



# MUMS RETURNING TO WORK

A GUIDE FOR WORKING MUMS

# PEER SUPPORT AMONG FAMILIES

**Families Supporting Families** is a project at Outside the Box which is developing peer support and exploring what things help support different kinds of families. We are looking at peer support across a broad range of people and topics. The people include parents who have poor mental wellbeing, parents with teenagers, families with young children, grandparents who are helping with day-to-day parenting support, Rainbow families where a parent or child describes themselves as LGBT+, families who have to come to Scotland from other countries, and families with a child who has disabilities or other different needs. The issues include: mental wellbeing, social inclusion, peer support, access to community led activity and services where needed.

## Mums returning to work

We met with groups of women who are returning to work after having children. They described how there were local peer support groups and networks for Mums with babies and young children, which many women find are good for their own wellbeing and for their children. These groups mostly happen during the day and this source of peer support stops for most women once they go back to work.

From speaking to Mums and employers, we have developed 2 resources:

- A discussion paper that helps highlight the good practice of employers in Scotland as well as looking for solutions to support Mums to have equal access to work.
- This guide outlines some of the issues women are facing in their return to work. It gives information about support networks and shares some of their experiences – which we hope will give some emotional and practical reassurance to other women in these circumstances.

**We want to thank all the Mums who helped us with this guide.**

## What are women saying?

What was good about going back to work?

‘I was really pleased to get back to work, don’t get me wrong I love being a Mummy but I needed to have adult company and another purpose again.’

‘I work with a supportive team, where things in the work place are not always perfect, there is always scope to discuss this and look to solutions without feeling that you’ll be in trouble for raising them.’

‘Good communication and flexibility is key.’

## What is happening for Mums returning to work?

There are gaps for women around their awareness of maternity rights and in their rights when returning to work. In addition, many women are unaware of the supports available to them. What Mums said was significant for them was what happens for women returning to work after having children and how this impacts on their family lives.

## Why it matters?

An estimated **70% of mothers** in Scotland are currently in paid employment. This is three times as many as 60 years ago. The majority of mothers in employment work part-time, six in ten with children who are pre-school or primary school age and half with children at secondary school.

A National Childbirth Trust survey has found that **one in three women find it difficult to return to work** after maternity leave. Work place social support was one of the main factors influencing how women rated their experience of returning to work.

‘At first when I told my employer I was pregnant, he panicked because it’s a small firm and I was the only one doing that job. I felt worried by his reaction but, to give him his due, he spoke to me about it and we worked out a way around it suitable for the firm meaning I felt very supported when I came back.’

‘I felt like I got my identity back- past being a Mummy, which gave me a bit more confidence.’

‘Getting to come in for team meetings before my return was helpful so I could get my head back in the zone again.’

‘I had a phased return which was really good for me because I was feeling really emotional about leaving my baby.’

Women were worried about their child missing them, that their child’s development might be affected by them going back- while many felt that it would be challenging to continue breastfeeding after their return to employment. In addition, women had fears about managing multiple responsibilities as well as specific work related concerns such as the attitude of their boss and /or colleagues. The most common concern overall related to childcare.

## What’s the cost?

The cost and availability of childcare is a major issue for families, particularly Mums returning to work. Many are unable to afford to return to work on a full-time basis as this would mean paying exorbitant fees for childcare to enable them back to employment. The **average cost of a part-time nursery placement in Scotland for a child under two is estimated at £6000** per year. Only 25% of councils in Scotland report they have enough childcare for every parent working full-time. That figure is even lower for parents who do not work

‘Good family back-up and support always helps but not everyone has that option.’

‘Knowing that my work was breast feeding friendly and I’d have a space to express milk for my baby was helpful.’

From the point women informed their employer they were pregnant to the point they were due to return to work many Mums had similar experiences at each end; when employers were supportive of women during maternity, they were generally supportive on their return. When employers were difficult, it tended to be the case that the whole process was stressful and challenging.

typical office hours and for parents of disabled children.

Using family to get back to work was an option that worked for some- families were able to share the responsibilities, particularly grandparents who were either retired or working part-time taking a major role in helping with childcare. But as times change in relation to different responsibilities and affordability to retire, many Mums were unable to rely on family to give enough of their time to meaningfully subsidise child care.

## Maternity discrimination

The Equality and Human rights Commission research states that more than three quarters of pregnant women and new mothers, **the equivalent of 390,000 women experience negative and potentially discriminatory treatment** at work each year.

ACAS has recently published guidance to help employers create supportive workplaces for women during pregnancy and maternity. ACAS received

## What were the challenges of going back?

‘There probably is a lot of information out there but some employers are genuinely in the dark about how they should approach maternity and women’s return to work.’

‘I knew as soon as I told my boss I was pregnant, I would be viewed as having very little use and she did not disappoint. I was isolated from the rest of the team and told I was a ‘burden.’ On my return she made sure I felt unwelcome- I left 4 months later.’

‘I was forced to come back on a full -time basis or I was told I could lose my job.’

more than 14,000 calls last year about pregnancy and maternity issues- an increase of almost 10% on the previous year.

Some examples of maternity discrimination include:

- Pressure to resign.
- Reduction of pay/hours.
- Refusal of training or promotion opportunities.
- Demotion on return to work.
- Removal of responsibilities.

## What the Law says

Legislative provisions include:

- Equality Act 2010 which outlaws discrimination against employees because of the ‘protected characteristic’ of pregnancy and maternity during the ‘protected period.’
- Employment Rights Act 1996 which sets out rights to health and safety, time off for ante-natal care, maternity leave and unfair dismissal.
- Maternity & Parental Leave etc. Regulations 1999 which set out a woman’s entitlement to maternity leave and the notification requirements.

‘I felt so alone and isolated- I didn’t know my rights and was being told I didn’t have any.’

‘My employer sent me 3 separate contracts after I told her I was pregnant -each one contracting me out of my maternity rights and I was pressured to sign or I’d lose my job.’

‘I’d had a difficult birth and my baby had to have an operation after she was born. A few days later, after getting home from the hospital, I received a letter telling me that whilst on maternity I had been put on the re-deployment list and would have to re-interview for my job. My baby was still unwell, I was breast feeding and we were all trying to recover as a family. I still don’t know how I got myself to that interview.’

- European law including the Pregnant Workers Directive and the recast Equal Treatment Directive which provide pregnant women or women on maternity leave with protected status.

What is Statutory Maternity Pay [SMP]?

- Statutory Maternity Pay [SMP] is paid for up to 39 weeks.
- You are entitled to 90% of your average weekly earnings [before tax] for the first 6 weeks.
- For up to date information on your SMP entitlement follow: [www.gov.uk/maternity-pay-leave/pay](http://www.gov.uk/maternity-pay-leave/pay)
- For up to date information on Paternity pay and leave entitlement follow: [www.gov.uk/paternity-pay-leave](http://www.gov.uk/paternity-pay-leave)

What are my rights on maternity leave?

- All employees have the right to 52 weeks maternity leave with the right to return to work thereafter.
- You are entitled to all your contractual terms and conditions during maternity leave, apart from your pay.
- You have the right to be offered a suitable alternative vacancy if you are made redundant during maternity leave.



‘Employers dressing up your rights as favours to you.’

‘Honestly you feel so guilty about coming back to work anyway and having to leave your baby with someone else is hard enough- the last thing you need is to be treated like crap on top of it all at work’

‘I was asked during my maternity if I’d like to come back on a full-time or part-time basis with the option of changing if I needed to. I chose part-time but then ended up doing in three days what I should have been doing in five.’

‘What really upset me was when I came back I’d had important responsibilities taken from me and given to others.’

- You have the right to ask for flexible work.
- You are protected against unfair treatment, unfair dismissal, discrimination because of pregnancy, child birth and maternity leave.

## Some guidance

What happens if you feel you are being treated unfairly or discriminated against?

- Try not to doubt yourself, if you are feeling that you are being treated unfairly, you probably are.
- Get information on your rights [from this resource and our links page].
- Keep note of emails, letters, phone conversations- no matter how insignificant you think they are.
- If you are beginning to feel unwell or stressed because of how you are being treated consult your doctor, they will be able to help whether it be to give you some time off for breathing space or reassurance that your situation should not be causing you to feel this way.
- It can feel incredibly lonely when you’re being treated so badly so make sure you talk about what’s happening with the people you love, it helps!

This was never discussed nor was I given them back. I felt like I was being punished and no longer valued.'

Whether the testimonies from women are a result of employers being misinformed, misguided or they simply do not understand what constitutes good practice; the impact for women and their families is unacceptable and can be hugely detrimental.

- If you are not already part of a Union, perhaps it would be useful to join one for advice and support or contact your local Citizens Advice Bureau.
- Seek legal advice [see our list of useful contacts for info].
- Try not to blame yourself, it's not your fault you are being treated this way.
- Don't lose hope- you will get through this.

What happens if my employer refuses to allow me to return to work?

- If an employer refuses to take you back, this would constitute an unfair dismissal unless the reason was because you had been made redundant and there was no suitable alternative vacancy or if it was not reasonably practical to take you back- perhaps because of justifiable internal re-organisation.

What about breast feeding and returning to work?

- While there is no statutory right to time off to express milk or breastfeed a baby in the workplace, where an employer refuses to accommodate your breastfeeding needs this may give rise to a claim for sex discrimination.

## Mums myth busting - how am I going to cope returning to work?

### **Myth: 'I am failing my child by returning to work.'**

Fact: No you're not. Research suggests that having many positive relationships in early childhood are of real benefit to your child's development. They'll miss you and you'll miss them because you've given them everything they've needed to get to this stage. That doesn't mean all that has stopped because you're going back to work, it just means that you're giving your child the opportunity make attachments with other people but you will always be the Mummy!

### **Myth: 'I am going to keep working in the same way I did before I had kids.'**

Fact: No you're probably not but you'll feel even more tired and that's normal. Going back to work after having children is a seismic undertaking. You'll have more to balance, more to think about, more to do and less time to do it. Women and employers place a huge amount of pressure on keeping the same ways of being productive they had before children and yes maybe you could spend an hour less on the sofa at night to get on with some work but you're knackered. Having an open conversation with your employer from the outset about your responsibilities at home will prepare you both for this and in turn look to solutions that are manageable. You're at an enforced different pace now but that doesn't mean you're contributing less. Equality is not linked

to productivity in the workplace. Employers often overlook this but, by doing so, they are in danger of losing important skill sets so make sure you set a pace beneficial to you as well as your employer.

**Myth: ‘I will have time to think about how my childcare will work whilst I’m on maternity.’**

Fact: Maybe but having a new baby is all encompassing and it’s a time when you can be at your most vulnerable so don’t feel pressured into anything [by yourself or others]. It’s important you make time to properly consider what your options are whether it be family, paid childcare, friends or a mix -and how this is going to fit with what you and your baby needs. With the best of intentions people who want to help can often have set expectations for being part of childcare without understanding your working life. Returning to work brings with it additional pressures so it’s important you feel as clear as you can be about your boundaries when the time comes.

**Myth: ‘My employer will know my rights through maternity and returning to work.’**

Fact: Don’t take this for granted. Employers should know your rights and their obligations but this certainly is not always the case. Some employers have genuinely never had to consider how to make provision for maternity and your return to work. Ensure you do some research around your rights and if you can, have a chat with your employer about a plan that will support your maternity leave and return to work.

**Myth: ‘My partner and I will take equal share in childcare and all the responsibilities that go with it when I go back to work.’**

Fact: Perhaps, but even with the best of intentions this is often not the case. Many women feel that a great deal of pressure comes from societal attitudes that they are to be the main carer as well as being at work. Mums are often the first port of call for taking time off if their children are sick and having to negotiate child care around their working responsibilities.

**Myth: ‘I will be able to take time for myself.’**

Fact: It can be really hard to achieve this and often it can feel like you’re having to negotiate with a million factors to get it but it’s vital if this is something you really value. Don’t feel guilty about it- everyone needs time out to re-energise. Doing things like making meals in advance for through the week can help as well as not being too hard on yourself if you’re not cooking everything from scratch. Asking for help from people doesn’t mean you’re not coping and if people are there and willing there’s no harm in using this support.

## A final message from working Mums

Take enough time to think about what is right for you and explore your options.

**“Returning to work after having children can be tough but you’re not alone.”**

Whatever you decide to do is right.

**“If and when you return to work, this does not mean that you have failed your child or anyone else- it is just another phase of many that you’ll deal with and get through.”**

It’s OK to change your mind with experience or if your circumstances change.

**“Feeling like you’re having to start from scratch is daunting but it’s normal and it will pass. You’ll be fine.”**

**“You are strong and you can do this!”**

## If you want to find out more

### **The Partnership Action for Continuing Employment [PACE]**

A Scottish Government initiative operated by Skills Development Scotland dedicated to individuals with the advice and support they need when faced with redundancy.

Public enquiry line: 0800 917 8000

### **ACAS in Scotland**

Independent and impartial advice to assist with resolving issues in the work place.

Public enquiry line: 08457 47 47 47

Minicom: 08456 06 16 00

[www.acas.org.uk](http://www.acas.org.uk)

### **Employment Tribunal Service in Scotland**

Public enquiry line: 0845 795 9775

Minicom: 0847 737 3722

[www.justice.gov.uk/guidance/courts-and-tribunal/tribunals/employment/index.htm](http://www.justice.gov.uk/guidance/courts-and-tribunal/tribunals/employment/index.htm)

### **Equality Advisory Support Service [EASS]**

UK Helpline: 0808 800 0082

Tel: 0808 800 0084

[www.equalityadvisoryservice.com/](http://www.equalityadvisoryservice.com/)

### **Family Friendly Working Scotland [FFWS]**

Supports and promotes the development of family friendly work places across Scotland and provides free legal advice.

Tel: 0300 012 0312

[www.familyfriendlyworkingscotland.org.uk](http://www.familyfriendlyworkingscotland.org.uk)

## **Mummy Social**

Connecting Mums across the UK as an online support network and helping Mums make contacts with other Mums in their local area for socials, chat and coffee.

[www.mummysocial.com](http://www.mummysocial.com)

## **Maternity Action**

Charity committed to ending inequality and improving the health and well-being of pregnant women, partners and young children- from conception through to the child's early years.

Advice Line: 0808 802 0029

[www.maternityaction.org.uk](http://www.maternityaction.org.uk)

## **Working Mums- advice/support/jobs**

[www.workingmums.co.uk/advice-and-support/back-to-work/](http://www.workingmums.co.uk/advice-and-support/back-to-work/)





## Contact us

Outside the Box provides independent support to groups and people across Scotland who want to make a difference in their communities. We work on a broad range of projects offering support, information, training, evaluation and advice.

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There is more about what we do at [www.otbds.org](http://www.otbds.org)

