

UNITED NATIONS – VIENNA

# CHILD CARE AND CAREER: THE DIFFICULT BALANCING ACT



**Most staff members have to face it at one point or another. The birth of a child requires them to make difficult decision regarding their career. Mostly this is true for mothers but more and more also for fathers.**

**STEFANO BERTERAME  
PRESIDENT OF THE STAFF COUNCIL  
UNITED NATIONS STAFF UNION – VIENNA**

The UN provides for maternity leave and paternity leave but they help up to a point and do not always permit to take proper care of the child in the early years while keeping the job. Special leave without pay helps but it is not always an option and it has its limitations.

Staff faced with the difficult decision return to work after they have exhausted all the options, need to find a solution for the proper care of their child. What is available in the locality varies from country to country.

In Austria, the social welfare system allows parents who are locally employed to take up to two years of leave with a minimum pay while keeping their job.

Because of these policies, local authorities focus the provision of child care services mostly from two years and above because in most cases one of the parents will stay at home with the child at least until he/she is two years old. Thus, the number of child care places for children below two years is limited and UN staff working in Vienna have considerable difficulties in finding child care facilities for children below two years when they need to return to work after sixteen weeks or even after an extended period of special leave without pay.

The staff union and associations and the management of the UN organizations based in Vienna (UNOV/UNODC, IAEA, UNIDO and later on CTBTO), aware of this problem presented their concerns to the Municipality of

Vienna. The Municipality agreed in 1986 to establish and staff a child care facility within the premises. Initially, the child care centre, which was hosted in a small prefab house placed between the towers of the UN in Vienna, had limited capacity (only 30 places). Demand was clearly higher than the offer. In 2000 it was agreed to build a proper structure to increase the capacity of the service.

A new child care centre, which was designed *pro bono* by Ali Reza Gahemi an architect working with UNIDO, was built with a mix of funding. Part of the money came from a special fund of the Municipality of Vienna and part from the staff welfare funds of the various organizations originating from small levies applied to the sales of the commissary. The new child care centre was inaugurated on 30 August 2001. At the inauguration of the centre, speaking on behalf of the Staff Unions and Associations of the VIC, Walter Scherzer, President of the Staff Association of the IAEA, said “A miracle has come true. The result is a spanking new child care facility completely in keeping with the VIC buildings surrounding it – and undoubtedly one of the finest nursery schools in Vienna and possibly within the UN system”. Walter Scherzer had all the reason to be proud having been one of the driving forces behind the project.

The Vienna International Centre (VIC) Child Care Centre caters for children between the ages of 3 months and 6 years. There are 148 places available and they are distributed among the four Agencies of the VIC. Places are allocated according to a set of eligibility and priority criteria (income, contractual status, length of service, marital status, etc.), although hardship cases are reviewed on an individual basis.

The Centre is managed by the Municipality of Vienna on the same lines as other municipal Kindergartens, including fees, teaching and administrative arrangements. The language of the Child Care Centre is German, although

some of the staff of the centre are able to communicate in English with the parents. The Centre follows the pedagogical approach that is used by the "Kindergarten" of the Municipality and follows many of the Montessori methods that embraces the maxim: "help me do it myself". The focus is on learning the skills that will ease a child towards greater independence.

The Child Care Centre is open from 07:30 - 18:00. It is closed on all Austrian and UN holidays. It is open during the summer but parents are asked to take the children out for four weeks between June and August.

There is an Advisory Committee consisting of representatives of the management of the Child Care Centre, the Administrations and Staff Unions of the participating organizations that provide the necessary oversight and advise on the management of the Centre. In 2006, a satisfaction survey was carried out and 80 per cent of the parents stated that they were satisfied with the service. There were some concerns on the speaking language of the Centre (German) because some parents



were not comfortable in speaking German and that the staff of the Centre was not always fluent in English. Demand is still high and there is a waiting list although there are some alternative options available especially for children from 3 to 6 years.

Although the UN staff in Vienna are in a favourable situation because of the local policy and the willingness of the local authority to support their needs, it is also important to note that staff unions and association worked together with management to bring the case to the host country and to find creative solutions to face the costs of the construction of the facility.

Although, it may be difficult to find similar conditions in other duty stations the lesson learned from Vienna is to work together with management and look for local opportunities to be exploited. Our experience is that staff are ready to pay higher costs than those offered by local services if they can have child care facilities inside the premises with opening hours and conditions that take into consideration their needs.

The organizations of the United Nations are promoting worldwide the standards of social welfare, care and education and it is good if we, as staff no matter whether we are management or staff representatives, would be able to show that we are trying to apply the same standards that we are promoting inside of our organizations. There has been considerable progress in the last years in many areas (breast feeding, paternity leave, recognition of domestic partnership, telecommuting, etc.) sometimes the conditions are there and all it takes is to build partnerships to make something come true. ■