

Child care and the overwhelmed parent ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Earlier this month, a mother in North Augusta, S.C., was arrested after authorities learned that she had dropped her 9-year-old daughter off at a nearby park while she worked her shift at a McDonald's restaurant. That news, along with a flurry of reports last week that she was fired from her job - later found to be erroneous - prompted public debate about the the difficulty of finding and affording child care.

One sympathetic woman, a stranger to the mother, even began a crowdfunding campaign on YouCaring.com called "Support Debra Harrell." To date, it has raised nearly \$40,000, far exceeding its \$10,000 goal.

The kindness of strangers is always welcome. But what working mothers really need are systematic ways to find and afford safe, local care options for their kids. While many parents scramble to find care in the summer months, especially for older children out of school, it's a year-round challenge for families with kids younger than preschool age. Twelve million infants (from birth to 4 years old) are in daily care with someone other than a primary parent, according to the Census Bureau.

Resources for choosing a child-care provider are antiquated. Only 27 states even post reports online on both regular monitoring and inspections of child-care centers, and only 24 do for home-based child-care. In California, according to a recent report by The Center for Investigative Reporting, parents had to actually go in person or call during business hours to request reports on one of the 48,000 state-licensed day care, preschool and after-school programs. Even in the heart of Silicon Valley, reports aren't available online. Costs are high. Child Care Aware America, a national organization focused on quality childcare, reports that the annual cost of day care for an infant is more than the average cost of in-state tuition and fees at public colleges in 31 states. And according to the news site Vox, the problem is just getting worse; the cost of child care is growing at nearly twice the rate of prices economy-wide.

Quality of care is critical. We are learning more every day about how important the first three years are to brain development. Synapses essentially organize the brain by forming pathways that connect the parts of the brain governing everything we do. According to Zero to Three, a national advocacy group for families with infants, a healthy toddler may create two million synapses per second. The adults they interact with and the environments they're in on a regular basis hugely impact the quantity and quality of these connections - influencing the rest of their lives.

Given that the stakes are so high and the costs so steep, how does an already overwhelmed working parent find a decent, affordable child-care provider?

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