



Maternity Mentoring

Making the most of maternity
leave for you and your employees

Executive Summary

Our research shows that targeted maternity mentoring can help employees navigate the challenges of new parenthood and productively return to work at the end of 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.
- Mothers who experienced mentoring during the project all considered it to be a positive and valuable experience that met and exceeded their hopeful expectations.
- Mothers really valued the role maternity mentoring played in creating time to focus on themselves and reflect more on their own identity.
- Mothers found the practice of reflection useful because it helped them to take positive, purposeful actions on their return to work.
- Mothers valued an ongoing mentoring relationship and wanted support before, during, and after maternity leave.

“I think it’s really important... you know, just having, space and time to think ‘How am I feeling?... Being able to pause and say, ‘OK, actually, aside from being really, really tired... Am I anxious? Am I sad? You know. What’s causing those feelings?’ And so now I think that’s definitely been the most valuable thing.” Anne

- Mentoring has the potential to be a key resource in supporting staff on maternity leave to find positive and constructive patterns of thought towards their return to work.
- Mentoring provided the time, focus and safety to verbalise nebulous thoughts and fears. With the mentor’s encouragement, the mothers felt validated, their confidence improved, and it supported them to plan and find solutions to complex challenges. The mothers could then generate their own strategies to bring about positive actions that mitigated their concerns and worries.

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.ⁱⁱⁱ Countries in which there is long maternity leave tend to have a higher motherhood penalty.^{iii iv} However, short maternity leave may make women leave the workforce or avoid having children.^{vi} 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 diverse 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 mentoring programme included a ‘mentee toolkit’, a booklet with prompts and resources to support mentoring sessions. 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

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. Mothers who received maternity mentoring felt that this support helped them to navigate the challenges of new parenthood and productively re-engage with work at the end of maternity leave.

- The mentored mothers uniformly considered mentoring to be a positive and valuable experience that met and exceeded their hopeful expectations. Three out of five of the mothers who received mentoring spontaneously reported that they planned to continue with the mentoring arrangement at their own expense after completion of the study and one reported referring a family member for mentoring. This outcome is a powerful marker of how valuable they found the mentoring.
- We asked the mentored women what they thought they would use mentoring for and then what they had used it for. The two most prevalent topics were how to deal with work and how to balance the competing priorities they now faced in their life between self/baby/ work commitments.
- Mentoring provided the time, focus and safety to verbalise nebulous thoughts and fears. With the mentor’s encouragement, the mothers felt validated, their confidence improved, and it supported them to plan and find solutions to complex challenges. The mothers could then generate their own strategies to bring about positive actions that mitigated their concerns and worries.
- Mothers who received maternity mentoring felt that it had helped them to feel more positive about returning to work during maternity leave and to engage productively with work on their return.
- Mothers who received maternity mentoring placed considerable value on how the mentoring process gave them time and space during the chaotic first few months of motherhood to concentrate on themselves and reflect on what they were going through.
- When women with no access to maternity mentoring were asked if talking to someone outside of their usual social connections might have helped as they adapted to motherhood, they all unambiguously agreed it would.
- Mothers faced challenges from the moment that 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.

- The opportunity to access an informed, external, attentive and supportive listener was recognised by all participants as beneficial during the transition to motherhood.
- There was clear evidence that having resources to extend the mentoring process into the everyday lives of the mothers was an effective strategy to maximise their continued engagement with and learning through the mentoring. The mentee toolkit, summary emails from the mentor, suggestions for resources, readings to access, and pre-session activities: all helped to embed more securely the benefits of mentoring for the mothers. It is important that these elements of the programme are not lost in any future iterations.

Recommendations for Employers



Support staff in accessing effective maternity mentoring programmes. This may be offered through an employee benefit scheme.



Staff should be able to access repeated maternity mentoring sessions with the same mentor during pregnancy and after the return to work.



Use a maternity mentoring programme that gives mothers the resources to extend the mentoring process into their everyday lives, such as a mentee toolkit, summary emails from the mentor, suggestions for resources, readings to access, and pre-session activities.

“I do feel like I’ve got a good let’s say like bank of like, resilience in there now. And probably that’s probably heightened by the fact that I’ve had someone almost like patting me on the back or like, you know, like building me up to it.” Evie

“It [mentoring] was really useful ... for helping to prepare to think about going back to work, but even to think about like using the KIT days... I kind of took, I took charge of them. I think this is actually, really, really important ... and so I did a few calls, got excited was like, I like my colleagues, I’m looking forward to going back to work” Evie

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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- Making Maternity Work: A Longitudinal Analysis of Employees’ Experiences of Maternity Leave

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