

Back-to-School Is a Retention Risk for Working Parents



Every year, the same workplace pressure arrives with surprising force.

School calendars shift. Kindergarten starts slowly. Bus schedules change. Daycare spaces fall through. Before-school and after-school care is not yet confirmed. Older children move into new schools with new start times, new transportation needs and new routines. Parents are asked to attend orientations, meet-the-teacher sessions, registration appointments, assessments and early dismissals. Then, almost as soon as the first routine settles, a professional development day, school closure, illness or childcare gap disrupts it again.

For many employers, this gets treated as a short-term scheduling irritation. A few employees ask to leave early. Someone requests remote work for two days. A parent needs to shift a meeting. A manager gets frustrated because coverage is thin. HR receives a question about whether the request is “really required” or just a personal preference.

But for working parents, school transition periods can feel much bigger than a few awkward calendar adjustments. These moments often expose whether the organization’s flexibility promises are real. They reveal whether managers understand family responsibilities. They test whether HR can balance operational needs with human realities. They can also become the point where a parent quietly decides whether the organization is sustainable for them long term.

That’s why Canadian HR leaders should treat school transition periods as retention moments.

This is not about giving parents unlimited flexibility or creating unfairness for employees without children. It’s about recognizing that predictable school and childcare transitions create real workplace pressure. Employers that plan for that pressure can reduce disruption, improve trust and retain experienced employees. Employers that respond inconsistently or dismissively may create avoidable disengagement.

Childcare Instability Is Still a Workplace Issue

It’s easy to underestimate how fragile school and childcare arrangements can be until you have to manage them.

Statistics Canada reported that in 2025, 58% of children aged 0 to 5 were in child care in Canada. Participation was similar to 2023, but parents' difficulty finding child care increased. Among parents using child care, 50% reported difficulty finding it in 2025, up from 46% in 2023. The most common challenge was finding available care in their community, reported by 65% of parents who had difficulty, followed by finding affordable care at 42% and subsidized care at 35%. For parents not using child care, 31% said their child was on a waitlist in 2025, up from 26% in 2023. ([Statistics Canada](#))

That data matters for HR because childcare instability does not stay at home. It shows up in attendance, scheduling, punctuality, remote work requests, stress, productivity and retention. A parent who cannot secure before-school care may not be able to start at 8:00 a.m. A parent whose child is on a waitlist may rely on a patchwork of relatives, neighbours or temporary care. A parent whose kindergarten child has a gradual-entry schedule may need flexibility for several weeks, not one afternoon.

For school-aged children, the issue continues. Statistics Canada reported that in early 2025, just over one-third, or 35%, of children aged 6 to 12 attending school were in child care. Younger school-aged children were much more likely to need care, with 47% of children aged 6 to 8 in child care compared with 33% of children aged 9 to 10 and 20% of children aged 11 to 12. ([Statistics Canada](#))

Those numbers explain why back-to-school pressure is not limited to parents of toddlers. The transition into elementary school, the shift from daycare to before-and-after-school care, and the move from one school routine to another can all affect work. Even parents of older children may face transportation, supervision, disability-related school supports, exam schedules or mental-health concerns during school transitions.

When HR understands this, it can stop treating every request as an isolated inconvenience and start planning for a recurring workforce reality.

Parents Remember How Employers Respond

Retention is often shaped by moments that seem small to the employer but feel decisive to the employee.

A parent remembers the manager who said, "Of course, take the morning and get your child settled. Let's talk about coverage for the rest of the week." They also remember the manager who rolled their eyes, questioned whether childcare was really an emergency or suggested that the employee was less committed than colleagues without children.

Those moments matter because working parents are constantly calculating whether their job still fits their life. This is especially true during school transition periods, when stress is high and routines are unstable. If the workplace responds with clarity and flexibility, parents often feel more loyal. If the workplace responds with suspicion or rigidity, they may start looking for a role that gives them more control.

This does not mean employees should be excused from planning ahead. Parents also have responsibilities. They should communicate early, explore childcare options, propose realistic solutions and continue meeting reasonable work expectations. But employers should recognize that even well-prepared parents face school-related disruptions that are outside their control.

The retention risk is highest when employees feel they are being forced to choose between being a reliable worker and being a responsible parent. That tension can push experienced employees out of roles where they otherwise perform well.

Flexibility Is Now Part of the Employment Value Proposition

For many employees, flexibility has become part of how they evaluate the overall value of a job.

Pay still matters. Career growth still matters. Benefits still matter. But the ability to manage real life without being treated as a problem has become central to engagement, especially for employees with caregiving responsibilities.

Back-to-school season reveals whether flexibility is practical or merely promotional. A workplace may advertise hybrid work, family-friendly values or employee wellbeing, but if managers react negatively when parents need short-term adjustments, employees will see the gap between messaging and reality.

This is especially important in a labour market where skilled employees have become more selective about the conditions under which they will stay. Even when employees are not actively job hunting, they are forming impressions. They are asking whether their employer understands their reality. They are watching how leaders treat colleagues who ask for help. They are assessing whether flexibility is distributed fairly or only granted to favoured employees.

For HR, this is a culture and retention issue. A clear approach to school transition periods can help ensure flexibility does not depend on manager personality, employee confidence or informal privilege.

The Family Status Issue Cannot Be Ignored

School transition requests may also raise legal issues, particularly around family status.

Family status is protected under Canadian human rights legislation. The Ontario Human Rights Commission states that people in parent-child relationships have a right to equal treatment in employment and cannot be discriminated against in working conditions, hiring, promotion, training, benefits or termination because they care for a child or parent. The OHRC also states that employers and unions have a legal duty to accommodate people based on family status to the point of undue hardship. ([Ontario Human Rights Commission](#))

The leading federal case on childcare accommodation remains **Canada v. Johnstone**, where the Federal Court of Appeal confirmed that certain childcare obligations can fall within family status protection under the Canadian Human Rights Act. The case involved a Canada Border Services Agency employee who sought a fixed work schedule because she and her husband could not secure childcare around rotating shifts. The court confirmed that childcare obligations can be protected where specific conditions are met. ([LEAF](#))

HR should be careful here. Not every school-related preference becomes a legal accommodation requirement. A parent may prefer a certain start time or remote arrangement for convenience, and that may not automatically trigger a duty to accommodate. But where a workplace rule, schedule, shift requirement or attendance expectation interferes with a substantial childcare obligation, HR should not dismiss the issue casually.

The practical lesson is simple: treat parent requests seriously enough to assess them. Ask what the employee needs, what alternatives they have explored, what work requirements are affected, what temporary adjustment is being requested and what operational impact would result. A structured assessment protects the employee, the manager and the organization.

The Gender and Equity Dimension

School transition periods do not affect all employees equally.

Women still often carry a disproportionate share of caregiving coordination, even in households where both parents work. Single parents may have fewer backup options. Newcomer families may have less extended family support. Employees in lower-paid roles may have less access to private childcare, flexible transportation or paid backup care. Employees with children with disabilities may face more complex school meetings, therapy appointments, transportation issues and support planning.

This means a rigid approach to school transition periods can have equity consequences.

An employer may think it is applying the same attendance rule to everyone, but the impact may fall more heavily on employees with caregiving responsibilities. That does not mean every request must be approved. But it does mean HR should examine whether policies, schedules or return-to-office expectations create avoidable barriers for parent employees.

The risk is not only legal. It is also reputational and cultural. Employees notice when a workplace makes it harder for caregivers to succeed. Over time, that can affect advancement, retention and leadership diversity.

If an organization says it wants to retain women, develop diverse leaders or support inclusion, it cannot ignore the day-to-day friction that pushes caregivers out.

The Manager Makes or Breaks the Experience

Working parents often do not experience “the organization.” They experience their manager.

A manager who handles school transition requests well can maintain trust and operational control at the same time. They ask for early notice where possible. They discuss coverage. They focus on outcomes. They apply policies consistently. They involve HR when a request may involve accommodation or repeated scheduling conflict.

A manager who handles these requests poorly can create conflict quickly. They may make sarcastic comments, compare employees with children to those without, deny requests without considering alternatives, approve flexibility inconsistently or frame caregiving as lack of commitment.

HR needs to train managers on this issue before school transition season begins.

Managers should know that they do not need to say yes to everything. But they do need to respond respectfully, gather relevant information, avoid assumptions, document decisions and escalate potential accommodation issues. They also need to understand that casual comments can do damage. A remark like “must be nice to leave early again” can undermine trust and may later become evidence of bias or resentment.

A better manager response is calm and practical: “Thanks for letting me know. Let’s look at what coverage is needed and whether this is a temporary schedule adjustment,

remote-work request or something HR should help assess.”

That kind of response keeps the conversation professional and problem-focused.

Back-to-School Should Be Planned Like Any Other Business Cycle

Employers plan for seasonal demand, vacation periods, year-end reporting, inventory cycles and budget deadlines. School transition periods deserve the same kind of operational thinking.

The school calendar is not a surprise. September comes every year. So do winter break, spring break, summer camp gaps, early dismissals and professional development days. The exact impact varies by employee, but the pattern is predictable.

HR can help by creating a school transition planning window. Managers can be encouraged to ask employees to flag anticipated scheduling issues in advance, while recognizing that not all issues can be predicted. Teams can review coverage needs before September. Employees can be asked to propose workable solutions, such as adjusted hours, remote days, shift swaps, compressed schedules, vacation time, personal days or temporary workload adjustments.

This does not require a complicated policy. It requires a clear process.

When the process is visible, employees are more likely to communicate early and managers are less likely to improvise under pressure. That reduces resentment because decisions feel less arbitrary.

Fairness Does Not Mean Identical Treatment

One of the hardest parts of supporting working parents is managing fairness across the workforce.

Employees without children may feel that parents receive special treatment. Employees with older children may feel that parents of young children get more flexibility. Managers may worry that approving one request opens the door to every request.

HR should address this directly. Fairness does not always mean identical treatment. In employment and human rights contexts, fair treatment sometimes requires considering individual circumstances. At the same time, organizations need operationally reasonable boundaries.

The best way to manage this tension is transparency about the process, not disclosure of personal details. Employees do not need to know a colleague’s childcare situation. They do need to know that scheduling flexibility is handled under consistent criteria, such as operational impact, notice, duration, role requirements, available alternatives and legal accommodation obligations.

HR should also ensure flexibility is not framed only as a parent benefit. Employees without children may also need flexibility for disability, eldercare, medical appointments, religious observances, education, grief, emergencies or other legitimate reasons. A broader flexibility framework reduces the perception that one group is being favoured.

The message should be: we consider flexibility requests fairly, consistently and based on circumstances, while maintaining business needs.

The Cost of Getting It Wrong

When employers mishandle school transition periods, the cost is often hidden at first.

Employees may not complain. They may not file accommodation requests. They may not tell HR that their manager's response changed how they feel about the organization. They may simply become less engaged. They may stop volunteering for extra work. They may use more sick time. They may begin searching for jobs with more predictable schedules or better flexibility.

This is why school transition periods are retention risks. They are not always dramatic, but they are revealing.

A parent who already feels stretched by cost-of-living pressures, commute demands, childcare instability and workload may not need a major incident to leave. Sometimes one dismissive conversation is enough to confirm that the job no longer works.

For organizations concerned about retaining experienced employees, that should matter. Replacing a trained employee is expensive. Losing institutional knowledge is disruptive. Rebuilding trust with remaining employees takes time.

Supporting parents well during predictable pressure points is often far less costly than replacing them later.

What HR Can Do Before the Next School Transition

HR can take several practical steps before the next school transition period begins.

First, review existing flexibility, remote work, attendance, accommodation and leave policies to ensure they address caregiving-related needs clearly. If the policies are silent or vague, managers will fill the gaps themselves.

Second, train managers on how to respond to parent requests. The training should cover respectful language, consistency, documentation, escalation to HR, family status accommodation and operational planning.

Third, create a seasonal planning process. Remind employees and managers ahead of September, winter break, spring break and summer that school-related scheduling conflicts may arise and should be discussed early where possible.

Fourth, give managers decision criteria. They should consider the nature of the request, duration, operational impact, available alternatives, whether the employee has explored reasonable options and whether the request may involve family status accommodation.

Fifth, track patterns. If certain departments deny nearly all flexibility requests while others approve them freely, the organization may have a consistency problem. If working parents are leaving at higher rates, HR should examine whether scheduling and manager support are contributing factors.

Finally, communicate the purpose. This is not about lowering standards. It is about supporting employees through predictable family transition periods so they can continue contributing effectively.

The Retention Lesson

Working parents do not expect employers to solve every childcare or school problem.

Most know that schools, daycares, buses and family routines are outside the employer's control.

What they do notice is whether the employer responds like a partner or an obstacle.

A workplace that supports parents during school transition periods does not need to be chaotic or overly permissive. It needs to be prepared, consistent and humane. It needs managers who can have practical conversations. It needs HR processes that recognize family status obligations. It needs flexibility rules that balance operational needs with real life.

Back-to-school season is often described as a family milestone. For employers, it is also a culture test.

The employee who feels supported during that stressful first month of school may remember it for years. The employee who feels punished for being a parent may remember that too.

For Canadian HR leaders, the choice is not between supporting parents and running the business. The real opportunity is to support parents in a way that keeps good employees engaged, productive and committed to staying.