

How to – Support Employees Returning from Parental Leave

Being a new parent, or parent to more than one child, is a major life event. After time away from work, returning can be very stressful for some people. Returning to work from parental leave should be given similar consideration and support as an employee returning from a leave for any reason (i.e., worker's compensation, disability etc.). A survey of Canadians found that 79% felt that their return to work after parental leave could have been managed better, and 40% considered quitting during the return-to-work (RTW) process. This can include proper workplace and business supports, and mental health and emotional support.

So, how can we do our best to support the RTW transition? Commonly reported themes include:

- Ongoing communication (if agreed upon) during leave
- Team connectedness while still on leave (i.e., inviting to celebrations or holiday events)
- Feeling valued and considered while off or upon returning
- Inclusion in business planning and/or career opportunities while on leave
- Role clarity and expectations prior to returning
- Openness to flexible or graduated hours upon return
- Opportunity for proper onboarding and re-training as needed

Many of these will be addressed if a leader is experienced in practicing empathy. Empathy fuels connection, and rather than feeling FOR someone encourages you to feel WITH them. What is empathy and how is it different than sympathy?

Brené Brown explains here - ([3 min watch](#))

Ensuring empathy is being practiced during all aspects of the parental leave process allows leaders to make decisions and communicate mindfully in a supportive manner.



Checklist of Supportive Actions for Leaders

Before Parental Leave:

- Discuss how frequently the employee would like to communicate about work before their leave starts, and what form of communication they prefer.
- Offer the option for the employee to remain on the team email distribution list or other form of company communication, allowing them to be informed of company announcements or changes, awards, internal job postings, etc. If this is not possible, designate a key point of contact who can pass along this information to the employee.

Sources:

<https://eleveneleventalent.com/blog-content/how-to-support-employees-returning-from-mat-leave>

<https://thisismomsatwork.com/wp-content/uploads/edd/2021/05/2021-Maternity-Leave-Experience-Report-Moms-at-Work-1.pdf>

<https://engineerscanada.ca/sites/default/files/Managing-Transitions-en.pdf>

<https://brenebrown.com/videos/rsa-short-empathy/>

During Parental Leave:

- Make direct contact with the employee at agreed upon intervals to check-in. Allow them to share about their home life if they wish to, or simply state that you hope they are doing well and that you look forward to seeing them again soon.
- Consider the employee's career plans when doing business or succession planning.

Leading up to their RTW:

- 4 weeks prior the RTW date, arrange a meeting or phone call to confirm the employee's position and role. Discuss any initial assignments, or career plans and use this time to discuss if there are any fears or reservations around returning. Listening is one of the most important pieces to make sure the employee feels heard and understood.
- Where possible, consider the employee's preference or any accommodation requests that will support their RTW process. Some examples may include a flexible schedule or a gradual return to work plan. This may make things easier for adjusting to work and childcare transitions.
- Ensure that appropriate arrangements for technology requirements, computer access and a designated workspace have been coordinated prior to the employee's first day back.
- Communicate with fellow team members about the return and any resumed or new roles.

Return to Work:

- Schedule regular 1:1 check-ins with the employee. Open lines of communication will enable ongoing support and help identify challenges and setbacks early on.
- In addition to discussing work responsibilities, consider using tools like the [Mental Health Continuum](#), a stress scale of 1-10 or an 'emotional weather report' to help the employee articulate how things are going. Please see the 'How to do Mental Health Check-Ins' document for more information.
- Practice empathy. Acknowledge that the RTW from parental leave may bring up many emotions for the employee. Empathy allows us to connect to these emotions even if we have not experienced the same situation.
- Offer retraining opportunities, professional development, or mentorship.
- Ensure the employee feels valued. Recognize contributions and provide positive reinforcement.

One of the most important things you can do as a leader is to role model and set the tone with workplace culture regarding parental leaves. Communicate a culture of respect and value around parental leaves and employees who take them. Send the message that employees on leave continue to be a valued part of the team and that their productive re-entry and continued career are of strategic importance.

Sources:

<https://eleveneventalent.com/blog-content/how-to-support-employees-returning-from-mat-leave>
<https://thisismomsatwork.com/wp-content/uploads/edd/2021/05/2021-Maternity-Leave-Experience-Report-Moms-at-Work-1.pdf>
<https://engineerscanada.ca/sites/default/files/Managing-Transitions-en.pdf>
<https://brenebrown.com/videos/rsa-short-empathy/>