

As A Mental Health Crisis Grips American Kids, Employers Look for Ways to Help Parents.

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Some employers are beginning to offer tools for parents and caregivers to help them help their struggling kids.



Francis Scialabba

Since the onset of the pandemic, child suicides and suicide attempts have spiked, including among kids as young as 10 years old. The troubles are even more dire for teenage girls, who, during 2021, attempted suicide ~50% more frequently than they did in 2019. In March, the CDC's Debra Houry called data on teen mental health a "cry for help."

Some employers, seeing the toll children's mental health can take on working parents, are taking action by adding well-being benefits—not just for the people on payroll, but also for their children—to their total rewards packages. We surveyed the provider landscape to understand the options and how the benefits are intended to support employees and their families.

Parenting comes first. Dena Bravata, chief medical officer at Castlight Health and co-founder of Lyra Health, recently told HR Dive, “parents with children under 18 make up 40% of the workforce,” and employers will “pay indirectly for the lost productivity of parents caring for children with mental health issues.”

Some are already footing the bill. According to a 2021 survey from On Our Sleeves, an advocacy group for children’s mental health, rising concerns about children’s mental health have lowered employees’ productivity at least some of the time. Over half of the 1,680 parents surveyed in April 2021 reported missing work at least once per month or having their workday interrupted because of a child’s mental health concern during the two years prior. One parent surveyed by On Our Sleeves, Gina, described juggling parenting and working in 2021 as “being an elastic, because I’m always being pulled and stretched until I snap.”

Breaking barriers. Rachel Bailey, a human behavior expert with a background in psychology, might sympathize with Gina’s balancing act; she sees her corporate clients perform similar maneuvers.

HR departments and ERGs contract Bailey to hold seminars or office hours about children’s mental health. Bailey believes that bringing in a resource like her during the workday to discuss “practical strategies” for helping kids helps parents, and ultimately benefits the employer.

Bailey told HR Brew that “there’s such an additional burden for working parents,” who are “pulled in so many directions.” Bailey said one way employers can offer support is by bringing mental health education to employees’ desks.

“So what I actually say to companies when I do talk to them is [parents] need that [support]—they won’t take this, and then they’ll be distracted. They won’t actually find a lot of help on their own, because it’s like, ‘I’m too busy,’” Bailey said. “But then they’re distracted at work. So when a corporation offers...that [support], they’re giving the parents the help they need and they are making it way more accessible, so that they can actually focus more on the job.”

Bailey said the parents she works with are appreciative. She gave a recent example of the gratitude one working mother showed her following an ERG talk Bailey gave to 400 employees in February.

“The word she used actually was, ‘I was drowning, and I felt like no one even had the right life preserver to throw me, and I finally felt like you’ve got it,’” Bailey said.

At your fingertips. For the parents who prefer to ask for help privately, there are apps being offered by some employers that claim to offer solutions.

Maro Parents and Cleo Teens are two apps launched since the beginning of the pandemic that are designed for use by parents or caregivers to use wherever, whenever. Cleo Teens, which comes from the same platform that offers Cleo Kids and maternal health benefits, launched in February and partners with 125 employers, including Pinterest and Equinox.

Maro Parents offers health education materials and a multiple choice journaling tool for parents to use as an easy way to track “critical data,” such as “outbursts and crying spells,” and “sleep and activity and focus data.” CEO Kenzie Butera Davis that told HR Brew the journal provides,

over time, a “well-rounded story” of how a child is doing that parents can share with their child’s therapist.

Davis said that prior to using the app, a parent employed at one of Maro’s clients tracked these symptoms using “spreadsheets or notes in their phones.” Davis said this method of haphazard note-taking wasn’t “systemized” and cost the already busy parent an average of 10 to 15 hours per week.

“Having a consistent way to document this information and share it out with their child’s therapist is providing a big decrease in overall stress,” Davis said.