

HOW CAN EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY WORKPLACES SUPPORT EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY FAMILIES?

A review of the evidence and the case for action



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is increasing interest in what employers can do to support our nation's emotional health.

In this report, we discuss how employers' actions to support adults' emotional health in the workplace could bring intergenerational benefits: Not only will these activities benefit employees today, but they are also likely to have positive impacts on their parenting skills and capacities, which will support the emotional health of the next generation.

Emotional health refers to the skills and beliefs that impact our thoughts, feelings and behaviours and shape our social and emotional functioning and wellbeing. Good emotional health enables us to feel, think, behave and interact with others in ways that allow us to thrive and to make a positive contribution in our families, communities and workplaces.

There is increasing interest amongst employers about what they can do to promote good emotional health. Emotional capacities like empathy, resilience, compassion and adaptability are important for high performance in the workplace.

Early childhood is a time of rapid development which lays the foundations for lifelong emotional health. Supporting emotional health and development during this period can make it more likely that today's children will be emotionally healthy throughout life.

There is a compelling business case for caring about early childhood: Today's babies are the future's workforce. The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood's Business Taskforce have stated that improvements in early childhood development would lead to £27.5 bn in additional earning in the UK workforce and £11.8bn in additional profits for businesses¹.

All children will benefit from an improvement in their emotional health and development, but there might be greater benefits for children, families and society if we can improve the emotional health of children in families experiencing poverty and disadvantage, whose development is at greater risk of falling behind.

Babies' and young children's development is shaped by the care they receive from their parents or caregivers². When parents provide nurturing, stimulating care they support the development of their children's social and emotional capacities.



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Therefore, by supporting today's parents in the workplace, employers might also have a positive impact on children's emotional health and development.

Much of the discussion about the impact that employers have on parents focuses on structural factors, such as pay, leave and flexibility. These things are vital in enabling parents to get on well in the workplace and to be the parents they want to be. But they are not the only thing that matters.

Adults' day-to-day experiences at work also shape the parents they can be. **From pregnancy and throughout children's lives, parents' experiences at work shape how they feel and how they behave. By improving these experiences, employers are likely to be able to have a positive impact on families' lives.**

In this report, we investigate how organisational practices can improve parents' emotional health, and the positive consequences this could have for parenting and early child development. We suggest that employer actions to improve employee emotional health might have positive consequences for employees who are parents, which could influence their parenting and therefore their child development.

Our review of the literature found very little evidence about the lasting impact of employers' practices on the emotional health of employees, let alone the transferable impact of these activities on parents' wellbeing and behaviours. More research is needed to better understand these issues.

Based on the available evidence and our understanding of parenting and child development, we have developed theoretical models which describe how employers' activities *might* influence parental emotional health, parenting skills and capacities and children's wellbeing. We hope that these might inform and inspire further research and action to promote emotional health in the workplace.

Employers' efforts to improve emotional health at work are likely to have positive ripple effects across our families and communities, and benefits for the next generation. There is a clear need to develop the evidence base further to support employers to make informed decisions, and to have a positive impact.

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UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONAL HEALTH AND WHY IT MATTERS TO EMPLOYERS

Good emotional health enables us to feel, think, behave and interact with others in ways that allow us to thrive

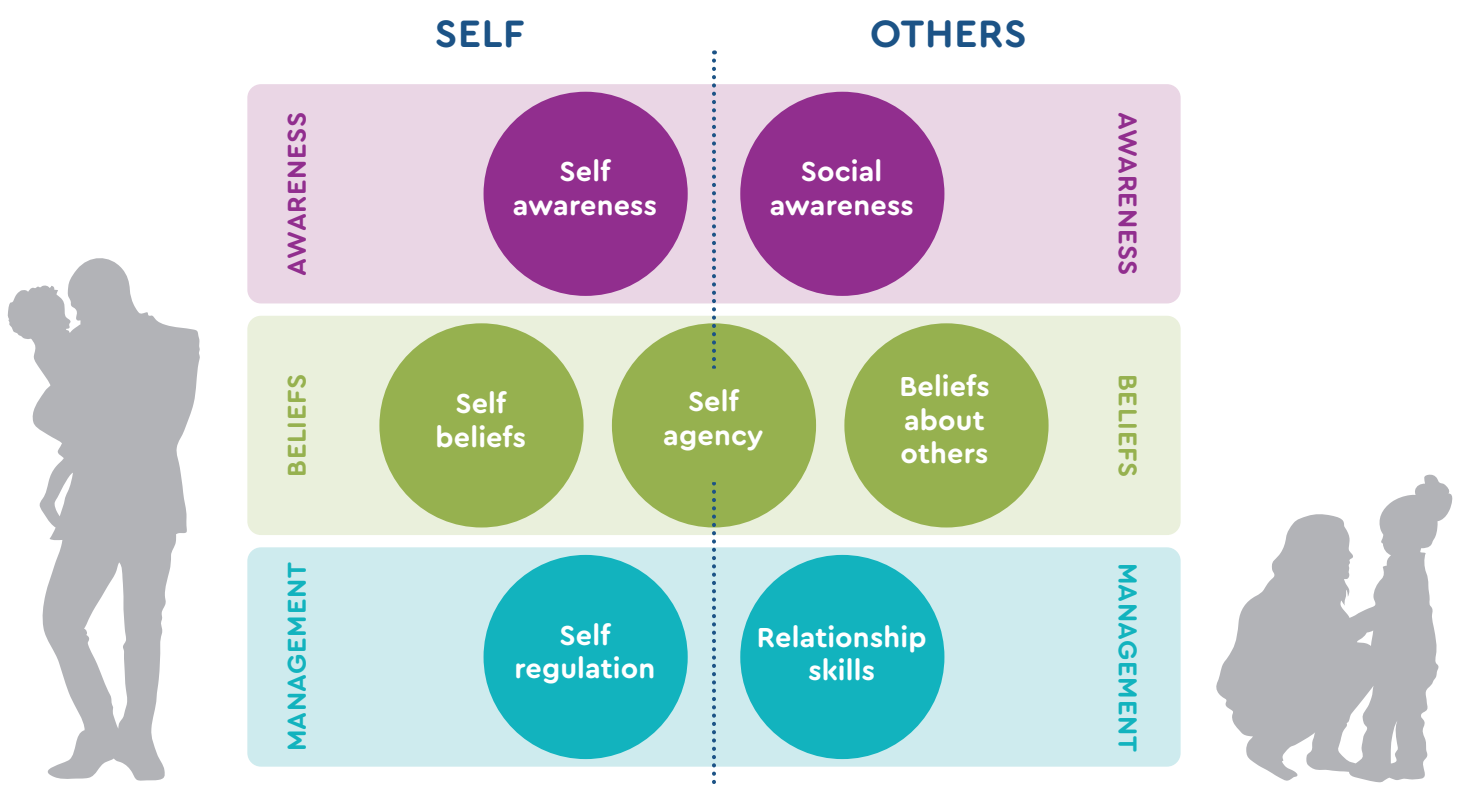
Emotional health refers to the skills and beliefs that impact our thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and shape our social and emotional functioning. The skills and beliefs that make us emotionally healthy enable us to be aware of, understand and manage the whole range of emotions we experience throughout our lives, and the way we respond to and interact with the people around us³.

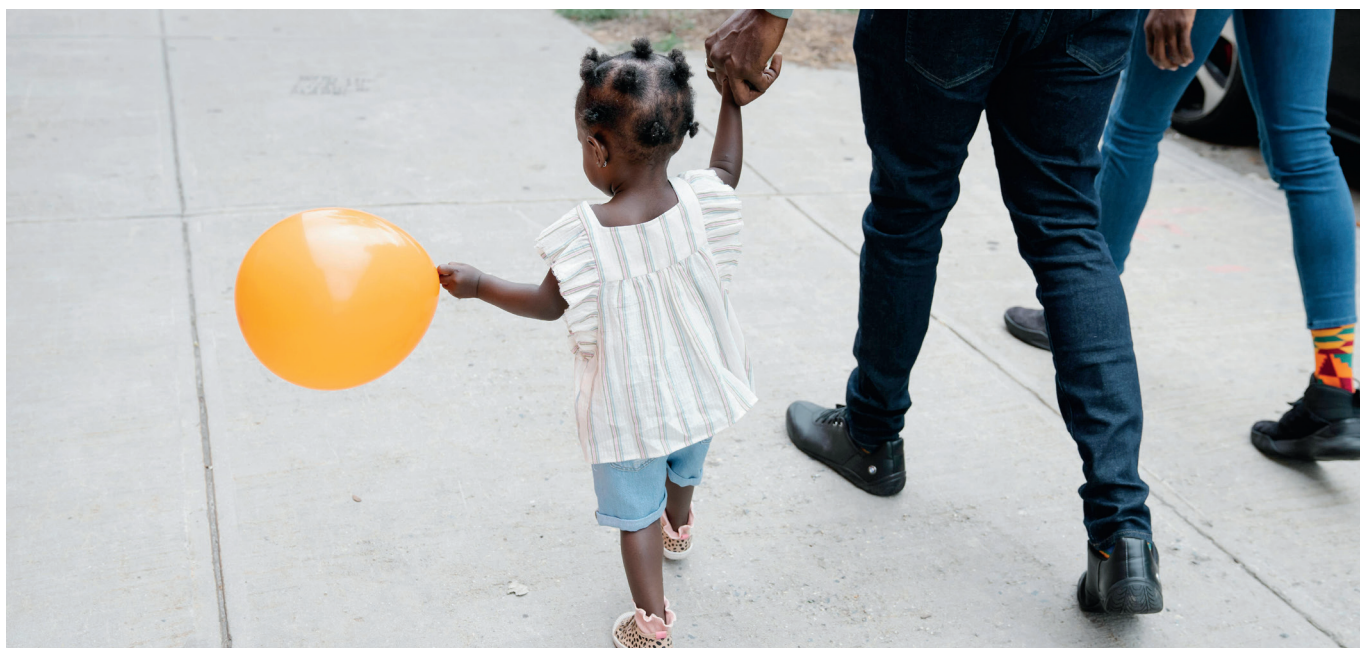
The Centre for Emotional Health has identified seven assets of emotional health, shown in the diagram below.

Our emotional health is affected by our relationships, experiences and environments, particularly the interactions we have with other people. In turn, our emotional health informs how we feel, think, behave and interact with those around us. Emotional health includes skills and beliefs such as self-awareness,

self-regulation, agency and relationship skills. These skills and beliefs impact our quality of life and enable us to make a positive contribution to our families, communities and workplaces.

If we understand mental health as a positive state – not just the presence or absence of mental illness – then being emotionally healthy is very similar to being mentally healthy. The World Health Organisation's definition of mental health is very similar to emotional health. It defines mental health as a state that *"enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community."* Emotional health is different to mental health, but emotional and mental health are fundamentally intertwined. Our emotional health assets can be invaluable in helping to protect and promote good mental health.





There is increasing interest amongst employers about what they can do to promote good emotional health

The skills and capacities that underlie good emotional health are vital for businesses to thrive. These skills have been called "soft skills" or "21st century skills" but these terms do them a disservice – they are not soft and neither is their value unique to the modern age!

Skills like empathy, resilience and compassion are all connected to emotional health, and they are important for high performance in the workplace. They make us good team members, support good customer service, and enable us to be good leaders. They help us to communicate, to be creative, to collaborate and to persist in finding new solutions to problems. Developing employee emotional health and wellbeing has benefits for the workplace in terms of performance, productivity, staff retention, attendance and team dynamics⁴.

A report by Development Economics looked at five "soft skills", including skills grounded in emotional health such as communication and interpersonal skills which they argued are "essential to creating high-performing and successful organisations." They argued that when employers utilise and nurture these skills it results in positive outcomes for individuals including employment opportunities, career progression, and the development of employee confidence and satisfaction⁵. In 2015, Development Economics estimated that by 2025, the contribution of soft skills to the economy would be over £127 billion.

Soft skills are important to all parts of the UK economy, but they make a particularly important contribution to financial and business services, retail, and public services, including health and education⁶.

The world is uncertain and constantly changing. Climate change and digital advances such as AI, are changing how we live our lives and the challenges we face. In recent years the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis have created new challenges for many people and organisations. Many aspects of work are also becoming increasingly automated or replaced by technology. In the context of all of these challenges our more human capacities – such as social and emotional skills – are particularly important. These skills enable us as humans to deliver things that machines cannot. In their provocative article on this subject, Hughes, Hunt and Tomlinson (2023) write "*Put simply, we will need empathy, social skills, resilience and planning abilities to negotiate resource scarcity on a hotter, more crowded planet shared with powerful robots.*"⁷

Emotional health is not only important because it helps build a more productive, resilient and thriving workforce. It also helps to prevent mental health problems which can be difficult and costly both to individuals and to their employers⁸. Mental health problems are a significant and growing health challenge in the UK. According to research by the LSE, these problems cost the UK economy at least £118 billion a year due to factors like lost productivity and economic inactivity. This accounts for around 5% of UK GDP (as of 2019)⁹.

WHY PARENTING SKILLS AND CAPACITIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD WILL SHAPE THE EMOTIONAL HEALTH OF THE NEXT GENERATION

Employers are not just interested in current employees' emotional health today, but in the emotional health of the future workforce

Increasingly, employers are interested in promoting the emotional health of our babies and young children. For many, this a moral commitment: they want to ensure our children have a good start in life and are happy and healthy. But there is also a business case for caring about young children's emotional health. Today's babies are the future workforce. As Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek (2016) describe, if we support the development of children's social-emotional capacities, we will see more "*happy, healthy, thinking, caring, and social children who will become collaborative, creative, competent, and responsible citizens tomorrow*"¹⁰.

We can make a difference to people's emotional health at any age, but there is a particularly strong case for acting early in life. The evidence is clear that the earliest years of life, including pregnancy, infancy and early childhood, are a period of rapid development and a prime time to influence social and emotional development. The brain is particularly "plastic"^a during this period and its development is influenced by children's experiences and environments. Early development lays important foundations for later development.

The first years of life are a time of both opportunity and vulnerability: If we support babies and young children's emotional health and development, it can set them on a positive trajectory and improve the likelihood of good emotional health throughout their lives. Conversely, if babies and young children experience adversity and poor emotional development, it can have pervasive and long-term consequences^{11,12}.

The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood's Business Taskforce has published a report making the case for businesses to play a greater role in ensuring children have access to the positive relationships, experiences and surroundings to support early development. They describe how improvements in early childhood would lead to £27.5 bn in additional earning in the UK workforce and £11.8bn in additional profits for businesses¹³.



a. Plasticity refers to the extent to which the brain changes structure and function in response to external inputs.



Babies' and young children's emotional health is shaped by their interactions and relationships with their parents

Babies' and young children's development is shaped by their environment and experiences. The most important aspect of these early experiences is the care that babies receive, and the interactions they have with their parents or caregivers¹⁴.

Sensitive, responsive, consistent relationships between babies and their parents support babies' emotional health and development in several ways. For example:

- When parents respond sensitively to babies' emotions, and soothe them if they are distressed, this helps children to learn how to manage and understand their emotions.
- Early relationships provide a template for children's expectations in later relationships¹⁵.
- Parents support children as they experience and learn how to navigate social situations and the world around them, and provide a "safe base" from which children can explore the world.
- As children develop, parents provide "scaffolding", guidance and support which helps them to develop their own social and emotional skills^{16,17}.
- Early interactions where parents' respond to babies' cues and non-verbal communications such as gaze and pointing, are the basis for language learning which supports social and emotional development¹⁸.

Because of the vital role that parents play, supporting parents to provide nurturing care to their babies and young children is a clear way to influence children's wellbeing and development. There are two ways in which public services, communities and employers can support parents in their important role¹⁹:

Some parents will benefit from support to build their skills and capacities to provide sensitive nurturing care. Other parents might struggle to provide the nurturing care they want to give their child, because of the psychological and practical pressures placed on them by other stresses in their lives. These parents might benefit from support to reduce the stresses in their lives. The diagram below represents these two ways in which we might support parenting. These are not mutually exclusive, and some parents might benefit from both types of support.



PEDAL's Parent Skills Framework describes the parenting capacities and skills that can be targeted by interventions aiming to have a positive impact on babies social and emotional wellbeing and development

In PEDAL, we have developed a framework that captures the skills that shape how parents interact with their children and that can be enhanced or learned with support. The framework was initially developed to help us to understand the ways in which parenting programmes influence parenting, but it can also be useful in thinking about how wider experiences and interventions in parents' lives might build valuable skills and competencies^b.

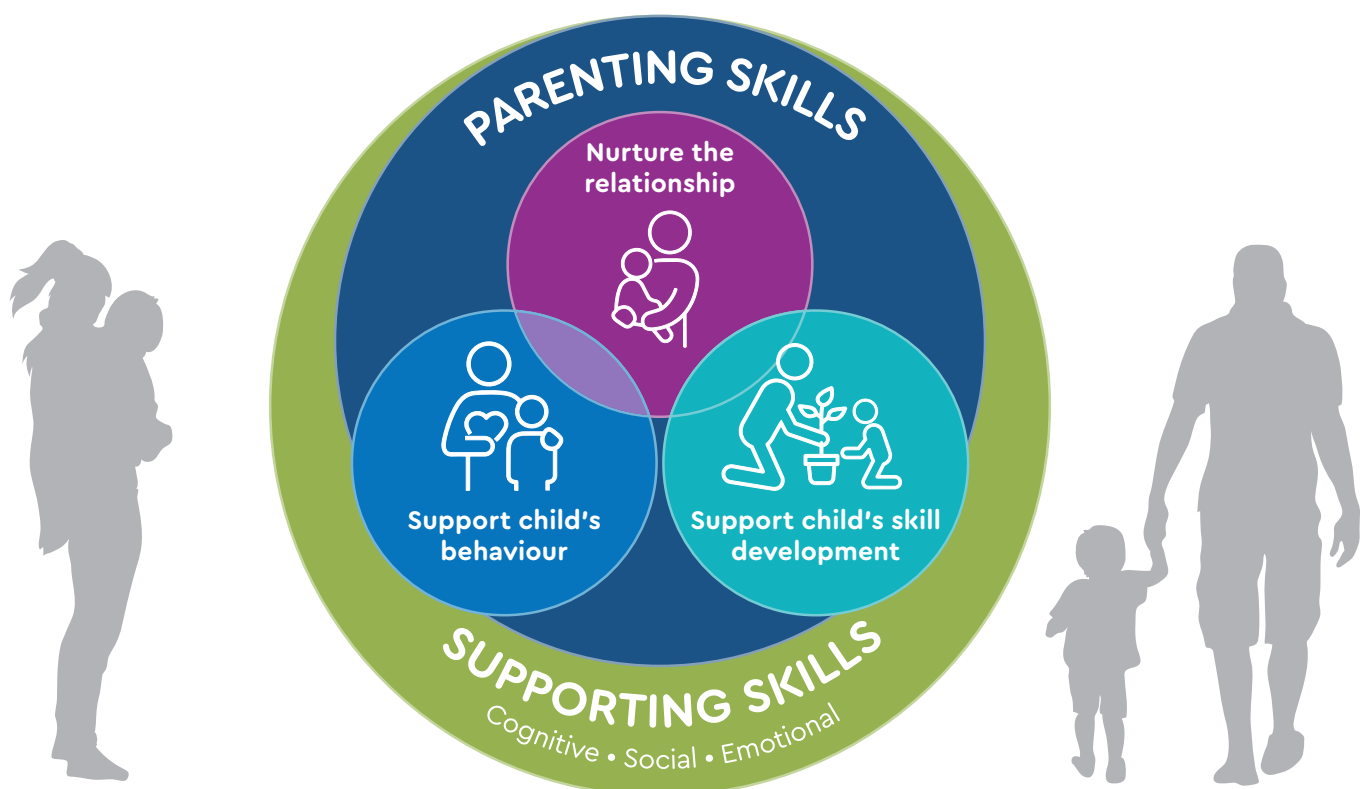
The skills in the Parent Skills Framework relate to three domains of parenting:

- Nurturing the relationship;
- Supporting children's behaviour, and
- Supporting children's skill development.

These three domains of parenting are strengthened by a set of supporting skills that relate to parents' internal capacities, their own cognitive, emotional and social skills.

The skills in the framework are interconnected and can support each other – developing skills in one domain can spark change in another. The skills all operate on a spectrum, whereby parents are likely to feel more skilled and confident in some areas, and less experienced and effective in others. Parental skills are dynamic and will be influenced by a range of contextual factors, as well as parental characteristics. The extent to which parents draw on these skills will vary at different times and in different situations, and can also be influenced by children's needs, personalities and temperaments. Factors outside the parent-child dyad, such as worries about housing and food insecurity, parents' wider support network, and their own history of being parented can all make acquiring and maintaining these skills easier or harder for parents.

Parents do not need to excel in all of these skills in order to support their children's wellbeing and development. The literature is clear that no parent is perfectly attuned to their child all the time, and it would not be beneficial if they are – some element of "rupture and repair" is part of all relationships, and children need parents simply to be "good enough"^{20,21}.



b. The Parenting Skills Framework was developed through reviewing international frameworks relating to early childhood development, models of parenting, and theories of change for evidence-based parenting programmes. We also looked at measures used to capture changes in parenting and sought expert advice from practitioners and academics.

PARENTING SKILLS FRAMEWORK

Parenting skills to...

Nurture the relationship



Sensitive responding:

Parent is supported to notice and be curious in interpreting their child's cues, make efforts to respond to their individual needs and match their pace, allow the child to take the lead, and give positive attention by showing interest without interfering in exploration. The parent is supported to make efforts to repair 'ruptures' in interactions, through a process of rupture-and-repair.

Expressing warmth and positive regard:

Parent is supported to express warmth, affection, comfort and positive regard towards the child, as well as conveying acceptance and encouragement.

Playful: Parent is supported to share playful interactions that are child-led, developmentally appropriate, and appropriate in their timing and intensity.

This includes 'challenging parenting behaviours' (e.g. rough-and-tumble play) that provides a safe place for children to explore beyond their comfort zone.

Parenting skills to...

Support child's behaviour



Positive behaviour support:

Parent is supported to encourage the child's positive behaviour through practices such as giving praise, compliments and rewards.

Behaviour management:

Parent is supported to respond to the child's challenging or risky behaviour in a consistent, non-harsh way that's designed to reduce the occurrence of the behaviour.

Proactive and protective parenting:

Parent is supported to create plans, establish routines, set clear rules, monitor the child and create a safe and predictable environment and network of relationships. The parent is capable of keeping the child healthy (e.g. nourished) and safe while protecting them from abuse, neglect and maltreatment.

Parenting skills to...

Support child's skill development



Support child's socioemotional skill development:

Parent is supported to guide the child in developing skills, including emotional express, emotion regulation, social skills and prosocial skills, such as non-aggressive conflict resolution. This also includes the parent's efforts to co-regulate the child's emotions.

Support child's skills for learning, cognition and language:

Parent is supported to guide the child in developing skills related to executive function (e.g. planning, staying focused, filtering distractions, meeting goals), problem solving, persistence and language development (e.g. the parent is supported to respond to verbal cues and talk frequently to the child).

Autonomy support:

Parent is supported to encourage the child to make independent choices and decisions, and can support the development of their capacity to solve problems.



SUPPORTING SKILLS TO...

Parents' own social, emotional and cognitive skills



Empathy, perspective taking and mentalising:

Parent is supported to recognise and consider the perspectives of others. They are able to identify the child's feelings, and express understanding, compassion and empathy. Parent is supported to interpret the child's behaviour in terms of envisioned mental states and can make reasonable attributions through capacities for mind-mindedness and reflective functioning.

Effective communication skills:

Parent is supported to appropriately monitor their thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

They are able to express these in ways that do not negatively impact others.

Self-efficacy: Parent is supported to experience a sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy. The parent is able to create and hold onto a personal sense of self-assurance based on personal assessment.

Emotional and behavioural regulation skills:

Parent is supported to experience, understand and express their emotions, and act on these with behaviours that are appropriate for the situation. They are able to maintain a regulated state while caring for a distressed/dysregulated child.

Problem solving skills:

Parent is supported to anticipate and identify problems, generate solutions, take action and seek assistance.

Parent is able to set goals, self-motivate, persist, self-evaluate and cope with stress in ways that do not significantly disrupt their caregiving role.

HOW EMPLOYERS MIGHT SUPPORT PARENTS' SKILLS AND WELLBEING

Employers' practices are likely to improve early childhood development by enhancing parents' skills and capacities

Every person's emotional health is shaped by the different environmental contexts in which we are immersed in on a daily basis such as families, schools, communities and workplaces²².

There are 4.69 million working parents and caregivers of children under five in the UK today²³. Employers can make a huge difference to the lives of these parents and their children, including to their emotional health.

Much of the discussion about the impact that employers have on parents focuses on structural factors, such as pay, leave and flexibility. These things are vital in enabling parents to get on well in the workplace and to be the parents they want to be. They generally address stressors such as time and financial pressures that make parenting more difficult.

We believe that, alongside reducing stresses on parents, employers can also improve parents' emotional health and capacities through their day-to-day organisational practices.

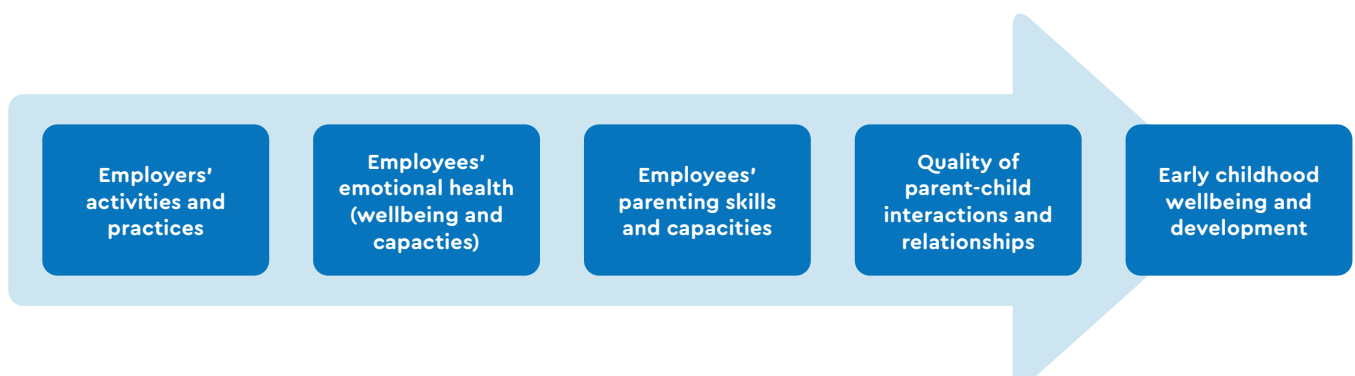
The workplace environments that employers create and the ways they support and develop employees have the potential to improve employees' wellbeing and to develop their skills and capacities to support good social and emotional functioning. We believe this could have knock-on consequences for employees' parenting skills and capacities, with benefits for

parenting and early childhood development, as shown in the theoretical model below.

Intuitively, most employers and employees agree that day-to-day working practices impact emotional health, with impacts that transfer to the home environment. However, this is not an area that receives much attention. There is evidence that poor experiences of work cause stress which impacts on home life. But there is far less about the positive impact that employee practices can have²⁴. The Royal Foundation's Business Taskforce reported a gap in examples of business practices to promote employee's soft skills and how this can support early childhood development²⁵.

In this project, we set out to better understand if and how employers' practices enhance parenting skills and capacities. We wanted to understand what actions employers can take to support early childhood development through improving their employees' emotional health.

This is an area worthy of attention because all employers should be able to find ways in which they can improve day-to-day working practices to support employees' emotional health, whereas some structural benefits are harder for some employers to offer (for example manual jobs can be harder to do flexibly and some employers have limited resources to enhance parental leave and pay.)



We reviewed the evidence about how employers' actions can influence employee emotional health, parenting and early childhood development

At the Centre for Emotional Health and PEDAL, we wanted to support employers to take more evidence-informed actions to support children's emotional health and development. Therefore, we set out to investigate the research and data about what employers do to improve employees' emotional health, the positive consequences this has on employees, and the knock-on impacts this has on parenting and early childhood development. We hope this could help more employers to take evidence-informed steps to benefit both their current employees, and the employees of the future.

PEDAL researcher, Dr Stephanie Nowack, conducted a pragmatic review of the academic and grey literature to better understand the evidence about how employers' actions can influence the emotional health and capacities of their employees. As suspected, we found very little literature in this space.

There is limited robust evidence on the lasting and transferable effects of employer activities on employee wellbeing and abilities, especially in relation to parenting skills. This report draws together the best evidence we found, but it also shows areas where more work is needed.

To complement the scant research evidence, we researched the practices of three well-known employers to understand the work they do to support emotional health and playfulness at work. We used this, together with our parenting skills framework, to develop some theoretical models which set out how specific employers might be having a positive impact on the parenting capacities of their employees, and how this might impact early childhood development.

There is evidence that organisational practices have a positive impact on employee wellbeing in the workplace

Wellbeing at work is multifaceted and can be enhanced in different ways. Hedonic wellbeing is achieved through experiences of pleasure and enjoyment. Eudaimonic wellbeing is achieved through experiences of meaning and purpose. Social wellbeing is the experience of healthy, reciprocal, positive relationships^{26,27,28}.

Currently, employers and researchers interested in improving emotional health are predominantly focusing on offering individual-level interventions, including massage, yoga, mindfulness, or stress management classes^{29,30,31,32}. The overall evidence of these individual-level interventions is inconclusive and modest in effect^{33,34}.

The way an organisation treats its employees on a day-to-day basis makes more difference than individual interventions in improving workforce wellbeing. Factors such as the nature of work, work-life balance, colleague relationships, workplace culture and leadership can either enhance or diminish employees' emotional health. There is evidence that changing organisational practices is more effective in boosting workplace wellbeing than individual-level practices and can have more sustained impacts^{35,36}.



“When it comes to creating emotionally healthy workplaces, there is a need to go deeper than offering free yoga sessions or wellbeing hours. It is the more foundational habits and structures that create a genuine emotionally healthy environment.”³⁷

Improvements in a range of policies and practices have been shown to make a positive impact on employee wellbeing. These include^{38,39,40,41}:

- Enhanced job design
- Increasing job control
- Improving the social environment in the workplace
- Training
- Reward systems
- Flexible working arrangements and improved work-life balance
- Improved management practices
- Information sharing about the functioning of a company
- Internal promotions
- Participative decision making

There is clearly a need to focus on enhancing all employees' work environment, instead of, or as well as offering individual-level interventions to improve employee emotional health⁴². The Centre for Emotional Health have previously described how support must address both individual and organisational levels. Personal emotional health influences workplace outcomes, and at the same time, fostering an emotionally healthy workplace is key to employee wellbeing and development⁴³.

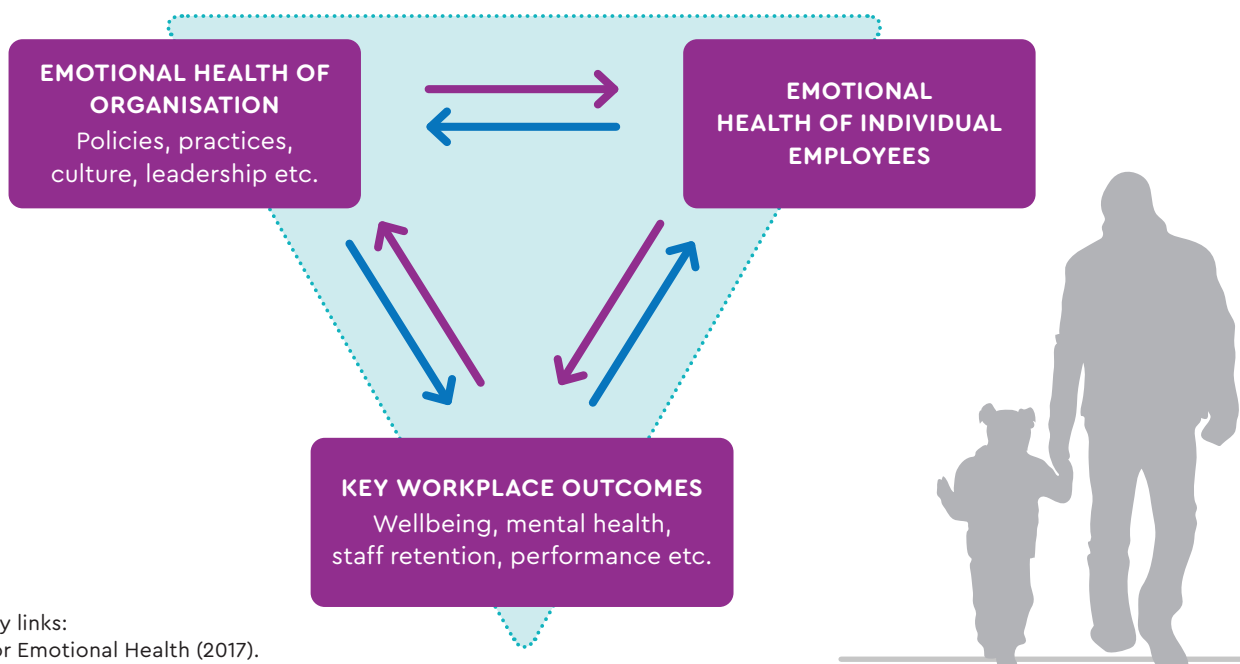
When explicit support is provided for employees' emotional and mental health, such as counselling or coaching services, evidence shows that workplace practices can help to integrate this support and promote its use. Compassionate leadership can foster a supportive workplace culture help employees feel comfortable asking for and accessing support. Effective strategies might also include scheduling support services during work hours or incorporating them into professional development programs. When managers share their personal challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities, it can encourage others to engage with available support⁴⁴.

Better emotional health in the workplace brings individual benefits such as improved relationships, enhanced problem-solving and increased motivation. Employees who have more personal and social resources, can experience a "gain spiral"⁴⁵. For example, they may find it easier for them to access supportive social environments and further benefit from these interactions.

Emotional health is about skills and capacities, alongside feelings of wellbeing. To effectively support emotional health, a dual approach is necessary: both cultivating an emotionally healthy environment through workplace policies, practices, culture and leadership, and equipping employees with relevant skills⁴⁶.

Workplace training programmes can enhance interpersonal skills, communication, empathy and conflict resolution⁴⁷. Training can build basic communication skills, emotional intelligence and empathy (and – if well designed – all of these together).

Figure 1: Diagram showing the relationship between the emotional health of an organisation, the emotional health of individual employees, and key workplace outcomes



Source: Family links: The Centre for Emotional Health (2017).

Positive experiences at work can also build other skills and behaviours. For example, when employees have more agency at work, this can support their ability to find solutions, make sound decisions and respond effectively in challenging situations⁴⁸.

Many individual and organisational factors can influence emotional health, and employers can take a multi-faceted approach to promoting the emotional health of their employees. One example of a multifaceted approach is Working Families' award winner ClwydAlyn, which offers individuals advice services, support groups and discounts on gym membership, but also looks at how internal processes such as internal communications, feedback mechanisms and flexible working practices support employee wellbeing⁴⁹.



The Centre for Emotional Health have previously mapped practices that enhance different aspects of emotional health (mapping onto the seven elements of emotional health described on page 3)⁵⁰. Examples of these practices are shown in the table below.

Aspect of emotional health	Employer Practice	Example
Self-awareness	Encouraging reflective practice	Encouraging and supporting reflection during supervision and performance reviews.
Social awareness	Fostering a compassionate workforce	Emotionally health practices are embedded within the culture and values of the organisation. Leaders model compassionate practices.
Self-beliefs	Valuing employees' contributions	Designing jobs so that all employees have "good work" that is meaningful and allows opportunities for learning and development.
Self-agency	Promoting employee autonomy and involvement	Designing jobs so that all employees have "good work" that enables choice and autonomy. There are opportunities for employees to express their feelings and opinions and contribute to decision making processes.
Beliefs about others	Creating a psychologically safe culture	There are effective policies and procedures in place to tackle workplace bullying. Leaders are clear about the role they play in creating emotionally healthy teams.
Self-regulation	Supporting healthy self-regulation in the workplace	Training and supervision support employees, including leaders, to develop their intra and interpersonal skills.
Relationship skills	Building positive relationships across the organisation	

Some elements of emotional health at work do translate into the rest of life

To understand if employer practices impact on parenting, we must first understand the extent to which skills and wellbeing at work persist and transfer to life outside work.

The evidence shows there are reciprocal relationships between positive experience and wellbeing at work and wellbeing in wider life, as summarised in the table below.

Generally, feelings about, and functioning in life outside work has a stronger impact on health at work than the reverse. However, there are some areas where what happens at work has an influence on life outside of work^{51,c}.

Importantly, feeling purposeful at work and having friends at work has a positive effect on aspects of emotional health outside of work. These are important findings because, with this knowledge, organisations could focus more on fostering environments where employees feel a sense of purpose and where close social relationships are nourished at work. By targeting these areas, organisations can leverage the positive impact of feeling purposeful and building friendships in the workplace. This, in turn, could ripple into employees' personal lives. It might strengthen their sense of purpose and relationships as parents, which may positively influence their children.

Bi-directional relationships between life and work wellbeing as well as their asymmetries are visually presented (Weziak-Bialowolska et al., 2020)

Arena of wellbeing	Effect from life to work	Effect from work to life	Observations
Life satisfaction ↔ Job satisfaction	Effect in both directions	Effect in both directions	Stronger effect of life satisfaction on job satisfaction
Happiness in life ↔ Happiness at work	Effect in both directions	Effect in both directions	Mutual influence, but no stronger effect noted in either direction
Life depression ↔ Work depression	Effect from life to work	No effect from work to life	Feeling depressed in life impacts feelings of depression at work
Feeling things in life are worthwhile ↔ Feeling work is meaningful	Effect from life to work	No effect from work to life	Feelings of meaning in life impacts feelings of meaning at work
Content with relationships and friendships in life ↔ Feeling close to people at work	No effect from life to work	Effect from work to life	Feeling close to people to work contributes to a sense of good social connections in life
Purpose in life ↔ Feeling purposeful at work	No effect from life to work	Effect from work to life	Feeling purposeful at work increases sense of purpose in life

c. Weziak-Bialowolska et al. (2020) reported that 67.9% of the sample in the study were parents and had children under the age of 18 currently living in the household.



There is mixed evidence to suggest that improving emotional health will influence parenting

We found very little research into the impact of workplace interventions on parenting. However, we do know that parental wellbeing is associated with parenting quality and child development⁵².

There are some examples of adult interventions that bring indirect benefits to children. For example, mindfulness interventions are shown to reduce parenting stress, which then has a positive impact on child development. However the mental health literature shows that improvements in parental mental health after treatment do not always lead to improvements in parent-child relationship quality and child development^{53,54}.

There is some evidence that workplace experiences influence family interactions

We found some evidence about the impact of work experiences on parenting and child development:

- There is evidence that negative experiences at work influence parenting and child development indirectly, through their impact on parenting stress⁵⁵.
- Families can experience stress and conflict caused by tensions between professional obligations and family responsibilities, which can be alleviated by family friendly policies^{56,57}.
- Offering explicit parenting support in the workplace, such as parenting programmes, has been shown to have positive impacts on parenting, child behaviour and employer benefits such as occupational commitment and job satisfaction^{58,59}.

However, there is little evidence on how wider workplace practices impact family interactions, parenting and child development. This is not to say they do not have an impact – just that this has not been researched. Anecdotally, we hear that employees feel that positive workplace experiences have ripple effects outside work and into to family life, but this has not yet been tested through robust academic research.

There is an opportunity for committed employers to work with researchers to develop the evidence which will enable us to better understand the impact of employer practices, and thus to promote positive, evidence-informed initiatives in the future.



THE NEED TO DEVELOP A BETTER EVIDENCE-BASE TO UNDERSTAND HOW EMPLOYERS MIGHT INFLUENCE PARENTING

At the Centre for Emotional Health and PEDAL, we wanted to support employers to take evidence-informed actions to support emotional health and development in early childhood. Being evidence-informed means drawing on evidence from research, data, community insights, and professional expertise to understand if and how activities or interventions might translate into tangible changes for children. This is important because it helps to take actions that have the best chance of being effective. Being evidence-informed ensures our practices are ethical and defensible.

It is important to be evidence-informed in our decisions, and to evaluate practices to ensure they have the intended consequences, and do not cause any unintended consequences. One might hypothesize, for example, that enabling employees to work from home supports family life because it allows parents to be physically present for their children. But what if this way of working blurred boundaries and led to parents working when their children are around, with a consequence that they are less attuned to their children? We can only understand the impact of actions if we start to collect data and feedback on their impact.

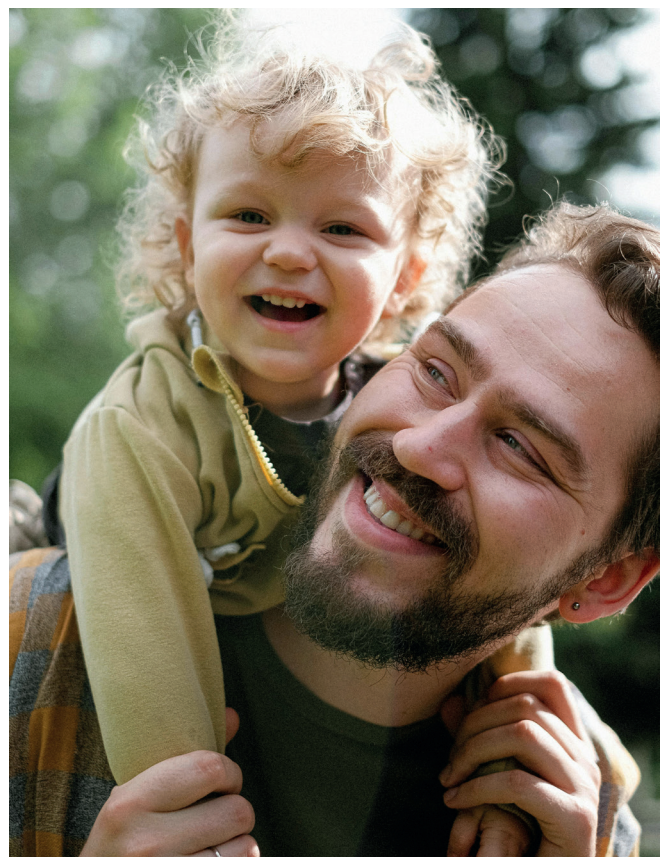
This project has shown that there is little evidence for employers to draw on to inform their working practices to have a positive impact on parenting and early child development. On issues such as this, where there are gaps in the evidence connecting activities (i.e. employer practices) with outcomes (i.e. child development), theoretical models can help us. These models describe the mechanisms that might be involved in connecting activities and outcomes.

Logic models map the relationships between activities and intended results, using an "if then" structure, ie. if X activity happens, then Y outcome will occur. They require us to identify our underlying theories or assumptions about how activities will have an impact⁶⁰. Developing a logic model requires us to question why and how we

think activities will achieve results, and to identify our underlying theories and assumptions.

On the pages that follow are three theoretical logic models which describe the practices in three well-known family friendly organisations, and how these practices might be influencing parenting and child development. These are only theoretical models. These are included in this report as examples of how we think employer practices might be impacting parenting. They provide hypotheses which might be tested through research and evaluation or refined on the basis of feedback.

The logic models draw on PEDAL's parenting skills framework to think about how capacities and skills developed at work might influence parenting at home.



SUPPORTING PLAYFUL WORKING BY THE LEGO® GROUP

The LEGO Group is a family run Danish company founded in 1932. Since 1949, the company has been manufacturing toys made from its famous bricks. The LEGO Group is one of Europe's biggest companies and the largest toy manufacturer in the world by sales. The name 'LEGO' is an abbreviation of the two Danish words "leg godt", meaning "play well". A commitment to play runs through The LEGO Group, informing not just what they produce, but also how they operate. This case study describes the work within The LEGO Group to embed playful working across the company.

The LEGO Group is committed to encouraging employees to play, and to learn and work playfully. Playful activities are defined as those that meet five characteristics: it is joyful, meaningful, actively engaging, iterative and socially interactive⁶¹.

Encouraging Play

Within The LEGO Group, the Employee Play Engagement Team encourage and support colleagues to engage in play, sharing the benefits of a playful approach. The team create tools, resources and activities to support leaders and their teams to be playful. They also offer colleagues the opportunity to spend two days a year volunteering in local activities connected to learning through play and run an annual Play Day where colleagues from across the globe meet to play and socialise together.

The Employee Play Engagement Team work to foster a playful mindset across the organisation, creating a culture where people feel comfortable and safe to play, and see this as part of how they work. The Team run a range of courses for colleagues about learning through play. They also host an internal platform with inspiring playful activities for colleagues to use at work, at home or in their communities.



On behalf of The LEGO Group, Rambøll conducted a literature review^d into the business benefits of playful working, which suggested that play at work promotes three outcomes: employee wellbeing (higher job satisfaction and lower stress), team connection (increased cohesion and sense of belonging), and creativity (problem solving and learning new things).

The company have recently undertaken an in-house pilot to understand if an eight week "play treatment" resulted in changes in these three outcomes among a group of employees. The play treatment consisted of workshops, information, encouragement and support for a group of "play initiators" in their teams. Play initiators were regularly sent suggested activities for both task related, and non-task related play and were expected to lead daily play activities for their teams, for up to an hour a week. The outcomes of this group are being compared to colleagues not involved in the pilot. Results will be published shortly, to shine a light on how play contributes to improved outcomes for employees.

CONCLUSION

Theoretically, a playful culture at work could bring benefits to family life too. Anecdotal feedback from the LEGO team suggests the benefits of play are sustained and transferable beyond the immediate impacts in the work environment, giving employees practical ideas for play at home, and skills that support parenting. Building on the current evaluation of their "play treatment" it would be valuable for the LEGO team to do more to understand if and how playful working influences employees' parenting and wider life outside work.

d. At the time of publication, this literature review had not been published outside LEGO.

Linking The LEGO Group's playful workplace practices to parenting skills and child outcomes – a theoretical model

INPUTS

What does The LEGO Group do for employees?

- Support for employees to be playful at work – resources and encouragement to undertake playful activities.
- Opportunities for play with colleagues both in work and alongside work.

MECHANISM

How could The LEGO Group's practices affect parent employees?

Improved Wellbeing: playful activities are likely to increase motivation, job satisfaction and wellbeing at work.

Improved Creativity: increased creativity, generation of, and openness to, new ideas and perspectives.

Improve Collaboration: playful activities are likely to increase collaboration and connections with colleagues. Playful activities provide new ways for people to communicate, express ideas and connect.

IMMEDIATE OUTCOMES

How might this change parents and parenting?

Empathy, perspective taking and mentalising: Increased collaboration at work might support the parents' ability to recognise and consider the perspectives of others, which could also support mentalisation in parenting.

Improved communication skills: Undertaking playful activities as a team might support the development of the parents' abilities to communicate their feelings and emotions.

Playfulness: Increased playfulness might transfer from work to the home environment. The LEGO Group's activities aim to increase colleagues' "play confidence", how confident they feel in explaining and practicing learning through play, and this could transfer to home too.

Problem-solving abilities: A positive and creative work environment might support greater problem-solving abilities in parenting.

INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES

How might this support child development?

Nurturing Relationships: As a result of their experiences at work, parents may become more playful, better able to sensitively respond to children's needs, and better at expressing warmth, with positive consequences for the parent-child relationship.

Autonomy Support: The playful, non-authoritarian culture at LEGO promotes decision-making and creativity, which parents can mirror at home to foster their child's independence. Parents might encourage independent thinking and problem-solving in their children by providing opportunities for choice and creativity.

SUPPORTING EMOTIONAL HEALTH THROUGH CULTURE AND SUPPORT AT ELLA'S KITCHEN

Founded in 2006 by Paul and Alison Lindley, Ella's Kitchen aims to revolutionise the baby food market by offering healthy, organic options that are fun and exciting for children.

Ella's Kitchen is renowned not only for its innovative products but also for fostering a supportive and playful work environment. The company's internal culture, referred to as "Ella's-ness," emphasises a unique blend of business acumen, creativity, and a supportive, family-like atmosphere⁶².

A playful and supportive workplace

Ella's Kitchen is playful in how it operates. For example, roles and teams are given playful, descriptive names to foster a sense of fun and creativity, the HR team is called the Makes People Happy Team. This playful culture may help employees to be more playful outside of work, with benefits for their children.

There is a supportive and person-centred approach at Ella's Kitchen. Activities designed to support employees include:

- An open, informal communication style to ensure transparency and a sense of community.
- Activities to build a sense of community and shared endeavour such as assemblies, which bring colleagues together and recognise employee achievements and shared progress.
- Activities and resources explicitly to promote wellbeing and mental health such as regular wellbeing activities, trained mental health first aiders and a regular mental health newsletter.

Employee-parents will also benefit from the company's flexible working policies, hybrid working and parent coaching. The company's values are clear and embedded around the organisation. The

company's five core values include collaboration, making everyone feel welcome, and being childlike, which is defined as being, "honest, carefree, imaginative, playful, spirited and genuine."⁶³ Training, development and employee appraisals focus on these values. There is a commitment to diversity and inclusion in Ella's Kitchen, which focusses on enabling people to bring their "true self" to work and to talk about wider life and needs in the workplace. This helps parents to share both positive stories and challenges of family life.

Ella's Kitchen's focus on employee wellbeing, support and work-life balance creates conditions for improved parental wellbeing, which can have positive impacts on child wellbeing.



CONCLUSION

Ella Kitchen's primary drive to improve employee playfulness and wellbeing lies in business performance. As the company say: "We know that happy, healthy people do the best work, so we work really hard to be a tip-top employer focussing on understanding the whole person."⁶⁴ However, theoretically, Ella's Kitchen's practices are likely to have positive impacts on parenting and therefore children's emotional health and development too. Further testing would help to validate this model and understand if and how parents' experiences at work influence their family life.

Linking Ella's Kitchen's workplace practices to parenting skills and child outcomes – a theoretical model

INPUTS

What does Ella's Kitchen do for employees?

- Energising vision and shared purpose
- Positive and lived organisational values
- Positive collective human experience
- Support for parents and family-friending working practices
- Playful language and ways of working
- Regular social interactions
- Activities to promote wellbeing and mental health
- Inclusive environment and policies

MECHANISM

How could Ella's practices affect parent employees?

Improved communication skills: An open and transparent working culture and opportunities for social connection supports employees' communication skills, including their ability to express their feelings.

Improved self-efficacy: The positive and rewarding culture might support feelings of self-confidence and self-efficacy.

Improved wellbeing and positive affect: Workplace mental health and wellbeing initiatives, the sense of social support and community at work and enhanced work-life balance support employee wellbeing and reduce stress.

Playfulness: A playful culture in work may enhance employees' playfulness.

IMMEDIATE OUTCOMES

How might this change parents and parenting?

Communication skills: Through their experiences at work, parents may become better able to talk about their own thoughts and feelings to their children.

Emotional and Behavioural Regulation: Improved wellbeing may enable parents to become better at managing their own emotional responses and provide emotionally stable environments for children.

Improved self-efficacy: Increased self-confidence and self-efficacy at work may lead to the parents feeling more positive feelings of self-assurance when parenting too.

Playfulness: Increased playfulness might transfer from work to the home environment.

Problem-solving abilities: A positive and creative work environment might support greater problem-solving abilities in parenting.

INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES

How might this support child development?

Nurturing Relationships: As a result of their experiences at work, parents may become more playful, better able to sensitively respond to children's needs, and better at expressing warmth, with positive consequences for the parent-child relationship.

Support children's behaviours: As a result of positive workplace practices, parents may become better at encouraging positive behaviours through practices such as giving compliments and praise.

DEVELOPING EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL SKILLS AT TIMPSON

Timpson is a UK-based family-run retail business known for services such as key cutting and shoe repairs. The company has gained recognition for its people-focused management practices which emphasise employee wellbeing and development as key drivers of business success⁶⁵.

Timpson's approach to workplace management is built on kindness, trust, and personal connection. James Timpson advocates a "people-first" culture that aims to create not just a more harmonious work environment. This could also potentially benefit employees' families, particularly by reducing parental stress and enhancing emotional health and communication skills^a.

Developing emotional skills and capacities

Timpson's model is based on creating a virtuous cycle where kindness and respect within the workplace extend outward to customer interactions⁶⁶. Employees are taught to view their customers with empathy and to engage them politely, fostering a mutual sense of respect. This approach not only helps in building customer loyalty but also reinforces employees' emotional health, which they could potentially transfer to their lives beyond work.

As an example, when Timpson uses situational exercises to help employees practice calm, respectful communication in stressful customer service scenarios, this could develop skills that are transferable to parenting, such as patience, empathy, and effective communication, thereby potentially contributing to healthier emotional environments for their children.



Supporting parental wellbeing

Timpson also provide comprehensive employee support, including financial support, workplace mental health support and flexible work policies, which could theoretically impact parental wellbeing by reducing stress and enhancing work-life balance.

The company's focus on creating a trust-based, enjoyable work environment with flexible policies for life events demonstrates a commitment to work-life balance. By providing extra days off for significant personal events and fostering a culture of kindness, Timpson's strategy potentially reduces parental stress and enhances family time. For example, employees are given an extra day off when their children start school.

CONCLUSION

Whilst Timpson's primary drive to improve employee happiness lies in business performance, in theory, Timpson's practices are likely to have positive impacts on parenting and therefore children's emotional health and development too.

Timpson's focus on emotional literacy, autonomy, and work-life balance creates conditions for improved parental wellbeing and emotional literacy, which can have profound, positive effects on child development. If the skills developed at work transfer into parenting, they might enhance parents' empathy, emotional regulation, and effective communication, leading to healthier emotional environments for children. Further research can help validate this logic model, exploring how long-term changes in workplace culture might influence intergenerational emotional health outcomes.

Linking Timpson's workplace practices to parenting skills and child outcomes – a theoretical model

INPUTS

What does Timpson do for employees?

Comprehensive Training in Emotional Literacy:

- 16-week program focusing on empathy, active listening, stress management.
- Training employees in 'soft skills' like how to be a caring boss.

Wellbeing Initiatives:

- Mental Health Specialist, Financial Health First Aider, Director of Happiness.
- Programs that support work-life balance, e.g., extra days off for family milestones.

Supportive, Trust-Based Work Culture:

- Emphasis on autonomy, kindness, and personal connection.
- Creating a "fun" and respectful work environment.
- Employee feedback systems such as the "Happy Index."

MECHANISM

How could Timpson's practices affect parent employees?

Reduced Stress and Improved Wellbeing:

Workplace mental health initiatives, autonomy, and policies supporting work-life balance reduce parental stress.

Improved Emotional Literacy and Communication Skills: Parents working in an environment that focuses on emotional literacy develop empathy,

emotional regulation, and conflict resolution skills. These are reinforced through real-time customer interactions and internal team dynamics.

Parental Self-Efficacy and Reflection: Supportive work culture at Timpson enhances parents' self-efficacy and reflective functioning, empowering them to engage more thoughtfully with others.

IMMEDIATE OUTCOMES

How might this change parents and parenting?

Communication skills: Through their experiences at work, parents may become better able to monitor their thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and to communicate these to their children.

Emotional and Behavioural Regulation: Reduced stress at work leads to more improved wellbeing. This should enable parents to become better at managing their own emotional responses and provide emotionally stable environments for their children.

Empathy, Perspective Taking and Mentalisation: Regular feedback loops and emotional literacy practices at work might help parents to recognise and respond appropriately to their child's feelings and needs. They may also become able to reflect on and adjust their parenting approaches.

INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES

How might this support child development?

Nurturing Relationships: Parents may be able to apply the skills they learn at work – such as empathy and mentalisation- to family interactions, leading to better emotional communication with their children. Parents may become better at expressing warmth and responding sensitively to their child's emotional needs.

Improved Emotional and Social Skills: Parents may be able to use their own increased awareness and skills to support their children to develop skills such as emotional regulation.

THE CASE FOR FOCUSING ON THE MOST DISADVANTAGED

Being evidence-informed requires clarity on questions such as “What difference are we ultimately trying to achieve?” and “What activities do we think will achieve these outcomes?”⁶⁷.

Employers might be interested in addressing children's emotional health for different reasons, and this could lead them to take different actions. Employers who want to support more disadvantaged children and to address inequalities in early child development, for example, could take different actions from those who want to ensure more children across the population achieve very good levels of development to create a strong cohort of robust, resilient and high-performing workers for the future.

All children will benefit from an improvement in their emotional health and development, but the returns might be greater for children in low-income families and living with other forms of disadvantage.

Children living with poverty and other forms of disadvantage are at risk of having poor emotional health, which might make it difficult for them to take advantage of future social and educational opportunities, resulting in a growing gap in development and outcomes between them and their peers over time. Raising the emotional health of these children can enable them to participate in and benefit from other opportunities in school and beyond, making a significant difference to their developmental trajectory.

Many children in the UK are developing well and have the support, care and stimulation they need to thrive. The best returns on investment from early intervention come from “shifting the dial” in experiences and outcomes for those who would otherwise be falling behind, rather than making incremental gains for those already on a positive trajectory. For example, imagine we improve the behaviour of a group of three-year-olds. One of these children has previously been at risk of exclusion from nursery. The change in behaviour prevents his exclusion. The intervention is likely to

have a greater impact on this child's life chances than improving the behaviour of a child who was not at risk.

Children from low-income families would benefit the most from positive workforce practices, but their parents may be the least likely to access them

The evidence shows that adults in lower paid jobs have lower workplace wellbeing and are less likely to benefit from workplace benefits. Low-income parents often occupy lower skilled and less flexible positions, with lower workplace support, which can exacerbate the difficulties they face in creating stable and nurturing environments for their children⁶⁸. Those with less senior roles and less autonomy tend to have lower job satisfaction and are more likely to struggle balancing work and family life, leading to increased stress⁶⁹. In contrast, professionals in higher-skilled and higher-paid jobs tend to experience a more harmonious integration of work and family life, reporting higher measures of work satisfaction and family involvement.

Employers who want to support more disadvantaged children and to address inequalities in early child development need to consider how their positive workplace practices might benefit lower-income workers, including those who might be indirectly employed, such as through security, cleaning or catering firms. Reducing stress and increasing capabilities amongst this workforce could bring marked benefits for their children.

There is also a case for employers to focus attention on how workplace practices impact female employees. In the UK, women still tend to be the primary caregiver for babies and young children. Mothers are also more likely to work in lower occupational levels, and to face greater work-family conflicts, lower job satisfaction and autonomy⁷⁰.

CONCLUSION

In this project, we set out to summarise the literature about how employers' day-to-day working practices can impact parents, parenting and child development. Our review of the literature found very little research in this space.

We developed theoretical models which set out how specific employers might be having a positive impact on the parenting capacities of their employees, and how this might early childhood development. These are useful as a basis for employers to reflect on their practices and what might be making a difference to families' lives. They also set out useful frameworks that can be tested through research.

Theoretically, workplace practices could impact family interactions, parenting and child development. There is an opportunity for committed employers to work with researchers to develop the evidence which will enable us to better understand the impact of employer practices, and thus to promote positive, evidence-informed initiatives in the future.



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