor boundary management skills. Despite widespread overwork across the sample, parents tended to attribute these struggles to their own individual shortcomings or personalities. However, a holistic, organization-led approach to supporting employees with clear procedures, evaluations, and self-management tools is important to establishing a positive and collaborative remote work environment (Errichiello and Piceanese 2021). For example, having clear written guidance on work hours, communication, and specific job expectations. Providing employees with program management software or developing internal self-management systems could also help workers manage their time efficiently and make clear what is expected of them. Without structures such as these in place, some workers felt that in a remote environment it could be difficult to gauge whether they were keeping pace with what was expected of them, and this uncertainty could drive them to work even more.

Some parents experienced increased stress and burnout when they first began to work at home. When reflecting on their experiences, parents explained that initially they did not know what routines and structures they needed to make this mode of work feel sustainable in the long term. Burnout is a form of stress associated with employment that often accompanies experiences of overwork or extreme job demand and is characterized by feelings of overwhelm, disengagement, and incompetence (Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter 2001; Costin, Roman, and Balica 2023). Erin, a single mother with a fully remote job, explained that when she first started working at home, she had regularly overworked:

I used to just try to squeeze in an hour or two [in the evening after children were in bed] of trying to get the house reset, or trying to get some work in, or all of the above. And then I was staying up really late. My mind couldn't shut down because I wasn't giving myself time to wind down. And that [impact] was seen in my work as well as in how I was parenting my kids. So, I've really started to prioritize taking that time, unless there's some deadline [for work] that I have to meet, I try to take that time [in the evening] to read or just watch something on TV. And just reset. Because I have discovered that that's the only way we can function in this house. (laughs) Is if I reset myself a little bit.

Erin was far from alone in this experience of overwork and the stress that accompanies it. However, Erin, like many parents in this sample, had also learned to try to minimize these tendencies so that their habits were more sustainable and less damaging to their well-being.

Parents not only learned how to be efficient workers at home but also how to recognize the signs of burnout within themselves. Colin, who described the importance of routines at the beginning of this section, went on to describe his experiences with burnout:

I mean, part of it is just straight up discipline. (laughs) And learning from past experience of, like, 'oh, yeah. I can work all these crazy, long hours. But that has led to me not feeling great and burning out.' And so, part of it is experience [with working remotely], and part of it is just developing habits that support you.

Colin went on to explain that his strategies for managing boundaries, such as maintaining detailed to-do lists and keeping all his work materials in a separate area of his home, had helped him both manage and prevent potential burnout. Thus, part of how parents learned to support themselves as remote workers was by reducing their tendencies to self-exploit when working at home. This led to more sustainable habits that allowed them to function efficiently rather than succumbing to the stress of burnout.

Through the process of learning how to avoid or minimize burnout, some parents had begun to question why they had the inclination to overwork in the first place and whether they needed to overextend themselves. Nolan, a father with a fully remote job, explained,

I've learned discipline over the years. To define my [work] time. I theoretically *could* do lots more stuff and answer emails. But answering the email at 10:05 in the morning versus 10:05 the night before, it makes no difference for email return. It doesn't actually move anything forward. But that's through trial and error that I learned that. For a while, I would respond to those [late emails] and go back and forth, back and forth. And I realized, it didn't actually matter. It's performative. It doesn't actually make a difference.

Over time, Nolan had come to label overwork as unnecessary, and harmful because of the stress associated with regularly working in the evenings. Overwork was a feature of working at home for many parents to some extent. But the more experience parents gained with this mode of work, the more confident some felt in their ability to be good workers without overworking. Many parents also recognized that they needed maintainable habits if they were going to work at home for the foreseeable future. Grace, a mother with a fully remote job, stated,

I try really hard not to work at night. Not because I don't need to, but because I recognize that the burnout would be real and fast if I did that frequently...Just because my computer is there and the work needs to be done doesn't mean that I have to do it all at once. And I had to learn that very quickly, but I was fortunate enough to learn it before the pandemic.

Although Grace felt the temptation to work late at night, she also resisted this urge based on her prior experience working remotely and suffering from burnout. For Grace and many other parents, their long-term experiences had revealed important lessons. To minimize the challenges of working at home, they had to try to maintain habits and routines that protected them from the stress of overwork.

Inventing Structure: “I've learned that this is part of what makes work from home, work for me”

Many parents either leaned towards segmenting or integrating job and family boundaries when working at home, findings that align with prior literature (Cobb et al. 2025; Härtel et al. 2023; Kreiner et al. 2009). For example, several participants described transitional activities that helped signal that their workday was beginning or ending. Nolan, a father with a fully remote job, explained,

I'll do a little bit of meditation [before starting work]. I'll answer personal emails and plan my day out. Muck around on the internet, just mindlessly. And then, I have all my settings on my devices to flip to my work mode. So, then [when work hours begin] I get all that stuff. I get the notifications. And then I switch like, ‘okay, now I'm in work mode.’

These transitional activities help employees segment or more clearly distinguish boundaries between work and family (Rosengren et al. 2024). Similarly, Scott, a father with a fully remote job, had established a routine that helped him begin his day:

I've created a grounding ritual that I do in the mornings for virtual work. I've started something where I kind of am more intentional [with beginning the workday]. I take a breath, get the water or coffee that I want for the morning, settle [at my desk], make a to-do list, stand up, take a breath, and get to work.

While Scott's transition ritual was more detailed than most, his experience illustrated a common desire among interviewees to *feel* like they have moved from the sphere of family to work.

Several parents also felt that getting dressed in work attire helped segment boundaries between work and family. This "aesthetic labor" among remote workers decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Karjalainen 2023). However, in the post-pandemic era, some parents stated that it was important to feel physically prepared for their jobs. Kim, a mother with a fully remote job, explained, "I get really dressed and put on makeup. I've learned that this is part of what makes work from home, work for me. Is feeling like I've got my game on." Likewise, Susan, a mother who had worked fully remotely for over five years, stated, "I've always been the type of person that, I get up and get dressed every day. I have to put on shoes; I have to put on pants. I've never been a work in your jammies [type of person] or anything like that." While clothing aesthetics do not appear to influence employee productivity (Bartosiak, Loibl, and Hillery 2024), getting dressed was helpful for defining the bounds of remote workdays for some participants.

However, not all remote workers desired a clear separation between work and family. Some parents preferred to integrate these spheres of life to varying degrees, reiterating prior literature (Cobb et al 2025; Rose 2013; Hecht and Allen 2009). Some parents saw the ability to integrate boundaries between family and work as a potential benefit to leverage in both spheres of life. This view among parents contrasts with some previous findings that blurred or integrated boundaries often lead to overworking (Chung 2022; de Laat 2025). Instead, some parents in this sample saw blurred boundaries as an asset that they could use to accomplish their daily responsibilities as both parents and workers. For example, Vincent shifted back and forth between job and family tasks several times during a typical weekday morning. He preferred this integrative approach because it maximized his work efficiency and helped him manage the needs of his children. He explained,

At eight, I go upstairs. My son reads [in his room] and my daughter is in a room closer to me so she can interrupt me more easily. (laughs) I use the time I have before [taking the kids to school] to do whatever whack-a-mole comes up [with work] and get that out of the way while my daughter is interrupting me and whatever else is happening. Then, I take them to school. Once I'm

back, I usually have nine fifteen to eleven as my quiet focused working time. So that's when I try to do the big projects, the more complicated things, the things that really need focus and attention. So, when I come back [from dropping them off], it's a nice transition to dig into something significant [at work].

Several parents described similar maneuvers where they moved back and forth between job and family demands at different times of day. Often, around childcare arrangements. Although these routines differed from a nine-to-five in office job, many parents such as Vincent appreciate being able to better fit their work schedules to their family needs.

While employees varied in the extent to which they desired integration or separation between work and family, all of them required a physical workspace in their homes. The physical workstation or “set-up,” as many referred to it, was integral to their daily experiences because they spent so much time in these spaces. Many parents had gone through multiple evolutions before they eventually developed a set-up that they were satisfied with. Nolan stated, “I've had a few different iterations, but I've landed on something that works. I definitely have a door. I'm fortunate enough to have a home office, or at least a room that we've made into an office.” Some parents had a permanent workstation, as Nolan described, while others played musical desks and regularly moved locations throughout their homes. Parents often rearranged their spaces as their work arrangements and job demands shifted over time. For example, Jenna and her husband both worked fully remotely. They had previously shared a home office, but Jenna had started a new, demanding job that necessitated a change in her workstation. She explained,

My gosh, it was hard. We've been through a lot of iterations. When I started this new role, I needed a dedicated space to work. I needed a place to close the door, and I needed two monitors. And so, my husband stayed in the home office, and we made a little corner for me upstairs here [in my bedroom]. And I will unblur it [on Zoom] because you're asking the real questions. Since I'm on external calls a lot, I blur my background because this is just my bedroom. And there's an unmade bed right there. (laughs)

Many employees, such as Jenna, expressed a strong preference for having a private workspace. This most often meant having a door that physically isolated their workspace. Some parents had initially worked in larger multipurpose spaces in their homes before realizing the importance of having a more private, quiet space.

Despite their desires for private spaces, several parents explained that working from their bedroom was a last resort. This was in part because working in their bedrooms could take a mental toll on parents over time. Tessa, a mother with a fully remote job, explained that she had moved her workstation to her garage because of the job stress she experienced while being in her bedroom:

Our home office was in our bedroom, which is where I worked, and then we did some layoffs [at the organization], and I was just...it was not fun to sleep and work in the same space. So, I moved to the garage. I was just in the same room all day, and then I was not sleeping well because of all the stuff going on [at work]. It just felt like all the stress was in one room. So, for my own mental health, I decided to move.

Tessa's experience reiterated recent findings that remote workers often balance between creating functional and tolerable workspaces (i.e., avoiding spaces that they find too stressful or unpleasant) (Mechlenborg and Christensen 2025). For Tessa and several other parents, bedroom workstations could feel isolating and even depressing. Over time, they moved locations to try to alleviate these feelings. For example, Sara had recently begun working from her living room because of the natural light that the space offered. Despite the noise and disruptions when her children were home from school in the afternoons, she felt that this location was better for remote work than a dark bedroom office. These examples demonstrate how employees evaluated their physical workspace options and determined what would be best for them in the long run.

For some parents, a high-quality physical set-up was worthy of time, effort, and, for some, a significant financial investment. Several parents had considered their work arrangements when choosing to move to a new home (whether buying or renting). They opted for housing that had space for a private office when possible. Others made specific renovations to their current living spaces to create a long-term workspace. Isis, a mother with a hybrid job, had installed a custom door in a room of her house to make it quieter and more private. Similarly, Susan explained that she had renovated an area above her garage to create a new office space: "I moved to this space so that I could actually have windows. I was like, 'I will lose my mind if I stay in that space [indoors with no windows]'. Notably, most parents in this sample reported household incomes of over \$130,000, well above the US real median income of \$84,000 (King

2025). The cost of these renovations is likely unattainable for many with limited money to spend on nonessential expenses or those who rent housing and likely cannot significantly alter their spaces.

Among parents who were able to invest in their remote workstations, these highly individualized approaches to creating a suitable space facilitated long-term commitments to working at home. Adam and his female co-parent both worked from home full-time, and they had recently moved into a new home that had separate offices for each of them. He explained, “We moved for two reasons. One, we want to grow our family. And two, if we were both going to be working remotely 100% of the time, we actually did need a more accommodating space. We needed doors.” Similarly, Kristina and her male co-parent both worked from home full-time and wanted to establish permanent, separate spaces. She stated,

Since we're having another baby, we're having work done on the house. We're closing in the garage so that the third bedroom can then be the baby's bedroom. And we're turning the garage into a dining area and an office for me. Because it can be very difficult for two people to work at home and not have separate spaces.

These examples illustrated a commitment on the part of some parents to make their homes more suitable for remote work. Some parents acknowledged that significant financial resources were required to fully personalize their home workstations. Grace and her male co-parent both worked from home full-time and homeschooled their two children. These arrangements had led them to invest in four fully equipped workstations. She stated, “I recognize the privilege inherent in my family's working arrangement. Each of us has a desk and a full set-up. Everyone has an extra monitor and all the resources we need to make it a comfortable environment.” Not all remote workers were able to or interested in making significant financial investments in their work set-ups. But those who did felt as if their improved spaces could enhance their experiences when working at home.

Future Work: “Unless a job really fit my career trajectory, I don’t want to go back to an office”

As I have described here, working at home involved a variety of positive and negative experiences for parents. However, almost every parent interviewed ultimately wanted to continue working at home. They were extremely reluctant to give up the family-related flexibility benefits that they had found through these work arrangements. Grace, a mother with a fully remote job, stated, “You only get

one shot at this [parenting]. And so, yes, for the foreseeable future, when our children are children, we're still absolutely going to be working remotely.” Many parents felt that working at home was especially helpful for the life stage that they were at with raising their children. Some parents were committed to being remote while their children were young but were open to working in-person when their children were older. Many parents recognized that by working at home, they had gained benefits that most employed parents would love to have. Kim, a mother with a fully remote job, explained, “One of the things that working parents want in the modern workplace is a lot more flexibility. Flexibility in how much they work, flexibility in when and where they work.”

Parents grappled with the trade-offs of their work arrangements, such as blurred boundaries and overworking. But when taking stock of their overall experiences, many declared that the positives outweighed the negatives. Andrew, a father with a fully remote job, explained,

Yesterday I went to my kids' school for a fundraiser, and then I worked in the evening to catch up on stuff. It [working remotely] just makes it more sustainable [to be working parent]. There's not this pressure or stress to get it all done within the confines of this set time period... That's been the biggest thing for me. Especially with small children, it makes a huge difference. I'm a better caregiver. I'm a better parent. I'm a better partner and spouse to my wife. Because I'm able to accommodate my different needs [as a parent and worker] on any given day.

Andrew encapsulated what many in this sample felt, that any trade-offs to working remotely were worth being able to better accommodate their family's needs. Other parents had a more nuanced view on how the downsides of working at home impacted them. Megan described working at home as requiring intense self-management: “A work from home position doesn't always mean eight-to-five- done. It's that struggle you have. Like, don't open it [work notifications], but if I do it now, then my morning will be nice. I could take a walk. So, it's these battles you have with yourself all the time [when working at home].” This mode of employment provided parents with much more permeability of boundaries between work and family, allowing them to attend to family responsibilities in ways that were incompatible with working in-person. However, this mode of work also came with pressures and stress to prove that they were good workers, and boundaries could blur greatly, making it difficult to manage the distinctions between work and family.

When thinking about their career trajectories, parents weighed the idea of staying remote as one of several options that they had, all of which came with positives and negatives. Many parents acknowledged that there was no mode of work available that did not come with certain challenges; working in-person simply came with a different set of difficulties than working at home. Diane worked fully remotely and had not worked in-person since giving birth to her daughter. She explained,

I don't have a frame of reference to be this busy in life and not be able to work remotely. I literally cannot imagine it. I don't mind going to an office for a day or two, but I would need to be [working at home] home at least two or three days a week [in the future].

Diane was far from alone in feeling as if she *needed* flexibility to be an employed parent, themes explored further in Chapters 4 and 5. Many parents explained that if the price of working at home was learning how to manage blurry boundaries or strategize ways to reduce overworking, then so be it. Their desires for flexibility were strong enough to warrant the effort of learning how to be a remote worker.

While parents did not solve issues of overwork or competing job and family devotions, their descriptions illuminated their agency to mitigate these challenges. Parents highly valued working at home. Because of this, they were not only willing to navigate the accompanying challenges but saw doing so as important for generating the appropriate skills and mindset of a remote worker. Mark, a father with a fully remote job, explained,

I mean, for me personally, I'm fine with having to work on the weekend a little bit. I don't *want* to step away from being a dad to work on the weekend. But I am fine with working at weird times, to make all of this work [as a working parent]. But I could see for some people that it might be a challenge. It could be stressful [to work unusual hours]. I know there are people who prefer clearer containers on their working hours than I care about [having].

Mark and others felt that there were drawbacks to all combinations of employment and parenting. Given the choice, parents preferred to juggle the challenges of remote work, given the flexibility it afforded them.

Most parents wanted to continue working at home, either as fully remote or hybrid employees. But some were interested in increasing their time spent in the office while retaining some flexibility (about 11%). Jenna, a mother with a fully remote job, was struggling with her intense job demands at the time of our interview. She explained,

I'm looking for a new organization. A more local organization, with a hybrid [work arrangement] expectation. I'll never be 100% back in person. I couldn't. I don't want to do that. The commute especially. But I'm looking for something that's two to three days a week in the office. So that I can separate home and work more and just get that, that social value that I need from work.

Several parents described missing the informal opportunities to interact with colleagues. But some parents, such as Jenna, found this isolation untenable. Likewise, Sydney, a mother with a fully remote job, explained, “I miss [having] work friends. I don’t know how deep it gets virtually, really. Without that in-person opportunity to do something [with colleagues] that is not work related.” Most of the participants who wanted to increase their time spent in-person were fully remote workers. A few with hybrid arrangements also emphasized that they wouldn’t like to be fully remote in the future because they enjoyed the occasional time spent in the office. Across the sample, even those who were interested in more office time were distinctly uninterested in a fully-in-person job. Once parents were acclimated to their work arrangements, they were generally averse to the notion of rigid work hours and a commute.

When reflecting on their future work plans, many parents discussed work arrangements as similar to other employment benefits. They noted work flexibility when evaluating potential job opportunities, and they weighed work arrangements in relation to other employment features such as salary. Justin, a father with a fully remote job, explained,

I'm more motivated by the job, like the job responsibilities, than I am strictly by [whether it is] remote or not remote. With that said, it's [work arrangements] in the list of factors now. And the thought of a long commute that is really rigid would be really tough. So, I guess it's [work arrangements] a part of the consideration [for a new job], but it's not the main one.

While Justin did not consider work arrangements to be his top priority, many parents felt the opposite.

Several participants valued their flexibility so highly that they doubted whether anything aside from a significant pay increase would change their minds. Molly, a mother with a fully remote job, explained, “I am comfortable working remotely. And you'll probably have to pay me big bucks to get me back to the office. (laughs)”

Other parents explained that they were unlikely to ever return to working in-person unless a particularly enticing job opportunity came up. Celine was a fully remote mother whose female co-parent cared for their child in their home while Celine worked. She stated,

I absolutely do not want to go back to an office. (laughs) I think there are challenges to having a child at home with me [while working remotely]. But honestly, unless there was a job that *really* fit my career trajectory, I don't think I want to go back to an office at all.

This enthusiasm for remote work was widespread across this sample. Out of all participants interviewed, only one parent indicated that they would intentionally seek out a fully in-person job in the future. This indicates both the power of flexibility in the lives of parents and the potential for employers to offer a benefit that working parents highly value. It also highlights that employers are likely to face resistance if work arrangements become less flexible. As Benjamin, a father with a fully remote job, stated, “If I ever return to an office, it will be against my will.”

Conclusion

Previous literature has established that increased work flexibility can lead to overwork among parents who struggle to maintain commitments to their employers and their families (de Laat 2025; Chung 2022). My results generally support that parents sometimes overwork, and that they could struggle to accommodate their work and family demands, as illustrated by the common situation of simultaneously working and caring for sick children. But how parents discussed their work flexibility is more complicated than what has been previously described by flexibility paradox research and related scholarship. Parents anticipated that every iteration of being a working parent would come with a set of trade-offs. They expected to encounter challenges no matter what their mode of work was. As a result, most felt that the flexibility trade-offs of working remotely were worth the benefits gained, particularly in comparison to working in-person.

To be sure, it is not necessarily a positive finding that parents were willing to put up with some amount of overwork and self-exploitation because they felt as if they needed flexibility for their families. As will be described further in Chapters 4 and 5, parents were almost desperate for flexibility because the

demands and pressures of being a working parent were so intense. However, by actively developing strategies and structures to support themselves when working at home, parents also felt empowered. By creating work habits and routines that they could sustain long-term, parents could manage and even minimize instances of overwork and negative experiences of blurred boundaries. While they still faced challenges, parents had developed a set of personalized tools to manage these difficulties. The more experience they gained with this mode of work, the more prepared many parents felt to deal with challenges and to better leverage the various family-related benefits of working remotely. The family-related benefits of working at home that parents so highly prized are the focus of the next two chapters.

CHAPTER 4: STRIVING FOR EQUALITY, SETTling FOR EQUITY: THE DIVISION OF HOUSEHOLD LABOR AMONG REMOTE WORKING PARENTS

Introduction

Because of a lack of comprehensive federal policy and programs, childcare in the US is predominantly market-based and most parents independently find and pay for care (Herbst 2023). Existing subsidies and programs are primarily aimed at low-income families and often cannot accommodate all the children who need care (Herbst 2023). US parents contend with limited availability and wide range in costs based on amount and type of care, with annual costs averaging between \$6,500 to over \$15,000 for one child (Poyantzis and Livingston 2024). Given this context, unsurprisingly, at the forefront of parents' minds when discussing the family-related advantages of working remotely was childcare. Parents consistently described accessing and affording childcare as an enormous and multifaceted challenge, despite the majority of this sample having higher than average household incomes. Working at home made the difficulties of childcare, and other household tasks, somewhat more manageable for parents.

In this chapter, I described some of the household benefits parents experienced related to household chores, childcare, and cognitive labor. In the post-pandemic era, remote work arrangements were utilized by both mothers and fathers to help manage the daily demands of managing a household and child-rearing. I find that while fathers took on many physical daily tasks related to chores and childcare, they were rarely responsible for aspects of the cognitive load in the ways that mothers were when working at home. This is in keeping with broader US trends. While US men on average spend more time on household tasks and childcare duties than they have historically, women are still primarily responsible for these and for the cognitive load, also known as the mental load, or the planning, preparation, and decision-making associated with maintaining a house and child-rearing (Barigozzi et al. 2025; Daminger 2019; Ross-Plourde and Lachance-Grzela 2025; Weeks et al. 2025).

I also find that work arrangements influenced the overall division of household labor between co-parents. Over 80% of US households with children consist of two parents (US Census Bureau 2023), and

the majority are dual-income households (BLS 2025). In my sample, most participants had a co-parent living with them (94%), and of these two-parent households, almost all were dual-income (94%). Many parents in this sample stated that they believed that household and childcare responsibilities should be equally shared between co-parents, but they did not necessarily enact these beliefs. This aligns with prior research illustrating that, despite parents having egalitarian preferences, women may continue to do the bulk of household and childcare labor. For some parents, equally sharing tasks can be difficult or require extra time and effort (Martínez Echagüe 2025). Increased work flexibility can remove structural barriers to more equally sharing responsibilities, making egalitarianism feel more achievable among parents with these preferences (Pedulla and Thébaud 2015; Tabor et al. 2025). However, even with their work flexibility, many parents in this sample felt that although an equal division of tasks was their goal, it was not feasible in their households. They described their household's distribution of duties as instead being based on what was equitable, or fair, given their and their co-parents' relative work flexibility.

Across the sample, parents described sharing duties to varying degrees. But often the parents who had more access to remote work than their co-parents also had greater household and childcare responsibilities. In this sample, this was more often the mother than the father. Thus, many mothers maintained a larger share of tasks and this unequal division was often framed as equitable because differences in work flexibility were seen as a logical way to divide responsibilities. However, when both parents worked at home, participants in these households more often described their division of labor as nearing their preferred strategy of equality. In the case of most fully remote households, both parents' having work flexibility appeared to enable enacting their egalitarian gender beliefs.

The perceived effort required to create egalitarianism in household labor may be related to gendered views about the skills of men and women, namely the idea that women are naturally better at these tasks (Daminger 2020; Faircloth 2023b). Perceived inability to create egalitarian division of labor may also be related to structural constraints, including time availability perspective which suggests that parents often have differing job demands or flexibility and thus different opportunities to do household

labor (Daminger 2020; Chung and Van der Horst 2018; Gerstel and Clawson 2014; Carlson 2021).

Structural constraints can provide a rationale among parents seeking a non-gendered explanation of why their egalitarian beliefs are contradicted by their uneven divide of duties (Daminger 2020). Following Dominguez-Folgueras (2022) and Tabor et al. (2025), I incorporate both gendered and structural explanations of the division of labor into this analysis.

This chapter extends existing literature by analyzing post-COVID-19 descriptions of the distribution of household duties among remote working parents. I explore the impact of work arrangements on the division of childcare, household, and cognitive labor among parents in dual-income households who generally desired an equitable sharing of responsibilities. Specifically, I address:

- 1) How do parents describe the impact of remote work on the daily management of childcare, household chores, and cognitive labor?
- 2) What are the variations in the division of labor between households where parents have different combinations of work arrangements?
- 3) How do parents explain and feel about their division of labor in relation to their own and their co-parents' work flexibility?

Leveraging Remote Work for Family Needs

Mothers and fathers were generally stressed by the daily demands of being working parents. Managing childcare involved locating, affording, and handling logistics, all of which varied between children of differing ages within the home. Maintaining a home meant juggling time-sensitive daily routines related to meals and cleaning along with handling the occasional, disruptive household emergency (maintenance, illnesses or health needs, pet-related, etc.). All these tasks required time and effort to prepare, plan, and execute the required next steps. As a result of these stressors, many felt that remote work arrangements were a salvation for busy parents. Their mode of work provided what many parents felt was critical daily flexibility. So much so that some parents were nearly in tears when they described how it had changed their families' lives. In this section, I describe how mothers and fathers

regularly leveraged their work flexibility to manage the childcare, household, and cognitive labor required of working parents.

Infused in these descriptions is how parents felt about the influence of their work arrangements on the overall division of labor in their households. Parents were largely grateful to have flexibility at all. But some reflected critically about how their flexibility had shifted their household closer or further away from their goal of having an equal division of responsibilities. When explaining their current distribution of labor, several mothers said that they hoped to get closer to a more egalitarian division in the future. Some mothers also described their male co-parents as actively participating in household and childcare labor, and that this was distinctly different from traditional men in the past who contributed little to these tasks. During interviews, I consciously avoided using sociological terms such as “egalitarian,” “division of labor,” “cognitive load,” “mental load,” or “gender norms.” However, parents frequently used academic terminology referring to these ideas. This may be related to the high education levels of participants and indicates the impact of public discourse and widespread media coverage about these topics during COVID-19, which emphasized the immense stress that parents, and especially mothers, faced during lockdown (Creech and Maddox 2022). These results describe how, in the post-pandemic era, remote working parents used and thought about their work arrangements in relation to household, childcare, and cognitive labor.

Childcare: “I use my lunchtime to go pick up the kids”

Mothers and fathers alike described using their work flexibility to handle child-related responsibilities. This aligns with COVID-19 era findings, which have suggested that fathers, particularly those with egalitarian gender attitudes, take on more childcare duties when they work remotely (Lyttelton et al. 2022; Carlson, McPherson, and Petts 2024). When working at home, parents were able to more easily navigate chaotic morning routines with children, transport them to and from school and activities, and enjoy evening time together that was not truncated by commutes to or from an office. The topic that cropped up endlessly in interviews, and is the focus here, was the immense difficulty of obtaining and

managing childcare arrangements as a working parent. I did not originally include specific questions regarding childcare arrangements in my interview guide. But early participants frequently brought up these challenges, leading me to incorporate it into subsequent interviews.

Parents explained that the “childcare journey,” a term frequently used by mothers and fathers, caused them regular anxiety and stress. The childcare challenges that parents faced consisted of the entire process of locating and securing affordable care. In many cases, work flexibility helped parents close the gap between the childcare arrangements that they needed as full-time employees and what they could realistically obtain. Childcare costs range widely in the US, depending on the child’s age, the local availability of care options, and the type of care (full vs part-time; in-home vs a childcare facility) (Poyatzis and Livingston 2024). Child age played a particularly important role as children five years and older have access to public school and when available, the before and after care programs associated with some schools. For pre-school age children or younger, placement in a program is not guaranteed in the US and costs for care are higher for younger children. The regional cost of living and yearly price increases for childcare also vary in the US. The bulk of participants in this sample lived in the Western and Eastern regions of the US, which tend to experience higher yearly childcare cost increases than the South or Midwest (Desilver 2024).

Most interviewees reported an annual household income of \$130,000 or more (92%), placing them well above the 2024 US real median household income of about \$84,000 (King 2025). Yet parents often stated that the cost of care was excessively high. Some were unable to afford their preferred forms of childcare. Alice, a mother with a hybrid job, explained,

One of our favorites [childcare facilities] that we would have really liked to send our son to was definitely out of our price range. The truth is, we can't really afford any of this. Which is really why he's in [daycare for only] three days a week. Partly because we wanted him to adjust and partly because of the cost. So, we ended up compromising on a place that has maybe less robust programming than our number one choice, but is closer [to home] and is much, much cheaper.

In our interview, Alice readily acknowledged that her family was not low-income. Nevertheless, childcare for her son felt like an almost unaffordable expense. Some parents, such as Jenna, a mother with a fully

remote job, felt strongly that the quality of care that her children received did not match the high cost. She shared,

We pay as much in daycare as we pay for our mortgage. So, a third of our income is going towards the mortgage, and a third is going towards childcare. That's what really kills me. It's not even like, okay, great, they must be going to the Goddard school and be learning French. It's *not* even Montessori. If I wanted to put my kids in Montessori, it would be outlandish. It would be far more than the mortgage on our house, which I think is just so disappointing.

As Jenna and others lamented, what they viewed as high-quality childcare options were often out of reach. Though quality of care is a reasonable concern, this pales in comparison to not being able to afford any childcare. That this relatively income privileged group of parents frequently described locating and affording childcare as a struggle indicates that those with average or lower household incomes are likely in even more dire childcare situations. The lack of access to affordable childcare is a serious impediment to securing employment, particularly for mothers (Herbst 2023; Landivar et al. 2022).

Some parents in this sample relied on their work arrangements to help manage high childcare costs. Few parents directly referenced the savings associated with their work arrangements, but several were able to reduce the amount of childcare that they paid for based on their mode of work. Arielle, a mother who had a hybrid job, explained,

We initially thought our kids would have to be in daycare from seven am to six pm based on our commute schedules [to in-person offices]. And so, then [after she and her husband both began working hybrid jobs], we were able to shrink that down by two hours [each weekday]. It actually saves us a lot of money.

Given the high cost of childcare, reducing a few hours of care per week could be financially beneficial for families. Among the entire sample, 38% of parents regularly provided some amount of childcare while working at home. Parents often supervised their children after the school day had finished or during gaps of time in between childcare arrangements. Many nonprofit organizations had ambiguous policies regarding requirements for childcare while working at home. These vague or even nonexistent policies provided many parents with the option of watching their children while working remotely. However, most were reticent to do this full-time, a reluctance that was informed by their stressful COVID-19

experiences. Most parents relied primarily on some form of childcare (96%) rather than watching their children full-time while working (4%).

Parents frequently described a dire lack of childcare options and the competitive nature of locating care. For example, Courtney, a mother with a hybrid job, explained that at the beginning of the school year, she had watched her daughter in the afternoons three days a week while they waited for an aftercare spot to become available. While she would have preferred to begin the school year with full coverage childcare, Courtney was grateful that her work arrangements made it easy for her to temporarily watch her daughter. The age of children affected how difficult it was to both find childcare and, if needed, to work while supervising children. Indeed, parents of young children described dreading the waitlist process at daycare facilities. Joellen, a mother who worked fully remotely, stated, “The office administrator [at the daycare] is always the first person to know that somebody's pregnant. Once I peed on the stick, I was like, ‘I need to text or email her, please save a spot!’” One parent described a daycare waitlist that was 12 months long. Another parent had hired a consultant to help locate a nanny after an exhausting and fruitless independent search for childcare. These difficulties with availability led several parents to temporarily watch their young children full-time while working remotely. They described these situations as unsustainable and extremely demanding. Those with older, school-age children described a never-ending cycle of securing childcare during the summer, locating consistent after-school care during the academic year, and constantly pre-planning for school breaks or holidays.

When discussing their current childcare, parents frequently referenced the difficulties of the COVID-19 era of remote work because of the mandated closures of schools and childcare facilities during the pandemic. Many wanted to avoid replicating their stressful pandemic experiences. Indeed, scholars have identified that about 50% of US working parents may have experienced enough distress during COVID-19 to result in post-traumatic stress disorder (Meeker et al. 2025). Alex, a fully remote working mother, shivered and shook her head when recalling the pandemic lockdown. She emphasized, “I think [about] the COVID era like, we are *never* going without childcare again.” The shift to remote instruction

during COVID-19 helped illustrate that school is a vital source of childcare for US parents that enables their labor force participation (Collins et al. 2021). In the post-pandemic era, most parents had returned to relying on some form of childcare (96%). About 27% had a full-time childcare arrangement that spanned their entire workday. Another 21% of parents had enrolled their children in school, with no other childcare arrangements. The typical school day covered most but not all of parents' work hours. The remaining parents (48%) had multiple childcare arrangements that, when cobbled together, covered most or all of their work hours.

Among the roughly one-quarter of parents who had a single, full-time childcare arrangement, most operated similarly to a parent working in-person. They dropped their children off in the morning and picked them up in the early evening, working at home during the day. A few parents had full-time care that was provided by family members or paid caregivers in their homes while they were working.

Benjamin, a father who worked fully remotely, explained,

My mother-in-law and father-in-law have been kindly providing us with childcare in-house, and I also work from home. So, it's nice that the kids never have to go to a stranger's house or to a formal place of business. They're surrounded by people they know. And worst case, if something urgent happens, they're never far [from a parent].

Several parents, such as Benjamin, felt more comfortable with these in-home care arrangements than they did with sending their young children to daycare facilities for long hours. This was informed by their pandemic-era experiences, where parents were constantly home with their children. Indeed, some parents described that extra time gained with their young children was a silver lining COVID-19. Adam's first child was born during the pandemic when both he and his wife were working from home. Adam emphasized that this experience had shifted how he thought about the impending birth of their second child in the post-pandemic era:

It was really special to spend the entire first year of our first child's life with him. Every single moment. We will not be able to replicate that with our second child because the world has changed. While we still work remotely, the norms of the COVID period of parenting are different from the norms of now.

While the COVID-19 lockdown was extremely challenging for most parents, those experiences appear to have shifted how reluctant working parents such as Adam and Benjamin felt about spending time away

from young children that would typically be in daycare. Given that the US does not provide paid parental leave, as is common in most countries, working at home while children are cared for at home, as was Benjamin's situation, provides a makeshift version of leave. However, it is likely a more costly and stressful iteration than actual parental leave and is only possible among those who can work at home.

For about one-fifth of parents, their children's time spent at school served as their only form of childcare. Parents dropped their children off in the mornings and in the afternoons, they often took a scheduled break from work to pick up children and settle them at home before working for several more hours. Many recognized that this routine was incompatible with an in-person job. For example, John watched his school-age children at home in the afternoons alongside his wife, both of whom worked fully remotely. He explained, "I use my lunchtime to go pick up the kids. Because we're not too far from the schools, I'll take a half-hour break to get one [child], then come home. Check in [with work], and then do the other pickup." Many parents of school-age children relied on their remote work arrangements to resolve the issue of finding affordable, high-quality childcare in the afternoons.

Almost half of the parents in this sample (48%) had multiple childcare arrangements that often varied by day of the week and did not always cover the full workday. Many parents of younger children had a more expensive primary arrangement, such as a daycare facility, which was supplemented by a less costly secondary arrangement, such as a family member providing care. For parents with school-aged children, they sometimes secured after-care at their child's school, but these programs were competitive and expensive. Parents described relying on their work flexibility to execute their "hodgepodge" of childcare. For example, Nancy and her husband both worked from home full-time. She described their typical care arrangements as complex:

My daughter just started going to a [pre-school] program two days a week that is half-day. And then my son is in kindergarten. It's a half-day schedule, so he kind of goes randomly during the day for about four hours. And then on the other days, we have a nanny for six hours. That includes my mom nannying sometimes. And then, in the afternoons, I put my daughter down for a nap. So then after my husband picks up my son, we both are pretty much just tag teaming in terms of like if they wake up or if they need something.

Parents such as Nancy often needed to be available throughout their workday to manage multiple childcare locations, pick-ups, and drop-offs. They also regularly provided care during gaps of time between arrangements, requiring them to be somewhat on-call for children's needs. Several mothers felt that this as-needed childcare during the workday more often fell to them, even when their male co-parent had similar work arrangements. Notably, more mothers in this sample (42%) regularly provided childcare while working remotely than fathers (32%). These gender differences are discussed further in the section on co-parent work arrangements.

The flexibility of working from home was the oil that kept these complex and ever-shifting childcare routines functioning. Working remotely assisted parents with handling both the everyday jigsaw puzzle of childcare and any unanticipated complications. Some parents felt that they had found satisfactory childcare arrangements, often due to their work arrangements. Others described their care arrangements as overly expensive and stressful to execute, even with the advantage of working at home. Because their work arrangements had become so central to their family's childcare routines, some parents felt beholden to their workplace and reliant on having access to this mode of work.

Household Labor: “For traditional gender roles, my husband does a lot”

Chores that required parents to be physically at home (meal preparation, laundry, cleaning) were generally described by both mothers and fathers as part of their remote workday. This contradicts pandemic-era findings that when fathers worked remotely, they took on additional childcare more often than household chores (Lyttelton et al. 2022; Petts and Carlson 2024). In this sample, mothers and fathers similarly referenced completing household chores while working from home. However, this did not necessarily mean that parents felt that they equally shared household chores with their partners. Several mothers and fathers almost bashfully explained to me that while their ultimate goal was to evenly share all household chores with their co-parent, this had yet to happen. Jackie, a mother who worked fully remotely, explained, “We try our best to split things. Like as egalitarian as possible, I guess. And make

things fifty-fifty. But in my mind, fifty-fifty is like we do the same thing, but each do fifty percent. But it's not necessarily...it doesn't work out like that.”

Sometimes parents explained that it was the work arrangements of themselves and their co-parent that prevented their desired division of household labor. Others felt that equity, or a division that felt fair and just, was simply more reasonable than a perfectly even split. Jeff, a father who worked fully remotely, stated bluntly, “If anyone's [said that they have] achieved a pure fifty-fifty balance, I would say they're full of shit. And one of those people is unhappy, and they're just not being honest with themselves or their partner.” Jeff seemed to feel pressured to achieve a perfectly balanced split of tasks, and he was not alone in this feeling. Indeed, previous literature has found that parents can sometimes feel that equal sharing of tasks is an impossible goal given the immense demands of being a working parent (Faircloth 2021; Martínez Echagüe 2025).

The idea of equality was referenced frequently by mothers when they discussed how they shared household duties with their male co-parents, and they largely expressed a preference for an equal division. Yet some described their sharing of responsibilities as “more traditional” or more unequal than what they had imagined for themselves. Marian, a mother who worked fully remotely, felt that it was important to push back against traditional ideas of women handling the bulk of household labor. She explained,

I think women are taught, granted this is changing, but I think that there's still so much emotional, physical, and home labor that women are taught by example, society, etc., that it is for you [women] to figure [it] out. And if you're in a heteronormative relationship, like if the man picks it up, ‘that's so nice.’

Some participants, such as Marian, felt as if the standards for men were so low that even minimal participation in household chores was rewarded by society. Several mothers insisted that they were aiming for an equal sharing of tasks, not just less unequal sharing, but they seldom described having attained this. Instead, when equality felt impossible to achieve, some mothers appeared content with a division of duties that overall felt fair and just. In Marian’s case, she had outsourced house cleaning to reduce the amount of housework that she was responsible for and to lessen the stress that she felt when working from an untidy home, a common strategy among middle class US mothers (Collins 2019). While

Marian was not entirely satisfied with this solution, it did resolve her immediate concerns about the amount of time she spent cleaning.

Other parents felt as if an equitable or reasonably fair division of tasks *was* a marked improvement on historical norms. For example, Emma felt that she and her husband, both of whom worked fully remotely, shared most chores but that she took the lead on certain duties. However, she went on to reiterate the value she saw in her husband's contribution, stating, "I definitely recognize that for traditional gender roles, my husband does a lot. Which I definitely name [acknowledge] and appreciate." Emma's comments seemingly sought to distinguish her household from a more traditional, and more deeply unequal, division of responsibilities between co-parents. Several parents similarly expressed that any increased male participation in household tasks was a step in the right direction.

For example, some fathers felt that although they did not share equally with their female co-parent, they did more than fathers had historically done. Nolan, a fully remote father, stated,

I try to pick up more than the traditional dad. The old school have a glass of Scotch after work and a 'leave me alone' [attitude]. All that stuff. I still think that there is the default, like cultural or gender normed thing that my wife, like all things equal, she will take more of that [household chores and childcare]. Even though she works. It's that sort of mom tax type of thing. It's like that default thing that, as much as I try, I have no doubt that happens.

Nolan felt that the "mom tax" or the idea that his wife ended up handling more household and childcare tasks, was somewhat inevitable. But it was unclear how, if at all, he went about trying to correct for this tendency within his household. Nevertheless, Nolan's statement echoes recent findings that an egalitarian distribution of duties requires parents to actively strategize (Martínez Echagüe 2025). An unequal distribution in which the mother takes on more household duties can emerge passively in heterosexual couples even when they both state that they want an equal share of tasks (Martínez Echagüe 2025). These findings overall indicate the continued importance of understanding both structural (e.g., time availability, amount of work flexibility) and symbolic or gendered explanations of the division of labor. While both mothers and fathers found remote work useful for household labor to various degrees, gendered

expectations also seemed to influence how responsible or not parents felt for these tasks, even with their relatively high flexibility and subsequent availability to do household chores throughout the workday.

Cognitive Labor: “The planning falls to me. The execution's usually split between both of us”

In this section, I discuss parent remote work arrangements in relation to cognitive labor, or the planning and preparation that is associated with maintaining a family, also known as the mental load (Daminger 2019). Cognitive labor is often invisible and relatively intangible compared to physical household tasks such as cleaning or providing care to children. Mothers in this sample often mentioned scheduling, planning, or preparing for household or child needs while working at home. Despite many men sharing some or most household and childcare responsibilities with their female co-parents, remote working fathers rarely described handling aspects of the mental load. Regardless of how parents described their overall division of duties or what their and their co-parents' work arrangements were, mothers largely remained responsible for the mental load.

The mental load can include a wide range of duties, but most often involves anticipating a household or family need, devising plans to meet that need, and then making decisions to execute the planned action. For example, Lea, a mother with a fully remote job, described arranging childcare over the summer for her school-aged children as one of many tasks that were made easier by working at home:

It's researching crap, like the research thing. I mean, I probably could have done that in the office, too. But doing the stuff around the house, and just like keeping up with that [planning research] and being able to run a quick errand, is really helpful.

Lea acknowledged that the research or planning that she was doing to locate and secure childcare could have been done while working in-person. Like some other mothers in this sample, she grouped these planning responsibilities with other, more tangible, items on her general to-do list, such as chores and running errands. However, other mothers expressed a distinct preference for handling the mental load while working from home over completing physical tasks. Jenna, a mother with a fully remote job, explained, “I don't really do a lot of household chores when I'm working [at home]. But I will find myself doing mom stuff like signing my daughter up for summer camp or signing her up for swim class. Or

getting appointments booked.” Notably, Jenna classified these as “mom stuff,” applying a gendered label to these child-related planning duties.

Several mothers recognized that although they shared responsibility for many household chores or childcare tasks with their male co-parents, they still carried the burden of the mental load. In some cases, this defied mothers’ general descriptions of their households as being more or less equitable. Jenna went on to explain the contrast in how she and her husband, both of whom worked fully remotely, divided up “mom stuff” compared to their overall distribution of obligations:

As much as my husband and I are to the T super equitable, when it comes to the clerical work of parenthood, I really own a lot of that stuff. And we're just now, as I'm looking for a new job, I'm starting to learn how to share that stuff with him. But it's going to be a process of onboarding him to that stuff, you know.

For Jenna and many mothers in this sample, cognitive labor seemed to automatically fall under their purview, regardless of how other tangible duties were shared between them and their co-parent. Fathers were, by mothers, seen as needing instruction, or “onboarding” to these planning responsibilities, as Jenna explained. This meant that sharing the execution of this labor required women to teach or explain to men how to do so, requiring more time and effort than if women just managed the planning themselves. This created a barrier to sharing the mental load that did not exist in the same way for household chores or childcare obligations, duties that men did not seem to need instructions to complete.

While explaining the unequal sharing of the cognitive load in their households, several mothers seemed compelled to emphasize what their male co-parent *did* excel at. Joellen worked full-time from home and had three young children. She was breastfeeding her youngest child at the time of our interview. Her husband had a part-time, fully remote job. She initially described their overall sharing of tasks as “fifty-fifty.” However, like Jenna, Joellen went on to clarify that she continued to take the lead on anticipatory planning duties despite her having additional work and childcare duties compared to her husband. She stated,

For all of the discourse and very real experiences of women in straight couples, that women shoulder so much of the burden [of household and childcare responsibilities]. I think I do shoulder a lot of the anticipation of like, ‘Hey, we’re sending our kid to camp, we need uniforms,

this and that.' And my husband does a lot of the [day-to-day] work. On days where I'm like, 'Oh, my God, I've got so many meetings.' He's like, 'don't worry, I've got pick up and drop off.' I don't want to cast our relationship like, 'Oh, my God, I'm doing everything.' But I also want to be really clear that he doesn't work forty hours a week. But honestly, we triage on a day-to-day basis.

Joellen, like several mothers in this sample, was aware of her continued responsibility for the cognitive load but she was also eager to acknowledge her husband's daily involvement in childcare. Fathers in dual-income households do more childcare today than in prior decades, a finding reiterated in pre- and mid-pandemic-era research (Lyttelton et al. 2022; Yavorsky, Kamp Dush, and Schoppe-Sullivan 2015). Yet, mothers such as Jenna and Joellen, who described an equitable distribution of most tangible household duties, maintained that the cognitive load had naturally become their sole responsibility. These explanations of the distribution of the cognitive load may be related to gendered ideas of the abilities of fathers and mothers because these women felt as if they innately understood how to do these duties more so than their male co-parents did (Damingier 2019).

However, some mothers described the unequal sharing of the mental load in their households as being related to gender norms rather than the natural capacities of men and women. For example, Lily, a mother with a hybrid job, explained,

We still struggle with gender and the mental load. As in like, he's a man raised in a patriarchy. So, he's not the multi-tasker or plan-ahead person as much as I am. He's definitely on it with the kid. But we still have conversations like, 'Did you plan dinner? Did you just expect me to?'...And I do most of the meal planning and shopping. He tries [to do more], so that I'm not making him a list of what needs to be done, and [instead] we're opening our eyeballs and taking a look around at what needs to be done in the house and planning for that. But we still have that mental load conversation pretty often of how to prioritize household care. I still have to say, 'Hey, I need you to go clean the bathroom,' versus, 'Oh, it's time for the bathroom to be cleaned.' Usually, the planning falls to me. The execution's usually split between both of us.

Lily readily acknowledged that her partner had the capacity to take on aspects of the mental load. She also noted that he was already adept at caring for their child. But like Jenna, Lily described her efforts to share the mental load with her male co-parent as an ongoing learning process. However, Lily did not attribute this to her co-parent's abilities but rather to his socialization as a man raised in a patriarchal society.

For their part, fathers rarely mentioned aspects of cognitive labor when describing their share of household and childcare obligations. Some fathers did manage specific aspects of household preparations

or planning, such as paying bills or long-term planning for family vacations. Many fathers explained that they completed some duties, such as doing the grocery shopping or taking children to medical appointments, but that they rarely handled the planning or scheduling of these. These descriptions coincided with several mothers who explained that they specifically planned and placed responsibilities on their male partner's virtual calendars. Fiona, a mother with a fully remote job, explained, "If I put something on his calendar, like there's a meeting at school at this time. Or I can't pick up our daughter, so you have to do it. If I put it on his calendar, he will clear the time." Fiona viewed her husband as willing and able to do these things, as did most mothers in this sample. But the idea that fathers should or could share in the anticipation and planning of these tasks was noticeably absent both in their own descriptions and those of most mothers in this sample.

In the same way that some mothers felt that men did not have a natural capacity for the mental load and thus would require training, several fathers described a natural tendency for mothers to take on this labor. In some cases, this was despite fathers stating their interest in sharing these responsibilities. Nolan, a father who worked fully remotely, explained that although he had more work flexibility, his wife usually handled communicating with their child's teacher:

My wife usually takes the first pass [at handling child logistics during the workday]. If she's like, 'I can't do it right now', then I would. That's the example of the mom tax, right? There's this default sort of thinking that she's got to do it. But I would say the overwhelming majority of the time, I could, and I will respond.

Nolan references the same "mom tax" that he previously referenced earlier in this chapter to explain that although he did more around the house than fathers have historically, his wife still inevitably did more than he. Nolan went on to describe his willingness to take on more child-related logistics, stating, "It's almost easier for me because I'm not seeing clients [like my wife is.] So, it's actually easier for me most of the time. It's harder for my wife to do that if she's working directly with a client." Despite this acknowledgement, he did not describe any specific efforts to share these tasks more equally. This may indicate that even when men are aware of inequities and are interested in more equally sharing the mental load, they expect women to take the lead on redistributing these duties or initiating an "onboarding"

process. Meanwhile, the quotes above from Lily indicated that some women wanted men to “open their eyeballs” and take an active role in becoming self-aware of what aspects of the cognitive load they could proactively take on.

Indeed, even when fathers were aware of the overall uneven division of tasks with their female co-parents, they did not often reference the cognitive load as part of this inequity. Instead, they tended to explain feeling a general need to do more around the house or with their children. Andrew, a father with a fully remote job, explained, “I often have this weird sense of, I'm not doing enough. I'm always trying to, I guess, compensate for that... I have very strong beliefs around...that I don't ascribe to that traditional gender role sort of thing.” Although Andrew stated that he had strong beliefs about avoiding traditional gender roles in which women do most household and childcare labor, he did not elaborate on what changes could make his household more equitable. Other fathers felt constrained in their abilities to change their divisions of labor with their co-parents. Benjamin, a father who worked fully remotely, explained, “I recognize it as inequitable. I'm trying to find ways to take on more responsibilities, so that she doesn't have to do as much. I make efforts to improve that balance but haven't been able to get to a place where I feel we are equally sharing the load.” Benjamin explained that his ongoing health challenges and demanding job had prevented him from taking on more duties. Benjamin also implied in his statement that the most equitable arrangement in his household would be an equal division of responsibilities. As described previously, equality was a bar that many participants described striving for, but few felt that it was attainable. This led many parents to instead aim for something that felt fair and equitable, even if not perfectly equal.

Regardless of parents' work arrangements or how they described the overall distribution of responsibilities in their households, the cognitive load was “sticky” for mothers and difficult to shift towards fathers (Weeks et al. 2025). This labor “stuck” to mothers in that they described either not attempting to share these tasks with men or that they weren't sure how to teach men to become aware of or complete these duties. These responsibilities “stuck” to women, on the basis that they were viewed as naturally equipped to manage this labor and because, in large part, they already did so (Weeks et al.

2025). The impact of working at home was minimal for the gendered division of the cognitive load in comparison with day-to-day household and childcare duties, which fathers who worked from home more readily shared with their female co-parents.

The Relative Work Flexibility of Co-Parents

Parent work arrangements and their relative flexibility compared to co-parents were consequential for how they described and justified household distributions of tasks.³ All participants either worked fully remotely (75%) or had a hybrid job (25%), and most lived with co-parents who were currently working (89%)⁴. In a slight majority of these dual-income households, parents had different work arrangements from each other (56%) as opposed to homes in which both parents had the same mode of work (44%). Single-work arrangement homes consisted of fully remote households (31.7%) and fully hybrid households (12.7%). I label households in which parents had different work arrangements as mixed-work arrangement households. Most often, the interviewees in mixed-arrangement households had fully remote jobs, and their co-parents worked in-person (22.2%), or co-parents had hybrid jobs (20.6%). It was less common for interviewees to have hybrid jobs while their co-parents worked in-person (11.2%) or worked from home full-time (1.6%).

I loosely classify households as being inclined towards an equal or an unequal division of labor based on how parents explained and felt about their household's distribution of responsibilities.⁵ Almost three-fourths of parents felt that many or most household and childcare obligations were shared with their co-parents. I label these households as leaning towards an equal distribution of tasks (70%). This is a

³ While these data are limited by not having interviewed both parents in each household, the accounts of one parent shed light on their household dynamics. In one case, I interviewed both the husband and wife from the same household because they each worked remotely for a nonprofit organization. I interviewed each parent separately and overall, how they each described dividing household and childcare tasks aligned closely with each other.

⁴ Four participants did not have a co-parent who lived with them. Another four participants did not have a co-parent who was currently working. Given the focus of this section on work arrangements of both the participant and their co-parent, these eight participants are not included in this subsection.

⁵ I do not attempt to categorize households as being entirely equal or unequal, as interview data do not provide exact calculations of task allocation. Rather, these labels encompass a spectrum of experiences. Among those classified as equal-leaning, parents generally described tasks being distributed to varying degrees, while in more unequal households, parents described uneven sharing to different extents.

higher proportion of equally leaning households than what many pre-pandemic studies have identified, but it aligns with some COVID-19 era findings about parents with egalitarian preferences (Carlson et al. 2024; Shockley et al. 2021). Specifically, most fully remote households described an equal leaning distribution of responsibilities (85%), as did over half of mixed-arrangement households (63%). Parents often explained their household division of labor in relation to their work flexibility and that of their co-parents.

Fully Remote Households: “We’re very 50/50”

In fully remote households (N=20), both parents consistently worked at home. Some parents felt that the fully remote nature of their work arrangements, and that of their co-parents, had enabled their preferred distributions of household and childcare tasks. Grace and her husband both worked from home full-time. She felt differently about their division of duties now compared to when her husband had previously worked in-person. She stated,

I felt a different amount of pressure to get everything done while everyone was out of the house. So, when I went to pick the kids up [in the afternoon], everything was done by then. And certainly, my husband was still super helpful. But I was at home, so it kind of made sense for me to be the one doing it. And I was proximate [to the children’s school], so I was able to do pickups. It was a much different experience [than when they both worked from home].

Dividing up obligations more evenly between co-parents was potentially within reach among these households because both parents were similarly proximate to household tasks and children. While this did not necessarily result in an exactly equal divide of duties, parents explained that having the same fully remote work arrangements made it easier to navigate household and childcare responsibilities with their co-parents.

Because of their similarity in work flexibility, parents in fully remote households often felt as if they had a satisfactory, if not entirely even, distribution of obligations with their co-parent. For example, Jenna and her husband had shared tasks differently over time as their work and family demands changed. She explained,

My husband and I are super equitable. I’m a very fortunate millennial mom in that I’ve got that awesome millennial dad who does 50 to 70% of the [family] lift sometimes. We ebb and flow according to who’s having a lot of demands on their time. And because of my new job, he’s really

flowed while I've ebbed in terms of the family lift. But we have it down to a very concrete schedule and a routine as to who does what. And we really make it so that it's an equal distribution of work. And we are doing the same amount of dinners, bath times, and bedtimes. We're very 50/50, without trying to be so score-keep-y either.

For Jenna and most parents in these households, dividing chores and childcare in ways that felt equitable did not mean having an exactly even share. Indeed, in the prior subsection on cognitive labor, Jenna described in that she managed those tasks for her household. Nevertheless, she and many parents in fully remote households described the pooled work flexibility as a useful buffer against the stresses of being a working parent. This work flexibility among both parents made it easier to tackle responsibilities as a team. Andrew, a fully remote father who explained in a prior subsection that he needed to try to do more to support his wife, went on to state,

We have a pretty egalitarian arrangement. It's really wonderful, we really tend to support each other... We each have a work calendar, and then we have a shared calendar [where work obligations are added]. For things like a [child's] dentist appointment, it's just who's available at that time that day, and who's more flexible.

Prior research has found that for parental satisfaction and feelings of appreciation, the sense that responsibilities have been fairly allocated is often more significant than whether the actual distribution and execution of tasks is exactly equal or not (Gordon et al. 2022). In fully remote households, being able to “ebb and flow” according to family and work demands, as Jenna described, was easier because both parents had relatively high work flexibility.

However, fully remote households were not fully insulated from having a gendered division of labor that parents found unsatisfactory. Andrew mentioned in his quote above that he and his wife shared tasks based on who had *more* flexibility on a day-to-day basis as household or childcare needs arose. Several mothers in these households also described this notion of flexibility differences, even between parents with the same mode of work. These mothers labeled their male co-parents as having high-intensity jobs and subsequently as having more limited autonomy than themselves. As a result, these mothers were perceived as more flexible and thus became responsible for more household chores and childcare. Kayleigh and her husband both worked remotely, but her husband's job often demanded long hours. She explained,

We struggle with the balance of chores, to be honest (laughs). Because my job comes off like it's more flexible, and sometimes it feels like it might not be as valued as his job is. His is a corporate job. Even though we have very similar salaries...just because my job is flexible doesn't mean I should be doing more [household and childcare duties]. Because I still have to do work.

Kayleigh's experience highlights that co-parents having a similar salary does not necessarily result in more equal sharing of tasks, confirming existing literature (Lyonette and Crompton 2015; Sánchez-Mira 2024). This also reveals that co-parents having the same mode of work (i.e., fully remote) also does not guarantee a more satisfactory division of labor. Even though they had the same work arrangements, they worked in different employment sectors and Kayleigh felt that her nonprofit job was perceived as more flexible and as less serious than her husband's private sector position. This resulted in her being expected to pick up more household and childcare duties. Whereas Jenna described a give-and-take of domestic responsibilities between her and her husband, who worked in the private sector, as their work demands shifted, Kayleigh felt locked into her position as the more flexible parent.

Several other mothers echoed Kayleigh's experiences, adding further evidence that sector of employment and granular aspects of work flexibility can become justifications for unequal division of tasks within these households. For example, Nancy and her husband both had fully remote jobs, but he had more protected, uninterrupted worktime than she did. In contrast to Kayleigh's explanation, Nancy explained that this was a result of his personal preferences and the nature of his job compared to hers rather than a difference between the nonprofit and private sectors:

My husband is very much like; he needs to focus and do his work. Plus, he's in a lot more meetings than I am. And people randomly ask him to hop into meetings at the last minute. He's much higher up at his organization. I already know when my meetings are usually, and there's a lot more flexibility with my work. But my day looks a little different than his because I kind of integrate everything into my regular workday. Like today, I dropped off a kid, then I'm taking some meetings. I'm doing some work. Then I drop off my other kid. Then I'll go to the gym. Then I'll probably take a phone call. Then pick up my kid, nurse her, and go back to work. It's so integrated. I have to look at everything that's happening with the kids and then work, like almost retrofit my work into that schedule. So that can be challenging.

Kayleigh and Nancy each referenced their and their husbands' relative work flexibility to explain the unequal division of chores and childcare in their homes. But Kayleigh felt as if her husband perceived her job to be less serious and thus expected her to do more chores. In contrast, Nancy herself saw her

husband's job as being more demanding than her own and felt that this difference led to their unequal sharing of tasks. Although Kayleigh expressed more aversion to the inequality of their household division of labor than Nancy, both acknowledged that their additional responsibilities made it challenging to do their jobs. Because their jobs were perceived as relatively more flexible than their husbands', although Kayleigh disagreed as to whether this was actually the case in her household, they explained these distributions as being justified on this basis. This aligns with both pre- and mid- pandemic findings that dual-income couples sometimes cite the demands of men's jobs or the rigid nature of their work schedules as the seemingly practical reason for having an unequal distribution of childcare and household labor (Damingier 2020; Martucci 2023; Rinaldo and Whalen 2023). However, these explanations rely on patriarchal ideas that women's jobs are not as serious or demanding as men's and that this makes women more available for child and house obligations despite being employed (Martucci 2023; Rinaldo and Whalen 2023).

Most fully remote households had an equal-leaning distribution of responsibilities. Of those that did not, gendered explanations of women having more flexible jobs, and even references to the seriousness of their careers compared to men, were often invoked to justify why an unequal division persisted despite the similarities of parents' work arrangements. This indicates that even when parents' work arrangements are identical, power dynamics related to earnings and demandingness of jobs continue to be relevant for some families in defining who has more flexibility, and subsequently more responsibility for the division of household labor.

Fully Hybrid Households: “She’s hybrid but not as flexible hybrid as I am”

In fully hybrid households, both parents had the same work arrangements, as did those in the prior section, but these parents had hybrid work arrangements rather than fully remote. This meant that both parents worked from home regularly, but also that they each worked from an office several days per week as well. This group accounted for a relatively small number of households (N=8). In half of these households, participants described an unequal leaning division of labor, while the other half described a

more equal sharing of duties. In contrast to the examples of Kayleigh and Nancy in the last section, Ross was a father with a nonprofit job, and his female partner had a more highly paid, private sector job. They both had hybrid jobs, but Ross described himself as having more flexibility. He explained, “I would say she's hybrid but not as flexible hybrid as I am. Her workplace never really fully embraced the idea of hybrid. And so, it really comes down to supervisor discretion for her.” Ross had become the lead parent for some child-related duties, such as picking up and dropping off their toddler at daycare, because of the differences in their relative flexibility. Ross exemplified the reverse situation to that of Kayleigh and Nancy in the previous section, illustrating a more evenly divided distribution of duties when a father in a nonprofit job was perceived to have more flexibility relative to a mother with a private sector job.

Like many of the fully remote households, Adrian, a father, explained that since both he and his wife began working hybrid schedules, their distribution of childcare had become more equitable:

It's the flexibility from a spousal parity perspective. I used to be a five-day-a-week person in the city. My wife was a four-day-a-week person three miles away [from their home]. So, most of the pick-up and drop-off responsibilities fell on her. And COVID changed all of that for the better. I think it no longer falls on one partner to be the domestic partner.

Adrian reiterated that when both parents have some amount of work flexibility, it can become easier to share household and childcare responsibilities. Unlike Ross, Adrian did not feel that he necessarily had more flexibility than his wife, merely improved flexibility compared to his previous in-person work.

As was the case with fully remote households, not all fully hybrid households divided responsibilities evenly between co-parents despite having the same work arrangements. Lila explained that she and her husband divided up morning child transportation responsibilities depending on their hybrid work schedules: “I drop them off at school and then either come back home or go to the office. If my husband's going to the office that day and I'm not, then he will take them to school. Or if we're both going to the office, it just depends on who has the earliest meeting that day.” While this morning arrangement seemed to be based on the practicality of their work schedules, Lila went on to explain that everyday she paused her work in the afternoons, picked up her children from school, and then finished her work hours in the evening. Lila described this afternoon routine, and her majority share of the household

and childcare tasks overall, as a taken-for-granted assumption in her household. It was unclear whether her husband was unable or unwilling to further leverage his hybrid work arrangements. Either way, despite their similar work arrangements, Lila's flexibility was heavily relied on to help their family routines function smoothly, reminiscent of Kayleigh and Nancy.

Mixed-Work Arrangement Households: “Outside of work hours, we are pretty even and balanced”

Among the thirty-five mixed-work arrangement households, the combination of parent-work arrangements fell into two groups. One was households where the parents interviewed for this research worked from home full-time or had hybrid positions, and their co-parents worked in-person (i.e., only the parents interviewed ever worked at home). In other mixed-arrangement households, the interviewees worked at home full-time, and their co-parents had hybrid jobs (i.e., both parents worked at home but one did so more often than the other). Compared to fully remote or fully hybrid households, parents in mixed-work arrangement households frequently highlighted that their work arrangements relative to their co-parents influenced their divisions of duties. In these households, it was more often mothers who had more remote work access than their male partners (66%), rather than fathers having more flexibility than their female partners (31%).⁶ Whereas more granular differences in job demands were used to explain gender differences in responsibilities among fully remote or hybrid households, among mixed-arrangement households, a mother's high flexibility relative to their male co-parent was often used to explain why they did more household and childcare labor.

Among mixed-arrangement households where both parents worked at home for some amount of time, the overall division of labor could shift daily based on specific parent work arrangements. For example, Madelyn worked fully remotely, and her husband had a hybrid job. Madelyn noted the differences in how their family functioned on the days when her husband went into the office compared to when they both worked from home:

⁶ Among these mixed-work arrangement households was a participant who identified as nonbinary and thus is not included in this calculation of female/male relative flexibility because this does not accurately reflect their gender identity.

I definitely think that working remotely makes being a parent easier. And that's why it's just become a permanent fixture in our lives. My husband --he comes home sometimes on the days he's in the office at seven thirty, eight o'clock. And we're like, 'How did we function doing this [before he had a hybrid job]?' Because [before working hybrid] he would sometimes miss the kids entirely, or he would just be able to say 'Goodnight,' and that would be it.

On the days that her husband worked in-person, Madelyn took on most or all childcare responsibilities.

However, because he worked from home regularly, Madelyn described her husband's in-person workdays as outliers to their typical division of tasks. Aside from those few stressful days when she oversaw most childcare, she felt that overall, they shared most obligations. Thus, when both parents had differing levels of access to remote work, this could introduce daily variation in how parents shared responsibilities, creating multiple "versions" of the division of labor based on parents' modes of work that day (i.e., tasks are equally shared on days when both parents are home, less equally when only one parent is working from home). Because parents saw work flexibility as a practical constraint on co-parent availability, they often still viewed these varied divisions of labor as equitable if not equal.

Similarly, in mixed-arrangement households where only one parent ever worked at home, several parents explained that they had a different division of duties during work hours than they did outside of work hours. For example, Mia worked fully remotely while her husband worked in-person. She explained,

I end up straightening up the apartment or doing laundry more [while working from home]. In general, we try to be intentional about splitting stuff up. So, we're pretty even in the mornings [before he leaves for work]. We'll take turns. One person will cook dinner two nights a week, the other person will cook dinner two nights a week. If you're cooking, you meal plan and pack the lunches for the next day.

While Mia acknowledged the additional labor that she did while working at home, she also felt that outside of work hours, she and her husband equally shared responsibilities. This is reminiscent of Madelyn above, who explained distinct versions of her household's division of labor on days that she and her husband both worked at home versus days when he worked in-person. Mark, a father who worked fully remotely and whose wife worked in-person, explained a similar variation to Mia's:

Things that happen during the normal workday are like eighty to ninety percent me. That's true of appointments, too. I pick up a kid and take them to a doctor. Outside of work hours, we are pretty

even and balanced. We try to do a general switch-off structure for things. Like whoever cooks doesn't clean.

That Mark took on most childcare during the workday both aligns with the differences between his and his wife's work flexibility, while also contradicting traditional expectations that mothers will be primarily responsible for children. This indicates the potential power of work arrangements to disrupt traditional gender norms regarding the division of these responsibilities. In this sample, it was more common for mothers to have higher flexibility than their male co-parents. But when men did have more flexibility, such as in Mark's case, a slight majority described sharing most household and childcare tasks with their female co-parents.

However, the power of work arrangements to influence the division of labor usually flowed in the opposite direction and resulted in some mothers taking on most obligations. For example, Sara had a fully remote job, and her husband worked in-person. Unlike prior examples in this section where parents with different work flexibility sought to share tasks outside of work hours, Sara described her work arrangements as "cementing" her status as the default parent. This unequal division was a trend in her household that pre-dated her working at home full-time. She explained,

I work from home. My husband does not. So, I am sort of the first person contacted by schools. Well, I mean, I'm also the default parent as the female in the relationship. So, you know, schools call me first, the kids call me first.

Sara described having to manage child-related interruptions throughout her workday, both because of her work arrangement and because of gendered expectations that mothers are the primary caregivers. Since her husband's in-person job was relatively inflexible compared to her own, this unequal distribution felt justified by the flexible nature of her remote work. While Sara was dissatisfied with how responsibilities were divided in her household, she found it difficult to push back against the logic that working at home made it easier for her to handle these tasks compared to her husband.

Similarly, Kathryn was a mother with a hybrid job, and her husband worked in-person. Kathryn organized and facilitated all her school-aged children's various activities. She explained that the tradeoff for utilizing her flexibility in this way was that she regularly finished her work in the evenings:

My husband will be like, ‘well it’s 5 o’clock, why are you still working?’ Because I ran kids for three hours today, and I have to keep up with work. After they’re done with activities and we’re done with dinner, I have to keep working. And sometimes he won’t recognize that. With people who are [working] in-person, they’re like, ‘oh you should be done, time for work is over.’ No. If I’ve been running around for two to three hours to get kids to different activities, then no, it’s not over. I still have work to do.

In Kathryn’s case, her husband’s work arrangement was relatively inflexible, and so her own flexibility had become embedded in their family’s routines. This came at a personal cost to Kathryn, who described her daily routine as exhausting and challenging. It also seemed to create tension between her and her husband. Some fathers in mixed-arrangement households also referred to in-home conflict surrounding the division of tasks. Scott, a father with a fully remote job whose wife had a hybrid job, stated, “It is a constant conversation, sometimes a contentious conversation.” This indicates that among mixed-arrangement households, parent work arrangements had the potential to both alleviate or aggravate dissatisfaction with how duties were divided between mothers and fathers.

In contrast to fully remote or fully hybrid households, where parents had similar levels of work flexibility, in mixed-arrangement households, parents experienced concrete differences in flexibility. Depending on the gender of the parent with more flexibility and the overall approach parents took to sharing obligations, these mixed-work arrangements could solidify either a more *or* less gendered division of responsibilities. Some mixed-arrangement households illustrated the increasing complexity of the distribution of labor as a result of parents’ work arrangements. Several parents with different work arrangements shared tasks differently between work hours and non-work hours or on days when their modes of work were more or less similar. In some cases, even when mothers had more access to remote work than fathers, parents still sought to divide responsibilities equitably overall rather than have mothers become primarily responsible for household and childcare labor. However, in other mixed-arrangement households, mothers having more work flexibility than fathers could reinforce an unequal division of labor that is rationalized based on differences in work flexibility.

Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated the complicated impacts that parental work arrangements can have on the household division of labor. Many households used parents' work flexibility to try to divide duties more evenly between co-parents. Most fully remote households had an equal-leaning distribution of responsibilities. Some mixed-arrangement households also described dynamic distributions of tasks that varied by day, as did parent work arrangements, or by time of day. These variations were a result of parents navigating their differences in work flexibility while also seeking to equally share tasks. This suggests that when co-parents have different work arrangements, static categorizations of household division of labor may not easily apply. This finding is significant for understanding how parents' egalitarian gender beliefs can sometimes shift from being out-of-reach ideals to becoming more embedded in family routines because of parental work arrangements (Pedulla and Thébaud 2015).

Although fathers working at home regularly took on tasks associated with household and childcare labor, there was a gendered stall in the sharing of cognitive labor among parents working at home. Cognitive labor appears to "stick" to mothers, or to remain their responsibility, regardless of parents' work arrangements or how other tasks are divided. This may be in part because mothers have perceived ownership and knowledge of these duties (Weeks et al. 2025). Additionally, the percentage of parents who regularly provided childcare while working at home was higher among mothers (42%) than fathers (32%). This indicates that it may not be unique to the COVID-19 era for mothers working at home to take on more excess childcare than fathers (Parry 2025; Yavorsky, Qian, and Sargent 2022). Indeed, some mothers in fully remote households took on additional childcare because they were perceived to be more available than their husbands, who were described as having intense job demands. Mothers also often took on more responsibilities in households where they had more access to remote work than fathers.

Most parents in this sample said their preference would ideally be an equal division of tasks. Although most did not describe an exactly equal divide of responsibilities, many parents felt that given

their and their co-parents' work arrangements, they had achieved something close to an equitable arrangement, or one that was fair and logical. Parent perceptions are important for evaluating satisfaction with marriage, life, and parent well-being (Don, Biehle, and Mickelson 2013; Gordon et al. 2022; Pedulla and Thébaud 2015; Waddell et al. 2021). Thus, even in the absence of widespread equality in the household division of labor, the prevalence of divisions that felt equitable to parents indicates the potential positive impacts of remote work arrangements for parent satisfaction and well-being.

CHAPTER 5: THE WORK-FROM-HOME HANDCUFFS: REMOTE WORK AND INTENSIVE PARENTING PRACTICES

Introduction

While the previous chapter focused on how parents used work flexibility to manage household and childcare tasks, this chapter centers on how parents felt that their child-rearing approaches were impacted by work flexibility. Parents were strongly motivated to maintain their mode of work because of the complicated logistics of raising children. In addition to these practicalities, parents also sought to use their work flexibility to more fully enact aspects of intensive parenting that they believed were important. These norms, which were originally aligned closely with the middle-upper classes but are now widespread in the US, expect parents to devote immense time and effort developing their children's interests, abilities, and academic skills (Lareau 2011; Minnotte 2023). Specifically, parents in this sample often aimed to use their flexibility to spend copious amounts of intentional, quality time with children as part of supporting their holistic development. For some mothers and most fathers, they felt as if their work flexibility improved their overall parenting, which made them feel more positive about being a working parent. This sense that remote work made them better parents illuminates a second, more emotional reason why so many parents were eager to remain in these work arrangements.

Beyond the intense amount of energy that parents are expected to devote to child-rearing, these parenting norms can also be gender specific. Women are often presumed to be the ideal caregivers for their children, generating tension and judgment over who most closely adheres to good mothering practices between stay-at-home mothers and working mothers (Dillaway and Paré 2008; Hays 1996; Milkie et al. 2016; Odenweller et al. 2020). Modern fathering norms continue to emphasize historical ideas that men are financial providers but also assert that fathers should be involved in the daily care of children (Diniz et al. 2023; Pleck 2010). As these new fatherhood ideals have emerged, so has the notion of the second shift or the idea that many working mothers maintain responsibility for most parenting and household tasks despite being employed (Hochschild and Machung 2012). As noted in Chapter 4, two-parent households are common in the US, and most of these are dual-income households (US Bureau of

Labor Statistics 2025; US Census Bureau 2023). The acknowledgement of the second shift and increased interest among men to more equally share the parenting load has further pushed working fathers to take on aspects of child-rearing (Diniz et al. 2023). Thus, intensive parenting is increasingly a shared endeavor between mothers and fathers today (Forbes et al. 2020; Ishizuka 2019; Venard et al. 2024).

Attempting to achieve good parenting or subscribing to intensive parenting norms can extract a high personal cost. Working parents, particularly mothers, often feel guilt and immense pressure from trying to fulfill the needs of their children, their workplace, and themselves (Gunderson and Barrett 2017; Smith 2022; Lamprianidou et al. 2025; Venard et al. 2024). At the same time, parents often find inherent meaning and enjoyment in child-rearing, feelings that can enhance well-being (Musick, Meier, and Flood 2016). Some women, previously employed in demanding professional jobs, have described pivoting to less strenuous work after having children because they felt that their job requirements were rigid and incompatible with their mothering (Stone and Lovejoy 2021). Fathers in two-parent households are generally not pushed out of elite careers in the same way some mothers are, though both high- and low-income single fathers may experience work conflicts when seeking to prioritize their caregiving (Iztayeva 2024). As illustrated in prior chapters, the flexibility afforded parents by working remotely can help them mitigate simultaneous and strenuous work and family demands (de Laat 2025). In this chapter, I move beyond the usefulness of working at home for managing family demands to analyze how remote working mothers and fathers *feel* about their parenting. Beyond easing the execution of everyday logistics, work flexibility also influenced the extent to which some parents conceived of themselves as good parents and subsequently felt positively about themselves.

My findings demonstrate how educated, upper middle-income mothers and fathers utilize remote work arrangements to try to achieve their desired intensive parenting approach. In this sample, both mothers and fathers felt that their multifaceted work flexibility allowed them to lean in further to ways of parenting that they felt were important for good parenting. Though parents did not state their explicit interest or awareness of intensive parenting norms, their notions of what good parenting was were largely

aligned with these norms. These findings illustrate that remote work ultimately felt necessary to them for achieving normative parenting and that their feelings about their parenting were connected to having work flexibility. I also find that mothers and fathers use flexibility towards gendered parenting goals. Fathers felt that their work arrangements enabled them to be involved in the daily care of children while maintaining their financial contributions to the family; all key tenets of new fatherhood norms. Among mothers, all similarly *utilized* their work flexibility but two groups emerged in relation to how they *felt* their mode of work impacted their parenting. Some mothers (about 56%) primarily expressed that remote work reduced their stress and allowed them to more easily manage the typical routines of being a working mother. Other mothers (about 44%) articulated that their mode of work allowed them to provide their children with an experience that they felt was more akin to having a stay-at-home mother and consequently, that they viewed as beneficial for their children. Overall, this chapter elucidates how remote work arrangements shaped parenting approaches and the emotional impact which this had on mothers and fathers. I specifically address:

- 1) How do parents use their work flexibility to adhere to normative intensive parenting child-rearing approaches?
- 2) And, what, if any, gender differences exist in how mothers and fathers utilize and feel about their work flexibility?

Doubling Down on Intensive Parenting

Parents in this sample often felt reliant on their mode of work to make their lives function more smoothly and to feel more positive about their parenting. I argue that specific aspects of remote work flexibility allowed parents to intensify their already time and effort-intensive parenting strategies. Their mode of work allowed them to adapt their work schedule to fit the needs of their children. This adaptability often enabled children to participate in activities and helped parents more easily attend school events that they felt were important for illustrating their support for their child. When working at home, they were often spatially proximate to children, and in many cases, were more accessible for child emergencies or unexpected needs than they would have been when working in person. They could also

maximize their time during the workday so that their time and energy could be more singularly devoted to children when they were at home. This sometimes meant completing both work and household responsibilities during the day or working very early or late. Ultimately, working at home allowed parents in this sample to spend more time and effort on their children, reinforcing tenets of intensive norms related to intentionally fostering child development. Most felt that, compared to the alternative of working in-person, working remotely better enabled them to parent in the ways that they wanted. Because of their work flexibility, many parents were satisfied with their child-rearing approach in that they felt closer to achieving good parenting.

Adaptability: “When there is something solid on the family side, work can flow around it”

Parents working at home regularly adjusted their work start and end times, moved or changed work locations as needed, and often interspersed work tasks with family responsibilities throughout the day. Sara, a mother who worked fully remotely, described the emotional impact of being able to adjust her work as needed to meet her children’s needs:

There's this level of flexibility that means I don't have to constantly disappoint my family with things. I had a meeting once that was going to butt up against my eldest's track practice. And I took the meeting in the Dunkin' Donuts parking lot down the street from the school so that I could then get them there on time. There's just so much more flexibility with that. There's just so much less guilt.

Sara and several other parents had previously struggled to support their children’s involvement in after-school activities that overlapped with work hours. Parents sometimes felt isolated in managing these responsibilities because they had few connections to other parents with whom they could coordinate, schools rarely provided transportation, and public transportation was rarely viable. So, if parents could not facilitate pick-up and drop-off, sometimes their children could not participate in activities. Being able to adjust their work location and schedule enabled the development of a child’s skills and interests, key tenets of intensive parenting. While feelings of guilt and pressure to be perfect parents have previously been associated with lower career ambitions for women (Meeussen and Van Laar 2018), these findings indicate that remote work may help some feel less guilty about their parenting without having to sacrifice their career goals.

Parents also explained that their increased capacity to adapt when working at home allowed them to prioritize their parenting in ways that were incompatible with working in-person. Nick, a father who worked fully remotely, described that gaining this flexibility felt transformative:

People talk about the golden handcuffs at work. But the work-from-home handcuffs are even more binding. Because it's really hard to imagine going to a job where I don't have this kind of flexibility. It's like the work is fluid rather than solid. And so, when there is something solid on the family side, then work can kind of flow around it and adapt to it, rather than needing to flex my personal life around work.

The term “golden handcuffs” refers to monetary benefits that workers become accustomed to and then are often reluctant to lose (e.g., earning a high salary or regular bonuses) (Murphy et al. 2022; Yavaş 2024). Because his parenting was so important to him, Nick felt that the ability to work at home may be even more compelling than a high-paying career. This highlights a unique emphasis that many men in this sample placed on their fathering, that these responsibilities were similarly important to their paid work. For Nick and many other parents, working at home gave them the ability to feel like good parents by prioritizing the solid demands of child-rearing rather than their more fluid work demands. Nick and other parents felt reliant on these work arrangements after becoming accustomed to prioritizing their children in this way. Many other parents echoed these sentiments and similarly believed that their current parenting approaches were directly enabled by their work flexibility.

Parents also explained that their adaptability meant that they could be highly responsive to the unexpected needs of their children when working at home. They could go to their child’s school or daycare at a moment’s notice if needed. Jack, a father who worked fully remotely, was comforted by the idea of being able to respond quickly to child-related emergencies. He stated,

There is a nice benefit to being able to be home and ensure that everything is okay [with the children]. And if something bad happens [at school], then you're already home and able to get your kids quickly. Hopefully, this does not happen, but [if there were] an active shooter [at the children’s school]. They do drills at our kids' school [to prepare for an active shooter]. It's a ridiculous reality we live in, but that's something that we have to be aware of.

This ability to make spur-of-the-moment changes to their work schedule was not only comforting but also allowed parents to feel attentive to their children even while working. This carried over to less urgent examples of this capacity, such as attending midday events at their children’s schools. The ability to do

this helped parents feel more positive about their parenting, even while maintaining busy work schedules.

Adrian, a father who had a hybrid job, explained:

It's the flexibility to be there for the important things that you choose to be there for. And so last week, amidst a complicated and busy week, I was able to be home for two parent-teacher conferences. There's an element of working from home, and the flexibility of when and how one is working. I recognize the privilege that I have in saying all that. It allows me to have closer to that, you know, elusive work-life balance thing. Or at least my definition of it.

Adrian, like many parents, felt adapting his work to meet the needs of his family had become integrated into his daily routine as a working parent. Importantly, he also attributed this ability to helping him get closer to his personal iteration of “having it all” or achieving a work-life balance as a working parent. Historically, notions of having it all have been the purview of mothers who have long grappled with integrating employment with intensive mothering (Schmidt et al. 2023). Thus, this is an unusual goal for fathers to mention and indicates that as new fatherhood ideals become more pervasive, working men may consider it more important to seek a particular kind of work-life balance that includes significant caregiving responsibilities.

Parents multitasking in the late afternoons or evenings after children had returned from childcare facilities or school was also made easier by adapting their workflows to fit their children’s schedules.

Madelyn, a mother who worked fully remotely, explained how her work strategy helped her accommodate her children’s afterschool routines:

Once the kids come home, I'm still on call. I would say all my proactive work happens when the kids aren't home. And then all my reactive work— so, of course, if an email comes in and my kids are home, I'm not going to not answer it. But I'm not going to deliberately, let's say, schedule meetings when they're already home.

Madelyn’s strategic use of her flexibility allowed her to enact key tenets of intensive parenting. Firstly, she is the one providing care for her children after school, reaffirming the notion that mothers are the ideal caregivers for their own children. Madelyn was also able to largely shift her time and attention to her children in the afternoons while concluding her workday.

However, not all parents had this level of autonomy over their work, and not all work activities were malleable enough to be finished before children arrived home. For example, Beth, a single parent with a very meeting-heavy job, explained:

Hopefully, at three o'clock, I'm able to run out and go pick my son up. He comes back, and I'm still working till five or 5:30. I've tried to explain to him the concept of a latchkey kid, that he's a latchkey kid even though I'm home. He's nine, so he doesn't quite appreciate that. But he'll come in, put his school stuff down, and ask me to make him a snack. Sometimes I can. If I have to jump into a meeting, I cannot. And then he heads back to the playroom until I'm done.

Beth was usually able to take her lunch break during her son's school pick-up time, but beyond that, she was sometimes unavailable to actively engage with him while she finished her workday. While Beth's typical afternoons with her son deviated from intensive parenting norms, she also explained that she was able to regularly schedule her work meetings around any activities he wanted to participate in and events at his school. Within the bounds of their job demands, Beth and most parents in this sample made efforts to adapt their remote workflows to support the development of their children.

Proximity: "I've got to go run and pick up my kid"

Closely related to adaptability, parents also described their work arrangements as enabling them to be in close physical proximity to their children. While adaptability could vary by the specific job a parent had, almost all parents were near their children when working remotely because schools and childcare facilities were close to their homes. In contrast, many described commuting for more than thirty minutes, and sometimes over an hour, when they previously worked in an office. While adaptability of work timing and location allowed parents to be "on hand" quickly if their children needed them, this was largely enabled by parents working only a few miles away from their children. This proximity helped parents feel like they were more available to their children, regardless of how often they actually had to attend a school event or pick up a sick child. Additionally, parents did not have to reduce their employment in order to feel that they could be good parents in this way.

Because parents were nearby their children, it was easier to attend midday child events and minimize work disruptions while doing so. Attending these events was a way to signal active support and

commitment to their children, despite working full-time, in a way that was observable to their children, teachers, and other parents in attendance. Anna, a mother with a hybrid job, explained the increased ease she felt in attending to her children during the workday: “So next week I’m going to take my lunch break and go to my son’s Valentine’s Day party. Had that been pre-COVID [when working in person], I would *still* have made sure to go to that Valentine’s Day party. But I would have had to take half-a-day off.” Her proximity to her children enabled Anna to feel like a dedicated parent without having to sacrifice valuable paid time off or cause a noticeable disruption to her work. Similarly, when children needed something at the last minute, parents were able to attend to them quickly, with only minor interruptions to their workflow. Karen, a mother who worked fully remotely, explained that being nearby had changed the degree to which her children’s unanticipated needs disrupted her workday:

It’s very easy [to respond to an unplanned child need]. If I have something on my calendar, I could just be like ‘Look, can we push this 15 minutes? I’ve got to go run and pick up my kid from school.’ If I were working in the city still, you’re talking an hour and a half at the earliest before I could get back [to the child’s school]. So, there are a lot of pluses [to working nearby].

Proximity to children when working at home helped these parents adhere to ideal worker norms, while also allowing them to strive for intensive parenting norms, which emphasize availability and attentiveness to children.

Maximizing Time: “It frees up so much time to be with my son and focus on what matters with him”

Parents who subscribe to intensive child-rearing, as most in this sample did, often express feelings of overwhelm (Novoa et al. 2025). Because of this, parents were highly motivated to be efficient with their time during the workday. They worked hard to keep up with their job responsibilities, but also with laundry, meal preparations, errands, and other home logistics that were more easily done without children being home. Madelyn, who earlier described adapting her workflow to watch her children after school, also emphasized that working at home allowed her to be more efficient, “It has made our life so much easier in that it’s just a higher level of productivity. I can be smarter about my work hours...So that backlog of things that builds up from parent duties, you can really just be more proactive about.” This idea of being smart or efficient about time use speaks to the extreme expectations that parents were

navigating. However, parents were not seeking to maximize their time just for the sake of efficiency. Minimizing their to-do lists in the evenings and weekends allowed them to have more uninterrupted time with their children and to facilitate their children's participation in afternoon and evening activities.

By trying to use their time strategically throughout the workday, many parents hoped to ultimately have more quality, intentional time with their children. Emily, a mother who worked fully remotely, explained that being efficient with her time allowed her to prioritize her parenting:

As working parents, the flexibility of working from home can't be overstated. The fact that you are not filling your evenings and your weekends with appointments, to-do lists, or just general life admin. I think it makes a huge difference in terms of having your weekends *truly* be about spending time with your family and things that you want to do. As opposed to the very long list of things that you have to get to.

Although Emily stated that the goal was to have more time with her family, parents also sometimes had to push their work to the evenings to accommodate midday child needs. However, when they were able to get work and home-related tasks out of the way *during* their workday, parents could then spend even more concentrated time with children in the evenings and on weekends. Having this uninterrupted, quality time with children was a high priority for many parents in this sample. Colin, a single father who worked fully remotely, stated,

It just frees up so much time to be with my son and focus on what matters with him. And just connecting with him as opposed to, like, 'Oh, man, I gotta go to the grocery store. Then I gotta come home and do laundry.' It really limits the number of things I have to do when he's here. And it just allows me to do each of these pieces better. It allows me to be a better employee. It allows me to be a better dad. It allows me to be a better friend. It allows me to be a better partner.

Several other parents similarly expressed that working remotely created ease throughout multiple aspects of their lives and allowed them to focus their time and efforts on being attentive to their children. Notably, parenting is more stressful today than in prior decades, particularly among those who adhere to intensive parenting norms (Nomaguchi and Milkie 2020). Some parents today feel that the demands of child-rearing exceed their capacity (Nomaguchi and Milkie 2020). As illustrated by Colin, work flexibility that reduces stress associated with parenting may not only increase their perceptions of being good parents but could also have broader impacts on parent well-being (Kelly et al. 2014; Lee et al. 2017; Nomaguchi and Johnson 2016).

The connection between well-being and efficient use of time while working at home was also evident among pregnant and post-partum mothers in this sample. All parents interviewed for this research already had at least one child born at the time of interviews but about 7% were expecting an additional child at the time of our interview, and 11% had a child under the age of one. Pregnant mothers and those who had recently given birth explained that they were better able to work efficiently by adjusting their work location (e.g., a couch or bed) and clothing so that they could continue working while navigating the physical discomforts of pregnancy. Several post-partum mothers also shared that the time and effort involved with pumping breastmilk was much more manageable when working at home. Brooke, a mother with a fully remote job, previously had a hybrid job shortly after giving birth. She stated, “When you're in the office, it's literally forty-five minutes to an hour that you're pumping, and then the cleanup. And I did obviously have my own area where I could pump [in the office], but it just still feels a little weird.” Even when workplace policies appear to support lactating mothers, women such as Brooke can still feel that they have inadequate time and space to pump. This can contribute to feelings of guilt about taking time to pump at work and worries about maintaining breastmilk supply (Burns et al. 2022; Cunningham et al. 2024).

Being able to work at home can be a significant accommodation for pregnant and post-partum people that simultaneously makes it easier to maintain their work responsibilities. Emma had given birth to two children over the course of working at home and had found being pregnant and breastfeeding to be minimally disruptive to her job. She pumped breastmilk during our interview and explained:

I'll be in [Zoom] meetings like this [gestured down to the pump, which was outside the frame of her Zoom camera], pumping because I can. And it's not bothering anyone, and I don't have to go to another room. It's not like offensive or doesn't feel like inappropriate. I think it's a huge thing that I couldn't imagine not having.

The flexibility to pump at home and at times of their choosing minimized stress and reduced the effort needed to maintain breastmilk supply among mothers such as Emma. This not only reduced the overall stress that these mothers faced but also helped to reduce the interruptions they may usually experience to their workflows when breastfeeding at an office.

Parents overall saw their work flexibility as a key component of their child-rearing approaches. These results move beyond describing general time and spatial flexibility, which have previously been identified as elements of remote work (Kangas et al. 2023; Karjalainen 2023; Parry 2025). I assert more specifically that parents' work arrangements allowed them to be adaptable, to be near children, and enabled them to maximize time during the workday. These key dimensions of work flexibility ultimately helped them to adhere to intensive parenting. This, in turn, helped them feel more like the involved and attentive good parents that they strived to be.

Leaning into “New” Fatherhood: “I can be more present for my kids”

Most men in this sample felt as if their work arrangements helped them to be better fathers and as a result, they felt more positively about their parenting. Working at home enabled them to combine employment with parenting in ways they thought were not possible when working in-person. This included not only spending more time with their children but becoming more embedded in the routines of their children. These experiences were distinct from when they had previously worked in person. In addition, many men felt able to be a different kind of father than what their own fathers had been. Men working at home in this sample were not only doing ‘new fatherhood’ but also differentiated themselves from older notions of less involved, emotionally distant breadwinner fathers (Pleck 1987). Notably, new fatherhood norms are aligned overall with intensive parenting goals of deliberately contributing to child development through close attention and increased time spent with children. Thus, most fathers in this sample were simultaneously adhering to overlapping new fatherhood and intensive parenting norms.

Many men commented on the logistical ease of working at home, such as a lack of commute. But they also explained how their fathering had shifted, and in their opinion improved, because of working at home. Andrew, a father who worked fully remotely, described realizing the full benefits of this arrangement for his parenting:

At first, it was, ‘Oh, it's nice that I don't have to commute anymore.’ But I have been able to volunteer more at the school; I'm actually the PTA president. If there's any [child] need that arises. Being able to be at the school, being able to do doctor's appointments.

Being involved with children through indirect duties such as parent-teacher-associations is not often an aspect of parenting that men express an interest in. Yet Andrew has become PTA president and his enthusiasm for this and mundane responsibilities such as attending child doctor's appointments invokes not only invoked intensive parenting norms but also to new fatherhood norms.

Several fathers in this sample sought to distinguish themselves from their own fathers. They described themselves as much more aware of their children's needs compared to what they experienced with their own fathers. For example, Nolan, a father who worked fully remotely, explained that by avoiding a daily commute, he could be substantially more involved with his children than his own father had been:

It's being with my kids for the most part. Like, if I'm not driving them to school, I can be with them throughout their preparation for school. Getting them ready. My dad never did that. He was never able to. Being able to pick them up, being able to go to my kids' practices. Making dinners, all that sort of stuff.

Nolan indicated his dissatisfaction with his father's involvement and attention but also acknowledged that his father worked in person full time and was likely unavailable for many of the tasks Nolan described. In this way, Nolan saw his work arrangements as an opportunity for involvement with his children that his own father never had. He has integrated himself into the daily morning and evening routines of his children, taking on aspects of caregiving that have historically been feminized such as cooking and helping children get ready for school.

Fathers in this sample referenced the idea of work-life balance in ways that are often reserved for working mothers. Yet men who worked at home described their satisfaction with being highly available to their children while also maintaining their employment status. John, a father who worked fully remotely, described his idea of work-life balance by comparing himself to his father:

That's the biggest pro for me of working remotely. Being able to provide for my family *and* be present with my family. For me, I just like the fact that I'm able to be there. I can be more present for my kids. I didn't have that level of engagement with my dad, so I wanted to make that change.

Several men in this sample emphasized that their work arrangements had allowed them to achieve something like the best of both worlds, maintaining their employment and providing financial stability to their family while also becoming more involved with their children. While discussing this topic at all is unusual, feelings of having achieved something like work-life balance is even more atypical among working fathers.

Fathers often focused on the specific impact of not having a daily commute when describing the benefits of working at home. But rather than emphasizing that this saved them time generally, fathers saw a long daily commute as something that took away valuable time that could be spent with children. Nick is a father who worked fully remotely and whose young daughter was watched by his in-laws in a neighboring duplex during the workday. He explained,

I start work at eight thirty. And I get to hang out with my daughter through eight twenty-nine. It's not like I have to leave at seven to commute. Similarly, I sign off work at five, and I'm hanging out with my daughter at five o'one. It's not like I leave work at five and get home at six, like my brother, who commutes. Like, maybe I'll see the kids for twenty minutes at the end of the day. I can spend a lot of time in the morning and in the afternoon with my kids, which is great.

For many men, a tangible impact of working at home was spending more time with young children, who often went to bed early in the evening. When fathers in this sample were able to eliminate or reduce commuting, they felt better about their involvement as a parent.

Men who had previously worked in person had a direct way to compare how they felt about their fathering when they had in person or remote work arrangements. Jack worked completely in-person when his children were young and now had a hybrid schedule. He stated,

I think there were probably things that I missed when I was in the office. It would have been even more helpful if I'd had this structure when they were younger, because they go to bed so early. By the time you leave work, it takes an hour to get home, and then you do dinner, and then they go to bed. *There's so little time that you get to actually have with them* during the week, and that's not great as a parent. I regret that I couldn't have done this earlier, hybrid, to have had more time [with the children]. But it's definitely nice to be able to have this time now at least.

For fathers, time spent away from their families commuting seemed to impact the extent to which they saw themselves as involved and active fathers. On average, women tend to work nearer to home than men, though this gender gap in commuting has shrunk over the last few decades (Lee, Lahr, and Wang

2022). These fathers were grateful to become more involved in the daily care of their children and to be different from their own fathers or previous experiences they had when working in person.

Some who had previously worked in-person offered examples of how they had become more entrenched in their children's routines after working from home. Chris, a father who worked fully remotely and used to have a daily commute, explained:

I love being able to take the kids to school and then pick them up in the afternoon and be there while they're there [home]. It was definitely not the case when I was growing up, and it was not always the case in the past [for our family]. *I think it's just better for family dynamics and for my own well-being and mental health.* I feel a lot more grounded, centered, relaxed, and happy being able to work from home than I would be if I had to drive all around and be in the office.

Chris and several other fathers said that their work arrangements had a wide range of benefits related to both their parenting and, subsequently, to their well-being. By becoming more involved in the daily care of children and thereby adhering to new fatherhood norms, they had improved how their family functioned and, as a result, had also improved how they felt about themselves as fathers.

When describing why they felt positively about their parenting, men often explained their role in the day-to-day routines of children, supporting pandemic-era findings that remote work can increase father involvement with children (Carlson et al. 2024). Benjamin, a father who had a fully remote job, described how his flexibility had shaped his ability to be an involved father:

There's no question in my mind that being available for your children is important. There have been a number of cases where things [with the kids] just have happened, and it is no effort at all for me to be home and be there to help deal with the child who's just jumped off the couch and broken her leg. And I can support the household and my children by being available for them.

In addition to being available for urgent child needs, such as an accident, fathers also readily answered questions about the everyday routines of their children. They knew the details of school pick up, drop off, afternoon activities, food preparation, and bedtime routines. Some fathers even described their children preferring them over their female co-parent for some tasks ("If I don't put her down for a nap, there won't be a nap"). While rattling off the minutiae of a child's activities or daily routine may appear to be surface-level, fathers' intimate knowledge of these details displayed their sense of responsibility for these tasks.

This stands in contrast to fathers who follow the directions of a mother who is more knowledgeable about what children need.

Remote working fathers had primary responsibility for numerous aspects of daily childcare. This goes beyond spending time with children during leisure and play activities, as has been previously documented (Diniz et al. 2023). My current findings relate to Pleck's (2010) conceptualization of paternal involvement, which proposed three main components: engagement in child activities, warmth and responsiveness to children, and general knowledge of children. Being a remote worker enabled fathers to both engage in and become knowledgeable of their children's daily activities. The degree of warmth and responsiveness to children is less visible in these data because I interviewed fathers rather than observed them with their children. However, being attentive and responsive are key tenets of intensive parenting, and fathers likely invoked this component of Pleck's as well. Over time, some fathers who worked at home seemed to become "experts" on what their children needed in ways that have historically been reserved for mothers (Davis et al. 2022; Minnotte 2023; Schmidt et al. 2023).

These findings contrast with several pre-pandemic and pandemic-era results, indicating that remote work does not necessarily lead to increased father involvement in parenting (Chung and Booker 2023; Parry 2025). In this sample, most fathers attributed their increased involvement in their children's lives to working at home. John, a father who works fully remotely along with his wife, previously emphasized the importance of being present to his children. He summarized how his flexibility enabled fundamental aspects of new fatherhood ideals:

We're there for our kids. Any emergencies, we're there. We're more involved. We are able to provide not only financial support, but *also* the things that really help with development. So, the social interactions, being able to take time [with kids]. And not just on the weekends. I know what happens throughout the day with my kids. Other parents come home, and you just have to eat dinner and go to bed. That's it. That's all they have.

John not only encapsulated both new fatherhood and intensive parenting norms but also illustrated that for fathers in this sample, their work arrangements allowed them to enact the kinds of involved parenting that they aspired to. Scott, a father who worked fully remotely, emphasized that his

preferred parenting strategy didn't feel compatible with working in-person: I think really the biggest benefit [of working at home] is that I feel like I can take care of most of the other life responsibilities during the day, so that when my kids *are* home, I can be more present to them." Having work flexibility allowed these men to go further than describing an abstract desire to father in ways that would support their children's development, they were able to do so and felt more satisfied as a result.

As previously described, fathers in this sample tended to have egalitarian preferences for the division of household and childcare labor. These preferences may have made them more likely to become immersed in childcare responsibilities. Men who hold egalitarian preferences and espouse new fatherhood ideals more often enact these views than men who do not hold these beliefs (Carlson et al. 2024; Offer and Kaplan 2021). By working at home, these fathers also arguably have fewer job-related structural constraints that could prevent them from enacting egalitarian preferences than if they worked in-person (Daminger 2020; Pedulla and Thebaud 2015). All these factors may have influenced the extent to which these fathers utilized their work flexibility to become more involved with their children. Yet, because these men did not often become involved in the mental load of running a household and child-rearing, this suggests that there may be a limit to the extent of ownership or responsibility that remote working fathers take over certain tasks. The daily care of children more easily came under their purview than intangible or longer-term planning tasks for which mothers primarily retained responsibility.

Mothers Working at Home: "Getting By?" or "Having it All?"

All women in this sample utilized their flexibility while working at home to mother in ways that tended to be aligned with intensive parenting. However, I found distinct differences between two groups of mothers. These differences were not based on the actions they took when working at home but instead were based on how they *felt* about their work flexibility in relation to their mothering. These mothers all sought to foster their children's holistic development by way of spending immense time and effort intentionally interacting with and supporting them. However, what differed was the extent to which they expressed or felt that their mothering abilities were noticeably improved because of their work flexibility.

This stands in contrast to men in this sample, who more universally felt that their fathering capabilities were enhanced by working at home. Some mothers felt that working at home helped them get through each day and perhaps struggle a little less with the demands of mothering and working. Others felt decidedly that their flexibility had improved their mothering and empowered them to get closer to their version of having it all as a working mother. While their workloads were similar overall, their viewpoints of how working at home affected their mothering differed.

A slight majority (about 56%) of women felt that working at home primarily served to lessen the daily stresses of being a working mother. This group described work flexibility as helpful and even as essential for mothering while working full-time. But they did not express that working at home made them feel like better mothers or allowed them to parent in ways that they felt happier about. Yet these mothers were still enthusiastic and grateful to work at home. They often emphasized that having work flexibility made the seemingly impossible-- being a working mother-- feel a little more possible. I call this group of women “status quo” mothers because they frequently highlighted how the practical advantages of working remotely allowed them to maintain a grasp on the typical daily difficulties of being a working mother.

In contrast, the remaining 44% of mothers felt that remote work had noticeably brought them closer to their ideal form of mothering and, for some, to their iteration of having it all as a working mother. For many, this included becoming more similar to stay-at-home mother (SAHM) because they now worked at home. The idea of a SAHM looms large within norms of motherhood and SAHMs are often framed in opposition to working mothers (Hays 1996; Minotte 2023). This is in part because it is assumed that having a SAHM is better for children, as being located at home aligns with intensive parenting ideals of being available and attentive to children’s needs (Dillaway and Paré 2008; Minnotte 2023). Many in this group felt that their work flexibility enabled them to give their children a particular type of mothering, akin to SAH mothering, that they thought was most beneficial. As a result, some felt

empowered and happier with their mothering because of their work arrangements. I refer to this group as “work-at-home mothers” or WAHMs in reference to their self-expressed connection to SAHMs.

All parents in this sample navigated the constraints of their daily lives and sought to be good working parents. These results are centered on how women’s *feelings* about their mothering were affected by their work arrangements. The differences in expressed emotions between WAHMs and status quo mothers are not clearly explained by factors included in these data such as the division of household and childcare labor or the relative flexibility of themselves and their co-parents. Rather than explaining the origins of these feelings, these results demonstrate the variation in how these women who work at home felt about their mothering.

Getting by as a “Status Quo” Mother: “The day-to-day is much, much easier”

About half of the mothers in this sample (56%) felt that remote work provided an improved, if still imperfect, pathway to being a working mother compared to working in person. Status quo mothers felt that work flexibility helped them maintain a better grip on the demands of motherhood and their jobs. This stands somewhat in contrast to the more positive feelings of happiness and relaxation that several remote working fathers described. Several fathers expressed variations of excitement and joy because they felt as if working at home had improved their abilities to father, in ways that largely aligned with intensive parenting. Similarly to fathers, some WAHMs felt empowered, and consequently happy, that they could now give their children a level of attention and care while working at home that they had previously thought was only possible if they didn’t work. In contrast to fathers and WAHMs, status quo mothers described feeling decreased negative emotions, such as less stress or exhaustion, but did not often attribute their work flexibility as distinctly improving their parenting or making them feel more positive.

Although most parents in this sample were grateful to be able to work at home, the core reasons for these feelings were varied. Among fathers and WAHMs, this gratitude was often based on feelings of having gotten closer to the elusive notion of having it all as working parent. For status quo mothers, their gratitude was centered in how their work flexibility smoothed out daily frictions associated with being a

working parent, making it easier to get through each strenuous day. For example, Isis, a mother with a hybrid work arrangement, explained that having work flexibility could feel like the only viable alternative to being a SAHM:

I feel like in a situation where there's not a stay-at-home [parent], I don't know how else you do it [than by working at home]. I mean, you do it by paying for more childcare. But the logistics of taking care of kids are so complicated that it's not just paying more money to solve it; it's also just managing more logistics. Which is really hard.

Isis alluded to a shared idea among status quo mothers, that all the available options for balancing mothering and employment were “really hard” in different ways. Whether it was managing additional logistics or using their flexibility to relieve some of their need for childcare, for many status quo mothers, the demands of being a working parent continued to feel somewhat challenging even when working at home. Additionally, when WAHMs mentioned SAHMs, it was most often to remark about how they felt similar to SAHMs. Status quo mothers rarely mentioned SAHMs and when they did, they described SAHMs as separate from their own experiences, as Isis did.

While these mothers seldom likened themselves to SAHMs, status quo mothers did feel that their work flexibility was beneficial. For example, Lea, a mother with a fully remote job, emphasized wanting to have more intentional time with her child at the end of the day. She shared,

I mean, oh my God, the benefits are wild...If I'm cooking dinner that night, I can take twenty minutes to prep the vegetables before I go pick my kid up from school. Because in the evenings with two working parents, there's very little time to actually just *be* with your kid, eat, and go to bed.

For Lea and others in this group, the flexibility of working at home enabled them to work full time *and* feel less harried by the demands of intensive parenting. Lea saw great value in being able to prioritize quality time with her child in the evenings and saw her ability to do this as directly connected to working at home. Similarly, Mia, a mother with a fully remote job, pointed out how important it was to her to be able to quickly respond to her child's needs, “If she needs something at daycare, or she's sick, I can be there really quickly. Just that flexibility is *huge*.” Lea and Mia both echoed tenets of intensive parenting when explaining how “wild” and “huge” the benefits of their work flexibility felt. Yet unlike WAHMs, status quo mothers did not emphasize that their work flexibility allowed them to take actions more similar

to that of a SAHM. They also did not describe feeling as if their mothering was enhanced overall by having work flexibility. Rather, status quo mothers focused on the daily benefits of flexibility and the overall lessening of the burdens they faced as working mothers.

Far from feeling as if they had discovered a way of having it all as a working mother, several status quo mothers felt overwhelmed and conflicted that even with the added advantage of their work flexibility, they felt as if they were not doing a good enough job being working mothers. In part, this was because some status quo mothers saw the standards for working mothers as difficult to meet, even when working remotely. Others seemed to feel that using their flexibility to merely get through each day wasn't really a success, it was the bare minimum they could be doing as mothers. A sense of overwhelm is common among working mothers (Smith 2022; Lamprianidou et al. 2025; Venard et al. 2024), but some status quo mothers seemed to internalize that their struggles were particularly damning considering the added flexibility they had relative to mothers who worked in person. Joellen explained that as her job demands had become more strenuous, her parenting responsibilities had begun to feel more daunting despite her ability to work fully remotely:

I want to hang out with my children. I love my kids. I had kids for a reason. And I know I'm so lucky that even sometimes I can chop vegetables during the day or fold the laundry. That's an amazing privilege. But that's still not getting it done. I have so much privilege. And I still can't...I'm still not getting it done.

Several mothers, such as Joellen, seemed to put pressure on themselves because they viewed their ability to work remotely as a relative advantage. These comparisons and the continued stress of being a working mother led some to feel inadequate and overwhelmed. This was particularly apparent in cases such as Joellen's, where their jobs required attending many meetings or were otherwise very demanding. Joellen felt that she was not pulling off being a working motherhood in the ways that she desired despite having "so much privilege" due to the flexibility of working at home. In this way, Joellen and several other status quo mothers seemed to feel that flexibility was great but that it was still not enough to achieve what they wanted out of being a working mother.

Although some felt that being a working mother could still be difficult even with work flexibility, many status quo mothers insisted that overall, their work arrangements made their lives easier to manage and were far more amenable than working in-person. For example, Alice's young child had a speech delay and had frequent medical appointments. She explained that because she had a hybrid work arrangement and her husband was a stay-at-home parent, it had become more feasible to manage their child's needs while she remained working full-time. She stated,

It's financially impossible what we're doing. (laughs) But the day-to-day is much, much easier. Because he's a stay-at-home parent. I don't know how I would have made it work if he were not available. I mean things like speech therapy every week, and doctors' appointments. If I were having to balance all that and work [in person]...I don't know how people do it.

Alice reiterated an idea that many status quo mothers expressed, the notion that their work flexibility made their daily lives easier in many ways. For Alice, the additional care that her child required meant that her own work flexibility was a necessary supplement to that of her husband being a stay-at-home parent. While Alice's situation was extreme in terms of the amount of flexibility needed to tend to her child, many status quo mothers similarly felt that having to balance the demands of motherhood with work was made much easier by their work flexibility. Yet unlike fathers or WAHMs, these women did not go so far as to describe their parenting as vastly improved, instead work flexibility was a tool in their toolkit to help manage, but not fully fix, the typical challenges of being a working mother.

Having it all as “Work-at-home” Mothers: “It just gives me that flexibility to still be a mom”

About half of the mothers interviewed viewed their remote work arrangements as offering an opportunity for them to be a particular kind of mother; one who is attentive in much the same way of a SAHM, but while maintaining their employment. Several mothers in this group explained that being a work-at-home mother was the next best option to staying home without working. Kayleigh, who worked fully remotely, shared, “I always joke that this is the closest form of stay-at-home mom that I would get because I have to work financially for my family.” Few mothers in this group expressed serious interest in giving up their employment. However, some did want a different configuration of work and mothering

than what has long been the norm among women with full-time employment. Nancy, a mother who worked fully remotely, disliked that children's schedules were often dictated by parent work hours:

When you think about the fact that regular American work life looks like dropping your kids off at school in the morning. Then going to work until five pm. Picking up the kids, and you don't see them until five. And then they go to bed at seven or eight. The little amount of time that you spend with your family versus work is actually *very* concerning. We should question that, you know.

Nancy's enthusiasm for working at home stemmed in part from her feelings that typical in person work didn't allow her to mother in the way that she wanted to and severely limited her time with her children. For these women, being able to work at home enabled them to give their children the most time and attention that they could within the confines of full-time employment. Many were grateful for their work flexibility given that the common alternative, working in person, could make them feel as if their time with their children was severely limited.

Mothers in this group sometimes felt optimistic that remote work was a pathway towards an elusive goal: maintaining their employment while also mothering in ways that they felt were largely incompatible with working in-person. They often emphasized child-centric schedules and approximated aspects of stay-at-home mothering, such as avoiding having their children spend long hours at school or in childcare. Jenna, a mother who worked fully remotely, described feeling that this flexibility was urgently needed for many working mothers:

It's a whole working mom war that all of us working moms have in our heads all the time. Why have kids? You only see them 15 hours a week. They're so stressed about the transitions and the demands put on them. You're so stressed. But it's not like financially, there is any other option to stay home. So remote is great because it gives you that many more hours back with your kids.

Jenna's feelings of sadness about her limited options for spending time with her children as a working parent reiterates Nancy's similar concerns and that of many WAHMs. These mothers saw their work flexibility as reducing the sacrifices they had to make regarding their parenting to stay employed. For example, Meg explained that by working at home, she could continue to be employed without feeling as if she were "abandoning" her child. She stated,

I used to say, ‘I don't want to be a stay-at-home mom; I want to be a work-from-home mom.’ And this was way before remote work was trendy. I always knew I wanted to work from home. It just gives me that flexibility to still be a mom and not abandon my child because I have to go to work.

For Meg and other WAH mothers, they wanted the ability to prioritize their mothering in ways that they felt were not possible when working in-person. Thus, working at home provided an attractive solution that simultaneously enabled employment and the possibility of a more child-centric form of mothering.

Mothers in this group frequently mentioned the idea of giving their children a particular form of childhood. As Kathryn, a mother who had a hybrid position, explained: “I could not go back to being 100% in person anymore and give my kids the life that I want them to have.” Having child-centered daily routines and generally being available to children throughout the workday was very important to many WAH mothers. Anna, a mother with a hybrid job, explained that her mode of work allowed her children to have what was, in her opinion, a better childhood than if she worked in-person:

I kind of feel like I'm the only mom on the block who works. *And I feel like now, I can compete with those moms.* Like, if I'm not in a meeting, the fact that I can get my kid off the bus. I can take five minutes and meet him at the bus stop, *just* like those moms could. It ensures my child has a similar experience to what their kids have. Because if I were in the office, he would be in before-and-after-school care. He would have a very different childhood.

Anna alluded to an old yet clearly still prevalent set of cultural ideas that pits SAHM against working mothers. She felt self-conscious of her status as one of the few working mothers in her neighborhood and was relieved to be able to use her work flexibility to lessen the presumably negative differences that she felt when comparing between herself to nearby SAHMs.

Because intensive mothering norms assert the importance of near constant availability and attentiveness to children, those who work outside the home can be seen as shirking their mothering responsibilities (Milkie et al. 2016; Szastok et al. 2019; Odenweller et al. 2020). This has long generated feelings of competition and judgment between mothers, which Anna directly referenced. Anna also appeared to assume that children who have a stay-at-home mother have a superior kind of childhood, one that is based on the extent to which mothers can mold their routines around the needs of children. This sentiment echoes Collins’ (2019) finding that working mothers tend to feel as if they should configure

their lives to maximally benefit their children, relying on any resources they have available to reach this goal. While Collins (2019) identified financial resources as key to allowing mothers to outsource less critical tasks and focus on aspects of mothering that they deemed most important, among WAH mothers, I posit that work flexibility was the resource which allowed them to make their children the focus of their daily routines.

Importantly, WAH mothers experienced the same practical advantages from their work arrangements as status quo mothers did. But WAHMs framed these benefits as more powerful than just reducing stress or helping them to manage the daily demands of working motherhood. WAH mothers attached a meaning to their actions when working at home that status quo mothers seldom did because WAHMs more closely connected their work flexibility to their self-perceived mothering aptitude. They were often enthusiastic about their improved abilities to put their children's needs first. Kathryn, who previously shared that she needed a hybrid schedule to meet her children's needs, explained the effects of her work schedule:

I mean, everything changed with the kids too, because [before working remotely] they had very long days. They would have 12-hour days by the time I dropped them off and picked them up. And now I'm picking them up directly from school, and that was never a thing, *ever*. I mean, there's some cost savings with us not doing before-and-after-school care, but also just some schedule changes. They get more time at home. So, this is how they balance their schedule and actually have some free time, which is really nice.

Kathryn mentioned the practical aspect of saving money on childcare, but she was more concerned about how her hybrid work had benefited her children personally by making their routines less strenuous.

Unlike status quo mothers, who also frequently watched their children in the afternoons after school, WAHMs such as Kathryn felt that in making these changes, they were being more attentive, better mothers. Status quo mothers did not often explain this same connection instead referred primarily to the helpfulness of their flexibility. Similarly to Kathryn, Grace described the rigidity of her children's routines when she used to work in-person: "My husband and I would have to wake our kids up very, very early to put them in before-care. They would be in school all day. And there's very little opportunity for either

error or spontaneity.” Grace and Kathryn both acknowledged the same practicalities of children’s daily routines that status quo mothers sometimes described. Yet for Grace and other WAHMs, the key gain was that their children had more free time and didn’t have to wake up as early to accommodate parent commutes. These child-centric benefits are what WAH mothers relished about their work flexibility while status quo mothers tended to emphasize the reduction of stress and overall burdens they faced as working mothers.

While most mothers described having more time for their children when working at home, WAH mothers saw this additional time as an opportunity to shape their children’s lives even further. Megan, a mother who worked fully remotely, explained, “It’s because of this remote position that I can care for them and allow them to have a nice little normal childhood.” Her children came home after school rather than being, in her words, “dumped” in an aftercare program, one that she thought was inadequate because of its lack of educational focus and substandard food (“We do healthier snacks than what they could get there.”). Reminiscent of Anna, who prided herself on being the one to pick up her child from the bus stop just like nearby SAHMs did, Megan felt that by watching her children in the afternoons she was giving them the most typical, and beneficial, childhood that she could while also working full-time. Inherent within these ideas is the intensive parenting notion that whenever feasible, mothers should prioritize attending to their children (Hays 1996). Similarly, Megan also expressed the importance of being personally involved in whatever activities her children did:

They’re going to be involved in more sports [as they age]. And it’s not about getting to the locations; it’s just being there for them. I was in tennis in high school, and my parents worked so much that they never gave me moral support. So, I sort of want to do it differently. I think the remote position will help.

WAH mothers frequently commented on the importance of *them* being the person to pick their children up from the bus stop or to facilitate their children’s extracurricular activities. Embedded in these descriptions are both the continued importance of intensive parenting norms and the connection that WAHMs saw between being able to enact these norms through their work flexibility.

However, the extent to which being a WAHM was similar to being a SAHM was limited and some mothers encountered difficulties drawing the line between their actual and perceived flexibility. Several WAH mothers described instances of children making requests that they could not accommodate, such as having play dates or other outings during work hours. Among some WAH mothers, they were grateful for their flexibility, but their increased availability could overshadow their continued job responsibilities. Some mothers felt as if their co-parents and their children's caregivers and teachers expected them to be constantly available in part because of the apparent similarities between them and SAHMs. This could make mothers feel as if their employed status was being ignored because of their work flexibility. Marian, a mother who worked fully remotely, explained: "There are presumptions that the person who works from home, and especially if it's a woman...will pick up the care [of children]. And I'm like, women are not natural caregivers. We need to be done with this stereotype." Because her child's teachers knew she worked from home, Marian described navigating additional expectations of constant availability. It had been difficult to explain to her child's teacher that she could not always accommodate last-minute requests due to her job responsibilities.

Similarly, in her household, Sara was the only parent with access to remote work, and she felt that because of this, she had become cemented as the primary parent:

I'm still working full-time, but the assumption is that if a kid needs to go somewhere, it's my responsibility....I'm already the person who's expected to have the plan for dinner. And so, it sort of reinforces all of that. I now fit more into the mold of a housewife, even though I'm still working full-time. (laughs) It can be hard for me to sort of push back on the assumptions that I'll just take care of it because I'm here.

Sara and Marian both expressed gratitude for their work arrangements and enhanced ability to care for their children. Yet they also had full-time jobs that still required their time and attention. In contrast to other WAHMs, they did not necessarily see their similarities to SAHMs as being entirely positive. Rather, they felt as if they were being held to the standard ideas of a SAHM by those around them, despite their employment status.

Other WAH mothers explained that their work arrangements had enabled them to maintain their labor force participation after having children in situations where they otherwise may have had to leave their jobs. When considering their work trajectories, several saw increased access and acceptance of work flexibility as directly related to them staying employed post-partum. Some WAH mothers explained that, in their opinions, COVID-19 had incited more widespread acceptance of flexible work arrangements.

Melanie, a mother with a fully remote position, described this unexpected windfall of the pandemic:

I don't wanna ever say that COVID was good. But when I think about it, would I be working full-time right now if I couldn't work remotely? *I don't think I would be.* When I came back to work [after maternity leave], I was 80%, and then I popped back up to 100 because there was just an expectation to. I was told-- you will not get promoted if you're not 100%. Now, I feel like, wow, if my kids weren't in school and this [remote work] wasn't an option, I probably wouldn't be here still. I do feel like this era we're in is really unique. It came about accidentally, and I'm grateful for it.

This perception among some mothers, that work flexibility had become more acceptable and less harmful to their future job trajectories, differs from pre-pandemic findings related to flexibility stigma, where scholars found that mothers faced income penalties when they use flexible work arrangements such as working from home (Fuller and Hirsch 2018). This indicates that in the post-pandemic era, increased prevalence of work flexibility may have helped mothers such as Melanie feel more secure in advocating for flexible work arrangements at their current workplaces with less fear of losing out on promotions or raises.

Additionally, some mothers described feeling strongly that they needed to advocate for remote work arrangements in the post-pandemic era when searching for employment. Madelyn, a mother with a fully remote job, expressed this when describing her last job search. She stated,

I knew that if I was going to continue to work full-time, there had to be flexibility. So, while I was nervous [to bring up wanting a remote work arrangement], I also knew that it was *incredibly* important. And I wouldn't be able to feel comfortable picking a job if there wasn't that flexibility. And I still feel that way. If suddenly something came about where they said, 'You all have to commute to this office five days a week,' then I would start looking for a new job.

Madelyn laughed at the end of this response, clearly feeling that the benefits of having these work arrangements outweighed her attachment to her particular job.

For all parents in this sample, there were some similarities between working from home and being a stay-at-home parent. What makes this group of WAHMs distinct is that they viewed the practical benefits of their work arrangements as allowing them to enact an intensive, child-centric mothering that mirrored features of SAH mothering. Kristina, a mother who worked fully remotely, stated:

There was a part of me that thought I could be a stay-at-home mom. But then the other part of me is like, you don't want to throw away your degree. Not that it's throwing it away. I don't want to be anti-feminist and say you can't choose to stay at home; you totally can. But I also did want to feel fulfilled in my career and professional life.

Kristina grappled with the implications of wanting to be satisfied with her work and, at the same time, wanting to be a more involved mother than what she perceived that in-person work allowed for. For WAH mothers, remote work offered a path to enhancing the child-centric nature of their parenting because of their increased availability and attentiveness. At the same time, they were able to maintain their employment.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented evidence that parents in this sample utilized their work flexibility in ways that adhered to intensive parenting goals and that their work flexibility impacted their feelings about themselves as parents. I contribute new understandings of how time and spatial flexibility of working at home enabled all parents in this sample to enact tenets of intensive parenting. Specifically, this included adapting their schedules to meet the needs of children, being located nearby children and subsequently being more available than if they worked in person, and maximizing the amount of intentional, quality time spent with children.

When leveraging their work flexibility, mothers and fathers also practiced gendered parenting strategies related to ideologies of new fatherhood and intensive mothering. Fathers overall felt more positively about their parenting because their flexibility allowed them to be more embedded in the daily care and routines of children, echoing many ideas of “new fatherhood” (Pleck 2010; Diniz et al. 2023). Men not only felt better about their fathering but some even expressed a sense of having it all as working fathers, an unusual sentiment typically reserved for working mothers. Mothers in this sample were all

grateful to work at home and used their work flexibility in similar ways. But mothers diverged in the extent to which they expressed that work flexibility was simply a way to reduce stress associated with being a working mother versus a pathway to having it all. Status quo mothers felt that their remote work was an essential way to manage the challenges of working motherhood. But overall, they did not express that flexibility had led to them seeing themselves as better mothers. Work-at-home mothers saw their mode of work as a pathway to mirroring stay-at-home mothers and, consequently, giving their children a better childhood. They largely felt positively about the impacts of work flexibility for their parenting, though a handful found it difficult to communicate to others the distinction between themselves and SAHMs.

These mothers and fathers sometimes referred to their work arrangements as making them better parents, partners, and workers. Underlying these claims is the idea that these work arrangements feel like a powerful tool for many parents, powerful enough to potentially create work-from-home handcuffs that override a high salary (aka “golden handcuffs”). This is because working at home largely enabled parents to raise their children in the ways that they preferred, and that they thought were best for their children. They often saw themselves as being more successful working parents when they could enact these preferred child-rearing practices. Remote work, therefore, felt ideal, if still somewhat imperfect, for many of the mothers and fathers, especially in comparison to working in-person.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

In this final chapter, I discuss my central findings, the various limitations of this study, suggestions for future research and then finally several key policy implications of these findings. Overall, this research has provided empirical understandings of remote working parents' experiences with this new normal of work and family arrangements in the post-pandemic era. That parents in this sample felt so reliant on their mode of work to manage the demands of their jobs and family illustrates the role that such arrangements can play in providing crucial flexibility to parents. I do not argue that working at home solved work-family conflicts for parents in this sample, but that their flexibility allowed them to feel that being a working parent was at least feasible if still stressful and demanding in various ways. Rather than being a solution to the stressors of being a working parent, remote work arrangements provide a “finger in the dam” that helps decrease but not erase the flow of overwhelming expectations that working parents contend with in the US.

In this dissertation I have presented findings about how and why some parents in the US nonprofit sector worked remotely in the post-pandemic era. The nonprofit sector provides a useful case study for illustrating the organization-level variation in remote work and how this shaped parents' experiences. In Chapter 2, I described the various organizational-level benefits and challenges that many nonprofits, represented in this sample through employee interviews, faced when implementing remote work. While many fully remote organizations generally benefitted from having uniform work arrangements, mixed-work arrangement nonprofits faced more complexity in determining norms and policies related to work arrangements that employees felt were acceptable. The findings presented in Chapter 3 demonstrated the various challenges related to boundaries and overworking that parents faced when working at home. However, I found that parents learned to manage these challenges over time and overall, felt that the trade-offs were well worth navigating given the family-related benefits of these arrangements.

In the latter chapters, I explored why many felt that flexibility was vital for being a good working parent. In Chapter 4, I highlighted the tension of juggling household tasks and complex, expensive childcare when working full-time. Remote work flexibility acted as a balm of sorts to these conflicts, greasing the wheels of daily family routines and allowing working parents to more easily manage family responsibilities while being employed. Additionally, Chapter 4 illuminated the role that co-parent work arrangements play in shaping the overall division of household and childcare labor. Many parents in this sample strived for an equal division of tasks. Yet they explained that, given their work arrangements and those of their co-parents, an equitable or fair division based on parent availability was often more feasible, even if still somewhat unequal. Finally, Chapter 5 explored how their work flexibility influenced their views of themselves as good parents. Many parents felt more positively about their child-rearing when working at home, in part because their work flexibility allowed them to pursue intensive, and somewhat gendered, parenting approaches.

As results from both Chapters 3 and 5 illustrated, parents in this sample used the flexibility of working at home to adhere to both intensive parenting norms and ideal worker expectations. Although many parents viewed remote work as a necessity and felt that it made them better workers and parents in various ways; their work arrangements did not ultimately solve the work-family conflicts that they faced. Parental work arrangements cannot change the fundamental challenges of being a working parent in the US because those challenges are systemic and require policy intervention, examples of which are described later in this chapter.

Limitations

There are several key limitations to these findings that additional research could address. Several of these limitations are related to the demographic composition of this sample. With a predominantly white sample of parents (61.9%) and relatively small groups of different racial/ethnic minorities, I was unable to draw conclusions about the racialized experiences of parents working at home. However, I believe that with a more diverse sample and a specific line of questioning about the experiences of

racial/ethnic minorities working at home, the distinctions of these experiences could emerge in future qualitative research. For instance, one Black mother in my sample commented that working at home allowed her to homeschool her children and in doing so, she was able to shield them from the racial discrimination they had previously faced within school systems. Future research should specifically investigate the perspectives of nonwhite parents to understand if they have specific racial/ethnic related motivations for working at home and their experiences when doing so.

Similarly, while there are 22 fathers included in this sample, it would be worthwhile for scholars to further investigate whether a larger sample of men would reveal any variations in how fathers utilize the flexibility of remote work. My findings provide another piece to this scholarly puzzle rather than a definite answer to this question. Existing literature on this topic, both before and during the pandemic, is very mixed in regards to whether fathers become more involved in childcare when working at home (Carlson 2021; Carlson and Petts 2022; de Laat 2025; Ryan, Churchill, and Ruppanner 2025). Further research may confirm or refute my findings that fathers in the post-pandemic era do become ingrained in the daily routines of their children, in ways that largely adhere to new fatherhood ideals. Additionally, unlike mothers, where I identified within-group distinctions about how remote working women felt about their parenting, fathers within this study were generally aligned in pursuing these ideals. But because I interviewed fewer fathers than mothers, it is possible that further distinctions could be teased out with a larger sample size of men. Scholars could address these limitations by collecting more data on fathers who work at home.

This research also focused specifically on the nonprofit sector, which is a relatively small sector of US employment (6.5%) and one with unique attributes that differentiate these organizations and employees from the broader labor force (Gallagher 2023). Some of the organizational challenges and benefits of implementing remote work that I identified seem likely to resonate beyond this sector. For instance, for-profit and government entities may feasibly see a similar boost in employee recruitment and retention by allowing remote work arrangements and pre-pandemic literature supports this assertion

(Hacker Martin and MacDonnell 2012). However, nonprofits face particular resource constraints that may make these benefits more important than in other sectors. As noted previously, nonprofits have limited abilities to offer competitive pay and internal advancement compared to other sectors (Gee et al. 2023; Slatten et al. 2021), which may lead to remote work arrangements having an outsized impact on recruitment and retention in this sector compared to others.

Other sectors may also see the same kind of tensions between workers who are allowed to work at home and those who are not, as are illustrated in these results. Similarly, the desire among workers for clear, standardized policies and tenable norms related to working at home is also likely to resonate across sectors of employment. Yet, because of difficulties in retaining employees, nonprofits are more beholden to workers and their attachments to their jobs in ways that are less common in for-profit and government organizations (Chapman et al. 2023; Gee et al. 2023). Nonprofit leaders make decisions based in part on retaining the support and alignment of employees with the overall purpose of the organization (Akingbola 2013; Gee et al. 2023), a decision-making process that likely differs in government or for-profit organizations. For example, decreasing organizational costs that employees view as unnecessary, such as those related to office space, may be a unique concern of nonprofit leaders who are seeking to shore up worker alignment. Future researchers should seek to replicate this study in another sector of employment or perhaps by focusing on a particular industry to see whether the orientation of organizations and the employees change how remote work is implemented and what the impacts are at the organizational and employee levels.

Lastly, in this research, I specifically sought out parents who worked at home, rather than people who do not have children. Some findings related to parents in this sample may be likely to resonate with those who work at home and do not have children. For example, the experience of learning to work at home over time could be a shared process among remote workers that is not necessarily unique to having children. Similarly, childless remote workers are also likely to struggle with overwork and blurred boundaries. However, those without children do not have child-rearing responsibilities that their job

demands compete with, and they do not face the same kind of potential stigma that parents often do because of their visible family commitments. Parents in this sample largely viewed overworking as a worthwhile trade-off to navigate because of the family-related benefits of working at home. It is possible that those working at home without children would have a different viewpoint on the positive and negative impacts of working remotely.

While parents in this sample did not often refer specifically to their coworkers without children, some did imply, or outrightly stated, that their childless coworkers experienced remote work differently. Several mentioned the idea that their coworkers could leverage flexibility more than themselves because those without children could potentially move work locations easily because of their childfree status. For example, some parents suggested that because a coworker did not have children, they could use work flexibility to attain personal goals such as travel rather than attend to family obligations. Whether these comments actually reflect the experience of childless remote workers is not evident in these data.

Additionally, a small number of parents referred to a more nuanced idea about themselves in relation to their remote coworkers. They wondered how their own use of flexibility for their child-related needs may have negatively impacted their coworkers. Some felt that their coworkers with children largely “got it” and that these coworkers implicitly understood when a child-related need popped up, and parents needed to reschedule a meeting or take a Zoom call from the car on the way to a child’s soccer practice. But some parents acknowledged that their use of flexibility for family-related demands may be an imposition on coworkers and, in some cases, could make it more difficult for their colleagues to do their jobs.

In some cases, these comments stemmed from their own irritations with fellow remote working parents. For example, one parent explained that their coworker regularly cancelled meetings at the last minute because of her child’s school pick-up times. This parent wanted their coworker to be more realistic about her workday schedule and more aware of the effects that these cancellations had on their shared work projects. In a striking example of parent discomfort with these topics, another parent noticeably

hesitated and then ultimately decided to share with me that they felt uncomfortable because some of their coworkers chose to watch their children full-time while also working at home. This parent felt concerned that these decisions had negative ramifications for the coworkers, including other parents like them. On the one hand, this parent felt deeply uncomfortable with the notion that working parents should be required to pay for full-time childcare, given the cost and availability issues of care for children in the US. But they also explained that when their coworkers choose to go without childcare at all, it could be substantially harder to have productive meetings with them and that these parents could be more difficult to coordinate with in general. The depth of this concern remains unclear. This participant remarked that on any other day, this topic may not have popped into their head. But at the time of our interview, they were frustrated with one of their colleagues for this very reason.

This example is compelling, in part because of the participant's extreme hesitation to share this insight with me, seemingly because they feared appearing to discriminate against parents who could not or would not pay for full-time childcare. Their very careful and calculated explanation gave me the impression that they were peeling back a more hidden layer of the nuances of remote coworker collaboration. I present this as a suggestion for future study because this example was not within the scope of my research. Because so few parents I interviewed provided full-time childcare for their own children while working (4%) and because this concern was raised by so few participants, I had little data on this topic. As my sample is entirely limited to parents, future scholars might investigate further the sentiments among childless remote workers towards their parent counterparts. The fact that parents themselves raised these concerns, even very occasionally, indicates the potential saliency of these topics among nonparents. On the seldom occasions that they raised these issues, parents were visibly uncomfortable discussing these topics, clearly feeling that sometimes their flexibility could go too far and disrupt the workflows of coworkers. Overall, these limitations revealed that this area of research is ripe for additional studies about both parent and childless remote workers.

Future Research

These results highlight several directions for future research. The emotions of parents who work remotely, discussed primarily in Chapter 5, emerged from the data as evidence of how parents viewed work arrangements as instrumental to decreasing their stress and guilt and to helping them feel like better parents and employees. Future researchers could seek to further investigate the emotions that parents associate with gaining work flexibility and why flexibility prompts these feelings among mothers and fathers. Prior literature has documented the difficulties that parents can experience because of work flexibility, namely the flexibility paradox or tendency to overwork when given flexibility (Chung 2022; de Laat 2025). Parents in this sample saw overworking as a specific challenge they had to manage when working at home. Research aimed at further understanding the emotionality of these experiences will likely shed additional light on why parents are so willing to navigate trade-offs of working at home such as overworking.

Similarly, although I did not explicitly ask parents to explain their parenting goals and strategies to me, their daily routines and uses of flexibility largely aligned with key tenets of intensive parenting. Future research could focus more specifically on how parents working at home articulate their parenting approaches. Asking about their approaches or views on parenting more explicitly may help to illustrate the potential diversity in parenting approaches among remote working parents. Some diversity in these views seems likely, given that other scholars have already identified that some parents deviate from these norms to various degrees (Dow 2019; Minnotte 2023). Additionally, these data do not explain why mothers in this sample varied in how their work arrangements made them feel about their parenting. Status quo mothers felt that their work arrangements simply made day-to-day life easier as a working mother. But work-at-home mothers felt empowered to be more similar to stay-at-home mothers and subsequently saw their parenting as improved by working at home. Factors such as age of children, stress levels, or job demands could explain these differences, but these were not evident in these data. Future scholars could investigate whether broader samples of women echo or dispute the sentiments expressed by those in this sample and why any differences emerge.

These findings also illustrated that when one or both parents worked at home, variations in work flexibility influenced how parents divided up household and childcare responsibilities and how they explained or justified these divisions. In this sample, many parents stated that they desired an equal division of these tasks with their co-parent, and that this was the ideal that they were striving for. This is somewhat surprising because the extent of preferences in the US for equality in the division of household and childcare labor is unclear (Dernberger et al. 2020; McConnon, Midgette, and Conry-Murray 2022; Offer and Kaplan 2021). However, these views are more likely to be held by the types of parents in this sample, those with middle-and upper-incomes and high levels of education (Pessin 2024; Raz-Yurovich and Okun 2024; Zheng, Wang, and Zhou 2025). It is also possible that parents felt compelled to express egalitarian gender beliefs that they thought would be more socially acceptable, also known as response bias or social desirability bias (Bergen and Labonté 2020; Ross-Plourde and Lachance-Grzela 2025). Some mothers and fathers did indeed seem almost embarrassed to admit that their household did not have an equal division of these tasks. Yet because some mothers and fathers shared that their household remained more traditional than they would have preferred, rather than attempting to mislead me, I don't believe that response bias played a major role in these findings. However, these data are also limited to the descriptions that parents gave about their household divisions of tasks and their feelings on this topic. I do not have data that allow for comparisons of the actual amounts of time that co-parents spend on household or childcare tasks. Instead, these findings shed light on parents' opinions about their division of labor. Future research utilizing methods such as a time diary could more clearly evaluate the exact timing and degree of equality among parents with remote work arrangements.

Additionally, among the eight participants in this sample who identified as queer and who lived with a co-parent, six described equally sharing tasks. This apparent tendency towards egalitarianism reiterates prior research that queer couples tend to divide childcare and chores more evenly than heterosexual couples (Ascigil et al. 2020). The co-parent work arrangements in these queer households upheld the overall results that fully remote households tended to be more egalitarian and that mixed-work

arrangement households varied in the division of labor. Of the egalitarian-leaning queer households, three were fully remote, and the other three were mixed-work arrangement households. The two queer participants who described unequal divisions of tasks were mixed-work arrangement households where the participants had more remote work access than their co-parents. Because of the small sample of queer parents, these data are unable to adequately describe the experiences of queer parents who work at home. Similar to the other demographic limitations of this research, scholars should endeavor to capture the diversity of queer parents' experiences when working at home by collecting additional data about these parents.

Also of potential interest for future research is a topic not evident in my results-- flexibility stigma-- the idea that parents may be perceived and treated as lesser workers when they need or use work flexibility (Gerstel and Clawson 2018). In this sample, parents certainly displayed a continued devotion to ideal worker norms but did not often reference feeling at risk of stigmatization because they worked at home. A small number of parents referred to the possibility of difficulties with obtaining promotions or internal advancement when working at home. While these fears have been borne out in some prior international literature (Fernandez-Lozano 2020; Kasperska, Matysiak, and Cukrowska-Torzewska 2024), it remains unclear how the notion of a flexibility stigma plays out in the post-pandemic context. Specifically, are there differences in instances of flexibility stigma between fully remote organizations and those with mixed-work arrangements? I did not specifically ask questions about flexibility stigma, so it is possible that parents working remotely, either at fully remote or mixed-work arrangement organizations, would have more information to share if asked explicitly about this topic. Future research could specifically investigate instances of flexibility stigma among parents working remotely in the post-pandemic era and how they feel about this notion when asked directly about it.

Importantly, those interviewed for this research all had access to remote work, so I cannot speak to the experiences of workers at these organizations who only worked in-person. Among those included in this sample, they described a dynamic of the haves and have-nots. People who were able to work at home

felt they were the more privileged class of workers at their mixed-arrangement nonprofits in multiple ways. They often had more autonomy and made more money than those who worked in direct service positions. Participants sometimes felt conflicted and guilty because, on top of these other advantages, they also worked at home. Future scholars could seek out the perspectives of people who work in-person at organizations that allow some workers to be remote. Including these perspectives will illuminate how in-person workers think and feel about these dynamics as a useful complement and extension of the results presented here.

Lastly, differences in access to remote work between employees at nonprofit organizations sometimes prompted questions of inequity and privilege among participants in this research. Several workers felt that their nonprofit had struggled to align organizational values related to fairness and equality with policies for working at home. Employees sometimes described organizational leaders as being too tentative or unwilling to establish clear directives and policies because leaders feared formalizing unequal access to remote work between workers. Among completely remote organizations, many of these tensions were avoided entirely. At these organizations, workers described fairly turn-key operations and policies that were equally applied to all employees. For many, the policies related to their work arrangements were largely irrelevant to their everyday work. In contrast, these policies and the resulting tensions between workers loomed large among participants at mixed-work arrangement organizations. Participants at mixed-arrangement organizations acknowledged that they did not necessarily want to give up their remote work flexibility to ease frictions, but they did express a desire for clear and equitable remote work policies. In addition to studying the long-term trajectories of mixed-work arrangement organizations, scholars could also investigate return-to-office directives and the extent to which these mandates are primarily championed by personal preferences of those in leadership positions rather than being based on the needs of the organization or employees.

Policy Implications

Work flexibility allowed parents in this sample to pursue idealized forms of parenting through individual strategies. This perpetuates the idea that work-family conflicts and stressors are problems for parents to solve and that they must rely on individual household resources, such as flexibility and money, to address these conflicts (Chung 2022; Collins 2019). Relying on work arrangements in this way maintains neoliberal ideas of individualism and personal responsibility that shift societal-level problems onto individual families. Specifically, this use of work flexibility perpetuates norms that parents must be resourceful and inventive to manage their work and family demands rather than expect support from government programs and policies. The continued individualization of the challenges facing working parents in the US reinforces the prevailing idea parents need to seek creative means of mitigating their struggles rather than expecting government entities to support them. Indeed, US mothers often do not anticipate support from government, or even necessarily their spouses, and instead assume they will need to utilize their individual resources to manage the almost inevitable friction between work and family that they face (Collins 2019).

This tendency in the US to expect parents, particularly mothers, to independently resolve work-family conflicts contrasts with most countries in Western Europe, where governments equip parents with paid leave and childcare that is both affordable and aligned with the needs of parents (Collins 2019). Or in Germany, where widely available part-time work is used by mothers to help reduce conflict between work and family demands (Collins 2019). In the US, parents face a scarcity of policies and support, specifically the lack of parental leave and the shortage of affordable childcare. Even with the relative advantage of working at home and middle-and-upper class household incomes, parents in this sample described at length the dire need for reforms to the US childcare system. Specifically, reforms are needed to address the affordability, accessibility, and quality of childcare and to align these care systems with the needs of working parents (Herbst 2023).

While many iterations of childcare reform are possible, the core reforms needed in the US require just two straightforward legislative components: providing adequate federal funding to childcare centers and programs around the country, and the passage of tax credits to help families pay for childcare (Elias and D’Agostino 2021; Sabu 2025). Not only are these pieces of legislation feasible in the US, but these were both briefly addressed by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, passed during COVID-19 with overwhelming bipartisan support. While the long-term versions of these reforms were featured in the original version of the Biden Administration’s Build Back Better Act, these measures failed to gain significant congressional support. Childcare is not only a crisis during an emergency such as COVID-19. The longer it takes lawmakers in the US to act on childcare reforms, the more detrimental the situation is likely to become for parents across income levels and the political spectrum. While these changes are critical for working parents, the childcare system is also merely one, albeit large, piece of the gaping hole in US family policy.

The lack of family policy in the US serves to essentially privatize raising children as the individual responsibility and investment of parents, a notion that is not only harmful to families but also damaging for the national economy (Adema, Clarke, and Frey 2016; Bandelj 2023). Parents must compete in a labor market that is often incompatible with family responsibilities. Raising children can be prohibitively expensive without supportive policies and programs (Adema, Clarke, and Frey 2016; Eichner 2020; Herbst 2023). Because US policies are so hostile to working parents, workplace policies that aim to be “family-friendly” can be particularly impactful for parents compared to those in other countries that have more reliable government support (Blom et al. 2025). National family policies, such as paid parental leave are not economic deterrents (Earle, Mokoman, and Heymann 2011) and can actually bolster economic outcomes and reduce inequality (Adema, Clarke, and Frey 2016; Glass and Waldrep 2023). Policies such as expansive tax credits to parents, widely available, publicly funded childcare programs, and paid leave after the birth of a child are all commonsense proposals that exist all around the world in various forms (Adema, Clarke, and Frey 2016; Boling 2015; Collins 2019; Eichner 2020).

Family policies should be expanded not only for the potential economic impacts but because parents need support and children are a social investment in the collective future of society (Banjelj 2023; Bandelj and Spiegel 2023; de Laat, Doucet, and Gerhardt 2023; Eichner 2020).

Beyond highlighting the need to overhaul US family policy, these findings also speak to the inequitable implications of remote work among parents in the current policy context. Many parents cannot work at home because of the nature of their jobs or the industries in which they are employed. While remote work has remained more widely available than before the pandemic, access is generally greater among workers with higher levels of education and in certain occupations such as management and other professional fields (Pabilonia and Redmond 2024). The parents in this sample are primarily middle-and-upper-class families who already use their above-average monetary resources to manage childcare difficulties and sometimes to outsource aspects of household labor. Even with these financial resources, parents find that their mode of work has become essential to their lives, and they cannot imagine functioning without it. Parents saw remote work as extremely beneficial for their child-rearing, and many counted on flexibility to execute their family's daily routines.

Nonetheless, having this flexibility did not change the underlying employment and family conditions that parents faced. These work arrangements also did not fundamentally alter the work-family conflicts that parents sought to manage, particularly the difficulties that they face related to childcare and related to the structure and norms of full-time employment. Parents may have viewed remote work flexibility as a viable, individual-level way to address their specific family needs. But these work arrangements should also be critically viewed as a band aid or inequitably available and insufficient means of blocking the crushing wave of much larger structural problems related to being a working parent in the US. The heavy burden of being a working parent in the US threatens to overwhelm even the more economically privileged, much less those with fewer privileges. Most families represented in this sample had more financial advantages compared to many in the US. Yet many parents still maintained that being a working parent was incredibly challenging and sometimes felt impossible.

Because of this, I refer to work flexibility throughout this research as something that parents use to manage but not to solve work/family conflict. The flexibility of working at home can be deployed by parents to manage their work and family demands. But it does not lower the overall burden working parents face in ways that policies such as parental leave and increased access to high-quality, affordable childcare can and do in many countries. Research that focuses on relatively privileged populations can be viewed as a “canary in the coalmine” for understanding the experiences of those with fewer resources and less privilege. Parents in this sample may have had several relative advantages to lower income counterparts and those who worked in-person. But they still felt that being a working parent was an uphill, never-ending marathon of trying to maintain ideal worker expectations, living up to intensive parenting norms, and using all their individual resources to somehow achieve these fundamentally opposed goalposts. If these parents are struggling, how can those without remote work flexibility and with fewer monetary resources be expected to manage any better? The struggles and challenges expressed among those in this sample highlight the dire need for expansive family policies because that is the only mechanism that can address these difficulties equitably and effectively. These findings illustrate how and why parents in this sample worked at home but also highlight the limitations of parental work arrangements to mitigate the systemic challenges that US working parents face.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Background & Daily Routine

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your family? Who do you live with?
2. How old are your children? Are your children in childcare?
 - a. (if yes) How many days a week do they spend there and for how many hours each day?
 - b. (if yes) Who picks up and drops off the children?
3. What is your current job and responsibilities?
 - a. Do you currently work in-person, hybrid, or remote?
 - b. (if hybrid) About how many days per week do you work remotely?
4. (if they have a partner) What is your partner's current job? -and do they work in-person, hybrid or remote?
5. What is a typical weekday like for you when you work remotely? Can you walk me through the previous day for example, starting with when you woke up and ending with when you went to bed?
 - a. (possible prompts) What time do you, your partner, and the kids wake up? What time is breakfast? What time is drop off/pick up from school or childcare? When you and your partner finish work? What time is dinner? When is bedtime?
6. Do you have any help around the house with cleaning, childcare, cooking, or gardening?
 - a. (if yes) Who helps you with these things?

- b. (if yes) How often do they help?

Remote Work Experiences

Next, I'd like to talk about your experience working remotely.

7. How long have you worked remotely or hybrid?
8. What are the logistics of your remote work set-up? Where do you do your work? (if their partner also works remotely, where are they set up?)
9. Did your job begin as a remote position or shift from in-person to remote after you had begun working?
10. Part of this project is understanding best practices for remote work and how to organize it in ways that support workers. How does your workplace organize telework? Are there any guidelines, rules, or support mechanisms in place for remote workers?
 - a. How do you feel about the way remote work is structured in your workplace? Do you like how it is managed or are there things that could be improved?
 - b. Do you feel there are generational differences in how your coworkers think about and approach remote work?
11. How long have you worked in the nonprofit sector?
 - a. Do you think that working in a nonprofit has any advantages or disadvantages compared to working at a for-profit company?
 - b. Why are you working in a nonprofit? What drew you to this work and why have you stayed in it?
 - a) What role does the mission of the organization play for you personally? How does the mission figure into recruitment for the organization?

So now I'm going to ask you about the benefits and drawbacks of working remotely as a parent.

12. Tell me what you think the benefits of working remotely are. Does it make being a working parent easier in any way?

13. What are the most challenging or difficult aspects of working remotely? - Does it make being a working parent more difficult in any way?
14. Do you think you will continue to work remotely in the future? Why or why not?
15. What advice would you give to working parents about working remotely?

Partner and Children

Now I have a few questions to ask about your household and how you balance between work and family.

16. How do you and your partner divide up childcare, household chores, cooking, cleaning, shopping, planning, etc.?
17. If you could dream for a minute about what your preferences would be, what would an ideal division of these duties look like for you? What kinds of support would be helpful to have as a working parent?
18. Do you feel that anything has changed in how you and your partner divide up childcare and household duties since you began working remotely?
 - a. (if yes) What has changed and how?

Demographics/Wrapping Up

19. Is there anything that has popped into your head as we've been talking that you would like to add? Anything you haven't gotten a chance to share with me that you would like to share now?
20. Now I'm going to cover a few quick demographic questions so I can understand what kinds of families are included in this research.
 - a. Are you married?
 - b. How would you describe your gender identity?
 - c. How would you describe your sexual identity?
 - d. How would you describe your racial and ethnic identity?
 - e. What is your highest educational degree that you've completed?
 - f. What year were you born?

g. Which income range best describes your individual annual income? Which income range best describes your partner's annual income? Which annual income range best describes your family? (paste options into zoom chat for them to read)

- a) Less than \$40,000
- b) \$40,000-\$69,999
- c) \$70,000-\$99,999
- d) \$100,000-\$130,000
- e) More than \$130,000

21. Is there anything else you'd like to ask me about myself or my research?

Thank you so much for your time and please reach out to me if you have any questions that you think of later. I really appreciate it and have a great day!