

# *Motherhood and Engineering: A Successful Combination*

## **Helping Women Balance Work And Family Is Good Business**

By Holly Bigelow Martin

**M**any engineering firms have recently woken up to employees' needs for help in balancing work and family responsibilities. In the past two years, companies have begun to offer many basic benefits, such as child care referral services and six months unpaid leave for newborn child care. They also continue to experiment in new areas, such as day care and sick child care programs.

"Instituting work and family programs is one of the strategies that companies are using to recruit more women, make the climate for women better, and improve their retention rate," says Parisa Mostafavee, of Catalyst, a nonprofit organization that works with business to effect change for women.

Catalyst has instituted an annual award for companies that demonstrate commitment to leadership and development of female employees through corporate policies and programs. Tenneco, Inc., a diversified industrial corporation that hires engineers in many disciplines, won the Catalyst award for 1991.

"We felt like we had made some strides in improving the situation for women at Tenneco, not only in advancement, but also in work and family support programs," says Barbara Reyna, a manager in Tenneco's human resources department.

In January 1990, the company purchased a corporate sponsorship in Kids on the Mend, a special child care center located close to Tenneco's headquarters in Houston, TX. "The sponsorship buys a discounted daily rate of \$20 a day for employees whose children are too sick to take to regular child care centers," explains Reyna. "If your child becomes sick in the middle of the night, you can call a 24-hour telephone line and tell them you'll be bringing him or her by in the morning."

Though Kids on the Mend is located on the pediatric floor of a hospital, it has a friendly environment, as well as the advantage of having the pediatric staff available, Reyna explains. "The program has been well received, and we've had good reports on the hospital," she says. "A lot of people want to stay home with their sick children, and we're not trying to imply that just because we have this program we expect employees to use it. What I've heard from our employees is that it's a wonderful safety net for those times when you've organized an important meeting with people coming in from out of town, or you have a project that just has to get out."

Tenneco also offers an overnight dependent care reimbursement provision. "We found that people were paying between \$25 and \$75 for babysitters when they went on an overnight business trip," says Reyna. "With



this program, we will reimburse up to \$30 for overnight child care expenses." Tenneco has a similar program for overtime work requested by a supervisor, which reimburses employees around \$7 an hour for extra expenses incurred by after-hours child care. "Quite a few people take advantage of these programs," Reyna reports.

### *Adoption Assistance Program*

Tenneco has implemented an adoption financial assistance program that reimburses employees up to \$3,000 per child, or \$4,000 for a special needs child. "We also will be providing a latch-key child educational newsletter, sent directly to the employee's child at home. We're constantly looking at how we can update our work and family program," Reyna adds.

Du Pont is another engineering firm known for its pioneering efforts in the work and family area. "In 1985, we did a study in the Wilmington, DE, area where we have about 25% of our work force, asking employees about their work and family needs," reports spokesperson George Palmer.

"First, they felt there was no way to find adequate child care, so we established the Child Care Connection referral service, which was open to our employees as well as to the public. You can call and tell them your needs — location, age group, types of programs offered — and they can, through their computer base, give you a list of child care providers to choose from. This past year we saw a need to expand, so we established a national child care referral service, contracting with an outside provider," he explains.

Du Pont also offers "SchoolMatch," a nationwide referral service that helps parents match a school system with the needs of their children. Particularly valuable for employees who are transferred or moving to a new location, it has information on more than 15,000 public school systems and 7,000 accredited private and parochial schools. "If parents have an interest in a particular type of program, such as music, SchoolMatch provides guidance on what is available," says Palmer. "Some 400 of our employees used the service in the first seven months it was offered."

As a result of another survey, Du Pont also saw a need for sick child care. "We helped the YMCA in Wilmington establish the Sneezes and Sniffles center, which provides child care on a day-to-day basis for kids who aren't feeling quite well," Palmer says.

"A few years later, we found there was a need for more child care facilities near some of our operations," he reports. "Over the past three years, we've spent about \$1.5 million helping child care organizations rent space or buy equipment. A number of our plants in other states have also helped establish day care centers."

### *Higher Quality Child Care*

In 1990, Du Pont introduced a program to address employees' needs for higher-quality child care. The Flying Colors program began with \$100,000 in its first year to help child care providers in Delaware; Richmond, VA; and Houston, TX, obtain professional accreditation. Family day care providers can receive \$1,000 and child care centers \$2,000 toward application fees, facility

## **Basic Benefits for Mothers**

In addition to the programs covered in this article, the engineering companies surveyed offer all or most of the following benefits to help employees balance work and family responsibilities:

- Six to eight weeks of maternity disability leave after the birth of a child, with full pay and benefits.
- Six months of unpaid parental leave with full medical benefits, to care for a newborn, newly adopted, or seriously ill child.
- Adoption assistance program that reimburses parents up to \$2,000 for adoption-related expenses, such as legal, court, and agency fees.
- Formal or informal (at supervisor's discretion) part-time work programs for employees who want to ease the transition back to work from parental leave.
- Child care referral service, which provides free individual counseling about child care providers who can meet the employee's needs, leaving the final decision to the employee.
- Child care reimbursement accounts, which allow employees to set aside a certain amount of their salary before taxes, to be used specifically for child care.



## *Con Ed is looking into a new vacation and holiday care pilot program to provide care for school-age children when parents must be at work.*

improvements, training programs, and educational materials. "It helps local organizations get that boost they need," Palmer observes. In 1991, the program had \$125,000 available for a number of other areas where Du Pont has facilities.

Consolidated Edison Company, which provides gas, electricity, and steam in the New York City area, has instituted a program for emergency child care in cooperation with other New York firms. The program supports working parents who have to make an unexpected business trip, whose day care arrangements fall through, or whose children are mildly ill and therefore are restricted from their usual day care program.

"Basically it's a program for short-term care, which usually means up to three days in a row," explains Carolyn Dorais, a Con Edison benefits administrator. "Employees can call on this service to get help in an emergency situation while they look for a long-term or permanent solution."

Employees who use the program must live within the service area, which now covers most of Metropolitan New York. They call a member home health care agency, and a trained health care worker comes to the home to care for the child. "Workers are not qualified to take care of seriously ill children, so we have safeguards to make sure the program is used properly," Dorais says. "In a calendar year, we will pay 90% of the cost of the first ten hours the employee uses. For any additional time that year, we pay 75% and the employee pays 25%."

Con Ed is looking into a new vacation and holiday care pilot program to provide care for school-age children when parents must be at work. The program will be coordinated with an existing child care facility, in cooperation with other companies.

For parents of newborn or newly adopted children, Con Edison provides a total of 360 days of unpaid leave after maternity benefits end. "The job is guaranteed for the first 90 days after the maternity disability is over," says Dorais. "Employment in a comparable job is guaranteed for another 90 days, though beyond that, reemployment at the same level is not absolutely guaranteed."

AT&T, headquartered in New Jersey, offers a care of newborn or newly adopted child leave without pay that lasts up to one year. "Medical dental and vision plan benefits are paid for the first six months after disability ends, after which the employee would pay," says Judy Foster, benefits administration manager at AT&T Bell

Laboratories. At AT&T, the ratio of women to men taking family leave is now 40 to 1 as compared to 400 to 1 in the recent past — good news for dual-career families, because it may ease the pressure on mothers.

In addition to its regular family leave programs, AT&T has instituted an enhanced leave of absence, originally designed to let employees go back to school or explore other career options, while maintaining ties with the company. The leave pays full benefits for nine months to two years, with guaranteed reinstatement, and pays an additional \$8,000 a year for tuition reimbursement during that time. "A lot of our maternity mothers are using this program — it's turning out to be better than the care of newborn child leave, because it pays full benefits," Foster says. This enhanced leave may especially help mothers who want to update their engineering skills while out of work to care for their children.

### *Family Care Fund*

AT&T provides assistance to child care agencies through a \$10 million Family Care Development Fund to be distributed over three years. Since the program began in January 1990, it has funded 50 projects in 19 states at a total of over \$1 million. The goal of the fund is to increase the supply and improve the quality of child care that will have a benefit on AT&T employees. In order for any organization to get funding an employee must sponsor the proposal. The fund can be used for buying new equipment, offering training classes for home day care providers, or expanding a facility in order to allow more children to participate, for example, with a number of slots designated for children of AT&T employees.

AT&T is also testing a program in which workers can take one day of vacation spread out in two-hour increments. This could help mothers, for instance, who need to attend teacher's conferences or school programs. AT&T also has a formal flex-time arrangement, which helps parents schedule these activities. Employees must be present during the core hours of 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., but can start work anytime between 7:30 a.m. and 9 a.m. "What is probably going to be a more significant factor than parental benefits programs in the 1990s is an approach to working in which managers are encouraged to exhibit flexibility with their workers, rather than regimentation," says an AT&T spokesperson. ♦