

Dear Pat,

My spouse and I are expecting our first child in October, and I plan to take off twelve weeks after the baby is born. But we have not made plans for child care once I return to work, and we're not sure whether to sign up for a child care center or hire a nanny. My spouse also is a lawyer, and our schedules are pretty hectic. Do you have any suggestions?

Signed,
Working Parents-to-Be

Dear Working Parents-to-Be,

Deciding how to take care of your child once you return to work is difficult, particularly when your child is not yet born, but it's important to consider your options now rather than waiting until a week or two before you return to work. Don't forget that your spouse may also be entitled to family leave during the first year of your child's life. You may want to stagger the time that you and your spouse take off so that your spouse can care for your child for awhile after you go back to work.

Before deciding to place your child in a day care facility or hire a nanny, think about your other options. Do you have family members who could care for the child, even if only part time? Can you or your spouse arrange to work from home sometimes, particularly during your child's first year? Can you or your spouse reduce your working hours during your child's first year? Have you considered sharing babysitting duties or cooperative arrangements with friends or colleagues who also have young children? Being flexible and creative can help you come up with the best situation for you and your family.

A good place to start exploring child care facilities is the Web site of the New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department, www.newmexicokids.org. You can download the *Parents' Guide to Selecting Quality Child Care* as well as search for child care facilities by zip code or name. Many child care centers do not take infants or have limited space for infants. Many are associated with religious organizations and give preferences to their members. If you are a member of a religious organization, you should check to see if it has an affiliated child care center. You should expect to pay at least \$800 per month for full-time care of an infant. Another option is home child care centers which are often less expensive than regular child care centers and typically provide one child care provider for every three or four infants. Tour several facilities now to see if there is one that you like and try to reserve a place for your child in advance. Try to choose one that is convenient to your home or work, and remember that you typically will have to drive to and from the child care center during rush hour. If there is a waiting list, put your name on the list now, even before your child is born. Remember that many children, particularly infants and toddlers, get sick relatively often if they attend child care centers, and you will have to make other arrangements to care for your sick child.

You also may consider hiring a nanny, particularly during the first year or two. A nanny typically comes to your home and is probably the most convenient option for most new parents, but a good nanny may be hard to find and it is the most expensive option. You should expect to pay at least \$10 per hour for a nanny, plus social security taxes if you hire the nanny as an employee. A nanny can take care of your child even when your child is sick, but if the nanny gets sick, you may have to make alternative arrangements on short notice. Probably the best way to find a nanny is by contacting other parents who have used a nanny but whose children have outgrown the nanny (or will have outgrown the nanny by the time you need child care). You also can check craigslist for nannies or nanny agencies that place nannies for a fee. Make sure that you check the nanny's references carefully. It also is a good idea to have the nanny come to your home for a few days before you go back to work so that you can watch the nanny interact with your child and make sure that the nanny is the person you want to care for your child while you are at work.

If you have space to accommodate another person living in your home, you could consider a live-in nanny or an au-pair, a young person from another country who would commit to care for your child (or children) for a year or two in exchange for room, board, and a weekly stipend. Refer to the Cultural Care Au Pair Web site, www.culturalcare.com, or contact the child care coordinator for Albuquerque and Santa Fe at deena.beard@lcc.culturalcare.com.

Once you decide on a child care facility or nanny, you and your spouse may want to arrange your schedules so that one person takes care of the baby in the morning until the baby is dropped off at the day care center or until the nanny arrives while the other person goes to work early. In the evening switch so that the person who cared for the baby in the morning can stay at work a little later. Whatever option you choose, sign up for your employer's dependent care savings account if one is available. This allows you to pay up to \$5000 per year in child care expenses with pre-tax income.

It is important to remain flexible and to be willing to change course if you try a child care center or nanny that does not work out. What is right for your neighbor's child may not be right for yours. It is worth taking the time to find a situation that works for you.

Sincerely,
Pat

Ask Pat, provided by the Committee on Women and the Profession, will answer questions about gender bias in the legal profession. Letters are loosely based on real events. Send comments or letters to "Ask Pat," State Bar of New Mexico, PO Box 92860, Albuquerque, NM 87199-2860.