

Parenting in a Pandemic: When Your Office Becomes a Playground

By Alison L. Lynch &

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Meet the Authors



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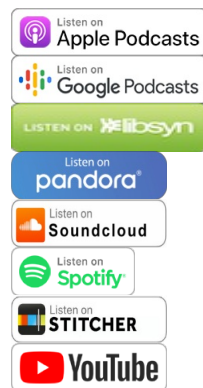
COVID-19

Details

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Work-life balance has always been elusive to define and achieve. While the pandemic managed to obliterate that delicate balance in one fell swoop, it also managed to level the playing field. Employers and their employees from every business and industry faced how to work from home, parent and educate and be on call 24/7. And we are still learning.

Jackson Lewis P.C. · Parenting in a Pandemic: When Your Office Becomes a Playground



Takeaways

Work-life balance has always been elusive to define and achieve. While the pandemic managed to obliterate that delicate balance in one fell swoop, it also managed to level the playing field. Employers and their employees from every business and industry faced how to work from home, parent and educate and be on call 24/7. And we are still learning.

What Employers Need to Know

- Moving to a remote workplace has fostered meaningful discussions about the reality of parenting and work life balance.
 - Employees have had to modify schedules and routine.
 - Managers should be prepared to address perceptions of imbalance for those coming to work vs those who work from home.
- Employers are experiencing an increase in demand letters due to a surge in layoffs and reductions in force caused by the pandemic, as well as claims for failure to reasonably accommodate or engage in the interactive process with employees seeking some form of accommodation.
- Managers need to be prepared for employee requests to remain virtual when and if the office re-opens. Documentation is key and involves addressing some critical questions:

- Are the job duties written in a way that would allow a person to carry them out at home?
- How do we justify and sufficiently document requiring the job to be performed in the physical brick and mortar office?
- Employers can offer support to employees juggling work and parenting by suggesting they:
 - Create boundaries where you can;
 - Set expectations with family members about your time and needs while working;
 - Plan ahead as much as possible to utilize quiet time; and
 - Establish a new routine and build in time for focused attention.
- No two employees are the same and there is no one size fits all solution.

Transcript

Alitia (00:06):

Welcome to Jackson Lewis' podcast, We get work™. Focused solely on workplace issues everywhere and under any circumstances, it is our job to help employers develop proactive strategies, strong policies, and business oriented solutions to cultivate a workforce that is engaged, stable, and diverse. Our podcast identifies the issues dominating the workplace and its continuing evolution and helps answer the question on every employer's mind. How will my business be impacted?

Work-life balance has always been elusive to define and achieve. While the pandemic managed to obliterate that delicate balance in one fell swoop, it also managed to level the playing field. Employers and their employees from every business and industry faced how to work from home, parent and educate and be on call 24/7, and we are still learning. This episode of We Get Work explores how we wear multiple hats, sharing the same space with our families as we work and how by practicing grace with ourselves and our employees, we will find ways to thrive in the coming months.

Our hosts today are Alison Lynch, Clarisse Petersen and Nolan McCready, who, prior to March, could be found collaborating around a conference table in the Orange County office of Jackson Lewis. Today, these three litigators, with a total of 10 children under 10 among them, argue motions from their home office while trying not to argue with their kids about healthy snacks at the same time.

Alison, Clarisse and Nolan, the question on everyone's mind today is how will my business be impacted by my employees, and maybe even me, continuing to work and simultaneously parent from home?

Alison Lynch (02:05):

Hi everyone. I'm Alison Lynch. Welcome to We get work™. On today's episode, we're going to talk about something that is impacting a lot of people throughout the world at the moment being a working parent, working from home in a pandemic. So I have three kids; Rowan who's five and a half, Kellen who's three and a half and Addison who is one today, actually. I am also the office managing principal for our Orange County office and co-chair of the firm's practicing and parenting group.

For those unfamiliar with this group, it's a resource group for attorneys at Jackson

Lewis, where we get together and discuss the struggles of being an attorney at a big firm while also trying to raise kids, and as Clarisse knows, we used to discuss things like time management and dealing with sports schedules and nighttime routines, and then the pandemic hit and it became much more about survival. And we, along with every other working parent throughout the world, have taken a number of twists and turns only further complicated with schools closing and virtual learning. We at Jackson Lewis are not the only ones implicated. We know that our clients are, as well.

So we have a lot to talk about in this subject. So joining me here today are Clarisse Petersen and Nolan McCready also from my office. So if you could both take some time to just introduce yourselves and tell us about your kids and then we'll get started, starting with Clarisse.

Clarisse Petersen (03:27):

Hey everybody. Clarisse Petersen here. I am a single mom of two amazing boys. My oldest Connor is nine. He's going to turn 10, wow, next month, and no, I am not ready for double digits, and I've also got a four year old, Cooper. He is the Tasmanian devil of the household.

Alison Lynch (03:45):

Wonderful.

Nolan McCready (03:47):

Hi everyone. I'm Nolan McCready. I have five kids. My oldest is nine Annalise, and then I have a seven-year-old daughter, Adelaide, a five-year-old son, Killian, a four-year-old son, Finnian, and an almost two year old son, Callum, and I would say all three of those boys are the Tasmanian devil and buying the title in my house.

Alison Lynch (04:13):

That's amazing. We need to give a Nolan a hand just for having five children and being a working parent.

Clarisse Petersen (04:18):

Seriously.

Alison Lynch (04:20):

So guys, can we just first talk about how the pandemic has impacted your ability to practice law and be a parent? Who wants to go first?

Clarisse Petersen (04:32):

I'll go first.

Alison Lynch (04:34):

Okay.

Clarisse Petersen (04:34):

I'll go first. So Alison knows this about me, and she's the same way, and we talk about this all the time. I'm a planner. We are planners. Our lives, our home life, our work life revolves around the ability to organize everything and our to-do lists and our calendars and our planners and post-it notes and all of that. And frankly, once the pandemic hit, all of that went out the window. So gone are the days when school time drop off is the same and pick up from school is the same, and then you take them to soccer and then karate and then swim class, and you had your weeks and your days laid out perfectly to a T.

That went out the window. So certainly I know I'm not alone here, but the pandemic for sure has impacted our schedules and our ability to do our job and also be there for our kids. For me, at least the number one thing that the pandemic is forcing me to learn, if you will, is how to adapt, how to adjust, how to deal with this new normal when we know this new normal is anything but, right?

Alison Lynch (05:40):

Yeah, absolutely, and there have just been so many twists and turns along the way. So I actually came back early from maternity leave a week before I was sent back home because of this pandemic, and one of the things that sort of kept me motivated in terms of just the ability to go back and do this job now with three kids was knowing that two of my kids were going to be in school, and I was going to have that space for them to sort of learn and be with their friends, and then they all got sent home. So in the beginning there, I know I'm not alone when I say it was rough and messy, and we were trying to figure out what online learning was going to be for preschoolers. And it did not go well. So there were definitely a lot of conference calls, including video calls that were interrupted and working during very odd hours of the day just to sort of get things managed until we could get under some sort of a normal schedule. What about you Nolan?

Nolan McCready (06:37):

Yeah, definitely just throwing the schedule off. I've been fortunate enough that I'm in a household where we don't have two working parents. So my wife is able to be here and help out with the kids all the time. So pre-pandemic, my schedule was just try to maximize those eight to eight and a half hours in the office where it was just like, get all your work done so that when I could go home, I was home, and when I was at work, I was at work. And everybody now knows that since this whole thing happened, there are no boundaries anymore. It's just this constant back and forth of trying to be a good dad, make sure I'm present in my kids' lives, also giving my wife the relief that she so sorely needs most days, and then trying to be efficient and still get all your work done.

In the beginning, it was pretty crazy. So it was like, "Oh my gosh," trying to juggle the school schedules and the online learning at home, and I was probably working then it was like, "Everybody gets to bed. Okay. I got to make up that time," and doing that nine to midnight for so many months, but now you're still getting thrown off with the schedules, but it's getting slightly easier to understand, but I've noticed lately that I just don't have the wherewithal anymore to put in that nine to midnight shift anymore because it's just like, by the end of the day with work with everything going on, it's just, what's on Netflix? What can we just vegetate and just sit here and recuperate to

do it all again tomorrow?

Alison Lynch (08:07):

Absolutely. You can only do that sort of grueling schedule for so long and you'll need a break without question. Are either of you ... I know that with the twists and turns of this pandemic has taken the questions that we're getting from clients have changed. It was first, what are these new laws, but now sort of the practical implications of what this all is doing is hitting. So I'm just curious if you're hearing anything from employers on this particular subject, and I'll just kick us off on that topic. One of the things that I've been hearing from some of my clients are frustrations by employees who are coming into the office, who are able to come into the office because perhaps they don't have school-aged children who are home, or they have someone who's there to help them, and they're feeling like they're having to more work than the people who are doing the job from home because they do have kids at home.

So the challenges around managing all of that, I think clients are generally trying to do the right thing by being sensitive to the fact that they have people who are unable to come into the office and also thankful to those who are able to come into the office, but have been having to do these sort of mini investigations at the same time to make sure that people who are at home are still getting work done and that people who are coming into the office aren't being tasked with too much more work than they should be given. Are you both hearing anything from clients about these sorts of issues?

Nolan McCready (09:33):

I think in what I've noticed a lot of times is I think a huge increase in demand letters and things like that because there's been a downturn or layoffs or furloughs or what have you, and what I've started to see a lot is that you kind of see that initial reason why somebody couldn't come into work because of COVID and how that's impacted their lives. So-and-so might be a working parent and doesn't have help and just can't get into the office, but then all of a sudden it, we have the radio silence, and then there's just some of those issues where that seems to be the initial thing, but then it almost has become, and I think we've sort of talked about this offline a little bit where, now we're eight months into it and people are still saying, "Well, because of COVID and well, because of this," and it's almost ... I think some employers are getting a little frustrated as they're starting to see this almost as a crutch in this constant kind of excuse for typical behavior.

So it's just kind of walking that fine line of knowing that we're all in this together and everybody's dealing with the same things and trying to show a little extra grace because not only are your staff and your non-exempt staff working from home and having parenting issues and their lives have been the upheaval, it's just, you also have that happening to management. So everybody's kind of understanding that, but at the same time, I think that's what I've noticed is that there's almost a sort of frustration where it seemed like it's being used too much as an excuse. Where, in the beginning, it's like, "Okay, yeah, I get that." And then it starts to turn into you need to think twice and start to do a little bit more digging in to find out what's really going on.

Alison Lynch (11:21):

So interesting that you bring that up, Nolan, because I couldn't agree with you more. In the beginning, that was always the start of every conversation and, "Oh gosh, this darn COVID and what have you," but now it's like, "All right, we've been in this for eight months now, and it's pretty clear that these things aren't going to change anytime soon." And so what are we going to do about it? How are we going to adapt to that? How are we going to create our new, normal, our new schedule? From what I have seen from our clients, it's not so much ... I'm not getting specific questions quite yet, but what I am getting are fellow moms, fellow dads, where we are on a video call and our kids, or our fur babies, or whomever pop into the video and how do we deal with that?

How do we manage keeping the meetings on track, scheduling phone calls while the kids have zoom and just sort of navigating this multitasking? Right?

Clarisse Petersen (12:22):

Yeah, absolutely. I think one of the things that this pandemic has done is fostered a discussion about the realities of parenting and what that means. It's no longer sort of this perfect image that everything's fine. There's nothing happening behind me. People aren't screaming in the background. Everything's perfect, to instead, people having that discussion with one another about the fact that things are tough, and here's what's going on with me, and my son has a cold, and I'm now paranoid that it's COVID and not just a normal runny nose that I see every other week.

One of the things, I think the positive things, that have come out of this pandemic is that sort of human interaction where you have that moment of, "Oh, you're going through this, too?" It's refreshing, and it's comforting to know that this is something that so many of us are going through. So to that end, why don't we talk a little bit about some practical tips that we can give to working parents who are working at home with their kids at home? I know that we've all been doing this now for eight months or so. So do you guys have any ... What's working for you? Can you give us some tips about how to manage this all?

Nolan McCready (13:30):

Yeah. I think now, as Clarisse mentioned, we're eight months into it. So everybody probably understands what their schedule is, even though that's not a normal schedule and it's not, "Hey, we're going to drop the kids off. School starts at 8:00. So I'm going to drop the kids off at 7:30, between 7:30 and 8:00 and drive into the office and start my day." So now I know for me, I have my oldest. She's going to school half the day, but it's not until the afternoon, and then I have two other school-aged children that are doing all online. So they start at eight, and then my oldest starts at about almost noon.

So it's just me, from a work's perspective, I try to make sure the online kids, let's just get them set up, and it's eight o'clock. So then after they're online, after they've started their day, then I sit down to start my day, and then it's just kind of trying to work and set the tone where if there's a very important call or something going on like what we're doing right now, it's just saying, "Hey, I got to lock the door. I have my headphones in." I would say to my wife, "Hey, my headphones are in. The door's locked. I really got to buckle down and get this thing done. I will let you know as soon

as I'm done."

And I think for all of us just kind of ... because we don't have those boundaries, and especially with me, I have a bunch of young kids, and they don't understand. They just think I'm home. Like, "You're home. So what do you mean you have to work? What is this?" And so they think that because I'm home, because I'm not wearing one of my "work shirts" that I'm not working. So I think just those things is trying the best you can to set those boundaries and try to stick to them and be repetitive in your process, and that will help everybody in your household sort of get through that.

Clarisse Petersen (15:21):

Yeah. And I think I hear what you're saying. In addition to boundaries, it's just setting expectations so that your family knows what you're doing and that every time you come out of your room ... I know every time I leave my room, literally the question is, "Are you done working yet?" And it's like, "Nope." So now I'm trying to tell them, "Here's what Mommy's doing throughout the day, and here's when I'll be able to stop." So I think that's great advice.

Alison Lynch (15:42):

So for those of us who have school-aged children, and Nolan and I, I think we both have a fourth grader, and our hybrid schedule is the same, too. They do online learning in the morning for a couple of hours and then they go to school in person for a couple of hours, and that's it, five days a week. So it's not my ideal hybrid schedule, but there you go. That's their hybrid schedule. Right?

So pre-COVID, my fourth grader didn't really use a computer at all, and when it became clear that the computer was here to stay, we had to figure out rather quickly, "Okay, how are we going to adapt to that?" So I wanted to simplify all of our lives as much as I could. For my son Connor, that meant, and I know I'm not alone in this, but for every subject, my son would have to dial into a new zoom meeting. So I would have his computer laid out, and I would bookmark all of his classes in the order in which he was supposed to log into each class. On my end of things, I would then set timers or alarms or what have you so I knew, "Okay, this is when his break is. this is when his lunch is, this is when each period or subject or what have you is done. And now this is when we have to take him to school."

I set those timers because, as you guys all know, the schedule is constantly changing, and I can't keep that on track. So in doing that, it allows me to kind of work around his schedule, and Nolan alluded to this, there are times where it's just, you've got a really important call, a really important meeting. It's a non-negotiable thing. You just cannot be interrupted, and in those moments, I would have, and I learned this, this was a great tip from a mom, girlfriend of mine, but she has laid out preset activities for the kids if they get bored. She has snacks prepared within reach on the counter, in the pantry, in the fridge, what have you, but she lets the kids know, "Hey, mommy's got to be on a phone call. It's a really important call. It's an hour. It's important that you guys just kind of hang outside while I'm on this call." And they have their list of things that they can go to if they need food or they're bored or something.

Clarisse Petersen (17:55):

That is great advice. I love that planning. Planning is so key to so much of what we do as lawyers, but especially as working lawyers. One of the things that I tried to do early on, and I'm really fortunate in the sense that I've got my mother-in-law who is our full-time nanny, and then my husband works four days a week. So he's home one day a week, but in the beginning, I think everything was just sort of up in the air and blurring together, and that was driving me a little bonkers.

So I tried to make schedules for my kids where it was from this time to this time, you have to do some sort of art. You have to draw something, cut something, whatever it is you want to do, and then from this time to this time, it's free play and this time to this time you need to look through books or read or what have you, and then you get this much iPad time, and then you get show time, just to kind of force them to move along throughout the day and not to feel like they were just wandering around without any sort of schedule. I think that in their minds, it helped things feel a little bit more normal.

Then I tried to also have a routine for myself where I was getting up at a certain time, trying to get work done before they woke up and giving myself the hours of the day where I knew that I was going to need to get as much work done as possible. So all great advice. So being in this new normal, I know some odd things have happened during our workdays that wouldn't normally happen if we were in the office. So have either of you had any particularly embarrassing or really funny thing happen while working from home with kids?

Nolan McCready (19:25):

So I'll start. We were having ... it was a little sort of ... Everybody started doing like virtual happy hours or let's just all get together because we're all kind of working from home. We don't go into the office and see each other. So we had organized just a little get together on zoom, and my boys all came in and they're on the bed, and all of a sudden we just signed on. All the boys are jumping out of bed and then boom, five seconds in, one of them just front flip right off the bed. Please put the hand out. Hopefully nobody saw that and nobody's calling child protective services, but that was mine.

Alison Lynch (20:07):

No children were harmed in the making of this video.

Clarisse Petersen (20:14):

My embarrassing story was not even two, maybe three weeks into the pandemic. So that would have been early April for us, and nobody knew what we were doing. We were still trying to familiarize ourselves with zoom, but here we are. Let's have these zoom meetings, and I can't even remember what the meeting was about. I just remember there were a lot of faces on the screen. So it was an important meeting, and my little one, Cooper, my four year old decided he needed to go to the bathroom. So he came into the room, and he was so great. He was so quiet too. He was really trying hard because mommy's on a call, and he goes into the bathroom, but he doesn't shut the door, and the bathroom is in plain view in my screen. I literally have a four-year-old pulling his underwear down and plopping on the toilet and taking a giant poop in

front of everyone to see. Then I had to finally turn off the video because I had to clean him up. So I'm not going to forget that one.

Alison Lynch (21:14):

Yeah, and I know Clarisse and I have shared these stories with each other before, but I have a little bit of a similar story because we were potty training my middle guy during the beginning of the pandemic, and it was, as most parents know, for some kids it's harder to do one than the other. And for my little guy, it was number two. He had a toy sitting up on this mantle that if he would just do it, he was going to get this monster truck that could go really fast and have really cool wheels.

So I'm in my office on a call, and I just hear the door fly open, and he comes running in and he's like, "Mom! I pooped!" I'm like, "Okay." I couldn't not be excited for him because this has been time coming. We had been trying and trying and trying. So I pressed mute and gave him a hug and said, "Good job. I'll be right there," and had to finish my call, and there we go. So, fun stuff, but I also think it's about giving yourself a little bit of grace, right?

I mean, everybody knows this is a tough time, and so if you're a little guy, which mine certainly did, if he wants to hop on your lap in the middle of mediation and say hello to the mediator, so be it. Work it in. This is our lives. So to the extent that we don't have to mute ourselves or we don't have to turn off the video. I mean, it just sort of is what it is and just understanding that these are the days where we have to learn to be flexible and adapt and adjust and most importantly, give yourself a little grace.

Clarisse Petersen (22:43):

Absolutely. I think that's one of the biggest takeaways that I think all three of us would love for every working parent out there to have is to give yourself some grace. Be realistic with what's going on right now. So final question for you guys, which is, how do you think this pandemic is going to impact work-life balance and working parenthood moving forward? And forward from what? I'm not sure. We're all talking about when this vaccine is going to come out and when things are hopefully going to change and go back to somewhat of quote unquote normal, but do you think things will be different at that point in time having had to spend all this time at home?

Nolan McCready (23:21):

I think that part of it, you're going to see some working parents are going to be thrilled to get back to work and get back to the office.

Alison Lynch (23:29):

Can I see a raise of hands?

Nolan McCready (23:35):

I think it's funny. You're going to see probably the work from home balance is going to be for the people who don't have as much going on at home., They're going to be like, "Wait, I just want to stay home. I don't want to have to commute. I don't want to have to get out of my sweat pants. I don't want to have to do anything. I'm fine. I've been efficient. Nobody's complaining about the product I'm putting out.|" And then there's

going to be other people who are just like, "I need that bubble. I need to focus and I need to get back to the office." I think that's probably what you're going to see is who really needs that, who's desperate for that and kind of needs that normalcy back in their lives.

Then from an employer's perspective, I think what you're going to start seeing is managing those people who are going to make those requests that they want to stay home. So this is kind of definitely always one of those forecasting talks that we have with our clients is just saying, "All right, if it's ..." especially in California, if somebody is going to make some sort of request to do that, it's going to be, is it documented? How well do we have the description of the job duties and being able to stay at home or how are we documenting and justifying that that person has to be in the physical brick and mortar office?

So those are, I think the biggest things. From the working parent perspective, it's just going to be, have they figured it out and do they want to stay home or are they dying to get back in the office? And then for the employers, just making sure everything is, once it starts to get back to normal, adjusting and putting that, documenting it and having it be that way.

Clarisse Petersen (25:05):

Yeah. And I mean, that's a really great point because especially if you have a business or an office where being in the office was a requirement and we'd previously said you can't work from home, and then everyone just did for a really long period of time. I think you're right that we're going to see a lot of requests to continue doing that, and we're going to have to navigate those discussions and make sure that we've got business reasons for why that's a reasonable request.

Alison Lynch (25:29):

No two employees are the same. Their situation is going to be different, and yeah, there is no one size fits all. So it's just about figuring out what works best for that particular employee and if they are productive at home and can do the essential functions of their job from home. Okay, great. It's interesting, work-life balance. Every time I hear that phrase or that term, it's so interesting to me. I got some really good advice from a lawyer years ago, and she taught me. She was like, "The sooner you get rid of the notion that there is such a thing as the perfect work-life balance, the better off you will be." Right?

So even pre-COVID just letting go of that notion that there is this perfect balance between the two, I think that is even more important today and just understanding every single day is going to be different. There isn't going to be some set formula to juggling both the parenting piece and the practicing piece, and it's about just understanding that you have to go with the flow and adjust and adapt, and that's really hard for somebody like me who has to plan every hour of her day, but I have to throw out the calendars and the to-do list sometimes and just kind of ...

Nolan McCready (26:43):

Yeah, agree with all that. And I think if there's one takeaway for everybody from this chat, it's just show each other some grace. Give yourself a little grace and understand

that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. None of us know where it is or when it's coming, but we will get there, and thank you, Alison, for this talk, and thank you, Clarisse. It's been great and always a pleasure to talk parenting and working with the both of you.

Alison Lynch (27:09):

Our pleasure. Thanks, guys.

Clarisse Petersen (27:10):

Thanks, guys.

Alitia 1 (27:14):

Thank you for joining us on We get work™. Please tune in to our next program where we will continue to tell you not only what's legal, but what is effective. We get work™ is available to stream and subscribe on Apple podcast, Google podcast, Pandora, SoundCloud, Spotify, and YouTube. For more information on today's topic, our presenters and other Jackson Lewis resources, please visit JacksonLewis.com. As a reminder, this material is provided for informational purposes only. It is not intended to constitute legal advice, nor does it create a client-lawyer relationship between Jackson Lewis and any recipient.

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