Returning to work post-baby

Coos, gurgles, babbles, first smile, first food, first crawl, maybe even first steps or first words—the early days of your baby's life are full of firsts. But now it's time for you to leave the nest and return to work. Even



if you always said you could never be a stay-at-home parent, many moms and dads are surprised to find themselves torn about the reality of leaving their little one in the care of others. Or you might have always imagined yourself staying home during the early years, but then crunched the numbers and realized it's not feasible. One thing is certain: going back to work after having a child is a major life transition that will take some getting used to.

Acknowledge the big picture

While you may resent the fact that you have to go back to work because of financial reasons, take a realistic look at the alternatives. Sure, juggling work and family priorities can create a lot of stress, but the financial strain can be just as stressful. And while many parents can accentuate the joys of staying at home with the kids, many more will tell you about the day-to-day struggles—the moments of boredom, exhaustion and lack of mental stimulation. There are good and bad points to both scenarios and while the grass may look greener on the other side, remind yourself that for most parents there is no "perfect" situation.

Leave kids in good hands

Do your homework on child care (ideally well before you're back on the job) so you can go to work reassured that your child is getting the best care possible. If a grandparent, relative or nanny is providing care at home, discuss the ground rules, especially around discipline, nutrition and activities in advance, to ensure you're both on the same page and that your expectations are clearly conveyed.

If you're sending your child to daycare, talk to other parents whose children go there. A licensed daycare program follows government standards, including child to teacher ratios, and also has to adhere to certain curriculum guidelines. Sending kids to a well-managed daycare will give you some peace of mind and help you rest easy in knowing they are not only being well taken care of, but are also getting a quality education and learning how to socialize with other children—valuable skills that will prepare them for school.

Get real

Many new parents hold themselves up to impossible standards they'll never be able to achieve. Go easy on yourself, especially during your first months back at work. If leaving the laundry for another day means you'll be able to spend some extra time nuzzling your little one, let the washing slide. Remember: when you look back on these early moments with your kids you're more likely to remember the giggles of their first ride on a swing than the toys all over the floor. Constantly striving to be the "perfect parent" and comparing yourself to others is the most certain way to set yourself up for failure.

The same goes for work. Of course, you're there to do a good job, but you need to acknowledge the realities that parenthood demands. Managing expectations, while one of the biggest challenges, is also the best way to keep you and your employer content.

Give yourself a break

Probably the biggest change new parents have to adjust to is the absence of "me" time. Your world goes from being all about your own choices, decisions and schedule to revolving around parenting, work and home priorities. Without time for reflection or relaxation, you can start to feel like a hamster on a wheel, running nowhere fast. Whether it's waking up 30 minutes early in the morning to read the paper and sip your coffee, keeping a journal or carving out time during the week to go to the gym, make an effort to schedule some time in for you to be alone with yourself and your thoughts. The break might seem tiny, but its impact on your

psyche can be huge, giving you the insight and energy to face the day-to-day juggling act of being a working parent.

If alternative work arrangements, such as flexible schedules or occasional work from home are acceptable within your role, be sure to consult with your manager to create a plan that works for you both. Doing so might save you precious commute time, help you better manage a tight schedule, and can give you more face time with the kids.

Whether you've dreamed of staying home for your kids' early years or always intended on heading back to the workplace, the changeover from new parent to "working parent" can be filled with anxiety, guilt and a feeling that you're doing a mediocre job at everything. But by being realistic, managing expectations (your own and colleagues'), and going easy on yourself, you will not only get past these early bumps in the road, but may even learn to enjoy the ride.