

Crisis in the centre

Daycare - it's more than just mom and apple pie

By MARILYN SMITH

"Carol's making a hell of a mess." Carol paid no attention to Lisa's remark and continued to wring out her soggy sandwich crusts. They were soggy because she'd overdunked them in her chocolate milk.

Carol and Lisa are two of 38 kids at the York Co-Operative Daycare Centre. They come five days a week, while their parents — students, staff and faculty — go off to the York factory. The kids stay in Grad Residence 3, eating their snacks, taking their naps, playing and learning in an environment a lot of people hope meets their needs.

There are limitations. And right now the biggest one is the inadequacy of their location. The university donated three apartments and the lobby of Grad Residence three last year after their old quarters in Winters College became too crowded.

But a lobby is after all a lobby, and the three apartments were not meant for the eating, napping and playing habits of 38 kids ages five months through five years. Things like non-washable paint on the wall and carpet instead of tile in the eating area account for a good deal of the shabbiness in parts of the centre.

Cramped conditions

Come naptime, 28 camp cots are crammed in three small apartment rooms. At every twitch and turn, one kid is rolling over onto his neighbour. And kids do a lot of twitching and turning.

The cots are set up after the lunch tables and over-turned wire-basket seats are piled up in a corner out of the way. Then after the nap, the cots are put away, and the tables and seats put back down.

In between this backstage juggle of sets, the kids go off to the lobby. Here the carpet is an asset to their rough and tumble play. A jungle gym takes up one whole corner of the area, and the picketed-off infants' area another corner. For the rest, it's a mad jumble of kiddycars, trikes, tractors and other wheeled paraphernalia.

Right now, staff can cope with the crowded conditions by sending some of the kids outside to the playground just off the lobby. But come winter, all those little bodies bumping into one another is going to create tensions.

Success created problems

In some ways, it's the overwhelming success of the centre that has created the problems. From a beginning three years ago with 18 children and an unstructured program, the centre expanded at a ratio that has completely outstripped the available provisions. Now there are 38 full and part time children enrolled. In September there was a waiting list of over 200 names.

What happened to those people? Most likely they found alternative arrangements, the daycare staff says, but at the sacrifice of the convenience and comparative bargain rates of the York centre.

The monthly \$55 fee still doesn't allow the centre to break even. Last year's debt of \$1,950 has been covered by a \$2,200 grant from Council of the York Student Federation, but increasing costs cannot be met, especially if the centre is to maintain its original goal of good, inexpensive and convenient daycare facilities.

A lot of changes have occurred since the inception of the original centre by women from the Women's Liberation Movement. This excerpt

from a report by Elody Scholz, a parent and student with two kids at the centre, gives an insight into the spirit of the original centre.

"We operated that first year in two rooms of Winters College with 18 children ranging from three weeks to over four years. From the beginning, the centre strove to develop a feeling of trust and co-operation between all the parents and children. A totally unstructured program for the children allowed them a maximum of freedom to learn. Parents shared voluntarily in all activities of the centre. Any child whose parents were connected with the university, whether students, faculty or staff, was accepted. During the fall of 1969 we were unlicensed, and not officially recognized by the university. By mid-term however, we were under considerable pressure by the university to comply with government regulations and became licensed under the Day Nurseries Act of Ontario."

Had to follow regulations

Compliance with the Day Nurseries regulations meant hiring two full-time staff members, with qualifications recognized by the Day Nurseries Board. To pay the staff, more children were enrolled and the fee schedule drastically raised.

The original co-operative structure no longer worked according to Scholz. Some parents worked a nine to five day, and weren't available for shifts in the centre. They required a daycare service, not a co-operative. From a loose system of voluntary participation, the centre moved to an elaborate committee system headed by two co-ordinators. Decision making was made in general meetings.

Finding this system too restrictive

for day to day practicality, the parents and staff decided this year to elect three parent co-ordinators. They handle liaison with the university and government agencies, enrolments, and schedules for parents. They also act as a committee on general matters. All major policy changes are still made in general meetings.

Parents help too

Five full-time and two part-time staff members now service the centre. In addition, each parent must give one half day of service each week. That generally means serving a shift in the centre, but laundry and other duties are handled by those parents who can't get away from their jobs during the day.

Each of the five full-time staffers has training in childcare. Their qualifications include university, European and community college approaches to the field. Each of the five, all female, work with a particular age group. And although it has fallen on the women to staff the centre, the fathers of the children serve their tour of duty.

This element of the co-operative approach, parents sharing in the making and workings of the centre, is being lost as the centre expands. The traditional approach to the nursery school is not the approach of the daycare centre.

In a nursery school, the children are age-grouped. The York centre works in age group shifts for certain activities because of lack of space. But generally an open-ended system where the children cut across all age groups prevails. Consequently, there is an enriched interaction process that the average child, living in a nuclear family where he is one of a kind, or at school, where he is one in an uni-age group, never experiences. It's a move back to the social atmosphere of the big clan family structure. The child is exposed to large numbers of people of all age groups, infants through to adults.

Children exposed to others

Consequently, says one mother, the children at the centre are confident and active. They get along well together, and they can relate to a number of adults instead of just mommy and daddy.

If the co-operative system is to succeed, then centres will have to remain small. Only then can parents really participate and create their kind of structure.

But there are limiting factors. The most important is the demand for daycare facilities. With a waiting list last fall of 200 names, can a few

privileged parents be content to operate just because their needs are met? Projections for next year predict large numbers of applicants.

The centre has asked the university for help. For the immediate future, a secretary is being hired to chase down provincial monies that can be used for capital costs in setting up new centres. Hopefully, 80 per cent of costs should qualify for government coverage. The centre is asking that the university cover 10 percent of the costs, with daycare fees paying the rest of the bill.

Some say it takes \$20,000 to establish a daycare centre. This is a ridiculous figure, Scholz claims. "Capital costs at the most would be \$5,000."

Centre presented brief

The centre has presented a brief to president David Slater and vice-president William Small, listing the rationale for planning future centres. They have suggested that two types of daycare be provided in 1972.

One large service type centre would provide care for 40 to 60 children. This centre would be professionally run, and parents who are unable or unwilling to work and contribute their efforts to a co-operative daycare centre would find this kind of daycare to their needs. This centre could be built as an annex to proposed Grad Residence 4, and would be Metro or provincially funded.

Another daycare centre for next year could then be run exclusively as a cooperative effort. Because this type of centre is more oriented to a community of parents, staff and children, the ideal size would be 20 to 30 children. This kind of daycare could hopefully get its funding through campus organizations. Space needs would be smaller and perhaps found in a college or the Ross Humanities building.

Demand rising

Even with the proposed expansion, the demand will exceed the facilities. People at the existing centre say they realize this, but they want controlled expansion. Subsidy to parents for the daycare fees is provided through Metro, but fees for a daycare service will be higher than those for co-operative daycare.

Slater has shown an interest in the expansion program. But the ultimate decision is up to the senate's academic committee. They will decide what kind of priority the daycare issue has for York.

Possibilities for community service in the centre extend beyond staff, student and faculty parents. In their report, the centre suggested



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