



SUPPORTING EXPECTANT/NEW PARENT EMPLOYEES THROUGH COVID-19

There are currently high levels of anxiety in the community regarding the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic, with expectant and new parents (mothers, fathers and partners) especially concerned about the potential impact on pregnant women, babies and young children from both a personal and professional perspective.

The purpose of this resource sheet is to raise awareness of the health and work-related risk factors facing expectant and new parents during this period of uncertainty and provide practical strategies and legal considerations for employers to support them through this time.



The perinatal period represents a unique period of increased risk, even without the emergence of the pandemic. With more anxiety in the general population relating to COVID-19, this is magnified amongst expectant and new parents. Specifically, concerns surrounding the potential impacts of the pandemic on the developing baby, birth and infant, together with changes now associated with the delivery of maternity and postnatal care serve to further increase already high rates of anxiety within this population.

DR NICOLE HIGHET / CENTRE OF PERINATAL EXCELLENCE (COPE)



How does this help to reduce work-related risk factors?

Work-related factors, also known as psychosocial hazards, refers to anything in the management or design of work that increases the risk of work-related stress.

This can lead to physical injury, mental injury or both at the same time.

The perinatal period represents a period of increased mental health risk for expectant and new parents, even without the challenges of a global pandemic.

The speed and magnitude of organisational change required in response to COVID-19 may also cause even greater exposure to work-related factors in this vulnerable population.

Supporting employees through these changes is therefore critical in helping to reduce common work-related factors such as:

- Low job control.
- Poor support.
- Poor organisational change management.
- Low role clarity.
- Poor environmental conditions.
- Remote and isolated work.
- Violent or traumatic events.

For more information see:

<https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/doc/work-related-psychological-health-and-safety-systematic-approach-meeting-your-duties>



One size does not fit all.

It is critical that you communicate with your employees to understand their specific needs.

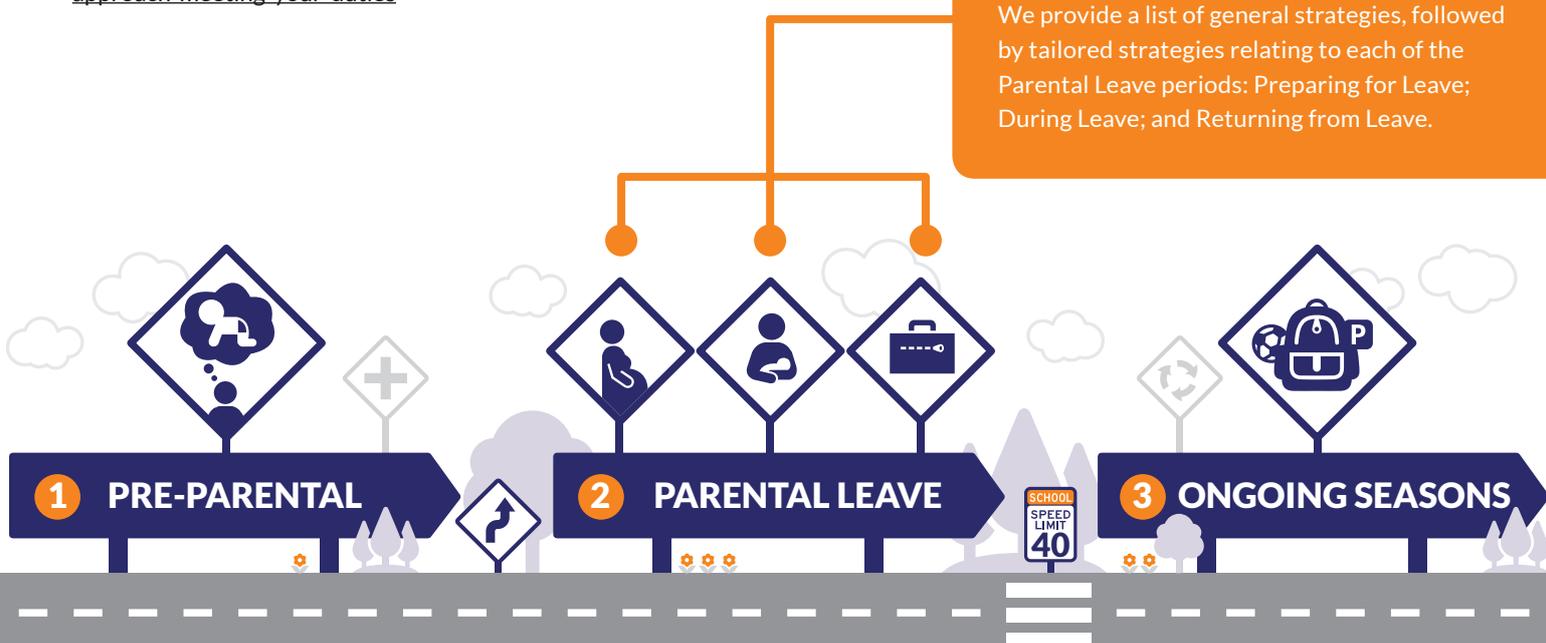
Ask, don't assume!

Supporting the Parenthood Journey

To appropriately assess for and respond to risk, it is useful to consider the parenthood journey in three distinct phases. The strategies you adopt will differ based on where employees are in this journey.

In this resource sheet, we focus specifically on the Parental Leave phase.

We provide a list of general strategies, followed by tailored strategies relating to each of the Parental Leave periods: Preparing for Leave; During Leave; and Returning from Leave.



General Considerations

EMPLOYEES MAY BE EXPERIENCING:

- Increased concern regarding health and safety of mother, father, baby and other family members.
- Physical and emotional impact of increased stress and anxiety.
- Social isolation with less face-to-face support from traditional sources (grandparents, social groups, etc).
- Caring for elderly parents as well as kids—including the need to self-isolate or undertake additional social distancing if elderly parents live with the family.
- Increased risks associated with family and domestic violence.
- Job insecurity, financial pressure or concerns.
- Loss of connection, structure, routine.
- Discomfort relating to working from home (feelings of intrusion, work-life conflict).
- Transition upon transition—personal transition to or from Parental Leave in a period of rapid organisational and global transition.



WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO TO HELP:

Build a sense of trust and control

- Be open and transparent about the current situation at work. As much as possible, explain how decisions are being made, and how they will be communicated. This includes regular communication regarding the safety measures available in the workplace.
- Develop specific COVID-19 resources for employees and managers, and create a dedicated section on the intranet for support at this time.
- Provide information and support on establishing effective working-from-home practices, or encourage the use of EAP to assist in this process of transition. Refer to **Resource: Supporting Working Parents in the Transition to Home-Working through COVID-19** <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/covid-19/>.
- Clearly communicate leave and any other relevant entitlements (including long service leave). Send clear messaging that there are no negative consequences for accessing leave. Refer to **Your Legal Obligations in the COVID-19 Pandemic**, page 8-9.
- Discuss redesign of jobs around hours and flexibility to accommodate childcare needs during this period, e.g. for single parents or if both parents are working, employment contracts with fixed hours may need adjustment.

Encourage connection

- Connection is crucial to human wellbeing and is now more important than ever. It is critical that employees are regularly connecting with each other, and with their managers (creativity may be required). One-to-one catchups create an opportunity for vulnerable employees to raise concerns.
- Connect parents to each other through a Working Parents Network or mentor/buddy program, and involve employee's partners if appropriate. Refer to **Resource: How to Set up a Working Parent Network** <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/resource-sheets/>.

Actively promote available support

- Remind employees how to access EAP services, Parental Leave Transition Coaching and any other support available, e.g. HR team, updated resources available on the intranet, online platforms, policies relating to family support (including Family and Domestic Violence), etc.

Role-model compassion and care

- Provide compassionate and clear leadership that acknowledges the unique challenges of Parental Leave transitions under these circumstances.
- Consider creative support options in addition to EAP. For example, delivering care packs for those in self-isolation or unable to go out for groceries.
- Promote self-care: good sleep, exercise and nutrition.



Preparing for Leave—Considerations

EMPLOYEES MAY BE EXPERIENCING:

- Anxiety relating to:
 - > Visiting hospital for antenatal appointments and the birth.
 - > Uncertainty over hospital resources available for the birth (staff stretched to deal with increased workload from the pandemic) and changes to maternity care provision, e.g. visitor access.
 - > Less anticipated support from grandparents or others who are self-isolating.
- Intense pressure in some sectors, such as healthcare and retail, may increase work-related risks to pregnant women. For example, coming into contact with more people than usual (thus increasing the risk of infection), dealing with irate or distressed patients/customers, standing for long periods of time and lifting heavy items.
- Pre-existing financial concerns relating to Parental Leave exacerbated by job insecurity (self and/or partner).



Don't underestimate what the last physical day in the office means for women going on Parental Leave—that demarcation symbolises the start of the next phase. They still need that last day defined, including an acknowledgement of their start to Parental Leave and assistance to 'switch off' ahead of the birth.

JUSTINE ALTER, PSYCHOLOGIST
TRANSITIONING WELL

WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO TO HELP:

Build a sense of trust and control

- Proactively contact expectant parents to offer information and support during this period. Provide as much clarity and certainty as possible regarding Parental Leave arrangements, including payment.
- Assess and review the Health and Safety of all roles currently filled by pregnant employees and make adjustments where necessary. Refer to [Your Legal Obligations in the COVID-19 Pandemic](#), page 8-9.
- Continue to offer flexibility for employees attending to medical needs, e.g. telehealth, face-to-face appointments for ultrasounds, examinations, etc.

Encourage connection

- As Parental Leave approaches, make sure there is a robust Keeping in Touch (KIT) plan in place that takes COVID-19 into account.
 - > Encourage regular connection (but respect individual preferences).
 - > Discuss the use of KIT Days, brainstorm how they might be done in the context of COVID-19 if necessary, e.g. engaging in online training, joining conference calls, office and team meetings.
 - > Reiterate that the plan can be revisited at any time, especially as things change in relation to COVID-19.
 - > Refer to [Resource: Staying Connected during Parental Leave](#) <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/resource-sheets/>
- Set up a Last Day teleconference, group chat or group email for each employee starting their Parental Leave. Celebrate the impending transition to parenthood, highlight their value to the organisation, and remind them you look forward to their return.

Actively promote available support

- Remind employees how to access EAP services, Parental Leave Transition Coaching and any other support available, e.g. HR team, updated resources available on the intranet, online platforms, policies relating to family support (including Family and Domestic Violence), etc.

Role-model compassion and care

- Provide compassionate and clear leadership that acknowledges the unique challenges of transitioning to Parental Leave under these circumstances.
- Consider creative support options in addition to EAP. For example, delivering care packs for those in self-isolation, or unable to go out for groceries.
- Promote self-care: good sleep, exercise and nutrition.



During Leave—Considerations

EMPLOYEES MAY BE EXPERIENCING:

- Anxiety relating to:
 - > Health of the mother and baby immediately after birth, including length of hospital stay, e.g. some hospitals may encourage early discharge if safe to do so.
 - > Reduced access to postnatal healthcare and breastfeeding support, e.g. Maternal Health Nurse visits may vary by location and time.
 - > Feelings of 'invisibility' and disconnection from the workplace during this critical time.
- Lack of connection during a critically at-risk time:
 - > Suspension of mothers' groups.
 - > Less hands-on support from grandparents who are unwell or self-isolating to reduce their risk of infection.
- Physical impact of increased stress and lack of sleep (from caring for a newborn and due to increased anxiety).

WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO TO HELP:

Build a sense of trust and control

- Make contact as soon as possible.
 - > Check how they are and reconnect.
 - > Provide an update on how the company is dealing with the current situation and what resources are available to all employees.
 - > Where possible, be transparent around how organisational and team decisions are being made during this period and how they will be informed about any changes, in line with your consultation obligations—see [Your Legal obligations in the COVID-19 pandemic](#), page 8-9.
- Given the rapid change of pace relating to COVID-19, agree on the best practical means of providing regular updates.
- Arrange for resources to be sent to them, if needed.
- Ensure all parents on leave are included in any parent-specific initiatives or distribution lists relating to COVID-19.

Encourage connection

- If they have just had their baby, remember to mark the occasion meaningfully, even if 'virtual'.
- Review employees' KIT plans. In particular, ask those who elected not to stay in contact during leave whether their preferences have changed in light of the current COVID-19 situation.
- If appropriate, discuss how employees might use KIT days during this period if they want to, e.g. online training, joining conference calls, office and team meetings. For information and ideas, refer to [Resource: Staying Connected during Parental Leave](#) <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/resource-sheets/>
- Ask if they would like to be assigned a mentor/buddy to have an informal check-in point, in addition to their manager.
- Connect parents to each other through a Working Parents Network or mentor/buddy program, and involve employee's partners if appropriate. Refer to [Resource: How to Set up a Working Parent Network](#) <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/resource-sheets/>.

Actively promote available support

- Remind employees how to access EAP services, Parental Leave Transition Coaching and any other support available, e.g. HR team, updated resources available on the intranet, online platforms, policies relating to family support (including Family and Domestic Violence), etc.

Role-model compassion and care

- Provide compassionate and clear leadership that acknowledges the unique challenges of being on Parental Leave under these circumstances.
- Consider creative support options in addition to EAP. For example, delivering care packs for those in self-isolation, or unable to go out for groceries.
- Promote self-care: good sleep, exercise and nutrition.



Returning from Leave—Considerations

EMPLOYEES MAY BE EXPERIENCING:

- Anxiety relating to:
 - > Job insecurity—will there be a job to come back to? What will it look like?
 - > Disruption to any existing transition back plans that were set up prior to COVID-19.
 - > Pressure to perform well upon return, exacerbated by the challenges everyone else is facing too in navigating this significant transition.
 - > Feelings of ‘invisibility’ during Parental Leave could be exacerbated upon return. It may be especially challenging to become visible again if everyone is working remotely.
 - > Challenges of working from home with an infant, and potentially older children too (potential impact of COVID-19 on childcare facilities and schools).
- Lack of connection during a critically at-risk time:
 - > Difficulty re-integrating with the team and broader organisation while working from home completely or partially (particularly if the previous manager/team members are no longer with the organisation).

WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO TO HELP:

Build a sense of trust and control

- If not yet returned from Parental Leave:
 - > Set up a re-induction/training plan to get them up to speed on organisational changes that have occurred during their leave and the organisation’s response to COVID-19.
 - > Ensure they are provided with all the necessary equipment to perform their role from home, if needed.
 - > Contact all stakeholders (internal and external) to formally announce their return and how to contact them.
 - > Ensure they are included in all meetings relevant to them.
- Pay particular attention to providing clear deliverables and (realistic) expectations during this transition, ensuring you celebrate achievements and successes.
- Acknowledge the additional challenge of working from home (potentially with kids and partner also at home) and make a plan for how it could work. Review the plan and make changes as needed. Refer to **Resource: Supporting Working Parents in the Transition to Home-Working through COVID-19** <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/covid-19/>.
- Discuss role flexibility regarding hours and projects as needed.

Encourage connection

- Set up a welcome back teleconference, group chat or group email for employees who are transitioning back during this period.
 - > Celebrate their return, reminding the organisation of their value to the organisation, their role and key responsibilities.
 - > Take the time to introduce them to new team members.
 - > Build connection by creating a relationship based on the ‘whole’ person (asking them about the baby, sharing interests).
- Encourage more regular check-ins by managers at this time.
- Connect parents to each other through a Working Parents Network or mentor/buddy program, and involve employee’s partners if appropriate. Refer to **Resource: How to Set up a Working Parent Network** <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/resource-sheets/>.

Actively promote available support

- Remind employees how to access EAP services, Parental Leave Transition Coaching and any other support available, e.g. HR team, updated resources available on the intranet, online platforms, policies relating to family support (including Family and Domestic Violence), etc.

Role-model compassion and care

- Provide compassionate and clear leadership that acknowledges the unique challenges of returning from Parental Leave under these circumstances.
- Consider creative support options in addition to EAP. For example, delivering care packs for those in self-isolation, or unable to go out for groceries.
- Promote self-care: good sleep, exercise and nutrition.



Supporting the pre-parental and ongoing seasons of parenthood is also important for employers to consider through this unprecedented transition.

Other Considerations

Whilst not a focus of this resource sheet, supporting the pre-parental and ongoing seasons of parenthood is also important for employers to consider through this unprecedented transition including the impacts upon:

FERTILITY TREATMENT

- IVF clinics may close as resources are diverted to attend to COVID-19.
- Delays to treatment may result in some hopeful parents losing the opportunity to conceive at all.
- For more information refer to **Resource: Supporting the Hidden Journeys to Parenthood** <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/resource-sheets/>.

ADOPTION AND SURROGACY PROCESSES

- Fertility treatment changes may impact individuals going through surrogacy.
- Travel restrictions may delay or prevent successful adoptions.
- For more information refer to **Resource: Supporting the Hidden Journeys to Parenthood** <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/resource-sheets/>.

PARENTS OF OLDER CHILDREN

- You may now find yourself working from home while also caring for children. For school-aged kids, there may be education demands too (home schooling), and the need to emotionally support them through this period of uncertainty.
- For more information refer to resources:
 - > **Transition to Home: What do I need to know about working from home with kids and partners through COVID-19?** <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/covid-19/>
 - > **Supporting the Ongoing Seasons of Working Parenthood:** <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/resource-sheets/>

Resource: Your Legal Obligations in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Advice current as at 1 April 2020

HRLegal

Employers have a legal obligation to provide a safe and healthy work environment for all employees, so far as is reasonably practicable, but a number of other considerations now arise specific to COVID-19, particularly for expectant/new parent employees.

LEAVE ENTITLEMENTS

Personal leave

A pregnant employee may take personal/sick leave entitlements if unwell. Pregnancy is not considered an illness or injury, however if a woman experiences a pregnancy-related illness or injury, sick leave can be taken.

Special maternity leave

A pregnant employee who is eligible for unpaid Parental Leave may also take unpaid special maternity leave where she has a pregnancy-related illness.

Parental Leave

The National Employment Standards provide that employees who have completed at least 12 months of continuous service with their employer are entitled to up to 12 months' unpaid Parental Leave. This includes casual employees who have been employed on a regular and systematic basis over at least 12 months.

This unpaid leave must be taken in one single, continuous period. Employees can request one extension to this leave for an additional 12 months and employers can only refuse this request on reasonable business grounds.

During the unpaid Parental Leave period, employees are able to utilise any paid leave, such as annual leave or long service leave.

Parental Leave can commence at any stage in the six weeks prior to the date of birth, however this can be brought forward by agreement. Pregnant employees may wish to consider requesting an earlier commencement to Parental Leave given the current risks of contracting COVID-19.

TRANSFER TO SAFE JOB WHILST PREGNANT

If it is unsafe for a pregnant employee to continue working in their usual position, the employee is entitled to be transferred to a 'safe job'. Given the rapid rate of infection, it may be reasonable to transfer women in an alternative role where they have a high risk of catching the virus, i.e. medical health worker.

If there is no appropriate safe job available, the employee is entitled to take paid 'no safe job leave' for the risk period, and be paid at her base rate of pay for ordinary hours worked during the risk period.

An employer may require medical certification or other evidence in support of an employee's request to be transferred to a safe job.

CHANGE OF WORK CONDITIONS

The issues surrounding COVID-19 has created unforeseen challenges for the community, including for many businesses. This has led to many businesses having to implement changes such as stand downs, reductions in hours and possibly redundancies.

Resource: Your Legal Obligations in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Advice current as at 1 April 2020



Stand downs

Employers are standing down their employees where there is a stoppage of work that is beyond the control of the employer, and the employees cannot be usefully engaged. This is commonly occurring where businesses are temporarily ceasing operations due to a government direction, e.g. closure of a business, inability to adhere to social distancing requirements, etc. Employees are stood down without pay.

Where an employee is stood down due to COVID-19 they will not be penalised in applying for the government paid Parental Leave as long as they document:

- How many hours they worked in the 13 months before the birth.
- How many hours they would have worked but for the COVID stand down.

This information will need to be provided to Centrelink.

A stand down will not necessarily impact employees if they are on unpaid Parental Leave. However, if they are stood down upon their return from Parental Leave, they will not be paid.

Reductions in hours

COVID-19 is unusual in that it is likely that most Australian businesses (and most teams within businesses) will be impacted and many employees will be subject to changes in their working conditions, most likely a reduction in hours.

Where an employer decides to make significant changes to an employee's job, e.g. to status, pay or location, while they're on unpaid Parental Leave, they are obliged to:

- Discuss these changes with the employee; and
- Give them an opportunity to talk about these changes.

This will be particularly important for employees who are due to return to work after Parental Leave in the near future.

Additionally, many awards and enterprise agreements have a consultation process for when there are major changes to the workplace, such as redundancies.

RETURN TO WORK AFTER PARENTAL LEAVE – WHAT IF THERE IS NO WORK TO BE PERFORMED?

Where an employee's job does not exist anymore or it has changed after they return from Parental Leave, then they should be offered a suitable available job that:

- The employee is qualified and suited to work in.
- Is nearest to their old job in pay and status.

Due to the impact of the COVID-19 and business closures, an employer may no longer require the employee's role to be performed anymore. This will usually result in redundancy unless stand down applies.

In the event of redundancy, the employee will be entitled to a redundancy payment and notice in line with their employment contract or the National Employment Standards. The redundancy payment will be based on the employee's base pay for ordinary hours of work for their pre-parental leave role.

APPLYING FOR GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

Services Australia has announced that it will temporarily expand its eligibility for JobSeeker Payment for job seekers so that permanent employees will now be able to access JobSeeker if they have lost their job or have been stood down.

However, these employees cannot access employer entitlements, such as annual leave or sick leave, or income protection insurance at the same time as getting JobSeeker Payment.

Additionally, on 30 March 2020, the Australian government announced the 'Job Keeper' scheme to encourage businesses impacted by COVID-19 to retain staff. The subsidy will be paid to businesses at a flat rate of \$1,500 per fortnight for each eligible employee. This will also apply where workers have been stood down without pay.

Services Australia will pay a temporary fortnightly \$550 Coronavirus Supplement from 27 April 2020 where employees are getting an eligible payment.

A one-off Crisis Payment is available if employees are in severe financial hardship and either:

- Need to self-isolate.
- Are caring for someone self-isolating.

The Jobseeker and Youth Allowance payments are tapered, meaning if employees are earning nothing for the fortnight they will receive the full welfare payment.

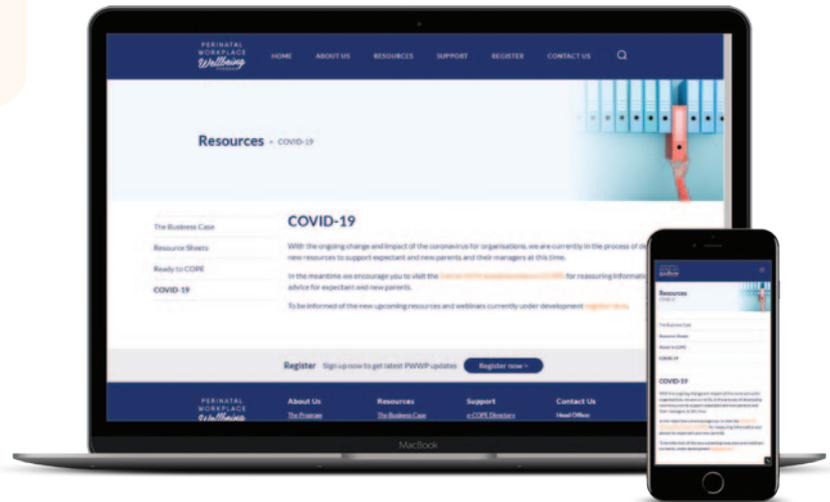
Where employees are on a reduced wage as a result of COVID-19 (but remain below the income threshold) they will receive a portion of the payment.

Resource: Useful Resources Relating to the COVID-19 Pandemic

As the situation with COVID-19 is rapidly changing, we have created a dedicated page of resources to support you during this time.

This page is being regularly updated.

Please visit <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/covid-19/> for further information.



For more information about the PWWP

W www.pwwp.org.au
E info@pwwp.org.au

