

# Day-care growth keeps pace with two-income families

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Since 1987, the number of day-care slots available for Montana children has nearly doubled, growing from 9,388 to 18,066 by 1992.

According to the Montana Department of Family Services, the Flathead Valley has seen comparable growth.

The number of registered day-care family homes serving 3-6 children grew from 28 in 1991 to 57 in 1993; registered group homes serving up to 12 children grew from 48 in 1991 to 54 in 1993, and the number of licensed day-care centers serving more than 13 children grew from seven to 10 over the same period.

Much of the growth in demand for local day-care services can be directly attributed to the increasing number of families in the Flathead with two working parents, Christofferson said.

More and more local churches are providing child care for congregation members, at least after school. They, like other large-scale day-care centers, are subsidized to some degree, Christofferson said.

But the true entrepreneurial spirit of the day-care industry is reflected in women who start smaller, family or group day homes, Christofferson said.

Dawn Nix and Debbie Birks, owners of Downtown Day Care in Kalispell, have made careers of child care.

Birks started day care as a mother, while Nix got into the business as a teacher in pre-school and Montessori programs. They eventually met at a large day-care center in Kalispell.

Frustrated with the troubles that come with running a center serving as many as 100 children, Nix purchased a house on Kalispell's east side to start her own group day-care home. Birks

later joined her in Downtown Day Care.

Both were followed by several of the parents whose children they cared for.

"Very few day cares start quickly, because it takes a while to develop a reputation and some trust with parents," Nix said.

Both Nix and Birks say the goal of profits and the responsibilities of child care are an unnatural mix. They must walk a fine line, charging an affordable rate while paying themselves a decent wage and meeting the overhead costs of quality day-care service.

Birks and Nix work under the same conditions that most day-care providers must live with, according to Christofferson. They can't afford health insurance or retirement plans, and their salaries are minimal.

But they take control of their working conditions however they can. They incorporated in order to protect their personal assets, for tax reasons and to waive workers compensation costs, since they are the company's board of directors.

They recently decided to alternate three-day weekends to give each other some substantial time off.

"We expect to be treated well. We expect respect, because we are not just baby-sitters," Birks said.

"We believe in the service we provide to society," Nix added.

The two interview parents extensively before agreeing to take their children, in order to "find out what they expect from us and let them know what we expect from them," Nix said.

They ask what kind of special care the parent is looking for, and they con-

firm parents' ability to pay for child care "just like they would pay their cable bill."

They require parents to sign contracts that obligate them to pay a full-time monthly rate, whether they use day care for 15 days or 20 days a month. This assures a reliable cash flow to pay expenses, plan for staffing needs and budget for the future.

Nix and Birks believe society needs to recognize the importance of treating child-care providers well.

"If you don't have a provider with a good attitude, then who do you have with your kids?" Nix asks.

Christofferson noted that Montana is ranked 49th in the country in dollars dedicated toward day-care programs and day-care regulation.

The Department of Family Services has enough staff to inspect a random 20 percent of the registered day-care homes in the state each year, and day-care centers are visited only once a year, she said.

"My concern is that a lot of facilities are out of compliance (with state rules), and it's simply because we don't contribute enough funds to quality child care," she said.

Christofferson said the United States is the only industrialized country in the world where most businesses do not offer day care as a benefit to employees.

And then there is the societal attitude toward day-care providers. As one national columnist put it, "We want care givers, not care sellers."

"A decade ago, one of the biggest issues facing providers was getting the parents to pay them," Christofferson said. "They saw themselves as providers and not businesswomen."

Now day-care providers have become far more professional, viewing their service like any other product in a market economy.

"They've come a long way," Christofferson said.

## Day-care providers play vital role in keeping business world productive

By JIM MANN

Local child-care providers say their industry gets little respect in terms of working conditions and societal recognition.

Government, particularly Montana government, has lagged in providing support for an industry that society depends on, they say, and the private sector also fails to recognize the importance

of quality child care. "If all the child-care facilities in the state closed for one day, the ramifications would be tremendous," said Susan Christofferson, director of the

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Nurturing Center, a child-care information and referral service in Kalispell.

Christofferson said the public and private sectors would be crippled if day-care centers were to close, because mothers and fathers everywhere would have to stay home.

Day-care shut-downs have in fact taken place in Seattle

and Spokane.

"Collectively, it's a huge market, and we think it's going to get bigger," Christofferson said, referring to the demand for day care.

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## Rock and roll

Volunteer Eve McGhee, 68, rocks twins Isaih and Zachery Holter at The Nurtur in a program that, among other things, allows young mothers to return to high school. Marlyn James, program administrator, says that 15 babies are now being cared for. Sixty people age 18-80 have volunteered to spend 2-hour shifts each week rocking, feeding and changing the babies, giving them one-on-one care. As many as three volunteers at a time help James and her three staff members care for the babies age 6 weeks to 3 years old. (Inter Lake photo by Karen Nichols.)

# Unique program for teen parents

**K**ALISPELL (AP) — Teen-age parents will be able to get instruction and experience in raising their children while continuing their own education under a new project being launched this fall at Flathead High School.

"To the best of my knowledge, there is no other program like this," said Susan Christofferson of The Nurturing Center. "... This project is going to impact this society so much."

In a partnership with the home economics department at Flathead High School, The Nurturing Center is opening The Nurtury — a day-care and educational center for teen parents and their children, families involved with Child Protective Services and other special-needs children.

Teen-age parents participating in the program will take a one-period class that focuses on the unique circumstances of teen parents. The class instructs young parents on coping with new responsibilities, parenting and child development, and financial and work skills to help them live independently.

"Society is going to have to support these students if they don't learn to do it for themselves," explained teacher Betty Thompson, who is coordinating the school project.

Meanwhile, the teens' children will be cared for at The Nurtury. And another hour of the students' day will be spent in the "lab" at The Nurtury, where the young parents practice parenting skills. Students receive a half-credit for their time at the center.

The program is designed for girls like Monica Reum. Last spring, at age 16, Reum gave birth to Cory. She is committed to her son but knows she needs to keep going to school: "It's hard to get through life not going through school."

When Reum returns to school this fall, she'll know that Cory is in good hands at The Nurtury.

The Nurtury is licensed to care for 24 children, Christofferson said. They will probably be 6 weeks to 3 years old. After that, the children can enter Head Start.

She estimates it will cost about \$25 a day to take care of each child. Students must pay for

child care at The Nurtury, although scholarships are available for those who can't.

Payments for state-referred clients should make the program self-supporting, she said. "I believe strongly in this partnership. The city of Kalispell and Flathead County have to be invested in the future of families," she said, noting that the governments can levy 1 mill for child support if they wish.

"How much money are we going to save our city by having healthy, happy, productive workers in another 20 years?" she said. "Kids at risk need an extra boost."

Christofferson doesn't expect much controversy over operating a day-care center that caters to teen parents.

"We didn't create the need. We're just responding to it. We have to separate ourselves from making the judgment whether it's right or wrong to have a child," he said.

"As a mother and father parent a child, so must the community parent families. We've been isolated for too long."