

Kids and Company gives working parents new child-care options

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EXCERPTS:

Working parents in Edmonton have a new child-care option that offers a bright, airy downtown facility, guaranteed placement, emergency backup care, nutritious meals, education programs, no late pickup fees, and even eldercare services.

The catch is, you can't use it unless your employer has signed up to be a client, and paid an annual fee starting at \$5,000 for membership per company.

Kids and Company, a Toronto-based corporate-sponsored child-care provider, is opening its first Edmonton location, at 10304 108th Street, in the warehouse district. They offer full-time, part-time or emergency child care.

A few weeks away from opening, the centre held an open house Wednesday as parents toured class-rooms filled with tiny chairs and tables, educational toys and puzzles, and an outdoor yard.

The daycare is only open to corporate clients, which include the University of Alberta and BMO. Their employees get a guaranteed spot. Parents also pay varying child-care fees, about \$50 to \$60 a day.

Victoria Sopik, a mother of eight, founded the company in 2002, with Jennifer Nashmi.

"The general public can't have a spot in our centre and what that allows us to do for our corporate clients is guarantee child care for their employees," said Sopik, the company's CEO.

"There's no waiting list, there's no chance they're not going to get a space. We're always open and available for them."

The facility is provincially licensed, employs 40 teachers, and has space for more than 180 children from infants up to 12 years old, divided into classrooms of between 10 to 15 kids overseen by two teachers each.

"It's play-based learning, so lots of what goes on when they're one, two and three is learning things while they play, but we also have sign language, French, a Montessori program, dance, music and a great art program."

Kids and Company has nearly 40 locations across Canada and will expand to 50 by the end of the year.

Sopik said it has tried to open in Edmonton for a long time but had difficulty finding a suitable site downtown with outdoor play space.

About 20 corporate clients have signed up so far.

Sopik said Kids and Company is planning to open another three locations in Edmonton - one within a year and the others after seeing where the demand is.

The service is an employee recruiting and retention tool for companies, Sopik said.

"Most employees will tell their employer that they'd love to have on-site child care, but employers don't want to get into the business of being providers of child care. They don't have the space or the liability. We take all that on and what they get for \$5,000 is a guaranteed space."

Statistics provided by Kids and Company say an estimated 45 per cent of working parents miss at least one day of work every six months due to child-care breakdowns.

The centre saves spaces for emergency child care.

"It could be there's no school to-morrow. It's a (professional development) day and you think 'I can't stay at home and look after my nine-year-old.' We have a program that will look after your nine-year-old."

Kids and Company also provides personal support workers or nurses to assist aging parents in home.

The University of Alberta says it partnered with Kids and Company because of increasing demand for daycare services. The five non-profit day cares around the campus are at capacity and have lengthy waiting lists.

Another client, BMO offers its employees up to 10 days of backup child care. In 2011, BMO staffers across the country used about 400

days.

"I'm a mom, and there's nothing worse than when your child care falls apart and you're trying to balance everything," said Gabriella Zillmer, senior vice-president of human re-sources for BMO.

"We want to give them peace of mind and access to a safe and healthful environment for their children to go to so they cannot worry and focus on what they need to focus on in the workplace."

-reprinted from the Edomonton Journal

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