



Lowenstein Sandler's Women's Initiative Network Podcast: Real Talk

Episode 36:
"Parents Under Pressure": The Surgeon General's Warning About Parental Stress and How Law Firms Should Address It

[Megan Monson](#), [Nicole Fulfree](#), [Rachel Moseson Dikovics](#)

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Rachel Dikovics: Welcome to the Lowenstein Sandler Podcast Series: The Women's Initiative Network, Real Talk. I'm Rachel Dikovics, an associate attorney and member of the Women's Initiative Network at Lowenstein Sandler. Before we begin, please take a moment to subscribe to our podcast series at lowenstein.com/podcasts, or find us on iTunes, Spotify, Pandora, and SoundCloud. Now let's take a listen.

Rachel Dikovics: Welcome to another episode of the Women's Initiative Network, Real Talk. I'm one of your hosts, Rachel Dikovics, an associate in Lowenstein Sandler's White Collar Defense Group.

Megan Monson: I'm Megan Monson. I'm a partner in Lowenstein Sandler's executive Compensation Employment and Benefits Group.

Nicole Fulfree: And I'm Nicole Fulfree, a partner in Lowenstein's Bankruptcy, and Restructuring department.

Rachel Dikovics: We've talked before on this podcast about the stress that comes with trying to achieve the elusive, perhaps mythical work-life balance. We've also talked about how becoming and being a parent affects women's experiences and trajectories in their careers. Today we're looking at these issues from another angle. In September, the Surgeon General whose title is essentially Chief Medical Doctor for the United States, issued an advisory titled Parents Under Pressure. It said that the state of parents' mental health in the United States is, "an urgent public health issue."

This isn't a small step. Advisories from the Surgeon General are reserved for, "significant public health challenges that require the nation's immediate awareness and action." Even though there was a ton of media coverage related to the advisory, I personally haven't heard it discussed at work. So today we are taking care of that and talking about it. More specifically, we're going to discuss why women attorneys who are parents are particularly stressed, what we can do to combat that stress on an individual level and what law firms and other employers can do to reduce stress of parents in their workforce.

First, let's remind our listeners who we are and where we are in our parenting and lawyering journeys. I've been practicing law for six years and I had my first child last year. She's now about a year and a half.

- Nicole Fulfree:** I've been practicing law for about 11 years now and I have a three-and-a-half-year-old daughter, a 16-month-old son, and I'm expecting a new baby in the beginning of next year.
- Megan Monson:** And I have also been practicing for about 11 years and I have an almost three-year-old daughter.
- Rachel Dikovics:** All right, let's get into it. So the advisory talks about a few stress points for parents that I think are particularly relevant to us and probably to the three of us especially. But the biggest is probably time demands. The advisory says the average employment work hours for parents have increased over time, with parents now dedicating an average of 33.5 hours per week to employed work or engaging in work-related activities. This represents a 28% increase for mothers and a 4% increase for fathers.
- At the same time, time spent parenting has also gone up. The advisory says that time spent weekly on primary childcare has increased by 40% among mothers from 8.4 hours in 1985 to 11.8 hours in 2022 and by 154% among fathers from 2.6 hours in 1985 to 6.6 hours in 2022. So Nicole and Megan, what's your reaction to these figures?
- Megan Monson:** My initial reaction is that people working these hours certainly are not lawyers. But the second being, I do think it's interesting for the increase of the time fathers have spent parenting increasing and I think that really seems to be pervasive throughout society. I know in my own personal life, in my friend's lives, all the fathers are a much more active role than I think might have been historically the case.
- Nicole Fulfree:** Yeah, Megan, I think you took the words right out of my mouth. I think it's at 33.5 hours per week. I mean, if you're any typical law firm, I think the average billable hours expectation, which again, there's a distinction between billable hours and engaged hours of working. The billable hour requirement minimum is usually around 180 hours, which breaks down to about 45 hours a week. And a lot of people are doing a lot more than that. I know we've all had months where we've potentially doubled that or more, which is insane.
- So I think for women attorneys who are mothers, these hours are really getting higher. But then one thing that I think can also counter that is like you said, Megan, the dads being more involved. I know that's definitely the case for me as opposed to different generations. I think I often hear the comment from the boomer generation and older that like, "Oh, so-and-so is such an active father. My husband never changed a diaper." And I think those figures are really decreasing. The millennial dads who have never changed a diaper, I think the number is extremely low, as it should be, and I think that's a super helpful fact for working moms today.
- Rachel Dikovics:** Yeah, I agree with both those things, but one question that I had about the hours is whether we're talking about weekdays or weekends or the whole week because 11.8 hours, I feel like I easily surpassed that during the work week.
- Nicole Fulfree:** In active parenting, you're saying?

- Rachel Dikovics:** Yeah, absolutely. And certainly on the weekends. So maybe these are limited to weekday figures, but yeah, it all seems a little low to me. The average hours per week working seems low and the average of hours per week in a primary childcare role also seems low.
- Nicole Fulfree:** Yeah, let's talk about that for a second though. I'm curious, in both of your guys' everyday life, what does your parenting time look like?
- Megan Monson:** So my parenting time for me is I get up with my daughter, so that could be anywhere from six to seven o'clock. I'm with her for at least two hours, go to work. Then I come home and spend once I get home from work with her until she goes to bed. And that could be from 5:30 to 8:30. So I mean given weekday, I'm still spending at least four to five hours with her while working a full-time job.
- Nicole Fulfree:** And that's if she sleeps overnight.
- Megan Monson:** Yes.
- Nicole Fulfree:** Big assumption. Assumption there.
- Rachel Dikovics:** Yeah, I mean my schedules pretty similar. I get up with my daughter, try to get ready around her, especially if I'm coming into the office, do handoff to her care team, which usually happens between eight and 8:30. Finish getting ready, come to the office if I need to come to the office, go down to my desk if I'm working from home. And if I'm working from home, I try to check in a little bit during the day, say hi a few times, which is I think really helpful. If not, then once I get home, which I try to do by five because that's when I have childcare until. Once I walk in the door and she sees me, that's it. So I'm not logging back on at that point. So usually from about five-ish until about 8:30, I'm not on the computer at least. And that's if she actually falls asleep.
- Megan Monson:** I think the hours spending on primary childcare are very low for the amount of time you spend on just one single day and working a full-time job.
- Rachel Dikovics:** I mean, I could do 11.8 hours in two days on workdays.
- Nicole Fulfree:** So let's break it down what you guys just said. I think, and mine's very similar, so I think if you're, let's say conservatively spending five hours a day, that's 25 hours during the work week, the "work week," I think our work week is much more fluid than most people and then at least 12 hours on each weekend day. I mean we're above 50 hours per week and you're not off. So that number I think is extremely low.
- Rachel Dikovics:** So that also kind of begs the question, we're talking about 50 hours of primary childcare a week, probably between 40 and 50 hours of work each week. Does that leave any time left for neither working nor parenting? And how does that affect our ability to show up effectively for both things?
- Nicole Fulfree:** So I think one thing that we have to talk about when we're defining parenting is also there's active, active parenting where you're with your kids, you're up,

you're changing diapers, you're preparing meals, you're handling tantrums, you're playing.

Rachel Dikovics: You're playing. Yeah, the fun part.

Nicole Fulfree: Good things too.

Rachel Dikovics: The good parts.

Nicole Fulfree: And then there's the more passive part of parenting, which I think has increased a lot over the past years compared to other generations with research on parenting and the theory of parenting and how should I appropriately handle this tantrum and how am I supposed to speak to my child and what are the words that I should use or shouldn't use? And how do we parent boys versus girls and is there a difference? And all of those sorts of things. I personally spend a ton of time researching are there microplastics in my baby bottles, those types of health and wellness things, what should their nutrition look like? I spend a lot of time after my kids go to bed worrying and researching those types of things. And so I think that is additional what I would call parenting hours, even though it's not actively with the kids. But I think that's additional time spent on your kids.

Megan Monson: And so I think to your question, Rachel, I view honestly the vast majority of my non-working time is spent parenting in some capacity. And I'm always encouraged to take "time for myself," but as a mother, then I feel guilty. And so it just is like a constant cycle. And I do think sometimes it does make it then hard to effectively show up at work and as a parent with your A game on a hundred percent all the time because you're giving every which way.

Rachel Dikovics: And there's guilt from both ends.

Megan Monson: Correct.

Rachel Dikovics: If you feel like I'm not putting in enough hours or I miss something at work because I was focused on something related to parenting, there's guilt from that end. And then there's I think constant, mostly probably self-inflicted guilt on the parenting end thinking that you're not spending enough time with your child or if your child's upset when you leave, it is hard to deal with those things and makes it difficult to focus on work.

But I deal with the same thing as you make it, and I'm sure Nicole too, there's no time left apart from work and parenting. Emily Oster recently said that the word parenting as a verb was only conceptualized within the last 50 years, which interestingly is the same approximate time period that this study was looking at. More like 40 years. But in this time where time spent actively parenting has gone up, that's when the same time that this concept of parenting being an intentional, thoughtful thing that you do and not just kind of a passive part of your life has also cropped up.

And I think if we think back to our childhoods versus the childhoods that our children are having, I think parents are a lot more hands-on now and a lot more involved. Whereas my husband talks about when he was a kid being kind of sent out in the morning and expected home for dinner, and that just

doesn't happen today. For lots of good reasons, but probably for some that are just a result of this kind of anxious parenting style that I think a lot of us have developed, maybe partially due to the amount of information that's available about how to do it correctly.

Nicole Fulfree: Yeah, for sure. I think the rise of social media and these influencer accounts that can teach you about parenting, I think there's good and bad parts to them. It makes the information really accessible, but I think it also does create a lot of anxiety around the different theories and are you doing it correctly and are you hurting or helping your children and things like that. So there's a lot of information coming at us and I think it adds a lot of pressure to our generation.

Megan Monson: And I'll also add, right, I mean at least the three of us here, we're all practicing attorneys, so we're the type of people who want to research, find the answers, get all the information. So that's how we operate, that's how we're successful at work. But then that also drives us to be spending more time doing these other aspects of parenting because we want to know all of the information and be doing the best that we can.

Nicole Fulfree: And it's hard because I also feel like the downtime issue. I feel like I'm a better mom and a better worker when I do get just an hour to watch my Netflix show after I go to bed, even if I have both the monitors next to me or one of the monitors, whatever. I do feel like I got my own time, but I really only get that when my workload at work is a little lower than usual. If it's a normal workload, then I literally don't have time to do that. And I don't feel like I am as rested as I should be, and I maybe I'm tired at work and I don't feel as productive, and I may not be as patient with my kids.

Rachel Dikovics: I noticed my daughter's weekend nap times are the times when I get an hour and a half or two to myself, truly to myself. And if that doesn't happen, this actually this last weekend we're recording on a Tuesday and on Saturday my daughter skipped her nap for basically the first time in a long time that I can remember. It was an accident. She fell asleep in the car, not that there was an accident in the car, it was an accident that she fell asleep in the car and then refused her nap. And so there was zero downtime that day.

And then on Sunday when she did nap, I needed to do some stuff for work while she napped. And so the whole weekend I had no time to kind of just do whatever I wanted to do, whether that was clean up around the house or watch a show or whatever. And it makes starting a new work week feel very draining because you come into the week feeling exhausted already from your weekend.

Sometimes it can feel like working parents are really set up to fail. Reshma Saujani, the CEO of Girls Who Code frequently talks about how the school day typically runs from around eight to around three, while the workday runs from nine to five, often later for many of us. How do you guys each deal with these kinds of logistical issues? Have you figured out how to be in two places at once yet?

Megan Monson: Unfortunately not. But I will say I think having the flexibility to work remotely sometimes I think is key to really trying to be in two places at once. So you can take a call while you're sitting in the parking lot waiting for your kid, things

like that, which may not have been the case five, 10 years ago. And at least for me, I think the other really helpful aspect is to have the tribe of people who are in your corner and able to help and help support you, whether it's through work or parenting. And so by having the family members that you can rely upon in addition to just your spouse, I think is extremely helpful for trying to do it all.

Nicole Fulfree: Yeah, agreed. And the eight to three timeline is that's when your kids are five and above. And right now we all have kids before that category. My daughter got into the lottery, preschool program in our town, which is wonderful, but the hours are 8:50 to 11:20, which poses an even greater problem. And my solution to that is we have a nanny. I do drop off every morning. It's important to me to see her into school, but either my husband who also works from home or our nanny will pick her up in the middle of the day. That's something I miss out on and I have to miss out on it. But like Megan said, I think the working remotely has given me the flexibility to stay at this job because I know, for example, my daughter has her Halloween parade next Thursday at 11, and I've just blocked my calendar from 10:45 to 11:30 so I can go see her first Halloween parade. That's a non-negotiable for me. And because of the remote hours, people aren't necessarily going to be looking for you. Your calendar's blocked and I'll make up for it later.

Megan Monson: You'll make up the time either in the morning or at the end. So you're still going to get the work done. You just have a little more flexibility of when.

Rachel Dikovics: Yeah, that's one of the things we've talked about before, that flexible work locations are really parent-friendly. And I think especially woman-friendly. And I agree with you Nicole, I think it enables women to stay in the workforce when a lot of times otherwise, I think especially pre-COVID when working remotely was not a normal thing that people did frequently. If you are in the office five days a week from nine to six, you're not going to see your kids. And I think for a lot of women, that's just not acceptable. And so the calculation becomes, do I want to not see my kids and work or do I want to not work and see my kids? And I think the ability to work remotely makes that calculation not need to happen for most people.

Nicole Fulfree: 100%. Another thing that I want to note about that and being at home for certain days during the week is my son who's still 16 months, he's still really attached to me. I mean, both my kids are, they're both very young, but my son doesn't go to sleep as well when he hasn't seen me at all throughout the day. And I notice a marked difference between days where I work from home and when I don't. He's so much more clingy at bedtime. He wakes up crying during the night because I genuinely feel like he hasn't gotten to see me enough during the day. Whereas if I'm home, I get to check in on him, see what he's eating, give him a hug, then he's fine going to bed. But I think that it really does impact the kids too, not being able to see you. And I think moms especially feel that.

Rachel Dikovics: So the advisory calls on employers to do three things to support the parents in their workforce. First, expand paid parental family and sick leave and provide flexible work arrangements, just what we were talking about and provide access to childcare. Second, train managers on how to support work-

life harmony as the advisory calls it. And third, provide comprehensive and affordable mental health care. What are your reactions to these recommendations in particular? Do we feel like these are the things we actually want and need?

Megan Monson: I mean, I certainly think at least the first one, having good paid parental leave is critical just because we are very fortunate that our employer offers robust leave program, but not all women and parents are. And I think that initial time is really needed to be able to become a parent and kind of re-acclimatize yourself on how to do that. And I think it would be very difficult to go back to work immediately after having a child.

Nicole Fulfree: Agreed. If our firm didn't provide the parental leave that it provides, there's no doubt I would not be working here anymore. It's just the guilt that I would feel and what I would feel like I'm missing out on, it just wouldn't be sustainable for me. And so once you do have that time, I think you get to feel fulfilled and you shepherded your child through until an age where you do feel comfortable to hand them off to someone else. That's just vital time that you can't get back and moms especially need that.

I think on number two, I just don't think there's any way that you can actually give any effective training to managers on how to support work-life harmony. I think it's either a value your manager has or a value they don't have. And I don't know that any required PowerPoint slide or speaker that comes in for 45 minutes to talk to the... And not to call them out, but the boomer generation about work-life harmony, I don't think it's going to change their views on how people should be reporting to the workplace and how you should be working. Those are ingrained views that I think are not going to change. I think as the next generation comes up, I think people who are around our age have similar values with respect to work-life harmony or balance or whatever we want to call it. And I think that's going to improve things, but I don't think there's any training that's going to do it.

Rachel Dikovics: Yeah, I totally agree. We've talked before about the importance of paid leave. I think it cannot be overstated how important a robust parental leave policy is both for men and women. And I think that the more men who take the leave that they're entitled to take, the better it is for everyone because it helps to really remove the stigma that women can sometimes feel for taking the full amount of leave or extending a leave.

And I think we see that kind of day to day. I know Nicole has mentioned before that when a male colleague says they can't make a particular call or meeting because they're doing something with their kid, it's really great to hear and makes, I think, all of us feel more comfortable saying the same kind of thing. And it's fine to just say, "I can't make it" and not explain, but when people who are not moms do explain and have the same reason, it makes it a lot more acceptable for everybody.

Nicole Fulfree: Even if my evil adversary needs to reschedule for his kid's doctor's appointment, I will allow him, because I appreciate what he's doing for parenting.

- Rachel Dikovics:** What do we think about mental health care of being affordable and offered through employees? My reaction to that is that's just another thing I don't have time for.
- Megan Monson:** I mean, I guess that's true, but at the same time, if it is something for people who are struggling and do need that help, making it more accessible and one less thing that they have to try to find, I think can be helpful. Just being able to have those resources available and to be able to, for example, if you need to speak to somebody while you're at the office, just having those things and then at your fingertips makes it a little bit less daunting. And maybe in my view, more likely somebody would seek mental health care if they need it.
- Nicole Fulfree:** And I think the rise in telehealth with respect to mental health care is super helpful. And I've done that for, we went through some difficult times with my daughter and her health at the beginning of her life and I had to talk to somebody to get through that. And having it on telehealth made it really easy. Like Rachel said, the first thing that comes to mind is that's in the bucket with self-care, going to the gym, getting a massage. That's just not going to happen even if I need it. But being able to just schedule it like a work call and just sign on to Zoom and talk to somebody makes it a lot easier when it's at your fingertips.
- Rachel Dikovics:** What else do we feel employers, particularly in the law, should be doing to support the parents and their workforce and in particular the mothers in their workforce?
- Nicole Fulfree:** One thing I think is just a little bit of recognition, and it's something that I try to do with the other parents in my group, but just learning their kids' names, asking about them, showing I care about them and their family life. I think it goes a long way to feel supported in your family life too, and that your people that you work with actually care about what your kids are doing too, is just a more supported feeling that makes work feel a little bit more like at home.
- Megan Monson:** And that's not something that should be that difficult or time-consuming for anyone to do. It's just taking a little bit of an interest, and it can go a long way.
- Rachel Dikovics:** I think women kind of naturally ask, especially if you also have kids, you're naturally going to ask your female colleagues how their kids are doing. But I don't know that it comes as naturally to men, but I think it's very noticed when it does happen because there's such an identity shift for women, I think especially after having your first child. When you come back from your first parental leave, you're a different person than when you left and there's no higher priority for you than your child.
- And I think that recognizing that and just saying, like Nicole said, "How's so-and-so doing?" Remembering their name, remembering how old they are, and recognizing that to your employees who are parents, they're thinking about their kids all the time and showing support by also bringing them up can make people feel a lot more comfortable and supported.
- Nicole Fulfree:** I think it's also important to kind of along the lines of what you said with our adversaries saying that they want to reschedule a meeting if they have to

take their kids somewhere. I think it's important to say that internally, especially to our junior women. I always take my kids to their doctor's appointments unless there's extenuating circumstances. And I think it's important to say that my kids are my priority. I'm going to be at my daughter's cardiologist appointment. That's a non-negotiable for me.

And I think instead of just saying I have a meeting, letting especially my junior female colleagues know that I'm going to be out for an hour because I'm taking my kid to the cardiologist, that's my priority. I think they will feel more comfortable coming to me when they have those types of priorities. And again, if they're a hard worker and they're making, we record our billable hours here, there's no secrets in how hard anyone's working. It's okay for that to be a priority for them too and still have this job.

Megan Monson: And I think even too sometimes it's also nice to have the recognition. I could think of a few instances where you have weekend or late-night calls and you're trying to juggle wearing both hats and to say, "I'm happy to do this, but you may hear some noise in the background." And having people be appreciative and understand that I think is also, at least for me, I found that very refreshing. They're like, "Oh, I get it." Just being willing to recognize that you do have this other aspect of your life.

Rachel Dikovics: Yeah, second shift. Yeah. I know we've all said basically around five, we're off the computer, but I know it's true for me and I'm sure for you guys, I'm taking calls sometimes during that time and my daughter's probably going to be in the background or something she's listening to is going to be in the background. And it's a lot more comfortable when people kind of acknowledge that in a positive way than pretend it's not happening. Make you feel like you need to mute every five seconds. Yeah. So I think understanding and showing people that you care goes a long way.

Nicole Fulfree: Yeah, I can talk between five and seven, but I might be like the BBC dad who has the kids running in the background. When the nanny leaves, there's no promises on what my husband can keep the kids from doing.

Megan Monson: But I think Nicole's right. I think also some of it is employers and on all of us as we continue to get more senior in our careers, is instilling those values in the next generation and sharing ways that we've been able to make it work as more folks in the workplace start to have children, they're going to be going through these same stresses that we currently are facing now. And so I think to be more supportive and open and vocal about it just takes, again, the taboo and stigma away from taking an hour out of your day to take your daughter to a doctor's appointment.

Nicole Fulfree: And I think the Surgeon General's report said something along the lines of parenting or our children are sacred. And that's true. And I don't know how previous generations have tried to act like it's less important than work, but our children are sacred and raising them is the most important thing, and workplaces need to start recognizing that.

Rachel Dikovics: Thanks for joining us for another episode of the Women's Initiative Network, Real Talk. We'll see you next time.

Rachel Dikovics:

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