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The Parenthood Partner

EVP Melissa Gonzales on
Medela's mission to help every
woman in America along her
own motherhood journey

By Sara Deeter

Every woman's journey into motherhood is different. Some women breastfeed for months, some for years. Some have health insurance that covers all critical equipment (like breast pumps), and others have insurance that covers only a few of those products. Some women go back to work after a few weeks, and some re-enter the workforce after months or years. But no matter what a mom's experience looks like, says Melissa Gonzales, Medela is there to help.

As executive vice president of the Americas at Medela, a family-owned

company dedicated to enhancing the health of moms and babies alike, Gonzales works to ensure that every woman across the US has the support, resources, and solutions she needs to be the mother she wants to be.

A Medela veteran of nearly twelve years, Gonzales served in a number of leadership roles before securing her current role, including vice president of sales and channel management and executive vice president of North America. But long before she joined the top ranks of Medela, Gonzales was in a very different line of work.

"I began my career as a nurse," explains Gonzales, who obtained her nursing degree from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1989. "That has really given me a full understanding of the health and clinical side of our business, as well as the complexity of all our products."

All of Medela's products are very technically advanced, Gonzales notes, and are developed based on the latest research on the mechanism of suckling, the human body, nursing patterns, and more.

But whether they're an engineer or a business leader, everyone at Medela shares a passion for women's health and



Melissa Gonzales
EVP of the Americas
Medela

well-being as well as work/life balance. “Medela’s mission is very personal to everyone here,” Gonzales says. “We wake up every day knowing that we’re saving lives by going to work.”

In fact, Gonzales and her teams at Medela save more than lives—they also bring awareness to the health benefits of breast milk, which helps save the nation approximately \$1.9 billion in healthcare costs.

“The benefits of breast milk are incredible,” Gonzales says. “It’s one of the only medicines that can reduce the risk for four of the most common and costly

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childhood conditions—ear infections, gastroenteritis, respiratory infections, and intestinal infections—by 50 percent in the first year of life.

“Yet we know that nearly 60 percent of moms don’t breastfeed for as long as they intend, and they wean for a number of reasons, including returning to a workplace with inadequate policies or support,” Gonzales continues. “And two-thirds of new moms go back to work after giving birth, some returning to a workplace with inadequate policies and support. So, although 80 percent of moms start out breastfeeding, less than half stay on that journey past three months.”

For close to sixty years now, Medela has worked to help moms overcome those challenges and benefit from the many physical, financial, and emotional advantages of breastfeeding. “We try to look at the issue from every angle,” Gonzales says, “including legislation, advocacy for the benefits of breastfeeding, and ensuring parents’ access to support, supplies, and services.

“And on the other side of it,” she adds, “we look at how we can work with the big employers to help raise their awareness of what they can be doing to lay a foundation of support for parents who are going back to work.”

Through programs like New Moms’ Healthy Returns, Medela Cares, and The Moms’ Room, Medela provides customizable, single-source solutions to mothers and employers.

“Employers want to help support moms who are returning to work—they know that if they can enable their workforce, they’ll have a better chance of retaining those women—but it becomes difficult because they don’t know how to create something that is simple to use as well as comprehensive,” Gonzales says.

And that’s where the New Moms’ Healthy Returns turnkey solutions come in. “We provide everything that

MELISSA GONZALES’S SHORT GUIDE TO PARENTHOOD

1. Be your own best advocate.

“There is a ton of support out there, but you know best about what you want and what’s going to work for you. You have to voice those things.”

2. Ask for help. “Ask your employer, your clinician, or people in your community—they want to help you be successful, they just don’t always know how.”

3. Know what you need. “There is so much information out there about what’s available to you, or what you should be doing as a parent. Take the time to sort through the noise and distraction to figure out exactly what you want your parenting lifestyle to be, what your support system looks like, and what your capabilities are.”

moms need throughout pregnancy and during their baby’s first year,” Gonzales says, “from 24/7 virtual support, breast milk shipping services, and access to education, a support community, key resources, and lactation professionals.

“Those are just short-term solutions, of course,” she adds. “In the long term, we have to solve these problems on the legislative level. And though we are far behind other countries, we are making great strides in improving the federal policies that—like our holistic benefits packages at Medela—provide parents with the flexibility, access, and supportive cultures that they need to be successful.” **AHL**