

Encouraging Family Wellness

Wellness is more than just a feeling—it is a way of life. Most American businesses strive to support this way of life in their employees. In fact, a Hewitt study showed that more than 80 percent of companies now offer work/life and/or employee assistance programs (EAPs).

But what about the wellness of employee families? More specifically, what about the wellness of their adolescent children?

The wellness needs of tweens and teens

While the needs of younger children are a primary focus of work/life programs, from breast-feeding to back-up day care, the needs of older children do not receive the same attention. Yet “tweens” (8- to 12-year-olds) and teens need just as much attention, support and time from their parents as younger children—if not more—to achieve and maintain physical and emotional wellness.

Adolescents are at risk for obesity, sedentary lifestyles, drug and alcohol abuse, premature sexual activity and reckless behavior. For example, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention studies have found the following:

- 28 percent of 9th through 12th graders had a history of episodic heavy drinking (five or more drinks in a row)
- 22 percent of 9th through 12th graders had used marijuana in the previous 30 days
- 16 percent of 6- to 19-year-olds are overweight (three times the percentage in 1980)

Many parents know these dangers and worry about their unsupervised and/or underchallenged children. In fact, a Brandeis University study of employees at J.P. Morgan Chase found that parents with “high stress” about after-school arrangements miss approximately eight days of work a year, while parents with “low stress” miss only three.

How companies are reaching out

While adolescents can call their parents’ EAPs and work/life programs, in what ways are companies *reaching out* to adolescents? While many aren’t, some are. For instance:

- The United Auto Workers and Ford Motor Company have developed *Family Services and Learning Centers* near Ford and Visteon locations around the United States. The specific programming offered is based on the results of focus groups and a nationwide needs-assessment survey of employees, retirees, spouses and teen-agers. Programs include health and wellness activities, support groups, driver education classes, friendship events and more, with a focus on intergenerational activities.
- Verizon, in conjunction with the CWA and IBEW unions, provides a program known as *Kids in the Workplace*, which provides free care for school-age children (up to 12 years) on planned school holidays when Verizon is open for business.
- Abbott Laboratories, Allstate, Baxter, Discover Financial and Hewitt work in partnership to offer *Summer of Service*, volunteer programs for teens who are too old for summer camp but too young to work.

- Cianbro, a Northeast construction company, offers a \$1,500 annual incentive to employees who join the wellness program, and they extended the program to include health risk appraisals for employees *and* for their families.
- PNC Financial Services provides school holiday back-up care centers for older children in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. Among other activities, the children can use computers, make videos and put on plays.
- Arizona State University (ASU) offers *Child and Family Services*, which assembles information on activities (many on campus) for children and teen-agers of ASU employees. Activities range from sports and the arts to education and volunteering.
- Many companies (including America West Airlines, Compaq, Cox, Dole, Home Depot, Mitsubishi and Texas Instruments) partner with *Parents: The Anti-Drug* to disseminate information to their employees on how to keep children and teens drug-free.

Health fairs for the family

While many companies provide health fairs for their employees, they usually occur during work hours and do not include family members. However, many municipal agencies organize health fairs that are aimed specifically at teens and that focus on preventing pregnancy, violence and drug use. For instance, the Health and Human Services Department of Portland, Maine, recently had a health fair that featured rock bands to attract teens. The *6th Annual D.C. Covering Kids & Families Community Health and Wellness Fair* included hot dogs and hamburgers for participants along with education about the free and affordable health-related resources available in Washington, D.C.

Your organization may be able to work with municipalities to provide and publicize health fairs for your employees and their teen-age children and other family members.

If you can only do one thing . . .

If a company decided to do just one thing to help the adolescent children of their employees, the best choice would be to offer flexible scheduling. After all, the main source of children's well-being is their parents, and parents who have flexible scheduling can be more available.

As Martha Harrison, a four-day-a-week working mother of two says, "If I can be there better for my kids, I can also be there better for my employer."