



# Supporting Parents at Work

## Good Practice Overview for SME Employers

Becoming a parent is a major life transition for employees — and a significant operational moment for small and medium-sized businesses. While SMEs often face tighter budgets and smaller teams, our research shows that the **benefits of supporting parents outweigh the costs**. There are many simple, low-cost ways to support parents that staff will greatly appreciate.

A supportive, well-managed approach reduces legal risk, improves retention, strengthens morale, and protects business continuity.

### Why This Matters for SMEs

In smaller organisations:

- One absence can have a visible operational impact.
- HR expertise may be limited or informal.
- Policies may not exist until needed.
- Employees may hesitate to ask for support due to fear of career implications.

This makes **early planning, clear communication, and simple structures** especially important.

### What Good Practice Looks Like

#### 1 Get the Basics Right (Legal Compliance)

Ensure you understand statutory obligations around:

- Maternity, paternity, adoption and shared parental leave
- Antenatal appointments
- Flexible working (day-one right to request)
- Health & safety risk assessments
- Protection from pregnancy and maternity discrimination

Reliable guidance is available from [Acas](#) and [Gov.uk](#) (see [Legal entitlements for expectant parents](#)).

Even simple written policies reduce confusion and legal risk.

## 2 Encourage Early, Open Conversations

The tone set when an employee shares pregnancy news shapes the entire experience.

Good practice includes:

- Responding positively and professionally
- Scheduling follow-up planning meetings
- Discussing leave intentions early
- Creating space for fathers and non-birth parents to discuss plans

Early dialogue reduces uncertainty and protects workflow (see ['Deeper Dive' on How to create a supportive workplace culture](#)).

## 3 Plan Absence Strategically

In small teams, structured planning is essential:

- Begin handover conversations early
- Identify business-critical tasks
- Document processes
- Consider temporary redistribution of work
- Build multi-skilling where possible

Clear planning protects both the business and the employee's role (see [Managing staff absence](#)).

## 4 Use Flexible Working as a Strategic Tool

Flexibility is key and often just as valued as enhanced pay.

Options may include:

- Adjusted start/finish times
- Hybrid or remote working (where possible)
- Compressed hours
- Phased returns
- Informal flexibility for emergencies

Flexibility improves retention, motivation, and productivity — often at low cost (see ['Deeper Dive' on Flexible Working](#)).

## 5 Support a Positive Return to Work

A smooth return requires:

- A pre-return check-in
- Clear priorities for early weeks
- Realistic workload expectations

- Ongoing conversations about childcare or breastfeeding needs

Support does not end on day one after the return from leave (see [Planning the return to work](#)).

## The Business Case

Supporting parents leads to:

- ✓ Higher engagement and loyalty
- ✓ Reduced recruitment and training costs
- ✓ Improved productivity
- ✓ Stronger workplace culture
- ✓ Better reputation as an employer

Employees who feel respected in balancing work and family are more committed and more likely to stay.

## Key Takeaway for SME Leaders

You do not need expensive benefits to be a supportive employer.

What matters most is:

- Clear communication
- Fair and consistent processes
- Basic legal compliance
- Practical flexibility
- A culture of trust

Small, low-cost adjustments often make the biggest difference.

**This 'Good Practice Overview' is part of the [Supporting Parents in SMEs Toolkit](#).**