

Returning to Work After Paternity Leave

How to make the transition smoother — for you, your baby, and your relationship

Going back to work after paternity leave is one of those things that feels straightforward on paper and genuinely hard in practice. Whether you've had two weeks or several months off, returning to the office while leaving your baby behind is an adjustment that catches many dads off guard.

Here's an honest guide to doing it well — practically, emotionally, and as a family.

The Emotional Side (That Nobody Warns You About)

Most guidance on returning to work focuses on logistics. But the reality is that many dads find the emotional adjustment more challenging than expected — in both directions.

Some feel genuine grief at leaving the baby. Others feel relief at returning to a structured day and adult conversation, then feel guilty about the relief. Some experience a strange sense of displacement — no longer fully immersed in family life but not yet back in their professional groove either.

All of this is normal. Give yourself time. The first two weeks back are the hardest, and they do get easier.

If you're really struggling: Talk to your GP. Paternal postnatal depression is real and is more likely to emerge as leave ends and the reality of changed life hits. The [Fatherhood Institute](#) and [Tommy's](#) have specific resources for this moment.

Sort the Childcare First — Ideally Months in Advance

London's childcare market is competitive. Good nurseries in popular areas have waiting lists of 12-18 months. If you haven't already, start looking now.

Your Options

Nursery Full-time nursery in London costs on average **£65-£95 per day** for children under 2, with Inner London at the higher end. That's roughly **£1,300-£1,900 per month** for five days — before any government funding applies.

Childminder Typically cheaper than nursery, more flexible on hours, and can feel more home-like for younger babies. Expect to pay **£6-£10 per hour** in London.

Nanny (shared or sole charge) A sole-charge nanny in London typically costs **£12-£17 gross per hour**. Nanny shares — where you split the cost with another family — can bring this down significantly and are popular in London.

Au Pair An au pair lives with you and provides up to 25 hours of childcare per week in exchange for board, food and pocket money (typically £100-£150/week). They cannot be used as sole childcare for very young babies.

Government Childcare Funding

This is significant and worth understanding properly:

- **15 hours free per week** for all 3-4 year olds in England (term-time, 38 weeks a year)
- **30 hours free per week** for eligible working parents of 3-4 year olds
- From **September 2024**, 15 hours was extended to children aged **9 months to 2 years** for eligible working parents
- From **September 2025**, eligible working parents of children aged **9 months to school age** can claim **30 hours free** childcare per week

To be eligible for the extended free hours, both parents must be working and earning at least the equivalent of 16 hours per week at National Living Wage, and neither earning more than £100,000.

Check your eligibility and apply via: [Childcare Choices - gov.uk](#) **Calculate your entitlement:** [Childcare Calculator - gov.uk](#)

Tax-Free Childcare

Separately from the free hours, [Tax-Free Childcare](#) lets you pay for childcare through a government top-up scheme: for every **£8 you put in**, the government adds **£2**, up to £2,000 per child per year (£4,000 if your child is disabled). This can be used alongside the free hours entitlement.

Apply at: gov.uk/tax-free-childcare

Your Flexible Working Rights

Since **April 2024**, all employees have the right to **request flexible working from day one** of employment — you no longer have to wait 26 weeks. You can make **two requests in any 12-month period**.

Your employer must respond within **two months** and can only refuse on one of eight statutory grounds (burden of additional costs, inability to reorganise work, etc.). Under changes coming from **2027** via the Employment Rights Act 2025, employers will additionally need to show the refusal is *reasonable* — a significant strengthening of the right.

Flexible arrangements worth asking for: - Compressed hours (four long days instead of five) - Working from home on set days - Flexible start/finish times to work around nursery drop-off and pick-up - Phased

return (some employers offer a part-time return for the first few weeks)

How to make the request: The request must be in writing. A template is available from [Acas](#). Be specific about what you're requesting and how it would work in practice — the more thought you've put in, the harder it is to refuse.

Further reading: [GOV.UK - Flexible Working](#) · [Acas - Flexible Working Guidance](#)

The Nursery / Childminder Settling-In Period

Most nurseries and childminders offer a settling-in process of around two weeks, where the baby attends for gradually increasing periods — starting with an hour and working up to a full day. This is mandatory in many places and is genuinely important.

Tips for settling in: - Try to be the one who drops off if you can — it builds routine and means your partner isn't handling all the emotional weight - Leave something that smells of you — a worn t-shirt in the baby's bag is a surprisingly effective comfort item - The goodbye is usually harder for you than for the baby — most babies settle quickly once you've left - The nursery or childminder should be sending you updates; if they're not, ask for them

Supporting Your Partner's Return Too

There's a reasonable chance your partner will also be returning to work within a similar timeframe — or that she's already back and managing more than her share of the mental load while you've been in the office.

The domestic mental load is real and measurable. Research consistently shows that even in dual-income households, women carry a disproportionate share of childcare coordination, appointment booking, nursery admin, packing bags and logistics. This doesn't just happen — it has to be consciously divided.

Practical things to share explicitly: - Nursery drop-off and pick-up (split the week clearly) - The nursery bag replenishment (knowing when nappies and wipes are running low) - GP, health visitor and developmental check appointments - Sick day coverage — who stays home when the baby is ill?

A useful tool for thinking through the division: [Fair Play by Eve Rodsky](#) — a structured approach to rebalancing the domestic load that many couples find genuinely useful.

The Work Bit: Getting Back Up to Speed

Two weeks away can sometimes feel like two months. A few practical things:

- **Ask your manager for a catch-up before your first day back** — even a 30-minute call so you're not walking in cold
 - Block out your first morning for email and context-catching, not meetings
 - Be honest with your team about needing a week or two to fully get back into the flow — most people will understand
 - If you've taken a longer period of SPL, consider requesting a phased return if you haven't already — most employers will accommodate this informally even if it's not a formal policy
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Useful Resources

- **Childcare Choices** — the government's hub for all free childcare entitlements
 - **Tax-Free Childcare** — government top-up on childcare spending
 - **Childcare Calculator** — work out exactly what you're entitled to
 - **Working Families** — excellent free advice on flexible working and parental rights
 - **Acas - Flexible Working** — templates, guidance, and what to do if your request is refused
 - **Mumsnet Childcare Forum** — real parent experience across London nurseries and childminders (despite the name, dads are welcome)
 - **Daynurseries.co.uk** — search and review nurseries by postcode
 - **Fatherhood Institute** — research and support for fathers navigating work-life balance
 - **Fair Play by Eve Rodsky** — practical tool for rebalancing domestic load between partners
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Government funding entitlements correct as of September 2025. Childcare costs are approximate averages for London and will vary by area and provider. Always verify current entitlements at [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk).