

The Advent of 24-Hour Child Care

The Gables treads a new child-care path

DAVID Fluitt stands in the driveway of the Gables Montessori Preschool and Children's Bed and Breakfast, watching the children play on the spot of lawn and animal-shaped climbing equipment.

"It's time to put new equipment in the playground," he says. "You've got to change things all the time, otherwise it gets boring."

But to any but Fluitt's restless eye, the Gables, which has only been open nine months, still has plenty of a new-school feel. Jars of sharpened colored pencils, gleaming wooden blocks, shiny "perfect pitch" bells and noise-making rattles line the shelves, begging to be stacked, banged and shaken. The cool grey carpet is spotless, the pint-sized furniture is still intact, the white walls conspicuously missing crayon marks.



David Fluitt and his bed-and-breakfast crowd: "The state was skeptical."

Children, some of whom are dropped off early by their commuting parents, eat their breakfast at a small table topped with a striped awning. As the children besiege him with questions, ask him to button shirts and show him their "owies," Fluitt

explains he is in the process of making the breakfast area into a "breakfast cafe" — a cafe scene painted on the adjoining wall is next.

"When they come in at 6:30 to eat breakfast it's not much fun," said Fluitt. "You need atmosphere to make it exciting for them."

And while Fluitt has worked hard to make sure the school and child-care center stays interesting for the children, running the business has been anything but dull for him. The school's opening was held up last fall when the real estate business that owned the adjacent parcel objected to a school going into the building that had been an expensive restaurant. More recently, Fluitt ran into opposition locally and at the state level when he applied for a license to run a 24-hour child-care facility.

"The state was skeptical, the county was skeptical, and the Child Care Council was up in arms," he said. "Our position is that you can

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that the council's reservations about the Gables were based on questions of placing children in extended care outside the family. "Everyone in child care, first and foremost, believes that children need to be raised in their family environment to the extent that that's possible," said Hunt.

"We know that some parents are working and they can't help it and that's become an important service," she said, adding the council's objections were aimed at parents who simply want a respite. "There comes a point where if the child has been in child care during the week and then is suddenly doing overnight care, is this good for the child?"

Hunt said the council's other concern was that the Gables provide a quality program for the children in the late afternoons and evenings and not just "a babysitting function."

However, Fluitt said so far parents are not abusing the privilege of being able to leave their children at the Gables after hours.

Some five regularly participate in the school's second session, which is geared toward parents working a swingshift and starts in the mid-afternoon, with a shorter version of the school's daytime Montessori program and the afternoon art and music classes. Others stay at the school for a few hours in the evening once every few weeks, while their parents take a night off.

Bedtime is at eight and, according to Fluitt, there's one staff person sitting with every three children, to read them bedtime stories and make sure they feel secure.

"It's an educational process," he

said. "If we do it and set some very high standards in our program here, perhaps they will be incorporated into state standards for this type of care."

Among those standards is the high ratio of staff to children, "double-staffing" to ensure a minimum of two staffers at all times, and security cameras inside and outside the school. But Fluitt, who said his goal is to have the Gables be "the best school in Santa Cruz," is planning to make things even better.

The school is adding a second Montessori teacher in the fall, bringing the staff to nine. Gymnastics and tap dance classes have recently been added to the program. A parent education series, open to the public, is also beginning this fall.

The Gables has hired a valet to

greet parents in the morning, serve them coffee in commuter mugs and help them drop off and pick up their children. And Fluitt has worked with several local businesses to create a scholarship fund that brings the cost of child care down across the board.

Fluitt doesn't want to stop with the Gables, however. He'd like to try a Watsonville facility next, and work with local industry setting up low-cost, quality employee child-care facilities. He's just formed a consulting firm to do that work.

"We put in 15-hour days around here — and probably answer a million questions — but it goes so quickly," he laughed. "That's one thing about working with children. You never get bored."

— Chela Zabin

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provide an environment that's safe and has a good staff (for evening care) — usually the children are left with a babysitter. It's up to the parents to decide what they want, but they should have the choice. A lot of parents work nights — many nurses, people who work in the sheriff's department, in supermarkets — I think there's a real lack of understanding about that."

With some prodding, the state eventually granted Fluitt his license, making the Gables the first in the state to provide child care around the clock. Legally, however, a child can only stay at a child-care facility for 23 hours at a time.

Suzy Hunt, executive director of the Child Care Council, explained