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Learn parenting skills at work

A new workplace program is offering parents tips and advice

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Imagine being able to solve your parenting problems at work. I'm not talking about sharing your latest spat over bedtimes, homework and what your teen will or won't wear to school with a sympathetic co-worker, but actually getting some valuable advice and honing your skills with strategies from the pros. A small but growing number of Canadian employees are enjoying this perk as a result of a new program called Parents At Work (PAW) that brings parenting experts into the workplace.

The program was launched last October by a male and two female professionals who noticed that working parents tended to feel alone and unprepared for tackling two full-time jobs -- a career and parenting. The solution? Bring in experts who can deliver lunch and learn sessions to busy professionals on a range of child-rearing topics that include tackling and preventing power struggles with your child, nutrition and sending your teen off to university.

"We look at the demographic of the employer we are working with and determine which seminars to offer. We can tailor programs to meet employees' needs. Say, for example, if there was a mini baby boom going on in an organization, we could address the issue of having a baby and becoming a parent," says Aimee Israel, one of the founders and now the chief executive officer of Toronto-based PAW. "It makes employees feel that they are not alone. They discover other people who are in similar parenting situations and going through the same issues."

Giving parents a support network and bringing resources appealed to the accounting firm BDO

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Dunwoody LLP, which introduced its first PAW session to employees in June. The topic was power struggles and the speaker was certified parenting expert Beverley Cathcart-Ross.

"It's tough being a parent, especially when you're a single parent or your partner works full-time as well," says Silvia Marabeti, director of human resources, Toronto region, with BDO. "Our objective with this program is to alleviate some of the stress of being a working parent." She adds that accounting firms tend to have a high turnover and the organization views this benefit as a way of helping to retain female employees, especially those who are in senior positions.

So far, employee response has been enthusiastic. "They have said they found the information very useful, have used some of the tactics that they learnt in the seminar and they want to attend more sessions," says Silvia. Aimee adds that her company's surveys show employees are giving sessions marks in the 90s and almost all respondents say they walk away with at least one parenting tip that has saved them time and energy.

PAW currently has 12 companies in Ontario using its service, including Motorola Canada, Research in Motion and Ernst & Young. It will expand into Vancouver this fall, then on to Calgary and Montreal. For more information on the program, visit www.pawcanada.com

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