

balance



sheets

A series of information sheets for employers interested in helping employees balance their work, family, and personal responsibilities

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What do Children Themselves Say?

Ellen Galinsky surveyed a nationally representative sample of 1000 children in 3rd through 12th grade for her book Ask the Children. She asked kids what they thought about their parents' jobs and what they wanted to tell their parents. Here are the children's top 10 messages for their parents:

1. Work if you want to work.
2. We are proud of you.
3. Love us, raise us well.
4. Keep on working and supporting us.
5. Spend focused and hang-around time with us.
6. Put your family first.
7. Be there for us – or else.
8. Don't bring the stress from work into the home.
9. Find out what is going on in our lives and tell us about yours.
10. Teach us how to work.

Contrary to what parents might expect, kids' #1 wish was not for more time with their parents, but for relaxed enjoyable time with parents who were less stressed and tired.

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Parents' Jobs and Children's Lives: Finding the Win-Win

Parents' jobs affect their children in many ways. How can employers simultaneously address the needs of both the current and the future workforce?

Infants and Preschoolers:

One of the biggest implications of parents' work for very young children is the type of care children receive while parents are working. Parents rely on relatives, in-home caregivers, family day care homes, and centers – often more than one arrangement is required to provide enough care to completely cover parents' work hours. Both the duration and the quality of care may affect children's development.

The "gold standard" study in this area is the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Study of Early Child Care. This massive research effort has now followed more than 1300 children at 10 different sites across the country from birth into the school-age years. The researchers assess the children frequently, and gather not only self-report data but also observe the children's behavior and performance on learning tasks. Findings include the following:

- Children who received sensitive and responsive care, regardless of its source, displayed better pre-academic and language skills and fewer behavior problems than children who received lower-quality care.
- Caregivers with higher levels of education and who worked in settings with fewer children per adult were more sensitive and responsive to children and provided a more stimulating environment.
- When environments were more stimulating and well-organized, children had better vocabularies, attention and memory skills and got along better with peers. In contrast, children who spent more time in front of the TV showed more behavior problems, had smaller vocabularies and did less well on math problems.
- Only 6 - 9% of children in care less than 10 hours per week showed elevated levels of problem behaviors, compared to 16-17% of children overall. Children with more hours of care showed the same level of problem behavior as the general population.

Lessons for employers: On the positive side, employer investments in care quality have payoffs beyond the individual worker. But, requiring very long work hours of parents with very young children, or doing so where high quality care is in short supply, can compromise the intellectual and social development of children.

SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN:

For school-aged children, one of the most important ingredients for healthy development is a stimulating home environment with good support for intellectual development. This means access to reading, support for school work, and exposure to cultural events and materials.

One of the largest and most persuasive studies in this area is the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, which has now followed young women and their children for more than 30 years. The data allowed researchers Toby Parcel and Betty Menaghan to examine the joint effects of mothers' and fathers' jobs, the role of family characteristics, and the importance of job quality for children's developing skills in reading and math. Their findings:

- When mothers or fathers both routinely work more than 40 hours per week, children's vocabulary development may be slowed.
- Children of poor mothers perform better on tests of reading and math when their mothers don't work at all than when their mothers have stressful, unstimulating, low-paid jobs – a thought-provoking finding in an era of welfare reform.
- Jobs that are intellectually stimulating and allow workers to make decisions are good for workers, but can absorb their time and emotional energy in ways that can be problematic when they also have large numbers of children, very young children, or partners with similar challenges.

- Parental resources, such as positive self-esteem and cognitive ability, become especially important when work is stressful or time-consuming.
- The effects of one parent's working conditions vary depending on the working conditions of the other parent – children's development may proceed normally when one parent faces challenges like too many hours or too much stress – but it may be tough to weather both parents facing such challenges.

Lessons for employers: Jobs with appropriate levels of complexity and challenge are good for both workers and their kids; jobs with too much of either are good for neither. Jobs that offer too little money or too little stimulation are problematic for both workers and kids.

YOUNG ADOLESCENTS:

A key factor related to young adolescents is parents' knowledge about their activities. When parents know what children are doing, children are less likely to engage in delinquency or substance abuse, and they are more likely to do well in school. Ann Crouter has conducted many studies of parental knowledge. Here are some of the things she has learned:

- Mothers who work longer hours are just as knowledgeable about their children's daily experiences as mothers who work less.
- Fathers whose wives work longer hours know MORE about their children's daily experiences than other fathers.

- Fathers whose wives work year-round know more about their kids' whereabouts and activities than other fathers.
- Both mothers and fathers know less when fathers report more pressure and overload at work and when the partners report less love in the marriage relationship.
- Fathers who are psychologically overloaded at work experience disruptions in their relationships with adolescent children.

Lessons for employers: Making it possible for employees to stay in touch with their children is important not only for their peace of mind but also for the well-being of the children and the community. Specific examples include computer terminals for workers to receive email from their children on breaks; permission for children to call when they get home from school; and ways for workers to receive messages on the factory floor.

ALL CHILDREN:

One of the biggest risks for children is the risk that their parents will divorce; the chances that a child will live in poverty multiply when that child lives with a single parent. Harriet Presser has spent considerable time studying the link between parents' work schedules and the risk of divorce. By following a large sample of married couples over time, she found:

- For fathers married less than 5 years, working straight nights (as opposed to days) increased the risk of divorce 600%.
- For mothers married more than 5 years, working straight nights

increased the odds of separation or divorce by almost 3 times.

- Working rotating shifts doubled the odds of marital dissolution for mothers married more than 5 years.

Lessons for employers: Working nights or rotating shifts can have serious and negative impacts on family life and children's well-being. Finding ways to make it possible for shiftworkers to participate in family events and to spend time with their spouses and children can be a big help. Sometimes, rules around how vacation time and work schedules are decided can make it hardest for workers who need it the most to spend time with young families.

EMPLOYER RESPONSES

Lucent (Murray Hill, NJ)

The Family Care Development Fund that Lucent operates in partnership with its two unions, the CWA and the IBEW, supports community-based initiatives. To that end, they seek the input of employees at 10 locations and a variety of work levels in order to design initiatives that meet parent needs. Over 10,000 employees responded and parents reported they had very limited choices in finding good care for infants and toddlers. Lucent heard the same theme when they talked with center directors! As a result, over 180 infant and toddler educators in six communities around the country have received an intensive 18-day training to be able to implement the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation's Infant and Toddler curriculum in their center – and young children are getting better care as a result.

ChevronTexaco (San Ramon, California)

Now that Chevron and Texaco have merged, the new company is in the process of choosing a single vendor for backup care. Decision-makers are using not only parents' preferences, but also research information about children's well-being, to determine which vendor offers the best services. ChevronTexaco also provides scholarships and funds regional training opportunities to caregivers and school-age providers of ChevronTexaco employees through its involvement with the Houston-based Corporate HANDS organization and the California School Age Consortium.

Eli Lilly and Company (Indianapolis, IN)

Lilly's Summer Science Camp serves employees' children aged 5–12, at both corporate headquarters and field locations. The camp is managed by the YMCA, but the company enhances the curriculum with science activities each day, all keyed to a weekly theme. This is a win-win-win. Lilly employees have good quality care for their children in the summer, their children learn about the work that their parents do, and Lilly has the opportunity to grow a whole new workforce!

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

Investments of time and energy in kids are not limited to workers who are parents. Many employees are coaches, mentors, aunts, youth group leaders, and tutors. Celebrate everyone's commitment to the workforce of tomorrow!

Parents sometimes try to prevent their jobs from negatively influencing their children by trying not to talk about work problems at home. This strategy can be unsuccessful in two ways. First, it doesn't prevent children from knowing when their parents are feeling tired, tense, or stressed. Second, it can prevent children from learning about the world of work. Ellen Galinsky suggests using the following strategies to help children learn about the world of work:

- Arrange for children to visit parents at work, or take pictures of the workplace home
- Share information about parents' jobs
- Encourage children to ask questions
- Encourage children to play out "work scenarios"
- Ask guests in your home about their work so children can learn about different occupations
- Relate to children the interesting (to them!) experiences you have as part of your work
- Know when to stop talking about work
- Tell your children the many reasons why you work
- Be thoughtful about what you want to teach your children about work
- Share your feelings about work, negative AND positive

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General Information

This series is a joint project of the Boston College Center for Work & Family, in Boston, MA, One Small Step, in San Francisco, CA, and the Midwestern Work-Family Association, in West Lafayette, IN, with participation by Work/Life Balance of Philadelphia, PA.

The Boston College Center for Work & Family (Center) is home to the national Work & Family Roundtable and the regional New England Work & Family Association, which together represent over 165 employers. These corporate partnerships provide a sounding board to ensure the Center's research responds to the needs of the workplace, and create a valuable opportunity for corporate leaders to convene to shape corporate and public responses to the demands of the workplace, family, and community in order to enhance employee effectiveness.

One Small Step (OSS) The Bay Area Employer Work & Family Association promotes the development of employee and family supportive initiatives in San Francisco Bay Area workplaces. Through conferences, publications and other services, OSS assists its nearly 100 members and other employers in taking at least "one small step" to respond to employee, family and business needs. OSS was founded by The United Way of the Bay Area in 1986 and currently operates under the auspices of the Northern California Council for the Community.

The Midwestern Work-Family Association (MWFA) advocates for quality work environments that are consistent with business objectives. MWFA was created through a partnership of The Center for Families at Purdue University and leading midwestern employers. With research, education, and outreach, the Center for Families at Purdue University strengthens services to families provided by employers, legislators, and others.



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