


# Making Maternity Work

Improving return-to-work  
after maternity leave





**“It [mentoring] just helped to have some time set aside during parental leave to reflect on what I want out of my work life and the balance. In a way that once I did start back to work, I just suppose I had that thinking underpinning it.” *Jemima***

## Executive Summary

Our research shows how employers can improve the wellbeing, resilience and work-readiness of employees returning from maternity leave.

## Key Findings

- Feeling valued and supported at work makes it more likely that an employee will continue to see their work as important.
- Parents often face hard constraints in their family life. When work is flexible enough to fit within these constraints, employees feel more positive about work, and they are more able to focus on the content of their work.
- Clarity and certainty about the role to which they would return markedly reduced stress for staff on maternity leave.
- Employees need to be able to access a network of support at work before, during, and after leave. Line managers who control contact with the organisation while on leave can lead to staff feeling powerless and vulnerable.
- Maternity mentoring can help mothers to navigate these challenges and to productively re-engage with work at the end of maternity leave.
- Support is needed before, during, and after maternity leave.

## Introduction

The ‘motherhood penalty’ – the drop in women’s earnings when they have children – is thought to be a key driver of gender wage inequality.<sup>i,ii</sup> Countries in which there is long maternity leave tend to have a higher motherhood penalty.<sup>iii,iv</sup> However, short maternity leave may make women leave the workforce or avoid having children.<sup>v</sup> Our research suggests a way through this apparent dilemma by helping to mitigate the impact longer maternity leave has on a parent’s career. Targeted support for employees, appropriate training for managers, and processes designed to accommodate parents’ needs can have an important positive impact on the wellbeing, resilience, and focus of employees.

## Methodology

Our project is a collaboration between researchers at the Universities of Southampton and Keele and local maternity mentoring business **bump & glide Ltd**. Eight employees of a large organisation, with a diverse portfolio of job profiles, were interviewed following their return to work after maternity leave. Five additional employees received maternity mentoring from bump & glide and were interviewed three times across their maternity leave and planned date to return to work. The interviews were thematically analysed to explore the women’s changing experiences of work transitions around maternity leave and to explore the role of maternity mentoring for employees, as they navigate the transition to motherhood.

# Research findings

We identified qualitative patterns across the dataset that illuminate important aspects of participants' experiences of work. The data showed that the perinatal period involves immense transitions: mothers re-evaluate who they are and what defines them; they have difficulties controlling what is happening to them and making decisions about what they should do next; and they face new challenges in juggling competing demands and responsibilities.

Employers play a vital role in supporting mothers during these transitions by facilitating protective factors and mitigating or minimising the stressors.

## We identified the following key considerations for employers:

- How maternity leave is managed can have an important impact on the wellbeing and productivity of staff. Line managers, in particular, have a major impact for the reasons outlined below.
- Feeling valued and supported at work helped employees continue to see their work as important. For example, employees reported investing considerable time and effort into preparing thorough and smooth handovers. When this diligence was not matched by line managers, the employees felt frustrated, disappointed and as if they and their work did not matter to their employer.
- Childcare arrangements were the most prominent stressor associated with returning to work after maternity leave. When employers recognise the lack of flexibility for employees outside of work and enable work to fit within these constraints, mothers feel more positive about work, and more able to focus on the content of their work.
- When employees had a clear understanding of the role to which they would return, they were more able to settle into their maternity leave and then feel confident about returning to work. Conversely, uncertainty about their role

caused considerable stress for some employees. Imposed or unexpected changes to working conditions, even when within the written job description, were destabilising and threatened employee engagement.

- An additional network of workplace contacts before, during, and after leave can provide welcome extra support and connection. Some employees experienced line managers as 'gatekeepers' who controlled contact with others at work. This action left staff feeling powerless, vulnerable and isolated during their leave and compounded their unease about returning to work.

**“I did some KIT days, although they were from home so not brilliantly useful... I have never felt so much like an afterthought” Eleanor**

- Maternity mentoring can help employees navigate these challenges, enabling them to identify and communicate their needs and to productively and meaningfully re-engage with work at the end of maternity leave. Mothers find maternity mentoring valuable because it provides a safe space for them to express their emotions and address any challenges they may come up against. This process helps them feel more confident and resilient ahead of their return to work.
- Employees faced challenges from the moment they became pregnant, and in some cases while trying to become pregnant. They valued maternity mentoring support that began before and continued after maternity leave, providing an ongoing relationship of trust and support throughout this time.

# Recommendations for Employers



Review processes to ensure that they recognise and respect the inflexibility of childcare arrangements and the need for parents to be able to set fixed boundaries to working hours.



Offer maternity mentoring to staff. Ideally, staff should be able to access repeated maternity mentoring sessions with the same mentor during pregnancy, maternity leave and after the return to work.



Create and maintain up-to-date onboarding protocols for staff returning from extended periods of leave (including all informal changes of practice at a local level).



Ensure that working roles are not changed – unless absolutely necessary – and that any changes are clearly communicated, through pre-agreed means of communication with the staff on leave.



Broaden lines of communication and connection with staff on maternity leave to include staff outside line management. Include a named person that employees on parental leave can communicate with, in addition to their line manager.



Provide appropriate training and resources for line managers to ensure that they understand best practice. This process may include training as part of the initial line manager development training, and/or online training that can be done at point of need.

**“What it drove home for me was how vulnerable and isolated you are in that leave period when you’re out of the business... It was very easy for [my line-manager] to gatekeep my access to my colleagues, my engagement, my feeling part of a team, any professional development opportunities, you know, it was she really acted as a gatekeeper there.” Christina**

## A note on terminology and scope

‘Maternity leave’ is the legal term in the U.K for leave for employees who are pregnant or have given birth. Some employees who are pregnant or give birth find reference to ‘maternity leave’ alienating and prefer the term ‘parental leave’. All the participants in our study identified as mothers, had experienced pregnancy and birth and used the term ‘maternity leave’. Further research is needed on the benefits of mentoring support for parents who do not identify as mothers and/or who have not experienced pregnancy and birth.

## About the authors

This policy brief has been prepared by Professor Fiona Woollard from the University of Southampton, Dr Alexandra Kent from Keele University and Serena Williams of bump & glide Ltd.

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## References and Resources

### Journal Articles (in progress)

- Longitudinal and Comparative Thematic Analysis - A Methodological Exploration,
- Making Maternity Work: A Longitudinal Analysis of Employees’ Experiences of Maternity Leave

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<sup>6</sup>W. Keck, Ch Saraceno The impact of different social-policy frameworks on social inequalities among women in the European Union: the labour-market participation of mothers Soc. Polit., 20 (3) (2013), pp. 297-328



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