Forget Flexibility. Working Parents Need Predictability

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Is a boring, ordinary schedule the secret to workplace happiness?

For years, we have believed that flexibility is the key to survival for working parents.

We advocate for flexible hours, flexible PTO, flexible locations. And the ability to log on from the pediatrician's office or finish a presentation after everyone goes to bed has certainly made our lives easier. Then summer hits, or winter break, plus spring break. And your family life becomes a game of human Tetris. One kid is in robotics camp, the other soccer, and they start at different times. Or maybe it's cold and flu season and each week someone different is home sick.

These are the moments that I daydream about a boring, ordinary schedule when everyone is where they are supposed to be. I know I am not alone. This made me wonder what working parents need more.

Ericka dives into the heat of modern motherhood, challenging the notion that personal identity must be sacrificed at the altar of parenting.

What the science says

There is something to this, according to a 2026 research study. Work Schedule Quality and the Production of Parental Stress and Parenting Time, published in Social Service Review, suggests

that lack of predictability is associated with both higher stress and less time with your kids. The researchers looked at many aspects of a work schedule. Length, when it was worked, variedness, predictability, and control. All played a role in parental stress and time spent parenting.

Which leads me to my point about control. Having flexibility can mean that I know I can leave work at 3:30 p.m. on Thursday to attend my child's soccer game. It can also mean that my employer decides at 3:30 on Thursday that I need to get on a Zoom call at 5 p.m. Both of these examples are flexibility. Only one allows me to have control.

There have been many studies that show giving employees control over their schedules can lead to lower levels of work-family conflict. So how does this differ from allowing employees to have flexible work options? Having unpredictable schedules can take a toll. One study, from professors at Columbia and Duke, found that when parents of young children were surveyed over 30 days, 87% of them had an unexpected change to their schedule. When these changes happened, the parents had worse moods and slept less.

Juggling act

When things aren't predictable, you start to feel like you're doing more work than you actually are. Every new meeting can disrupt your whole day. Can someone else pick up my kid? Can I reschedule the dentist? What will we have for dinner? Do I need to cancel my gym session that I already pushed to tomorrow because I had a meeting run long yesterday? It's a maddening juggling act.

So, let's stop comparing flexibility and schedule stability as if they are the same thing. Why can't companies offer employees both? Allow them to change their schedule when things come up. But also allow them to know what their day is going to look like. Not schedule as many meetings on short notice. Let employees know in advance when their hours may change. Know that just because an employee has no meetings on their calendar at 4 p.m. doesn't mean they have nothing going on.

There are so many articles that discuss how to help working parents balance their work and home life. How can you help someone find balance when they don't know what their life is going to look like? Perhaps the antidote to burnout isn't flexibility. It's having a sense of stability.