Family-Friendly: How Some Departments are Supporting Moms and Dads

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When Robert Wilson became a dad for the third time in 2017, he was in his second year on the job in the University of Arizona Department of Psychology [1].

Sensitive to the challenges that come with welcoming a new baby into the world, Wilson's supervisor, psychology department head Lee Ryan, took steps to help ease the transition for Wilson, including giving him a semester break from teaching and extending his faculty tenure clock by a year.

Wilson's now back to work full time, with three children — ages 7, 5 and 2 — at home. While his break from teaching has ended, he continues to benefit from a variety of family friendly measures implemented by the Department of Psychology in recognition that the challenges of raising a family don't end after infancy.

"The tenure clock extension and the teaching break were great for the first year, but I think the biggest thing the department does is the day-to-day stuff," said Wilson, an assistant professor of psychology. "That culture is almost more important. You feel like there's support throughout and not just the semester the baby is born."

One especially helpful practice, Wilson said, is the way the department schedules meetings — avoiding early morning and late afternoon hours.

"All the faculty meetings and required meetings are scheduled with parents in mind and with school pickup times in mind," Wilson said. "That's huge from a practical standpoint and from the signal that it sends as well: parents and families are welcome."

The decision to not schedule important meetings near school drop-off and pickup times, was a conscious one, Ryan said. It arose from a broader effort in the College of Science to improve support for all employees, including working parents.

Ryan was a co-chair of the College of Science's Workplace Climate Committee, formed two years ago and charged with creating a more welcoming and supportive environment for college employees. The committee has since hosted workshops and speakers on a variety of topics, such as diversity, unconscious bias and how to build a more positive work environment.

In the spring, the committee issued a document titled "College of Science Commitment to Building Family-Friendly Workplaces," with support from the college's dean, Joaquin Ruiz. It included suggested guidelines for how departments can better support working moms and dads by promoting campuswide resources and making adjustments at the unit level.

"It's about doing simple things that don't make it more difficult for people to be parents and
work in an academic setting," Ryan said. "Whenever you can provide that flexibility, you're more likely to be able to retain really good people."

Ryan and other department heads in the College of Science are now doing a variety of things to help parents balance their work and homes lives.

Michael Worobey, head of the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, has worked with employees on flexible work arrangements, has rescheduled weekly department seminars from the end of the day to earlier in the day, and has ensured that lactation areas are available for new moms in his department.

Those minor changes can make a big difference, he says.

"There's really no downside and plenty of upsides to paying attention to the fact that people have a life outside of work, and they actually are more productive at work when that's taken into account and they have the time and energy to deal with that properly," he said. "It's about getting out ahead of the needs of parents, rather than forcing parents to either modify in ways that aren't going to work well for them, or come asking for stuff that should have been offered without asking."

As a psychologist, Ryan says helping employees with work-life balance is important for mental health.

"It all has to do with stress," she said. "People shouldn't have to go through difficult family situations worrying that on top of that they may lose their job. So, to the extent that we can, we're going to try to accommodate individuals so they can keep working."

Ryan hopes other departments on campus will consider taking steps to be more family friendly and that those areas that are already doing things that work will share their ideas.

She offers the following tips for departments looking to create a more family friendly environment.

**Promote existing benefits**

The University offers a variety of benefits and resources at the institutional level for parents of young children, primarily through Human Resources and Life & Work Connections. Among those resources are the Paid Parental Leave policy, a Childcare Choice reimbursement program for qualified child care expenses, a Sick and Back-Up Childcare Program, workshops and individual consultations on parenting and a Family Resource Map showing lactation areas and diaper changing stations on campus.

Life & Work Connections also offers resources for employees who may be caring for adults, such as an aging parent or relative with an illness or disability, at home. Support tools include an online resource guide and a recently launched Caregiver Connections series of webinars and meetups.

Department and unit heads should be sure to promote these existing UA family-friendly resources and make sure employees are aware of them, Ryan said.

**Adjust meeting times**
Avoiding scheduling important departmental meetings or events early in the morning or late in the afternoon can be helpful for parents who have to drop off or pick up children from day care or school, Ryan said.

**Say 'yes' to flexible work arrangements**

"In this country there just isn’t enough paid family leave when you have a child, so we’ve tried to make it as easy as possible for people when they have a child," Ryan said.

Allowing employees to work from home or adjust their hours in the office can help not only new parents but people dealing with other family situations, such as caring for an aging parent or adult dependent, Ryan said.

**Invite kids to department functions**

Children are welcome to attend most psychology department parties and receptions, Ryan said.

Wilson, who often brings his children to such events, says, "It's a great way to meet people and get parents chatting and get the kids chatting."

**Create a lactation space**

Ryan recommends creating a comfortable, private space for new moms to breastfeed or pump. If space is available, units might even consider placing new moms in single-person offices, she said.

Life & Work Connections offers advice for establishing lactation areas [12].

**Be open to having children in the office temporarily**

Allowing children to be in the office in cases of illness or scheduling challenges can help employees feel supported, Ryan said.

**Install an inclusive bathroom with a changing table**

It's helpful to have changing tables available to both moms and dads, Ryan said.

**Temporarily revise work duties**

Adjusting work responsibilities on a short-term basis may help employees adjust after the birth of a child or other challenging family situations, Ryan said.

*For more information on UA family-friendly resources or for help making changes in your department, contact Life & Work Connections [4] at 621-2493.*

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