Comment: Tales out of preschool [US] [1]

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EXCERPTS

The scandal at the 92nd Street Y Nursery School - an institution that anxious plutocratic parents in New York City believe will facilitate their progeny's acceptance to Harvard and teach toddler barons social-climbing skills when they have barely learned to walk - is a reminder of how far a C.E.O. will go to keep a valued employee happy.

Jack Grubman, formerly a top analyst at Salomon Smith Barney, the investment-banking division of Citigroup, and the father of young twins, sought the help of Sanford Weill, Citigroup's chief executive, in placing his children at the Y.

Grubman later described a satisfying transaction in an e-mail to a friend: he had raised his rating of stock in A.T. & T., a potential Citigroup client, as a favor to Weill, and the Grubman twins appeared on the preschool's rolls.

Citigroup, in the meantime, pledged to donate a million dollars to the Y.

Now Grubman denies that there were any quid pro quos, saying that he invented the story to show off. Weill says that he never tried to influence Grubman, and that the donation to the Y was part of the company's philanthropic program.

Weill does acknowledge that he put in a word with the school in support of the academic aspirations of the Grubman siblings, saying of their father, "He was an important employee who asked for my help."

The preschool-age children of the twenty-five thousand five hundred Citigroup employees in New York City who aren't as important as Jack Grubman have to make do with rather less in the way of child-care opportunities. The company maintains two child-care centers, one in midtown and one in Tribeca, and shares a third in the Financial District. They are all amply equipped with building blocks and art supplies and computers, and are staffed by qualified teachers.

Unfortunately, the centers are available to employees only in emergencies-when a babysitter is sick, or when schools are closed on those national holidays which go unobserved by Citigroup. Employees can leave their children at a center up to twenty times a year. (Special provision can be made for, say, a mother just returning from maternity leave who needs to be nearby for nursing, or an employee who is left in the lurch for a couple of weeks by a nanny handing in her notice.) Most employees with children use the centers between six and eight times a year-a testament to the scope and efficiency of the primary child-care arrangements that parents make on their own.

As it happens, Sanford Weill himself has a long-standing interest in the impact of child care upon the success of a business: in 1988, he was the chairman of an advisory committee in Maryland which studied how to attract businesses by offering improved child care for employees. And Citigroup has been praised by children's advocates: in 2001, the Children's Defense Fund issued a report that cited the company for having taken the lead in improving and expanding the supply of child care nationwide. (Outside New York, the company has five full-time child-care centers for its employees.)

The child-care centers used by Citigroup in New York are run by a private, for-profit company named ChildrenFirst (which supplies the same service to the parent company of this magazine).

It might be just as accurate, though, to characterize the centers as CitigroupFirst, since backup child care is one of those benefits which serve the employer at least as much as the employee: offering a safe place to park children temporarily is a great way for a corporation to insure that it doesn't lose a day's work from a parent who might otherwise stay at home doing finger painting.

Backup child care is a fast-growing segment of the thirty-billion-dollar child-care industry, which is no surprise, since it is the kind of parent-friendly policy a company can introduce without having to contemplate anything quite so parent-friendly as full-time child care.

In the United States, of course, it's not hard for a corporation to look generous in providing child care, since state and federal child-care services are so inadequate.

In "The Price of Motherhood," published last year, Ann Crittenden reported that although half of all three-to-five-year-olds of working mothers in this country attend some sort of paid day care, no state requires its day-care centers to be accredited. Crittenden figured that it would cost more than fifty billion dollars to provide a national program for preschoolers.

That's a lot of money, but France manages to provide something comparable, with ninety-nine per cent of French children enrolled in preschools that are either free or available at a nominal charge.

The provision of decent universal preschool education may seem like a pipe dream, but a study released last week by the National Institute for Early Education Research points out the economic benefits of providing high-quality, year-round, full-time programs. The report argues that whatever such programs cost is money well spent in terms of children's welfare: mothers are able to earn significantly more over their lifetimes, thus raising their children's standard of living; and children benefit from being taught by qualified professionals.

"Such programs pay for themselves, and then some," Leonard Masse, a co-author of the report, says. They might even have another effect, one that Sanford Weill and his peers would surely applaud: busy C.E.O.s would be spared not only the trouble of making lobbying phone calls to fancy private schools but also the embarrassment, not to mention the litigation, that ensues when those unedifying efforts are exposed.

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