

Family-Friendly Child Care for Working Families: Implications for Employers



October 2004

Funded by the IBM Global Work/Life Fund

 **IBM** Global Work/Life Fund



Family-Friendly Child Care for Working Families: Implications for Employers

Introduction

Attracting and retaining effective employees is at the heart of what many employers know is the key to their business success. For employees who are parents, having high-quality care for their young children is at the heart of what they know is the key to their own success on the job. Having child care that addresses the needs of working families enables parents to go to work with less distraction and anxiety so they are better able to focus on their job responsibilities.

Unfortunately, poor quality has plagued the child care industry for decades. The 1995 seminal Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers (CQCO) study identified a paucity of high-quality care, finding that “only 1 in 7 centers provides a level of child care quality that promotes healthy development and learning.”¹ Interestingly, worksite child care centers rank among the highest quality centers in that study – testament that employers understand the importance of quality care and allocate the resources to ensure its implementation.

IBM has long understood the connection between its business success and the successful care of the children of its employees. In the past few decades, IBM has funded and supported research and programs that seek to improve the quality of child care. One of these projects is the Family-Friendly Child Care Project. Begun in 1996 and conducted by WFD Consulting, it is a multi-phased project that seeks to increase awareness and understanding of the child care needs of working parents. In the most recent phase of the project, child care center parents and staff were surveyed to better understand the elements of family-friendly child care. This paper presents selected results of interest to the business community.

The Concept of a Family-Friendly Child Care Program

Before a center can be considered family-friendly, certain quality of care elements must be in place. In this study, quality was measured by ratings of the staff-to-child ratio, the quality of the educational/developmental program, and the level of staff training/experience. These elements need to be satisfactory before family-friendly enhancements matter.

After a foundation of quality is met, what makes a child care center family-friendly? This study set out to define the services, activities, programs, and behaviors that matter to working families. In general, family-friendly programs give parents what they need most: high-quality care that operates on the premise that families are the center of children’s lives. That is, these programs are *family-centric*, not *center-centric*; they put family needs ahead of the convenience of the center and create partnerships

¹ Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Study Team (1995). Cost, quality, and child outcomes in child care centers, Executive Summary. Denver, CO: University of Colorado, Economics Department, p. 10.

with parents to ensure the well-being of the child. Additionally, they offer programs and services that enhance the well-being of families. But what are the *essential elements* of a family-friendly child care center? This study sought to identify them and understand their impact.

Goals of the Study

The primary goal of the project was to understand the key elements of a family-friendly program. Another was to understand the impact of high-quality, family-friendly child care on staff who work at the center and on parents as employees. That is, are staff at high-quality, family-friendly centers more satisfied with their jobs? Do parents who use family-friendly child care centers feel better able to manage their work and personal responsibilities? A final goal was to use the data collected to further refine the survey tool. A concise survey tool enables child care centers to self-assess the family friendliness of their programs and services, and helps parents initiate dialogue at their current child care center or use the instrument as a guideline when seeking high-quality care.

Methodology

A survey – the Family-Friendly Child Care Audit Tool – was developed to investigate the research questions. It included a series of questions related to each of the following six dimensions of family friendliness:

- A child-centered place (probing the relationships and connections between teachers and children);
- A parent-centered place (probing the relationships and connections between teachers and parents concerning the well-being of the child);
- A place that builds quality relationships with families (probing how welcome and included parents feel);
- A place that respects the diverse families and cultures it serves;
- A place that anticipates and responds to the needs of families; and
- A place that communicates with families by a variety of means.

Additional questions measured basic quality elements of the center, job satisfaction levels among center staff, and issues of work/life conflict for parents.

The survey was fielded to administrators, teachers, and parents at 63 child care centers. In all, 5,603 surveys were sent and 2,530 returned, for a response rate of 45%. A full report detailing the methodology and findings of the study is available on the American Business Collaboration (ABC) web site: www.abcdependentcare.com.² A revised version of the Family-Friendly Child Care Audit Tool is available at the site as well.

² The American Business Collaboration (ABC) is a groundbreaking collaboration of leading U.S. companies partnering to ensure that their employees have access to quality dependent care programs and services to help them manage their work and personal responsibilities. The basic principle guiding the ABC is the belief that companies can accomplish more by working together than by working alone.

Results of Family-Friendliness Analyses

Results were analyzed separately for parents and for staff to determine if they define family friendliness differently. For both groups, basic elements of child care quality proved to be important in the analysis. Once quality is accounted for, parents value several components as contributing to the family friendliness of the center. These include: the emphasis on the quality of staff/child relationships and staff/parent interactions; the sense of partnership and mutual support at the center as evidenced in strong relationships between parents and staff (particularly in non-profit centers); the respect demonstrated by staff towards parents which reflects staff's appreciation of the unique nature of each family; the ability of staff to respond to the needs of families by offering information, programs, and services to assist them; and a high degree of communication as well as a variety of communication channels (particularly in for-profit centers). Additionally, parents associate hours that care is offered with family friendliness. Cost is a factor in family friendliness, as well, but only in lower quality centers.

Staff are more limiting in their definition of family friendliness than parents. For them, family friendliness means developing quality relationships with parents and responding to their needs by offering information, programs, and services to assist them. They also associate respect for the uniqueness and diversity of families with family friendliness (particularly in for-profit centers). Staff appear to have a more traditional perspective of family friendliness: including parents in governance, offering some set of programs or services to respond to parents' needs, and being respectful of the make-up of the family. Like parents, staff associate hours that care is offered with family friendliness.

Table 1 displays the six family-friendly elements and the factors important to parents and staff:

Table 1. Family-Friendly Factors of Importance to Parents and Staff

	Parents	Staff
Staff/Child Relationship Scale	X	
Staff/Parent Interaction Scale	X	
Quality of Staff/Family Relationships Scale	X	X
Respect for Diverse Families and Cultures Scale	X	X
Responsiveness to Family Needs Scale	X	X
Communication Scale	X	

Parents define family friendliness more broadly than staff, identifying all six family-friendly factors as important compared to staff who define family friendliness along three dimensions only. Because parents have a broader definition of family friendliness than staff, centers can better serve families by expanding their thinking about how best to deliver care and services. The Family-Friendly Audit Tool, available on the ABC website, identifies the particular behaviors, programs, services, and practices that parents associate with family friendliness.

Investigating Business Impacts

To investigate the business impact of high-quality/family-friendly care, the study examined work/life stress and attendance conflicts for parents in the study. To create a measure of work/life stress, these elements were combined:

- Stress of family responsibilities affects work quality;
- Stress of family responsibilities affects focus and attention at work; and
- Degree parents feel positive they can manage work/life responsibilities.

This work/life stress scale was correlated with parents' ratings of the quality and family friendliness of their child care center. The study found that the work/life stress measure is negatively correlated with parents' ratings of the quality/family-friendliness of their center. So, for example, parents who report using high-quality, family-friendly care also report lower work/life stress. While the correlation is small, it is statistically significant ($r = -.139, p < .001$).

Parents were asked how often, over the last three months, they experienced particular work conflicts because of personal/family responsibilities. Table 2 displays the responses for parents overall and then displays results for parents whose ratings of their child care center fall into the bottom quartile on the quality/family-friendliness scale (low-performing centers) and then parents whose center ratings are in the top quartile (high-performing centers):

Table 2: Percent of Parents Reporting Work Breakdowns Due to Family Responsibilities in Last Three Months

	Total	Parents with Children in Low-Performing Centers ⁺	Parents with Children in High-Performing Centers ⁺
Refused to work overtime or extra hours: 4 or more times	16%	20%	14%
Left work early or came in late: 4 or more times	37%	42%	33%
Missed an important meeting: 1 or more times	19%	22%	16%

+ A low-performing center is defined as a center scoring in the bottom quartile on the quality/family-friendliness scale. A high-performing center is one that scores in the top quartile.

Work breakdowns are less likely to occur among parents using a high-quality/high family-friendly center than among those using a low quality/less family-friendly center in these three areas: inability to work overtime or extra hours, leaving work early or arriving late, and missing important meetings. For example, while 42% of parents in low-performing centers report that they left work early or arrived late four or more times in the last three months because of personal/family responsibilities, only 33% of parents in high-performing centers report this frequency. The quality/family-friendliness of the center does not make a difference in terms of parents missing a full day of work four or

more times or missing a deadline at least once, but the percent of parents reporting these occurrences was relatively low (11% and 16%, respectively).

Family-friendly centers, then, seem not only good for children and parents, but good for employers as well. Parents who use them appear better able to focus on their work and experience fewer conflicts with work demands.

Implications of Quality and Family Friendliness for Staff

Another finding is that administrators and teachers who work at high-quality, family-friendly centers tend to be more satisfied with their jobs than those working in lower-quality, less family-friendly centers. Because job satisfaction is associated with longer job tenure, and longer job tenure is associated with higher quality care, a loop is in play that reinforces the excellence of high-quality/family-friendly centers by retaining staff, but perpetuates the weaknesses of lower-quality, less family-friendly centers that are plagued by turnover. Family friendliness is a quality element that can help boost job satisfaction and reduce turnover in child care centers.

Services of Value to Parents

The study inquired about various services that might be offered by their child care center and asked parents to indicate the value of services *not currently offered*. The top five services that parents would value are:

- Information on community activities for children and families (94%);
- Information on support services for families (89%);
- Computers with software for children (85%);
- Enrichment classes (for a fee) such as dance, martial arts, music, or gymnastics (79%); and
- Flexible payment plans (79%).

These convenience services fell to the bottom of the list:

- Fax and photocopy machines (22%);
- Take-home meals (22%); and
- Dry cleaning drop off/pick-up (20%).

These findings help to dispel the notion that family friendliness means convenience services for parents. The study found instead that parents prefer programs that enhance the care experience for their child as well as services that address their more substantive needs as a family.

Conclusion

By offering high-quality care that puts the family's needs ahead of the convenience of the center, family-friendly child care centers assist employees in managing their work and family responsibilities. By reducing work/life stress and

attendance conflicts, productivity and retention are enhanced. In order to attract, utilize, and retain the best talent, employers have a vested interest in promoting family-friendly child care centers. Here are some ways that employers can promote family-friendly child care:

- ☑ Inform employees about the findings of this study and the availability of the Family-Friendly Child Care Audit Tool. Parents can use the findings to clarify and expand their thinking about what is reasonable to expect from a child care center.
 - ❖ Parents currently using a child care center can recommend that their center use the audit tool as a basis for discussion and for training. Additionally, their center can conduct a full family-friendly evaluation by asking parents and staff to complete the survey.
 - ❖ Parents seeking child care can use the audit tool as a guide to evaluate the quality of the care arrangement they are considering using.

Study results as well as the audit tool and a Parent Guide are available on the American Business Collaboration (ABC) web site: www.abcdependentcare.com.

- ☑ If employers operate a worksite child care center, or have arrangements with local child care providers, request that those centers review the study summary for providers titled, "Implementing Family-Friendly Child Care: Benefits for Families and Centers," available on the ABC web site. Encourage them to consider conducting an audit of their family friendliness.