



How to Talk To Your Employer about Employer Supported Child Care

“I have to go back to work, but I want to keep nursing my baby. There is no child care for infants near my work — I’ve looked everywhere” . . . “Our firm experienced a 20% turnover last year mostly due to the lack of available care for our workers’ children” . . . “I work a swing shift and it’s impossible to find evening care for my child” . . . “My partner at work is absent half the time because she stays home when her child is ill. I try not to blame her, but. . .”

Real questions, real problems for all of us — working parents, co-workers of working parents, and employers. One possible solution is to explore employer supported child care. There is a history of this kind of care in the United States. What do we mean by “employer supported child care?” **Employer supported child care is any arrangement which employers establish that assists employees with their work and family responsibilities.** These arrangements may be as simple as providing informational brochures about the local resource and referral agencies or as complex as establishing an on-site child care center. Most companies start small and expand their commitment as they see the benefits of becoming involved with work/family issues.

MAJOR OPTIONS

FLEXIBLE WORK POLICIES

Flexible Scheduling

Companies provide working hours which meet the various and changing needs of their employees. Some examples: staggered starting and quitting times around certain core hours; compressed work week in which employees work longer hours per day, but fewer days per week; a formalized plan for making up time lost due to emergencies.

Flexiplace

Employees work off-site part or all of their work week. Paying employees for their function instead of their time can also work for some companies.

From your employer's viewpoint— Initially, employers may be concerned about covering office responsibilities and about communicating with the off-site employee. Pre-arranged schedules and formal arrangements for covering emergencies may answer some of these concerns.

Shorter Work Week

There are several arrangements that employers are making to allow employees to work less than a 40 hour week: permanent part-time employment or job sharing with job security and benefits; voluntary reduced work time which allows full-time employees to reduce work hours for a specified period of time.

Shorter Work Week, Continued

From your employer's viewpoint—Benefit costs are a major concern to employers considering these options. Policy changes which prorate benefits and which reevaluate positions may be necessary. However, these options give an employer the flexibility of fitting the size of the workforce to the workload. These options are also ways to retain valued employees who no longer wish to work full time.

Personal Leave

Companies are finding ways to redefine sick leave and vacation time. Some have created *family sick leave* which employees can use for themselves or sick family members. Others are allowing a certain number of days of sick leave to be taken as personal days. Some allow sick leave and/or vacation leave to be taken in part day increments. A few companies have successfully lumped sick leave, holidays, and vacation time into one category called *personal leave* to be taken at the employee's discretion.

From your employer's viewpoint—Any change in leave policies has an effect on the company's benefit plan. An employee survey which demonstrates the work/family stress that is created by sick children and other family emergencies may be a way to start the discussions. While allowing some sick days for family illness may be a rather simple policy change, a broader examination of the entire benefit plan is probably necessary to implement the other options.

Dependent Care Leave

Companies are recognizing that there are many family situations, beyond maternity disability, that require an employee to devote full time to another family member for a period of time — birth or adoption of an infant, a medical emergency, or a debilitating illness of an older parent. Leaves with job security — with or without pay — are a way to retain valuable employees.

From your employer's viewpoint—Cost, equity, and job coverage are major issues for employers. Broadening *parental leaves* to *dependent care leaves* is sometimes more acceptable since this also benefits employees who don't have young children. But it will increase the cost of the benefits package. Guarantees to return to a comparable, but not identical job, and a transitional period of part time work could ease the problem of job coverage.

Children at Work

Accommodations at the worksite may allow infants to successfully spend time at work. Some companies have turned over space to be used by infants and a parent-hired caregiver. (Licensing regulations may restrict this option.)

Ways to work with your employer—Be a responsible parent. Consider the needs of your child and your co-workers and present a well thought-out plan for covering the dual roles of parent and employee.

INFORMATION AND COUNSELING SERVICES

Targeted Child Care Resource and Referral Service

Companies inform parents about available child care and provide some form of counseling on how to select care. Where resource and referral services already exist, a company will probably want to contract with that agency rather than create its own in-house service.

Ways to work with your employer—Tell him about BANANAS and California's network of resource and referral agencies. Distributing information on referral services and handouts on choosing child care is often an easy first step for employers to take.

Time off to look for child care

Some companies recognize that looking for and selecting satisfactory child care is a complex, time-consuming job. Release time to do that job effectively can be a valuable benefit.

Parent Education

Workshops or seminars on child care and childrearing can be conducted at the workplace. In addition to responding to employees' information and counseling needs, seminars can become a vehicle to assess the level of employees' child care concerns.

Ways to work with your employer—Offer to set up the workshops. Be clear about what you want from your employer. Do you want him to provide space? Are you requesting that employees have release time to attend the workshops? Who is going to pay the honorarium for the workshop presenters?

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Flexible Benefit Plans

These are also known as *cafeteria plans*. They allow employees to choose from a menu of taxable and non-taxable benefits which best suit their individual needs such as medical or life insurance, or child care. Usually employers establish the maximum dollar amount which they will contribute to each employee's benefit package. If an employee chooses more benefits, the extra cost is borne by the employee. These plans may or may not include dependent care assistance plans (DCAP).

DCAP

Dependent Care Assistance Plans (DCAP) are salary set-aside plans which allow employees to set up a pre-tax account from which they pay for child care. They may or may not be a part of *cafeteria plans*.

Ways to work with your employer— Any change in a company's benefit plan is a major policy and financial decision. Introducing your employer to potential tax and benefits savings may interest him enough to start the process. Once there is a commitment to change, a benefits consultant will probably be necessary to actually implement a DCAP or cafeteria plan.

Direct Subsidies

The employer assists in paying employee's child care fees, usually in child care of the family's choice. This can take the form of direct reimbursement to the employee, payment to the provider through vouchers, scholarships or the purchase of reserved spaces for children at certain child care facilities. This is a useful benefit only if there is an adequate supply of child care in the area.

From your employer's viewpoint— Often this is an advanced step for an employer after he has become sensitive to work/family issues. Information on the availability and cost of child care in the community is essential in deciding whether this is a useful benefit.

SUPPORTING OR CREATING SERVICES

Charitable Contributions

Donations of money, goods or services can significantly improve the quality of programs in your community and/or lower the cost of care. These can be contributions to child care programs or to your local resource and referral agency for provider training, etc. These donations can be linked to special considerations for the company's employees.

Sick Child Care Services

Companies may decide to provide a subsidy to help pay for the care of sick children or to establish a program for sick children (either by organizing a site for this care or by hiring workers to go into the family's home when there is an illness). Companies may want to broaden their vision to consider a wider range of emergency situations such as overtime, conferences, or an illness of a child care provider. They might also consider joining with other employers to form a consortium to offer this benefit.

Ways to work with your employer—While sick child care is the number one problem identified on employee surveys, established sick child care programs are frequently under-utilized. If your company is considering this form of subsidy, you might suggest parent focus groups about sick child care first. Really knowing what works best for families will help design a better program.

Special Circumstance Child Care This is the provision of child care for employees at conferences, night meetings, over-time, and out-of-town assignments. It can be a direct cash grant to purchase child care or child care provided at the conference or meeting site.

School Age Summer/Vacation Care These are times which create special work/family stresses. Some companies are beginning to sponsor day camp/field trip programs and other innovative projects to address this particular problem.

Family Day Care Networks There are several ways companies can work with the family day care providers in their area: recruit and train new providers near the company, supply support services, contract with or organize a network of family day care homes.

Ways to work with your employer—Educate your employer about the different types of child care. Recommend ways that support for training and equipment could help improve the quality of available care.

DIRECT PROVISION OF CHILD CARE

On-site Child Care Center It is a major commitment for a company to develop its own center. Employers should plan to conduct a feasibility study and needs assessment. Hiring a good child care consultant at this point is an essential investment.

Ways to work with your employer—Offer to participate in a planning committee. If you are asking your employer for this kind of commitment, you're going to have to be willing to invest your time and energy also.

Consortium Programs Two or more companies which may want to open their own centers might find it more feasible to work together in developing a center. Consortia have also been used to provide sick/emergency child care.

Reserved Spaces If the local supply of child care is adequate, reserving spaces (paid or partially paid by the employer) in local centers or family day care homes may be more feasible than trying to develop new programs.

Ways to work with your employer—Up-to-date information on local supply and cost is essential. Your resource and referral agency is your best source.

Who really benefits? The answer is **EVERYONE** benefits if the program is well-designed and fits the special needs of the workers as well as the employer. In companies in which child care services are provided, employee turn-over decreases, recruitment and job performance improve. Further, companies realize benefits in tax deductions, tax credits, capital expenditure amortization. The public image as a business which cares about its families is enhanced. Parents and children are, of course, the obvious beneficiaries. But, all of us gain from having children well taken care of while their parents work.

GETTING STARTED WITH EMPLOYER SUPPORTED CHILD CARE

Although each workplace has different needs, administrative structures, and planning techniques, there are some steps which are generally helpful.

1. **Form a working committee.** Be sure to begin with representatives from the widest possible range of employees at the workplace, including management, clerical, maintenance, etc.
2. **Conduct a needs assessment.** Gather statistics on how many employees need child care, how much they can afford to pay, and what they see as a workable/ideal situation for their children and themselves. Collect information on ages of children, geographical locations of homes, modes of transportation, transportation routes, etc. Employee surveys are a common, though not necessarily the best, way of gathering this information. Think of other ways to collect this information - small group discussions, personnel records, recruitment and exit interviews are examples.
3. **Make a time plan and try to stay with it.** The development of your ideal employer sponsored child care probably won't take place immediately. Plan the benefits in stages and try to insure some continuity by incorporating child care in the future plans of the company and workforce negotiations.
4. **Research the availability and cost of child care in your area.** This will prevent duplication of existing services. It will also show the met and unmet needs, the cost for services, and models of child care delivery. In California, there is a network of child care resource and referral agencies to help you find these statistics.
5. **Enlist professional organizations or unions when appropriate.** The role of organized labor groups in employer supported child care is entirely dependent upon the situation of each company or each consortium of companies. Sometimes union leaders also need educating about the work/family issues important to their members.
6. **Get outside consultation.** But, be sure to seek outside consultation at the appropriate time! Your local resource and referral agency may be the best source of help as you begin to sort out options. Once you have company interest and have narrowed your options, a professional consultant may be necessary. Remember that different consultants are good at different things. Someone who is good at feasibility studies may not be able to restructure your company's benefit plan or design a child care center.
7. **Utilize in-house media.** Bulletin boards, newsletters, etc. should all include articles on child care as an issue — both for the company and the community. If your company has taken some initial steps, publicize those activities. It may encourage everyone to move ahead on work/family issues.
8. **Don't be afraid to start small.** One or two parents with a lot of perseverance can begin to work wonders! But, remember to be open and flexible along the way. Listen carefully to the concerns/objections of others. They will have to be answered for the program to be successful. Pay particular attention to the source of resistance and/or disinterest. You'll learn a lot about how to target the development of your employer supported child care benefits.



EMPLOYER SUPPORTED CHILD CARE RESOURCES

Several organizations provide assistance in developing employer supported child care.

Alameda County Child Care Information Program for Contractors

Technical assistance and materials on employer supported child care available to Alameda County contractors. For information call Rory Darrah, Child Care Program Specialist; (415)530-6303.

BANANAS

Provides comprehensive information and referrals on child care and children's services to parents and providers who live in northern Alameda County, 6501 Telegraph Ave., Oakland, CA 94609; (510)658-1409.

California Child Care Resource & Referral Network

An umbrella agency of California resource and referral agencies. The Network can assist your company in purchasing targeted referrals from local resource and referral services. Located at 111 New Montgomery, 7th Floor, San Francisco, CA 94105; (415)882-0234.

Child Care Law Center

A nonprofit legal organization which addresses a variety of child care issues. Located at 22 Second St., 5th Floor, San Francisco, CA 94105; (415)495-5498. The Law Center has several useful publications. Call for publication list.

New Ways to Work

An organization dedicated to promoting more humane ways to work such as job sharing and flexible hours. Located at 149 Ninth St., San Francisco, CA 94103; (415)552-1000. Call for publication list.

One Small Step

A coalition of employers and others interested in employer supported child care. Sponsored by United Way of the Bay Area, 410 Bush St., San Francisco, CA 94108; (415)772-4315.

Here are some useful publications:

Work & Family Clearinghouse, Women's Bureau, U.S. Dept. of Labor

A national clearinghouse offering information and guidance to employers who are seeking to respond to the dependent care needs of their employees; (800)827-5335.

Business Links

A quarterly from Resources for Child Care Management, 261 Springfield Ave., Suite 201, Berkeley Heights, NJ 07922; (201)665-9070. \$30/year.

Employers & Child Care: Benefiting Work & Family

A report published by the U.S. Dept. of Labor, Office of the Secretary, Women's Bureau, Washington, DC 20210.

Flexible Spending Accounts Implementation Guide

Detailed instructions and sample forms to start and administer FSA plans. Available from Day Care & Child Development Council, 609 W. Clinton St., Ithaca, NY 14850.

It's Good Business: Company Assisted Child Care

A video produced by the California Senate Rules Committee. Introduces employers to the costs and tax benefits of employer supported child care. Available through your local state senator's office. \$6.00.

Small Business Options for Child Care: Final Report

A report published by Berkeley Planning Associates, 440 Grand Avenue, 5th Floor, Oakland, CA 94610; (510)465-7884. \$15.20. Other employer supported child care publications available. Ask for publication list.

