



Holding It All Together

Workplace Experiences of Parents and
Carers of Neurodivergent Children





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Key Findings

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Executive Summary

Parents and carers of neurodivergent children are playing an increasingly significant role in the workforce, yet the impact of caring responsibilities on their employment remains largely overlooked.

While awareness of neurodiversity in the workplace is growing, far less attention has been paid to the experiences of those balancing employment with supporting a neurodivergent child.

In Autumn 2025, we conducted an anonymous survey to understand that experience. We expected around 50 responses. Instead, 252 parents and carers took part, signalling the scale of unmet need.

The findings are clear and compelling.

Nearly nine in ten respondents said their ability to work or progress has been limited. Almost three-quarters have changed their working patterns, almost one in three have left work or taken a career break, and 80% reported a negative impact on household income.

The impact on mental health is equally significant. Almost all respondents reported a decline in mental health, including high levels of stress, burnout and anxiety.

This strain is sustained and shaped by two interconnected pressures: systemic barriers in education and health services, and workplace responses that can either reduce or intensify that burden. Although many employers are described as supportive, practice is inconsistent and there is a strong demand for specialist workplace support.

This report provides a structured snapshot of lived experience and establishes a baseline for action. Without timely support and inclusive workplace practices, skilled and committed parents are reducing their hours, stepping back from their career or leaving work entirely.

Supporting parents and carers is not a niche issue. When support is delayed or inconsistent, families carry the consequences.

Aileen Shrimpton
Mindroom



Foreword

My son was never invited to playdates or parties. While other parents chatted at the school gate and built informal support networks, I stood alone. I was often frazzled before I'd even started my working day.

In the office, I listened to conversations about soft play and weekend plans. I seldom shared more than I needed to justify time off for appointments or taking personal calls at work from the nursery or school. Here, too, I felt alone.

That was over a decade ago. Over that time, I have seen neuroinclusion rise up the workplace agenda and the positive benefits that it brings. Yet the workplace experiences of parents and carers have largely gone unrecognised or unsupported. Parents and carers of neurodivergent children are still doing as I did: holding work, family life and overstretched systems together, often invisibly.

Our children are creative, resilient, funny and full of potential. As are we. The challenges described in this report arise not from them or us, but from the fallout of systemic pressures outwith our control: delays in assessment, fragmented services, and the daily effort required to secure understanding and support.

This report was led by a small team of parents and carers, many of whom are neurodivergent. We wanted the findings to be our voice, reflecting the lived reality of balancing employment, caregiving and wellbeing, and to surface the economic and wellbeing costs that arise from this. It is deeply personal for us.

This is not an academic study and does not offer definitive conclusions. Rather, it is a snapshot of lived experience and a call for partnership. When workplace support is clear and consistent, families can remain in work and careers can continue to grow.

We hope these findings help parents, carers, employers and services to work together to make support more visible, predictable and easier to access.

Gill Christie, Baillie Gifford
On behalf of The Project Team



About this parent-led research

This study was conducted in Autumn 2025 as an anonymous online survey of parents and carers of neurodivergent children. It was designed and reviewed by a panel of parents and carers, most of whom have lived experience of neurodivergence. The aim was to capture everyday realities and provide a structured snapshot of workplace experience.

The project sought to:

- Gather baseline evidence on workplace experiences
- Identify barriers to balancing work and caregiving
- Understand the impact on employment, income and wellbeing
- Identify practical actions that policy makers and employers can take

The questionnaire combined multiple-choice questions, many of which allowed multiple responses, with open-text boxes to capture narrative insight. All questions were optional.

The survey was shared through Mindroom's Neuroinclusion at Work network, on our website, and on social media. All quotes and case studies have been fully anonymised. The sample was self-selecting and primarily reached parents connected to our employment networks. It is not nationally representative and does not fully reflect the experiences of parents who are not in the labour market.

While the findings cannot be generalised to all parent carers, the consistency of responses suggests the identified themes are widespread rather than isolated.

"Flexibility is everything. When coming into the office became compulsory again, that really tipped things for me.

People don't see that I've often been up since about five in the morning. I might have had three hours of crying, emotional distress, trying to get my child through the morning, and then I'm expected to turn up to an important meeting at nine like nothing's happened.

I can do the work. It's not that. It's the rigidity around how and when it's done".

Who Took Part

A total of 252 parents and carers responded. Responses came from across sectors and working patterns, with many participants in skilled roles.

Most respondents were women and most lived in Scotland's Central Belt, with responses also received from elsewhere in Scotland and the UK.

Respondents were embedded in the workforce. Of them, 69% worked in senior, professional, or middle management roles, and the hybrid working pattern (44%) was the most common.

Most respondents were in paid work (86%), with a smaller proportion not currently in work (14%), including some who were studying or identified as carers.

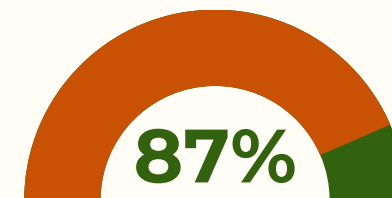
Across sectors, the largest groups worked in finance (19%), education (18%) and health & social care (18%), alongside the third sector, and a wide range of other roles.

Caring responsibilities were sustained and often intense. Nearly 45% had a child in secondary school, and 38% had a child in primary school, challenging assumptions that pressure eases as children grow older.

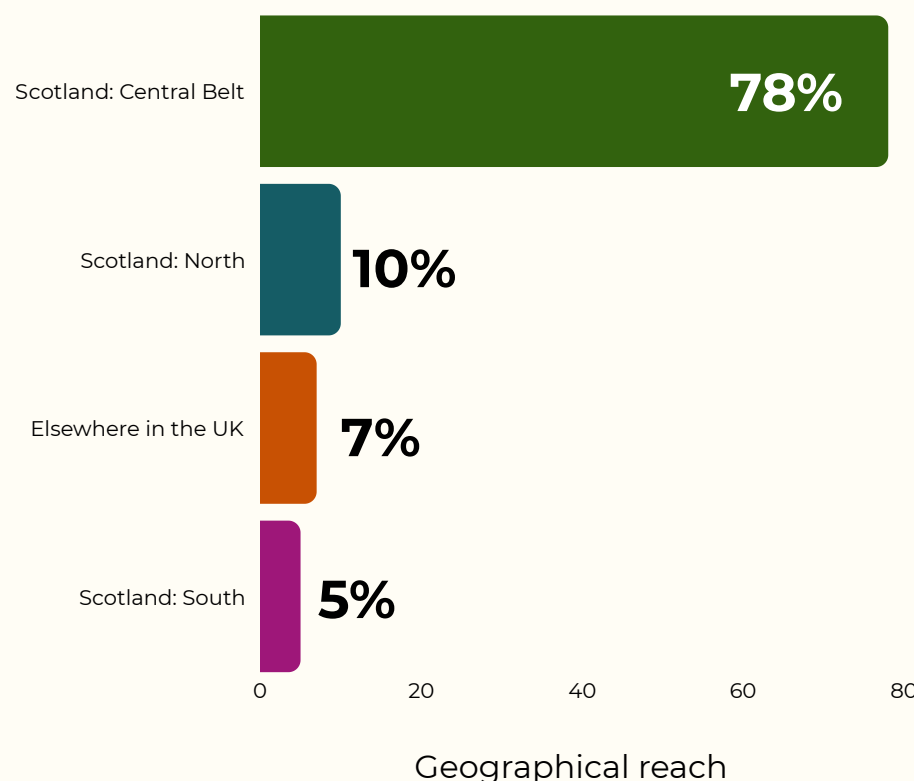
Almost half cared for more than one neurodivergent child, and 55% reported providing 30+ hours of care or support each week.

252

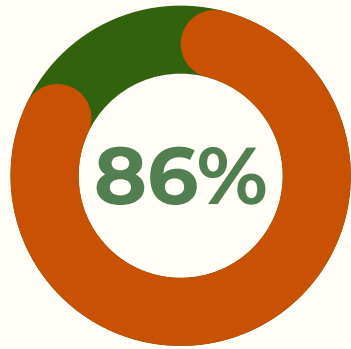
total number of parents and carers responding to the survey.



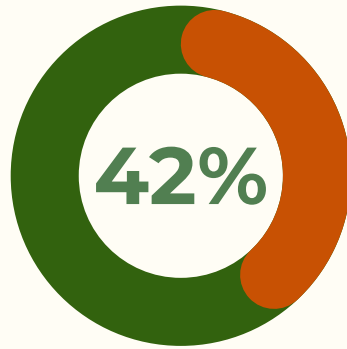
of respondents were women.



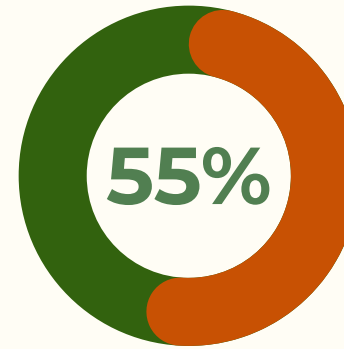
Who Took Part



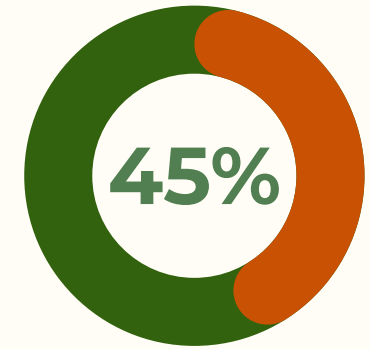
of respondents were in a form of paid employment.



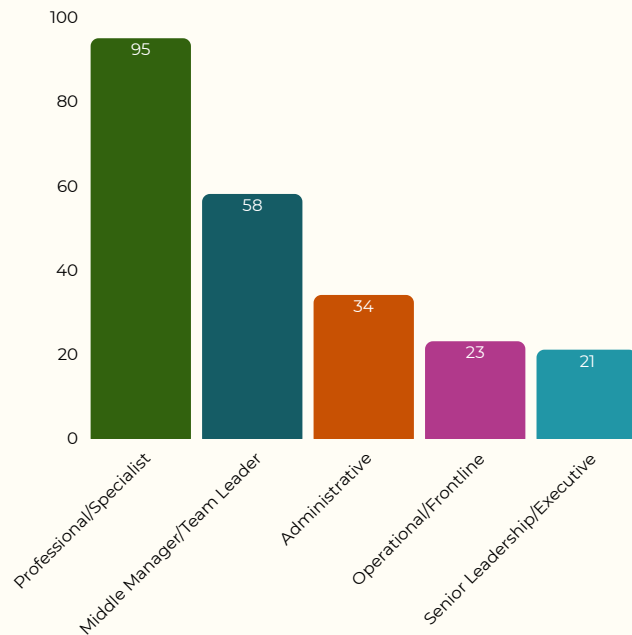
care for more than one neurodivergent child.



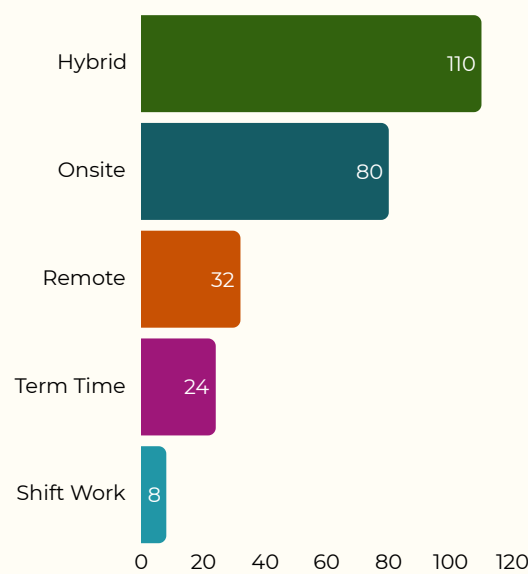
spend 30+ hours per week caring for their neurodivergent children.



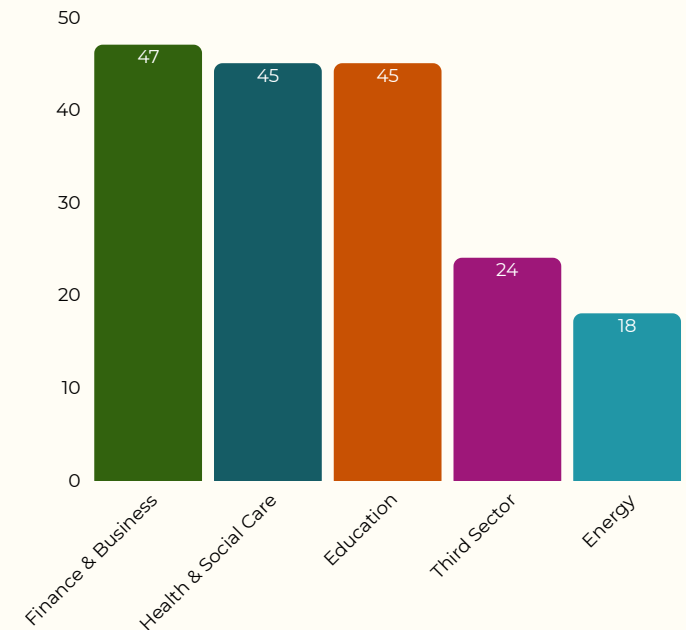
had children in secondary school.



Top five job roles



Top five working patterns



Top five sectors



Dawn's Story

Behind the data are individual stories like this one. This parent's experience illustrates how caring responsibilities, neurodivergence and workplace culture intersect.

Goodness me, where do I start? Going through the assessment process with my child made me realise I probably have similar traits myself. When I tried to raise that at work, the conversation was quickly redirected to HR.

That felt uncomfortable. What do you say when you do not have a diagnosis? It is not that the culture is openly negative, but everything becomes formal very quickly. It turns into paperwork rather than a conversation.

People see me turn up and do my job. They do not see what happens before and after work. I have never asked for support. It is not advertised, so I just manage. I work extra hours in the evening to keep everything afloat. I do not think anyone has noticed.

I am careful about what I share. Once things become formal, it stops feeling safe, so I say I am fine. No one follows up. As long as you are performing, there is little curiosity about what you are carrying.

I have made career decisions based on what I can cope with, not what I am capable of. When I see other roles advertised, I do not even consider applying. I do not have the mental load to take on more.

At the same time, I am navigating menopause. Brain fog and forgetfulness add another layer of shame. You feel like you should just push through. If conversations about neurodivergence had been normalised earlier, I might have recognised myself much sooner.

We need workplaces where talking about neurodivergence, menopause and caring responsibilities does not feel like admitting failure. A specialised Employee Assistance Programme that understands how these overlap would feel genuinely supportive. I have never accessed specific support from work. Even knowing what exists would make a difference.

Key Findings

For many families, work, wellbeing and financial stability are shaped by forces beyond their control.



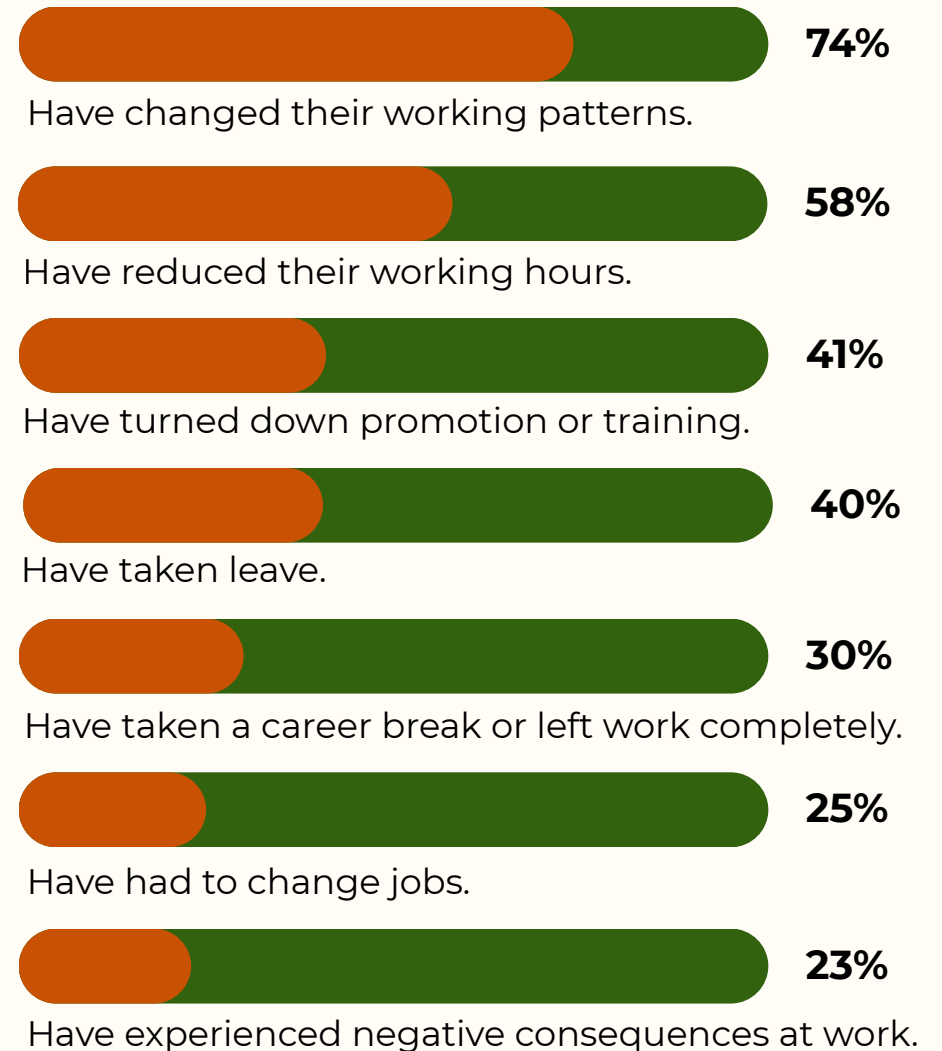
Work & Career

Caring for a neurodivergent child has a significant and often long-term impact on parents' working lives. For many, this goes beyond occasional disruption. It shapes working patterns, career progression and financial stability.

When asked whether their caring role had limited their ability to work or progress, 88% of respondents reported an impact. For most parents and carers, participation in the workplace is therefore constrained by caring responsibilities.

"So effectively I have lost my career, a large amount of income and pension."

Almost every respondent reported at least one tangible effect on their work or career. Parents describe reducing hours, adapting working patterns, stepping back from opportunities or leaving work altogether. These are rarely voluntary choices. They reflect the pressures parents are navigating, with consequences for progression, income and long-term security.



Household Income

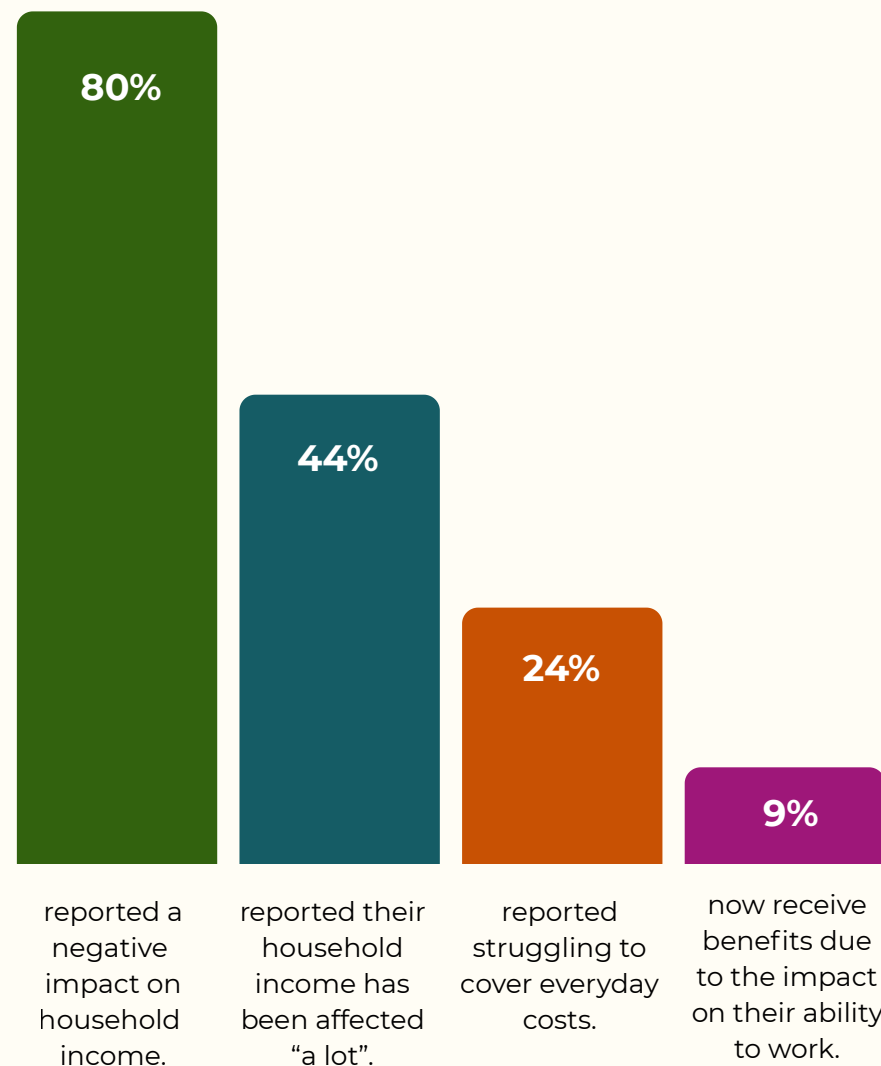
The impact on work translates directly into financial pressure. Over three-quarters of respondents reported that their household income had been negatively affected.

While most households describe themselves as generally managing everyday costs, 20% report struggling to cover essentials such as bills, food and transport, and 13% report receiving free school meals. Combined, these indicators suggest that almost one in four families is facing financial pressure.

These findings point to a sustained financial penalty. Reduced working capacity, lost careers and unpaid leave are resulting in lower household income, and for some, formal reliance on benefits despite a clear desire and ability to work.

This picture sits uneasily alongside national commitments to reduce child poverty. Families are not stepping back from work by choice. They are navigating systems that make sustained employment difficult without reliable support

"We pay for tutors because school does not work for her. The financial pressure adds another layer of stress."



Health & Wellbeing

Balancing employment with caring for a neurodivergent child is having a profound impact on parents' mental health. Of those who responded to the question, 98% reported a negative impact on their mental health.

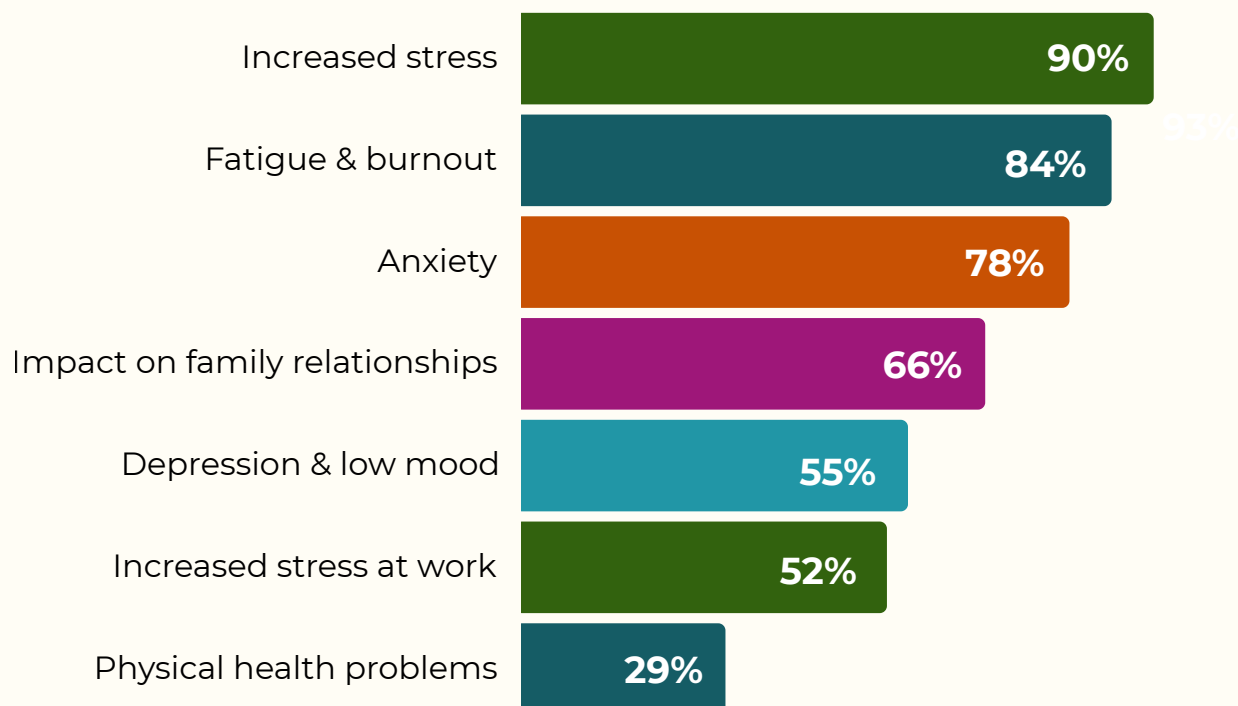
This is one of the clearest findings in the survey. For many parents and carers, the strain is not short term. It is sustained and cumulative, and linked to delays, gaps and inconsistency across education and health support. Respondents described high levels of stress, fatigue, anxiety and low mood. Many also reported a negative impact on family relationships and physical health.

There is also a wider cost. When stress and burnout persist, parents are more likely to seek formal support, including GP appointments and mental health services, and to experience increased sickness absence and reduced capacity to remain in work.

"I'm managing to stay present, but there is not much of me left."

"I'm constantly fighting and begging for very small adjustments."

Types of Impact on Health and Wellbeing



Accessing Support

Over half of respondents sought support from a GP, and 37% sought support from a mental health professional. Counselling and therapeutic support were frequently described as helpful, although many reported paying privately to access timely support.

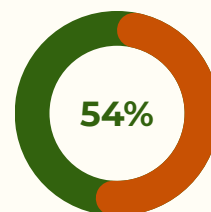
Almost one in seven were prescribed medication, often described as the primary option offered.

Peer support and parent networks emerged as equally significant, with many parents highlighting the value of connecting with others in similar situations. Informal support from friends, family and colleagues was also commonly cited.

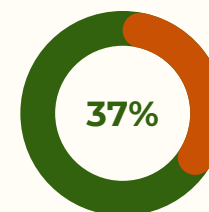
However, nearly one in four reported not seeking formal support at all, often due to lack of time, limited availability, or low expectations of statutory services.



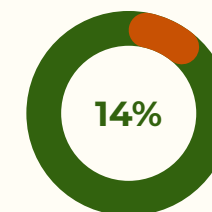
reported not seeking support. Common reasons included lack of time, difficulty accessing services and low expectations of statutory provision.



Sought support from a GP



Accessed mental health support



Were prescribed medication

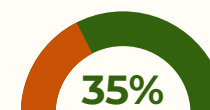
"Medication is the main thing I was offered."



found talking therapy a helpful support



accessed peer support or parent networks



accessed other wellbeing or carers' services



identified workplace flexibility or managerial understanding as helpful. Flexible working, compassionate line management and occupational health support were frequently cited as protective factors.

Workplace Support

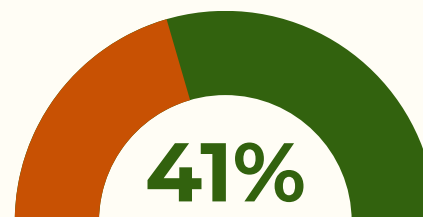
The data show a complex picture. Many parents report that their caring role has significantly limited their ability to work or progress. At the same time, experiences of employer understanding and support vary widely.

Some parents describe workplaces where flexibility, empathy and practical adjustments are embedded in everyday practice. Others report limited awareness of neurodivergence, inconsistent responses or processes that feel overly formal and difficult to navigate.

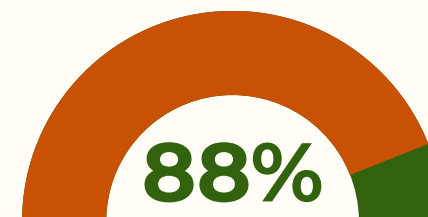
For a number of respondents, the availability of support appears to depend heavily on individual managers rather than on organisational culture.

While 60% felt their employer was supportive, the findings indicate that employer support is uneven. Where understanding is strong and flexibility is normalised, parents are better able to sustain employment and remain engaged in their careers.

Where awareness is low or processes feel rigid, parents are more likely to scale back their ambitions, reduce hours or step away from progression.

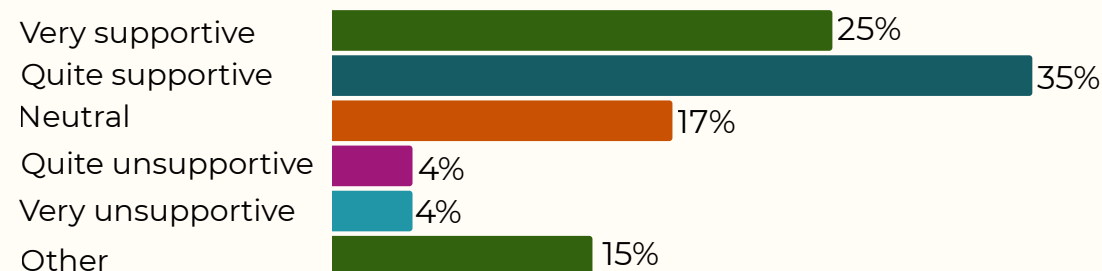


felt their employer understood neurodiversity well or very well.



felt their caring role had limited their ability to work or progress.

How supportive is your employer?



Barriers to Work

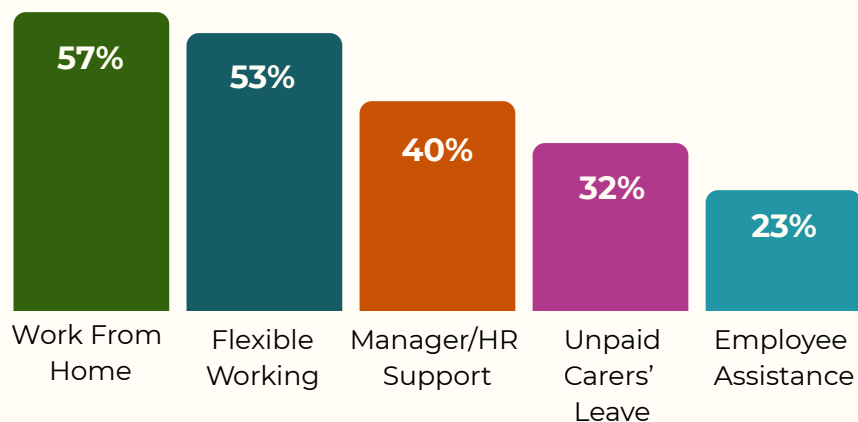
Workplace barriers do not exist in isolation. They sit alongside wider pressures on families.

Most parents report long wait times for assessment and support, and limited support outside work, creating relentless pressure that spills over into working life.

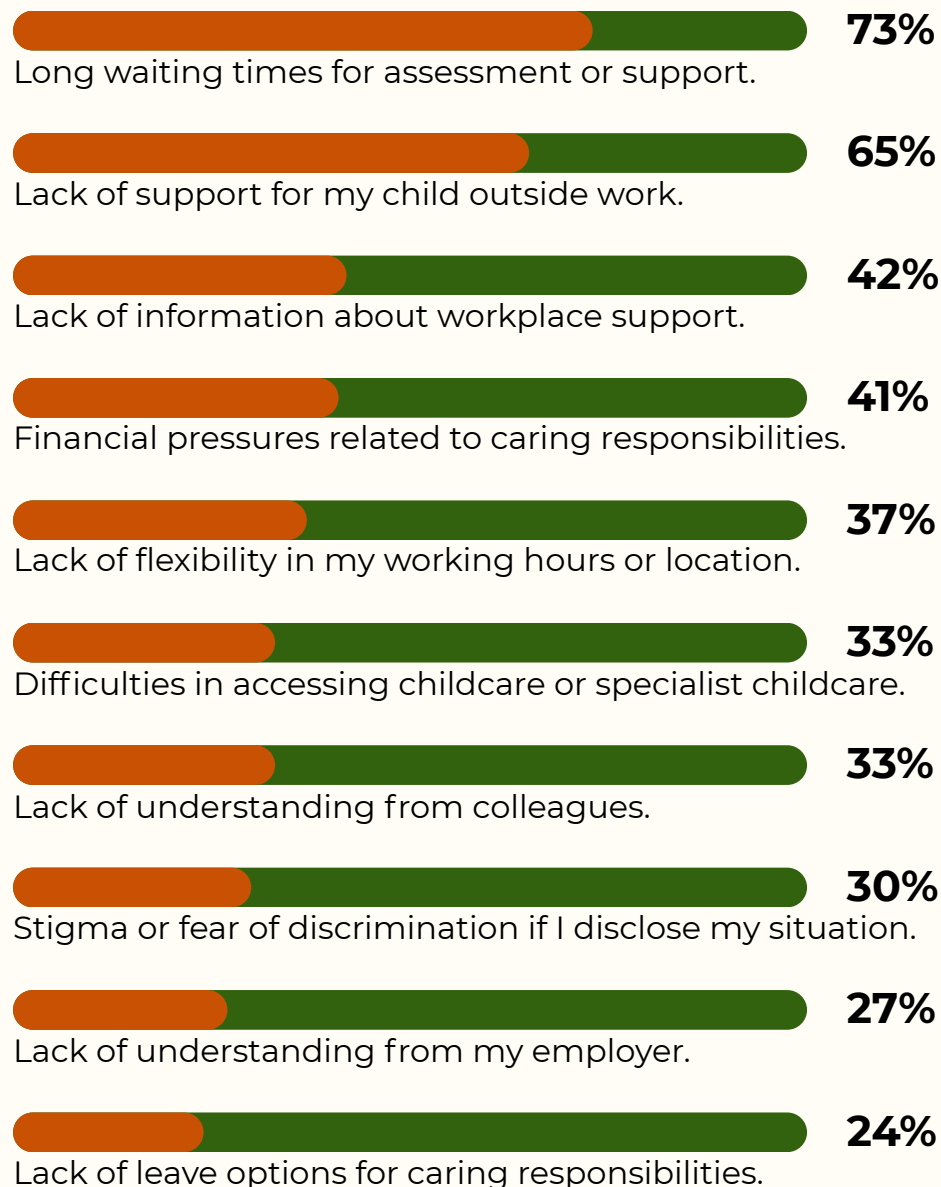
Inside workplaces, the most common challenges are not knowing what help is available, a lack of flexibility and financial strain.

Together, this suggests that practical, clearly communicated support and flexible working arrangements are key levers employers can control, even when external services are stretched.

Top five workplace supports



Barriers to Work



What Parents Need from Workplace Support

Nearly two-thirds of respondents said that specialist programmes tailored to parent carers would be helpful. This is not a marginal demand. It reflects sustained pressure that flexibility alone cannot resolve.

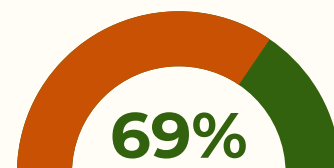
Across the survey, parents describe emotional strain, navigating complex services, and career compromise.

While flexibility helps, it does not address the cumulative impact of navigating health systems, education pathways and ongoing uncertainty.

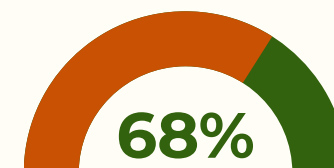
The data suggest that what parents are seeking is not simply generic wellbeing provision, but informed, specialist support that understands neurodivergence, caring responsibilities and employment pressures together.

“Parenting a neurodivergent child has impacted my career beyond what I ever expected. I have made peace with not progressing.”

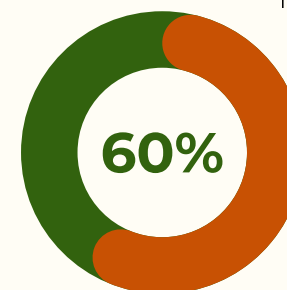
“If I disclose, I worry about how that will affect my career. Once it becomes formal, it stops feeling safe.”



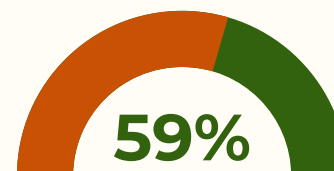
Specialist emotional
& wellbeing
support.



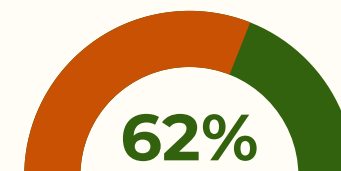
Advice on
navigating
education and
health systems.



Coaching support to help support their child and
manage work.



Advice on the
rights
of my child.



Peer support from
other parents or
carers.



Two Spheres of Influence

The findings point to two interconnected forces shaping the workplace experiences of parents and carers of neurodivergent children

The first is external pressure.

Long waiting times, inconsistent provision and limited access to specialist services create sustained strain for families. These pressures directly affect parents' ability to remain in the workforce, progress in their careers, and protect their mental health and well-being.

The second is workplace response.

Employers are not responsible for wider system failures, but they do influence whether those pressures are absorbed or intensified. For many parents, the difference between sustaining employment and stepping back comes down to flexibility, understanding and practical support.

Taken together, the evidence shows that pressures beyond the workplace shape what happens within it. Workplace culture, line management practice and access to informed support shape whether caring responsibilities become career-limiting.

The recommendations that follow are grounded in what parents told us would make the greatest difference.

"I don't think there's a real understanding, if I'm honest. People know the words, neurodiversity and inclusion, but they don't see what day-to-day life looks like. I can get multiple calls from school in a week telling me to collect my child, and you just have to go.

I don't talk about it at work. I don't want to be seen as someone who can't cope. I cry in the toilets sometimes, but I would never tell anyone that. Conversations feel formal and rushed, like a tick-box exercise. There isn't enough space to say what is really going on.

I haven't pushed for progression because I'm already running on empty. By the end of the day, I'm exhausted, and then I switch straight back into parenting. If flexibility were assumed rather than negotiated, it would make such a difference. An Employee Assistance Programme that truly understood this life would feel like real support."

What Employers Can Do

Employers cannot remove the external pressures families face.

However, they can ensure those pressures do not become the reason experienced employees disengage, reduce ambition or leave the workforce.



Building Supportive Workplaces

The following actions reflect best practice and offer a clear starting point for meaningful change.

Together, they establish a practical foundation for fair and effective employer practice.

For many parents, the ability to remain in work depends less on complex interventions and more on consistent flexibility, informed leadership and practical support delivered without stigma.

Offer Flexible Working

Flexible working is the single most important workplace support for parent carers.

Employers should:

- Proactively offer flexibility rather than waiting for requests.
- Recognise that flexibility may need to be ongoing.
- Ensure flexible arrangements do not limit progression or visibility.

Key Learning

Flexibility should be standard practice, not a negotiated exception.

Invest in Manager Training

Support should not depend on individual goodwill or managerial luck.

Employers should:

- Provide training on neurodivergence and the realities of parent caring.
- Equip managers to respond confidently and consistently.
- Create space for safe, informal conversations about caring responsibilities.

Key Learning

Consistency ensures support does not depend on individual managers or luck.

Clarify Carer Policies

Unclear policies create inequality and discourage disclosure.

Employers should:

- Develop or strengthen carer policies that recognise neurodivergent caring responsibilities.
- Clearly communicate leave and flexibility options.
- Ensure access does not rely solely on informal negotiation.

Key Learning

Clarity makes support visible, predictable and fair.

Provide Specialist Support

Generic wellbeing provision does not meet the level of need identified.

Employers should:

- Work with specialist providers who understand neurodivergence.
- Provide clear, practical guidance on navigating education and health systems.
- Facilitate peer networks where appropriate.

Key Learning

Effective support must reflect lived reality, not generic assumptions.

Protect Career Progression

Many parents limit their ambitions in order to remain employed.

Employers should:

- Monitor retention and progression for employees with caring responsibilities.
- Ensure flexibility does not restrict development or promotion.
- Include parent carers within wider equality and inclusion strategies.

Key Learning

When parents limit ambition to stay employed, organisations lose skilled talent.

What Policy Makers Can Do

Many of the pressures described in this report originate beyond the workplace.

Delays in assessment, fragmented services and inconsistent provision are directly shaping outcomes for Scottish families.

Addressing these issues is not solely a matter of social policy. It is integral to economic participation and to the delivery of Scotland's Fair Work and child poverty commitments.



Building Coherent Systems

The following actions reflect system-level priorities identified by parents and carers.

Together, they establish a practical foundation for fair and coordinated policy.

When education, health and employment policies align, families are better able to remain in work, protect their mental health and reduce strain on family life.

Strengthen Early Support

Long waiting times and inconsistent provision were among the most frequently reported barriers.

Policy makers should:

- Invest in timely diagnostic and assessment pathways.
- Strengthen early, school-based and community support so families can access help before a crisis.
- Improve transition planning between educational stages.

Key Learning

When systems delay or restrict access, families and workplaces absorb the consequences.

Recognise Parent Carers

The data show sustained impact on employment, income and wellbeing.

Policy makers should:

- Explicitly recognise parents of neurodivergent children within national policy.
- Promote rights to flexible working and carer leave.
- Offer targeted financial protections for families with ongoing caring responsibilities.

Key Learning

Economic participation and child poverty commitments depend on systems that work.

End System Silos

Parents described navigating fragmented systems with little coordination between services.

Policy makers should:

- Align health, education and employment strategies.
- Ensure employment policy reflects the real world impact of service gaps.
- Promote cross sector collaboration to reduce crisis driven care.

Key Learning

When systems operate in silos, families carry the consequences.

Support Innovation

The findings point to a clear need for more informed and inclusive workplace practice.

Policy makers should:

- Provide clear guidance for employers on supporting parent carers.
- Invest in innovation and promote sharing of effective practice.
- Promote inclusive employment models and address the gendered impact of caring.

Key Learning

Inclusive employment strengthens families and the wider economy.

Invest in Prevention

Families are too often supported only in crisis rather than early on.

Policy makers should:

- Prioritise investment in early intervention and preventative family support.
- Reduce crisis-driven access thresholds.
- Protect community and school-based provision that supports families before escalation.

Key Learning

Preventative investment protects employment, mental health and long-term family outcomes.

Conclusions

This report brings together the voices of parents and carers who are working hard to remain in employment while supporting neurodivergent children. Their experiences show that the challenge is not parenting neurodivergent children themselves, but navigating delayed and fragmented support while also managing workplaces that are not always designed with these realities in mind.

Across the findings, a clear pattern emerges. Employment, wellbeing and household income are closely interconnected. When support is delayed or difficult to access, the consequences are felt not only within families but also in workplaces. Parents describe reducing working hours, stepping back from career progression, or leaving employment entirely in order to meet caring responsibilities.

These experiences intersect with wider policy priorities. Progress on the implementation of Scotland's Children's Neurodevelopmental Pathway, alongside commitments to Fair Work and child poverty reduction, all depend on recognising the realities families are navigating. When support arrives too late, the burden shifts to families and increasingly into workplaces.

This report highlights both an opportunity and a challenge. Employers can play a decisive role in enabling parents and carers to remain in work through flexibility, informed leadership and practical support.

At the same time, improvements in assessment pathways, education support and coordinated services can significantly reduce the pressure placed on families.

Parents and carers in this report are not stepping back from work by choice. They are doing everything they can to sustain employment while supporting their children.

Parents want to work. With the right support, they can. Without it, families and the wider workforce carry the cost.

Stay in touch

If you'd like to learn more about Mindroom and how we support children, young people, parents, carers and employers, please get in touch.

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Acknowledgements

This report is grounded in the experiences of parents and carers who generously shared their realities. We are deeply appreciative of their time and honesty.

We are grateful to the Neurodiversity Network at Baillie Gifford for supporting this project, and to the organisations, networks and businesses who helped distribute the survey.

And most of all, thank you to our children. You remind us every day what matters most. This is for you.

All case studies and quotes are fully anonymised and, where necessary, composite accounts have been used to protect the identities of respondents and their children.