

Families, Employers And The Community Benefit From High Quality Child Care: Ten Emerging Workplace Support Options

By Celia Moore

Working parents with consistent high-quality care are more productive and more committed workers. So what are employers doing to support working parents and provide assistance in securing high quality care?

Historically, employers' support of employees' child care needs has varied widely. Though many organizations recognize the importance and value in supporting child care, and have expressed an interest in work-related child care, they often don't know the extent of their options. In fact, there are many ways employers can support their employees address childcare needs. Below, we've outlined ten of these options.

Direct Child Care Assistance

Direct assistance *actively involves employers in the provision of child care services and programs*. Direct assistance ranges from employer-sponsored and/or subsidized on-site centers, to the provision of after school, summer or emergency care programs.

1. On-site or near-site child care centers

- On-site or near-site employer-sponsored or supported child care centers are perhaps the most publicized employer-related child care support.
- There is a wide range of financial supports of on- or near-site centers: granting direct financial assistance, generating funds specifically earmarked for the centre's operating budget, providing discounted loans, and/or offering low- or no-cost space, utilities, maintenance and cleaning.
- There is also a wide range of employer involvement in the operation of these kinds of centres. The centre can be fully owned and operated as a department of the company, as is The Copper House, the center managed by **Husky Injection Molding Systems** in Bolton, ON. However, this is the least common kind of employer-supported centre. Centres can also be operated by a third party or contracted to a community-based childcare provider, such as at **IBM Canada** in Markham, ON.

New Resource: *Work-Related Child-Care Centres in Canada 2001*, Human Resources Development Canada, available in .pdf at <http://labour.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/worklife>.

2. Child care subsidies

- Recognizing that it is not always feasible or appropriate to build or support an employer-sponsored centre, employer subsidization of child care costs can help employees afford high quality care. Subsidies can be especially useful for employers whose workforce is geographically disperse, or where salary levels or working conditions (work hours, location etc.) make affordability a top issue for parents.
- Exemplary employer child care subsidies are found in some of the larger collective agreements in Canada. The CAW has negotiated a direct \$10 per day (up to \$2000 per year) subsidy for child care for children five years of age and under with **GM, Ford, and Daimler-Chrysler**. At **Canada Post**, the members of CUPW have negotiated a child care trust fund of approximately \$1 million annually, that is used for direct subsidies, reimbursements for leave related to child care, and information programs or research on CUPW members' care needs. CUPW has importantly made respite care and care for children with disabilities a priority.

New Resource: *Family-Friendly Provisions in Canadian Collective Agreements 2001*, Human Resources Development Canada, also available in .pdf at <http://labour.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/worklife>.

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3. Emergency Care

- Even the most stable child care arrangements can occasionally become temporarily unavailable, or inappropriate, forcing parents to be absent from work or leave on short notice. Employers in Canada are beginning to support short-term emergency or back-up care as a way to reduce absenteeism and improve productivity.
- Employers provide emergency care support by purchasing or prepaying for a space or spaces in an existing child care centre, which can be used by employees on a temporary or emergency basis. In Vancouver, **VanCity Credit Union** and **HSBC Bank Canada** have partnered in the purchase of an “emergency” space at CityGate, VanCity’s head office on-site centre. Previously, the space was being used at 40 percent capacity by VanCity staff alone. Sharing the space ensures higher capacity, and frees funds that can be used to offer additional emergency spaces elsewhere.

4. After-school or summer camp programming

- Community after-school and school vacation programs are often oversubscribed, leaving many families with limited choices or limited access to appropriate programs. To fill this gap in Toronto, the YMCA New Ventures Initiative was created. It is a corporate/community partnership program to provide short-term, flexible children’s programs to employed parents, in the workplace and in the community,

at YMCA recreation facilities and summer camps

- **Steelcase Canada** in Markham, ON, has been involved in the YMCA New Ventures Initiative for two years, offering a summer camp program that allows parents to bring their children to work—reducing commuting and carpooling times, and allowing children to connect with their parents in their workplace environment. The children are bused to local YMCA camps for the day directly from the worksite and then returned to the worksite at the end of the day.

5. Sick child care

- Caring for ill children is a particular challenge for parents. Employers can help support parents by providing them with time off, flexible hours or the ability to work from home temporarily in order to care for sick children (see Option #7 and #9), but in cases where the child is only mildly ill, some employers have begun to collaborate to provide licensed care for children at-home for the day.
- The National Capital Region Emergency Child Care Consortium in Ottawa, ON, provides a number of emergency child care services for approximately 20,000 employees in the region, including the **Ottawa-Carleton District School Board**. The Short Term Child Care Program, accessed by members of the Consortium, provides a variety of services to employees with emergency care needs, including at-home care by licensed providers for parents with mildly ill children.

Indirect Child Care Assistance

Indirect assistance *supports parents in meeting their care needs*. Many initiatives that support work-life balance can be considered indirect child care assistance—by supporting balance, they allow parents to meet their many responsibilities without negative impact.

6. Information and referral

- Although opinions vary, the general assumption is that each change to a child care arrangement—changing centres, choosing a camp, hiring a nanny—takes up ten daytime or working hours to investigate and select. High-quality information and referral initiatives can drastically cut the amount of working hours

parents need to find and choose child care. Ceridian LifeWorks offers a complete resource and referral service for people needing information and support to make childcare arrangements. Employers like **RBC Financial Group**, **IBM Canada**, and **3M Canada** offer LifeWorks to their employees.

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7. Flexibility

- Start- and end-time flexibility allows employees to formalize different schedules around core hours defined by the company, offering parents the ability to drop off or pick up their children from school or child care setting with less stress and fewer hassles. A culture of flexibility, where parents feel comfortable talking about their children, and having the freedom to leave work early to attend their children's events or appointments, is another key way that employers support their employees' care needs.
- Many small business, family run and voluntary sector organizations offer formal or informal flexibility for employees.

8. Parental networks

- Parental networks (virtual/on-line or in-person) exist formally and informally in organizations—parents share advice at lunch hour, arrange family events, or swap information about childcare and behavior guidance. Replacing the traditional backyard fence, neighbourhood kitchen visits or community gathering, employers can learn to benefit from helping employees organize and support themselves. These networks often provide a no cost internal resource and referral system, help reduce parents anxieties and reduces the feelings of isolation often felt by working parents, both moms and dads.
- A number of years ago, women working alternative work arrangements at **CIBC** started a women's network to share advice and provide support to one another. Connecting employees that work under common circumstances, and providing information and education in the form of 'lunch and learn' workshops and seminars builds a supportive workplace community.

9. Family care leaves

- Since parents often take their own vacation and sick days for family responsibilities, companies

are beginning to offer paid time off to care specifically for family-related issues. Many employers now offer between one and ten paid days off for Family Care needs, and also are beginning to extend job protection to employees who need to take unpaid leave for longer periods of time for family-related crises. (*Family-Friendly Provisions in Canadian Collective Agreements 2001* also has information on family care leave.)

10. Extended and flexible maternity leaves

- The expansion of maternity leave benefits and job protection to 50 full weeks in Canada provides working parents financial support specifically when their families are very young. Employers are increasingly 'topping up' or supplementing these benefits to assist families and reduce financial stress. Gradual return to work (starting part time and gradually returning to full time status), additional unpaid leave are other options being offered by an increasing number of employers.
- As an employer, the **Federal Government** offers a Care and Nurturing Leave, which allows employees leave without pay, for one or more periods not exceeding five years in total, for the care and nurturing of young children.

As employers' become more aware and understanding of the needs of working parents, make the connections between the availability of high-quality child care and their organization's ability to meet their objectives, and learn about the wide variety of support options available to them, we are likely to see more employers support childcare, more parents taking advantage of workplace programs and support initiatives, and more childcare programs and early childhood educators building bridges between the childcare community and employers.♦

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