



Manager's guide: Supporting parents returning to work.

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Introduction

Becoming a parent is a big life-changing experience, especially if you're a first-time parent. Managers play a key role in ensuring parents feel supported and positive when they return to work after parental leave.

Here we look at ways you can help to foster a smooth transition, including spotting when an employee might be struggling to adjust to the workplace.

From dealing with separation anxiety, childcare arrangements and a busy workload, parents can face many challenges when returning to work.

Some employees, who are new parents and working remotely, may be finding it hard to balance their workload with the responsibilities of being a parent. Others may be sleep-deprived or struggling to switch between parent-mode and work-mode.

Whatever the reason, there are many ways employers can promote a compassionate workplace, to help returning parents successfully reintegrate and feel supported.

Protecting your employee's health and wellbeing while they're at work can also really help them to succeed and thrive.



Recognise the challenges parents face

A survey of 1,000 mothers found that around one in three (31 per cent) found it harder than they expected to return to their job after maternity leave.

A good starting point is to understand the range of emotional and physical difficulties and concerns that might impact an employee's performance and behaviour at work.

Specialist perinatal mental health nurse, Rachel Woodruffe agrees, and stresses that some parents might be dealing with uncomfortable physical health problems post birth, such as:

- pelvic girdle pain
- back ache
- breastfeeding issues (e.g., needing to express milk during work hours)
- incontinence after childbirth

“If you notice that a colleague is finding it hard to manage their workload, take a moment to consider that they may be finding it hard to juggle their job with other commitments, such as childcare, or being a new parent,” says Rachel.

It's important for managers to recognise that parents might also be experiencing a range of emotions as they readjust to work life. Some parents, for example, may be coping with the effects of poor-quality sleep. Others may be dealing with child separation anxiety and worrying about:

- the financial burden of childcare
- getting home on time after work to collect their child
- juggling work with being a parent

“It's also not uncommon for parents to worry about not doing a good job at work, and feel they're being treated differently by their colleagues because they're part-time,” adds Rachel.



A parent's story

“When I returned to work after having a baby there was a lack of empathy, understanding and support from my manager (both times), and other senior colleagues.

It was like I'd never been away and was very much expected to hit the ground running and get on with it.

Having been out of the work environment for 12 months, simple things like getting dressed, wearing makeup and going somewhere, felt unfamiliar.

Using a laptop again and being in an office and going to meetings felt very unfamiliar too - it took some adapting to.

On top of that you are dealing with a huge life changing experience - particularly if you have become a parent for the first time.”



Signs that a colleague might be struggling

Research in 2021/22 found that over **900,000** workers were affected by workplace stress, depression, or anxiety in the UK.

Recognising the signs that a colleague may be having difficulties coping with work and taking action to address it can result in a happier and healthier workplace. You might find for example, that they are:

- not being productive at work or making uncharacteristic mistakes
- being unusually quiet or withdrawn in team meetings
- feeling tired and lacking energy
- stressed
- distracted and regularly checking their mobile

If you notice that a member of your team is behaving differently, talk to them. Try and encourage open and supportive conversations to understand what they're thinking and feeling.

This will help you to think creatively together and put appropriate measures in place at work.



A parent's story

“On my first week back in the office after returning from maternity leave, I felt that I wasn't a priority for my manager. It felt very busy and disorganised, and that no specific time had been carved out to spend with me.”

“My manager at the time didn't even say hello to me until the end of the day, which felt horrible. It also didn't make me feel welcomed or valued. But I'm sure there was just a complete lack of awareness of the effect it had on me.”

“This same person later went on to break both arms on a skiing trip and had to take three months off work. After returning to work they said that they had a whole new appreciation for how disconnected you can feel from a business and working life after a sustained period of time. They added that it had provided a whole new perspective on maternity leave.”

Ways to ease the impact of returning to work

As well as offering support, organisations should strive not to take professional development opportunities away from parents who might be returning on an apart-time basis, or during pregnancy. Research suggests that this can affect their confidence and make it more likely they will leave their job.

Employers have a responsibility to protect the health and wellbeing of their employees too. They should consider how to soften the impact of returning to work for parents, and ways to make their work environment a parent-friendly and welcoming place. Here are some ideas.

Provide support options and a transition plan

A 2024 gender pensions gap report has found that women are **60 per cent** more likely to carry out unpaid primary carer roles, than men.

Managers should consider the effect of family leave and caring responsibilities on financial wellbeing, specifically pension savings.

Women, on average, will take **10 years** out from their careers to raise a child, costing around **£39,000** in lost pension savings.

Check how aware the person is of their rights, support options and financial wellbeing benefits offered by your organisation.

Make sure your own knowledge is up to date too. For example, there might be benefits or support available to employees to help them with mental and physical health challenges, that you can signpost them to.

Have a structured transition plan in place for returning colleagues, with the relevant resources to signpost them to and training when they return. This could include things like:

- mentoring opportunities
- refresher training
- employee assistance programmes (EAP)
- flexible working

Offering a structured transition will also help to demonstrate your commitment as an employer to their success, and wellbeing.

Some organisations provide e-learning guidance for managers on how to support their employees through any pregnancy journey. This is provided by the pregnancy charity, Tommy's, and links to childcare support via the Government.

Schedule regular check-ins

Make time for regular and focused conversations to find out how your team member is doing and actively listen to the concerns and challenges of returning parents.

Supportive measures should also include addressing health and safety risks and offering solutions to safeguard staff wellbeing. Check that they have done a workstation assessment along with any other risk assessments that may be appropriate for their role and have everything they need.

Use your check-ins to recognise and acknowledge your colleague's efforts and contributions to the team too. Letting people know that you value their contribution can help them to feel valued and respected.

It can really help to boost their performance and self-confidence at work and demonstrates your understanding and compassion as a manager

Support breastfeeding parents

Research has shown that returning to work is one of the main reasons women stop breastfeeding, with 20 per cent of women stopping upon their return.

It also found that combining breastfeeding with work may be hard for breastfeeding parents, depending on their work setup.

Organisations should make sure that parents are aware of the breastfeeding support that's in place, and what they can expect in the workplace. If for example a woman who is breastfeeding is office-based, check if there is a private lactation and pumping room for her to use.

Or for remote employees who are breastfeeding, consider encouraging off-camera meetings to avoid them feeling uncomfortable or self-conscious. Depending on the employee's role, you might also want to explore if offering more flexible working hours can help in this situation

Encourage peer-to-peer support

Consider if there are any parental support networks in your organisation for parents to share experiences and offer emotional support to each other. If there isn't any, why not take the lead in creating a support network to encourage peer-to-peer support?

These types of networks can play an important role in fostering a sense of solidarity and support among parents who are dealing with similar challenges.

Set realistic goals

Make sure you review workload and assignments regularly to avoid placing employees under undue pressure.

For example, this might not be the best time to start introducing challenging goals or projects. Encourage colleagues to set goals that are achievable. Try setting small goals related to wellbeing as a great way to help ease your employee gently into their working day.

If your colleague is feeling easily distracted, you could explore building some mindfulness sessions into their working day to address this. There's lots of evidence to show that mindfulness can help to create productive and supportive teams.

Offer a flexible work schedule

A 2020 survey of the UK's Best Workplaces for parents highlighted flexible work schedules as a key priority.

Support employees to overcome any barriers they might be facing at home to help them do their job effectively. This can include offering a flexible work arrangement, such as working from home, a job share, or being flexible with their working hours, if needed.

This can also help parents returning to work to ease back into their roles, while managing childcare responsibilities.

Recognising that each employee's situation is different, and exploring ways to accommodate their needs, will also demonstrate your understanding and compassion as a manager, says Rachel Murray, Head of Employee Health and Wellbeing at Bupa UK.

Demonstrate your commitment to work-life balance

Check existing policies to ensure they are family-friendly and support parents' needs. If your organisation is not already doing so, you might want to consider introducing policies, such as:

- **parental leave**
- **childcare assistance**
- **flexible spending accounts**

Try and lead by example by encouraging boundaries between work and home life and respecting non-working hours. Share your own achievements and challenges. You could also share with your team what's helping you to stay healthy and focused.

By implementing flexible policies, fostering open communication, and showing empathy, employers can create a supportive work environment for parents to thrive - both professionally and personally.

**As a manager, you'll
reap the benefits of a
happy workforce too.**



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