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Jessie Sample

*University of Arkansas, Fayetteville*

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**Work-Life Balance of Parents of Special Needs Children**

**by**

**Jessie Rose Sample**

**Advisor: John Delery**

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**Sam M. Walton College of Business  
University of Arkansas  
Fayetteville, Arkansas**

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## **Work/Life Balance of Parents of Special Needs Children**

### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this thesis is to show that establishing a work-life balance for its employees, especially those with special needs children, is essential to the health and production of a company. This thesis explores this topic by addressing hardships faced by parents of special needs children, examining programs available to help employees attain balance between work and life, and by examining what different people need at different stages of their lives. This work will hopefully raise awareness and inspire employees with special needs children to look at their specific hardships and stage in life to understand what type of work-life balance programs they would need a company to provide. In terms of the employers, by understanding what extra work-life balance programs parents of special needs children need, they will know how to get maximum productivity from their employee.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Building a sustainable work-life balance culture within a company is a win-win for ALL. Dr. Fredrick F. Reichheld is a renowned speaker at major business forums and has stated, "an increase in retention of just 5% can boost revenues 25% to 100%" (Reichheld). In support of this, Forbes magazine has reported that not having work-life balance is one of the top 5 reasons employees do not stay with a company (Cassery). But what is work-life balance? According to Susan Simmons, work-life balance means "bringing work, whether done on the job or at home, and leisure time into balance to live life to its fullest. It doesn't mean that you spend half of your life working and half of it playing; instead, it means balancing the two to achieve harmony in physical, emotional, and spiritual health" (Simmons). According to Jim Bird, CEO of Worklifebalance.com, "work-life is meaningful achievement and enjoyment in everyday life" (Subramian). Though work-life balance can mean different things to different people, at its core it refers to the fact that finding that balance between both work and life is essential.

Life is about balance. Work-life balance is an aspect that will help improve the satisfaction of employees and employers. This is especially true for employees with special needs children. Employers that understand this and establish a work environment for their employees that help them attain this balance they seek between family and work will reap benefits as well. The purpose of this thesis is to show that establishing a work-life balance for its employees, especially those with special needs children, is essential to the health and production of a company. I will first discuss the hardships faced by parents of special needs children. Secondly, I will examine programs available to help employees attain balance between work and life. Next, I will show the importance of employers gaining a better understanding of their employees by examining what different people need at different stages of their lives. Lastly, I

will show how employers will realize that work-life balance does not only benefit employees but their companies as well.

## **HARDSHIPS FACED BY PARENTS OF SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN**

### **Diverse Disabilities, Diverse Needs**

There are many different types of special needs children and different needs and care come with each one. No child is the same, even if they have the same handicap. According to 211 LA, “The definition of “special needs” is broad and includes health, mental health, developmental, and other kinds of conditions and diagnoses. Some examples include: autism, serious emotional and behavioral disturbances, mental retardation, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), epilepsy, cerebral palsy, feeding and eating disorders, tics, elimination disorders, learning disabilities, orthopedic, visual, speech or language impairments, other serious medical conditions, history of abuse or neglect, medical or genetic risk due to familial mental illness or parental substance abuse” (CHILD). “Children with special needs also include those children who are “at-risk” for disabilities such as those who have a developmental delay. In California, the definition of special needs also includes children who may not have specific diagnoses, but who are assessed as needing special services, support, and monitoring” (CHILD).

The type of special needs child a person has at home highly changes the type of work-life balance that is needed. Many people also have different expectations when it comes to what his/her special needs child’s abilities entail. Both parents will need to be on the same page for a parenting plan that best fits the child. Each family has their own individual balance system. Some people have special needs children who are hospitalized. Some special needs children are in and out of the hospital their entire life. There is also the difference as to whether a person’s special needs child is mentally or physically handicapped or, in some cases, both. There are a

variety of different mental handicaps and each is different depending on the person. Down Syndrome is one example of a disability that affects a person both mentally and physically.

“About one in every 800 American babies is born with Down syndrome, and it is estimated that about 350,000 people in the United States, and just under 6 million people worldwide live with this condition today” (DS). Due to the large number of families affected by this condition, this specific disability is discussed in this paper.

According to Wikipedia, Down Syndrome is when people have forty-seven chromosomes instead of the usual forty-six. There are specific physical signs related to people with Down Syndrome. These individuals tend to be overweight, have eye problems (most wear glasses), have small ears, have a petite nose, and often have a small mouth. Also their hands are often wide and short with only one flexion crease unlike the normal two most people have. A person with Down Syndrome often has a short attention span, is slower at learning, gets easily frustrated, and has many medical complications. Some of these complications include airway blockage during sleep, eye problems, frequent ear infections, heart problems, hearing loss, and weakness of certain bones (Wikipedia). These many disabilities make it very time consuming for parents to deal with. Depending on the type of disability, there are many specific issues that would affect one’s work/life balance. For example, disabilities might require a round-the-clock-caregiver, frequent hospitalizations, or frequent trips to the doctor. This would require parents to be able to take more time off from work for either short or long periods of time. Many struggle finding a balance between the disability and life let alone time for work. These hardships do not diminish as the special needs child becomes an adult.

This misconception that families of special needs children are only affected by hardships until the special needs child is an adult is untrue in many cases. Though many people with

special needs are high-functioning, there are not sufficient programs that allow them the opportunity to live an independent life. The responsibility then lies on the parents. In November 2009, Jennifer Ondrejka, Executive Director on The Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities, commissioned a study of the transition for Special Needs adults into independent living. She commissioned this study because parents were not satisfied with what few options they have for their special needs child and many of them do not even know what those options are. With the help of the government and with assisted living, parents might feel some relief from stress and have a more intact work-life balance. There are many aspects that affect what type of work-life balance is needed when being a parent of a special needs child. Some additional life issues such as divorce, siblings, and stereotypes are examined in this paper.

### **Divorce**

One additional life issue is the topic of divorce. 50% percent of first marriages, 67% of second marriages, and 74% of third marriages end in divorce, according to Jennifer Baker of the Forest Institute of Professional Psychology in Springfield, Missouri. According to enrichment journal on the divorce rate in America, the divorce rate in America for a first marriage is 41%, for a second marriage it's 60%, and for a third marriage it's 73% (divorce). These are only statistics for the overall percentages of people getting divorced. A couple with a special needs child is even more likely to experience a divorce. According to an article in the New York Times, about 75% of couples, end up getting split up or divorced (Lieber). There are many extra stresses on the parents and a lack of time to nurture the marriage since so much emphasis is placed on the child and his/her needs.

In the case of a divorce, sometimes one parent will need to take on the role of being a full time parent as his/her primary job, which then brings up the topic of alimony. "The primary

caregiver parent not only provides daily care to his/her special needs child, they also manage doctor appointments, therapy sessions, and treatment regimens. They also research and secure funding for the special needs child's expenses, maintain the funding year after year and track the family's medical insurance reimbursements. Since many of these activities can interfere with the primary caregiver parent's employment, they often may find it difficult to maintain a full time job. Due to these challenges, the primary caregiver parent's income earning potential is often compromised. This should be a factor when determining whether spousal maintenance is required" (Vasileff).

Child support is another aspect of a divorce that needs to be considered when having a special needs child. Factors such as medical bills, nutrition, modifications to home/vehicles, and the extra cost of programs like Special Olympics can alter how much child support is paid each month. There are many extra expenses, such as those discussed above, that should be factored in by the courts. Visitation schedules might be different too because of complications with travel, and both parents will need to be highly flexible. As shown by these few factors, getting a divorce with a special needs child is much more complicated and there will be need to be open communication the rest of your child's life, not just until they're 18 as in most divorce cases.

### **Siblings**

Another life issue associated with having a special needs child is the impact it can have on additional children. So much extra care and attention is focused on the child with the disability that oftentimes siblings get lost in the shuffle. This can cause feelings of jealousy and anger, which can lead to feelings of guilt. Sometimes siblings of the child will have harbor resentment because their family can't go on vacations, or do activities that most families are able to do together. According to the Sibling Support Project, "Throughout their lives, brothers and

sisters share many of the concerns that parents of children with special needs experience, including isolation, a need for information, guilt, concerns about the future, and caregiving demands. Brothers and sisters also face issues that are uniquely theirs including resentment, peer issues, embarrassment, and pressure to achieve" (Wade). Events that are special to the sibling will often be missed because medical issues will arise from the special needs child. An older sibling of a child with special needs might remember a time when it was just them and their parents and things were easier. But they also learn to stand up for their sibling and become a huge part in helping be their care taker. The amazing thing about being a younger sibling of a special needs person is that someday the sibling will become more like the special needs persons older sibling, especially in the case of someone with a mental disability. Divorce impacts sibling relationships, because in many cases siblings of a special needs child will be stepping up and aiding in that parental role and having increased responsibilities.

The important thing is for a family to grow together and to not resent each other. Parents need to talk to their other kids about their feelings and make time to show them how important they are too. "On the positive side, siblings may become more sensitive to others and less self-centered than they otherwise would have been. Studies of families of children with Down Syndrome have found that the siblings tend to be more mature than other kids their age, more accepting of differences and more understanding of the difficulties others may be having- in general, more empathic" (Effect).

### **Stereotypes**

Judgment is an additional life issue that comes from having a special needs child. From the moment a person finds out they're having a special needs child, people are going to suggest what they should do. People will suggest terminating the pregnancy, giving the baby up for

adoption, putting the child into a home, etc. When a person announces the news that they will be giving birth to a special needs child, they get a lot of “I’m sorrys” because people believe this to be a worst case scenario. In public, people oftentimes stare or avoid the parent and special needs child because they are “different”. Parents and siblings struggle with thoughtless people who use the word “retard” and “short bus,” but channeling those frustrations into something positive is the only healthy recourse. People are ignorant and raising awareness by becoming involved in campaigns that promise to not say the “R” word is a great way to help others become more educated and compassionate.

### **Summary**

For any working adult, there are hardships. However, based on the many issues discussed above, it is clear that these hardships are even more true for parents of special needs children. These hardships are very time consuming for parents to deal with. Many struggle finding a balance between the disability and life, let alone time for work. This has resulted in extreme financial hardships for many of these families.

According to the OPCS disability survey, “55% of families with disabled children are living in or on the margins of poverty” (Gordon). These additional hardships faced by parents of special needs children make it very difficult for both parents of the child to work. According to the same study, “84% of mothers of disabled children do not work, as compared to 39% of mothers with a non-disabled child, though it costs, on average, three times as much to raise a child with a complex impairment than a non-disabled child” (Gordon). Despite this, “A lack of high-quality, affordable and accessible child care and out of school opportunities for disabled children is still proving a major barrier for many families wanting to escape poverty by moving

into work” (Disability Rights). It is clear that in order to work, parents of special needs children need flexibility in their work environment. These parents have to deal with multiple issues that could pull them away from work, sometimes at a moment’s notice. They also may need more psychological care to deal with the hardships of raising a child with special needs.

Family/marital counseling might also be beneficial. Because of the likely extra expenses, assistance with budgeting could be helpful. It necessary for families of special needs children to identify resources in their local area, and work-life balance programs offered at work to assist with these hardships.

## **WORK-LIFE BALANCE PROGRAMS**

Though there are many types of work-life balance opportunities that companies can provide, American workers do not feel that their companies do enough. 89% of American workers say work-life balance is a problem. Of those 89%, 43% do not believe their employer is doing enough to address this issue, and 37% say that time with family is the first thing that suffers (Parker). It is clear based on the hardships discussed previously that one hardship faced by parents of special needs children when it comes to work is time. Because of this, the type of work-life programs that companies can offer parents of special needs children that would be most beneficial would center around flexibility with time. Three different programs that center around flexibility with time are child care, telecommuting, and flextime programs.

### **Child Care**

A study by CAI on companies that provided child care listed three great points that could serve as advantages to employers for providing that service. The first point was possible savings in money” (CAI). A 2005 study, co-authored by University of North Carolina professor Rachel Willis, surveyed 925 employees at three light manufacturing firms—two that offer on-site child

care and one that does not. It found that the two firms offering the benefit saved between approximately one-half and twice the cost of operating the child care centers, including subsidies to employees and other costs” (CAI).

The second point was improved employee morale, reduced turnover and absenteeism, and increased productivity. “In a report by the National Conference of State Legislatures, child care issues were the main cause of increases in absenteeism and tardiness reported in nine out of 10 companies. Also, 80% of the companies said that sometimes work days were cut short because of problems with child care” (CAI).

The third and final point was how providing child care was a great incentive for recruitment. “A study conducted by Simmons College, Graduate School of Management, found that 93 percent of parents cite work-site childcare as an important factor in job change, and that 42 percent of all employees surveyed said that the availability of on-site child care was an important factor to their decision to join their present employer” (CAI).

Since the majority of both women and men work these days, childcare is a very important issue. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor, “In 2009, 61% of mothers worked out of the home” (Working). Even though there is a large increase of women working today, it is often still the case that the woman calls into work to stay home with the kids. Childcare may be a great way to increase work/life balance for those employees with younger children. This is particularly so for couples where both spouses work. By providing this care, employers could create a situation where employees feel more balance between work and home life, and are better able to accomplish their jobs while at work. Essentially, employers could reduce family stress and allow employees to more effectively do their jobs.

## Telecommuting

Being able to work from home is another common tool that employers sometimes offer their employees to improve work-life balance. There are different definitions of telecommuting as shown below (“How Many People..”).

**Estimates of the number of people that telecommute vary by about an order of magnitude. This reflects different definitions of telecommuting.**

Survey	Year	Millions of Workers	Definition of Telecommuting
U.S. Census	2000	~4	Worked from home most of previous week, includes salaried and self-employed (Mokhtarian et al. 2004)
Current Population Survey	2001	3.4	Wage and salary workers, doing some paid work at home for main job (Mokhtarian et al. 2004)
Cyber Dialogue	2000	16.3	At least once/month; 7.4M full time workers, 4.3M part-time works, 4.0M contract workers (Mokhtarian et al. 2004)
American Community Survey	2005	4.8	Answered "Worked at home" in response to "How did this person usually get to work last week?" (ACS 2006)
RECS (EIA 2001)	2001	3.6	Households responding "Yes" to "Does anyone work on your computer at home instead of traveling to their employer's place of business?"
American Interactive Consumer Survey	2004	44.4	"employed Americans who performed any kind of work from home, with a frequency range from as little as 1 day a year to full time" (Telework Coalition 2007)
WorldatWork	2006	12.4	"Regular employee who works remotely at least one day per month during normal business hours" (WorldatWork 2007)
		16.2	"Self-employed individual who works remotely at least one day per month during normal business hours"(WorldatWork 2007)
IDC	2005	9.1	"worked from home three or more days each month during regular business hours," 2.2MM exclusively from home (Korzeniowski 2005)

Working from home has proven to increase performance among adults that like to work from home. They can focus more on the tasks at hand and it is often a quieter environment. Companies can also benefit because employees don't call in sick as much. One downside to employees is that often times there is less chance for promotion. Also, some people cannot handle distractions at home if they choose to keep their children at home with them. Working from home is becoming more and more popular even though companies once thought employees would take advantage of the privilege and that there would be less management involved. Due to the increase of technology in today's world, many things are being done online. People are

able to call into conferences and can post and share their work online. In many places of work this is done with people are overseas, as well.

### **Flextime Programs**

The third type of work-life balance mentioned earlier is flextime. Flextime programs allow their employees various ways to accumulate work-time hours and bonus vacation time. One type of flextime program is called 19/30. This is a program designed to allow employees one extra day off each month to use for personal reasons. It is for full time employees only and is completely voluntary. People are not required to use the program if they choose not to. How the program works is that employees are required to work an extra thirty minutes each day but it cannot be during lunch. If an employee takes a sick or vacation day, those thirty minutes do not have to be made up. Before taking their day off, it has to be approved by their supervisor. Also, the 19/30 time cannot be carried over month to month.

This program offers a lot of flexibility to employees. Employees work slightly longer hours for their days off ahead of time and employers have to approve what day they get off. There is a clear plan and communication from the very beginning. One obstacle is that this is built for an eight-hour a day, forty-day week work schedule. It would need to be modified for companies with different hourly work schedules, such as ten to twelve hour work days already. Also, for most companies, it is not available for contract or temp workers, only full time employees.

### **Programs in Europe vs US**

The programs listed previously are work-life balance programs that are most popular in the United States. One of the biggest differences between the US and most of Western Europe is regulations. The US has relatively few regulations in place to provide work-life balance, and the

few that are in place are not nearly as strong as those in Western Europe. One of the few US regulations in place is the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA).

“The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) provides certain employees with up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave per year. It also requires that their group health benefits be maintained during the leave” (United States). FMLA promotes equal employment opportunities and allows employees to reach work-life balance by taking unpaid leave if certain family and medical situations arise. “FMLA applies to all public agencies, all public and private elementary and secondary schools, and companies with 50 or more employees. These employers must provide an eligible employee with up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave each year for any of the following reasons: for the birth and care of the newborn child of an employee, for placement with the employee of a child for adoption or foster care, to care for an immediate family member (spouse, child, or parent) with a serious health condition, or to take medical leave when the employee is unable to work because of a serious health condition” (United States).

Generally, United States companies are focused on the competitive advantages when they offer work-life programs. Europe views offering work-life programs as more of a social responsibility to their employees. Some widespread work-life programs in the EU are paternity leave and vacation. These are important because they give parents of special needs children additional time from work to address the hardships that they may face.

Paternity leave has been around for decades in some EU countries, but now they are becoming more refined in terms of fathers being allowed to have more leave time to help take care of their children. As of March 2000 in Denmark, fathers can be given paternal leave for a total of 10 months at 30 percent of their regular salary until the child is three years of age. The leave cannot be longer than six successive months. Beginning in 2003, the EU Directive on

Parental Leave required at least two weeks paid paternity leave promised for fathers in the UK (Personnel).

In 1993 the EU recommended that employees get at least four weeks mandatory vacation each year. In terms of holidays, the lengths of time differ among EU countries but under current Dutch law, employees who do not take their full holiday cannot instead receive cash. Many companies also close down the business during the holidays so that all employees are forced to take a vacation. Facts 2000 survey stated that employees would rather have more than 30 days holiday than have a company car or pension (The Financial).

As stated previously, the type of work-life programs that companies can offer parents of special needs children that would be most beneficial would center around flexibility with time. The programs discussed above are important because of the opportunities that they do present parents of special needs children. However, there are additional programs and considerations companies can provide to create a better work-life balance for their employees. Additionally, successful companies are those that understand their employees' needs and desires outside of the work environment. These needs and desires can change with the age of the employees. Successful companies are those that provide their employees with a number of opportunities to meet their diverse needs and desires.

### **DIFFERENT EMPLOYEES, DIVERSE NEEDS**

When it comes to families with special needs children, it is important to also consider generational differences. For earlier generations, it was not uncommon to see special needs children removed from their own homes, and placed in special needs homes. Though this is no longer the case, people still have different needs and wants at different stages and ages in their life. For example, teens are very interactive and influence many family decisions in terms of

where money is spent. Generation Y people are huge multi-taskers when it comes to cell phones, instant messaging, and the internet. Generation Y is also the biggest population to be raised by a single working mother. This plays a huge role in what kind of balance they need in their life and what is “balance” to them (Boone). All of these needs are important to consider when it comes to finding work-life balance.

Generation X is considered to be more family oriented, so they might need more time with their family when it comes to work-life balance. Also, they prefer goods and services that support causes and have meanings behind them. By looking at those few facts that compare Generation Y to Generation X, it is easy to presume that Generation X employees need more work-life balance opportunities provided to them since family appears to be first. Therefore, generation X families with special needs children would be more likely to find programs that offer them more time at home very important. On the other hand, Generation Y is a generation more used to being in single parent homes so they might tend to be more flexible and understanding about devoting more time at work (Boone).

According to Karen Ensle, Associate Professor/Family & Consumer Sciences Educator, “The Generation X agents born between 1961 and 1981 are independent thinkers and know their shortcomings. They are sandwiched between their own parents and their children, and they have a different commitment to work and family than the “Baby Boomers” (Ensle). The Xers are willing to sacrifice salary increases and promotion and tenure for more time with family and friends. The Xers value fitness, time with their children, and the institution of marriage. To them, Extension is a “way to make a living”. They say, “Life is too short to be a workaholic.” They ask, “Are we working harder or smarter?” (Ensle)? By understanding this, companies

would be wise to offer employees with special needs children from this generation programs that offer them more time to spend with their families.

In 1994, Ohio Cooperative Extension researchers studied Generation X agents. The study revealed that Xers either burned out, decided the pay was too low, or their family was more important than spending evenings away from family for work. In completing their study, the Ohio Cooperative Extension researchers concluded important work issues were (Enslie):

- Flexible hours,
- Lowered work load,
- Having administrative support,
- Flextime,
- Sabbaticals along with unpaid leave,
- Pre-tax spending accounts,
- Counseling and assistance programs, and
- Stress reduction seminars.

Because they make up the majority of the work force today, studying what is important to Generation X and Generation Y employees, specifically those with special needs children, can greatly improve and modify work-life balance programs. While work-life balance and what people value as important is often related to age, it can also be determined by their stage in life. Various factors must also be considered regardless of age, including whether or not someone is single, married, married with children, single with children, divorced, widowed, etc. In today's world, the possibilities are endless. Each of those situations would affect the type of work-life balance that is needed. It is important that employers understand work-life balance programs do not just benefit their employees, but their companies as well.

### **WORK-LIFE BALANCE: THE BENEFIT TO COMPANIES**

Work-life balance programs improve profits, retention, effectiveness, employee health, and morale. According to Bloomberg Businessweek reports, a recent survey representing 80%

of Fortune 500 companies ranks work-life balance as one of the most important work attributes, second only to pay. The same study found that “employees who feel that they have good work-life balance tend to work 21% harder than those who don’t” (Robinson). In addition to these benefits, work-life balance programs increase revenue, reduce costs, and drive retention. Many top firms and research studies agree with these findings (Robinson).

- ▲ Work-life programs cut stress-related health costs (job stress tab for business annually: \$344 billion, Middle Tennessee State)
- ▲ Work-life programs increase profits. Firms with the highest employee engagement have triple the shareholder return (Hewitt Assoc.).
- ▲ Work-life programs drive the best retention. At firms with low engagement 40% of employees want to leave. At high-engagement firms, only 10% think of leaving (Towers Watson).
- ▲ Work-life programs build commitment. Flex programs promote near universal loyalty (Reichheld).
- ▲ Work-life programs drive productivity. A Federal Reserve Bank study found that effective work-life balance implementation resulted in a 10.6% increase in productivity.
- ▲ Work-life programs boost job satisfaction. Employees who are satisfied with their benefits are three times more likely to feel satisfied with their jobs and loyal to the company (MetLife).

Clearly work-life balance is a two-way street. It is not just the employees that benefit, but companies benefit as well. By meeting their employees’ needs, the employees better meet the needs of the company.

### **Companies with Great Work-Life Balance Opportunities**

There are many companies that have great work-life programs for parents with children or parents that have special needs children. According to Business News Daily, based solely on employee feedback, firms in this year's Top 25 Companies for Work-Life Balance are (Brooks):

- MITRE
- North Highland
- Agilent Technologies
- SAS Institute

- CareerBuilder
- REI
- National Instruments
- LinkedIn
- FactSet
- United Space Alliance
- Rackspace
- Orbitz Worldwide
- Novell
- Susquehanna International Group
- Slalom Consulting
- Discover
- Morningstar
- Wayfair
- Citrix Systems
- Hitachi Data Systems
- Southern California Edison
- Bain & Co.
- NAVTEQ
- W.L. Gore
- Fluor

Working for a company that has a reputation for good work-life balance is a great start for parents of special needs children, or anyone in general. Work-life balance is a tricky but important subject. Additional issues are going to complicate life and one's work-life balance. Having a child with a mental or physical handicap is going to increase the complication, but with the help of a good company, attaining work-life balance is possible.

### **PERSONAL EXPERIENCES**

I know that attaining work-life balance is possible when you have a child with special needs because I watched my parents attain it. My sister was born with Down Syndrome. She was born premature, weighing only two pounds, and was too small to fit into some baby doll clothes so even premature clothes were huge on her. At first the doctors didn't think she would make it because she had a heart problem and was so small, but with special care she was able to pull through, even though she was in the hospital for several weeks.

During her long hospital stay, my parents were very blessed because my mom was a stay at home mom and didn't have to miss any work. My dad was working for the company, Conoco, at the time and was in an entirely different situation. He had already worked out his work-life balance having two kids prior to my sister's birth, but having a child with Down Syndrome and being hospitalized put him in an entirely different situation when it came to balancing both work and home life. Thankfully for him he had understanding bosses. He was able to miss a few days here and there, and his bosses were flexible because he always got his work done. Also, when he was not able to miss, work my mother was able to stay at the hospital with my sister, Terah.

Not every couple is that fortunate if they have a hospitalized special needs child. My sister was able to leave the hospital and come home after forty-five days but not everyone is able to do that as some are in and out of the hospital their entire life. Terah grew up to be a very high functioning special needs person. She can make her own meals, dress and bathe herself, and can even add and subtract. On the other hand, she cannot drive, be home for more than a short period of time by herself, or use big appliances like the oven. Raising a child with a mental handicap was a very different experience for my parents. My mother was attending school so she balanced night classes with being a stay at home mom.

During the summer months we would go stay with our dad. He had a job that was forty minutes away from home, and it was not possible for him to commute while we were there. So his boss offered him the option of working from home as long as he reached all of his work deadlines. By his boss understanding his need and adapting his work-life balance options, my dad was able to be productive in both work and home life. Having Terah in my life is what inspired me to raise the awareness on how important it is for both the parent of a special needs child and the employer to find a work-life balance that benefits both of them. There are two

groups in this equation, and flexibility from both sides will ultimately help provide the work-life balance.

## **CONCLUSION**

From this thesis, employers and employees will hopefully see that work-life balance is a lot more entailed when a special needs child is involved. Employees need to know what specific work-life balance programs they need to be able to work. They can do this by understanding what extra hardships are in their lives, and by being realistic at what stage they are at in life. A lot of these decisions will have to do with the type of special needs child they have. Employees will also need to understand that companies will not always offer those programs, so it is important to evaluate everything and make clear distinctions between needs and wants.

On the other hand, employers need to know just what their expectations of their employees are, so that they will know if the employee is reaching them. They also need to know what time and effort they are willing to put into establish work-life balance programs, and which programs fit well with company policies and are beneficial to the company. Employers will see that while it might take extra work-life balance effort to hire a parent of a special needs child, it can still be beneficial and the employee can still have maximum performance in the company.

The purpose of this paper was to prove that establishing a work-life balance for its employees, especially those with special needs children, is essential to the health and production of a company. This paper showed that successful companies are those that understand the hardships faced by parents of special needs children, create programs that help their employees attain balance between work and life, and understand their employees' needs at different stages of their lives. Work-life balance creates successful employees, and successful employees create better companies.

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