

Community college programs try to fill child-care gap

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Finding high-quality, reliable child care that is also affordable can be difficult for parents, but area community colleges have been taking steps to make that search a little easier.

Schools such as Cabrillo College not only operate day-care centers on their campuses for the community, they also offer a childhood-development curriculum.

"I couldn't tell you how valuable they are," said Marcia Meyer, coordinator of child-care programs for the Santa Cruz County Office of Education.

"I don't think the public is aware of how much training is required" to be a day-care teacher, she said.

In the past 10 years, Meyer said, the demand for child care has been steadily increasing. But in the last few months, that trend in Santa Cruz County has actually declined, not because there is less need for child care but because other factors, such as the location of day-care centers and the local economy, have forced parents out of the market.

Some day-care centers in Santa Cruz County have openings but their locations may not always be convenient to many parents, and others have placed themselves out of certain par-

with a "tri-lemma" — the task of trying to find the right combination of affordability, availability and quality in child care. With nearly 1,600 children moving into the county every year, Meyer said, parents may find it more difficult to successfully mesh all three factors.

For some parents, sending their children to a day-care center like the one at Cabrillo College offers an attractive alternative to private centers, whose fees are often higher than those charged at community colleges. The Early Childhood Education program at Cabrillo is a good arrangement for both parents and students enrolled in the ECE degree program — parents get quality, low-cost child care and students get a training ground.

Cabrillo's day-care program provides care for about 45 children, Monday through Friday. One group of children attend a morning session, which lasts from 9 to 11:45, and another group attends from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Fees are determined on a sliding scale, taking into consideration family income and the number of children in the household. The morning session fee runs from \$70 to \$200. Full day care is as much as \$430 a month and as little as \$100 a month.

Day-care center director Caroline Carney said there is "a

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ents' price range, Meyer said.

Since the 1989 earthquake, the local economy has staggered, Meyer said, and some families have struggled to make ends meet, making the cost of day care prohibitive. In some cases, parents have had to work different shifts so they can alternate child-care duties, she said. Such an arrangement, however, often puts a strain on family relationships.

"But parents have to do what they have to do," she said.

Meyer said parents are faced

very long" waiting list, but openings do become available.

Because the center is a training ground for ECE students, there are specific groups of children enrolled at the center. Certain slots are reserved for children of a particular age group, ethnicity or socio-economic background, said Carney, who has taught early childhood development classes for about five years at Cabrillo.

Although some Cabrillo students and faculty use the center, the majority of children



Mike McCollum

Children at the Cabrillo College day-care center sit in a designated area after a fire drill this morning. Student teachers Alexa Kurillo and Dale

Wilson (head down) and teacher Julie Miller stay with the children as Miller, with her hand in the air, counts heads.

come from the community. The parents co-op program requires them to volunteer a few hours, usually on Fridays when most of the 14 ECE students are off. State certified teachers supervise parents and the students at the center.

ECE students receive a two-year certificate that enables them to work at state-licensed day-care centers. The pay is usually low and there aren't too many fringe benefits that come with the job, Carney said. And the job has its shortcomings.

"One of the occupational hazards is having bad knees and backs and being sick a lot" because workers often catch the children's ailments, Carney said. They do it, Carney said, because "they want to make a difference in the world. And it's also an enormous amount of fun."

Most of the ECE students are women, but this year the program has two men, Carney said. "We just love it when we have men," she said, "and the children love it, too."

Several students over the years have come to the ECE program to make a career change. Some of them had been working in the computer industry.

"They say, 'This is not what I want to do the rest of my life,'" Carney said. "They want to make a move from an impersonal job to a personal job."

The college is looking into providing evening child care. College officials are conducting a survey to determine the need for the service, Carney said.

At Monterey Peninsula College, a similar program has been in existence since the early '60s, school officials said. An on-campus day-care center houses 50 children between the ages of 2 and 5.

The program, which is run by four state certified day-care teachers, operates from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday and its fees are also on a sliding scale. The full rate is \$19 a day. The center, like Cab-

rilla's, is a learning lab for students enrolled in the college's ECE program. But parents whose children attend the center must volunteer one hour a week and attend a class in parenting one day a week.

About 80 percent of the parents whose children attend the center are on some type of assistance program, such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children and the Job Training Partnership Act, said Cathy Nyznyk, a teacher at the center.

Nyznyk said there is no evening day care at MPC, but it has been included in the college's five-year plan. However, evening care will have to wait at least another year — college officials have said there is no money available in the 1991-92 budget, she said.

Hartnell College in Salinas offers not one but three sessions, caring for about 80 children, said Jeanne Garcia, program director.

One session, designed for 2-

to 5-year-olds, is held Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 9 a.m. to noon. On Tuesday and Thursday mornings, between 9 and 11, the program offers a parent co-op session in which parents can earn college credit for working at the center. The sessions are for children 2 to 5, Garcia said.

The center, which has been in operation since the early '70s, also offers the "Year to Grow" program, designed for children whose fifth birthday falls after the start of school but before Dec. 2. The program offers a more advanced curriculum for these students.

Fees are determined on sliding scale, with the Monday, Wednesday and Friday schedule costing an average of about \$75 a month. The co-op program runs about \$25 a month and child care for Monday through Friday runs about \$135 a month.

Hartnell also has no evening child care. ECE officials hope to have those services in the future, but don't know when.