*The below template letter is for individuals, groups, or stakeholders to send to decision making leadership at their university or other STEM institution. The most strategic option will depend on power structures at your workplace. Consider ways the letter can be most effective in your case. Letters from more people, groups of people, and people holding more power can be more effective than individual senders. This letter is a guide to help you advocate for your employer to be more accommodating to parents and other caregivers during the pandemic and beyond.*

To: [Provosts]

Cc: [President, Faculty leadership]

Dear [University] leadership,

As [University] considers resuming onsite and offsite research and teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, we, the undersigned [faculty, university groups, individuals, etc.], ask that you provide substantial flexibility, and support for faculty, staff, and students who have caregiving responsibilities and be creative in your approach. The lack of childcare for working families was a national crisis before COVID-19 and [university] has an opportunity to show leadership during the current especially challenging times. This letter proposes several steps that would help address our communities’ needs as we all return to work.

Most support systems allowing parents and those caring for elderly or disabled family members to pursue normal full-time work have failed due to COVID-19. For the duration of the pandemic when schools, daycares, adult daycare and eldercare centers are closed, expectations that employees perform their full work as well as caregiver duties during traditional working hours are neither realistic nor sustainable, despite the fact that many employees can work remotely. [University] employees cannot focus effectively when they must simultaneously care for family members and/or educate their children, nor can they repeatedly complete their work in the middle of the night. Core remote work hours coincide with the times of greatest family care responsibilities, particularly for young children, making it entirely unclear who will care for these children while their parents attend to their jobs. Employees who have care responsibilities for adult family members face many similar challenges. Overall, employees need more support for family care in order to be able perform their jobs at full capacity.

While more privileged families may be able to hire in-home caretakers or tutors, relying on that as the campus-wide solution is impractical at best, and inequitable at worst. The availability of such help is uncertain, and the level of care required could more than double families' care expenses at a time when wages are likely to be reduced, in some cases for multiple family members simultaneously. Families with the greatest income and privilege, potentially including tenure-track faculty and those in leadership positions, will be those best situated to secure the services of the available caregivers. Graduate students, staff, instructors, non-tenure-track and professional faculty, and early career tenure-track faculty may be left without viable solutions. Additional care burdens of this situation fall most heavily on women students and early career faculty and staff, as well as first-generation professionals with fewer resources and Black, Indigenous, and people of color, who are already burdened with additional challenges to success in academic settings.[[1]](#footnote-0) Thus, [university’s] current lack of actionable solutions regarding family care threatens to seriously set back diversity, equity and inclusion efforts. When Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, Disabled, and LGBTQIA people are disproportionately impacted, as has been the case with COVID-19, we risk losing critical members of our workforce and community.

This is an unprecedented crisis for our [university], and we acknowledge that family care is only one piece that must be balanced as our community returns to campus. We offer suggestions below for how the [university] can show leadership and facilitate a return to work in an equitable and just way. Returning to work must consider the needs of our diverse faculty, staff, and students who must balance their dedication to [university’s] goals with their responsibility to care for their families. We offer the following (additional recommendation on the 500 Women Scientists’ factsheet *Recommendations to Minimize Career Penalties for Parents in STEM Fields During the COVID-19 Pandemic*.[[2]](#footnote-1)):

* Provide employees greater flexibility to complete tasks outside of 'core work hours'.
* Align [university] return-to-work and fall teaching expectations with the realities of K-12 educational schedules, such as allowing employees to shift hours to accommodate irregular drop off and pick up schedules..
* Allow individual instructors to choose between teaching online or in-person, and synchronous or asynchronous, for the 2020-21 academic year, as it best aligns with their caregiving responsibilities
* Direct unit leaders and supervisors to acknowledge the reduced capacity for work and productivity during the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath during annual performance reviews and promotion and tenure decisions. See additional suggestions for PI’s and supervisors on 500 Women Scientists Recommendations sheet.2
* Provide financial subsidies to students, single parents and lower-salaried employees facing gaps in the cost of care so that they can afford more expensive in-home care solutions.

We recognize that some of these solutions would require financial commitments during a time of budget reductions and acknowledge the real economic strain on the [university]. At the same time, we are acutely aware that any plan placing the responsibility of solving the family care problem entirely on the affected families will disproportionately burden those already facing challenges in professional settings (e.g. mothers and Black, Indigenous, and people of color). A short-term investment in our community members will facilitate equitable access to learning, research, and teaching excellence, help [university] fulfill its commitments made in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion goals and in its Black Lives Matter statement, and benefit both individuals as well as [university’s] long term mission.

There is a severe strain placed on students, faculty, and staff with family caregiving responsibilities during this already trying time and we appreciate your consideration in helping address it in an equitable and just way. We request that [university] find substantive ways to support its families during this crisis.

Respectfully,

[signatures]

1. 500 Women Scientists. 2020. Scientist Mothers Face Extra Challenges in the Face of COVID-19. Scientific American. <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/voices/scientist-mothers-face-extra-challenges-in-the-face-of-covid-19/> [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. 500 Women Scientists. 2020. Recommendations to Minimize Career Penalties for Parents in STEM Fields During the COVID-19 Pandemic. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/582cce42bebafbfc47a82b04/t/5efe2d4db415005eed87f73a/1593716047550/Mom+Penalty+and+COVID+Factsheet.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)