

San Jose Mercury News

July 31, 2002

Child care is good for business

IF our mail is any indication, there's a lot of grouching around the water cooler this week about a call for employers to pay more for child care.

Child-care advocates pointed out in a report Monday that working parents pay 60 percent of the cost of their children's care and government picks up 39 percent. Employers contribute just 1 percent, even though reliable child care increases productivity and reduces turnover, which helps the bottom line.

Reaction from readers was swift and unanimously opposed to more employer support. A sample appears on the opposite page.

The reader reaction is understandable. In the current economic climate, companies are looking for ways to trim costs, not add them. This isn't the time to be increasing the business tax burden.

The letter writers also say child care is a parent's responsibility and business shouldn't offer expensive perks that only benefit some employees.

Yet this community needs more and better child care, and parents can't afford to pay more. The average California family already spends 18 percent of household income on child care. Government takes up some of the slack, but in high-income areas like Silicon Valley, thousands of families who make too much to qualify for government help still don't make enough to afford care.

Employers help with the cost of health care, life insurance, school tuition and transportation. They should be part of the child-care solution.

Many already are. Cisco Systems, which opened a 400-child center nearly two years ago, has found that having on-site care helps attract and retain good employees and contributes greatly to productivity.

Workers who don't have kids get tired of picking up the slack for co-workers who have to rush out the door to pick up kids or who miss meetings because the sitter didn't show up. On those days, on-site day care looks like a benefit for all employees.

But businesses don't have to open their own day care centers to help solve the problem. They can subsidize existing centers or pay for backup care. One survey found that half of

But businesses don't have to open their own day care centers to help solve the problem. They can subsidize existing centers or pay for backup care. One survey found that half of companies don't even help employees take advantage of federal tax relief for child care. There's so much that can be done.

Parents of young children are in the work force. Many, especially single parents, don't have a choice about that. Employers need to do what they can to make work and family fit together. In the long run, whatever benefits workers benefits companies, too.