

The return of the mother

By *Becky Byers Kcehowski*

So you've done it. You're a responsible and hardworking lawyer who has experienced a miracle. You have a child.

Before the big birthday, you took initiative, finished your projects and recruited others to cover you for the next 12 weeks. You dutifully disclosed your condition to your superiors and clients. Your nurses pried the Blackberry from your hands as you entered the third phase of labor, and somehow – just somehow – when you finally got to meet your baby for the first time, you forgot for a minute about who else you needed to call. For a little while, at least, you relax, put down the cell phone and concentrate on being a loving and caring mother to an infant who depends on you completely. Your life changes gears beautifully.

But from the moment the baby arrives, the "Day" looms.

For the first few weeks, you are all-consumed with your little miracle. The "Day" seems a distant future event. You've got more than two months to learn how to be a mother. You don't worry about the "Day" yet, and besides, you're an admitted workaholic who never once envisioned yourself staying home full time. When the time comes, you're sure you'll be ready.

But the days home turn into weeks and then months. The interrupted nights have been rough, but you've become accustomed to being home. You've enjoyed the extended break – the first since you graduated from law school. Your world now revolves around diapers, feedings, naps and ensuring that your baby is the smartest 2-month-old ever. Perhaps you've even created a spreadsheet to track these critical daily details.

Yet the "Day" approaches. As you contemplate the "Day," you ask

yourself: Am I sure? How can I leave this little one? No one could possibly care for her like I do. I'm the only one who understands what she needs. How is this going to work? Can I really speak and write coherently when I'm up three times a night?

At that moment you need an ear. A particular ear. Sure, you've talked to your husband, your mother and your friends from high school, but maybe – just maybe – you need someone who has experienced the "Day" and not only survived but succeeded. And, there, as you contemplate the direction



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of your career and your family, at that moment, the question is whether there is someone at your firm – some other lawyer – you can call.

For me, there was. I am lucky enough to work in an office managed by a mother who experienced the "Day" herself. I was also preceded in my own personal miracle by a few other mid-level female associates who had recently experienced the "Day." Another senior female attorney took a keen interest in my return and checked regularly as to my thoughts, feelings,

workload and home balance.

This, for me, made all the difference. With access to sympathetic and encouraging ears, I asked basic questions about how it feels to be back to work, how to find the right child care or what to do when I had to manage a project and a baby simultaneously. The experiences of those mothers who had been through the "Day" and, miraculously, remained happy reassured me. I saw that their children were smart, well-adjusted and well-behaved. I saw that they loved their kids as much as the mother next door who chose to stay home with hers. I saw that their children admired and respected the role models that their mothers had become. And, even now, when the pangs of guilt rise as my oldest daughter, now 3, says, "Mommy, you're going to work AGAIN?" I need only walk down the hall, share the story and ask, honestly, whether I've made the right decision.

The responsibility to mentor and encourage new mothers as they transition back to work falls to those of us who have experienced the "Day" and still work on. If a woman chooses to stay home with her children, I applaud that choice. But any such decision should be informed and supported and, if desired, made after discussion with those who have chosen it and those who have not. A new mom should not leave the profession frustrated because there was no one to ask and she was out of ideas. If you've experienced the "Day" yourself, and you remain a happy and committed working mother, I encourage you to make yourself available to those women working through it themselves.

Becky Byers Kcehowski is an associate at Jones Day in Pittsburgh.

