



An alternative view on new motherhood and work

by Sandie Dennis



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It can be difficult to speak openly about the pressures of new motherhood and work.

From the moment you tell your employer that you're expecting, it's easy to feel as though you're letting them down.

Then, once your baby is born – and it feels as though your entire world has changed – it's on to worrying about how you'll cope when you return to work. Will you be able to catch up straight away... and will your colleagues be sympathetic if 'business as usual' takes a little longer than they expect?

I wanted to find out more about what life as a new working mother is really like, so I decided to ask one.

Here, Katie (a senior associate at an international law firm based in London) shares her valuable, and often searingly honest, insights into how new motherhood has changed her life, and how she's managing her personal transition back to work.



What guidance would you give to pregnant working women, from their leave date to their baby arriving?

The first thing I would say is, get some credits in the sleep bank.

As hard as that might sound, while you're trying to organise work and baby preparation in the background, this is going to be the last opportunity you'll have for a while to get some decent rest, so don't waste it.

Try to factor in a leave date that gives you enough time to get organised... assuming that your baby could arrive at just about any time...

I ended up going into labour early, which only left me with five days between finishing work and my baby arriving. I don't mind admitting that I was exhausted; on the back foot before my baby had even arrived.

In practical terms, buy your baby kit early and set up your nursery in good time, batch-cook meals and freeze them, and if you can, arrange for a good cleaner to come regularly. These are all potentially



stressful things that can be nicely crossed off your 'to-do' list before you give birth.

Don't be like me... I was so busy at work, that I literally set my cot up on the afternoon I went into premature labour!

Try to think ahead about how you'll find support and get enough sleep after your baby arrives. I didn't have a night nurse or a nanny, but in hindsight I would have seriously considered it – particularly since I ended up having a C-section.

It's so important that you don't try and do everything on your own. Having a baby is tough, and no-one is going to pat you on the back for being a martyr. I try to remember that old saying, "it takes a village to raise a child" ... because it's true!

How would you describe your first few months of parenthood? What were your biggest challenges?

OK, I'm not going to sugar-coat this. They were the worst months of my life.

Having a baby wasn't just a huge adjustment, it's also utterly relentless. I had zero time to myself... even using the bathroom and having a shower became a game of roulette. I didn't realise how much I needed, and valued, time to myself until I had a baby.

I'm a transactional lawyer, so I thought I could deal with sleepless nights. But at least when I'm closing a deal, I get to catch up on sleep eventually – there's an end point, which doesn't come with our 'Boss Baby' (I call him this because that's what he is... he literally calls the shots in our house).

Added to this was my terrible start to motherhood. I had a long labour, with no epidural and ending with an emergency C-section. To cut a long story short, I was discharged from hospital much earlier than I should have been, my C-section wound became infected, and breastfeeding was a total disaster.

I felt like a failure, not just for not being able to give birth naturally, but that I didn't bond with my baby immediately. I felt as though I'd "let myself" get into this situation... as if it had all been within my control.

As a (fairly) competent senior lawyer in my "other life", I found it hard to take advice, and I didn't appreciate the length of recovery time I would need after my C-section. I had never had major surgery before.

It took me almost a year to feel physically fit again, and unlike most other major medical procedures, I also had a new-born baby to care for straight away.



How did you prepare for your return to work?

I had professional exams to take when my baby was around seven months old. That involved around 250 hours of study, all as I faced the personal challenges I've described above, and others besides.

It was an extremely stressful and challenging time, but I stayed in touch with my employer throughout, speaking with my boss and clients regularly, and keeping tabs on work matters. I also used up all of my KIT days.

All of this helped to keep my brain fired up before I came back to work, which was really beneficial when it came to returning full-time.

I would definitely recommend having whatever childcare you've planned in place well ahead of going back to work. That way, you'll have help with transition periods, such as when your child is adjusting to nursery, before you add the pressures of work.

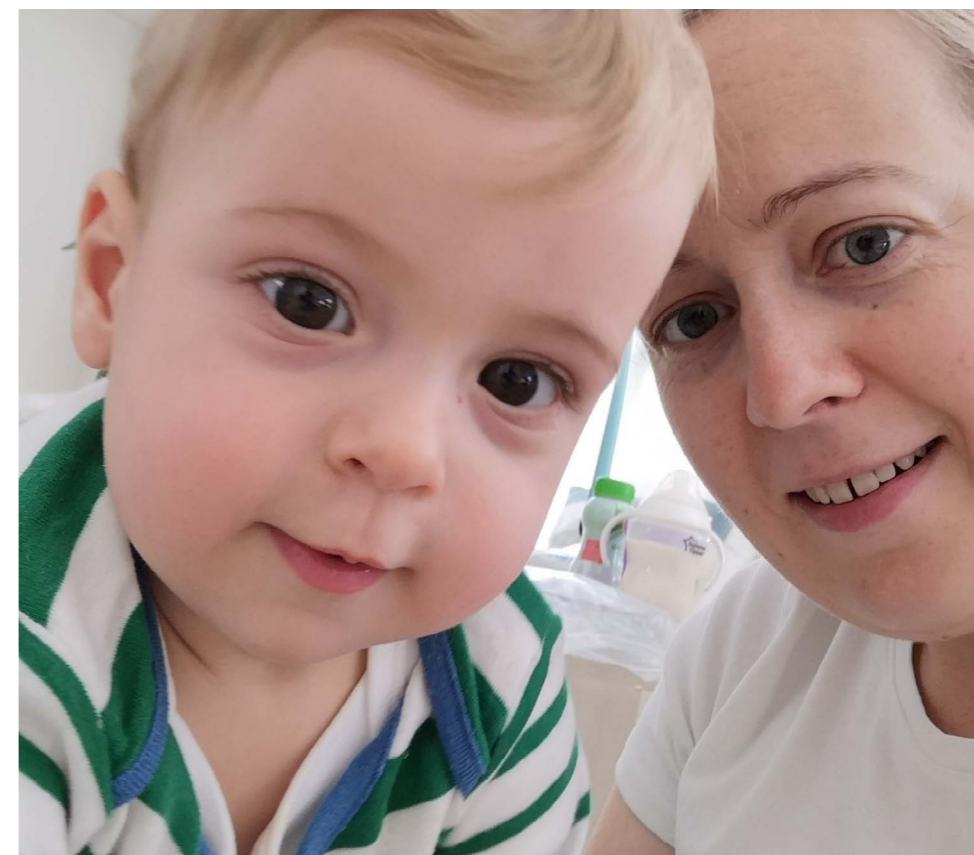
What would you do differently regarding your return, if you were to do it all over again?

It might sound strange to say this, but I would have gone back to work earlier.

I ended up taking 10 months of maternity leave. That was mainly driven by the qualification exams I was doing, plus sorting out an international relocation, which was then delayed due to the pandemic.

If I hadn't been dealing with the other major life matters I've already described, then I think around six months would have been fine. To be completely honest, I discovered that I don't enjoy looking after a new-born, and that I wanted to get back to work.

But I also discovered that there's absolutely nothing wrong with that!





What advice would you give to other women who are about to face this life changing transition?

It feels like some phases will never end... but don't worry, they will.

Things get better, slowly but surely. I found it helpful to break those first few months down into three-week intervals, to make them more manageable.

Remember that babies develop and change rapidly, so whatever is happening now will probably have changed in a few weeks. You could end up finding, as I did, that time flies by. People told me that the days are long but the years are short, it's so true.

Try not to beat yourself up or feel guilty if you're not enjoying new motherhood, or if you don't bond with your baby straight away. I'm still working on this, and my son is 14 months old now. It could be that I'm better with older kids, or as they grow into

adults... I know I can't wait to enjoy a glass or two of wine with my son.

Oh, and don't think you can carry on any perfectionist or 'control freak' tendencies into motherhood, because it's just not going to happen. You can't control your body, especially during the birth, and guess what, you can't control your baby either. Just focus on keeping your baby safe, dry, fed and healthy, and try to accept help and support where it's offered...

...whilst staying away from rogue advice like "breast is best." Fed is best – there are positives and negatives to both breastfeeding and formula feeding.

Ignore all the 'Insta-Mums' too – they make motherhood seem impossibly easy. It's not glamorous in the least; we all have to deal with screaming babies and 'poonamis' at 3am.

Continuing with your career, what has been your biggest challenge?

Getting back up to speed with the market and industry know-how is still a work in progress for me, even months down the line.

Turning my mind back to work-mode has been hard, especially as I came straight back into doing a leadership development course and a full load of client work / transactions, but it's all about allowing myself time to adjust.

But working remotely, while a challenge and a new way of working, has allowed me to spend more time with my son, so there have also been some benefits.

I've had to adjust the balance of childcare with my husband. Initially, we had intended for him to be our son's full-time carer, but as he's getting older and needing less naptime, he's turning out to be a lot of work! We've now decided to put him into nursery for some of the time and that's working out well (I can see that he is benefitting from the social contact with other little ones, so it's a win win).

Finally, it's been a challenge to find enough time for myself, in between work and childcare... there has been very little time to relax, or catch up with friends, for example. But I'm hopeful that this will improve as my son gets older.

How did reading Katie's candid words make you feel, either as an employer, or an expectant working mum?

Have they given you new or different insights into balancing motherhood with work?

If you'd like to discuss any of these issues further and in confidence, please don't hesitate to get in touch.



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