

Parenthood From Every Angle

The concept for a regular column called *It Takes a Village* is the idea of the Women in Deep Foundations Committee. This inaugural article was compiled by Ann Beaver, P.E., a geotechnical engineer for the Tennessee Department of Transportation, who entered the industry eight and a half years ago after returning to school for her civil engineering degree once her kids were in school.



Drawing by Peggy Hagerty Duffy, P.E.

Since this is the May/June issue of the magazine, we would like to say Happy Mother's and Father's Day to all our parents out there! Welcome to an article that we hope will be reoccurring. Many of us in the workforce are parents, and we all know the challenges that can bring. We would like to open a discussion of some of the most challenging "parenting while working" topics. What better place to start talking about parenthood than at the beginning? In this issue we want to cover challenges that are faced as employees become parents, both from the employee's point of view as well as the employer's point of view. We also are offering ideas to help make the transition into and out of parental leave a little easier for all involved. This is such an exciting time in people's life, but it can also be stressful. We've talked to some DFI members about how we can make it less stressful and focus more on the exciting parts.

Rebecca Scherzinger, P.E., a project engineer at S&GME, has been in the industry for five years and is a soon-to-be mom.

As you are preparing for parental leave, what was the first thing you looked at?

I started by looking into Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) eligibility, state mandated parental leave policies and short-term disability (STD) leave (company-provided or private) as well as company policies on sick leave/vacation and paid-time-off (PTO). After making a list of what paid and unpaid leave I was eligible for, I reached out to my company's HR department to start the conversation.

What did you do next?

The next step was sharing the news with my manager and starting the first of many conversations of what my maternity leave would look like. Unfortunately, I was not eligible for FMLA unpaid leave, but I was glad to know I had been enrolled in our company's STD policy for the past few years, so I didn't need to worry about an exclusionary period. One of the reasons I had more discussion with my manager about my maternity leave was due to the fact that I wanted to return to work part-time and slowly increase my hours for a more gradual return. I didn't want to take additional unpaid time off without the job security of FMLA and decided to start back one day a week. This was a personal decision that I'm thankful both my manager and our company were supportive of; as a soon-to-be first-time parent, I wasn't sure how the transition back to work would be.

What would be your best advice?

As is often the case, effective communication is imperative; frequent conversations leading up to my leave and the intent to stay in touch during my leave will hopefully alleviate frustration and make for a smoother transition.

Parental leave from the employer's perspective can also be stressful. Here is advice from Meeok Kim, Ph.D., P.E., associate principal at Thornton Tomasetti who has worked in the industry for 16 years. She is an employer that has had to deal with both sides of the situation.

What have you found as a challenge to parental leave?

Many countries have introduced legally binding requirements for an employer to offer employees parental leave. Also, our society has evolved to establish and honor a social contract and expectation of parental leave for an expecting parent. Many companies incorporate or enhance the requirements into employee benefits. However, the reality of the parental leave for an employer can be challenging beyond the compliance and commitment.

The expecting parent who takes a leave often has several years of experience and is an essential part of a project or company's workflow. Taking them out of the workflow, even for a relatively short period of time, could be very impactful and cause disruption or interruption to the project and/or company.

How have you, as an employer, worked to make this easier?

Although it is challenging, once an employee notifies their employer about the upcoming parental leave, it is essential to discuss leave and work transition plans. The plans should be

established based on conversations between the employee and employer and should take place at least two months before the planned leave. Items to be discussed should include the duration of the leave, check-in dates/times during the leave, identification and transition of responsibilities, and a re-engagement plan after the leave.

What about the work the employee is doing? What have you found that helps with that transition?

Try to set up a buddy system. The buddy employee would be someone who will replace the employee for the duration of the parental leave and ideally would have a similar level of experience. The buddy should start to shadow the expecting parent through email communications as a minimum. It is ideal that the pair have a weekly meeting starting two months before the leave so the transition can be smooth for the employees and project team.

What else should the employer do?

Check in with the employee about the leave and transition plans two weeks before to confirm and revise the transition plan. Also check in with the employee one week before returning to work to confirm and update the re-engagement plan.

Amshu Chappa, P.E., is a senior geotechnical engineer at Brierley Associates with 10 years of experience in heavy civil and nuclear power industry. She is also a newer mother with some thoughts on the transition into motherhood.

What was your experience as a new mother?

Parenthood comes with such intense emotions. It is beautiful! But there is so much that is not talked about. As a first-time mom, the first year was the hardest for me. The fear of not doing enough for your baby is excruciating. On top of that your own life seems to have changed drastically. It isn't yours anymore. Being tired becomes a constant part of you while caring for an infant. As a working parent, the guilt is another added pressure. And of course, there are work expectations and keeping up the home. When I look back now, even though my



Your children will be excited to learn what you do at work (drawing by the young son of Johanna Mikitka Simon)

husband is an amazingly supportive person, I wish I had known that I was fighting through postpartum depression all by myself. I just want first-time moms to know these few things:

- You are not alone! I felt what you feel and pretty much every other first-time mom does too.
- I know you are doing everything you can, and you are perfect the way you are!
- Don't let anybody tell you that you aren't doing enough. Breastmilk or formula doesn't matter, you are doing what is right for your child's health and your mental health.
- Talk to your supportive group of family and friends. The friendship and love that comes out of these groups is priceless. You definitely become a better version of yourself.
- It gets better with time, and you will find a whole new you again. Just hang in there!
- Having children can make you more productive and effective, and gives you a great push to do all those things in life that you wouldn't do. Don't let anyone scare you and say, "Hey your life is over now that you had kids." That is not true. Life only gets better!!
- You can travel with a baby! Don't let anyone else tell you otherwise.
- Separation is good for you and your baby. My baby and I thrived and bonded really well despite my being at work while she is at daycare. Just because you aren't with your baby 24 hours doesn't mean you love your baby less. The time you spend with them after or before work will make you realize how precious every second is with them.
- I don't know how I survived with 3-5 hours of sleep (feeding 2-3 times a night). "It's hard" would be an understatement. All I can say is that women are one strong species.
- The dilemma to leave your baby at daycare or not is a big one. For us, daycare was great. Our little one loved going and playing with other babies. Whatever you choose — daycare, nanny or work from home with help — just remember you made the right decision for your family and go with it. Each one has its pros and cons. You got this mama!
- Lastly, I was fortunate to have a supportive environment at work that helped me overcome the fears of being a new mom and to do my best at work. I hope that all new parents receive that kind of support!

When parenthood knocks on your door, you strive to become the best version of yourself on all fronts of your life — at work and in your personal life! So, keep thriving!

As we stated, we hope this can become a reoccurring article to help all parents and employers learn ways to ease the stress of "parenting while working." If you have challenges or answers that you want to share, please send them to us at widf@dfi.org.