



# Mindful Return

Planning a peaceful, empowered, and radiant return from parental leave.

## 99 Questions to Ask Yourself Before, During and After Parental Leave

*Congratulations on your upcoming or new arrival! By having a baby, you are going through an experience that will forever change your life, both personally and professionally. You created life. And now, you're tasked with figuring out how exactly to balance your old patterns with caring for a new bundle of joy.*

*If you're like most parents, you have some (or a lot of!) anxiety about what the future holds. **Know that you are not alone.** The secret to silencing these fears and gearing up to return to the office lies in how you prepare for your new role as a working mom.*

*The following 99 questions are intended to help you think through all those many aspects of life you'll want to navigate as you go out on parental leave and return to work. Spend some time answering these questions, and you'll set yourself up to make your maternity leave not a career setback, but a **career-advancement tool.***

### Ask Yourself These Questions Before Baby Arrives

#### **At the Office:**

- What strategies can I use to prepare my colleagues for my leave in a well-planned, thoughtful way? (Need a template maternity leave plan? See [www.mindfulreturn.com/template-maternity-leave-plan](http://www.mindfulreturn.com/template-maternity-leave-plan). Need a template paternity leave plan? See <https://www.mindfulreturn.com/template-paternity-leave-plan/>.)  
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- What daily tasks and longer-term projects will need to be taken care of while I am out on leave?  
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- Who will fill in for me? Which projects will be assigned to which individuals?  
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- Do those filling in for me have the resources they need to get the job done? Who needs to learn what? Who needs to meet whom?  
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- If colleagues are taking over projects while I'm out, what are their expectations about what will happen upon my return? What are my expectations? My boss's expectations?

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- Have I documented any routine processes I use that others might not know about?

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- If I go into labor at the office, what's the plan? Does a colleague have important emergency contact information?

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- Have I scheduled a conversation with my boss to cover my leave plans? When will this meeting take place?

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- Do I plan to communicate with my employer while I am on leave, and if so, by what means and how often?

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- Can I build planning-my-parental-leave into my official goal-setting process, and at annual review time, can I be evaluated on how well I navigated my leave and return?

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***In Considering How Many Weeks to Take for Leave:***

- What amount of paid or unpaid leave is your employer required to provide you? (Be sure to check out both state and federal laws. The federal Family and Medical Leave Act, for example, requires your employer not to give away your job for 12 weeks, but DC's version of the Act requires your job be held open for you for 16 weeks.)

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- What amount of paid leave does your employer provide?  
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- How much paid leave can you cobble together through sick days, vacation days, disability benefits, etc.?  
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- What type of financial cushion do you have? (We started a savings account early for my second maternity leave, knowing it was likely to be partially unpaid, and I “paid” myself out of that account during my leave.)  
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- How will the length of time you take affect the work you’re doing? Is there a conference or a project you want to return for that will affect the timing of your return?  
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- What do your ob/gyn and pediatrician say about what’s best for you and your baby’s health?  
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- Knowing what you know about yourself, how happy will you be at home for an extended period?  
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- Is the amount of leave you declare now negotiable later? In other words, if you tell your employer you’d like to take 12 weeks, but later you find you’d like to extend it by a week or two, would your employer be open to that conversation? If you said no, are you sure?  
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- Would your employer be open to phase-back-in options? (For example, I came back 3 days the first week, 4 days the second, and had longer days at work as each week went on. Some employers also automatically offer things like a return to an 80% schedule for the first month back.)
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## ***In Deciding on Childcare Options:***

- Have I talked to others who have used the types of childcare options I'm exploring (center-based daycare, in-home daycare, nanny, nanny share, au pair)?
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- If I'm planning to use daycare, have I put myself on any required waitlists? Can I plan to visit one per month to spread out the visits?
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- Are there parent listservs in my area that might be helpful in this search?
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## ***In Thinking About Feeding Your Baby:***

- What can I do to plan ahead for feeding my baby? What are my thoughts, feelings, and current plans regarding nursing, pumping, and formula?
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- If I plan to pump, can I block milk pumping times on my calendar now (perhaps for the next 6 months or a year), so that I can carve out time in my day before other meetings get scheduled?
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- Where will I pump?
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## ***In Thinking About Your Working Parent Posse:***

- Who can help guide me through this transition to working parenthood?  
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- Are there colleagues who recently have gone on leave at my organization who can tell me about their experiences?  
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- What do I like about their approaches? What do I dislike?  
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- Are there other new parent communities (online or in-person) where I can meet other working mamas?  
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## ***In Thinking About How You Will Take Care of And Nurture Yourself:***

- Is finding time to take care of myself (even just a few minutes) a daily habit? If not, how do I make it one?  
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- What fills me up and calms me down? If I'm not sure, can I journal about it?  
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## **Ask Yourself These Questions While You Are Out On Parental Leave**

### ***In Thinking About What Communication Plan You Made with Your Employer:***

- Am I living up to the expectations I set regarding communicating with those at work?  
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- If not, how can I best communicate to change those expectations?  
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- If I didn't set any specific expectations around communication, do I need to give someone a heads up as to when I'll be in touch?  
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- Is it possible that *not* being in touch on substantive projects during my leave is in itself a strong leadership stance?  
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### ***In Thinking About Whether Your Planned Leave Is the Right Length:***

- Is the leave I planned to take feeling too short? If yes, can I negotiate to extend it?  
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- If it's feeling too long, can I talk about going back earlier?  
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### ***In Thinking About How You Will Reintegrate:***

- Toward the end of my leave, can I put meetings on the books with my key office stakeholders for the first few weeks I'm back, to have them fill me in on the key things I should know from my time away?  
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- Is there a working parent colleague I can plan to have lunch with the first day I'm back in the office, with whom I can be open about how I'm feeling?
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## ***In Assessing Whether Your Child Care Plan is On Track:***

- If I'm on daycare center waitlists, what can I do to improve my chances of getting a spot? (These may involve sending handwritten notes announcing your baby's arrival and declaring your love for their center, or having your partner call to check in and let them know they're still your first choice.)
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- If I'm planning to hire a nanny or an *au pair*, do I have a plan to interview candidates?
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- Do I have backup plans if my original childcare options fall through?
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## ***In Thinking Through the Transition Period and the Return to Work:***

- What supplies will I need for my child? (Cooler bag, ice packs, change of clothes, bottles, etc.)
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- What meals can I cook and freeze for the adults in the house, to make dinner prep a bit easier upon my return?
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- If I'm breastfeeding, can I freeze milk for my baby so I don't have to worry as much about how much I pump every day? (Note that pumping to have extra is often easier in the mornings, when your supply is highest.)
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## ***In Thinking About How You Will Take Care of Yourself:***

- Do I have a self-care plan?

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- Have I found a community of other working parents?

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## ***In Thinking About the Skills Parenthood Is Helping You to Develop:***

- What new skills am I developing through parenthood?

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- Am I giving myself credit for these new skills? If not, how can I?

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## **Ask Yourself These Questions Upon Your Return to Work**

### ***In Planning the Schedule for Your Return:***

- Can I phase in my return to work? If so, what might that look like?

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- Could I start during the middle of a week, or on reduced hours for the first few weeks?

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- Can I phase my child into childcare before my first day of work, so we both can get used to the new arrangement?

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## ***In Thinking Through Your Reintegration Into Work Projects:***

- Have I set up 1:1 meetings with key stakeholders for my first few weeks back, to get an overview of what happened while I was gone and ideas for how I can be most helpful and effective moving forward?

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- Is there work I want to or feel I should take back? Have I communicated this to my colleagues?

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- Did my leave provide a growth opportunity for any colleagues, such that there are things I don't need to take back, and where I can take a managerial or strategy role instead?

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- Can I continue to mentor any colleagues who covered projects for me while I was out?

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## ***In Thinking About Your Strengths and Your Value to Your Employer:***

- During my annual review process, are there ways I can take credit for having carried out a well-planned and executed leave and return?

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- Are there skills I am gaining as a parent that I can put to use in the office? Have I advertised these new skills to my colleagues?

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- Can I “curate” my to-do list, so that the most important things are sure to get done each day?
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## ***In Thinking About Your Work Schedule, A Few Weeks After Your Return:***

- Is the arrangement I’ve established for the hours I will work, and where I will work them, proving to be a good one for me?
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- If not, with whom can I discuss this to talk about possible changes to work hours, telecommuting, or flexibility?
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## ***In Thinking About Your Relationship With Your Child’s Caregiver***

- Am I happy with the way the relationship with my child’s caregiver has started? If not, what exactly is bothering me?
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- Do I give good instructions to my caregiver in the morning, as to what my baby’s night was like?
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- Do I receive enough information from the caregiver at the end of the day about how the day went?
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- If the relationship hasn’t gotten off on the best foot, what can I do to remedy it?
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- Is it time to look for another option? If so, what are my other options?
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## ***In Thinking About Sharing the Household Load With Your Partner:***

- Do I have an open and ongoing dialog with my partner about how we share our home and baby commitments?
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- Is there a weekly time we can touch base on who is doing what, to see if what we're doing is working for both of us?
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- Are there responsibilities my partner and I can share differently?
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- Are there things we could be delegating to a third party?
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- Have we discussed how we will share responsibilities when the unexpected (baby sick days, snow days, etc.) happens?
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## ***In Thinking About How Well I Am Taking Care Of Myself:***

- Am I eating and drinking enough during my workday (especially if pumping) to keep up my energy (and milk supply)?
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- What small but DAILY act of self-care can I commit to?



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- Am I going to bed as early possible at night, to get a few hours of uninterrupted sleep?
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- What can I do so I remember to cut myself lots of slack, knowing that this is period is incredibly hard for everyone?
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## ***In Thinking About the Working Parent Village That Will Support Me:***

- Are there parents at my office I can plan to have lunch with each day of my first week back
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- Are there parent groups at my office that I could join? If not, could I create one?
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- Are there other working parents at my child's daycare with whom I might connect?
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- Are there online communities I could engage with around working parent issues?
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Finally, remind yourself that returning to work after parental leave is a process, not a single event. The first days are indeed the hardest days, and within a year, you'll be feeling much more like the new normal version of someone known as you. For now, though, take the time to feel and acknowledge whatever it is that you're feeling, and know that the other mamas out there who have done this return-to-work thing have felt these things, too.

For more support, order a copy of the book ***Back to Work After Baby: How to Plan and Navigate a Mindful Return From Maternity Leave***, and consider joining an upcoming session of the Mindful Return program ([www.mindfulreturn.com/e-course](http://www.mindfulreturn.com/e-course) - for new moms, and [www.mindfulreturn.com/paternityleavecourse](http://www.mindfulreturn.com/paternityleavecourse) - for new dads).

# Employers: Please Train Your Managers On Parental Leave-Related Behavior

**Why? Because your employees deserve to be treated with respect when they do the very human thing of having a child.**

By LORI MIHALICH-LEVIN  
on February 17, 2023 at 10:48 AM



If January is any indication, 2023 is going to be an important year for turning up the volume on the struggles new parents face in the workplace. As a lawyer and working parent, I first tuned into the story that went viral in the legal press beginning around January 10, about a grossly inappropriate text message a law firm attorney sent to a former associate who left after her maternity leave. Then, on January 22, I spotted the Washington Post piece entitled “WNBA player Dearica Hamby says Aces ‘bullied’ her over pregnancy.” The legal and athletic professions may be worlds apart, but these stories share a common theme.

In the case involving legal professionals, an employment lawyer named Joe Dileno, who was then a senior attorney at Zashin & Rich, a Cleveland-based law firm, sent a text message to a former colleague who had left the firm after returning from maternity leave. In his message, Dileno called this associate “soul-less and morally bankrupt” for leaving the firm. “What you did – collecting salary from the firm while sitting on your a–, except to find time to interview for another job – says everything one needs to know about your character. Karma’s a b—h.” Though the firm ultimately parted ways with Dileno, it first issued a defensive-sounding statement calling his text a “heat-of-the-moment” response and noting that the associate had taken a new job “within days of her return to work.”

Fast-forward not even two weeks, and we hear from former Las Vegas Aces WNBA star Dearica Hamby that she was bullied by the management of her former team when she became pregnant with her second child. Hamby says that she was both asked about

whether her pregnancy was planned, and then chided for “not taking precautions to not get pregnant.” She has since been traded to the Los Angeles Sparks and wrote that “Being traded is part of the business. Being lied to, bullied, manipulated, and discriminated against is not.”

The problem in both of these cases isn’t one of policies. Both the WNBA and Zashin & Rich had maternity leave policies in place. One key issue here is what the parental leave community refers to as “winning the manager lottery.” According to Benefit Bump’s Mom Survey, more than a third of new parents who leave their jobs do so because of “poor manager support.”

Employers, please pause and ask yourselves this question: do you build any training around managing parental leaves into your education for the managers, partners, counsel, etc. at your organization? If not, prioritize this issue now. Don’t do it because legal risk and employee retention are on the line. Do it because your employees deserve to be treated with respect when they do the very human thing of having a child.

When you formally educate your managers, teach them about your organization’s parental leave-related policies and benefits, the laws that apply, and who they can turn to for support in managing a parental leave on their team. Don’t stop there, though. Educate them about the well-documented maternal biases (see Brigid Schulte’s work) and fatherhood forfeits (see Jasmine Kelland’s research) that lead so many of us to make inaccurate assumptions about caregivers. Teach them about Yale neuroscientist Dr. Ruth Feldman’s findings, too, that show the remarkable neuroplasticity for adults in the year following the birth of a child, and Amy Henderson’s work on the career-critical skills that parenthood promotes. Give them facts about the supply-and-demand nature of breastfeeding, and show them how to protect employee rights under the new PUMP Act.

Above all, emphasize that parental leave is a normal part of a career, and that inappropriate behavior will not be tolerated. Research shows that “in companies where the managers recognized parental leave as no more than a brief interlude in a person’s long-term career ... [and where there was a] supportive company culture, [employees] reported a renewed energy and focus for their work, a feeling of being valued, and an enhancement of professional relationships.” (See research by David Collings, Yseult Freney, and Lisa van der Werff.)

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**Lori Mihalich-Levin, JD, believes in empowering working parents. She is the founder and CEO of [Mindful Return](#), author of *Back to Work After Baby: How to Plan and Navigate a Mindful Return from Maternity Leave*, and co-host of the Parents at Work Podcast. She is mama to two wonderful red-headed boys (ages 10 and 12) and is a health care lawyer in private practice. Her thought leadership has been featured in publications including *Forbes*, *The Washington Post*, *New York Times Parenting*, and *Thrive Global*.**