

STAYING CONNECTED DURING PARENTAL LEAVE



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN, AND WHY IS IT **IMPORTANT?**

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According to the ABS, the average length of Parental Leave in Australia is eight months—this is a significant time away from the workplace and requires organisations to consider how they stay connected with a new parent and support their return to work—not a case of ‘out of sight out of mind’!

Parental Leave is a time of **major transition** and new parents can feel disconnected and concerned about changes that may occur in the business while they are on leave.

Encouraging workers to **stay connected during their Parental Leave** can offer many benefits to both the employer and employee.



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WHAT ARE THE **KEY BENEFITS** OF STAYING CONNECTED?

For employers

- Continues a strong relationship with the employee.
- Provides important channels of communication to express any concerns and work through possible solutions together.
- Reduces 'shadow turnover' (employees who quietly leave because they assume the organisation won't support their needs upon return).
- Supports seamless delivery to clients/customers.
- Fulfils an organisation's consultation obligations and helps to mitigate discrimination risk.
- Reduces the impact of work-related factors.

For employees

- Validates their important contribution to the organisation—making them feel acknowledged and validated.
- Reduces social isolation at a vulnerable life-stage through connection.
- Facilitates a smoother transition back into the workplace.
- Provides an opportunity for more open communication regarding the transition back, and working through concerns and possible solutions with the support of the organisation.
- Reduces the potential to experience unconscious bias relating to their career commitment.
- Assists in maintaining relationships with managers and co-workers.
- Encourages greater trust and loyalty to the organisation.
- Offers a protective factor against anxiety and depression.



I was worried about visiting my workplace because I thought they would ask when I was coming back, and the truth was I hadn't even thought about it yet. When I finally did go, everyone was so lovely and I really enjoyed introducing them to my baby. It was nice to connect again.

How does staying connected reduce the impact of work-related factors?

Work-related factors, also known as psychosocial hazards, are anything in the management or design of work that increases the risk of work-related stress, which can lead to physical injury, mental injury or even both at the same time.

Helping employees stay connected during Parental Leave can help reduce common work-related factors such as:

- Low job control.
- Poor support.
- Poor organisational change management.
- Low recognition and reward.
- Low role clarity.
- Poor workplace relationships.
- Poor environmental conditions.

FOR MORE INFORMATION SEE:

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



Before I went on leave I had a few conversations about staying in touch and felt really positive. Then my baby arrived and I was so busy, several months went by before I realised none of it had come to pass. In hindsight, the business had no processes in place so it was just left to chance, and that just did not work.



THREE STEP PLAN FOR STAYING CONNECTED TO YOUR EMPLOYEES

STEP 1: Ensure systems are in place that support connection during leave

1. **Decide on appropriate access to internal systems during leave** e.g. email and intranet access. Keep in mind that if your employee elects not to check their work emails, you will need to use an alternate personal email (with their permission) so that they can be included on communication.
2. **Ensure the system can accommodate an 'opt out' option** for those who do not wish to be contacted during their Parental Leave.
3. **Systematise the processes with IT and other departments** to ensure that the employee on Parental Leave does not get disconnected.
4. If possible, **create an automatic alert** to HR or the relevant manager when any accounts are about to be suspended for someone on leave.
5. **Update the exit process** for managers to ensure:
 - A manager's departure triggers communication to any team members on Parental Leave.
 - If the manager was the primary contact for the parent on leave, someone else is assigned to maintain the connection.
 - The new manager is introduced to the person on leave.

TIP

If possible, add a return date to trigger an alert at least 4-6 weeks before the person is due to return so that preparations can be made.

A common issue is that managers have left while team members were on Parental Leave, and so that touch point is lost. This loss of connection can generate a lot of angst for the person on leave, and fear for what will happen when they return.

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I couldn't wait for Parental Leave. Truth be told I felt a bit burnt out and just wanted a break. Well, parenting isn't a break but I did completely switch off from work for a while. When I did start talking about my return date I realised how much I was looking forward to being back!

The key to staying connected while on Parental Leave is **ASK, DON'T ASSUME!**



STEP 2: Agree on a Keeping In Touch (Kit) Plan before Parental Leave starts

4-6 weeks before the employee goes on Parental Leave, ask how they would like to remain in touch and document their preferences.

- Agree on a KIT plan (see page 8 for a KIT Plan template that you can customise for your organisation).
- Discuss keeping in touch days:
 - What is (and isn't) a KIT day.
 - Clarify that it is paid and both parties need to agree to it.
 - Agree how and when you will communicate about possible KIT days.
- Agree to revisit the plan if there are any major changes on either side (e.g. new manager, Parental Leave extended).

TIPS

Discuss and agree on a KIT plan at least a month before Parental Leave is due to commence. Don't leave it to the last minute—sometimes people need to go on leave earlier than expected!

Congratulating a parent on the birth or adoption of their child is often the first communication you will have with them while on leave. It's a meaningful way to establish the type of connection you will have throughout their Parental Leave—make it count!

Keep the KIT plan flexible—it's hard for new parents to know how they will feel once the child arrives, and how connected they would like to be. Respect their wishes if they would prefer not to be contacted during Parental Leave.

If there are already employees in your organisation on Parental Leave, it's not too late to set up/formulate/create a KIT plan. Send an email inviting them to read the guide on page 7 and offer to set up a call to chat about what might work best for them. Be sure to specify that it is purely optional.



Ensure consistency across the organisation—inconsistent experiences erode trust and can do more harm than good if preferences are not honoured.



STEP 3: During leave keep in touch consistently and appropriately

If the employee wishes to keep in touch:

Keep them in the loop

- What's happening in the broader organisation?
- What's happening in the team?
- What's happening with key clients/customers?

People on leave are often unsure whether they are entitled to attend events while on leave. Extend personal invitations to specific events or training opportunities and don't let them find out on Facebook or LinkedIn!

Maximise their 'visibility' in the organisation

- Include them in key HR processes i.e. performance, remuneration and promotion. Be careful not to assume they won't be interested, able or willing. Ask them!
- Don't remove all references to them e.g. keep their name on email/ phone lists and org charts, leave their desk/office nametag in their workspace, add a section to each newsletter with the names of employees away (on leave, on holiday, on sabbatical etc).
- Actively promote the use of Keeping In Touch (KIT) days.
- Encourage attendance at company events—extend a personal invitation.

Consider allocating some budget to support connection with parents on leave

- Babysitting allowance for employees on Parental Leave coming to a company/social event.
- On-site babysitting for all working parents during major events.
- Coffee catch-ups for new parents to meet with other working parents or team-mates.
- Allowance for taxi/parking for parents to bring their new baby into the workplace.

Create additional connection opportunities for working parents, where appropriate

- Set up a Working Parent Network. (Refer to Resource: 'How to Set Up a Working Parent Network')
- Assign a buddy to each parent on leave. A buddy can act as an additional, informal touchpoint for the person on leave, typically tasked with maintaining contact, personally greeting them when they come into the office during leave, sharing news and providing other informal support during the period of leave and transition back to work.
- Consider emailing all employees already on Parental Leave introducing them to each other so they can connect if they choose to (be sure to get permission for sharing personal email addresses).

Have a backup

A common issue cited by people on Parental Leave is that the person they were connecting with (e.g. a manager) leaves the organisation, and they lose their main touchpoint.

A situation may also arise when the person nominated to keep in touch fails to do so. Create processes to monitor whether contact is being maintained, and be prepared to make changes as needed.

EMPLOYER CHECKLIST

- Parents provided with Keeping in Touch (KIT) Information (see page 7).
- KIT Plan discussed and documented (see page 8).
- KIT contact agreed (e.g. HR, manager or other appropriate representative) based on agreed KIT Plan.
- Personal email address and/or phone number recorded (with permission from employee).
- System updated:
 - KIT preferences recorded.
 - Emails remain on, or HR/manager automatically alerted if they are about to get switched off.
 - Where appropriate, added to the database for automatic newsletters, intranet alerts, etc.
- If applicable:
 - Invited to join Working Parent Network.
 - KIT buddy assigned.
- Backup plan/alert created in case nominated KIT person leaves, fails to make contact or is unable to maintain agreed level of contact.



I was very uncertain about returning to work. I was on the verge of simply not coming back when HR reached out to me about the options for returning. They helped me prepare for a conversation with my manager about returning, and I ended up having a really open conversation about what I felt I needed to come back to work. I felt very well supported, I'm so glad HR reached out!

If the employee **does not wish to be contacted** while on leave:

- Ensure they are aware of the benefits of staying in touch, and the various ways they can keep informed if they want to and that this can be adapted if their views change.
- Let them know how to advise you if they change their mind.
- Remind them to make contact at least four weeks before the end of their Parental Leave to confirm their return date or request an extension.

TIPS

If systems allow, record when contact has been made, and use this to generate an alert when no contact has been made for X months, or diarise regular check-ins. Ensure there is an 'opt-out' option for those who do not wish to be contacted during Parental Leave.

Diarise reminders to have regular check-ins to say hello and keep the channels open (but not intrusive).

It can be daunting to travel into work with a new baby after a period of absence—offer to reimburse the costs of a taxi/parking so they can travel easily, have a team member meet them downstairs so they don't have to walk up alone, arrange a cake/morning tea to encourage everyone to stop by and say hello.

If plans change on the day that they are coming in and the team is unable to spend time with them, make sure that you communicate this with them and possibly reschedule so they do not feel like they have been a burden/disruption to the team.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Keeping in touch is a choice

- ✓ Make sure people understand the benefits of keeping in touch during leave.
- ✓ Respect their wishes if they do not wish to be in touch until their Parental Leave ends.
- ✓ Set up the infrastructure to enable you to remain appropriately connected. Asking for preferences and then not having the system to honour them could do more harm than good.
- ✓ Consistency across the organisation is crucial—don't leave it to chance.

RESOURCE: KEEPING IN TOUCH (KIT) DAYS – A QUICK GUIDE

What is a KIT Day?

A KIT day is a short period of paid work that an employee can engage in while on Parental Leave. The purpose of the paid work must be either:

- To stay connected with the workplace.
- To help the transition back into work.

Employees are allowed 10 KIT days during the first 52 weeks of Parental Leave, and another 10 days if leave is extended beyond that time. Accessing KIT days does not impact Parental Leave Pay or unpaid leave entitlements, nor does it 'break' or extend the period of leave.

What type of activities qualify as a KIT Day?

These could include:

- ✓ Participating in a planning day.
- ✓ Engaging in training.
- ✓ Attending a conference.
- ✓ Doing work to become familiar with the workplace, or the role, before returning to work, e.g. induction meetings, attending meetings in relation to the future of their role.

But does not include social activities, such as:

- ✗ Social events.
- ✗ Casual catch-ups with your colleagues.
- ✗ Other unpaid activities relating to work.

Is it necessary to work full days?

KIT days can be worked as a part day, one day at a time, a few days at a time, or all at once.

Note that one hour or more of paid work activity counts as one instance of keeping in touch, and this counts towards the 10-day limit. This means that an employee cannot, for example, do 20 x half days.

Is the employee paid for a KIT Day?

Yes, the employer must pay the employee their normal wage for performing work on a KIT day or part day. For example, if an employee does four hours of work, the employee must be paid four hours' worth of their hourly wage. This will count as one KIT day.

Are there any restrictions on when a KIT Day can be accessed?

A KIT day cannot be accessed within the first 14 days after the birth or adoption of a child.

An employer can request a KIT day no earlier than 42 days after the birth or adoption of a child, but an employee can request it any time after 14 days.

Are they mandatory?

No. The employer and employee must mutually agree to the KIT days, and an employee doesn't have to use them if they don't wish to. The timing of taking such days is also by mutual agreement.

What else do we need to know?

An employee will be considered as having returned to work (and therefore entitlements will cease) if they do any of the following:

- Resume regular work activities, other than KIT days.
- Access more than 10 KIT days before the end of the Parental Leave Pay period.
- Access a KIT day within the first 14 days after the birth or adoption of a child.

It's a good idea to keep records of these days so that Parental Leave entitlements are not inadvertently affected.

References

Fair Work: www.fairwork.gov.au/leave/maternity-and-parental-leave/when-on-parental-leave

Department of Human Services: www.humanservices.gov.au/organisations/business/services/centrelink/paid-parental-leave-scheme-employers/how-manage-your-role-scheme/keeping-touch-your-employee-getting-parental-leave-pay

EXAMPLES

Jane wanted to settle her new baby into childcare and resolve any teething issues relating to her return to work before her official restart date.

She agreed with her manager that she would use her 10 KIT days to gradually ramp up to full-time work. For the first two weeks she worked three days, then four days in week three and resumed full-time work in week four.

James is taking six months' Parental Leave.

He attended a work planning day which lasted four hours. He was paid his normal wage for four hours, and this counted as one KIT day. He now has nine KIT days left and plans to use some of those to attend training on a new software package the company is adopting.

RESOURCE: KIT PLAN TEMPLATE



How much contact would you like to have with us during your leave?

- A lot
- A bit
- No contact please

What is the best way for us to contact you?

- Email (please provide the best email address to contact you on).....
- Phone (please provide the best number to contact you on).....
- Other (please specify)

What types of things would you like to hear about? (tick all that apply)

- Organisational news, changes, initiatives
- People changes
- Training events
- Conferences
- Networking/social events
- Other (please specify)

Would you be open to being contacted about possible job / promotion opportunities before the end of your leave period?

- Yes please
- No thanks

How would you like the arrival of your child to be announced to the organisation?

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IF APPLICABLE – Would you like to join our Working Parents Network?

Please note that if you decide to join, we would need to share your personal contact details with the organisers and other members of the network so that they can send you relevant information and contact you about upcoming events. (Refer to Resource: 'How to Set up a Working Parent Network')

- Yes please
- No thanks

IF APPLICABLE – Would you like to join our buddy program?

Please note that if you decide to join, we would need to share your personal contact details with the organisers and your assigned buddy.

- Yes please
- No thanks

Do you give permission for us to share your personal email address with other working parents who are interested in connecting?

- Yes
- No

RESOURCE: SAMPLE LETTER FROM HR OR MANAGER TO EXPECTANT PARENTS



Dear [Expectant Parent],

We are very pleased to support you as you prepare for Parental Leave.

We realise you will soon be very busy focusing on your new family, however we would love to stay in touch with you during your period of leave, if you would like to. We are very happy to be guided by you as to how we do this!

For now, I'd like to draw your attention to 'Keeping in Touch (KIT) Days' which you can access during your leave, by agreement with your manager. The purpose of KIT days is to help you stay connected with us during your period of leave, or help ease your transition back to work, without any impact on any Parental Leave entitlements that might apply to you.

With the agreement of your manager, you can access up to 10 KIT days, and you will be paid your normal wage for any hours worked on these days. The types of activities that qualify include: participating in a planning day, company offsites, training sessions, and attending conferences. Please see the guide attached for more information.

Here are some other ways you might choose to stay in touch with us during your leave:

- Connect with colleagues on social media e.g. LinkedIn.
- Read company newsletters/blogs/intranet news.
- Social catch-ups with manager, team-mates, other working parents.
- Stay up-to-date with your co-workers' news and embrace opportunities to connect.
- Join our Working Parent Network [IF APPLICABLE].
- Sign up to our buddy program [IF APPLICABLE].

To support you during your leave, and to understand your preferences for keeping in touch during your leave, we would like to agree on a short KIT Plan. Please let me know a suitable time and I will send you a meeting invite.

I anticipate this will only take approximately 20-30 minutes, and during this conversation I would welcome the opportunity to answer any questions or provide any other support that will help you to prepare for your upcoming leave.

Kind Regards

[HR or Manager]