

## Law Firm Allows Full-Time Parenting in the Workplace

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Roxanne Conlin still remembers how it felt, leaving her first child with a babysitter when the infant was only one week old. It was 1966. There were few women in the law and even fewer in practice after having children. Conlin was finishing her last year of law school and had a job with a small firm that offered no maternity leave. It was horrible, she says. I cried every single day.”

When Conlin started her own firm in 1991, she swore that the women who worked for her would not have to play out that same wrenching scene. Today, Roxanne B. Conlin and Associates, a Des Moines, Iowa-based plaintiffs firm, is one of only a handful of firms in the country that allows parents to bring their babies to the office. This is not on-site day care; it is full-time parenting in the workplace. Over the last 18 years, Conlin’s firm has had 20 office babies.”

There is no rule about how long a child can come to the office, but most go to day care at about age 1. Conlin says day care may be good for toddlers, but the first year is for bonding between parent and baby. There is just no substitute for being held in your father’s or mother’s arms, she says.

Conlin runs a small shop. She is the sole owner, backed by one other lawyer and a dozen legal staff. But anyone who thinks that babies can interfere with major litigation should talk to Microsoft Corp. Conlin’s firm won a \$180 million settlement from the software giant in 2007 after three months of trial and earned an additional \$75 million in legal fees, an Iowa state record. Sibling publication *The National Law Journal* has named her one of the 10 most influential women attorneys in the country.

She calls herself an evangelist, but few big firms have asked to hear Conlin’s good news. Alston & Bird, Arnold & Porter, and Sullivan & Cromwell provide some on-site day care. But Carla Moquin, president of the nonprofit Parenting in the Workplace Institute, says that employers are deeply skeptical about the notion that filing briefs and filling bottles are compatible. After all, it’s a challenge just to eat and shower with a baby in the house, so how can one function at the office with junior’s bouncy seat on the desk?

Conlin understands that reaction, but says it’s uninformed. In her experience, parents are so happy to keep their kids nearby that they are motivated to perform at the top of their game. And because they aren’t constantly worrying whether their child is being fed or changed, they are better able to focus. Parents have the baby in their office or by their desk throughout the day, with colleagues readily available to babysit during meetings or calls.

Amy Hernandez, a former law clerk, had her baby on hand when she drafted the response to a summary judgment motion in a sprawling fraud case. She was working 10 hours a day; her baby either slept in the office or was carried in a sling. Rather than feeling burdened, she was thankful. [Conlin] never made me separate from my baby, says Hernandez. “ I would have walked on hot coals for that woman.”

Not only is this arrangement good for parents, Conlin says, it’s good for the office as a whole. Babies relieve tension and offer much-needed distraction. They also elicit good behavior from adults in the room even opposing counsel. Tiffany Klosener, a senior attorney with Conlin’s firm for six years, routinely had her baby with her during conference calls and depositions. If he fussed, someone in the office would hold him until she was done. But, she says, a little cooing in the background often kept the dialogue civil. It’s harder to be aggressively adversarial with someone who has her child there, says Klosener.

This arrangement doesn’t work in every case, however. A decade ago, when Conlin started the firm, she had a young receptionist who abused the opportunity to bring her baby to work by leaving the child with

other staff members to care for him all day. Conlin says that failure taught her that success requires constant multitasking. The next receptionist she hired, who brought two of her kids, can feed a baby with one hand and type with the other.

For Conlin, the greatest benefit of allowing babies in the office is that it has allowed her to keep talent. Deborah Epstein Henry, president of Flex-Time Lawyers, a work/life consulting firm, says the months after maternity leave are crucial: “ If you can respond in the vulnerable time with a creative solution, it might carry women through.”

The turning point for Shelly Johnson, Conlin’s longtime discovery manager, came after her twins were born in 1991. This was during the asbestos litigation boom, and she was the resident expert in those filings. But with two other kids already, child care was an issue. She and Conlin worked out a schedule that let Johnson bring her twins to work in the evenings, once her husband was home with the older children. “ It allowed me not to have to make that choice between staying at home with my children and having a career, says Johnson. I can have both.”