



Freedom day? Working parents in the ping-demic

Following 'Freedom day' on 19 July, the desire to meet-up (IRL) for team building, collaboration and just being plain Zoom sick are enough of an incentive for many employers to want to get all employees back in the office. Home-schooling (shudder) is thankfully a distant memory and schools out for summer so this shouldn't be a problem at the moment, right? Well, not quite as there are some important issues to sidestep when requiring working parents back to the office en masse.

Firstly, the childcare landscape may have changed, or be changeable. [Reports](#) suggest there may be less childcare available than pre-pandemic providers, making it harder to get childcare. As well as this, recent figures suggest over 600,000 people, have been pinged by the NHS app and required to self-isolate, meaning parents are at the mercy of not just themselves being 'pinged' and being forced to self-isolate at short notice but also childcare providers, such as nannies, and staff in nurseries or summer camps being pinged - making it more likely that the childcare that is in place could unexpectedly fall through.

Employees with, or who have children with, underlying conditions may be more cautious than others about returning to busier spaces, including tubes, trains and offices, especially given that not everyone has been (or can be - for example due to medical conditions) vaccinated, there is still some risk of transmission from the 'double jabbed' and given the current spike in infection rates. There are also the invisible issues that working parents and their children may be facing, after months of upheaval and home-schooling, which may make returning to the office more challenging.

There have been a couple of high-profile cases recently, such as [Dobson](#) stressing the fact that there is still a childcare disparity in that women still do tend to have more childcaring responsibilities and the need for employers to take account of this, or risk an indirect sex discrimination claim.

This is not to say that some parents, including working mothers, might not be keen to return to the office. In fact, a fair few working parents who are able to do so, may be running to the office to help redraw a clearer dividing line between home and work and escape the scene of the home-schooling crime!

Ultimately, the reality is that like with other groups of employees there's no one size fits all approach. It's unclear how the return to the office will pan out and the government has said it doesn't rule out having to impose restrictions later in the year. Bearing that in mind plus the legal risks and employee relations implications of forcing through such a requirement, as ever employers would be best

placed to engage with employees to understand their particular challenges. Successfully navigating the great return to work in the immediate future will likely require some flexibility.