

Who's Minding the Kids?

By Hannah Hayes

At ChildrenFirst, Inc., a child-care center in downtown Chicago, they're taking advantage of a quiet day and changing the bulletin board themes, getting ready for Friday when public schools will be closed and ten extra children will be signed up. The firm is a savior to the lawyer/parents who work down the street at the firm of Kirkland & Ellis and rely on the center for regular and/or emergency child care.

Gabby Monahan works on her caseload at K&E, secure that her children are in good care. Last month the day-care center Monahan's two children then attended closed down abruptly because of a fire in a different part of the building. Fortunately, Kirkland & Ellis's contract with ChildrenFirst provided a backup—a service that the child-care center provides for 260 companies throughout the country. “Without this,” says Monahan, “my mind would not be 100 percent on the job. It gives me peace of mind that I have someone professional taking care of my kids.”

Many law firms are beginning to recognize the pressing need for day care and the far-reaching benefits that come with providing it. Nearly half of law school graduates now are women, and Department of Labor statistics show that stay-at-home moms represent only 13.5 percent of all households . . . do the math, and it only makes sense for firms to alter professional biases regarding child care and thereby help its entire workforce, male and female.

ChildrenFirst began in 1992 when Boston-based Ropes & Gray recognized the difficulties its employees had finding child care. After the firm built a day-care center and contracted with ChildrenFirst to run it, it invited other law firms in the Boston area to share the space. ChildrenFirst, Inc., now serves 260 businesses throughout the country and has worked with several small firms and bar associations to help build consortiums to cover the costs.

Parenthood Penalty

Studies suggest that family issues like lack of child care have contributed to keeping the glass ceiling firmly in place. Increasing numbers of women enter the legal profession each year, yet only 15.6 percent of partners are women, according to the National Association of Law Placement. According to an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission study released in 2003, “[C]ontrolling for seniority and a wide range of other potentially relevant variables, women's odds of working as law-firm partners are less than one-third of men's odds.”

Despite these gloomy numbers, however, more law firms are continuing to find that providing child care pays off. “Our firm strongly believes that this is a great employee benefit and that it improves our recruiting ability and retention,” says Brooksley Born, a retired partner at Arnold & Porter and a former member of the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession. Born recently led an initiative sponsored by the Commission that produced a comprehensive guide to providing child care for the legal profession, *Legal Progeny: A Guide to Providing Child Care for Legal Employees, Lawyers and Bar Associations*. Her work on the publication reinforced what she already knew from

experience at her firm: “Providing child care increases productivity, it raises employee morale, and we think it is certainly an economic plus for the firm.”

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