

Methodology

In September 2026, Institute staff conducted nine one-on-one interviews with recent mothers who received diapers through the Diaper Distribution Demonstration and Research Pilot grant with support from National Skills Coalition. These individuals had expressed interest in being contacted for interviews about their experiences navigating the workforce. The interviews focused on uncovering the challenges of navigating employment and job searching after having a baby. All interviewees were provided with a gift card to thank them for their time.

Profiles of Speakers

A Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) and single mother of two young daughters, Williams is working toward the goal of becoming a nurse, even as she has struggled to balance expectations of long work hours with family responsibilities.



Even with an accommodating employer, Kellie's work life has frequently been disrupted by her children's health issues. She has found that despite her college degree, it has been difficult to access the higher-paying jobs her family needs.



TayTay works in the fast-food industry but hopes to transition into a remote position that offers greater flexibility and more time with her six children.



After facing repeated job rejections, limited employer feedback, and barriers to accessing public benefits due to the benefits cliff, Lyndsey is considering transitioning to teaching to better align her work schedule with her children's needs.



H.S. aspires to become an ultrasound technician but has faced transportation and childcare barriers to employment, including times when she brought her child to work with her because she lacked other options.



With a high school diploma and a dedication to her work at her previous places of employment, Nada has felt disillusioned by a string of job rejections as she cares for her 10-month-old.



After moving from Illinois to Indiana for her husband's work, Searra dreams of getting her CDA to work in childcare, something that she sees increasing her family's income and allowing her to care for her 10-month-old.



Equipped with a medical assistant certificate, Jessica thought that she'd be able to get a job that she and her three children could afford to live off of. Instead, she works seven days a week at full-time and part-time jobs to make ends meet.



Breyahanna wants to be a business owner and entrepreneur, but is struggling to find opportunities that would equip her with these skills while also allowing her a flexible schedule to care for her daughter, who has a disability.



TAKEAWAY #1

New mothers want higher pay, schedule flexibility, and benefits for their households, and sometimes feel they must change career paths – either through different jobs or advancing skill development – to access them.

"I'm good at working at restaurants and grocery stores. Those are the main jobs I worked at. But my main goal right now is to go back to school...I do want to find work, but I really want to go back to school."

- Searra

"I don't even know if I could work a job with everything I'm trying to balance... [but] I'm looking for work from home jobs again."

- Breyahnnna

"[As a mom, you have to] probably find somewhere...that'll work with you. You're not going to get this time back with your kids. [It's important to] figure out something that's going to work for you where you're not missing everything with them."

- Kellie

"So once again it's a lot of sacrifices in it because I can't do a lot of stuff. I feel that I could get into the mill, but why am I going to try to get into the mill when I can't be there 12 hours? I can't do these crazy hours, and I can't do swing hours."

- Nada

"My goal is to become a nurse. And that's a challenge because, again, you have children and [you're] going to school full time for that. That's a whole 'nother story...because eventually you'll get to a point where you have to do your clinicals and you have to be in school more versus working. And how do they expect students to really be in school, you know, like full time and not work? Cause I have to be getting paid."

- Williams

"I try to prioritize being available. I don't want to be working all the time and miss everything. But I also need to work enough and bring home enough money to make ends meet. That's what I try to look for something that's at least above a certain amount of money, that's going to be a part-time job. So that if I can work, I can make it work with the schedule, making a decent amount in a couple of hours."

- Jessica

"I would love something where I can stay at home or even getting into the medical field where I hear a lot of people say, 'Oh, I'm getting off at this time and I still got time to spend with my children' instead of being there from morning to night, and they're asleep when you come home. That's important to me."

- TayTay

"I'm definitely searching outside of my college degree. Right now I'm just trying to find something, you know, that fits my daughter's schedule."

- Lyndsey

TAKEAWAY #2

Many low-income mothers can't access paid family and medical leave, yet view the time as something that would've helped them with career transitions and returning to the workforce.

"I was eligible for 12 weeks of unpaid leave, but I couldn't afford to take 12 weeks of unpaid leave. So I just used [the three weeks of] PTO that I had saved up. It was nice to not have to lose a paycheck, but I had to have an emergency C-section, so recovery was kind of hard. A couple of times [after returning to the office I felt] uncomfortable, like from the pain of giving birth. Or just being tired still."

- Jessica

"[I took] an unpaid leave. My workplace doesn't do maternity leave. They just have you sign a form that you're going to come back after having a baby. So it's like you're not unemployed, but you're not employed at the moment... [and] they're trying to rush me back. Get me back there by the middle of this month. Like they say, the business don't stop, even though life happens."

- TayTay

"I had slowed down for a while because I felt like I was still dealing with post-partum, so I didn't really want to stress myself out with that postpartum and actually get my CDA. But my goal is to actually work with children."

- Searra

"I literally had him [my baby], went back to work, you know, worked three months after having him. I literally had him on Sunday, Friday ended the week. So I went back to work...Like, it's just a lot. It's a lot for moms."

- Nada

"I think I was only out for the six weeks. For needing the money, and then [my employers] were wondering when I was coming back."

- Kellie

TAKEAWAY #3

Lacking workforce supports to navigate the transition to being a working mother, many mothers turned to their families for support, even as many wished to be able to do it on their own.

"My sister sometimes will help me. Or my mom. And now going forth knowing that I'm in a predicament and they're already on standby...Without my mom and my aunt. I don't even know what I would do."

- Nada

"It's more family than anything else [as a top source of support]."

- Jessica

"But as of now, when I do go back, hopefully with my sister, she's still open to the idea of keeping them. But that's what it was for me."

- TayTay

"My sister did take the time to come over and help me with the baby...My child's father, he's been the best father ever to my child. Like when I need rest, he will get the baby."

- Searra

"I'm really independent, so even having to depend on my family, that broke me down. Everybody knows I'm not going to ask you for a penny, but, I needed them. I was in my most vulnerable state. I'm the person who helps out or figures out ways to be there for my family. So when they had to fully step in, I just felt like crap. I just feel helpless, really. That was a struggle. But they understood. They know how I am, but they were my biggest blessings...They definitely, definitely had my back."

- Williams

"Between my parents helping me and trying to figure out different ways to make it work with my newest one, [it's] too rough. I honestly can't tell you the last time I was positive in my bank because everything just keeps coming out and it's like with the kids being sick, I can't get the hours...it's just rough."

- Kellie

"So in a way, I'm blessed that I'm not working because I could be here for when they are sick. But at the same time, I am not blessed because we are struggling financially and I have to rely on my parents to get the things that my children need, which definitely sucks. I feel as a mom it just really sucks because I have this immense guilt that I'm not doing the best that I can for my kids, that I know I can do more or I could do better."

- H.S.

TAKEAWAY #4

Mothers in the workforce and job application process displayed remarkable resiliency, even when faced with significant structural barriers such as inflexible workplaces, a lack of access to transportation, and unaffordable childcare.

"As a mom, I had to do what I had to do... moms are like superheroes, honestly, because we just navigate. And it's not always the right thing. But there's no right way in being a mom, because every kid is different, every mom is different, and every week is just crazy... It's a lot that I'm navigating. I have a lot of pressure on me. I cry and it's not like I'm depressed. It's just like sometimes you have to let out that emotion because there's just a lot of pressure...I'm working on the fumes. Like, even sometimes on my lunch, I get one hour, I go to the car and I just go to sleep."

- Nada

"I need the money, so I can't really take care of these kids if I don't have the money. So it's one of those. I gotta kind of suck it up, even if I'm tired.."

- Jessica

"Sometimes starting jobs aren't willing to work around my kids' schedules. Like daycare being closed, that's difficult... [But] I don't really call off from work unless it's an emergency."

- Breyahnnna

"[Without childcare] I couldn't work because I had to stay home with her. It's so crazy talking about it because when you're out of it, you really don't think about what you had to endure."

- Williams

"[My advice to other mothers would be] just to remain consistent and to not be discouraged by the amount of job applications and stuff that you have to go through.."

- Lyndsey

"I applied to 43 jobs...What trips me up is you have to have a job in order to get approved for a daycare. But then you also have to have daycare in order to have a job...It's like you're telling me I have to have this one thing before I get this thing, but I can't get this thing until I get this thing. Like, it doesn't make any sense."

- TayTay

"A lot of workplaces [only offer from] 8am to 4pm for an interview and it's rough when you have a job already and my daughter's school starts at 8am and she gets out at 3pm...[but] my son's daycare was complaining about me coming [to get him] after 4pm. I can't work the 40 hours because I got to take her in at 8am and then pick him up by 4pm. It is like going in there needing an interview, I might as well just take the day off, which doesn't help."

- Kellie

Final Thoughts

I would like for other people to understand that
**it is okay that we don't have jobs.
We are doing the best that we can.**

Like you said, we should give ourselves grace because we are doing the work, the hardest job of them all, and that's being a parent. I feel like being a mom or dad is ten times harder than actually having a 9-to-5 job, **because as a mom, you don't get to clock out.** You're always there. You're a teacher, you're a nurse...But I mean, above all you're everything, you are their whole world and more.”

- H.S.

