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Opinion

Child Care and Other Traps

By CAMERON STRACHER SEPT. 2, 2000

In the ultimate triumph of family-friendly policies, the white-shoe law firm Chadbourne & Parke has converted a spare office into a nursery for the infant of one of its female partners. Now this mother can visit her baby and still stay on top of what's in her in box. According to a firm press release, when it's time for this mother to feed her baby, she is alerted by an e-mail or a quiet knock on the door from her nanny. The firm has another female partner who works from home a couple of days a week and still another who manages its Moscow office while she is on maternity leave in Washington, D.C. It is receptive to opening more nurseries in its offices as the need arises (imagine the sitcom possibilities).

Corporate policies like this are hardly unusual these days, as companies struggle to make the work environment more amenable to the needs of people with families. But are families always best served by such policies?

Granted, for many parents who can't afford nannies and must work, on-site day care is a lifesaver. And being able to work from home while on maternity leave is certainly better than having to cut short one's time off. But such "benefits" have also become yet another device -- like the pager, cell phone and wireless Internet access - that shackles us to work while purporting to set us free.

We are witnessing the transformation of the workplace into the home -- complete with kitchen, sleeping rooms and baby nursery -- and the home into the workplace. Vacations aren't vacations anymore, and coffee shops have become second offices. We measure our value as employees by the number of e-mails we receive and how often we are beeped.

Family-friendly policies are not so friendly when they end up keeping families apart and intruding on space that was once sacred, both in the home and in the office. The mother who brings her baby to work is less likely to go home to have dinner with her husband. The father who can access his e-mail from home is less likely to read a book to his children. Let's be honest: Isn't that why companies institute such policies? They want their employees to be more productive -- to spend more time working.

Being forced to leave the office at 5 p.m. because your baby is at home, not working weekends, taking a six-month maternity leave instead of a three-month leave -- these are good things. By making work easier, companies are actually making home life harder. They offer us a path of least resistance and help us avoid the hard choices we should be making. Work or family? Home or office? We can't have it all. Nurseries are a nice touch to keep the working parent at work, but they won't replace the real thing -- ankle restraints.

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