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Business Strategies

DOING THE RIGHT THING WHEN DISASTER STRIKES

For a short time after Hurricane Frances, we changed the office TV from CNN to the Cartoon Network for 2-year-old Sophia, who was visiting us. Her mother was working hard on our hurricane reporting team even though her daughter's day-care center had closed for the storm.

As I watched my colleague try to work and care for her child, I wondered: How did I do it for so many years?

For 18 years, I balanced work and child. Looking at the hours I worked helping with hurricane coverage just in the past two weeks, I can't imagine having to worry about a young child or even an older one as well as working crazy hours.

Hurricane Frances disrupted our work and personal lives in South Florida. Workers who had perhaps the



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toughest challenge were parents taking care of children and children taking care of parents.

Palm Beach County parents juggled children and job while schools and day-care centers were closed. Others were taking care of elderly parents whose nursing homes were suddenly without electricity.

In difficult times, we turn to the people we know: our friends and family. Sometimes,

and perhaps particularly in transient South Florida, that "family" is in the workplace.

"This is where you really show your mettle," says Patricia Thorp, president of **Thorp & Co.**, the Coral Gables corporate communications firm, which paid its employees when its office was closed. "It's a crucial time for business to do the right thing."

Other employers responded to their workers' plight: **Office Depot** offered financial assistance to employees whose homes were damaged by the storm. **Burdines-Macy's** continued paying employees scheduled to work at stores forced to close during the storm.

And here's a class act: **The Breakers** hotel in Palm Beach paid all its employees even though it was closed 20 days to

remove debris and make repairs.

Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, which was forced to close when it lost power, encouraged faculty and administrators to bring children in as needed as the campus prepared to reopen. **JFK Medical Center's** day-care center in Atlantis took extra children when the hospital's charter school was forced to close after losing power.

Yet other employers turned a blind eye to employees' needs or made the situation worse by not paying them for lost work time. Though smaller businesses are in a more difficult financial situation, whatever help they can offer in such times could make the difference in keeping those employees.

The situation brought back

the day-care struggles I once went through for my son. The balancing act was never easy.

For 18 years, I scheduled my life around his — I did interviews, attended conferences and traveled around times when he was at school or with his father.

When he was young, I had to make up to three day-care arrangements to cover the time I would be at work. When he was on summer vacation or spring break, there were multiple arrangements with day camps and kind friends.

My son recently left for college and now I'm an "empty nester." There is no rushing to leave work to pick up my son at school or work.

Suddenly, my time is my own. I appreciate the flexibility I now enjoy, but also recognize that there is more potential to

waste time.

When I had my son to care for, I had little time to goof off. I had to be focused if I was going to finish my work in time to pick up my son from school.

So I heartily empathize with workers who had their routines uprooted during Frances, and I applaud those businesses that recognized their employees' plight and valued them enough to care.

To working parents: Hang in there during those "hurricane" days when the kids may be underfoot and making life difficult. Try to remember: You never get days with your child back, so enjoy them while you can.

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