

Promoting family-friendly work [US] ^[1]

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EXCERPT Changing workplace policies as they apply to childcare, work/life balance and parental leave would go a long way to combat worldwide poverty, according to a report from the Paris-based International Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. The report, *Babies and Bosses, Reconciling Work and Family Life*, not only compares the different approaches the 30 OECD countries take to help parents balance their work and family commitments, but also compares employer practices as they apply to work/life balance. ... The report also stresses the importance of government spending on after-school and childcare services as keys to reducing poverty for working families. "Getting family-friendly policies right will help reduce poverty, promote child development, enhance equity between men and women and stem the fall in birth rates [worldwide]," according to the OECD study. English-speaking countries -- though doing generally well in some respects such as low infant mortality and percentages of women in the workforce -- have some of the highest rates of childhood poverty, mainly because fewer single parents work in these countries, according to the report. ... "An on-site childcare center, for instance, not only serves the families whose children are enrolled, but also sends the message to all employees that the employer is serious about investing in those resources that make a difference in people's personal lives," she says. "Employers who truly treat their employees as individuals with important personal responsibilities and can demonstrate that through their own policies and practices -- no matter what government programs may or may not be mandated -- will ultimately be most successful in cultivating a loyal and committed workforce, and that not only serves the families well," she says, "but also provides returns to the bottom line." Indeed, says Shelly Wolff, Stamford, Conn.-based North American director of Watson Wyatt Worldwide's health and productivity consulting practice, the only way to "step out of poverty is to give people the ability to work while juggling the responsibilities of family obligations." "Governments and employers have important roles in supporting cost-effective methods and appropriate economic incentives for employees, and that government role is most effective when balancing incentives with accountability," she says. Some successful examples of approaches that help fill financial-needs gaps, Wolff says, are targeted pre-tax subsidies for services such as child care, non-covered healthcare expenses, job protection for a period of time after a child is born, a percentage of pay for a period of time after the birth and even transportation to help promote financially effective ways for parents to return to work. "This would help to promote individual independence from government support through work," she says. "Employers can also serve an important role in retaining a valuable workforce," Wolff adds, "by supporting part-time return to work, flexible schedules, access to affordable sick baby care, on-site/near-site daycare centers and an ability to work from home when possible to ease the transition." Among the study's other conclusions: - Giving parents money on condition that one of them is not working but caring for children sounds sensible but is often counterproductive. It destroys incentives to work and leads employers to assume that women will stay at home, so they stop hiring women and stop investing in their careers. - Tax/benefit systems should be designed to give both parents strong financial incentives to work. - Single parents should be obliged to look for work and be given the quality childcare support to ensure that they can. - Parental leave works best when it is short but well-paid. To promote gender equity and greater paternal involvement in child rearing, some part of the leave should be shared by the parents.

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