

Who cares for the kids?

Stumbling blocks litter the way to child care

By TRACIE WHITE
 Sentinel staff writer

LIZ POULOS' 3-year-old son Aaron has been in six different day-care homes in the past year and a half. His mother has been in five times that many, conducting what seems to be a never-ending search for good care.

"I've kind of curtailed my looking," said Poulos, who is pregnant with her second child. "I'm just discouraged. I'm worried about his own mental health."

Poulos is not alone in her search for day care. With an unprecedented number of infants and toddlers being cared for by day-care workers, the need for good care has stretched nationwide. With more women entering the work force, it's a trend not likely to change in the near future.

"The assumption today is that everyone is going back to work," said Julie Edwards, founding director of the child-care center at Cabrillo College. Reflecting the views of much of the local day care community, Edwards complains that the resources aren't being provided to back up this overwhelming need for care and, as a result, children are paying for it.

"It's so crazy not to put our resources where our children are," Edwards said. "We're going to have to pay for it in the long run."

Poulos works part time as a technical consultant for a fashion firm, and lives in Santa Cruz with her husband, Chris Poulos, a full-time plumber. Her day-care search has been marked by a long line of disappointments.

The first home that took Aaron closed after five months. Poulos pulled Aaron out of the second when he burned his hand on an open heater. She wasn't happy with the third home because the other chil-

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dren were much younger than Aaron and he didn't fit in. The fourth had to reduce the number of children it cared for and Aaron was forced to leave.

By the fifth placement, Poulos began hearing complaints from the day-care providers about her son. Aaron was being too aggressive and defiant, they said, and Poulos began to worry. Her son was becoming touchy and shy and would cry easily if scolded by other adults. "I think he was becoming sensitive because of going to so many day-care homes," Poulos said. "It was just such an unstable base."

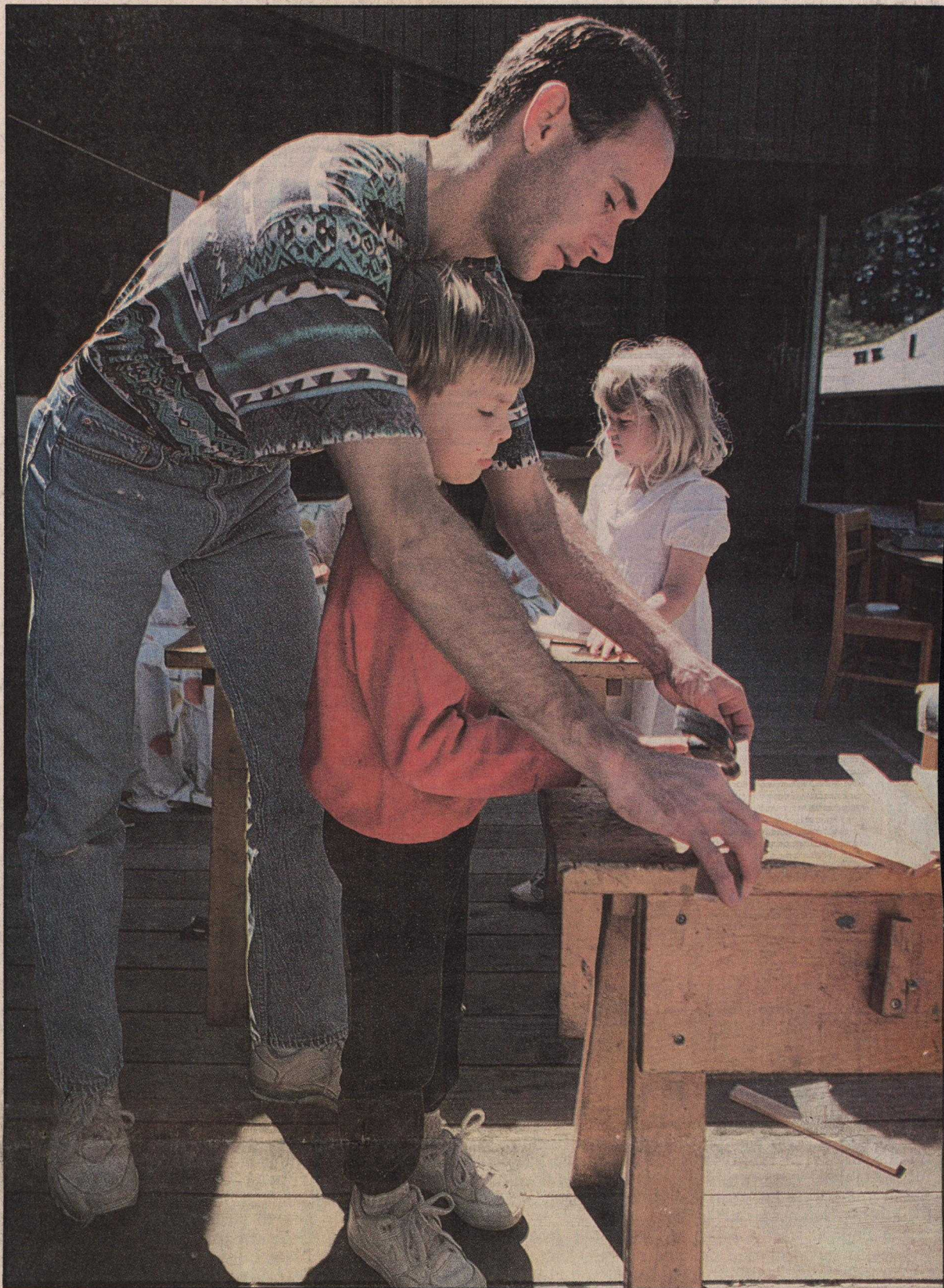
Poulos said she and her husband would like to buy a house some day and to do that, she'll have to go back to work. So she plans to start the day-care search again as soon as possible. For now, she's staying home with her son.

"It's been very discouraging," she said.

THE DAY CARE situation in Santa Cruz County has shifted slightly since the Oct. 17, 1989 earthquake, according to Marcia Meyer, coordinator of child development programs for the county. Availability has gone up, but parents are still having a hard time finding the care they need.

The stumbling blocks are cost, scheduling and quality of care, Meyer said. Infant care and after-school day care is still in short supply, and it's difficult to find part-time or extended hours of care, she said. Parents looking for subsidized child care face long waiting lists.

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Dan Goyro/Sentinel

Eddie Jobe helps John-John Tipton with a project at UCSC's child care center.

License is no guarantee of a quality care center

By JOHN McNICHOLAS
 Sentinel staff writer

DAY CARE centers and homes are licensed, but that's no guarantee of good care.

"We're not looking for quality of care in the sense of a good program," said Janet Reed, county Children's Services director and in charge of licensing family day-care homes. Right now, according to Reed, there are 509 licensed homes in the county.

"We're looking to make sure the place is a safe environment for children — that yards are fenced, children are protected from pools and traffic, what the kitchen looks like, that basic health and sanitation standards are maintained."

"The operator must have a clean criminal record" with no convictions, she continued, other than minor traffic violations. Some exemptions may be granted. The fingerprints of everyone in the home are checked with the state, or nationally if they've lived in the state less than two years.

The state does the same.

Doug Anderson, licensing program supervisor for the state Community Care Licensing office in San Jose, said his investigators look into centers that care for infants and children.

Neither office makes referrals.

"We look to see there are no health and safety hazards, to make sure it has equipment and toys, indoor and outdoor, for the age group they're serving," Anderson said.

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Child care

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According to a recent report by the county Child Development Resource Center, one out of four people calling the Child Switchboard Center in search of day care last summer failed to find the care they needed. During the three month period surveyed, from July to September, 223 parents didn't find care.

"Many parents are forced to quit their jobs, some return to the welfare system, and others may be compromising on quality to find care at all," the report states. Parents' complaints about the care they did find ranged from too many children at the site to a lack of adequate staff training and inadequate health and safety standards.

"IT'S HARD TO find a program that meets your

needs," said Edwards, who receives calls daily at the Cabrillo child-care center from parents desperate about child care. "The real issue is about quality. Day care is so under-staffed and so under-funded. Daily I have to tell people 'I can't help you.'"

The Cabrillo center serves 28 families; it has a waiting list of about 300.

"People come here a lot looking for child care. Women come in holding this 6-week-old baby just devastated. They sit in my office weeping because they can't find good child care. Yet they have to go back to work. Basically the baby's held hostage by the mortgage."

Because of the high cost of housing in the county, parents are trapped, she said. "People are frantic. It's a real trauma for young parents. It never occurred to them they wouldn't be able to get care."

In addition, it's difficult to recruit qualified personnel into the day-care profession because most providers don't receive adequate pay, Meyer said. Salaries range from \$5 to \$7 per hour, with few or no benefits.

"Lately there have been fewer and fewer qualified people and a there's a high turnover," she said.

Cyndi Ricca, president of the local family day care association, has provided care in her home for eight years. She loves the work, she said, otherwise she wouldn't do it. The pay isn't enough to keep her in the business.

"The day-care community as a whole has been subsidizing day care," she said. "I've been subsidizing child care out of my own pocket. My income as a provider is really poor ... My husband, for the first five years, said, 'Is this a hobby or what?'"

FAMILIES PAY an average of between \$2 and \$4 an hour for child care, depending on the age of the child and the type of day care they choose. Infant care is significantly more expensive, and day-care centers usually cost more than licensed in-home care.

Ricca said she hopes that recent federal money allocated for day care will eventually help day care providers at the local level.

The \$20 billion program passed by Congress in the fall, along with the recent ordinance passed by the county Board of Supervisors that will charge develop-



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

At one point, Liz and Chris Poulos gave up the search for child care for Aaron, 3.

ers a child-care fee, are both positive signs, Meyer said. The government is realizing the overwhelming needs facing families and day care providers, she said.

Studies have shown that every dollar invested in quality child-care programs saves \$6 in lowered costs for special education, grade retention, public assistance and crime later on, said Meyer, citing a 1989 Children's Defense Fund report.

The county would raise an estimated \$240,000 a year with the proposed developers fees, less than 2 percent of the \$17 million spent locally on child care every year, but, said Meyer, it's a start.

Currently, about \$11 million of that money comes from parents, but most of the balance comes from government programs.

"Child care is really a community issue. The piece that has been missing is the private sector."

Statewide, the quality of day care has been decreasing since the mid-70s when California was seen as a model for child development programs, Meyer said.

Since the passage of Proposition 13, and with the rapidly increasing state population, the day-care budget has taken a beating, Meyer said. Currently, only one out of every six children eligible for state subsidies is actually getting them.

In the private sector, businesses have started to address the needs of their employees. Some have opened day-care centers on site, although this is still the exception to the rule, especially in Santa Cruz County, Meyer said.

Dominican Hospital has a day-care center for its employees, and county employees are hoping to open

a day-care site in the fall, said Meyer. O'Neill Inc. in Capitola has been considering providing day care for its employees and so have a handful of employers in the Harvey West area, but that's about it, Meyer said.

UC Santa Cruz, which has provided day care on campus for its students for years, is currently worried about funding, according to Lise Bixler, director of child care services at UCSC.

"All the information we're getting is to gird ourselves for additional cuts," Bixler said. "It depends on the state Legislature."

"For us, we have a bare-bones budget already. We can't accommodate any more cuts," Bixler is depending on the passage of a referendum on April 23 and 24, which proposes an increase of the current student fee of \$1 per quarter up to \$3 to pay for day care.

"I'm confident that the students will continue their support of child care on campus," Bixler said. "They are very aware of the issues and how child care supports a diverse community on campus."

The day-care center at Cabrillo College gives first preference on space to students, but the care is not primarily for students. The center was set up as a training program for student teachers.

"We desperately need campus child care," Edwards said. "It's one of the most pressing needs in the county. The average age of Cabrillo College students is 31. It's a vast cross section of the whole county."

MIKE CARBALLO, a student at Cabrillo College, has finally found child care for his two children, but it wasn't easy. He received full custody of his son and daughter in January 1990.

"I was set up to my ears with working and trying to raise my children at the same time," said Carballo, who worked at an electronics assembly job. "My work situation changed dramatically. I had to find a job where I could be to work on a time schedule that would give me enough time to drop my kid off at child care, or enough slack if I had to leave to pick them up. Seagate finally told me, 'We can't deal with you anymore.' I was bummed out."

Carballo tried working other jobs, but the difficulties in scheduling child care for two children along with a full-time job finally just became too much. He quit and went on welfare.

"It was like the best day of my life," he said. "I knew I was going to have time to take care of my kids. Time to be a parent and to give the kids the nurturing that everyone needs. Our life was just really crummy. I was coming home distraught and stressed out."

Carballo now has state-subsidized child care, which allows him to go back to school, and he's found good day care — after a struggle.

"I just kept calling and calling and calling for a month and a half. I kept on this one lady who I particularly got good reviews about. I really scrutinized everything. She was geared to childhood development and not just setting kids in front of the TV."

"As a parent you really have to get out there, and you really have to ask a lot of questions and have high standards," Carballo said. "You have to make sure your kid is in a good wholesome environment."

Centers

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"We check the square footage, which determines how many kids they can have." They must have qualified staff, he said. A pre-school director must have 15 semester units of Early Child Education (ECE), he said, and three units in administration. A teacher must have 12 ECE units, while an infant care provider must have three additional units in infant care education. All must have had some experience in the field.

The state checks on what the activities are offered, Anderson said, "but the program is pretty much left up to the facility."

The ratio of care providers to children varies. Home care with one provider is limited to six children, according to Reed. Two of the six may be infants; three may be infants if the provider has an infant. With an assistant in the home, the limit is 12 children with three infants, or four if one is the provider's.

A helper that can stay alone with the children must be age 18; a helper age 14 or older is allowed, but cannot supervise children alone.

In a center for ages 2-6, the child-adult ratio must be one teacher for 12 kids, Anderson said; with a teacher and an aide, the ratio must be 15-1.

For infant-care centers, up to age 2, the ratio must be 4-1, he said, and for after-school care, it is 14-1.

"We investigate any complaints we get (about the centers) within 10 calendar days," Anderson said.

"We get back to the party making the complaint," he said, but other parents at the center aren't notified.

"That's one of the flaws in the system," he said. "Unless other parents call in and ask about the center, or talk to other parents, they might never know."

"There might be umpteen complaints, but unless we take an action concerning the license, the parents might not know unless they did some digging."

Parents can call and ask about a center, or look at the logs at the office, he added. The nature of the complaint and action taken are public, he said. Details such as names are confidential.

The county agency handles complaints concerning family day-care homes. "Last year we averaged four complaints a month," Reed said. "Overcapacity seems to be the most common complaint; over time, those are the situations that result in children being injured. That's something parents should be very aware of."

Those with questions about family day-care homes may call 425-2641; for information about child-care centers, call 277-1286.