

How to Stay on the Partner Track as a New Parent

Morgan Lewis partner Klair Fitzpatrick, just back from her fourth maternity leave, offers lessons learned from a nontraditional career path and tips for staying on the partnership track as a new parent.

As I finished writing this article, I was three weeks back from my fourth maternity leave at Morgan Lewis and a few weeks out from the start of a trial. I had three children before I made partner, and my fourth just five months ago.

I took 18 weeks' parental leave with each child, meaning that the year I was up for partner I had already taken collectively a full year off to have children. Despite this fact, I made partner the first year I was eligible, when I had three children under 5 years old.

For those who think you can't grow in your legal career while expanding your family, I want to share a few things that have helped me along the way.

Ask Advice

I'm one of the leaders of Morgan Lewis's parent network, which has established a formalized program to help parents.

In 2017, we piloted a mentorship program specifically designed to assist those going out on leave for the first time. The mentor can help with navigating matters such as the benefits process, how to alert your clients about your leave, what to do about deadlines that may fall during your leave, and how to communicate when you return from leave and are ready to get back to work.

Having a formal program in place takes the fear out of asking for advice on how to have your client work covered. The guidance from parents who've navigated this process before proved to be invaluable.

Surround Yourself With a Team

With four kids, I've had a child at practically every point in my career, so I know what it feels like to transition work at different levels of responsibility. I was lucky enough to have always been part of a team.

But as my client responsibilities grew, so did my responsibilities to my team. As a junior associate, there was less prep needed to hand off work and then pick it back up. As I became more senior, the partners I supported were often willing to take on the extra work themselves, so I never felt as if I needed to oversee anything while on leave. But I made sure to create comprehensive coverage plans for my cases before I left.

Now, as a partner, during my latest leave I leaned on my other partners pretty heavily. Every client knew who to reach out to on my team, so they were always supported. It was still my responsibility to communicate that to my fellow partners and my clients.

Be Aggressive Gaining Experience

Being a lawyer is a trade profession. You have to become a skilled lawyer to be promoted to partner and you can't become a skilled lawyer unless you have enough experience. So be aggressive in going after that experience.

Throughout my career I have always strived to work at a level above what was expected of me. I've taken on stretch projects, and that same team I mentioned supporting me during leave gave me pointers about how to improve and provided me more opportunities to try.

I've stepped into firmwide programs such as our associate training program, which gave me the opportunity to interact with people I don't normally work with who both got to see my work and become part of my support network.

These are the things you have to do, and you have to do it with a good attitude.

Find What Works for You

Being a working parent makes you a bit of a ninja. You have to be efficient, quick, and excel at multitasking—so not much different from being a good lawyer.

But you also need to prioritize what is important in your life and cut out what doesn't make that list. In order to ensure that you can take on the right opportunities when they arise, you shouldn't overextend in areas that aren't impactful.

You can—and should—participate in firm events, but you don't have to go to every networking event, and you don't have to stay to the end. When asked to attend something or take something else on, I always ask myself, "Will this make me a better lawyer or person and will this help my clients, my firm, or my family?" If the answer is no, I say no.

With four kids between the ages of 5 months and 9 years old, I have a lot more demands on my time. If your plate is full, don't take on more if it will affect the quality of your work or the kind of parent you want to be.

Join a Firm That Supports Working Parents

Many people will tell you to find a firm that has a good culture. I wholeheartedly agree, but it can be difficult to truly assess a firm's culture as an outsider.

Informally, Morgan Lewis has a really great culture of collegiality and supportiveness. I have always felt that the people I work with care about me and want me to succeed, whether that is making sure my cases are covered when I'm out or sending meals to my house when Covid-19 struck.

However, it is equally, if not more, important to also have formal support through firm programs such as sponsorship, mentorship, and other benefits to promote a collegial culture.

Having a ramp-up and ramp-down program that provides lawyers with the ability to work reduced hours both right before and after parental leave, with no change in pay, is a game changer. When that program was started at my firm it reinforced to me that I was at the kind of law firm that supported my decision to be a working parent.

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