

Baby Bliss

Infant Care Gets Boost

BY BONNIE ELGIE, CALGARY HERALD JUNE 11, 2009



Teacher Renee Ellsworth plays patty cakes with youngsters in her care at BabyWorks, a program launched by the Churchill Park Family Care Society. The children are, from left, Liam, Addison and, on her lap, Alastair.

Photograph by: Ted Rhodes, Calgary Herald, Calgary Herald

One of the most difficult decisions parents will ever face is finding the right child care for their kids.

For parents of infants, it can be especially stressful as they make the transition from maternity leave back to work.

Crick Nelson, mother of 17-month-old Mackenzie, remembers her emotional and challenging search for child care in the fall of 2008, and how one local non-profit group offered the perfect solution.

"Like any parent, the thought of leaving my daughter with someone else was hard. In my mind, there was no one who could ever take care of her as well as I could," she says.

For Calgary parents like Nelson, the options for good infant care are limited. Many day cares do not offer care for children under the age of two, because of the high staffing, equipment and program costs associated with this young age group.

However, in November 2008, a program called BabyWorks was launched by the Churchill Park Family Care Society, answering an urgent need for high quality care for infants in Calgary.

"The idea to open a centre that specializes in babies came after emotional conversations with parents who would agonize with us about the difficulty in finding safe, loving care for their babies that would relieve their anxiety about returning to work or school," explains Noreen Murphy, Churchill Park's executive director.

"It's still extremely tough to find infant care. That's why we are so pleased to offer Baby-Works as a service to our community."

Mackenzie Nelson started at BabyWorks on November 3, 2008, the day the program officially opened.

"Within a day, I was completely reassured that we had made the right choice," remembers her mom. "The staff answered my e-mails and phone calls very quickly, and quashed all my anxiety about leaving her. They were so respectful and responsive."

Murphy explains that BabyWorks is as much about making the parents comfortable in leaving their children, as it is about providing extraordinary infant care.

"Our staff is very experienced and understanding. They know that this is a very stressful time for parents. We offer an environment of protection, support and excitement for the children, and also focus on very detailed communication with very nervous parents."

The ratio of staff workers to children is one to three, meaning each child care provider forms strong bonds with the families. There is very detailed reporting to parents on everything from what the children ate or drank, to when they napped and how many dirty diapers they had.

"There is no typical day here," says Murphy. "Every child has its own schedule and diet. No one is made to follow a specific schedule."

She adds that staff spend the day "low to the ground", on the floor interacting with the children. The children are divided by ages, with the toddlers in one room and the young infants in another.

"We don't wear shoes in the centre," she adds. "The staff are all on their hands and knees with the little ones and all of the equipment is ankle-high."

BabyWorks programming promotes all stages of growth for very young children, including gross motor

skills, sensory development and a nutritional menu. Parents provide supplies like diapers and wipes, as well as any special dietary foods. It's an approach that works well for both the parents and kids.

Adds Nelson, "Mackenzie is happy at BabyWorks. She is always doing something whether it's being outside, going for a walk, painting or playing with other kids. I love coming to pick her up and finding her covered in paint. It means she is having a good time. She doesn't want to leave at the end of the day, but she wants me to come play with her."

BabyWorks is located in the neighbourhood of Hillhurst Sunnyside at 1407-7th Ave., a short-distance to downtown. The cost is \$1,375 per month for children up to 18 months old, and \$1,100 per month for children 19 months to two years old.

There is currently space available for infants and toddlers. Interested parents can inquire at (403) 457-4370.

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