

EPISODE 946

“SD: I’d grown up with a model of a mom who had a career, took a 10-year career break and then went back to work in a really big way. I knew that it could all come together in different ways. When I had my daughter, I had really expected that I would go right back to work, take a very short maternity leave and go right back to work. Then I had her and my body had some different plans. I also really dug into that moment of being a mom. I loved it. It was surprising to me. It caught me off guard.”

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:01:09.1]

FT: Re-entering the workforce is a challenge that over three million women with college, or advanced degrees are currently facing. My guests today are on a mission to make things simpler. Welcome to So Money, everybody. I'm your host, Farnoosh Torabi.

It is difficult to juggle parenthood with your career, that's an understatement, and find a path that works for both your ambitions and your family life. More than 15 million women find themselves on what they call the messy middle. My guest today, Jennifer Gefsky and Stacey Delo are behind the website *Après*, which helps women return or pivot in their careers.

Now they have a book to help their audience called *Your Turn: Careers, Kids and Comebacks-- A Working Mother's Guide*. We talk about how to anticipate the financials of becoming a mother, a parent while working, how to re-enter the workforce as seamlessly as possible and much more.

Here's Jennifer Gefsky and Stacey Delo.

[INTERVIEW]

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FT: Jennifer Gefsky and Stacey Delo, welcome to So Money and congratulations on the first 24 hours of releasing your new book, *Your Turn*.

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JG: Thank you so much.

[0:02:15.6]

SD: Thanks so much. It's so exciting to be on the show.

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FT: Jennifer, you're no stranger to this show. You've been on before as a founder of *Après*. This is a website I absolutely love and reference a lot to women and men, but really for women especially as they're transitioning from stay-at-home, parenting, taking a time break, go time off to going back into the workforce. This is a culture, the LinkedIn for working moms. Stacey, you're the CEO of *Après*. The two of you combined forces again to author this book called *Your Turn: Careers, Kids and Comebacks--A Working Mother's Guide*.

Time is of the essence ladies, right? I feel every year, there's a now more than ever feeling of having to talk about the importance and the imminency of how to help moms navigate their careers. It almost feels as we are on the precipice of another election and 2020 coming around, we really need this guidebook now more than ever.

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JG: Thanks, Farnoosh. This is Jen. Yeah, first of all, it seems like yesterday that I was on So Money. It was, I don't know, I think three years ago now at this point. Congratulations on continued success for –

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FT: Thank you.

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JG: - for So Money. We love the podcast. Yeah. Look, I think having the conversation is a great thing. The book coming out and having people talk about it and having women share their experiences with each other is I think helpful for anyone's journey. Especially this, because we know that women who are going through these transitions and what we call the messy middle of their careers, there's a lot of self-doubt. It's self-doubt about being a mom, self-doubt about how you are in your career during this phase. The ability to have an open discussion and talk about it, I think is enlightening for a lot of women.

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FT: One of the things that you tackle on the website at *Après*, which is also a big part of the book's mission is to help the millions of women who are in transition, who want to get back into the workforce and navigate it. You said, it is still really, really hard. We have a lot of insecurities, uncertainties. Why is it so impossible? What is going on? I'm sure there's a lot of forces at play, but what did you identify in the book to be some of the major reasons?

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SD: This is Stacey. First of all, I think your point that this is a really – this is a conversation that we seem to keep having and keep having and why isn't it solved for yet is just such a great one, for everyone to stop and ask themselves. If you're an employer in particular, what can you be doing to do better? I think one of the things that's happening at this moment that sometimes we need to stop and reflect about is that we're at this very interesting time in history when women are more educated than they've ever been before. They've made these strides into the workplace really since the early 1960s. Now we're at a point where they're highly educated, they have children later. The average age of when women have a baby has jumped from 26 to 28 really in just a two-year period.

By the time somebody decides it's time to have a baby and potentially focus on a different phase of their life, they have a lot of experience behind them. It is a question that we're still trying to solve for why don't we see more women coming and going from the workplace in a way that should be more natural? Why don't we see more women moving into more senior roles? I think it's really time for everybody to dig deep on some of the forces that are happening, that are contributing to why we don't see this. I think a lot of it is corporate America really paying attention.

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FT: What are some of the changes, the positive changes you're seeing in corporate America, as far as welcoming – first, just welcoming more women to the workforce? Because sometimes I think, women just don't feel they belong in some industries. They don't see themselves represented in certain industries. Then even if they get there, you don't feel supported and/or even compensated right. You're not earning what you're really supposed to earn. How are companies keeping up with the times and addressing these big issues? Ultimately, they're missing out on a very educated, as you pointed out, and dynamic workforce if they don't cater to working moms.

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JG: Yeah, this is Jen. I would say one of the things that we're seeing is the force of change of Millennials. In 2020, Millennials will make up the majority of the American workforce. That's astounding. That's people that are basically 38 and younger. Millennials grew up in the technology age, so they're used to these concept of, "I can work wherever. I can work remotely. I can be more flexible with my schedule." We're seeing employers are having to respond to that, which is great for everybody, especially mothers, right? Because moms tend to need flexibility. Why? Because we have obligations outside of the workplace as well.

Millennials are really forcing change and employers have no alternative but to listen. We're also seeing I mean, some interesting news recently out of the state of California about the gig economy and how employers are treating various employees. One of the things we're seeing is the change of real estate. We're here – I know Farnoosh, you're in New York, I'm in New York,

this concept of the open workspace where real estate is very expensive, right? The idea of someone working from home is helpful to employers now and they're realizing that.

You're seeing more and more of open workspaces, lockers in the workspace. You don't even have a permanent desk. You come and go a little bit more. That welcoming of working from home, we're seeing that much more than we saw it 10 years ago. I think Millennials are driving change. Technology is certainly helping to drive change. Ultimately though, and Stacey made this point earlier, I think Stacey made this point earlier, women are graduating at faster rates than men at all levels of education, so employers have to pay attention to this component of the workforce. Otherwise, they're going to lose out on a lot of the best talent. Those employers that are paying attention to this demographic, ultimately can have a great workplace.

One last thing I would say is Millennials, we're seeing two are demanding change. We see this with the Me2 Movement, right? We see Millennials saying, "I want to be treated fairly in the workplace. I want my co-workers to be treated fairly in the workplace." That all of those components are creating this change, which will ultimately lead to great changes for women. But, and this is a bit but, there is the motherhood penalty and it still exists. We have to continue to work against it.

We recently finished the US Open here in New York. Serena Williams is an amazing advocate for moms to have someone out there competing at the highest level and talking about being a "working mother." I mean, she recently had a baby. It's all of those things that actually matter, right? To see a woman who's successful, who's working hard, who's strong, who's committed and was a mom, changes perception.

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FT: Oh, my gosh. Bow to Serena Williams. You talked earlier about this messy middle. I'd like to explore this a little bit and maybe – I love that you're giving language to another wise period of time that's just hell, if we don't have another better terminology for it.

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JG: Say it like it is. Yeah.

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FT: Say it like it is. Tell us about some of the challenges, because I think this is also a time in a parent – during parenthood when you start to lose career, momentum to where you're really starting to question the value of even going back to work, because you can't fathom straddling both worlds. What do you want to remind women about the messy middle, to keep their – because you keep them moving towards – to keep the pendulum still swinging right in the career direction.

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SD: Yeah, this is Stacey. It's time that we have some language for a period of time that's ultimately short. I think that's one of the messages that we want to get across to women from a workplace participation perspective. We do see a dip in the number of mothers with children between the ages of 0 to 3. Then it doesn't really recover until their children are – meaning, the number of women that are back into the workforce who are mothers, doesn't really recover until their kids are between the ages of 6 and 17. It doesn't really take a rocket scientist to figure out that that's when your kids are in school, right?

There's this period of time when unfortunately, the bulk of women aren't supported with paid leave, right? Those statistics are still really staggering and the majority of women go back to work just two weeks after having a baby. There's a lot of support systems that we could be providing for women to ultimately retain them in the workforce. Maternity leave and paid leave is really just a big piece of the pie. Flexibility is what comes into play here, really thinking about what your support system looks like.

One of the things we really tried to get at in the book is that you can take ownership of a lot of these pieces, even though they all – some of them sound really, really big to control. You can take ownership in the way that you start to communicate particularly with your partner, or your spouse, your employer and then yourself and really what you want out of this time period.

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FT: I really love the word ownership. I think that's a perfect way to empower and enlighten women and everybody to feel more in control of a situation that can feel very much out of their control. We can sit there and really be upset with the fact that our employer only gave us so many days, or weeks off, or that our employers just not really a dynamical place to work for parents, or you do feel the system's working against you. Okay, so what are you going to do now right?

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SD: I would call boating with your feet, which means you vote to leave a place as it's not supportive of working parents. There are employers that are really thinking about this and you have to seek them out. You have to do the work to find them and you can do that online, you can do that obviously by coming to our website and other sites that are starting to really provide the information of what companies are providing for women and for families.

One of the things that we like to talk about a lot is that a lot of these things that are good for women are actually good for the workplace in general. You want to find companies and businesses and it's not just always big companies. Small businesses often offer a lot of different types of flexibility and whatnot that you could be looking for. You need to seek them out and exactly, take – I mean, that's the title Your Turn. It's your turn to take ownership over a lot of – including planning for a career break and saving for it, which I know is something that you understand, Farnoosh, is it's important as well.

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FT: You know, it's also a great career path for working moms is being your own boss, entrepreneurship. What have you noticed – what kinds of trends have you noticed as far as women who are also parents who are starting businesses? Is the trend on the rise?

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JG: Well research, yeah, research shows the trend is on the rise. Women are starting businesses at a faster rate than men, which is very exciting, but it's not the end-all be-all either. I mean, being an entrepreneur is if people think they're becoming an entrepreneur to work less, they're mistaken. I mean, having your own business is very difficult and a lot of work as well. Although, you are in control and you're in charge, so there's something to be said for that as well.

Farnoosh, you had to ask what do we want women to know. I would say that if you have listeners who are moms, who are working, or who are on a career break, I think the two big takeaways I have is first of all, if they're – this isn't one of the takeaways, but if they're struggling at all, or questioning themselves at all, I hope that they get the book *Your Turn*, because we really do dive deep into all the various issues and the various ways we can help and the ways women can help themselves.

Number one, I think that one big takeaway is you're not alone. If you're struggling and you're questioning yourself as a mom, as a career person, what you're doing, whether you're in the right career, you are not alone. I mean, we find and we've talked to thousands of women. We find that this is common. I mean, women question themselves, we question what we're doing, with question our ability as moms, we question our ability as in our careers.

Number two and this is going, taking it one step further and what Stacey was just saying is you have to advocate for yourself. Not only you have to look at your edger job and say, "Okay, does my employer offer certain things that are going to help me?" You have to advocate. No one's going to hand it to you. I have to say, that's at work and at home, because one of the biggest obstacles women face are their obligations at home. Obviously, we all know but research shows women take on the vast majority of the home obligations. It really hurts our ability to be successful in our careers.

You have to advocate for yourself both at work and at home. After advocating for yourself at work, if your employer is not willing to make the changes that will allow you to be successful, there are employers out there that are willing to provide you what you need to be able to work and to be able to handle all of your obligations.

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FT: I really appreciate too in your book, you tackle finances as a really important piece to this puzzle, because realistically, if you're not working, or even if you are working, there are trade-offs, right? When you're not working, you're not able to secure your own savings necessarily. When you are working, you have costs, right? Childcare, etc. I actually contributed to that chapter and one of the things that I have found has worked for me and other moms, working moms is investing in childcare as expensive as it can be, even when it does compete with your salary, thinking of it as a long-term investment.

You mentioned that the messy years are short. That's the good news. They're not forever. Thinking about how you can make certain investments in your time, in your childcare to be able to get what you need, to be able to go back into the workforce, or stay in the workforce as it is, I think is so important. Then the other thing is if you are going to be staying home for a long period of time, that's your choice. Well, can you bring in some money at some point? I think that's always a good thing to be thinking about in the back of your head, because for me, it's really important for all stay-at-home parents to have some sense of financial independence.

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SD: Also how to get ahead of some of it. I love the chapter that you participated in in our book and my mother who is a financial advisor for over 30 years also participates in that chapter. I think that a lot of the – sometimes when you leave the workforce, it can feel really disempowering, because you're not bringing in money and it can set up all sorts of different dynamics potentially with a spouse.

Getting ahead of some of that so that you can still feel like you have a little bit of ownership over that time in your life, maybe either through savings in advance, which is difficult, but getting ahead of it in that way, just little different pieces and I know you probably have some great tips there as well.

Just so that you can feel you're – one of the dynamics we see is that sometimes when you're not working, you tend to take the guilt on of – one of the things we see is that people will give up

any services that they have to include childcare, because they feel so guilty that they're not bringing any money in. I think you can do yourself a service by getting ahead of a little bit of that and then being able to allocate some funds during a break to other things, so that you can have some space.

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FT: Outsourcing is so important when you need it. To be able to really again, value your time just as you do your money, is a mindset shift. Once you make it, I think you can start to really see the value in affording certain things that may have seen frivolous.

Well, I would love to learn a little bit about your own personal transitions. What were the turns that you took when – how did you claim ownership of your careers post-children? Both of you, Stacey you have two children, I believe. Jennifer, three children. I have two. Between the three of us, amongst the three of us, there's – I can't do quick math in my head. Was that in seven, eight? Oh, my God. It's been a long month. It's only October 2nd or 3rd. Anyone of you can go first, but I'd love to hear a little story about maybe something that you did that perhaps is even in the book, or you mention it in the book as a lesson for other moms you want to pay it forward.

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SD: I can go first. This is Stacey. One of the things Jen said that I thought was so great is that you have to advocate for yourself. That really took me back to my personal story of when I had my daughter. My first child, I was really flourishing in my career at the time as a journalist. I loved my work and I was so happy and excited about it. Then I got pregnant and I was really happy and excited about that phase. I had really looked forward to being mother, or looked forward to being a mother for as I mean, really probably my whole life. It was such a good moment for me.

I didn't really know how when the two came together, how it would all fit together. You don't really know until you're in the moment. I'd grown up with a model of a mom who had a career, took a 10-year career break and then went back to work in a really big way. I knew that it could

all come together in different ways. When I had my daughter, I had really expected that I would go right back to work, take a very short maternity leave and go right back to work.

Then I had her and my body had some different plans. I also really dug into that moment of being a mom. I loved it. It was surprising to me. It caught me off guard that I decided I wanted to go back into work, but on a part-time basis. From the advocating perspective, I was lucky to be at an employer that part of the paid leave package was that you could come back part-time. That being said, it was buried in the paperwork as a line item that you could ask for that I would never have seen, unless a colleague and friend of mine who was also pregnant at the same time pointed out to me. I went in and asked.

That's the only reason that it happened. Nobody came over to my desk and had to be on the shoulder at some point and said, "Hey, if you want, you can come back three days a week. You'll still get your full benefits. You can be part-time." I think that that's just such a critical message that Jen and I want to get across to women is that you will never get those opportunities, unless you ask for them. The rest of the story goes on from there and the different paths that I took that led me here as an entrepreneur.

Essentially, it was the shift from working full throttle and thinking that that's exactly where I would be immediately after she was born, and it really changed into something that I thought was a gift at the time, that being able to go part-time.

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FT: Stacey, was your employer surprised that you had pointed out to the fine print, or were they pretty accommodating and didn't ask questions?

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SD: I think because it was in fine print. They were like, "Oh, yeah. Sure, no problem." I think, I was really delighted that that was their response. It came up again, because I stayed part-time. The paperwork said that you should go back to work full-time nine months after the birth of the child. That nine months came and went and I was still going part-time. I didn't really mention it to

anybody. Nobody brought it up to me. Then eventually, my manager called and said, “We need you to come back full-time.”

I said, “You know what? I'm not ready. I feel I'm producing and contributing in a way that still is really valuable to the company and I will completely understand if it's not going to work out for you. Right now for me, part-time is really where I want to be.” She's a mother of three and she was on speaker phone. She picked up the phone and she said, “You know, I wish someone had done this for me.” No problem. I stayed part-time until I left the company. I'm forever grateful. I think it's a great message that women can do those things for other women too.

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FT: Yes. Yes. We have to share the realities of how we're making it work. What I'm also hearing from your story is that you got really good at asking for what you want. I don't think it's inconsequential to the fact that you are now a mom. I think that's one of the great things about parenthood is that it does you get straight to the point, because you realize your time is valuable. You are tired, right? You don't want to spend hours mulling over things. You're just like, you got to make decisions. In this case, you decided to be your own advocate. I love that story.

Jennifer, do you want to – I know you've had big jobs as an attorney and working for major league baseball. Those are big demanding jobs as you hinted to earlier. When you became a mom, what's something that you wish you had known back then?

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JG: Oh, my gosh. Listening to Stacey, I was realizing one of the reasons we worked so well together on this book is we have very different approaches to things and we're very different in many ways. I was just listening to her story I'm like, “She was so level-headed throughout that whole thing.” I feel like I did everything wrong. When I was a young mother I – well first of all, I honestly believed that having children would not affect my career. I don't know what I was thinking back then. Clearly, I hadn't yet had children with that view in mind.

I literally thought it wasn't going to affect my career. I was like, I'm going to have a baby. I'm going to go right back to work. I'm going to continue working really hard. You know what? It worked for a little bit of time, especially when I had one child. One child is a lot easier than two and two are easier than three. We advocated in the book not to do, which is to number one, I wish going back, I would have really sought out women who had done it and been there and gone through it and could have given me advice about one, this is a finite period of time in your career. We talked about that a little bit already.

When you're so mired in it and when you're so exhausted, you talked about being exhausted and just being emotionally spent, you're just – honestly, I really don't think I was thinking all that clearly back then, because I didn't have this great plan. After I had my second child and he was about two-years-old, there were some things going on in preschool with one of my kids and I was like, "I'm done. I can't do it anymore." I had a very big commute, really about an hour and a half each way to and from work. I felt I was never seeing my kids, I jumped.

I really wish I would have consulted with other women. I am a huge supporter in women supporting other women. I think we talked about it in the book, but it's one of the things I feel so strongly about, which is we cannot be our own worst enemy. If we want to make strides in the workplace and we want employers to change, we have to be there for one another. We have to support one another.

Regardless of the journey you're on, by the way, and I see this a lot, women who never took a career break have feelings about women who have taken career breaks and vice versa. It's like, you don't know why people do what they do, or the journey that they're on. We shouldn't judge and we should just support one another. Seeking out women who could have given me advice.

Also, one of the financial issues, which to be honest, I was totally in the dark about, because what's the number one thing you hear when people say, "I can't keep working, because I can't even afford to pay the babysitter. My salary doesn't even cover the babysitter." We hear that all the time. It's such a small – a speck of information when you consider the loss you're going to take if you take a career break.

By the way, the book doesn't advocate any particular path, whether you choose to stay, whether you choose to go, whether you choose to take a one-year break, a 10-year break, you choose to go part-time, we know people are going to make all those different decisions and we think it's great. You should make those decisions with your eyes wide open. When you're talking about taking a career break and I didn't realize this, and I had a seven-year career break, I didn't realize that it wasn't just my salary lost, it was my pension lost, my benefits lost and you're going to take a pay cut when you do eventually come back into the workforce. Every dollar you make for the rest of your career is going to be based off of that lower salary.

It's a significant, a significant financial hit that you take personally when you decide to take a career break. Again, I am happy I took my seven-year career break, but I didn't realize when I did it the price that I was going to pay to do it from a financial perspective. Those were a couple of things that I wish I would have done before I took my career break. Again, I don't have any regrets, but I think it's really important that women understand the ramifications of any decision that they make before they make it.

It is tough, because it is a blurry time in your life usually, especially if you're a young mom. You've got little toddlers. You never really get a break. "You're working all weekend at home." It's a very difficult – it was certainly a very difficult my life from a – I came last in my priority list. I wasn't exercising. I wasn't eating well, all of those things. Those are just a couple of things that I would think about and consider. We talk about all of those things in the book and more.

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FT: Well, everybody go pick up the book. It's called *Your Turn: Careers, Kids and Comebacks--A Working Mother's Guide*. Thank you so much Stacey and Jennifer for joining us. Thank you for writing this book and the great work that you're doing at Après. Many wonderful resources you're birthing for society and we really – we hope to have you come back.

[0:31:55.9] JG: Thanks, Farnoosh. Thanks for helping us with the book and participating in the book. Hopefully, your listeners will read it and see the great advice you give to the readers in the book, because we really appreciated you, from you doing that.

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