

Help! I just had a baby and I'm freaking out over returning to work.

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Many women experience the same fear of returning to work after they have a baby. Even the most driven women are surprised to find the drive to succeed has vanished after the baby's birth. The maternal instinct to care for your baby kicked in a lot harder and faster than expected. What to do?

Everyone is different. Do not compare yourself to others and be honest with your feelings. The greatest disservice to your child and family is an unhappy mother. Look deep inside and figure out what is the right path for you. There are sacrifices to be made on both ends. If you cut back on work, then your career will be affected significantly but to the benefit of your child. And if you return to work, you will likely feel guilt for leaving your child. Whatever you decide, go in with full force and have no regrets for your decision.

The full-time working mom.

Many women need to work and return to the workforce after maternity leave ends (if not sooner). Or, perhaps they need the break from a crying baby and want to return to work. Or, the drive to succeed never left. For these women, your career is truly your second child. Your supervisors are going to wait and see if you will be able to handle the same kind of responsibility you had before the baby's birth. Although employment laws protect mothers, the reality is many women do not return to work with the same intensity and are not as "valuable" as they once were. The first year of life for your baby is also going to be the most difficult one for your career. Figuring out the balance between career and baby and even family is a real challenge. If your dream is to [become a partner in a law firm](#) or obtain a high-level in-house position like General Counsel or an equivalent high-powered position, you truly have to leave your home life at home. You need to put the same amount of dedication into your profession as you had before the baby.

What does that mean? If you are an associate, that means you need to accept every assignment that is offered, work the same amount of hours as before (if that's nights and weekends, then it will be nights and weekends), interview and train junior associates and staff, meet with new and existing clients, write articles, etc. etc. While you are at work your focus is advancing your career and doing everything possible to ensure it happens. Do not put pressure on yourself to resume where you left off. Ease into it by setting goals for yourself for the first, second and third months back at work. For instance, during your first month set the goal of working 80% of the number of hours per month as your monthly average. So if you typically bill 185 hours per month, then make sure to bill at least 150 hours during your first month.

You must compartmentalize your life. There is a time for being a mommy, and there is a time to be an attorney. If you have a nanny or take your child to day-care, instruct the person who is watching over your child to call you only in the event of an emergency, such as a high fever, terrible rash, etc. You owe it to yourself to have as little distraction as possible. What that means is that you need to do the groundwork to make sure you trust the caretaker 100%. You have to understand no one is going to take care of your child like you. That being said, there are plenty of people who will take very good care of your child and make sure that s/he is happy and healthy. Spend a lot of time with the caretaker prior to returning to work so that you are comfortable knowing your child is in good hands. Ideally, in the event of an emergency, there should be another person (parent/grandparent/friend/partner) who can assist in managing the child until you return home. If you have a solid support system in place before returning to work, you will be much more effective at work.

Once you leave work, the same level of focus and attention should be put into your family. It will be difficult to juggle career and family for the first year or so. Be kind to yourself, and allow yourself to experience guilt for

leaving your child and for leaving work.

All of this will pay off in the end. Statistically, women who are capable of balancing their career and family are the most fulfilled. Furthermore, they will not have to take a step back in their careers as a sacrifice for their family. These women understand and accept no situation is perfect, but the family will thrive as long as the mother is happy and setting a good example for her children.

The part-time attorney.

After having a baby, many women try to work part-time and or do not return to work until their children are in school. If you are one of the rare cases of women who can work part-time, that is terrific. But, you still have to understand that you are compromising your position within your law firm or organization. Many firms/organizations offer the same level of health care benefits to their part-time employees. When times are tough, you will run the risk of being one of the first people to be let go since your cost is the equivalent to that of a full-time employee. Further, law firms tend to let go anyone not considered a "superstar" in tough times. And while you might be a brilliant and talented attorney, you are still only able to work a certain number of hours per week and your position is compromised within the firm.

On the hand, there are firms who tout themselves as being highly supportive women working part-time. Working Mother magazine lists the top 50 Best Law Firms for Women (<http://www.workingmother.com/BestCompanies/node/1421/list/271>). I do believe there are some very rare cases where a woman can work on a part-time basis and not have compromised her career. She is still on partner track (although it would take a few more years) and has the same respect as her full-time peers. This is not the norm and difficult to achieve. If you can work part-time in such an environment, you too will be happy and have made a wonderful sacrifice for your family.

The full-time mom returning to practice after a hiatus.

Many women do not want to return to work, and do take a hiatus from practicing law for several years. When you decide to return to practice, you must understand you simply do not have the same skill set. And while you were away, associates junior to yourself are now at your level and are your current competition. The market may have changed, and the need for someone with your experience may have diminished dramatically. For instance, if you were a corporate attorney in 2007 and now returning to the practice of law after a two-year hiatus, you will be surprised to find that it is VERY difficult to find a job as corporate attorney. You will need to be very patient with the job search as it could take many, many months - even years. You must be open to the type of work you seek and do not expect to be compensated at the same level you were. As with the corporate attorney example, this person needs to apply to all kinds of positions - litigation, real estate, employment, etc. In an interview, not only do you have to prove your enthusiasm in returning to work but also your dedication to practicing law. Employers will be weary of hiring you for fear you really are not dedicated to practicing and will quit to return home. And once you do start working, even in a position you are less than thrilled with, you must put 110% of your energy into your career. If the firm expects you to bill 160 hours per month, you should work 180. Immediately make your presence known in the organization and reach out to every supervisor with whom you may work. Accept all assignments offered. For the first 6-12 months of your career, you must be a superstar and prove your value. The effort will pay off. Even though the type of work is less than ideal, your supervisors will respect you and treat you very well. And, eventually you will be able to shape your career.