

# Allyship is essential to new mothers returning to work, says study

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Credit: Sarah Chai from Pexels

Returning to work after parental leave can be one of the most challenging experiences for any parents, especially mothers, to navigate. Fortunately, there are simple, kind and thoughtful ways in which

organizational members—regardless of formal status, parental identity or gender identity—can help mothers feel supported as they return to work, which can also benefit job satisfaction and maternal well-being.

### New research

published in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* by Carlson School of Management Professor Nitya Chawla, leading a national team of researchers, examined the impact of allyship in the workplace for mothers after childbirth.

They collected qualitative data from 45 mothers to learn about specific behaviors they viewed as true allyship. Then, they conducted a study of 155 postpartum mothers who returned to work in the preceding four months to better understand the implications of postpartum allyship for mothers' well-being, career decisions and family lives.

### The team found:

- Four types of allyship were identified in the first survey: co-navigating HR infrastructure and policies, creating physical and flexible workspaces for mothers and (i.e., clear work-family boundaries), validating the worker identity (i.e., celebrating a postpartum mother's return to work and expressions of confidence) and validating the mother identity (i.e., checking on well-being and showing interest in the baby).
- Experiencing postpartum allyship helped increase mothers' confidence in their own abilities to effectively balance their work and motherhood identities (i.e., work-motherhood self-efficacy). At the same time, these allyship experiences reduced mothers' feelings of guilt that they were falling short of expectations.
- The second part of the study indicated that, because of the increased confidence in themselves, postpartum allyship reduced

mothers' inclination to quit the workforce to stay home with their child. Instead, mothers were more likely to believe that work can benefit their family lives.

- Postpartum allyship also helped alleviate mothers' symptoms of

"In a country that lacks paid federal leave, working mothers are often forced to return to work far before they are ready—a significant factor in influencing women's decisions to leave the labor force," said Chawla.

"While we may still be years away from any change to federal policies, there are ways in which we can assist mothers as they return to work postpartum and reduce their inclinations to leave. Postpartum allyship behaviors help working mothers feel like they can bring their whole selves to work, with both their professional and maternal identities living in one space."

**More information:** Nitya Chawla et al, Allyship in the fifth trimester: A multi-method investigation of Women's postpartum return to work, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (2024). DOI: [10.1016/j.obhdp.2024.104330](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2024.104330)

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