

More “Ps,” Please: Parental Leave Left Me a Better Practitioner

By Laurie Carr Mims



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While feeding mashed peas to my baby and fielding questions from my toddler about what else starts with the letter “P,” I realized that the letter “P” comes up a lot in association with maternity leave: pregnancy, prenatal, postpartum and—most importantly—parent. Upon further reflection, I discovered that in returning to my practice after my two generous five-month paid leaves, I have experienced some additional life-altering “Ps” that have left me a better, more successful, and happier lawyer.

Passion

When the most complex analysis I had done in months was calculating the hours since the baby’s last feeding, I longed for the intellectual stimulation of my cases. We are lucky to be in one of the few professions where we learn new things daily. Whether it is learning a new industry to understand the compensation scheme for an employment case or researching an esoteric area of constitutional law for a pro bono matter, it feels great to get those synapses firing. I never appreciated this benefit of our work like I did after spending several months on maternity leave.

Perspective

Too often as lawyers we lose touch with business or life realities while we are immersed in the legal and procedural aspects of our cases. Usually, talking to our colleagues only exacerbates this problem. While on leave, I left the legal world and

started spending the majority of my days interacting with people who were too young to talk or other new parents. For me, meeting other new moms and dads was one of the best surprises that came with parenthood. We had a unique bond, even if we came from very different walks of life. Unlike legal-world dwellers, these other new parents from different walks of life and professions did not have any idea what an interrogatory or a TRO was—and they couldn’t care less. Besides trading

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tips on diaper-changing and baby-proofing, we discussed their lives and their jobs in various industries. When I returned to work, I had a fresh perspective on how the world functions that was shaped by these interactions. I found that I approached issues differently and could more easily understand my clients’ business-driven, real-world interests and goals.

Priorities

You hear it countless times while pregnant: Kids change everything. It’s true. No more movie dates on a whim, no more leisurely weekends, no more sleeping in—more like no more sleep, period! But what I did not expect was the change in priorities. Having time and energy to spend with my kids became critical, which meant that I needed to focus on efficiency at work. When I have to get home to my kids, there’s no

dillydallying over emails or following every potential lead in my Westlaw research when I have already found cases directly on point. Because I now have limited time, I must hone in on the most important aspects of the case rather than getting wrapped up in hours of minutia. Realigning my priorities has made me a more focused attorney, resulting in more cost-effective services for my clients.

Poise under Pressure

Let’s face it—being a litigator is a stressful, demanding job. But in many ways, it is easier and more manageable than comforting a colicky infant or placating a screaming toddler. And, it no doubt causes less stress than a child’s health issues or decisions about how best to discipline and educate your children so that they grow into the people that you want them to be. Coming back from leave, I felt I was a more grounded and resilient version of my former self. A discovery mishap or ugly exchange with opposing counsel no longer fazed me as in the past. I am now a parent with profoundly important decisions to make and actions to take regarding my kids, and the pressures of litigation seem light in comparison. This transformation has lifted a weight from my shoulders, and I am able to think and act more calmly and decisively as a result.

Before my maternity leave, I worried that taking time away from work and having kids would negatively affect my career or my enjoyment of legal practice. Now that I am back, one of the great surprises is that my temporary absences from the profession and becoming a parent while away have improved not only how I feel about practicing law, but also how I practice it. My life and career are enhanced in ways I never expected.

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