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Back in the Swing: When Work and Family Collide

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It's hard enough to bid farewell to summer and return to business as usual on the job.

Combine that with the back-to-school rituals and you have the makings of a potential meltdown, especially when you consider the state has 4 million workers and about 1.4 million students in public school.

It's always difficult balancing the demands of the job with the obligations of family, whether your toddler is heading off to the first day of kindergarten or your teenager is leaving for college. It can mean that even when you are supposed to be back in the game at the office, you still have your eye on the family.

Most employers recognize there are times when the balance of work and family may tip more toward the home front.

Indeed, experts say companies are more likely to be accommodating these days because they recognize that stance builds goodwill with employees. And the opposite holds true: Ignoring these family concerns can produce low morale and a resentful and unmotivated work force.

"Being family friendly just makes good business sense," says Jan Margolis, managing director and founder of Metuchen-based Applied Research, a management consulting firm with 100 employees worldwide. "Employees are willing to go the extra mile because we went the extra mile for them."

Indeed, ninety-nine times out of 100, it's not a big deal if an employee has to take off for a few hours, especially if the employer can be prepared, says Margolis, a former senior vice president at Bristol-Myers Squibb.

But there are limits. The job is still, first, a place of business. So here are some things to consider before and after the going gets tough.

- If you're planning a vacation around the Labor Day weekend, consider cutting it a day short. Don't get home the night before school starts and you've got to return to work. This should leave you a bit of breathing room for last-minute back-to-school shopping. Perhaps take a vacation day for the first day of school, or a half-day.
- Think ahead. Talk with friends, neighbors or other parents who may be willing to help out with child arrangements.
- Speak up. If you're having a problem -- perhaps you need to meet with your child's next teacher -- see if a co-worker can cover for you. They'll probably be glad to, since then you can help them out the next time. Don't just call in sick at the last minute. "People get the blues because the summer is over and with the change of seasons generally. Employers are not immune either," says John Sarno, executive director of the Employers Association of New Jersey in Livingston, which represents more than 1,000 employers with some 250,000 employees. "To the extent you can have open doors and fluid communication, it can only help."

- If you need to talk with your boss about taking some extra time off, be sure to think about the matter from the employer's perspective, not just your own. "Don't act as if it's an entitlement. Act as if it is a mutual problem-solving session. You need to make it work for the boss and for you," says Ellen Galinsky, president of the nonprofit Families and Work Institute, a research organization in New York.
- Make sure you understand your company's time-off policy and sick day policies. Some companies have employee assistance programs to help out in a crunch, says Jean Holbrook, director of product management for Minneapolis-based Ceridian, a human resources outsourcing company.
- Think about working for a company that has a formal policy of offering flexible hours. At drug maker Pfizer, for instance, employers and their managers set schedules. Workers are required to be in the office for a "core" of six hours, between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m., but they can come in early and leave early or come in late and leave late. The key is flexibility. "It has become very much a part of our culture," says Barbara White, vice president for human resources for North America for Pfizer's consumer health-care business, which is based in Morris Plains.

Remember, all things will pass. There will come a day, sooner than you may imagine, when you'll miss the back-to-school routine and other special family times.

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