

FAMILY



Inter Lake file photo

A GROUP OF GIRLS TAKE part in a Kalispell Parks and Recreation Hula Camp at Woodland Park last year. Summer vacation is looming and parents should start thinking about activities for the children.

Vacation trepidation

■ Summer puts working parents in bind

By CHERY SABOL
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Summer vacation is no picnic for working parents. With less than a month of school left, some parents are scrambling to find a place for their school-age children who are not old enough to stay

home alone.

The school year is a relative breeze; after supervision in the classroom all day, students can often manage on their own for an hour or two until parents come home from work.

But summer — long, unsupervised days, often with siblings to care for, and hot-weather temptations like lakes and rivers — can be a daunting proposition for children and their working parents.

"Sadly, many times, children are kind of stuck," said Mary Lyons, who handles child care at the Nurturing

Center in Kalispell.

"A parent called and said she had been in the area for two months and asked, 'What do I do with my 5-year-old?'" when school is out, Lyons said.

Compounding the problem is that few day-care facilities have space for summer-only youngsters; many even take summers off.

"Then what we find is older children, school-age children 6 and up, needing care," Lyons said.

They're a problem crowd, too old to be entertained by "sitting and playing with blocks all day" and too young to be left alone.

Some children still are not mature enough to be left unsupervised at 12, Lyons said (though "you're not in day care when you're 12 years old," she notes). Even age 13 and 14 can be too young, if there are other children they must be responsible for. And it's not fair to those older children.

"It's taking away from their summer" if they're expected to be surrogate parents during the day, Lyons said. "It

could build resentment."

There are endless opportunities for children in the Flathead, but few are full-day activities that can fill up the whole summer.

Lyons directs people to the Kalispell Parks and Recreation Department, which has one of the few daily, all-day programs for school-aged children.

Adventure Camp, for children ages 6-8, meets from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Discovery Camp, for children ages 9-12, meets the same hours. Cost for either camp is \$52 for city residents, \$59 for out-of-city residents.

Kalispell, Whitefish, and the county have other specialty sport and adventure camps, but they provide only temporary diversions for part of a day or a few days at a time. They may dovetail with the work schedules of some part-time employees.

"That's why it's so important for employers to be flexible," Lyons said. Glacier Institute offers several week-long educational camps at its Big Creek Outdoor Education Center on the North Fork of the Flathead River. The camps emphasize outdoor experience and science.

Prices range from \$250 to \$300. There are numerous Bible camps and

sports camps through the summer, but they typically cover only a week of the three-month vacation.

There is space at some day-care facilities, and some have special summer activities.

Sugar N' Spice Learning Center has an in-house summer recreation camp, and day-care slots are available for school-aged children this summer.

The Nurturing Center has a list of day-care centers and homes.

Many families, though, "will end up with a neighborhood teen-ager watching the children," she said. "For a lot of people, that's the only option."

That was what she did when her children were younger, she said.

There is no state law about how old a child must be to take care of other children.

"Responsibility is the No. 1 thing," Lyons said.

Baby-sitters should be trained in CPR and first aid, she said. The Summit and Red Cross offer classes in those subjects.

She would insist on background checks and reference checks, even for a baby-sitter a family knows well, she added.