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CAREER COUCH

When the Office Becomes Your Day Care Center

BY MATT VILLANO

Q. Your baby sitter canceled at the last minute, leaving you no time to make alternative arrangements for child care. Should you bring your youngster to work?

A. It depends on how well your child behaves and the type of job you have. Vicki Panaccione, founder of the Better Parenting Institute, a consulting firm in Melbourne, Fla., said that while some office environments aren't conducive to children, many companies are open to them every now and then, so long as they don't disturb the peace.

"Only bring your child if his presence will not be disturbing or disruptive to your co-workers," said Dr. Panaccione, a practicing psychologist. "They may coo over your son or daughter initially, but the novelty will wear off quickly if your solution turns into their problem."

Q. How often can children be found in the workplace?

A. No child care plan is flawless, so it can happen quite a bit. Some businesses have prepared for this quandary, offering on-site and off-site child care to help busy parents deal with emergencies.

Genevieve Girault, diversity communications leader at PricewaterhouseCoopers, said that some companies have policies that allow parents to bring their children into the office on occasion. "Bringing kids to work is not only a great way to expose your child to a workplace, but also to help the child relate to you," she said.

But some organizations strongly discourage children or don't allow them at all. Most manufacturing and pharmaceutical companies prohibit children for safety reasons, said Robert Larkin, a partner at Allen Norton & Blue, an employment law firm in Coral Gables, Fla. "You don't want children present for any type of hazardous work," he said. "Many companies prohibit children simply to minimize their liability in the event that something goes wrong."

Q. Is it wise to ask permission before bringing your child to work?

A. Absolutely. Even if you're familiar with your company's policy, clearing the decision with an immediate supervisor is the right thing to do. Patti Fralix, president of the Fralix Group, a consulting firm in Raleigh, N.C., said the courtesy conveys respect for the boss's authority. It may also help to eliminate potential surprises later in the day, she added.

"For all you know, your manager could be hosting the company president or another important visitor," Ms. Fralix said, and in such cases it's probably best to keep your child away.

Q. How do you keep your child busy throughout the day?

A. Entertaining children in the office can be a serious art, and the tactics vary, depending on the youngsters' ages. For younger children, coloring books, DVDs and video games can all be good activities; for older children, happiness may be as simple as a couple of good books, or a spare computer on which they can write stories or browse the Internet.

Still, it's important to be vigilant about noise. If you rely on video games, turn off the sound. If you bring in a DVD or a portable media device, make sure your child uses headphones.

Christy Allen, marketing manager at Posh Tots, a children's furniture company in Glen Allen, Va., said that in many cases, the best solution is to set youngsters up for the day in an unused conference room. "Kids can use these spaces to spread out on the table and color, build a tent or even take a nap," she said.

Q. What do you do if a colleague complains?

A. Listen patiently and apologize. If the colleague is upset about your child's behavior, reprimand the youngster accordingly. If the colleague groans about the child's volume or his presence in general, move the child to a different part of the office.

Whatever you do, be vigilant. Janie Harden Fritz, an associate professor of communication and rhetorical studies at Duquesne in Pittsburgh, said that even if your colleague was being unreasonable, the onus is on you to rectify the situation because the child's presence has disrupted routine.

"Your colleagues didn't ask you to bring in your child, and they shouldn't have to deal with any inconveniences the child creates," she said. "The last thing you want to do is alienate a colleague forever over something like this."

In extreme cases, where your child is particularly rambunctious or your colleagues are intractably unforgiving, it may be necessary to leave the office early.

Q. Can you be penalized for bringing your child to work?

A. Not legally, though abusing the privilege may change the way you are perceived around the office. David Lewis, president of OperationsInc, a human resources consulting firm in Stamford, Conn., said management might be reluctant to promote an employee if the bosses thought child care issues could compromise the capacity to assume responsibility down the road.

“Every time you bring your child into work, you’re telling your employer that you have trouble maintaining balance,” he said. “If you start establishing a pattern of using the workplace as day care, it can and will come back to hurt you.”

The best way to avoid this situation is to establish backup child care plans. Tory Johnson, chief executive of Women for Hire, a career services company in New York, said friends, relatives and trustworthy neighbors were the most sensible options, but noted that local day care and youth programs were good alternatives, too. “Even if your kids behave better than any other kids you know, bringing them to work always should be the last resort,” she said.

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