

Emergency child care for working mothers [GB] ^[1]

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See text below.

EXCERPTS

Working mothers are to be offered 'emergency child care' if a childminder goes sick or a child cannot go to nursery, under plans being drawn up in Downing Street.

State-registered agencies would be used to provide a last-minute service, saving women from the dilemma of whether to take time off or call in sick when normal child care arrangements collapse. They could also help mothers with child care during school holidays.

Until now, emergency child care has largely been the preserve of well-paid City mothers who are offered 'back-up nanny' services by their employers to ensure they stay at their desks. Wall Street firms introduced the idea in the late Eighties, and now banks in the City such as JP Morgan Chase and UBS routinely supply emergency child care as part of 'lifestyle concierge' services.

A handful of private agencies offers back-up care direct to parents, but they often specialise in nannies and their rates can be high. The government's plan would involve private agencies but would also use state-registered and vetted carers. That would open the door to poorer families, who could use the child care tax credit they receive from government to help to cover the bill.

'This has to be part of the package, in the sense that when your regular child care arrangement breaks down, who do you have to step in?' said Stephen Burke of the Daycare Trust, the national child care charity.

'Agencies basically enable the parent to carry on working safe in the knowledge that their child is being well looked after.'

The idea of state-subsidised emergency child care came from backbench women MPs, who have been consulted by Downing Street aides seeking ideas for the next election manifesto.

It follows calls last week from Julie Mellor, head of the Equal Opportunities Commission, for a national child care system 'as reliable as the NHS', which would fill in the gaps between the patchwork of arrangements many harassed working mothers have set up for themselves.

Emergency child care services could also help the 15 per cent of parents who work shifts, and therefore sometimes want care at unusual times - and provide cover for longer spells, such as during school holidays when nurseries often close.

The Daycare Trust is pushing for an expansion of 'sitter services', already offered in Scotland, which in an emergency will either send a carer to the parent's home if the usual minder falls through - or a nurse, if the child cannot go to nursery because he or she is sick with a minor ailment.

Ministers have already signalled that they plan to include nannies under the scheme, meaning the child care tax credit will finally cover nannies as well as nurseries and childminders. The credit can only be used for state-approved carers.

The changes could be introduced as early as April 2005 - just in time for the general election.

- reprinted from the Guardian

Region: Europe ^[2]

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