

Developing work and family services in the workplace

In the last five years much attention has been given to the rise in the number of families with dependent children where both parents work. In collaboration with a large multinational employer, Exploring Parenthood established a development project designed to offer information, advice and counselling to parents in the workplace. At the end of the three-year period the project team found:

f By the final year of the project 1 in 5 of the workforce had made contact with the service. Men, black and ethnic minority staff all used the service.

f Staff and management preferred a 'one-door' model of employee service provision offering a generic rather than a specific service relating to one area of work and family problems.

f Of the problems staff presented 45 per cent were marital/partnership or parenting problems. Relationship problems were seen as an area of concern for all staff. Women returning to work after a long break and employees with elderly dependants were identified as groups who might benefit from special help.

f For services to be used by employees, management and employees needed to collaborate in the setting-up and development of the service.

f The crucial level of management support and co-operation was at the middle manager and departmental level.

f The best publicity came from word of mouth endorsement by staff who had used the service.

In 1990 Exploring Parenthood, a voluntary agency pioneering parent education in the UK, collaborated with a large multinational employer to establish a parent education programme for new parents based in the workplace. The service stemmed from the recognition that - for both men and women - the psychological transition to parenthood in the 1990s was increasingly affected by the changing roles of men and women and the stress engendered by managing work and family responsibilities.

Supporting parents in the workplace

The experience of the project team in establishing the service highlighted important stages in the process of supporting working parents in the workplace.

Stage I Defining the need for a service

The initial contract with the company was to provide a very specific parent education programme for a very specific group of parents. There was general acceptance on the part of management and staff that women returning to work after childbirth, and their partners, would benefit from advice and counselling regarding their return to work and their re-negotiating of roles as employees and partners.

Stage II Expanding the service to meet the work and family needs of all staff

The consultation required to establish a specific service to new parents produced a recognition on the part of staff and management that all employees would benefit from a service focusing on work and family issues.

Stage III Developing user confidence

Having defined a broader service to encompass all staff the service had to be made acceptable as 'seeking help' of any kind was equated with problems, stigma and poor performance at work: user confidence was gained by project staff being freely available in the workplace.

Stage IV Gaining management backing

Though supported by senior management the crucial level of management support and co-operation was at the middle manager and departmental level. To do this, a service to educate and support middle managers in dealing with the work and family issues that they were confronted with was developed and the culture of the workplace began to change.

Stage V User endorsement

The crucial stage was word of mouth endorsement by staff who had used the service.

The collaborative nature of the way the service had been developed and management permission for staff to use the service were vital in creating the 'openness' that enabled employees to use the service.

Defining 'family friendliness'

Although the service developed within an employment context that was flexible with regard to working hours and employee friendly in outlook, the project found that - to be successful - the following conditions needed to be met:

- **An employee friendly environment**

This is a work team environment in which employees can publicly acknowledge that they have personal and private concerns that are affecting their performance at work and receive a sympathetic response from colleagues and their immediate boss.

- **A complementary advice and counselling service for both managers and staff**

Middle managers have to be able to acknowledge that they are constrained by both the limitations of their competence and the limitations of their role and unable to help staff resolve all their work/family problems.

- **An independent counselling service accessible to all staff**

This enables staff to have access to skilled professional help when concerned about work or family problems.

What form did the final service model take?

The final model of service that the project developed had 3 elements:

- **A general service available to all staff:**

Information advice and counselling for staff on any aspect of family life from childcare, health, housing, finance, career development, partner relationships to more acute mental health problems - the 'one door' service.

- **A consultation service for managers:**

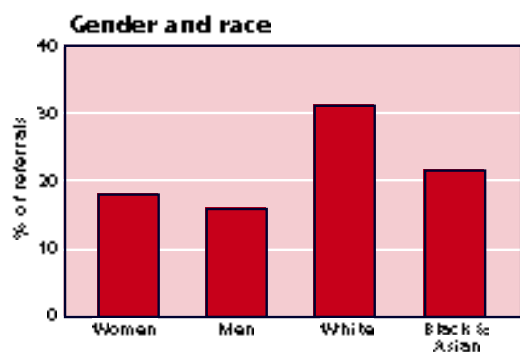
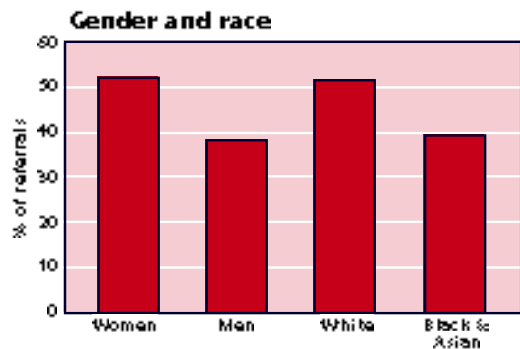
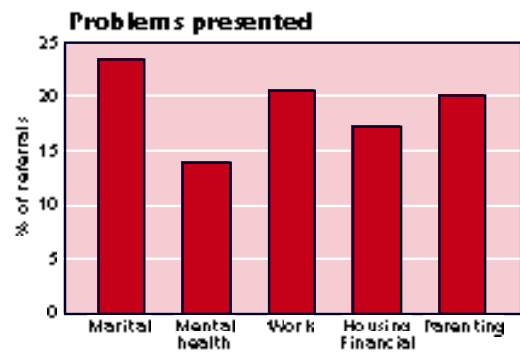
In order for managers to be clear about how and when to refer staff or how best to resolve staff problems themselves, access to the project staff was offered in the form of a consultation service offered both formally but more often informally.

• **Specific services for specific staff:**

The original idea of a specific service for 'new parents' became encompassed under the umbrella of the general service to all staff. In the experience of the project, only then was it acceptable and not seen as stigmatising. The project identified women returning to work after a significant break in employment and employees with elderly dependants as groups who would have welcomed special provision.

Problems addressed by the service

Of the 22% of the 400-plus staff who used the service in its final form the breakdown of users is as shown in the charts.



Differences from other employee advice programmes

This service differed from a sample of employee advice services that the project compared their model with in the following ways:

- It was developed in the UK and not based on an American employee advice programme adapted to the UK.
- It involved a high level of staff and management collaboration in its design and implementation.
- It had as its focus the relationship between work and family rather than just the personal problems of the employees.
- It worked with both the individual and the employment culture in order to achieve change in both worlds.
- A significantly higher level of staff came forward for counselling (22% as against an average in others of 6% - 12%).
- It was pro-active and preventative rather than reactive in design.

About the study

The pilot programmes were set up in three branches of IKEA; IKEA is continuing with the service now that the pilot phase has been completed.

Exploring Parenthood is a charity established over ten years ago to develop a parent education and advice service. It is currently developing several projects on parenthood and provides a family work service for employees and working parents, based on its pioneering work in helping parents in the workplace.

Further information

For further information about the service and a full project report contact: Exploring Parenthood, Latimer Education Centre, 194 Freston Road, London W10 6TT, Tel: 0181 960 1678, Fax: 0181 964 1827.

Related *Findings*

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- 42 Long-term cohabiting mothers (Sept 93)
- 44 Lone parenthood and family disruption: the outcomes for children (Jan 94)
- 45 Children living in re-ordered families (Feb 94)
- 53 Strategies used by low-income families with children to make ends meet (Jul 94)
- 63 The experience of 'excluded' primary school children and their families (Nov 94)
- 66 Eating on a low income (Nov 94)
- 67 Attitudes to spending on children (Dec 94)

For further details of these and other *Findings* contact Sally Corrie on 01904 654328 (direct line for publications queries only; an answerphone may be operating).



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