



Education

Advice for the Mother Working Outside the Home

The Decision to Work

1. **Reasons for working** More than 50% of mothers with babies or preschoolers work outside the home. The main reason for working is financial need. Some mothers return to work because they enjoy it or need to stay up-to-date in a fast-changing career. The question of returning to work versus staying at home has no easy or correct answer. The decision is one that each mother must make based on her particular circumstances. Children can do well either way. The family's needs and financial security are the real considerations.
2. **Pros and cons for your child** If you can provide your child with a consistent nurturing caretaker, there is no evidence that your return to work will cause your child any harm other than increased infections (but usually minor ones, such as colds). Children whose mothers work outside the home develop as well emotionally as do other children. The mother-child bond is not weakened. Benefits for a child whose mother works outside the home include increased independence, responsibility, and maturity. Young children of working mothers often have more opportunities to learn to trust other adults and to negotiate better with peers.
3. **Timing the return to work** A mother needs 6 to 8 weeks at home after the birth of her baby to recover physically from childbirth and establish breast-feeding. A preferred maternity leave would extend to 4 months after the birth, at which time the mother will have developed greater confidence in her mothering skills. In addition, by 4 months, the baby should have formed a secure attachment to his mother and be sleeping through the night. Some authorities suggest that mothers should try to spend the first 2 or 3 years of their baby's life fully involved with child-rearing, but the advantages of this commitment remain unproven. Unfortunately, many mothers do not have the luxury of deciding when they will return to work. Mothers should not feel guilty about returning to work when their babies are 3 to 4 months old.

Child Care Resources

1. **Types of child care** Several types of child care are available in most communities. During the first 2 years of life, children often do better with individual care or family day care because they need more cuddling and personal attention. The types of child care arrangements are (in descending order of preference for younger infants):
 - o Individual care in your own home This is the preferred arrangement for infants. The care is usually provided by a grandmother or professional sitter. Often you will need to advertise for a sitter in the local newspaper. The applicant's references must be carefully checked, especially for characteristics that are important to you. Most professional sitters will stay in your home just while you are gone, but some are available as live-ins (nannies).
 - o Individual care in someone else's home This arrangement is very similar to the previous one except that your child will not have the benefit of being cared for in his or her own home. In addition, you will need to pack diapers, bottles, and toys, as well as transport your child to the sitter's home.
 - o Family day care homes In these settings, the day care provider cares for two to six children in her home. This type of day care is usually less expensive than center-based care. Disadvantages are that the children do not usually receive as much individual attention as when they are the only child, and many of these homes are not licensed or monitored by the state.
 - o Center-based day care A day care center may care for 30 or more children. Many children do not adapt well to these large centers until they are over 2 or 2-and-1/2 years old. Optimally, day care centers are located at the workplace, but this is uncommon in the U.S. Day care centers are state-licensed and must comply with certain standards. If you are looking for a day care center, assemble a list of centers by asking friends or by looking in the Yellow Pages under "Child Care" or "Day Nurseries and Child Care." Don't make your final decision about a child care center until you have visited it and observed for at least half a day.
-

2. **The substitute caregiver: Choosing the right person** The most important factor in choosing a child care resource is finding a day care provider who understands and meets children's emotional needs. Choose someone who is warm, affectionate, and sympathetic; plays with the children; and has a sense of humor. Look for someone who listens to and complies with your style of child-rearing (for example, methods of discipline or toilet training). Form a close partnership with your child's caregiver.
3. **Helping your child adjust to day care** When you take your child to day care for the first day, plan on spending that day there. Let your child gradually reach out and become involved with the other children and the caregiver(s). On the second day, stay 5 or 10 minutes while your child makes the transition to interacting with the day care provider. If possible, leave a familiar toy or security object with your child. If the day care center is near your workplace, visit your child during the day. When you leave your child, do so with a cheerful attitude and let your child know you are leaving--don't sneak away. Don't be surprised if your child is teary on the first days when you leave the day care provider. For the first week, your child may talk about not wanting to return. Remain firm in your decision and your child will gradually adapt to the change. Some children take as long as 1 or 2 months to adapt fully.
4. **Caring for a sick child** The onset of illness can be a major disruption for the mother working outside the home. Many day care homes and centers will not care for sick children. Your options usually are staying home with your child, having your spouse take time off from work and stay home with your child, or having your child stay with a friend or relative who has agreed in advance to be a backup for illness care. Sick-care programs for children are springing up across the U.S. to help working parents deal with this situation. Many of these services are based in a special sick wing of a large day care center or a hospital. Some agencies offer sick-care baby sitters who will come to your home. If your child becomes sick during the working day and you think he needs to see a health care provider, try to arrange for a late-afternoon appointment by calling before 3:00 PM. Children with a sore throat, moderate cough, runny nose, or cold symptoms (but without a fever or breathing difficulties) can usually stay in or return to day care. The decision should be based mainly on how well your child feels. Children with fevers (over 100 degrees F, or 37.8 degrees C), chickenpox, vomiting, or diarrhea cannot stay in a regular day care setting. Children with a strep throat or an eye infection can usually return after 24 hours on an antibiotic. Many child care centers have their own rules about when a sick child must stay at home. You should become familiar with these rules.

Surviving Each Day as a Mother Working Outside the Home

1. **Look for a supportive employer and workplace.** Being a mother who is working outside the home can be harder and more stressful than being a mother who stays home because the main caregiver and housekeeping responsibilities are often never completely filled by other people. To lessen the burden, consider working only part-time if it's financially acceptable. Perhaps you can share a job with another person, so that each of you works 20 hours a week. Or perhaps your employer will allow you to have a flexible schedule or to work at least some of the time in your home. This arrangement allows you to leave early for a soccer game or special event at school.
 2. **Avoid sleep deprivation.** If you don't get enough sleep, nothing will seem to turn out right. Pick a reasonable bedtime and stay with it. Cut corners in other areas but protect your sleep time. Prevent sleep problems by teaching your baby to put herself to sleep.
 3. **Provide contact time with your child.** Research has shown that both the quality and quantity of time you spend with your child are important. Try to make breakfast a pleasant, unhurried occasion. Try to talk with your child during the commute to and from the child care provider with the radio off. Use the 30 minutes before bedtime to discuss the day's events with your child at your child's pace. Set aside special half-days on weekends to do things with your child. Also remember that including your child in adult activities such as shopping, cooking, washing, and home repair is also quality time. You are providing enough input if your child is usually happy.
 4. **Reduce your housework time.** If you can afford it, hire a housekeeper. In any case, try to simplify your home life. A spotless house must become a low priority. Do less cooking. On the weekends make triple recipes and freeze leftovers. In addition, make a date for a night out with your spouse or a friend at least once a week. Relaxation time is essential, not frivolous or wasteful.
 5. **Ask other family members for help.** It is imperative that spouses participate in the housework and child care. Responsibility for these tasks must be redistributed to prevent the mother from becoming overworked. For example, the father can help buy a son's clothing, take the children places, cook, and clean the house. School-age children can also be assigned some chores.
 6. **Watch out for feelings of guilt.** Try to understand that "Supermom" who does it all is a myth. You can't do everything single-handedly or perfectly. You need help and deserve help. If you have found a good child care provider, you should feel comfortable during the day about your child's well-being. Despite your best efforts, your child will sometimes cry when dropped off at child care and will sometimes become sick. Try not to rethink your career decision every time this happens.
 7. **Nurture yourself as an individual.** Carve out time occasionally to go out with girlfriends, to an exercise class, to a book club or whatever makes you feel whole again. Trade weekend child care shifts with your spouse to free up some individual time.
 8. **Find extra help if you are a single parent.** In the U.S. today over 30% of children live in single parent households. Using a support system from your family, friends, and neighbors is essential. Try to find a friend with a child close in age to yours. Share shopping, overnight and weekend visits, baby-sitting, and other
-

responsibilities with your friend. Trading services in this way will save you money. Living with another single mother may be mutually beneficial. Consider joining a support group for single parents. Look for courses on survival skills for single parents at community colleges.

Women's Health Advisor 2006.4; Copyright © 2006 McKesson Corporation and/or one of its subsidiaries. All Rights Reserved. Written by B.D. Schmitt, M.D., author of "Your Child's Health," Bantam Books. This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.

