



Staff Photos by Rita Reed

Care worker Mary Auge tied a shoe for Katelyn Maley while other toddlers played near sunny windows last week in the new Children's Center at the St. Paul Companies' headquarters. The \$1.6 million center allows employees to check on their children during the workday.



Mike Dukatz of Eagan took a break from work at the St. Paul Companies last week to have a hands-on lunch with his son Jack. The company recently won recognition from Working Mother magazine for building a Children's Center at its downtown St. Paul headquarters. The center allows working parents to be close to their preschool children.

On-site child care boosts job rewards for working parents

By Pat Prince
Staff Writer

Sydney Kase was working at her computer terminal at the St. Paul Companies recently when an important message flashed onto her screen. Her 8-month-old daughter, Lily, had just achieved a milestone, crawling out of her foam-block nest, and her child-care providers thought Mom might like to take a look for herself.

Kase, an attorney, took the elevator down seven floors and, within a few minutes, she was enjoying Lily's repeat performance.

The Children's Center, part of the insurance corporation's \$70 million addition to its downtown St. Paul headquarters complex, is the newest of 11 employer-subsidized child-care centers on or near worksites in the metro area.

Developing the \$1.6 million center has already reaped huge returns for the company since it opened at near capacity in September. The creation of the state-of-the-art center, along with a batch of other "family-friendly" policies and benefits, earned the company a coveted place in Working Mother magazine's recent listing of the 85 best companies for working moms.

More important, for employees such as Kase, who drops in daily to nurse and cuddle her daughter, the center has made being a working

parent both more manageable and a lot more fun.

"During the past four years I've worked there, not a month went by that I didn't consider quitting my job because of problems with child care," said Kase, who has two other children.

"I moaned and groaned to my boss how I didn't feel it was worth it to try to juggle the demands of my children with the demands of my job. This (center) has alleviated the burden of all my anxieties and worries that I really felt was getting in the way of performing my job."

That's exactly what companies have in mind when they provide this costly perk for workers. Bracing for an impending shortage of qualified workers, companies are becoming increasingly aware of the bottom-line reasons for offering child care and other family-related benefits, said Ethel McConaghy, vice president of Work/Family Directions, a Boston consulting firm that helps corporations create such programs.

The changing profile of the American family and work force is also a factor. Fewer than 10 percent of American families fit the "traditional" mold of a two-parent household with a bread-winning father and an at-home mother caring for the kids. Unlike the

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1950s, when only 12 percent of mothers with children under 6 worked outside the home, more than half do so now. By the year 2000, when women will account for nearly half the work force, about 57 percent of women with children under 6 will work outside the home.

When corporate officials explain their motivation for developing dependent-care benefits, they rarely mention altruism. "Trying to address the personal issues of working women and men is what we need to do to attract and retain the best and the brightest," said Todd Tonneson, manager of group benefits at St. Paul Companies Inc., where women account for 64 percent of the company's 2,500 downtown workers.

Although Minnesota companies overall are considered to be in the top 25 percent nationally in terms of providing family-related benefits, providing on-site child care is the least preferred option of employers, here and elsewhere. Of 1,400 such centers in the country, only 20 are in Minnesota.

Hospitals and nursing homes, which have round-the-clock staffing needs and employ large numbers of women, account for half of Minnesota's on-site centers and for the majority nationally — 900,

according to the Families and Work Institute in New York. Corporations and governments each provide 250 centers.

Smaller companies are greatly underrepresented in providing centers and other benefits, primarily because they lack the resources or technical expertise to do so, said McConaghy.

Tom Copeland, information specialist for Resources for Child Caring in St. Paul, says companies with fewer than 1,000 workers shouldn't even try opening their own centers. "I get calls from companies with 200 workers and they say they want to start a center, and I say, 'No, don't. The average size center in Minnesota has 63 kids. You want to set up a center that has a fairly good chance of being self-supporting, meaning, after paying overhead and salaries, you can't have a center with 23 kids.'"

Even large corporations regarded as being leaders in providing child-care support to employees may investigate the prospect of opening centers and decide against it. A few years ago, employees at IDS Financial Services Inc. in Minneapolis decided they would prefer to have their children in centers near their homes rather than at work, said Sharon Klun, the company's work and family

Employer-supported child-care centers, 1991 (On-site or near-site)

City	Employer	Child care center	Capa- city	Year opened
Coon Rapids	Mercy Hospital	Mercy Child Care	55	1975
Chanhasen	Instant Webb Inc.	Early Beginnings	97	1989
Brooklyn Park	Damark Int'l.	Korporate Kids	42	1990
New Hope	North Ridge Child Center	North Ridge Child Care	32	1987
Minneapolis	Riverside Medical Center	C.H.I.L.D.	65	1969
Robbinsdale	North Mem. Medical Center	Especially for Children	67	1987
Plymouth	AmeriData	Carousel Child Care	30	1987
Arden Hills	Cardiac Pacemaker	Busy Bee	42	1981
St. Paul	State of Minnesota	Capitol Child Care	98	1990
St. Paul	William Mitchell College of Law	William Mitchell Child Care Center	15	1981
St. Paul	St. Paul Companies	The Children's Ctr.	118	1991
St. Paul	St. Paul, St. Paul schools, Ramsey Co.	River Front YMCA Child Care Center	107	1991

Source: Resources For Child Caring, St. Paul, Minnesota

coordinator. Some corporations with workers spanning many age groups, including Target, say it would be unfair to provide a benefit to only some of its workers.

Because high-quality child care is

relatively abundant in the Twin Cities when compared with other parts of the country, there may be less need here for companies to open centers, Copeland said.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s,

when corporations started experimenting with family-supportive policies and programs, most companies saw on-site child care as the only way to respond to employees' child-care needs. Among the 110 companies with benefits related to child care in 1978, nearly all offered centers. Since then, some companies have closed centers and substituted a smorgasbord of options. About 5,600 employers now provide some form of child-care support.

The most popular form of support is a dependent-care assistance plan, which permits workers to use pre-tax dollars to pay for child care. Some companies, including the St. Paul Companies, also subscribe to child-care resource and referral networks, offer flexible work hours, six-month parental leaves and even lunchtime seminars on issues for parents. A few companies, including Honeywell and IDS, subsidize the cost of sick child care; others arrange for group discounts at child care centers or promote quality child care in the community.

But for workers such as Kase, who has used nannies and even tried working at home after Lily was born, nothing beats the on-site center when it comes to job satisfaction.

Few could argue with her enthusiasm. Operated by Childrens Home Society, the largest nonprofit

provider of child care in the state, the place is strictly first class. The sun-filled, 12,500-square-foot center features eight classrooms, a "large muscle" playroom with an indoor tricycle track and a 15,000-square-foot outdoor play area and garden, surrounded by a 10-foot security fence.

The center is dazzling, from its array of toys and equipment, to the "heart-healthy" diet and daily curriculum — even for infants — offered by four-year-degreed teachers. With all of that, the center, which charges market-rate fees, receives unqualified praise from workers. "It is just fantastic," said Debbie Daly, whose 21-month-old son, Scooter, attends the center.

"I used to work in the day-care field and I've never seen a center to top this. Even people who don't have kids here say how much they enjoy seeing the kids playing outside. It just makes everyone who works here feel so good."

An unscientific poll of preschoolers eating lunch yielded a similar assessment. Do you like it here, they were asked. "Yes!" they shouted. Why? The answer came without hesitation and in unison: "The toys!"

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