

Growing frustration over daycare shortage ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A newly opened daycare center in Changning District was forced to suspend operations after Shanghai authorities said it lacked official approval. The issue rankled some parents across the city, who said government should be helping, not delaying, an expansion in child-care facilities.

That sentiment has been gaining traction since China scrapped its one-child policy and allowed couples to have two children. More children equals more demand for daycare. At the same time, plans to extend the retirement age will put more grandparents beyond babysitting duties.

The child-care center at the core of the latest public debate was set up on February 18 in the headquarters of Ctrip, China's biggest online tourism company. Ctrip spent 4 million yuan (US\$613,125) to establish a place where company employees can drop toddlers during work hours.

The facility also comprised an early education component. It was set up mainly to care for children 3 years and younger, but Ctrip employees were also allowed to bring older children there after school and during school holidays.

Parents had to pay 2,580 yuan per month for the daycare service. It was so popular at the launch that available places were quickly snapped up and a waiting list was created.

The Changning Education Bureau was less enthusiastic. It said the center needed to apply for a license to operate an early education service and it requires prior registration with the Civil Affairs Office. It also said fees charged for the service must be vetted by authorities.

Ctrip officials told Shanghai Daily that they are now going through all the red tape to legalize the center.

Yang Xiong, a researcher at the Shanghai Academy of Social Science, said the government needs to do more to encourage the establishment of daycare facilities. Incentives could include subsidies or tax relief for companies that set up such centers, and expanded construction of more preschool centers in residential communities.

The time to act is now, before the two-child policy produces a wave of new demand.

"We can see the demand for child care growing," said Tian Xiong, director of the Shanghai Women and Children Committee.

There are 54 daycare centers and 300 care classes in kindergartens in the city, according to the Shanghai Statistics Bureau, while the estimated 400,000 children born in the city in the past two years require about 16,000 care classes before they start kindergarten.

Two-thirds of families with children under 3 years of age said they need child-care services, according a survey conducted last year on behalf of the Women and Children Committee.

"We encourage enterprises with spare capacity to set up daycare centers in their buildings," Tian said. "We are also hoping that 90 percent of communities in the city will provide at least some kind of service to nearby residents by 2020."

The shortage of available daycare has some people looking nostalgically back on the 1970s and 1980s, when most companies provided nursery care for young children while their parents worked.

"My mother took me to the nursery in the factory she worked at when I was only 3 months old," said Diana Wang, an office worker in Shanghai. "She was able to breastfeed me at first. Later, nursery staff fed me formula. There were toys there and I could play with other kids during the day."

As births decreased in the 1990s and many state-owned companies hit hard times, daycare as a worker benefit began disappearing and didn't reappear even when the birth rate started to pick up this century.

The job of caring for young children while their parents work has largely fallen on retired grandparents.

That was the case with Wang, who gave birth to a son in 2013. She returned to work after four months of maternity leave and had to ask her mother to look after the baby.

"I couldn't find any other solution because there is no nursery at my company or near my home," Wang said. "It really is hard when my mother can't make it for a day or two and I have to ask for leave from my job."

In some offices, it's not uncommon to see young school-age children doing their homework in conference rooms. Parents are often forced to bring their children to work if there is no one to look after them when school lets out.

"It's not a good solution," said Wang. "But what else can parents do?"

An employee surnamed Zhu at Hujiang.com, an online education company, is one of the few lucky ones. Her company operates what it calls a "baby house" for employees when they need help looking after their children. Because the service is free, it did not require official approval by authorities, Zhu said.

"It is very convenient," she said. "We have someone to look after our children during times when school is out."

But the "baby house" has its limitations. It is mostly geared toward older children, not toddlers who need special care.

Government needs to address daycare needs before they become overwhelming, according to some political observers.

"With the new family planning policy and plans to extend the retirement age, demand for child-care services will surge," said political adviser Liao Ying.

He suggests that kindergartens offer more care classes for young children, and more daycare facilities be built. There also needs to be more professional training for child-carers.

Tian said the government also needs to upgrade its supervision of daycare facilities to ensure that they are offering quality services.

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/spaces>