



TOOLBOX TESTING: CARDS FOR MENTORING CONVERSATIONS

What it is:

The author of *Mentoring New Parents at Work* (Routledge 2016), Nicki Seignot has also created a series of coaching / mentoring cards designed to support individuals making the transition to working parenthood. Through the use of imagery and powerful questions, The Parent Mentor cards offer ideas and inspiration for key return-to-work conversations. Their use is not exclusive to maternity. They are equally appropriate when supporting new fathers and adoptive parents with their journey to working parenthood

How does it work?

There are 48 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

The pack also contains a how-to guide with tips and suggestions for different activities and methods of use

Using the tool:

The cards can be used simply as images or questions or with both in conjunction and 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 stage of the journey. There is no prescribed way of using the tool.

A Coach / Mentor's experience:

As someone who regularly uses visual 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.

Using the tool

The verdict:

I tested the cards in two very different contexts; firstly with a client returning to work after maternity leave and secondly within a more generic business coaching conversation.

The cards were fun and engaging 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 possibilities and benefits associated with her return; so much more positive than the dread and sense of guilt that had become synonymous with thoughts of her first day back at work. They also opened a space for new exploration, role play and a commitment to a conversation with her manager regarding a phased return and change in working hours.

The client's experience

Maternity returner:

I found using the cards both fun and revealing. The question 'What was 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 practice a future conversation in the room with my coach. It was great thinking about 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 have a photo of it on my phone!

Senior Manager, International Energy Company

Business client:

I was uncertain about using picture cards for a business issue. It seemed a little gimmicky for the serious issues 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 2 images from the spread pack, one in the context of a challenging individual and another 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 and I found myself being less emotional and more objective and coming up with business, rather than personal, arguments to resolve my challenge. 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.

Managing Director of Sheffield based SME

Parent Mentor Cards: some pros and cons

UPSIDE:

- Helpful preparation tool for busy internal mentors and mentees
- Questions may stimulate new ideas and thinking
- The questions encourage good practice around asking open questions
- Practical to carry and easy to use
- Cards are lovely to handle, the card is good quality so should last a reasonable degree of handling
- Variety of images and questions
- Author generated images – no standard library shots.
- Feels like fun but the outcome is potentially insightful and productive
- Non-threatening way to address potentially sensitive topics or issues

DOWNSIDE:

- Mentoring conversations should be client led, therefore the coach / mentor needs to ensure they are offered as an 'extra' tool to add value to the session, and are not used complacently not as a replacement for a good conversation
- If using the question side of cards better not to look at image first as it could 'steer' the thinking rather than allow a completely fresh response

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