

When the Perks Include Finger-Painting

On-site day care might keep law firm parents happy, although no one knows if it will stem the attrition.

Brian Koide, 40, gently eases his long, lean torso onto a toddler-sized chair at Crowell & Moring's Bright Horizons child care center. There's chili for lunch today, but Koide's 2-year-old twins, Simon and Ian, seem more interested in playing with their plastic drinking cups than in telling dad about their morning or chowing down.

In fact, they seem a bit puzzled to see Koide, who dropped them off just two hours earlier on his way to work. Tumbling around in the sunny center on Pennsylvania Avenue, they don't know how lucky they are that dad's office is just a block away. But Koide, a counsel in Crowell & Moring's intellectual property group, does.

Koide and his wife, a consultant who works near Dupont Circle, have their system all figured out: She goes in to work early, while he handles the morning commute, getting the kids to the day care center around 9:30 or 10. When Koide heads out for a later lunch, he occasionally peeks in on the boys, but they're usually taking their afternoon nap by then. His wife retrieves them between 4:30 and 5:30 while Koide works on. Sometimes, he'll take a quick break for an early dinner downtown with the family before his wife and the boys head home to Arlington, Va., and he returns to his desk.

The routine functions fairly well most of the time, unless one of the couple has to travel or somebody gets sick. And Koide, whose eyes have the slightly glazed look typical of parents of twins, often doesn't get a chance to see his children before they go to bed or to talk to his wife until the end of the day.

But compared to many other lawyers with young children, Koide has a good deal. On-site (or almost on-site) day care is not the usual stuff of law firm benefits. Crowell & Moring chose to offer nearby day care as a way to improve its "quality of life" benefits, says chairman Kent Gardiner.

Balancing Act

Debra Bruno



DADDY AT DAY CARE: Brian Koide, a Crowell & Moring attorney, enjoys lunch with his 2-year-old sons, Ian (left) and Simon, at the firm's new day care center just down the street from the office.

How did the firm settle on child care over other perks such as a gym or an in-house cafeteria? Gardiner says the firm asked the employees what they really wanted.

JUST CHECKING IN

Opening the day care center a one-minute stroll down the street means that lawyers and staffers don't have to leave the office quite as early to pick up children or run out for hours during the day, Gardiner says. "What we have found so far is that this really does make it easier to make sure that the kids are OK and then come back" to work, he adds. "There are very few ways to do child care other than being close."

Crowell & Moring's center (which offers subsidized child care) opened in May, so just a handful of lawyers are using the center for child care at the moment. But the center has room for 120 children, and 80 of those slots are saved for Crowell & Moring kids. The center provides care for children from 6 weeks to 6 years old, with backup care for school-age children as well. The firm also

offers spots to the employees of a few nearby law firms: Morgan, Lewis & Bockius; Alston & Bird; and Arnold & Porter, as backup care when employees' regular child care falls through.

The gold standard in on-site child care was set by Arnold & Porter, which is regularly touted in the national press as one of the best places to work. Arnold & Porter was the first law firm in the country to offer in-house child care, establishing a full-time center in 1995, when the firm opened new D.C. digs. The center is tucked away on a lower level of the firm's 12th Street Northwest building, a cozy warren of classrooms where the teachers seem almost as numerous as the children. (Of the 10 biggest D.C. law offices, only one other—Covington & Burling—offers full-time child care. Most of the others do provide emergency backup care, often at a nearby day care center.)

Marketing gurus wouldn't be able to resist the jargon: It seems to be a win-win-win situation. The kids are happy, the parent/employees are happy, and the firm is happy because everyone else is happy. So what's not to like?

REMEMBER THE HOURS

Convenient child care is just a small drop in the work-life balance bucket. The money question is still: Will it stop the flight of lawyers?

Look at the hours most attorneys have to work, says Joan Williams, co-director of the Project for Attorney Retention and a professor at the University of California Hastings College of the Law. Unless a lawyer has a special part-time deal, she's probably putting in 60 hours or more a week, Williams says. That's an average 12-hour day, assuming no work on weekends (yes, it's a dubious assumption). Day care centers don't stay open that long. "And if they did," she adds, "people wouldn't feel comfortable having their child in a day care center 60 hours a week."

Unless they have a working spouse or partner with the kind of job that allows that other person to reliably handle the end-of-the-day pickup, many attorneys with young children solve the problem by tacking on work hours at home, says James Joseph, an Arnold & Porter partner who oversees the firm's child care center. The center officially closes at 6:30. "You'll see a lot of parents popping up online at around 9," when they're home and the youngsters are in bed, Joseph says.

Arnold & Porter's center, which charges market rates for child care, also offers last-minute backup care as late as 9:30, as well as from 9 to 5 on Saturday and noon to 4 on Sunday. "You can always tell when it's busier upstairs," says Sally D'Italia, director of the center.

And even on-site child care doesn't resolve the much more difficult question of who's raising the kids. Granted, these are top-notch programs. Bright Horizons centers follow early education standards set by the National

Association for the Education of Young Children. But no matter how loving or expert day care workers can be, they're not mom or dad, and a day care center is no substitute for a kid's own backyard.

Many working parents feel that pull, those misgivings that come in the middle of the night. If almost all feel there aren't enough hours in the day, then being a parent on the partnership track at a big law firm tightens the noose that much more.

THE QUALITY OF CAR TIME

Nevertheless, an on-site day care center offers the kind of convenience that means a lot to those whose time is measured down to the minute. An hour commuting in the car may not be high-quality time, but many parents like the idea that, instead of rushing to pick up their kid elsewhere, they get the entire ride home to talk about the new baby gerbils or the visit to the Air and Space Museum. When that's added to the drop-in convenience of an on-site center, employees might be encouraged to stay with the firm, at least until the children are in school.

Another benefit for the stressed mom or dad is the sense of the community among fellow parents in the office. If one person doesn't get a chance to visit the center during the day, some other parent might be able to report that little Amy was having a good day or seemed somewhat cranky.

And there's one more factor that can work to the advantage of law firms. An on-site or nearby day care center says something about a firm's focus on larger issues of retention, well-being, and quality of life, particularly for overworked parents.

Crowell & Moring, for instance, thinks of itself as a firm that welcomes part-timers, says managing partner Gardiner. One part-timer who is a parent made partner last year, he points out.

A day care center is "a wise business decision," Gardiner says. "It relates to how we think about people who are officially part-time or who have constraints on one end of the day or the other."

It also can be a reminder of life beyond the BlackBerry. James L. Cooper, a partner at Arnold & Porter, remembers being a summer associate in 1990 and seeing children in the firm's cafeteria and visiting the partners' offices. While the idea of kids seemed a long way off to him, he liked the feeling of children in the workplace. "It supplies a little more perspective on what you're doing. I was thinking, 'This is a comfortable place.'"

And that worked out to the firm's benefit in the long run. Cooper's two daughters, now 6 and 3, have attended the day care center for years. The center, he says, is "one of the reasons I stayed working here, to have that benefit available."

Balancing Act appears in *Legal Times* each month. Debra Bruno can be contacted at dbruno@alm.com.