

Picturing my comeback

This issue, we road test
The Parent Mentor: cards for
mentoring conversations

By Kathy Denton

What is it

Author (in partnership with David Clutterbuck) of *Mentoring New Parents at Work* (Routledge, 2016), Nicki Seignot has created a series of coaching/mentoring cards designed to support individuals making the transition to working parenthood. Through creative imagery and powerful questions, the Parent Mentor cards offer practical ideas and inspiration for key return-to-work conversations.

The aim is that they can be used not only in maternity, but also to support new fathers and adoptive parents with their journey to working parenthood.

How do they work?

There are 48 individual cards in each pack, each with a photograph on one side and a question on the reverse. The questions are framed in the context of four distinct stages:

- *Ending work*
- *Countdown to return*
- *Early days back*
- *Moving forward*

They are aimed at triggering exploratory conversations and deep reflections from individuals at any stage of their parental journey.

An image may be chosen at random, or a selection of questions explored relating to a particular challenge or stage of the journey. The images and

questions may also be used in conjunction with each other. There is no set/prescribed way of using this tool. The pack also contains a how-to guide which sets out the parenting context and offers suggestions for different activities and methods of use.

THE COACH'S EXPERIENCE

As someone who regularly uses imagery and postcards in my coaching practice, I was very comfortable employing this tool. Used judiciously, I find the most random of images can provoke new thinking, unearth deeply embedded concerns or fears, or simply provide an idea of how 'I want to be'. An image or metaphor can also remain a strong motivator or trigger for someone well into the future. I have clients who still keep 'their card' close at hand as a reminder/prompt.

The added benefit of the Parent Mentor cards is the focused questions in the specific context of new parents. They offer a versatile, engaging way to open or move a conversation forward and offer 'big' questions that might otherwise be avoided or ignored in what can often be a challenging transition back to the workplace after extended leave.

Practically, the cards are easy to carry around and the images are diverse, real and thought-provoking. Only one (a woman with a pregnancy bump) is explicitly maternity related.

The verdict

I tested the cards in two very different contexts: first, with a client returning to work after maternity leave and second, within a more generic business coaching conversation.

The cards were fun and thought-provoking and both clients responded positively to them. In respect of the maternity context, my client was about to return to the workplace. She selected two questions for exploration in our session:

- *What is holding you back from asking for what you want?*
- *What is going to be the best thing about being back at work?*

These two questions reframed her thinking, triggering new possibilities and benefits associated with her return – so much more positive than the dread and sense of guilt synonymous with thoughts of her first day back at work.

They also opened a space for fresh exploration, some roleplay and a commitment to a conversation with her manager regarding a phased return and changes in working hours.

THE CLIENT'S EXPERIENCE

Maternity returner

I found using the cards both fun and revealing. The question, 'What is holding me back?' was a little uncomfortable as I didn't realise



anything was! Then, as we explored further, I realised that my fear of a difficult conversation was making me quite anxious about my return. Exposing this meant I could reflect and practise a future conversation in the room with my coach.

It was great thinking of the good things about my return. I was so focused on feeling guilty about leaving my new son that I'd forgotten how much I actually enjoy what I do and the team with whom I work. The question cards helped to trigger a depth of thinking I had avoided.

I then found an image from the card deck that represented how I want to be on my first day back – I now have a photo of it on my phone.

A senior manager in an international energy company

Business client

I was uncertain about using picture cards for a business issue. It seemed a little gimmicky for the serious things I wanted to talk through – especially as I'd reached an impasse in my thinking – but Kathy persuaded me it might be worth a try.

I chose two images from the pack: one in the context of a challenging individual and the other around my leadership presence – or at least how I aspired to be in this difficult situation.

Talking about what I saw on the cards, rather than directly, seemed to give a slightly different perspective. I found myself being less emotional and more objective, coming up with business, rather than personal, arguments to resolve my challenge.

I was so focused on feeling guilty about leaving my new son that I'd forgotten how much I actually enjoy what I do

I wouldn't want to use cards every time, but in this case it certainly allowed me to view the situation from above and from another angle, which was really useful.

A managing director of a Sheffield-based SME

PROS AND CONS

UPSIDE

- Encourages good practice around asking open questions
- Author-generated image
- Feels like fun, but the outcome is potentially insightful and productive
- Non-threatening way to address sensitive topics or issues.

DOWNSIDE

- Mentoring conversations should be client-led, therefore the coach/mentor needs to ensure the cards are not used complacently as a replacement for a good conversation
- If using the question side of the cards, it's better not to look at the image first as it could 'steer' thinking.

● **Kathy Denton** is a chartered occupational psychologist and business coach

FIND OUT MORE
www.theparentmentor.co.uk