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CUBICLE CULTURE
By JARED SANDBERG



Setting Aside a Day To Take Kids to Work Is Losing Its Allure

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When Tony Lombardi worked on a trading floor and people brought their children to work, the kids got quite an education. "If you didn't know how to swear when you walked in at 8 a.m., you would be an expert by 8:15 a.m.," he says.

Clearly some of Mr. Lombardi's colleagues deserved a time-out. Phones would fly. Colleagues would threaten each other, and fights sometimes broke out as people ignored life's early lessons that hands are not for hitting and it's not nice to call people names. But even though they got to see adults act worse than they did, some kids didn't enjoy their visits. "It's almost like they look behind the curtain at the Wizard of Oz," Mr. Lombardi says.

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Is it a good idea to bring kids to the office for Take Your Children to Work day? Participate in the Question of the Day.

Meanwhile, the kids themselves weren't always on their best behavior. On one visit, one of the daughters of a supervisor had a meltdown, and the other managed to shut

down a computer alert that was supposed to notify a trader of the status of his orders. In workplaces unsuitable for kids, Mr. Lombardi says, "you really don't get to meet someone's kids. You usually end up enduring them."

Tomorrow is Take Our Daughters and Sons to Work Day, and if we're not careful, there will be a clash of uncivilizations or, worse, the kids will be bored senseless. Some of them may even wonder why, if this is all there is, they're bothering to work so hard at school.

Children, after all, have an excuse to behave childishly. But how to explain that people don't always bathe or eat a good lunch and their spelling still stinks? We want desperately to prove to our kids that people in the work world still use their imaginations, but failing that, we ply them with sugar and hope they don't think less of us for spending so much time here.

When Paul Pease worked at a fastener factory and kids toured it, he could see that they were bored to death because "they were looking around at anything but the person who was talking to them," he says. Even when he worked for a military contractor and built something cool -- electronic countermeasure systems -- the kids appeared to be nearly as bored as his colleagues.

Sales and marketing executive Dan Hooper made a presentation to his

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daughter's seventh-grade class about marketing, "I thought it went well," he says. One young man even said that he really liked marketing. The trouble was that the boy then asked Mr. Hooper if he was sure that he liked it. "Maybe there was something subtle in what I was communicating," he says. "Out of the mouth of babes comes the truth we often don't want to hear."

Gary Bradt, a consultant and public speaker, once took his 9-year-old son to a lecture he was giving on stress management. His son slouched down in the front row and was soon out like a light. "And this is a kid who doesn't fall asleep," says Mr. Bradt.

The take-the-kids-to-work program was created over a decade ago by the Ms. Foundation. Originally aimed at daughters, it was eventually expanded to include sons, who were thought to be missing out. Now, though, some school systems encourage both boys and girls to forgo the holiday. And some workplaces, perhaps crushed by the pressure to make this year's program more interesting than the ones in previous years, have all but given up on the day.

The Philadelphia law firm of Pepper Hamilton, though, still invites employees to bring in their kids every other year. Its elaborate program includes a mock trial, a tour, a visit to the fitness center to work off excess energy, and a takeoff on "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" accompanied by Skittles, Kit Kats and M&Ms. To avoid any sugar-induced combustion, "we're going to tell them they can't eat the candy until after they leave," confides Lori Brekus of the firm's human-resources department.

This year the mock trial, to be performed by attorneys and staff members, is titled, "Three Pigs and a Wolf: a Cautionary Tale." And the kids, who make up the jury, will award damages. In the 2003 production of "Cold Porridge," Goldilocks was being sued and the kids awarded \$7,500 in damages to the Bear family.

But Jeff Sinnott, a general manager at a sign manufacturer, wonders whether parents really require a special day to take their kids to the office. He says he doesn't expect to see any more kids than usual at work tomorrow, but that may still be plenty. "We are lobbying for a 'Leave Your Child at Home Day,' " he says, "in the hope of maybe one day a year getting something done at work."

Sometimes, though, we're reminded of what the day is all about. Last Wednesday, Brenda Osborne, a single mother of two from Ellenwood, Ga., put a missive out on the Internet, asking if anyone at a law firm would host her 14-year-old daughter Sunni (good math student, science-project winner, enormous smile), who wants to be a lawyer. The next day, Ms. Osborne got a response from the DeKalb County Child Advocacy Center one county away. Sunni will spend the day with one of the center's attorneys, and it may even turn out to be a day Sunni will never forget.

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