

(**tf feature**)

Work-Life Balance

how today's parents are making it work by Katie Begley

Choosing when to return to work can be one of the most stressful decisions a new parent has to make. Balancing the needs of your career and the needs of your family is likely to be challenging as well. Whether you are exploring your options before having a new baby, juggling motherhood with an established career, or returning to the workforce with a baby (or two) in tow, here's what you need to know to make it work for you and your family.

Work or Stay at Home?

The most important question to ask yourself is whether returning to the workplace is the right decision for you and your family. Every situation will be different, but consider the following questions to help you make your decision.

- **Can I afford to work or stay home?** Living on one income can be a big financial change for the family. You will have to decide if you can afford to have one spouse work and one stay at home as a full-time parent. Potential childcare costs should also be included in your discussion. Take a detailed look at your budget and decide what will work.
- **Am I ready to go back to work?** The first weeks with a new baby are magical. They are also stressful and tiring. Consider if you are ready for your baby to



Working from home is becoming an increasingly popular option for parents.

be in someone else's care while you are at work. It's okay if you want more time at home with your baby. It's also okay if you're ready for some separation.

- **Do I miss my job?** If you have a career that you love, staying at home with a new baby can be just as challenging as going back to work. If you miss your job, it may be time to explore how to get back to the workforce. If you didn't have a job that you love, it may be a good opportunity to try something new or go back to school.
- **Do I have a support system?** Whether you decide to stay at home or go back

to work, look for a support network of family, friends, and colleagues to help you as you navigate parenthood. You can find your tribe through shared interests, neighborhood meet-ups, or organized playgroups. Learning from parents who work inside and outside the home can provide insight as you navigate your return to the workplace.

Your Work Environment

Marie Risser, a telecommunications engineer and 2018 Working Mother of the Year Award recipient at Booz Allen Hamilton, has great advice for parents trying to balance work and life commitments. "Be honest about where you're at and what your needs are," she says. This includes being honest with employers and yourself.

If you don't see a role at your workplace that fits your needs, don't be afraid to ask. Marie pioneered the telework option at Booz Allen Hamilton 18 years ago by presenting a plan to company leadership detailing how she could work re-

motely without compromising quality.

"Be specific about how you're going to make it work," she tells those looking into remote work opportunities. Research the technology that your company's policies allow that could make remote work a possibility, says Marie.

Many parents may be considering returning to work after a prolonged absence. Maybe you've taken time off to stay home during your child's early years and are now ready to spend some time on your career. Whether you are looking for a new job or just getting to know your current workplace as a new parent, here are some things to look for.

- **Health plans:** Having a new baby brings all kinds of new experiences and questions. Figuring out how to pay immense hospital bills doesn't need to be one of them. Find out what is covered at your current employer for pregnancy and pediatrics. Benefits can include everything from visits to the obstetrician, hospital stays, lactation services, and well-baby check ups. Make sure to ask about dental and vision coverage as well.

- **Paid maternity and paternity leave:** Although Virginia does not require mandatory parental leave policy, many employers recognize the value that paid maternity and paternity leave has on employee morale and company culture. Parental leave policies can also apply to new birth or adoptive parents.

- **Remote work opportunities:** Stay home with baby and work, too? Sounds like the best of both worlds. Working remotely is becoming more and more common as digital technology replaces in-person meetings. This can be a great option for those who love their job, have established relationships at work, and can work efficiently from a home office. As a bonus, no one knows if you are responding to emails still wearing your PJs.

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Work-Life Balance (cont.)

• **Multiple tracks:** One size does not fit all in any aspect of parenting. Career-home balance is no exception. Look for options to move on and off different "tracks" when life requires your focus to shift. If you don't want to leave your job but also want to spend time with your new baby, ask about part-time or as-needed opportunities. You can take advantage of a position with fewer work commitments when life commitments ramp up, such as when taking care of a new baby.

• **Employee benefits:** Companies recognize the importance of supporting their employees. Check with the Human Resources Department to find out what initiatives the company may have for families. These can include lactation counselors and facilities, volunteer opportunities, family fun picnics, and college savings contributions.

Local Family-Friendly Firms

Working parents in Tidewater have a lot of options right here in our own community. Whether you are already working, looking to make a change, or just exploring your options, here are tips and advice from companies who offer family-friendly work policies.

Bon Secours Virginia was recently named one of the 100 Best Companies of 2018 by Working Mother. These 100 firms are leaders in the areas of female career advancement, paid parental leave, childcare assistance, benefits, and flex-time. With a female workforce of approximately 82 percent, Bon Secours is committed to progressive workplace programs that support working mothers.

Dawn Trivette, Administrative Di-

rector of Work and Family Services at Bon Secours, recommends parents look for flexibility in the workplace when seeking employment. Many employers today are able to use technology to create virtual offices and collaboration.

"Ask about flexibility to see if there is a chance to do something different," Dawn says. This could mean that employees are able to switch from full-time to part-time and back again as their needs change, an option offered by Bon Secours.

Flexible policies can even allow employees to pursue leadership opportunities when they are able to and scale back when they need to. "It allows them to take care of their family like they feel they should and their job like they feel they should," says Dawn.

She recommends potential employees look into other benefits their employers may offer, such as health plans, financial assistance with adoption or college savings, and employee discounts on things like cell phones, insurance, or other big purchases. Bon Secours regularly reviews its best practices and also learns from other companies and industries how they can make things even better for families, Dawn says.

TowneBank is another local company which has been recognized for its family-friendly initiatives. Allie Wittkamp, Director of Market Engagement, stresses the importance of company culture. "Being there for family, whether in a time of need, illness, or celebration, is really encouraged," she says.

The company promotes a "culture of caring," says Allie, by providing options like guaranteeing an employee's position

when they take up to 12 weeks of leave and offering healthy pregnancy coaching programs. Employees are encouraged to bring their children to volunteer days in the community. Across the company, the idea of balancing career and family permeates decisions and values.

Successful work-home partnerships are based on open communication, continues Allie. She advises parents to be as upfront as possible with company leaders about their home commitments. "Don't miss those milestones, those things that make life rich," she says. Having a plan for family emergencies is important but so is prioritizing time spent as a family at

ball games and recitals.

A meaningful career can have a huge impact on families, both financially and through an increased connection to a community outside of the home. It also comes with challenges and a lot of questions. While solutions will look different for each family, parents entering or reentering the workforce can find the perfect balance of family and career with careful thought, planning, and research. ● *Katie Begley is a magazine and fiction writer. She is a military spouse and the mother of two energetic toddlers. Connect @kmbegley or at www.katiemelynbegley.com.*

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