

Returning to work after parental leave? Read this first

The thought of getting back to work after taking parental leave can be pretty exciting – but there's no doubt it can be daunting, too.

No matter what you're feeling, planning ahead can help you tackle any challenges and makes for a smoother journey.

Here an expert in work transitions offers tips and strategies to help you make your return to work as trouble-free as possible.

Keep in touch

Planning ahead for your return to work before you take parental leave can set you up for a much smoother transition when the time comes.

Justine Alter is a psychologist and co-director at [Transitioning Well](#), an agency specialising in support for parental leave, work-life and mature age transitions. Alter says setting up a plan to communicate throughout leave is key.

“Discussing early with your manager, team and HR a clear ‘keeping in touch’ strategy for while you’re on leave will help you to navigate your way through this unique and often challenging transition,” she says.

According to Alter, most people aren't aware that they can use up to 10 days of paid ‘keeping in touch’ days. Employees on unpaid parental leave are entitled to take these days to go back to work so they can stay up to date with their workplace, refresh their skills and assist their return to work.

Alter recommends using your [keeping in touch days](#) to attend planning days or meetings that will help you stay connected and on top of what's happening in the

workplace.

Think ahead about flexible working arrangements

If you're planning to request flexible working arrangements when you return, you'll need to put this in writing, Alter says.

By law your organisation needs to respond to your request in writing within 21 days, she says, adding that [Fair Work Ombudsman resources](#) can help you establish what your workplace entitlements are.

Alter says it's a good idea to lock in flexible working arrangements in writing before going on leave as managers and roles could change during your absence.

"Many people find themselves in the tricky situation of having negotiated a flexible working arrangement verbally with their manager only to find that whilst they were on leave things changed and their intentions could no longer be honoured," she says.

Alter acknowledges it can be tricky to negotiate the specifics of your proposed flexible working arrangement when you haven't yet finalised childcare hours. But communicating and putting your broad intentions in writing will make things easier for you once you return to work, she explains.

Be prepared on the home front

Alter suggests it really helps to have open conversations with your partner (if you have one) around sharing domestic duties and the care of children when you go back to work.

If it's an option for you, it's worth looking at how you could outsource cleaning, preparing meals or other household duties.

Get ahead on childcare

It's a good idea to start transitioning your child into day care before you return to work, Alter says. "This will allow your child to settle and for you to get accustomed to not being there with them the whole time."

Having contingencies in place for when your child falls ill is also important, she says.

Be kind to yourself

Remember, any transition in life takes time.

“You may not feel like your old self when you return to work after parental leave,” Alter says. “It may take time for your confidence to return and for your neurons to fire up! Making the time and space to have some ‘me’ time is really important to keep your life balanced when you return to work after parental leave.”

Extending your parental leave

If you decide to extend your parental leave, the sooner you communicate this the better for everyone involved as the business may need to backfill your role.

It’s also a good idea to check out the [legal boundaries](#) around requesting an extension on parental leave.

In many cases, it’s better to request a longer period of leave initially as it’s easier to come back earlier than planned than to request an extension later, explains Alter.