



# Breaking the Silence: Revealing the Truth about Parenting and the Workplace

A study that was designed to uncover the struggles and the impact lack of sleep has on parents returning to the workplace.

*Nicole Ratchliffe*

FAMILY SLEEP COACH

# #1. ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hi There,

I'm Nicole Ratcliffe, an experienced holistic sleep coach based in Manchester and a mum of two.

In 2017 I created the brand Baby2Sleep and since then I have been supporting families improve their little ones sleep and improve parental well-being.

In 2022 Baby2Sleep launched Passport2Parenthood to help expectant parents begin their journey on the right path. Educating parents-to-be on the vital details the antenatal courses don't talk about. The reality of having a baby and what happens once you get home with the baby. Sleep deprivation can be triggering, so supporting parents with infant sleep can help lower maternal mental health struggles. Sadly, suicide is now on par with heart disease as the biggest killer in the first 12 months after having a baby (MBRACE), and poor sleep and poor mental health are closely linked, so by supporting sleep, we can help improve mental wellbeing.

I am a birth trauma survivor, twice breastfeeding mum, and have suffered with long term severe sleep deprivation. I'm passionate about helping families to have a positive start and sleep is such a huge part of that.

I know from first-hand experience the impact that a lack of sleep can have on relationships, physical and mental health, mood and energy levels. That's why I've designed a range of courses and support packages to suit parents at all stages, from expectant parents wanting to give themselves and their baby the best possible start, to parents of babies, toddlers and children up to 6 years of age, who need positive change in their sleeping patterns.

Knowledge is power and when parents feel refreshed, empowered and confident, they are so much more able to handle the everyday challenges that parenthood brings.



# #2. GETTING STARTED

The transition from parenthood into the workplace can be a challenging experience for new parents.

This journey often involves a major adaptation process, as individuals are required to reconcile their roles as both parents and professionals.

This study explores the experience of parents returning to work after maternity or paternity leave.

The objective was to highlight the challenges faced during this transition, including the impact of sleep deprivation due to a baby or child struggling with sleep and the impact it has on the parents sleep, the relationships with managers, perception of job performance, and the general workplace support.

It is vital to explore this topic as it can help employers to gain insights into the struggles the employees are facing when returning to work post-baby, thereby providing them with resources that can help to develop and implement more effective strategies to support new parents in the workplace.

Furthermore, understanding these challenges can contribute to broader discussions around balancing work and family life, and fostering healthier, more inclusive work environments.

I hope the findings from this study can facilitate informed conversations between employers and employees, as well as provide a basis for further research on parent-friendly workplace practices.

## HOW WE DID IT

Survey distributed May - June 2023 via social media platforms for mums and dads to complete

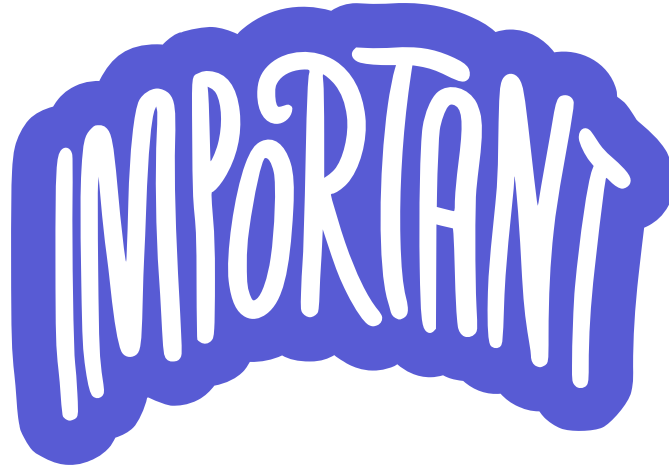
Carefully designed questions that were meant to capture different perspectives of the participant's experience.

Included queries about the impact of sleep deprivation on job safety and performance, the openness of communication with managers, their overall experience of returning to work, and the workplace support they have received during this time.

I am deeply appreciative of the 520 respondents who took the time to share their experiences. Their participation has laid a groundwork that I hope can lead to better support for new parents juggling their responsibilities at work and at home.

Nicole  
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## #3. EMBRACING THE JOURNEY



In the pages that follow, you will get to learn about what parents are facing when they navigate the transition back to work after having a baby.

It is important to acknowledge that some of the narratives you encounter may evoke a range of emotions. The stories shared by the respondents reflect their individual realities, painted with resilience, vulnerability, and at times, heartbreak.

For employers engaging with these findings, it's important to recognise that these experiences are not a disincentive but a call to action. Understanding the emotional dimensions of the return-to-work process can lead to more empathetic and effective workplaces. Embracing strategies outlined ahead can help promote a culture of support without compromising productivity.

So, with an open heart and a spirit of possibility, let us move forward to uncover the insights, recommendations, and solutions that lies ahead.

## #4. KEY FINDINGS

**62.5% of the respondents were struggling with sleep after returning to work**

**43.9% weren't able to confide in their managers about their struggles and how bad things were**

**When calling in sick after a bad night sleep it was difficult for them to admit the real reason for this to their manager, due to fear of judgement.**

**17.4% were not able to perform efficiently or safely in their roles in the workplace due to lack of sleep**

**1 in 3 of the respondents had a negative / mostly negative experience in returning to work after having a baby.**

**62.6% of the respondents would like to have a more open and honest relationship with their manager about sleep deprivation as a parent returning to work.**

**39.5% of the respondents said their baby only started sleeping well enough for them to function safely in their job between 18 months and 3 years old, with 22% admitting their child still didn't sleep. That is long after they need to return to work.**

**Judgmental attitudes from managers can discourage new mums from sharing their struggles, creating a sense of isolation and pushing them to silently endure their difficulties.**

**The lack of managerial concern over a new mum's personal well-being, as seen in the disregard for her sleep issues, can create a hostile work environment, discouraging open communication about personal struggles.**

**27.8% have left their jobs after returning to work post baby due to lack of support.**

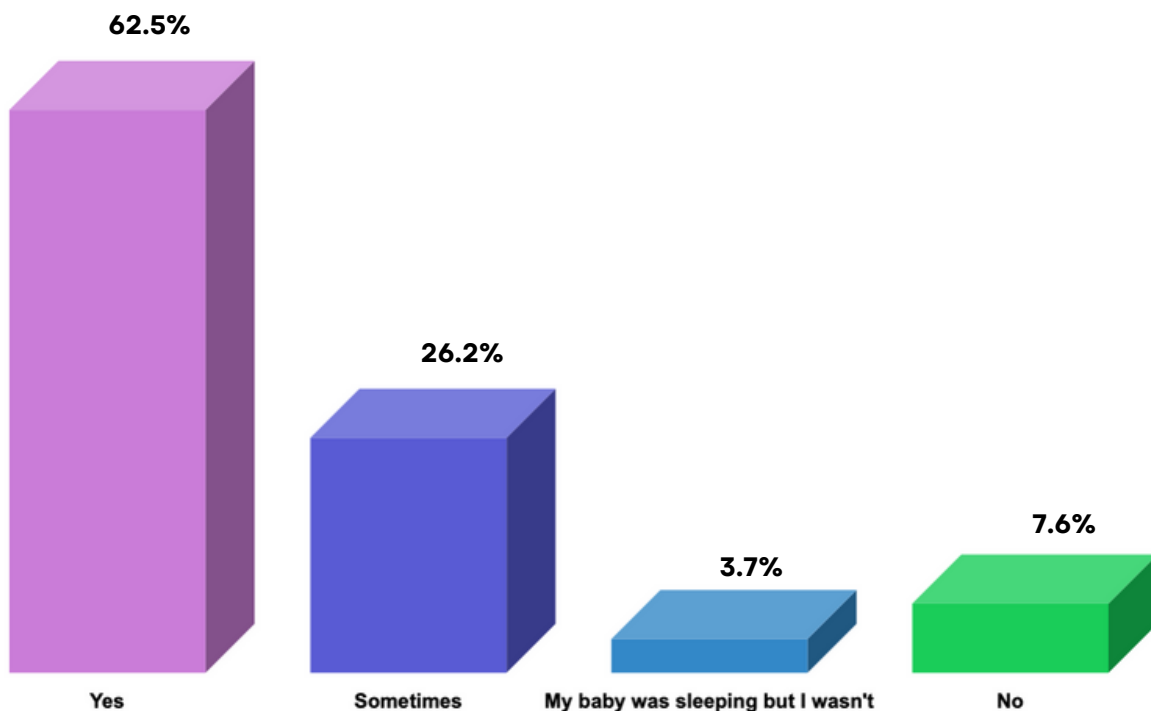
**The need for career progression and financial stability often trumps personal wellbeing, creating a climate where new mums feel they cannot voice their challenges.**

**A lack of alternatives and support systems for working mothers can lead to a sense of isolation and helplessness, making it more difficult for them to confide in their managers about their struggles.**

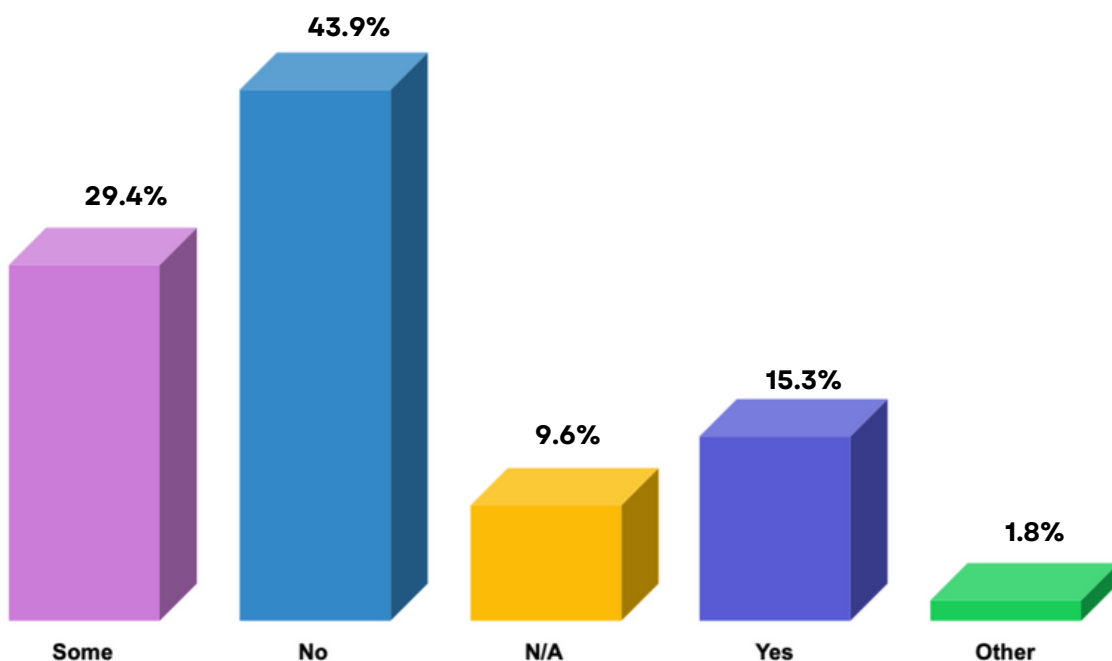
# #5. DETAILED FINDINGS



When you went back to work after maternity/paternity leave, were you struggling with sleep due to your baby not sleeping well?

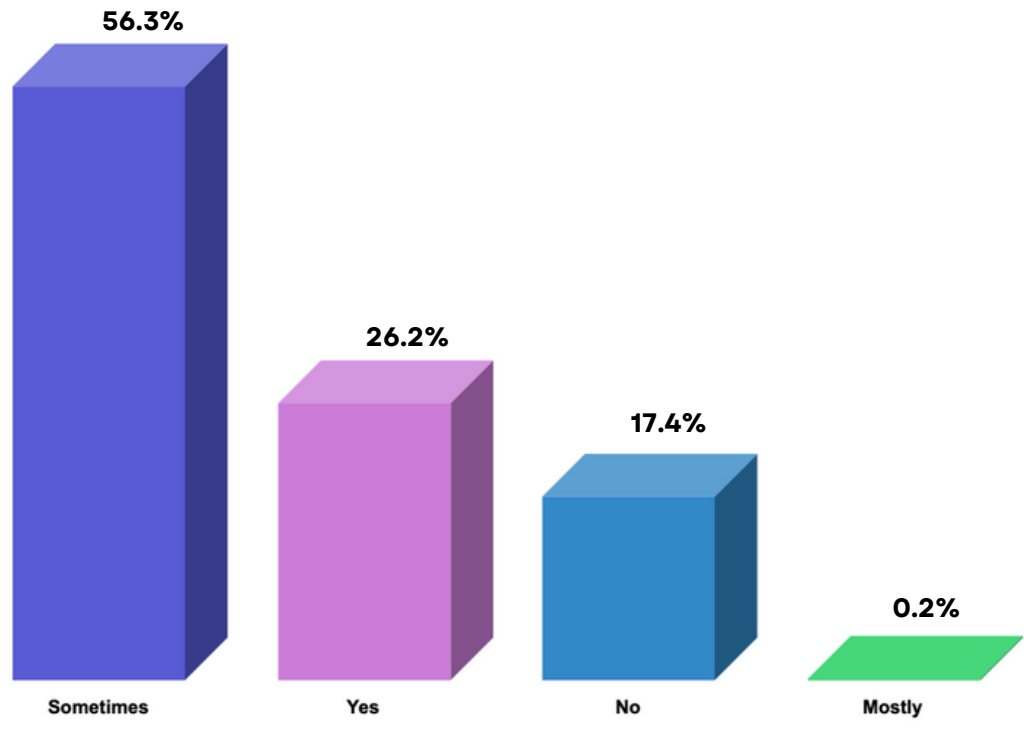


If you were struggling with sleep, were you able to confide in your manager about how bad things were?

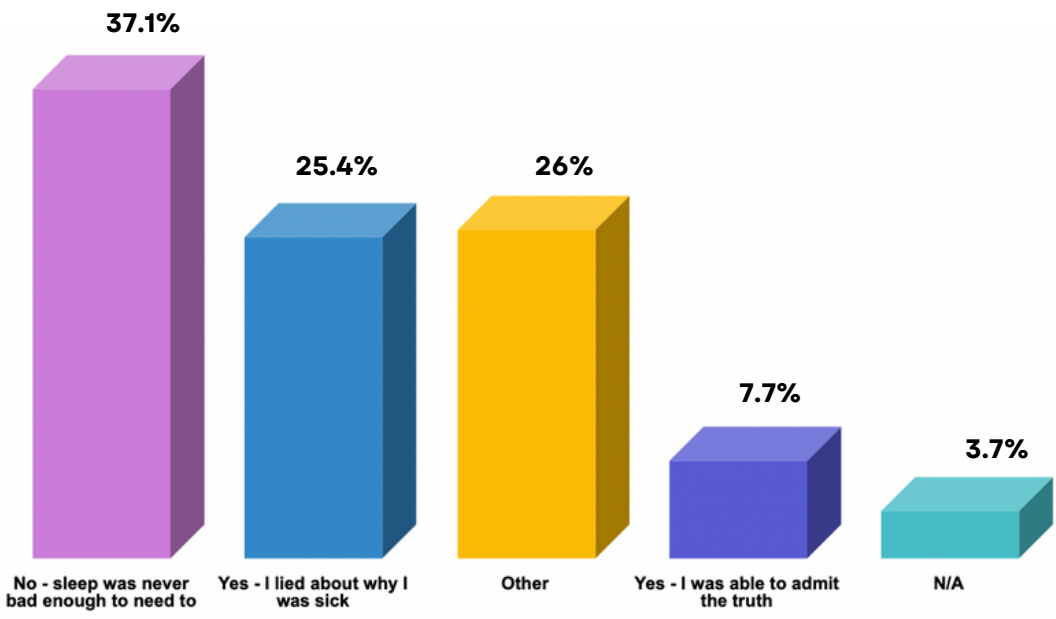




**Did you feel like you were able to perform in your role efficiently and/or safely?**



**Did you ever call in sick after a bad nights sleep? If so, were you able to admit this to your manager?**







If you felt you couldn't confide in your manager about how much you were struggling, please share your reasons.

'My manager was a middle aged man with no children. I was a mental health nurse working in a volatile environment and when I did approach him he started to show me statistics which didn't help with my anxiety/ the fact I didn't feel safe going to work.'

'Belittled and invalidated. The feeling that every mother returning to work struggles with sleep so why should I have special treatment. Or I was once told to just get a nanny to deal with the baby so I could get some sleep.'

'My boss dislikes people having maternity leave anyway (its costs money), doesn't believe having children should had any bearing on role when you return to work.'

'"It's tough, but that's why women used to stay at home at least til the kids went to school" - which to be fair I wanted to do, but we couldn't afford at the time.'

'Manager is very understanding, but being tired did not seem a good enough reason (certainly it's not on the HR drop down list on the sick leave form!) But I was so tired I couldn't function, I certainly couldn't work.'

'I work in a male dominated environment as an engineer. I have to compete with my male counterparts for equal amount of recognition and respect. Even when I do more of everything I do not have equality. Complaining about sleep would not help my career.'

'Not to admit I'm failing in my roles.'

'As mentioned above, there were weeks in which I was sleeping 2-3 hours a night, I could barely cope, but there was a workload that needed to be managed, and also after being questioned before returning back to work, so you needed to prove you could still do the work. I returned to work after 7 months for financial reasons. My manager questioned how I would manage, and how I would be able to make up the work I was missing due to expressing milk etc. (which would take hours out of my work day), but I had no other choice. I needed the money, I needed to make sure I was still progressing in my career and there were no other alternatives.'

'My boss wouldn't have cared either way! Not this new boss who asked the age of my children. I said 4 and 2 years and her reply was "Great they can be left alone for a few hours" .... Wtf !!!'

'They were very judgemental and just expected you to get on with it, as being a parent meant a bit less sleep. One of them had also had a child slightly after me and her attitude was well my child sleeps, so should yours. When it got to the point where I'd had 1 hours sleep or less for 3 months, I had to be off for a couple of days as my little girl was ill. They then pulled me in for an unofficial chat about my absence despite my having hit no trigger points in the absence policy. I went off sick for 6 months then resigned.'

'Manager very clearly didn't care and I was once told point blank "your childcare isn't our problem, other people manage it, it's not a good enough excuse" when being asked to attend training on my day off. She definitely would not have cared about my sleep.'

'Thought I would be judged'.

'They just didn't care'.



## What do you think your company could do better to support you in the workplace as a parent returning to work?

'Better childcare provisions (on-site childcare would be ideal - even better if costs were also kept to a minimum) - better maternity pay conditions would also be better, so that people would not have to return to work before they stop breastfeeding. I know many people would say more flexibility, but in some jobs, this is not possible, for instance in various education sectors (in my case, I was teaching 5 modules per semester, which involved at least a 3 hour lecture for each module a week, when 2 were in a row, it made expressing milk really difficult, and ultimately the 6 hours of teaching in a row on some days with only limited breaks is what made my milk dry up and eventually I had to stop breastfeeding because it was impossible to find the time to express). Better provisions for fathers would also have made a significant difference for me, as my partner could have carried some of the burden.'

'Allow flexible start times to the working day. It's hard because you don't want to negatively impact your employer but also it's a shame as women are frowned upon when they have to turn up late or look very tired. Just allow flexibility.'

'Anything! I work at a large paediatric hospital, you would think they would have a whole system in place to support postpartum employees, but they do not. One thing they do well is support breastfeeding & pumping. There are lactation rooms readily accessible throughout the hospital.'

'Back to work interview, more flexibility, ability to work from home, understanding, career progression. Check in meetings, appraisal.'

'Have a heart? Recognise that priorities may have changed? Recognise that parenting is also a full time job- have some empathy.'

'Better maternity pay so less pressure to return to work.'

'Better education in the workplace about sleep deprivation and how it can affect you mentally and physically, and also how it can prevent you doing your job effectively. More days off for child related situations, such as them being ill and not sleeping.'

'Delegate a person that is more approachable and has experience with returning to work after having a baby.'

'Trial and error - a chance to figure out what works. Trust. Allowing me to start late but work that evening for example. Knowing they see me as a whole human with a life outside of work, it just a worker bee.'

'Phased return to work following maternity leave as standard. Understanding the impact of sleep deprivation. Temporary reasonable adjustments to support remaining in work. I work in HR and have seen people in long term sick from sleep deprivation and the associated mental health issues. A supportive environment is needed but often not present.'

'Reduced hours/gradual return. Flexibility in role'

'Something like giving parents a few days allowance in the first 6 months of returning to work where they can just have a last minute day off if they haven't had enough sleep.'

'Hire better managers or train managers better, and be open to helping parents get necessary accommodations on time instead of shaming them for asking for help.'

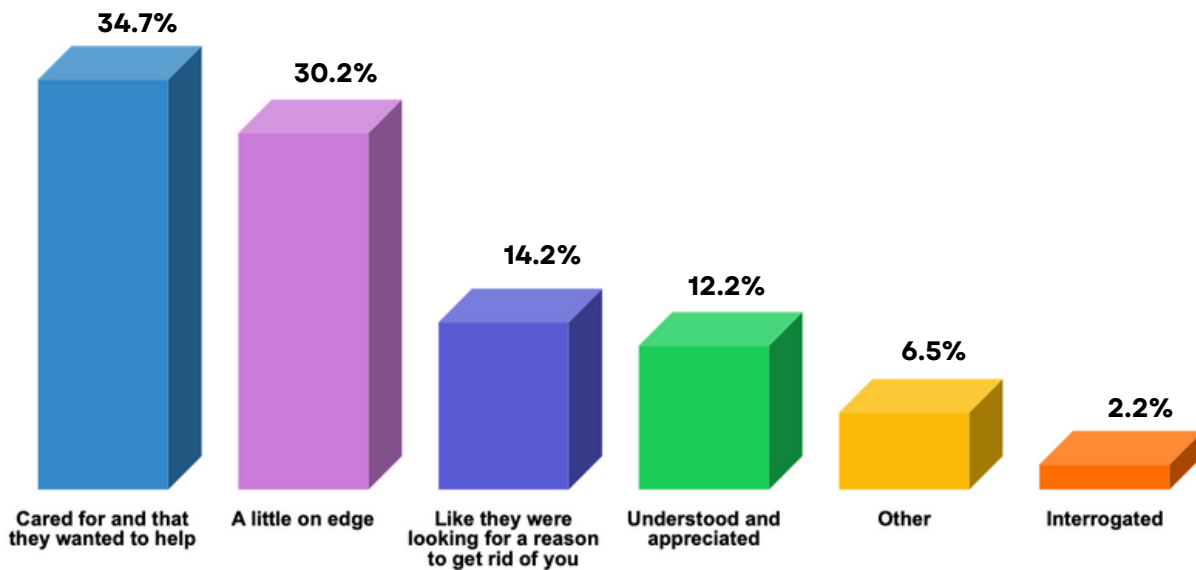
'Acknowledge that kids get sick a lot in the early years, especially when at daycare and give parents flexibility to care for them without guilt.'

'Listen better and acknowledge what I was saying so I felt heard rather than brushed off as if I was complaining about something that everyone has gone through. Not everyone has gone through such sleep deprivation but I was made to feel like I was making a mountain out of a molehill'

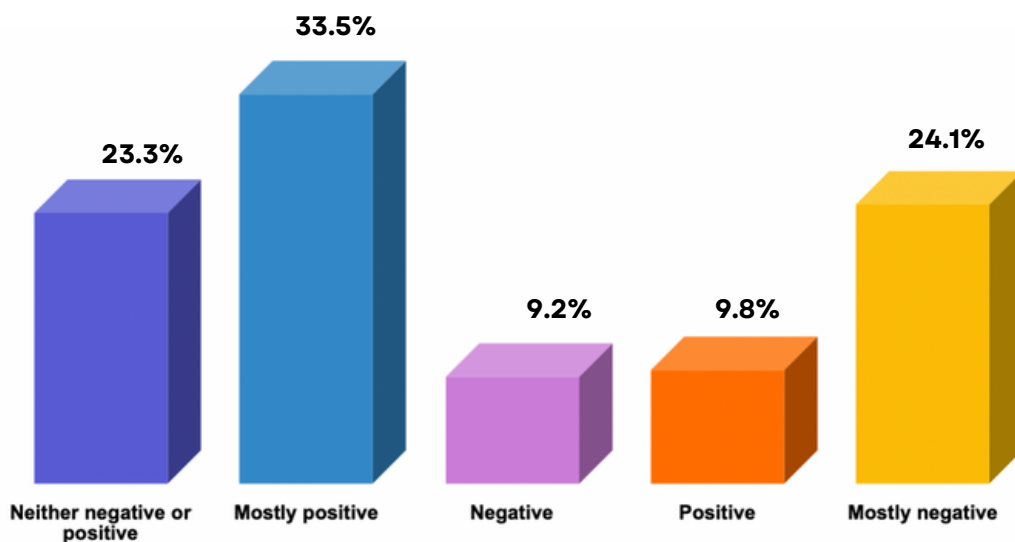
'Be more mindful of the struggles, understand that we can't just crack on as normal. It's a huge adjustment getting used to working & having a child.'



## How would you feel if your line manager asked you how you were coping in work?

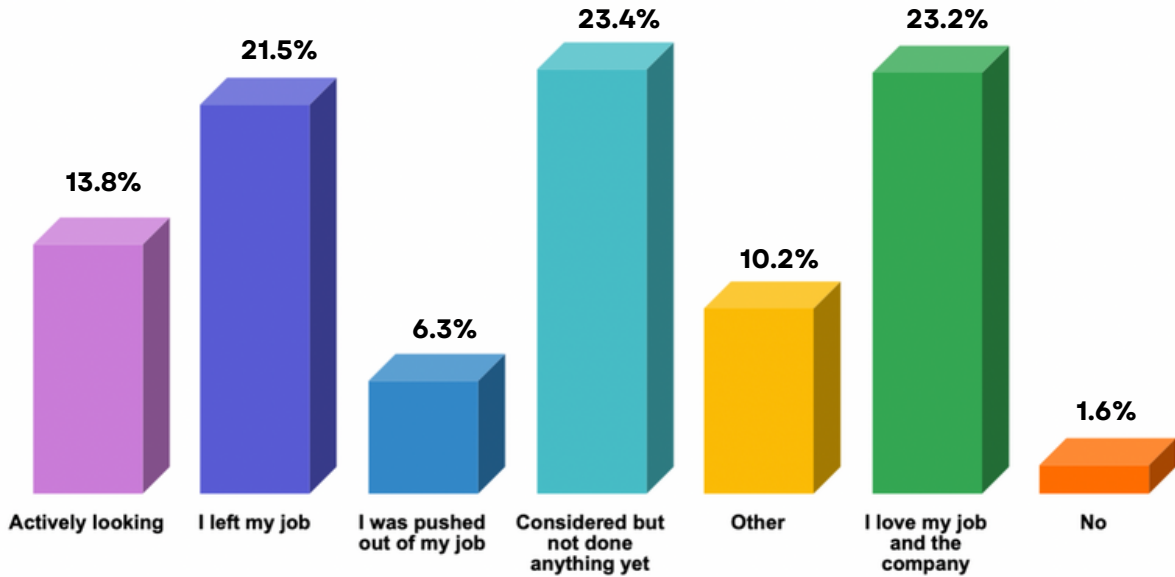


## Has your experience in returning to work after having a baby being positive or negative?

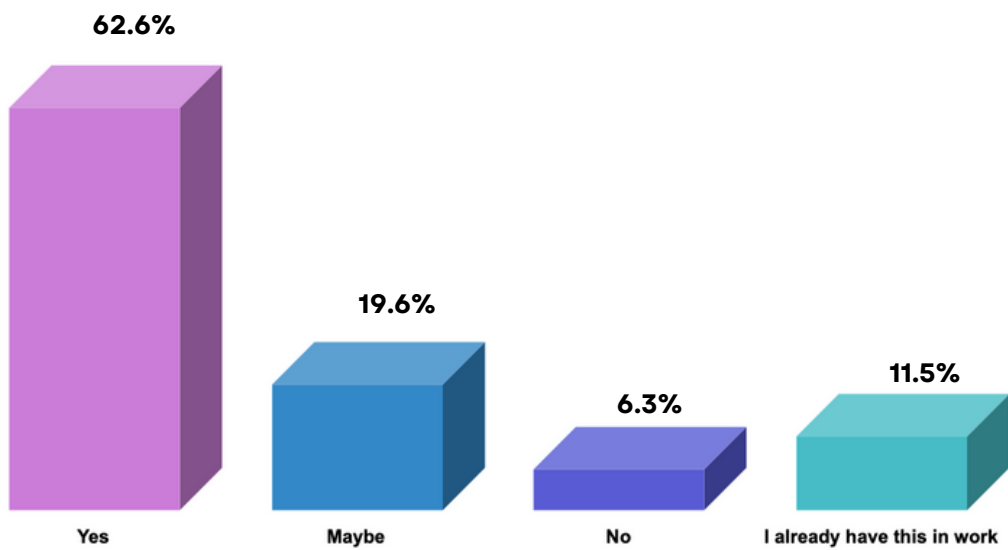




**Have you considered looking or have actively looked for another job after returning to work post baby?**

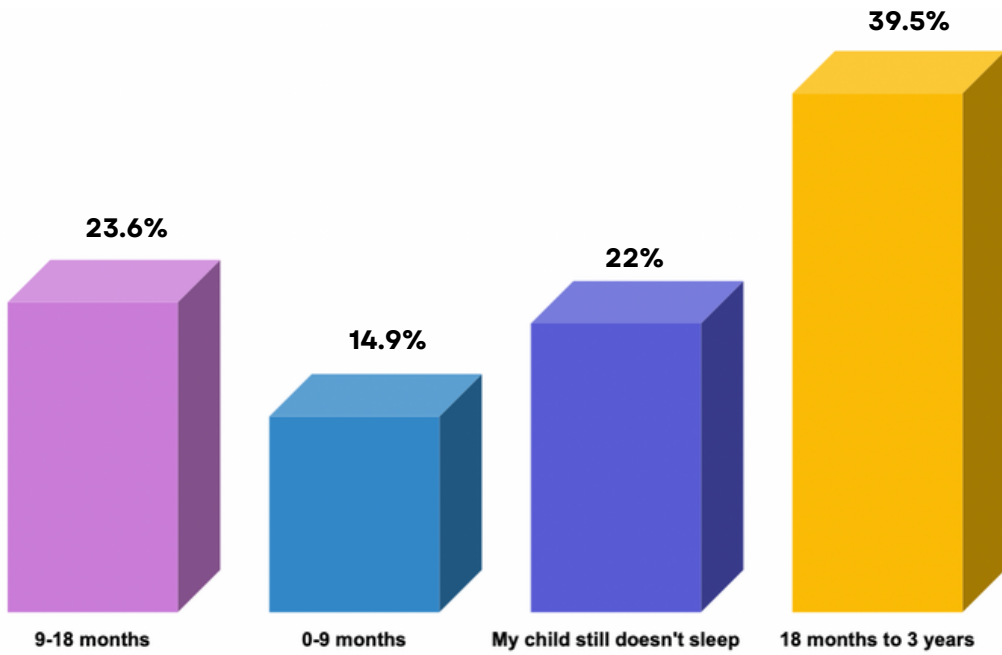


**Would you like there to be a more open and honest relationship with your manager about sleep deprivation as a parent returning to work, and help be made available if you need it? No judgement, just help and support.**





# What age did your baby start sleeping well enough for you to sleep enough to function safely?



# #6. LET'S CHANGE THIS OUTCOME

In spite of our findings of tiredness, parents often stated that they felt capable and competent to fulfil their work responsibilities, just lacking support in understanding and sleep.

So let's change that.

Evidence-based education is a missing piece of the puzzle in the parenting world. With the internet, we can have every right and wrong answer at our fingertips, but this can be overwhelming and have a negative effect on a person's mental health.

Most support stops at giving birth and follow on support tends to only be found when someone is in need and looking in desperation.

I believe that by educating expectant parents of the reality of what lies ahead and giving people links to support they may need, we will be able to make sure new parents get the right support they need at the time they need it.

The first 6 months with a baby can be so confusing, and in some parts quite scary when you don't understand what is happening to both yourself and your baby. By helping new parents navigate the very normal stages of baby development and supporting them with sleep, we are able to give new parents a better start to their parenting journey. They are more confident in their decision making, and don't feel judged.

When dads are returning to work after paternity leave, it is great for them to know that they have left their partner in the best possible state and know what they can do when they return home that gives them time to bond with their new baby, support and understand their partners needs, which in turn helps strengthen their relationships at home.

It doesn't just stop at returning to work though.

As the first 5 years are constantly changing for little ones while they go through so many developmental milestones, there are going to be many instances when a working parent may need a bit of extra support.

You may have heard of the terrible twos, but have you heard of the threenager years? By this time, your employee may have been back in work for 2 to 3 years and in that time they may or may not have had any struggles with sleep, but it is very common for parents to struggle with a combination of sleep and behaviour issues from their young children, and this can mean your working parents are feeling more stressed at home, they may not be getting any time to themselves of an evening, and this may start to sleep into their work.

# #7. HOW TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Are you interested in positioning your company as a family-friendly employer that values equality and attracts top-notch talent? In today's world, we are witnessing a shift in employee priorities, with individuals valuing both their personal lives and careers.

Addressing issues like the gender pay gap and supporting work-life balance are crucial to becoming an attractive workplace for the new generation of employees.

## WHAT PARENTS WANT:

### *Supporting Parenthood and Work-Life Balance*

It's essential to acknowledge that parenting responsibilities often fall disproportionately on women, widening the gender pay gap. Embracing a workplace culture that encourages equal sharing of parenting responsibilities can take time, but we are witnessing progress, with men advocating for better paternity leave and time with their newborns.

Mothers, too, are fighting to maintain their careers while balancing motherhood effectively. In fact, data shared from *Pregnant then Screwed* revealed that mothers of two children are among the most productive members of the workforce.

### *Addressing Concerns and Misconceptions*

Some employers may hesitate to hire individuals of childbearing age due to concerns about maternity or paternity pay costs, covering roles during leave, and retaining employees after they become parents. However, it's important to recognise the unique skills and attributes that parenthood brings for individuals, such as multitasking or handling pressure. These skills are invaluable in the workplace and can significantly contribute to an employee's growth and performance.



## *Supporting Employees During Parenthood*

It is important for employers to understand that becoming a parent doesn't automatically diminish an employee's capabilities. However, it's possible that they might face challenges balancing their new role as a parent and their existing job. To retain quality employees, organisations should provide the right support during this critical phase of their lives. Instead of replacing them, companies should find ways to assist employees through this transition, ensuring they continue to perform at their best.

## *Creating a Supportive Workplace*

Demonstrating care for employees beyond their office hours is essential. Acknowledge employees as holistic individuals and value their well-being inside and outside of work. Offering comprehensive support packages, including shared parental leave, return-to-work coaching, fertility and menopause support, helps build a well-rounded and supportive work environment.

## *Embracing Flexibility and Trust*

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the effectiveness of remote working and the importance of flexibility in the workplace. By trusting employees to manage their workload in their own space, even during challenging situations like the pandemic, companies can create a positive work environment. Offering flexibility and support during critical life stages, like parenthood, further strengthens employee loyalty and productivity.

To attract the best talent and retain quality employees, companies must prioritise family-friendly policies and support systems. Valuing work-life balance, offering comprehensive support during parenthood, and embracing flexibility are essential steps toward becoming a desired employer. By doing so, your organisation can provide a loyal, safe, and productive workforce, ultimately contributing to its overall success and reputation in the competitive job market.



# #8. RECOMMENDATIONS

**A few quick ideas that you might be able to implement straight away:**

Introduce an open ear policy to go alongside the open-door policy. There is no point having an open door if the communication can't be open and honest, listened to and actioned. You may find the ear is all a parent needs and comes up with their own solutions through talking it out, you may find that they are needing more support than you can offer them at that time so may wish to refer to other people within the business who can help, or you may suggest they speak to an expert.

No-one is asking you to fix all their problems, just listen patiently and be supportive, you may be surprised at how far a little support goes.

Ask them what they need. You may not be able to meet all requests, but you may find allowing them to leave an hour early to miss rush hour so they spend some quality time with their child, meaning an easier bedtime and less stress and allowing them to work the hour from home in the evening makes the world of difference to the family, the mental health of the parents and their loyalty to the company.

If possible, allow your employee 15 minutes where they can just sit on their own, guilt free, work free and child free. Maybe offer a space for meditation or bring in a company that can offer onsite massages to help alleviate some of their stresses and give them something they may not get anywhere else, just 15 minutes to be them.

Make sure your managers are aware that they are allowed to ask their team member genuine questions about how they are coping and ask them what they need, and they are allowed to feed this back and ask for support for them. No two stories are the same, so the support needs to vary from person to person depending on their individual needs.

**So yes, on the surface, you may think hiring someone of childbearing age is something to avoid but if anything, it gives your company a chance to step up and show that you are different, that you value your employees and that you are a company that talent should want to navigate to.**

# #9. SUPPORT

As we have seen, it is not common for babies to be sleeping well by the time a parent returns to work, so by letting **Baby2Sleep to support your parents**, whether it be through online learning or more in depth one to one coaching, workshops or online support, **we can help improve a baby's sleep** which in turn **helps the parent to sleep** resulting in a better rested employee who is more efficient and productive in their job.

By letting me educate and support your parents through these challenging times, they will feel more connected at home, be getting better sleep, feel more confident in their decisions at home and this will then filter back into their work life.

I am able to help your working parents from expecting a baby, right through to their child turning 6 years old.

**FOR ALL THE PARENTS** out there who are struggling, you are not alone. Your feelings are valid, becoming a parent can be overwhelming.

Opening up and discussing your struggles and asking for help is not a sign of weakness, it is a sign of strength.

**FOR ALL THE EMPLOYERS/ MANAGERS** out there, supporting your employees who are parents isn't just the right thing to do—it's smart business. You get to retain experienced staff, build a positive company culture, and increase productivity when your employees are not stressed out, overtired or overwhelmed.

If you are personally **struggling with your child's sleep**, take a look at our age-appropriate **self-paced online** video/audio **sleep courses** with **optional online support**.



[SEE THE  
SLEEP COURSES](#)

Nicole Ratcliffe  
FAMILY SLEEP COACH

If you are an **organisation** that is looking to **support returning-to-work parents**, my guidance can be instrumental in facilitating smooth transitions.

I can provide comprehensive workshops or individual consultations for your employees, focusing on techniques that encourage healthy sleep patterns for their children. By equipping parents with practical and effective sleep solutions, they can navigate the pressures of balancing work and parenting responsibilities more effectively. This approach will not only boost your employees' productivity but also promote an empathetic work culture that acknowledges and addresses their holistic well-being.

Get in touch with me at [nicole@baby2sleep.co.uk](mailto:nicole@baby2sleep.co.uk)



# #11. THANK YOU!

Thank you to the parents who generously shared their invaluable experiences and insights, contributing to the comprehensive findings presented in this report.

I am grateful for the support and encouragement received from friends, family, colleagues, and fellow professionals in the childcare and parenting community. Your belief in the importance of this research and its potential to positively impact the lives of countless parents has been truly inspiring.

You wouldn't be reading this report if it wasn't for an amazing lady, Corina Toweh, who has been working with me on a funded placement from Chester University. Corina has collated all of the information, listened me talk passionately about all the changes that need to be made, and turned it all into this amazing report for you all to read.

Lastly, before you go, I would like to make an appeal. Baby2Sleep operates on self-funded principles and the current times are financially challenging. If these discoveries struck a chord, please help me by doing the following:

- Share this report on social media, and with your friends and family
- Visit my [website](#) and social media channels to explore my services further
- [Invite me to talk](#) to your business or on a panel
- [Get in touch](#) for bespoke solutions for your child's sleep
- Apply the required from this report

If you have any further questions, require additional information, or are interested in exploring my services, please don't hesitate to reach out.

Thank you for reading this report.

Nicole,  
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