

HR Mixtape | Hosted by Dr. Shari Simpson | Guest: Rosina McAlpine, Founder, Win-Win Parenting

Announcer: You're listening to HR Mixtape, your podcast with the perfect mix of practical advice, thought-provoking interviews, and stories that just hit different so that work doesn't have to feel, well, like work. Now, your host, Shari Simpson.

Shari Simpson: Joining me today is Rosina McAlpine, founder at Win-Win Parenting. Rosina equips HR and leaders with research-based strategies to support working parents, reduce stress, and prevent burnout.

Rosina McAlpine: Dr. McAlpine, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

Shari Simpson: I'm so happy to be here. Thank you. I'm so glad we were able to do this. And this topic is really interesting for me. So I am a mom of three. They're not little anymore. If you've listened to the podcast for a while, you know that they're all grown and out of the house. But I definitely remember that season of life where I was trying to balance having a career and raising kids and the guilt and all the things that are associated with trying to manage it as a parent. So, you know, you built a parenting and workplace program. And I'm curious, what moment made you realize that working parents really need more than good luck from employers?

Rosina McAlpine: Well, it's actually a two part answer. And the first part is when I first became a mom, I pretty much realized what was going on. So it comes from definitely personal experience, especially you know, on the first day our son was born, I was given conflicting advice. Feed him every four hours, feed him on demand. Then I get him home and I've got an 18 year old now, but this was back then. And then I get him home and some people are like, oh, let him cry himself to sleep. That's fine. Others are like, no, psychological problems forever. So as an academic and a researcher, I'm like, somebody has to know the answers to these questions. So that's my personal story. And that's when I put together a book called Inspired Children, How the

Leading Minds of Today Raised Their Kids. I knew that there were people out there who knew how to do this. I've ever returned to work and I remember the first day back, I made a little calendar of the 12 months that I was with our son and I had a picture every month and I sat there for the first few hours flicking through the pictures, feeling so bad as a parent that I should be home. So that continues. Then my work at the university was looking at gender equality, work-life balance, employee wellbeing. And there was the hole. So that was the aha moment. All these programs were designed not for working parents who are time poor, many competing demands. So I thought, I'm a working parent. I know research based parenting education. I'm going to create something called Win-Win Parenting. Good for families, good for workplaces. So that's the kind of journey. And more recently, it's become even more impactful and urgent because what we're seeing is the statistics. We know that working parents have the highest rates of burnout, highest rates of stress, highest rates of employee turnout, lowest mental health scores. So something's got to give. And that's how this all kind of came together.

Shari Simpson: What do you think some of the biggest misconceptions are around working parents? And I'm going to put in there also caregivers, because I think as our population changes, now we're also seeing that advent of people who are in my generation who are now caregiving for older parents experiencing some of the same similar, I would say not necessarily the same, similar situations. But what are the misconceptions that you think still exist out there?

Rosina McAlpine: The biggest issue is making it an individual problem that employees disorganized or lacks commitment when actually it's a systems problem. And I think employers didn't understand it and I don't think individuals understood it, but now it's becoming very clear because of this data. So we're now, we're looking back and going. How did this happen? How do we have such a high rate of turnover, burnout? Something's, you know, wrong here. And that's where we have to understand that most families, individuals have to work now. Even if they choose not, you know, if they wanted to stay home or, you know, some want to work, some choose have to work and many people don't have alternate sources of support. So basically

this is, this is a tagline that I've been using for a long time. Working parents and carers are expected to work like they don't have a family or caring responsibilities and they're expected to care for their family like they don't have to go to work. That leaves us in an impossible situation because it's not true and that's why we're at breaking point at work and at home.

Shari Simpson: Oh, it's so true. And I love that your background is in the research perspective and leveraging data, because I think, you know, as somebody who just recently finished my doctorate, I have a different appreciation for the level of research that goes into some of this work. You know, when you've worked with organizations that say, hey, we're parent-friendly, what do you think that should mean? Not necessarily what does it mean.

Rosina McAlpine: A really good question, because a lot of people or a lot of organizations say we're family friendly, parent friendly, and really what it is, is they've got policies in place. And that's great. We need to start with policies. We need guidelines, policies, but is it in practice family friendly? So. Because this is kind of a new area, I put together like a five-point guide. I'm very happy to share it with any of your listeners. And so I'll just go through those five quick areas of what it actually means to be family-friendly. And the first one, as you said, is collect data on the risks. If you don't know the problem, you cannot fix it right. So be very clear that you understand the data. The second thing is Poor leaders, they're often parents themselves and they don't know, they're kind of torn between organisational policies, et cetera. So we need to train our leaders so that they've got the resources and the support. One of the things that really makes a difference is what if that leader has KPIs that relate to working parents? What if there was a KPI there? That would make you focus a little more on making sure it's right. The next thing, once you've got the data and the leaders know what to do, is the targeted programs. That's where the big help comes, but you need that preparation before you can put that in. And that's where you go, oh, well, I know what the risks are, let's address them with targeted programs. We've touched on this whole idea of family-friendly workplace culture, but it has to be genuine. So it's not just policies, but actually a safe space where working parents can discuss, receive support, get

the help they need to succeed at work and at home. And finally, the last, last of the five is monitor and report on the return on investment. If we don't measure it, we can't manage it, we can't know if we're doing a good job. So absolutely happy to share that free guide with anyone who would like, you know, a good start to what does it mean to create a family-friendly workplace.

Shari Simpson: I love that you mentioned you have to have the policies right. That's kind of the table stakes stuff. But beyond that, when you start to look at the programs that you need to put in place, what are the ones that you've seen that have been most successful in preventing burnout? And I guess having really good, robust, you know, metrics that you can go back to and say, hey, it actually was profitable, beneficial, more efficient for our organization to implement this program than to not implement this program.

Rosina McAlpine: So, one of the things, I've been doing this for 10 years now, over a decade. So, I've seen a lot of programs and I've created programs to fill the gaps because we're still learning as well and the gaps are still being filled. So, the first thing I would say to you is that they are ongoing programs. Our flagship programs are 6 or 12 months. not one session here on family friendly day. Do you know what I mean? Because that's not going to have the impact that you want. You want to be able to embed. So number one, ongoing programs. Number two, has to be available when the parents are available, the carers are available. So we like to have a mix of live and then an on-demand resource center. The other thing that's important is that parents actually feel heard and have a community so that they've got the ability to say, well, yes, I love what you've just said, but in my circumstance, I don't have this or I do have that. How would you adjust that? So live question and answer. And I think what best answers this question for you, I went and I looked at you know, the common feedback that we get because I think that's going to give you an insight into what works and what doesn't. So the first one I'm going to give you two quotes for practical strategies for managing work and family life, number one. So first person said, balancing work and family life strategies really helped me to cope. So the second one was the strategies for creating routines at home while managing a busy workload have been invaluable. So that's what's appreciated. That's my problem. Help me fix it,

right? The next one is guilt that I was telling you about. And this person said, as a single parent, I often feel torn between work and home. This program made me feel supported. So it removes that guilt so you can get on with it. not feeling alone. So this one said, good to know other parents are facing the same challenges. It makes me feel less isolated. So these are all the hitting points that you want in your program. We're not alone, we're overcoming guilt, we're managing work and family. I think this is a really important one, raising issues with managers, because that's a big fear point. And it says, this has given me the confidence to speak to my manager about flexibility to better balance work and parenting. The other ones we're talking about that proactive family-friendly culture. So my employer providing this program demonstrates, they're the words, demonstrates a genuine commitment to a family-friendly workplace culture. This is exactly the type of initiative that shows my organization understands the reality of working parents. And the final one I'll just add is employee loyalty. My workplace offering this program makes me proud to work here. touches my heart because that's what we want, don't we? Everyone wants to do a good job. Seeing my employer invest in these sessions helps me feel loyal, engaged and that's what makes a good program when all the points are being hit so that working parents feel like they're valued and they can do their job.

Shari Simpson: What I loved about the quotes that you shared, you could see the flexibility in the approach to programs because not one approach was going to help every parent. Every situation is unique. You're dealing with single parents, co-parenting. You know, maybe you're dealing with employees that the way that they figured out to manage their schedules, which me and my husband did this for a while, is we worked opposite opposite hours, we were like ships passing in the night. And that's very wearing on your relationship. You know, you talked about, as one of those five, is teaching managers on how to be supportive. And I guess I'm curious, what coaching have you provided them or advice you've given them to walk that line between supervisor and therapist? or supervisor and best friend. Because, you know, we do have, obviously, obligations to the business and to the metrics, and you do want to provide that flexibility. But like most things in HR, we're trying to navigate that line of, you know, business need and humanity all at the same time.

Rosina McAlpine: That's the exact point. We're not asking managers to be therapists. That's not what their role is. We are asking them to make sure that there are available support, whether they, if they need mental health therapy or other kinds of support. And most organizations do have EAP, Employment Assistance Provider, or they can direct them to them for confidential support. But that should be the minimum, not where they go. So the training number one is, even if you are a working parent, you might not know exactly what you said that broad range of challenges that working parents, they could be going through a divorce, they could have a child with additional needs, they could be the sandwich generation caring for a parent and caring for a child, you know. So when we train our leaders, first of all we give them an understanding of the many risks, the broad range of risks, and the the challenges at a when you've just had a new baby or you've got a toddler or you've got a school age or you've got a teenager are all so different. Again and if you're not at that stage you do not get you know what's going on. So training involves the data which is the motivator. Do something you can't just be reactive you've got to be proactive so that we reduce this data. The second thing is all the different options. The third thing is how do you have those conversations? How do you be an empathic leader without going, you know, intruding in someone's life?

Like it's a very hard balance. And this is where, you know, open conversations. How can I support you? What support do you need? Here's what our organization offers. We've got these monthly, you know, sessions. We've got EAP. We've got flexibility. Here's our policies. If you don't understand it, come and talk to me. So it really is about helping managers feel comfortable to help individuals feel they can come and also be authentic in their own challenges.

Shari Simpson: I love that. You know, one of the things that our organization did, this was a while ago, I want to say it was during the pandemic, I don't remember exactly, but we had somebody on our learning and development team who was by trade an actor, did a ton of plays, and we had him read a storybook on Zoom and record it and, you know, you could come and attend with your kids. It was such a, just a fun activity and, you know, low stakes. It was after hours. So, I mean, flexibility on that employee's part to be able to do that, but wonderful opportunity for, you know, parents to tap into something. That's just one example of, you know, where our organization has gotten creative. What are some other creative things that you've seen organizations do?

Rosina McAlpine: So at one end, things like that is great because it does demonstrate that I understand you have a life outside family and it brings working parents together as a community and that is a big important part. I'm not alone. I'm part of a community so that they are valuable. The other big things are where the actual leader shares. Now, we ran a program for an organization for parents with children of additional needs, because then again, they need all of that, but then they need something else as well. And the CEO of the company introduced me by telling his own story about his child who had MS. and yeah right and showed images of his daughter, he said he got permission from childhood right through to now, she was in a wheelchair but she just graduated from university. So it's such a beautiful thing when leaders are authentic and they tell the story, yes I, I feel your pain, I have been where you are, here's what helped me, means that that person in their team can come and say, can come and say without feeling shame or guilt or worry that it's going to impact their, their job, that that's what they've experienced as well. So I think that's a huge one, being authentic and, and really sharing.

Shari Simpson: What do you say to those C-suite leaders who are older in life and have chosen to not have children? That's part of their story, their journey. And they don't necessarily see the same sort of value in these programs that somebody like you and me who had to manage being a working parent kind of innately understand. I think sometimes there's an education piece to our C-suite that we have to run into. What's your suggestion there for those listening to to introduce these concepts so that they can start to add some dollars behind these programs.

Rosina McAlpine: There are so many reports, and I don't know a manager that doesn't understand data. So, like, we are, like, you know, I've gathered reports from the UK, the US, Australia, New Zealand. It's the same story across the world that, you know, how do you ignore an issue where you've got, yes, they are the highest levels of stress, highest levels of burnout, highest turnover. So even if you don't have a heart, which I hope that's not true when you read that, you can also read the bottom line. It is so expensive. to have people off work, to have people mentally and physically unwell, to have the strain that puts on the others in the team, how much it costs to replace someone. So if you've got someone with heart, you can lead with that. If not, lead with the dollar sign and know full well that prevention is much cheaper than cure. So from an economic point of view, you can get that story across pretty easily with the data that we've got.

Shari Simpson: I love that. Well, as we wrap up our conversation, what's one nugget that you would like our listeners to take away, one action that they can do this week in their organizations to be more supportive for employees that are also parents or caregivers?

Rosina McAlpine: I think the biggest thing that they can do is to get education. If you're not confident with this, you don't feel comfortable, you don't really know what's going on, first things first is education. Then when you know what's going on, collect that data. That's really important because then you can lead with empathy. So as I said, please take that free guide. You've got step-by-step to make things. What could make the employees in your team make it easier for them to succeed at work and succeed at home? And then you've got an amazing team.

Shari Simpson: I love that. Well, we'll make sure to include links to all of your resources in the show notes for our listeners. And this was a wonderful conversation near and dear to my heart as a parent. So thanks for taking the time to sit with me.

Rosina McAlpine: Thank you so much. I really appreciate that you've given me the opportunity to share all this. And if I may end on one last note.

Shari Simpson: Of course.

Rosina McAlpine: One of the things that I think we're forgetting in this world is that without working parents, we don't have an economy. A very big part of the economy is working parents. But more importantly, we don't have a society. So for all of those people who might choose not to have children or can't have children, know that the people who are raising those children now will be there for you to look after you for the rest of your life. So I think we just need to think a little bit bigger about what it means to support a working parent. We support our economy. We support our society.

Shari Simpson: Such a good point. Thank you so much.

Announcer: I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and links at thehrmixtape.com Come back often and please subscribe, rate, and review.