

# benefit fringe

back to school,  
at home

In a typical year, parents of school-aged children would be breathing a sigh of relief this month, knowing the struggle to keep kids busy and cobble together child-care arrangements during the summer is over because their kids are back in school.

This September, however, kids are back to learning, but many are not “in” school. Instead they’re working alongside their parents, Zooming with teachers and completing online homework assignments. No such respite.

“We know that there is going to be a continuum between in-person learning, which is not very likely; some sort of hybrid, which is logistically challenging; and the other end of the spectrum, which is fully remote,” said Adam Goldberg, founder and chief executive officer of Torchlight, a company that provides employee-caregiver support solutions.

All of this creates a lot of stress—not only over child-care arrangements but also concern that kids will fall behind academically. In a survey by the American Psychological Association late last spring, 71% of parents identified managing distance/online learning as a significant source of stress.

In addition to complying with federal, state or local mandates requiring certain types of leave for employees facing child-care challenges, there are other ways employers can help.

## Provide Flexibility With Schedules and Leave

Flexibility is key, Goldberg and other experts say. That might mean a no-questions-asked policy if employees say they need to take time off for a family crisis, he said.

Employers also could consider putting all of the paid time they offer into a paid-time-off bank, allowing employees to take time off as they need it, regardless of the reason, said Julie Stich, CEBS, Vice President of Content at the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans. Employers also can offer leave donation or buy-sell programs to help employees who have too little or too much paid leave available.

Employers also could consider allowing employees to move to part-time work or compressed schedules.

## Offer Child-Care Assistance

“The reality is that finding and affording child care was challenging for working parents well before the coronavirus hit,” said Alyssa Johnson, vice president of global client man-

agement for the Care@Work division of Care.com, an online platform for finding and managing family care.

Some employers are subsidizing employees’ memberships in search firms to assist them in finding care, Johnson said. Employers also are subsidizing backup care, including arrangements that may allow the employee to receive a subsidy to pay a trusted person for backup care.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2018 International Foundation *Employee Benefits Survey* showed that 3% of employers offered child-care subsidies, 7% offered emergency/sick child care, and 27% offered resource and referral services for child care.

## Supply Access to Educational Resources

Vendors such as Torchlight offer programs that include webinars, videos and other caregiver support education that employers can purchase for use by employees. Some of the education focuses on helping parents address the educational challenges of children with special needs.

Stich noted that employee assistance programs (EAPs) also can be a helpful source of child-care and educational information.

Some employers are paying for a portion of the cost of tutoring services, Johnson added.

“We definitely have seen companies step up and realize that they want to do more than just the bare minimum to help their employees.”

