

# Five ways to support new parents returning to work during the pandemic

August 25 2020, by Maria Karanika-Murray, Cary Cooper

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Returning to work after having a baby is highly taxing under normal circumstances, but it's especially tough now. Returning parents currently face a triple whammy of readjusting to work, sorting out childcare and coping with pandemic-related restrictions that weren't there when they went on leave.

It's a lot of pressure. For many at work, the [pandemic](#) has meant shifting to home working while at the same time caring for children because nurseries and schools are shut. The pandemic may have also [exacerbated existing inequalities](#) in families around the [division of labor](#), [gender roles](#) and [unpaid care work](#). For some, closed offices will have severed access to colleagues and opportunities too.

How, then, can we help [new parents](#) returning to work for the first time in these unusually difficult circumstances? In this article, we offer five bits of advice—drawn from our [recent book](#) that brings together a number of experts on issues surrounding parental return-to-work—to help both new parents and their managers handle the transition back into work during the pandemic.

## **1. Review changing needs and demands**

A good fit between [our needs and job requirements](#) is important for wellbeing, job satisfaction and productivity. Both needs and job requirements can change over time and so, too, can the fit between them.

Taking time to do a periodic review in response to major life changes—such as parenthood and the pandemic—is important. This should lead to a discussion between employee and line manager to adjust work to fit the circumstances, ensure that any resources needed are available, and maintain a good work-life balance and productivity.

## **2. Plan ahead**

Organize both [parental leave](#) and the return to work in advance.

It may sound like common sense, but not many parents have an open discussion with their managers or employers ahead of time to plan their

leave and handover tasks or to adjust their work ahead of a gradual or a full return. The pandemic restrictions make such careful planning essential, as access to manager or colleague support is not as immediate.

Enforced working from home also means the physical and temporal boundaries between work and home are nonexistent. This may necessitate redesigning how and when the job is done, in order to organize working hours, breaks and family time in a way that they fit together. Balancing work and family demands may also require being more structured with home-based work.

### **3. Beware of stereotypes**

Stereotypes of mothers (including pregnant women) [tend to be negative](#) and can contribute to the "[motherhood wage penalty](#)" – the pay gap between working mothers and similar women without dependent children. Stereotypes of fathers, on the other hand, can be positive and contribute to a "[fatherhood bonus](#)".

The loss of social time and face-to-face contact during both parental leave and the pandemic may [exacerbate stereotypes](#) and their [negative impacts](#) on performance. There's a risk that this then could lead to differential treatment and indirect discrimination.

So to help stop stereotypes from taking hold, organizations should make sure that [parents are included and listed to](#) when they return—for example by running parent forums or committees and scheduling meetings outside times of the day where family commitments are more likely.

And to make sure that stereotypes don't lead to unfair treatment, managers should be transparent about access to resources, take into account career breaks in career promotions, and monitor performance

evaluation data and criteria to make sure they're free from bias.

## **4. Identify skills relevant to both parenting and work**

Parenthood is a period of [intensive informal training](#) when important transferable skills are developed. These include person-related skills (negotiation, perspective-taking), tangible skills (work scheduling, managing multiple demands) and personal resources (such as ["psychological capital"](#) – hope, self-efficacy, optimism and resilience).

Such personal strengths are essential for [wellbeing](#), job satisfaction and [performance](#). Resilience would be a useful skill for a worker at any time, but the uncertainty and added stresses of the pandemic have made it especially important.

Coaching or mentoring can help returning parents to identify that they have these unacknowledged skills that will help them in the current climate. Managers should help staff to recognize and use them.

## **5. Make work-life balance a shared responsibility**

A workplace that promotes [good work-life balance](#) can have [tremendous benefits](#) for the health, wellbeing and performance of the whole workforce. Good work-life balance signals that an organization cares for its people.

Formal policies on work-life balance are important—but alone are inadequate. Employers should go beyond formal policies to promote a family-friendly culture that is free of negative stereotypes, rich in collegiality, and supportive and inclusive of all employees.

A good first step for employers would be to let staff tailor how they get

their work done according to their needs—for instance by setting their own hours and breaks. Known as "[job crafting](#)," this is a star ingredient for an [engaged, productive and resilient workforce](#). As well as contributing to staff wellbeing, this sort of flexibility is needed to handle the challenges of the pandemic too.

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