

**Arthur Emlen, “Absenteeism, Stress, and Employers”
Panel on Child Care, Work and Family
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Purpose and Method

Since 1982, in partnership with employers, employee groups, community and government agencies, and foundations, the Regional Research Institute for Human Services (RRI) at Portland State University has sought to improve the information available for decisions about employee child care and related benefits. Through grants, contracts, and a research service to companies and other employers, we have developed a survey methodology for objective assessment of employee child care and elder care needs and their implications for company policy. The survey provides employers with a useful profile of the workforce that helps them to think through which policies, benefits, and services will make sense for them to implement.

The methodology is a hard-headed approach to needs assessment that examines employees' current situations, economic circumstances, family composition, occupation and job characteristics, current arrangements for child care and elder care, continuity of care, as well as difficulties employees are experiencing at home, at work, and in finding or managing childcare arrangements. Outcomes are measured such as absenteeism (time loss through days missed, times late, times left early, and interruptions on the job) and stress perceived from each of several areas of life including child care, elder care, personal health, health of family members, job, family finances, and family relationships. Based on these outcomes, inferences about employee need are made by making multiple comparisons of segments within the workforce: employees with children vs. employees without children, mothers in two-earner families vs. fathers in two-earner families, single parents vs. those with an employed spouse, parents using different kinds of child care, high vs. low incomes, or management vs. non-management employees.

The entire workforce is surveyed in order to place maternal employment in a wide perspective in which family responsibilities of all employees are examined. The survey uses a compact questionnaire that is completed by employees and returned anonymously to the RRI or to a local sponsoring agency with which the RRI has a cooperative agreement.

We now have employee data from more than 32,000 employees surveyed in 103 companies and agencies in five cities-- Portland, OR (1982, 1983, 1985 & 1987), Washington, DC (1982), Kansas City, MO (1985), Salem, OR (1986, and Escondido, CA (1986 & 1987). For a succinct report to employers, see Emlen and Koren (1984), Hard to Find and Difficult to Manage: The Effects of Child Care on the Workplace. Some of the findings I shall cite were collected in 1985 in Kansas City, in a replication conducted and reported by Professor Sue Vartuli of the University of Missouri at Kansas City.

Findings

How do variations in child care arrangement affect employed parents?

In general, home care is associated with the least disruption of work. Out-of-home day care is associated with being late, leaving early, and missing days; but relying on kids to look after themselves is worse, costing the most in days missed, lateness, interruptions on the job, and early departures. Similarly, reported stress related to child care is associated in a parallel way. But stress and absenteeism tend to be inversely related if anything (i.e., It is stressful to sustain low absenteeism and a relief to be allowed it to some degree, but we will look at this issue in more detail.). In summary, it's better to have an arrangement for out-of-home child care than no adult supervision at all, but you do pay a relatively small price for out-of-home care, because of emergencies and unexpected glitches in daily management. Occasional absenteeism is a barely avoidable concomitant of family responsibility.

Parents report more absenteeism than employees with no children, except for men employees whose children are cared for at home. In two-earner families, women employees miss fifty percent more days per year than men, because they carry more of the daily responsibility for child care. Parental division of labor is a major contribution to the outcome; men have lower absenteeism rates because women have higher rates. The rates reflect the family solution to practically inevitable situations.

How much absenteeism is actually attributable to child care? Here's a rough estimate based on comparisons of the annualized rates we obtained. In a work force that overall misses about 9 days per year, on the average, men employees who have no children miss 7 1/2 days. Add to that 1/2 day for being a father, 1 day for out-of-home care, or 5 1/2 days if the kids are looking after themselves. The men are now up to 13 1/2 days per year. Women employees, even without kids, start out at 9 1/2 days, having lost a couple of days more than men per year probably because of a division of labor in which they assume more family responsibilities in general. Add 2 days if the kids are in care outside the home, or 3 1/2 if they are looking after themselves. The mothers are at 13 days per year-- nearly up to the fathers whose kids look after themselves. Add another 3 days if she is a single parent having no one with whom to share parental responsibilities. If she's management, she'll miss a day or two less, but she'll be late to work more often, since her job will allow it. Having a family income of \$30,000 or more, as compared to having less, saves women in management and professional positions nearly two days, or 1/2 day for women who are not. The income difference saves men 1 day at either occupational level. Take off several days if company personnel policies severely clamp down on absenteeism, but add stress.

Our preliminary analysis of company profiles shows that companies with low percentages of absent employees have higher percentages reporting stress related to child care; however, there is not a significant relationship when examining the responses of individual employees. There are segments within the workforce who fit a positive correlation between stress and absenteeism, but equally important are segments that do not. Consider four groups of women employees with children under 10 years of age from the 1985 Vartuli survey, which we analyzed by discriminant analysis and found increasing levels of difficulty, job stress, and dissatisfaction with their child care arrangements.

Group #1 (n= 460). Those reporting low stress and low absenteeism. They are managing easily, they combine work and family responsibilities without difficulty, and they have made child care arrangements with which they are satisfied.

Group #2 (n=259). Those who report absenteeism, but low stress. These are the employees for whom some absenteeism is a safety valve, sparing them from stress because a modicum of time loss makes it easier to manage child care emergencies. They are doing almost as well as group #1, but not quite.

Group #3 (n=357). Those who experience no absenteeism, but do report stress related to child care. These are the employees who pay a price, in the form of stress, for having to tow the line so strictly in a job or a company that allows no latitude for time loss. They are less satisfied with their child care arrangements than group #3 and report more stress in other areas of life, as well as difficulty combining home and job.

Group #4 (n=254). Those who report high stress and high absenteeism. This category includes employees whose general level of stress may even lead to absenteeism. They may be candidates for employee assistance programs. They are the employees who are experiencing the most difficulty combining work and family. They are most dissatisfied with their child care arrangements, have difficulty continuing arrangements they have made, and likely to report stress regarding their personal health.

How important are demographic differences?

Demographic variables appear to be less important than one would expect. Stress related to family finances is inversely related to family income as one would expect. But higher child care stress is not significantly associated

with low-family income, except for men employees with family incomes between \$10,000 - \$15,000. It is high also for low-income women employees, but they are not alone. Either you can't buy relief from child care stress or you don't.

Nobody seems to think that child care is affordable. For some families that's probably true. But the rate at which children are expected to look after themselves is not higher among low-income families; it increases with family income, even among two-earner families.

Our evidence suggests that the dominant difficulties facing employed parents occur when child care is hard to find and difficult to manage. Difficulty finding child care is persistently high in every city we've surveyed, and analysis reveals a ripple effect in which difficulty finding child care to be associated with a host of other perceived stresses and difficulties. Among people who turn to information and referral programs to find child care, of those who felt that they had to settle for less than they wanted, only 13 percent said that was because it cost too much. More important were issues of quality, such as the providers taking too many children (Paul Koren, 1987. [An Evaluation of Northwest Family Network Services](#)). Difficulty finding child care suggests a need for information and referral services and resource development on a community-wide basis. Difficulty managing child care, work, and family life suggests a need for flexible company policies that make that task easier.

Arthur C. Emlen
Portland State University