

Childcare during the holidays: What are the options?

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If you work full time in the UK, you are entitled to at least 28 days paid annual leave, including the eight bank holidays. For parents of school-age children however, that is often not enough to juggle childcare during the school holidays.

Parents are often forced to choose between expensive childcare or relying on friends and family to look after their children whilst they are at work. Childminders can get ill, go on holiday or simply be unreliable, or it may be that funds can only stretch so far to cover childcare. So, what are the options?

What the law says

Time off for dependants

Whilst the law does provide for a reasonable amount of unpaid time off to take 'necessary' action, it only applies to dealing with particular situations affecting employees' dependants (dependants being a spouse, civil partner, cohabitee, child or parent) ([Employment Rights Act 1996](#)). However, this only applies in situations where there is an unexpected or sudden event involving a dependent and does not apply to planned time off to care for dependants.

Parental Leave

Parental leave is available to some working parents ([Maternity and Parental Leave etc. Regulations 1999](#)). Any leave taken is unpaid and the employee must have been employed continuously for at least one year. The right applies to each child:

- an employee with one qualifying child may normally take up to 18 weeks' leave;

- an employee with two children would be entitled to 36 weeks' leave in total.

The option of taking parental leave may not always be feasible: you may not qualify; you may not want to step away from your job or simply you cannot afford to take parental leave.

Flexible working

Any employee (not just those with dependants) with at least 26 weeks' continuous employment can make a request for flexible working for any reason ([Employment Rights Act 1996](#) and [Flexible Working Regulations 2014](#)). This can include covering childcare. An eligible employee may request a change to their working hours, the times they work and/or a change to their workplace.

Plan ahead. Under the statutory scheme, employers can take up to three months to consider a flexible working request and may refuse it where there is a legitimate business reasons to do so. Only one request can be made in any 12-month period. There is nothing to prevent an employee from making other informal requests, however, an employer will not be obliged to deal with them under the statutory scheme.

Bring your child to work?

Fundamentally, it's down to your employer. If you work on a factory line or in a hospital, it is unlikely that you will be able to bring your child to work, but some spaces may be more suitable, such as offices. The ultimate decision rests with your employer.

If you can bring your child to work, it is critical that both employee and employer are aware of the risks involved:

- **Children may not be able to read workplace warning signs and signals.** They must, therefore, always be supervised to avoid any incidents.
- **Noise and disturbance to other colleagues.** In an open-plan office, the presence of children may disturb other members of the team. Consider whether there is a separate area or meeting room which could be used instead?
- **Ordinary equipment may become dangerous.** A photocopier or filing cabinet may seem a perfectly innocent item to an adult, but to a child, pulling or pushing in the wrong place can cause injury. Tampering with electrical connections may also put children at risk.
- **Fire safety.** Has the safe passage of children been factored into your fire risk assessment, along with the extra hazards they bring?

To negate these risks, employers should consider putting in place:

- **Uniform rules for all staff.** It is not fair to allow one person to bring their children in, but not another.
- **Health and safety revisions.** The workplace must be comprehensively risk assessed with the safety of both children and staff in mind, including fire risk checklists and evacuation plans.
- **Limitations.** Is there an upper limit to the age of children allowed? Is there a limit to the number of days permitted? Are there specific hours or days to avoid?
- **Notification.** Employers must set up a full procedure that allows workers to request permission for their children to come into work and timely notifications for when it may or may not be appropriate.
- **Facilities.** Will children stay within a meeting room or other separated area for most of the day? Which bathrooms and kitchens will they use?

Other options

The idea of a creche in the workplace is not a new idea. In fact, as long ago as 2003, Goldman Sachs brought London's first on-site creche to the workplace. It offers its employees with children 20 free creche days per year, followed by paid use, allowing them to maintain a better work/life balance without having to leave the office.

Offering such facilities is usually expected to create an initial drop in productivity, but in fact, the opposite is the case. The ability to leave your child somewhere close by and safe while you get on with your working day transitions into an increase in staff loyalty and retention, both of which dramatically improve productivity levels overall. Running an on-site creche is far from cheap, meaning currently, only a few large companies (Google, Addison Lee and BookingGo for example) can explore this option easily.

If you need advice on whether you can bring your children into work, or if you're an employer and are looking for advice on the matter, contact employment lawyer [Karen Cole](#) today.

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