

Becoming mum: the power of groupwork in navigating the maternity transition



Judith Plastow describes how maternity transition groups using an integrated approach are helping women in organisations chart their own path along the journey to becoming working parents.

The impact of maternity transition

I still have a crystal-clear image of leaving work for the start of my first maternity leave: my arms overflowing with a bouquet of flowers, a card of well-wishes and my bag stuffed to the brim with the last of the personal clutter cleared from my desk. My mind was full to the brim too. Looking forward to what was next, I felt both excited and anxious about my experiences to come: having a baby and becoming a mum for the first time. I was, however, completely in the dark about the losses that would occur and having to come to terms with those changes: no longer leading a team, all working together to meet the latest deadline; no longer keeping senior stakeholders in the loop about changes to our strategy; no longer even stopping to chat for two minutes at the photocopier about last night's must-watch TV. I was about to be cut off from a huge part of what defined me. Then again, when I returned to work after my leave ended, all of this felt like a lifetime away. What was my role? What was I good at? How was I going to be able to get it all done? Could I keep progressing my career, as I had before, while still being a good-enough mother to my son?

As Sugarman argues, transitions - or life events - are more than 'benchmarks in the human life cycle': they are 'processes', triggering a series of different emotions to be worked through.¹ The maternity transition is no different and is a pivotal time in a woman's career path. The 2016 Price Waterhouse Cooper's 'Women Returners' survey shows that three-quarters of working women wish to return to work following the break, but the experiences they have and the support they receive is mixed.² Leaving, then returning, to work generates multiple practical and emotional issues, on top of those already experienced in becoming a new parent. Fortunately, more forward-thinking companies, such as EY (formerly known as Ernst and Young), are acknowledging the importance of giving extra assistance to new parents in order to help them readjust and settle more quickly, with a longer-term strategy of improving people engagement and retention.³

Participant-led sessions

The opportunity to work with women going through the maternity transition therefore had real resonance for me. My aim was to create a workshop series for groups of women that could be delivered in a corporate setting. In designing the workshops, I recognised that, although I had my own experiences to draw upon, I wanted to understand what other parents had been through. Based on these insights, I wanted to identify themes for the workshop that would be broad enough to be relevant to all participants and their individual experiences, supporting them where they needed it most.

In order to do this, I conducted a number of interviews with working parents with children under three (so the experience was still fresh), from a variety of industries, both private and public. What struck me was that although all of those women I spoke to had been back at work for at least a year, these conversations were still very emotive. Themes ranged from the feelings ('I was so tired!', 'I felt so guilty', 'I was scared my maternity cover would be better than me and I would lose my job') to more action-orientated challenges ('My manager was so unsupportive, I didn't know how to handle it', and 'I didn't know how to ask for flexible working without them thinking I wasn't committed'.)

To be able to accommodate both emotional and practical considerations, I turned to the personal consultancy model, with its first mode of 'being with the client' facilitating the former, and the second, 'doing with the client', enabling the latter.⁴ These modes can be applied to three core themes I identified for the workshops from the research findings:

1) the opportunity to talk and share experiences with other



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mothers at a similar place in the journey transition ('being with'); 2) planning and practicalities for managing leave and return: understanding benefits, policies, flexible work options and negotiation strategies ('doing with'); and 3) enabling each participant to reflect on and identify their workplace identity and future ambitions, while balancing new responsibilities (moving between the two modes). The framework's flexibility means a range of strategies can be drawn upon, according to what is most relevant for the task in hand, ensuring the workshops are always attuned to the needs of the group. If the prevailing mood is reflective, I stay with them, offering a safe space to air feelings. When participants want to problem-solve, I facilitate idea generation to identify possible ways to help them move forward (see Box 1 below).

The importance of the group

Another key insight from my interviews was how isolating the experience of being a parent at work can be. All of the mothers I spoke with had been the only new parent in their team or wider department. Although many had attended National Childbirth Trust (NCT) meetings or other similar parenting groups, these were seen as less helpful in offering a solution specifically for this. There was little commonality, jobs held by participants were wide ranging, while the focus of discussion centred on birth and the early months of parenthood.

I recognised how important it was to do this work in groups within the same organisation, in order to help counter this sense of isolation in the workplace. From the outset, then, an existing connection was already present which could be built upon. My findings from a large media company, Hearst UK, with whom I have implemented a series of such groups, show how the opportunity to participate was seen as beneficial in itself. Feedback from participants included: 'It's great to take some time out... and talk to others at work in a similar situation,' and 'It's been really helpful to hear other people's stories.' By allowing the time and space for participants to think, listen and share - as individuals, in pairs and within the group - empathetic relationships formed.

Here, it was interesting to observe that although participants in the groups were of differing levels of seniority, being a parent was a great leveller. I encouraged peer-to-peer support, sharing experiences and offering advice to each other. This was the first stepping stone towards creating a parents' network, with the idea that maintaining these ongoing relationships might offer professional as well as personal benefit.

Identity

As coach Jane Moffett has highlighted, the issue of identity is paramount in maternity transition: 'At this time of change for women at their most fundamental level of identity, coaching can be key in helping women to acclimatise, emerge and grow into a new version of themselves.'⁵ Becoming a first-time mother can be all-consuming, requiring many fundamental adjustments. Personally, I found it completely redefined who I was. It had a huge impact on my day-to-day routine and required me to completely re-evaluate how I met my increased responsibilities with regards to home and, later, work. Simultaneously, the work organisation also changes during the maternity leave period: ways of doing things shift, and colleagues advance. In light of this, mothers have to renegotiate their place on their return, and so much change can result in loss of confidence.

To make the return to work transition as easy as possible, one of the pre-leave group sessions focused on allowing participants to record and reflect upon all their achievements as a way of capturing their work 'brand identity' at this point in time. This theme is picked up again in a post-leave session, encouraging participants to identify the new skills they have developed as a result of becoming a parent, consolidating them into a new and enhanced 'work brand identity'. I believe this to be one of the most important exercises of the groups, as a way of allowing participants to identify and celebrate all that they have achieved. The value of this was recognised: 'It was good to see all that I had done written in front of me' and 'I found it really helpful to think about my last two years of coming back to work since I was off the first time. You're so wrapped up in becoming a mum, you don't notice what you do, and looking at it now, I can see I have done other stuff!' →



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The value of space and time

At the end of the sessions I wanted the participants to feel more prepared for their transition, as perhaps I had not been. The participants were surveyed at the end of each pre-leave and post-return workshop series to evaluate the benefits of the group sessions and understand which particular aspects had been most useful, in order to help me hone the format of future groups.

The overriding feedback from the sessions was how important they had been for 'being the catalyst to start thinking about the things I need to think about'. Participants realised how valuable it was to spend time focusing on themselves, their ambitions for work and about being/becoming a working mother: 'the chance to think about important questions around [coming back to] work instead of just thinking about the baby.' Doing this with someone 'neutral' where 'I can ask anything I like and not be judged' was key. Creating a space to talk about feelings was appreciated, illustrating the importance of the more therapeutic intervention of simply 'being with the client'. I was grateful to the organisation for recognising the importance of this too, allowing me to incorporate the time for this into the sessions. Many participants commented on how they felt even more positive about their employer, Hearst UK, for offering the sessions.

The success of the format has led me to think about what other 'minority' groups might benefit from this kind of additional support in the workplace. Diversity and inclusion are becoming increasingly important issues in the corporate world, yet I see little being done to acknowledge the impact of how being 'different' is for these individuals, among

what is still a leadership majority of white middle-class men. The outcomes of peer support, network building and a sense of being supported and valued by their employer would no doubt have equally positive impacts on loyalty and retention for these groups too.

Following the birth of my second child, I became increasingly aware that my own sense of accomplishment in my dual roles, as a senior manager and as a mother of two small children, fell short. I struggled to reconcile the time I needed to achieve the ambitions I still harboured for career progression within the large corporation in which I worked, with the time I wanted to spend with my young children. Something was going to have to change. Through the work of my training, I was able to identify a potential new career path that would allow me to better meet my needs and those of my children. I became aware that the transition of having my two sons not only gave me the impetus to do this, but also the confidence to see it through. Knowing I had been able to take on the responsibility of becoming a mother and adapt to all the changes that ensued, gave me the self-assurance I needed, to believe I was able to embrace even more life changes, evidencing exactly how positive the maternity transition outcome can be, if supported properly.



Jenny*

Jenny was about to become a mother for the second time. She reflected on how with her first child, her sole focus had been on her baby. She hadn't really given returning to work much thought. Once back, she felt as if 'I had forgotten about work - and it had forgotten about me'. As a result, she felt she had been treading water, not really moving forward. This time, Jenny had a much clearer idea of how she needed to evolve her role when she returned and so wanted to be more proactive about managing her relationship with work while on leave. The 'Keeping In Touch' exercise (see Box 2) enabled Jenny to identify key personnel she needed to maintain contact with while on leave, and suitable work events during her time away that she might attend. The 'My Work Brand Identity' exercise (see Box 2) allowed her to identify areas she could develop while away, in order to 'bring out that side of myself again' and stand her in better stead. Jenny reflected on how getting her first job in this industry had been really tough, but she had persevered and done it. This reinforced her self-belief that she had the determination and ability to take this next step.

Michelle*

Michelle was a first-time mum, not long back from leave. While she had been away, her department had undergone significant changes. Michelle admitted to feeling isolated, hesitant and out of sync: 'I'm not really sure where I fit in anymore'. She felt she had little to contribute and lacked certainty in decision-making. Having the opportunity to share how she was feeling with a group of empathetic people, some of whom had similar feelings, gave Michelle a great boost, helping her feel she wasn't the only one going through this ('I thought it was just me!') and part of a group again. The 'My Work Brand Identity' exercise (see Box 2) enabled Michelle to reconnect with her working self, and acknowledge that the new skills she had gained since becoming a mum could also be of benefit in the workplace.

Box 1:

Personal consultancy overview

Personal consultancy provides a framework within which to integrate the practices of counselling, psychotherapy and coaching, enabling a more adaptive approach. Most counselling approaches facilitate 'inner change' through exploring perception and affect. In contrast, methods such as cognitive behavioural therapy, solution-focused therapy or coaching, champion 'outer change', realised in cognition and action. However, in reality, clients often wish to work more holistically towards both. As such, personal consultancy is based on a theory of the practice, rather than a theory of the person.

In personal consultancy, a desired outcome (emotional, cognitive, behavioural or a combination thereof) is agreed between the client and personal consultant to move towards. Moving between the four stages of *authentic listening, rebalancing, generating and supporting*, in what are essentially two modes - 'being with the client' and 'doing with the client' - the personal consultant and client work together collaboratively to achieve this change. According to what is required, the most appropriate concepts, skills and strategies from a variety of models can be selected and assimilated within the framework, to help facilitate this.

Box 2:

Workshop exercises

A number of individual, pair and group exercises are utilised within the workshops to develop some of the key themes. To give more explanation on those highlighted here in this article:

Keeping in Touch (KIT) is about helping participants find the right balance for them between having contact with work while on leave and focusing on their new family, recognising this may change over the course of their leave. Participants are encouraged to think about what information they might want to have from work, who they might want to keep in contact with and what form those interactions might take. Once this KIT plan is drawn up, participants are encouraged to share it with key team members and their manager, so this desired level of contact can be maintained.

My Work Brand Identity encourages participants to reflect and summarise all of their achievements to date, both in and outside work. From this, a list of skills, behaviours and attitudes can be created that captures their unique talents. Participants are then encouraged to bring this summary to life in a creative and memorable way to share with the group. A follow-up exercise in the post-leave group sessions encourages participants to think about the new skills developed on becoming a parent and how these supplement and integrate into their original summary. ■

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Case studies*

The characters in these case studies are composites of various experiences, disguised and anonymised so as to protect the identity of my original clients.

References

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