

Parents pay extra to find child care in the right place at the right time ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Claudia Grossmann started searching for day care soon after she became pregnant. The Mount Pleasant mother-to-be put her name on a half-dozen wait lists and regularly checked in with her top choice: a nationally accredited center in her neighborhood with a dual-language program. The wait list was long, but one August day, she got a call. A spot was available starting the next month. Only catch: Her baby was not yet born.

She and her husband had a choice to make. They could take it or wait perhaps another year for the next opening.

“We really wrestled and lost sleep over it. It was a lot of money,” she said. Ultimately, they decided: “It’s worth the peace of mind.”

So they wrote a check and started paying for day care — 14 days before their son was born. Five months later, when Grossmann returned to work, her son enrolled for his first day.

Children younger than 3 are the fastest-growing age group in the District, with a 26 percent increase in the number of infants and toddlers between 2010 and 2014. The explosion of young families is putting a new strain on an overtaxed child-care industry.

Many new parents describe a maddening search for child care, encountering wait lists 200 names deep or two years long and child-care administrators who do not return repeated phone calls, overwhelmed by requests from prospective clients who start knocking sometimes before they are even pregnant.

After all of that, when a coveted spot becomes available, many parents seize on it, even if they don’t need it — yet.

Margie Yeager, an education policy analyst, said she did not think twice about paying for an extra month of child care when a spot became available for her first child.

She had applied to 19 child-care centers while still pregnant, carefully mapping out possible options along her commute to work from Cleveland Park to Capitol Hill.

Her son, now 3½, was born seven weeks early, a situation that was made more stressful, she said, by the fact that it pushed up her timeline for finding child care.

As her return date loomed, she finally heard back from one of the 19. “Out of the heavens, there was a space.” She started paying to save it, then enrolled him a month later.

In 2015, there were 7,610 licensed child-care slots in homes or centers for about 22,000 children younger than 3 in the District, according to a report by DC Appleseed and the D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute. The mismatch does not take into account children from neighboring Maryland and Virginia who come in to work with their parents and spend their days finger painting and taking naps at nearby day-care facilities.

The shortage of care is most acute for infants.

Programs for the youngest children are the most costly to operate, as licensing requirements specify lower staffing ratios. Infant rooms also must be on street level, which means it is difficult for providers to secure space because they are competing with much more profitable retail businesses.

The city’s universal preschool program, a free full-day program for 3- and 4-year-olds, represents a light at the end of a tunnel for many parents in the District. But child-care advocates say the ramping up of universal preschool actually exacerbated the child-care shortage.

Many private centers once served children from infancy to prekindergarten, relying on larger preschool classes to underwrite more expensive infant programs. But they could not afford to stay open once the preschool private market diminished.

"We need to find a way to make child cares profitable again," said Miriam Calderon, a senior adviser for early learning for the Bainum Family Foundation, which is investing in strategies to help centers improve and grow, including by sharing scarce administrative resources.

She said government investment in child care also has to grow. The search for a high-quality center can be even more stressful for low-income parents who rely on government subsidies. The reimbursement rate is low — accounting for just 66 to 70 percent of the median cost of market rate, and so many centers do not accept subsidies.

For parents who pay full tuition, the District is one of the most expensive places for child care in the country, with an average monthly cost of \$1,868 for infant care at a center, according to the Economic Policy Institute.

There are more — and often less expensive — spots at in-home day cares, but parents often don't know how to find them or how to evaluate their quality.

Many turn to a growing workforce of nannies to fill in the child-care gap — or tide them over while they are waiting for a spot in a center to become available.

Katie Beckmann said she and her husband considered sharing a nanny when she was preparing to return to work three years ago, but the cost was too high.

She had applied to a shortlist of day-care facilities that were both within her price range and convenient, but no spots were available by the time her three-month leave was over. So she and her husband came up with a stopgap solution, with help from their parents.

They rented a studio in their apartment building near the zoo, and both sets of grandparents took turns staying there and watching their son while they worked.

The \$1,500 in rent was more affordable than paying for a nanny, she said. And after three more months, they finally got a spot in a day-care center a short walk from their home. "We got lucky," she said.

Sara Gibson also had to get creative when she got into the right day-care facility at the wrong time for her daughter, who is now in elementary school.

The Adams Morgan resident was offered a spot at a day-care center that was reputable, friendly and close by. But it was starting in September. Her daughter was not due until October.

She and her husband worked at nonprofit organizations and could not afford to pay to hold their spot. So they found another family who needed child care right away. They drew up a contract, and sublet their spot for five months.

"We knew spaces were scarce," she said. "We wanted that spot."

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