

Childcare centres ease parents' anxiety for having second child^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Lyu Jiawei had not decided to have a second child until she found a new childcare center in her community in east Beijing's suburban district of Tongzhou.

Even though running her own business enabled Lyu to work at home, she still found it difficult to take care of her son while dealing with routine work.

"Our parents cannot come to help like some other families. Besides, my parenting ideas are different from the elder generation's," Lyu said.

Devoting too much time on taking care of the first child, Lyu found it was almost impossible to have a second child without giving up her work.

In response to the rapidly aging population, China started to allow married couples to have two children in 2016, ending the one-child policy implemented decades ago. Since the implementation of the policy, the number of newborns in China has increased. However, who will take care of the baby has become a major problem faced by families of newborns, which is also the main reason that couples hesitate to have a second child, said Cui Shuyi, director of the demography institute of Shandong Academy of Social Sciences.

Statistics show that around 80 percent of childcare services of China are provided by families, including parents and grandparents, who often feel overburdened. Under the circumstances, there is a huge market demand for childcare services.

Lyu discovered a childcare center in the community when her son was 13 months.

"It accepts children aged six months to three years old, catering to my demand," Lyu said. In China, most kindergartens only receive children at or over three years old.

Actually, the childcare center itself is founded by a mother who has two children.

Gu Qi, 34, founder of MEYOU Baby Educare, said her original intention of starting the care center was to solve her own childcare problem. Gu resigned from her previous job after giving birth to her oldest son in 2014. Three years later, Gu had her second son.

Looking after two children all by herself, Gu got frustrated sometimes. She was also disappointed with the environment and the quality of teachers at the nearby kindergartens.

From then on, she began to prepare to open a baby care center in her community not only for her own children but for more families. The center opened on June 1, 2018, with child-friendly facilities and a big yard where children can have a variety of outdoor activities. Now it accommodates 25 children with the youngest aged 8 months. Lyu's 2-year-old son is among them.

"My son's safety and health are my principal concerns when choosing a daycare center," Lyu said.

The center has recruited university graduates and nursing majors as teachers to provide professional care to the babies and toddlers, and cameras have been installed to ensure parents can see their children at any time, according to Gu.

"The center has helped ease my pressure and gradually gained trust from more mothers like me," said Lyu, who is expecting her second child.

Living with peers in the baby care center has also brought a surprise packet to the parents.

"I used to worry about the lack of discipline my son was receiving at home," Lyu said. "Surprisingly, he has developed good habits like washing his hands before meals and having a nap at noon one month after he attended the center. He also made friends there." In northwest China's Gansu Province, early childhood education is also in high demand.

Li Xiang runs an early education center in a residential building in the city of Lanzhou, capital of Gansu, which has around 20 children aged between one and three years old. Most of them are the second child of their families.

She said the center, established last June, originally focused on early childhood education, but it currently provides childcare services as

many parents rushed here and asked whether she can provide daycare services.

Now parents send their children to Li's center at 8:30 am and pick them up at 5:30 pm. "Providing childcare services not only helps busy parents, but also helps children adapt to a new environment, improve their character, and develop good habits," Li added.

In response to the new demands created by the full implementation of the two-child policy, China will move faster to develop various types of infant and child care services, encourage private sectors to run childcare and early childhood education agencies, and provide better protection for children's safety, according to this year's government work report.

The State Council issued a guideline to promote the development of infant and child care services in April this year. It is aimed to give shape to and improve related policies, laws and regulations, to motivate private sectors to participate in the field as well as to meet the public need.

A childcare services law system, which will cover both urban and rural areas, is expected to be established by 2025, according to the guideline.

There are still concerns such as industry standards, charges for the services and security risks, according to Cui.

Gu was excited to learn that the government is encouraging the sector while calling for related regulations to be issued as soon as possible.

"Now, there are no uniform standards for childcare centers in Beijing," Gu said, mentioning that her childcare center is maintained in accordance with the standards of public kindergartens. "We should have specific standards on the sanitary condition, indoor air quality and the location of the childcare center, to name a few," Gu said.

The government should strengthen the supervision of childcare institutions, increase financial investment and play a leading role in rolling out market standards, regulations and laws to ensure the sustainable and healthy development of childcare industry, Cui said.

Shanghai has taken the lead in this field. The city rolled out a series of policies in April 2018 to improve its childcare services for children under three.

Jointly issued by 16 departments involving education, civil affairs, industry and commerce, healthcare and family planning, as well as food and drug supervision, the policies are aimed at establishing an institutional mechanism for the management of childcare services, promoting the development of childcare services and encouraging various forms of support from society to the sector.

As of May 2019, Shanghai has set up more than 170 new childcare agencies, able to provide services to over 6,400 children.

Apart from the first-tier cities, more provinces have ramped up efforts to improve their childcare services.

Central China's Henan Province, one of China's most populous provinces, planned to open, reconstruct and expand 1,000 nurseries in its urban and rural areas to accommodate more children. Meanwhile, the province has poured nearly 1.5 billion yuan (218 million U.S. dollars) to support childcare projects.

Experts also suggest that more efforts should be made to cultivate qualified staff of the childcare agencies and kindergartens, stressing that the establishment of childcare agencies and nurseries for children under three is important for the full implementation of the country's two-child policy.

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