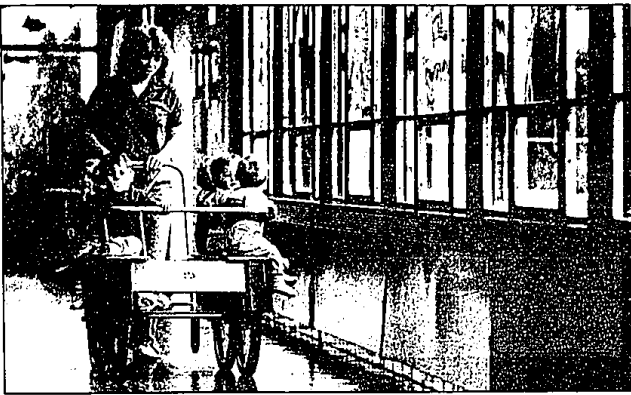


Day care center serves needs for all



STEVE FECHT/staff photographer

How do you take six infants, ranging in age from 6 to 12 months, for a ride? Newborn instructor Elaine Gardner uses a special push cart to treat her young charges to a trip down the halls at the Learning Tree Child Care Center, Livonia.

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ent's gut feeling, but they need to spend time at a child care center. The more they know about it, the better, said Carol Tresik, Learning Tree's executive director.

"I THINK parents who spend time in a center feel better about what they're doing and they deserve that," she said. "They want small class sizes, and they want to know that their child will be hugged when he's upset."

Carol Gatewood started the center because of her own frustrations as a working mother.

"The directors of the child care facilities I was using seemed to have no concept of what a working mother's needs are," she said. "They never seemed to consider their rules and regulations in relation to how it would affect working parents."

The Learning Tree is one of 392 centers in the country accredited by the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs. It gears its programs to the needs of the children and tries to make parents feel pampered.

It offers child care for infants 2 weeks old up to children 5 years of age. It keeps class sizes and the ratio of workers to children small and

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—Carol Tresik
executive director
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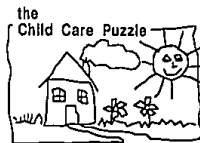
groups children by physical and developmental age.

It also offers parent workshops and, to give working mothers more time with their children, has a carry-out dinner program.

"I'VE SEEN mothers sob and sob; it's real hard for them to turn their child over to someone else for the day," Tresik said. "But we work with them and tell them to call a hundred times a day, if it will make them feel better."

The center doesn't try to become a substitute mother for the children although what's best for them is its primary concern.

"The optimum is to have this wonderful nanny like Mary Poppins come into your home, but that just doesn't exist out there, so parents



Monday
Choosing home over career and the effects of non-parental care on children.

Thursday, Dec. 24
Some suggestions on how to resolve the child care puzzle.

have to feel good about what they're doing," she said. "What's best for the parents isn't always best for the children, but once you alleviate their guilt it works out for the best for both."

"When you look at those big eyes and they're so trusting, how can you not give them the best care?"

Education stepping in to child care picture

By Sue Mason
staff writer

Education.
It probably reaches out and touches more people than the telephone. By state law, youngsters must begin their formal education by age 6. Most, however, start at age 5 with kindergarten and some start even earlier with a preschool program.

Considering that, could one answer to the child care dilemma come from education?

Quite possibly. Education after all, whether by design or default, already has provided solutions to a number of society's problems like sex education and AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) education.

Educators bristle at the thought of

being society's "institution of last resort," but one state official doesn't see parents turning to their schools for help as a back-handed insult.

"I can understand how it (education addressing society's problems) can happen," said Carolyn Logan, an early childhood education supervisor with the Michigan Department of Education. "It's not a choice by default but because it's logical. I can't think of one institution like education that has such an impact on families."

"Schools are one way of touching all families no matter what the income level."

But, Logan cautioned, parents shouldn't expect a quick fix when it comes to the child care dilemma.

ALL OF the money the state Department of Education has set aside for school-age latchkey child care is used to pay for the expansion or improvement of existing programs or for the planning and development of such programs.

The money comes from the federal government and this year the state will distribute \$118,922 to 18 established projects and 12 initiative projects. Logan estimates that 1,500 students between 4 and 13 years of age will benefit from this year's grants — a drop in the bucket considering the current need.

And when it comes right down to it, that's all parents can expect from the state at present.

The response to parental needs has come at the local level and even that is sporadic at best. School districts with declining enrollment found a way of using vacant school buildings by offering child care to residents, most on a tuition basis.

The Livonia Public Schools have devoted all but one classroom at the

former Jackson School to early childhood programs. More than 400 youngsters attend programs at the school, and there's a waiting list for any and all vacancies.

The Redford Union School District's moms and tots classes for 3- and 4-year-olds is very popular with residents and for 10 years it operated PREP, a prototype for preschool programs nationwide.

BUT WITH its financial difficulties — attributable to its heavy dependence on state school aid — PREP has been discontinued and the district is limited in expanding child care programs.

Just the opposite is true in the Farmington School District. It offers half-day sessions for preschoolers 3 to 5, but because its school buildings are so full due to an influx of students it can't even consider child

care programs, even for employees.

Educators agree that a positive preschool experience better prepares youngsters for school, but who should provide it is in dispute.

Some advocates are looking at the need for keeping latchkey children at school or in close proximity to schools, not necessarily as an extension of the school day, but to offer constructive leisure activities.

"We have evidence that a lot of unsafe and unhealthy things happen to a child who leaves school and is responsible to himself because he has no supervision," Logan said. "The need for quality child care is important not only to the child, but education."

"Who are the kids who are less likely to get into trouble? They're the ones in extracurricular activities and sports."

THE IMPORTANCE of quality child care is a given fact and Logan said the state is looking at it. After all, "there's no way education won't be involved, and I'm sure it will be a major factor in it (resolving the child care dilemma)," she said.

One solution may be an earlier start to schooling — bringing children into a school setting for academic and leisure activities geared to their age levels.

It's a logical answer and very likely to happen, but "on a blanket basis, it's a way off," Logan said.

"Education is being forced to prioritize its needs, and I think that the change in the grant this year to include programs for 4-year-olds is an indication of the realization of the need for quality child care," she said.



STEVE FECHT/staff photographer

Oversized blocks with plenty of crawl space were just right for Robin Hall (left) and Tracy Repoz to play a tiny tots' game of hide and seek.

Schools seen as answer

By Sue Mason
staff writer

It may well be a case of "when all else fails..."

Working parents are desperately seeking an answer to the child care problem and more and more are turning to the educational system.

In April, the state Department of Education's Project Outreach surveyed 801 residents statewide for their opinions about public education.

One of the questions dealt with public schools providing full-day preschool programs for 3- and 4-year-olds. The answers were indicative of a mood that says the educational system holds the key to the child care dilemma.

The survey showed that 65 percent of those polled favored such programs and 63 percent expressed support for public schools offering a self-supporting before and after school day care program for children of working parents.

Educators admit that school districts will play a role in providing a quality alternative in child care, but where the money will come from is a question they would like answered first.

"A school district has only so much drive and energy to put into a program, and we have all these other things that need to be addressed," said Kenneth Erickson, superintendent of the Redford Union School District. "The state is moving toward funding preschool programs and districts traditionally go where the money is."

"I'D SAY once the state starts funding them, they'll become a part of the educational program," Livonia School Superintendent

James Carli agreed.

"School districts are going to deal with this problem, so whatever we can do in working with parents has a payoff for all of us, but there has to be funding," he said. "But one of the big fights in Lansing right now is funding in the state aid bill for preschool programs when the K-12 (kindergarten-12th grade) formula isn't being funded fully."

Organized child care service has been some school districts' solution to what to do with vacant school buildings. The need was there and school districts had the space available.

The Livonia Public Schools converted the former Jackson Elementary School into an early childhood center. Four hundred preschoolers attend the center and there's a waiting list for any openings that occur.

"School districts are groping with the role of public education in terms of an obvious acute need," Carli said. "In so many cases people have looked to the schools to solve the problems of society because we deal with so many people."

"The trend is obvious and what we're trying to do is a reflection of society and working parents."

"SCHOOL districts realize that there's a wide diversity in the quality of child care," said Joan Lessen-Firestone, an early childhood development specialist with the Oakland County Intermediate School District. "It makes good sense that if you're going to deal with these children at age 5, they should have a quality experience before then."

"Schools understand that rather than warehousing youngsters we need to give them a nurturing experience that will allow them to grow and develop."

In Oakland County about half of the school districts offer some kind of full-time day care and almost two-thirds offer before and after school care, Firestone said.

One school district, while aware of the need, hasn't been able to respond. The Farmington School District is growing and needs its classroom space to accommodate the influx of new students.

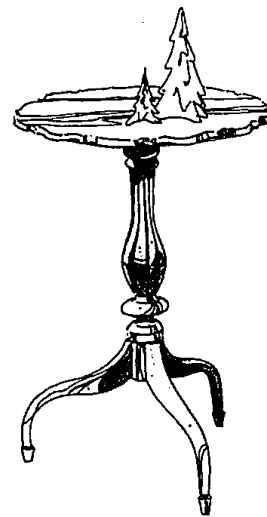
"Child care for working parents is a huge problem and, certainly, it's recognized, but we haven't been able to take action on it," said Mary Lou Ankles, assistant superintendent for special services. "And I'm not sure educators have come to the conclusion that full-day sessions are beneficial for such young children."

Educators for the most part agree that public schools will provide a solution to the problem of quality child care and that the pressure of school districts to take in children at young ages will continue.

"IT'S ESPECIALLY likely because good, quality child care isn't any more affordable for all parents than \$10,000 to send them to private school," Firestone said. "Child care is the responsibility of everyone in society, not just parents. It isn't just a fad, so parents, school districts and the government are going to have to work together to solve the problem."

Erickson would like to see schools operate child care facilities in cooperation with other special agencies. He's concerned that school-based programs may emphasize academics too much and put unnecessary pressure on preschoolers.

"Schools are more the institution of last resort for problems like this," Erickson added. "And it's a convenience for schools to become responsible for solving society's problems."



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