

Child care crisis in Coachella Valley

The Coachella Valley is facing a child care crisis. In a special report, The Desert Sun reveals:

- ▶ Licensed child care is available for only about one in five of the 191,455 children in Riverside County with working parents.
- ▶ Riverside County is ranked 55th out of 58 counties in the state in terms of child care supply.
- ▶ Many centers are filled, forcing parents to add their names to already long waiting lists.
- ▶ The shortage is especially acute for parents looking for specialized care, such as infant and toddler care, evening or weekend care, and care for special needs children.

"What we have is a critical lack of child care in Riverside County," said Jan Peterson, executive director of the Riverside County Child Care Consortium. "The reality is, there has always been a shortage of child care in the desert, but it has been exacerbated in the past five, six years since the growth in the desert area has become so dramatic."

our report:

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The gap between the available slots in licensed child care programs in the Coachella Valley and the number of children who need care isn't likely to narrow anytime soon.

[Valley faces child care crisis](#)

At a time when 42 people a day are moving to the desert, a child care shortage has left parents struggling to find suitable child care.

[Three desert families offer lessons from their child care searches](#)

Three desert families answer the question: What experiences did you have in searching for child care for your family?



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We want to hear your stories of finding – and retaining – quality child care. What tips can you offer new parents or new-to-the-desert families? What have been your frustrations? And what possible solutions do you have?

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- [Riverside County Children and Families Commission](#)
- [Riverside County Department of Public Social Services](#)
- [Riverside County Child Care Consortium](#)
- [Family YMCA of the Desert](#)
- [California Child Care Resource and Referral Network](#)
- [The Community Care Licensing Division](#)

Experts: Time to get creative with child care

By Jennifer Larson
The Desert Sun
December 20th, 2004



The gap between the available slots in licensed child care programs in the Coachella Valley and the number of children who need care isn't likely to narrow anytime soon.

But child care providers and early education experts do have some ideas for possible strategies to reduce that gap. One strategy is emphasizing the economic angle, and others focus on creative solutions.

According to Nancy Maich, special projects coordinator for First Five Riverside, the top priority is to find ways to build capacity and to make child care more affordable.

But as she told a recent meeting of the Coachella Valley Child Care Council, it's expensive to run a child care business, so providers need some help.

For example, First Five Riverside hopes to nurture the creation of more buildings throughout Riverside County with the AbCd program. The AbCd initiative strives to provide developers with incentives to build more child care centers and to use existing spaces in schools, churches and community centers for licensed child care operations.

The City of Palm Desert is also stepping up. The city commissioned a child care nexus study to see how a developer fee could be collected and administered to expand child care offerings.

Child care availability is important to employers said Rick Daniels, president and chief executive officer of the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership, a local nonprofit organization that works to recruit companies to relocate to the valley.

"Employers care if their workers show up and if their workers can be productive and do their jobs," he said. "And having to worry about...whether their children are being properly cared for can get in the way of that."

But employer-sponsored child care is typically the domain of large employers, and the Coachella Valley is still mostly a collection of small businesses. Small businesses usually can't justify the expense of operating or sustaining child care for their employees, Daniels said.

But Susan Shepardson said employers would be helping their employees be more reliable if they had better access to dependable child care.

"I think it's an issue employers need to look at, said Shepardson, child care coordinator for

Riverside County's Department of Public Social Services.

Another way to help out providers is to assist them in getting licensed, a primary function of the the Coachella Valley Child Care Council.

According to Jan Peterson, executive director of the Riverside County Child Care Consortium, that's an excellent idea.

"We have a very high percentage of children being cared for in unlicensed facilities, because the cost of providing the licensed facilities is so high," she said. "The consortium is working very hard to assist these people to become licensed because it is beneficial for both the safety of the child and the safety of the provider."

Providing on-going training -- or funding for such education -- to help child care workers stay current is another proposed solution.

According to Shepardson, the turnover of child care workers is high, so it can be hard to maintain a highly-qualified staff.

The Riverside County Child Care Careers Academy was established to address that need by providing stipends to child care workers. They can earn up to \$1,700 for taking a series of classes and workshops.

For many families, even if there are available spaces in child care facilities, the availability of affordable child care options is the major barrier.

So experts advocate finding additional ways to lower the cost, through grants or scholarships.

"There just needs to be more funding to assist families with child care costs," said Susana Dauto, first vice president of the Coachella Valley Child Care Council.

Dauto, the owner of Storyland Preschool in Desert Hot Springs, recently opened a new center in Coachella, which theoretically expands the availability of child care in that area of the valley.

But she sometimes has a couple of empty spaces in the new facility because not every parent can afford to pay the \$140-per-child weekly fee. And Dauto said she can't reduce the cost because she has to pay her staff -- and she wants to maintain a good staff of child care workers.

The Coachella Valley Child Care Council also supplies some scholarships to help low-income families with child care, also advocates for more funding to help those families.

Parent Doreen Guerrero has another idea for reducing cost while boosting availability. The Cathedral City mom and nurse, who often works evenings, noted that she'd like to see providers offer a little more flexibility in cost for parents who may not need full-time care during the day.

"It would be nice if the (child care centers) close to my house charged an hourly rate, instead of weekly," she said.

The Coachella Valley might also consider strategies that other states have experimented with, such as the At-Home Infant Care program that Minnesota established in 1998.

That program gave certain low-income parents a choice between receiving a monthly stipend to stay home and care for their children for a certain amount of time, or returning to work and using a state subsidy to pay for child care. But it was not without controversy. And the program's funding was eventually decreased when state funds were cut, and the program was repealed.

Other states, such as Missouri, New Mexico, Illinois and Iowa have also considered similar programs, as did Montana, which created a pilot program modeled after the Minnesota program.

Utah established a program that gives income tax credits to parents who provide full-time in-home care for infants.

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Valley faces child care crisis

Growth in the valley means the demand far outstrips the supply

by Jennifer Larson
The Desert Sun
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Desperate to find someone to care for her infant son, Kaycee Pollard worried she would have to quit her job.

Wenona Rexinger once turned down a job promotion at a local hotel because she couldn't find child care for the nights and weekends she would have had to work.

And Desiree Eggers feared she would be fired from her job because her day care center couldn't cope with her daughter's behavioral problems.

They are just a few of the thousands of Coachella Valley parents confronting a family crisis: There is not enough licensed child care for the growing number of children moving to the desert with their working parents.

And in many cases, when parents do find licensed child care -- in either private homes or centers -- they can barely afford to pay the bill.

At a time when 42 people a day are moving to the desert, the shortage has left parents struggling to find suitable child care.

For many, the only solution is an unsteady patchwork of whatever's available -- friends, neighbors, families or unlicensed providers who aren't overseen by the state or county.

And the struggle to find the right kind of child care at the right price takes its toll on many parents.

"I was almost crying, it was so stressful," Pollard said, remembering how she used to think, "I'm going to have to quit my job because I don't have any place to take my son."



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COACHELLA VALLEY CHILDCARE CRISIS

5 TIPS ON FINDING LOCAL CHILD CARE

- **FINDING RESOURCES:**

For a list of local providers and financial aid information, contact the Riverside County Office of Education's Children's Services Unit at (800) 442-4927, or the Indio branch at 863-3345.

- **AFTER-SCHOOL**

PROGRAMS: To find care for school-age children, contact the Family YMCA of the Desert at 341-9622; the Coachella Valley Park and Recreation District at 347-3484; or one of several local Boys & Girls Clubs.

- **ASK AROUND:** Check with neighbors, friends, churches, synagogues and your child's school for recommendations.

- **CHECK THE PHONE**

BOOK: It's the only place some providers advertise.

- [Post or read comments in our online forums](#)

"What we have is a critical lack of child care in Riverside County," said Jan Peterson, executive director of the Riverside County Child Care Consortium.

A Desert Sun analysis shows problems are mounting:

- Licensed child care is available for only about one in five of the 191,455 children in Riverside County with working parents.
- Riverside County is ranked 55th out of 58 counties in the state in terms of child care supply.
- Many centers are filled, forcing parents to add their names to already long waiting lists.
- The shortage is especially acute for parents looking for specialized care, such as infant and toddler care, evening or weekend care, and care for special needs children.

The Coachella Valley, like the rest of Riverside County, is seeing unprecedented growth, according to the U.S. Census. The new arrivals are worsening the child care crunch in California's fastest growing county.

"The reality is, there has always been a shortage of child care in the desert, but it has been exacerbated in the past five, six years since the growth in the desert area has become so dramatic," Peterson said.

The Riverside County Office of Education Children's Services Unit, a local resource and referral agency, estimates that licensed child care is available for only 18 percent of Riverside County children with parents in the work force.

Most local centers and family-based providers keep waiting lists for open spots, and they rarely have problems filling vacancies.

The Bermuda Dunes Learning Center started a waiting list within a month of opening in 1993. The center was licensed to care for 60 children then and now cares for 180.

"We have always been full with a waiting list," said owner and co-director Gayle Clark. "Approximately 75 to 100 are on the wait list. That's fairly typical for our center."

Cathy Knudsen, child care coordinator for the Family YMCA of the Desert, reported that all of the Y's preschool programs are full with waiting lists. The Y offers child care for more than 960 children each weekday at 12 local sites, including several public schools. Fees are on a sliding scale based on family income.

"We would be able to serve more if we had more space," Knudsen said.

Shortages in the desert, experts say, mirror national child care trends.

"It's just a pretty tough situation out there," said Linda Smith, executive director of NACCRRRA, a national network of child care resources and referrals. "It's very difficult to find

high quality child care."

And parents do want high quality, safe child care. As parent and Palm Desert resident Julia Littig-Vance said, "My children spend most of the day there."

Having enough licensed child care spots is essential because it ensures there's oversight of the providers, family experts say.

In California, the state department of social services' Community Care Licensing Division oversees licensing of both family-based and center-based child care providers.

To qualify for a license, providers must make sure their facilities meet the state's safety and space requirements, which can sometimes require expensive additions or renovations.

The cost factor

Cost is certainly one major factor. Child care is expensive to buy and expensive to provide.

"Affordability is probably the top issue," said Gloria Kinzler, coordinator of the county's Children's Services Unit in Indio.

Various estimates put the average cost of child care in Riverside County at \$4,000 to \$5,000 a year for one child.

According to the California Child Care Resource and Referral Network, center-based care in the county cost nearly \$5,800 for one preschooler in 2002.

That's nearly \$500 per month for one child. Tack on another child, and the bill skyrockets.

It costs even more to procure care for an infant. Many parents pay \$800 a month or more.

"The cost of a month of child care is equal to a month's rent," Kinzler said.

And that's out of reach for many working parents, she said. They might be barely scraping by on minimum wage and still not qualify for government subsidies, leaving them to figure out how to pay for child care all on their own.

The state funnels federal dollars to needy families for child care through the CalWORKs program, which helps parents who are making the transition from welfare to work, and through the Alternative Payment Program, or APP. That program helps pay for child care for low-income parents who are attending school or working.

To qualify for assistance, a family of two must prove that its monthly gross income is less than \$2,700. A family of four would need to gross less than \$3,200 each month.

Then, they would qualify for a subsidy -- that is, if the money is available. And often the

waiting lists for subsidies are long, Kinzler said.

About 1,400 kids in the desert are being served by those assistance programs and others overseen by the Riverside County Office of Education. But about 8,000 families in Riverside County are on the waiting list for state subsidies through the Alternative Payment Program.

"If there's 8,000 in the county, you can figure there's at least a third of that in the desert," Kinzler said.

In 1996, federal legislation was passed to reform the nation's welfare laws. The Department of Labor created a program called Welfare-to-Work to encourage people on the welfare rolls to make the transition.

As people began moving off welfare and going to work, the need for child care shot up dramatically, Peterson said.

In California, state funds for subsidies have been cut while the need continues to escalate.

"I don't know that we're ever going to meet that need because the state keeps resisting the effort to fund it fully," Peterson said.

Experts say cost shouldn't be the only factor parents consider, however. Parents also need to keep quality and safety in mind, even though some might feel they don't have that luxury.

Monica Arledge, who cares for children in her La Quinta home, said the first question she gets from parents is, "How much do you charge?"

"I want to tell them: 'You're not shopping for a car. You're looking for a responsible person to take care of your child,' " she said.

Babies and toddlers

Infant and toddler care is also at a premium in the desert.

About 5 percent of the licensed child care centers in Riverside County have spots for infants, according to county estimates. Even child care providers who have openings rarely have spots for these youngest of children.

Boehm Child Connection in Palm Desert recently opened an infant room, where Ronnie Montez and Alicia Aguilar keep a sharp eye on as many as eight babies each day.

"We already have a waiting list," director Stella Leonard said as Montez sang "The Itsy Bitsy Spider" to two wide-eyed babies who lolled on the floor next to her knees. "The demand is there."

Many centers do not offer care for infants or for toddlers younger than about 2 years. The state

requires a lower worker-to-child ratio for infant care, which makes it more expensive to provide than care for preschool-age children. For example, Boehm charges \$800 per month to care for one infant -- higher than the preschool rate because the center needs more workers to care for the babies.

"We did it not because it was cost effective but because there was such a need," Leonard said.

In fact, Boehm Child Connection is planning to expand its infant program by five more spaces.

"The need is there," Leonard said, stopping to chat with Shawna Risnes, who was hoping to find a place at Boehm for her 11-month-old daughter, Tara.

Risnes, a self-employed Palm Desert resident, knows about the need for infant care as well as anyone.

"I've called around, and most places are not taking this age range," Risnes said of her daughter.

That was Kaycee Pollard's problem, too.

Pollard, who lives with her parents in Palm Springs, returned to work when her son, Caleb, was about 4 months old. But the first child-care provider she found for Caleb went out of business.

That sent Pollard into a panic.

"I was just out of luck, looking everywhere," she said.

One family-based child care facility she looked at didn't seem safe enough for a soon-to-be-mobile infant, and another was convenient but too expensive.

"It's supposed to be a really good place, but I can't afford \$200 a week for day care," said Pollard, who works as a front desk supervisor for a local hotel. "I barely have enough money left over to pay my car payment and to make sure that Caleb has food and diapers."

She felt fortunate to finally find a spot for Caleb in a licensed home-based center in Cathedral City, even though she is still on a waiting list for a state subsidy and must pay the entire \$130 weekly fee out of her own pocket.

"Everybody was full," she said. "Lisa (her new child care provider) just happened to have an opening, and I was so happy."

Untraditional hours

It's much easier for parents who work nine-to-five, Monday through Friday to find day care than for those who work evenings or weekends.

Doreen and Roman Guerrero of Cathedral City sometimes scramble to find someone to care

for their 17-month-old daughter, Marie.

Doreen often works into the wee hours as a nurse at Eisenhower Medical Center. Her husband has slightly more regular hours because he teaches school, but he often has night meetings.

During the day, a woman in Coachella watches Marie, but the Guerreros had no luck finding a child care center with evening care for the nights when both parents work. The centers were either full or too expensive, or both.

So the Guerreros often cobble together care for their daughter, sometimes relying on a neighbor for a few hours of evening care.

"We don't know how we're going to work it out quite yet," Doreen Guerrero said of an upcoming night when both she and Roman would be working.

Wenona Rexinger, who opened a day-care center in her Palm Springs home in 2001, understands the predicament for families like the Guerreros.

In an effort to help parents find quality child care, she launched DesertDaycares.com, a Web site where family-based child care providers can advertise their services.

She said she could count on both hands the number of local providers who offer care seven days a week. Despite the need, there simply aren't many providers willing or able to work the long hours to serve parents who work late or all night -- a common phenomenon among people who work in the service sector or have low-wage jobs.

Monica Arledge used to work nights as a cashier at an Albertsons supermarket. When she discovered she was pregnant with daughter Allie, now 4, she realized there was no way she could work those hours, and evening child care was not readily available.

So Arledge launched her own in-home child care business in 2001. She is now licensed to care for eight children in her spotless La Quinta home, and she never worries about having vacancies.

"I get at least three to four calls a day," Arledge said. "I have to turn them down all the time because I'm full now."

Some of the calls are from parents looking for child care to last later into the evening. But Arledge closes shop at 5 p.m. because she wants to spend time with her own family.

Many other family-based providers do the same.

Sarah Mosley, who launched Family First Child Care in her Cathedral City home about eight years ago, tried to offer longer hours when she first launched her business.

A former McDonald's fast-food restaurant manager, she remembered what it was like to need

child care in the evenings. And she remembered how expensive it was to hire a private nanny - she paid about \$120 per night, three nights a week, for about eight months when her son, Joshua, was a baby.

So Mosley offered care 18 hours a day, seven days a week, for casino workers, grocery store stockers and others who work off hours. But the marathon work days took a toll.

"It burns you out really fast," she said.

The result: Mosley now operates from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. so she can spend time with her own kids.

Special-needs children

Things are tough for parents of special-needs children, too. Child care locally and around the country for these kids is hard to find, according to the National Child Care Information Center, a national clearinghouse affiliated with the federal Administration for Children and Families.

Lynette Aytch, assistant director of the FPG Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, agreed.

"Often, in community-based child care settings, the care staff aren't adequately trained in how to work with children with special needs," she said.

"Sometimes centers may have reluctance in caring for those children because they don't feel they have the adequate resources and support."

Desiree Eggers knows that all too well.

Her younger daughter, Halie, has several medical conditions, including bipolar disorder and Tourette syndrome, that make finding suitable child care more challenging.

Eggers said she found that some caregivers simply couldn't -- or wouldn't -- handle her daughter, now 10 years old.

"I got called daily from the school to come pick up my daughter," she said of one failed experiment. "They would check her in for attendance and then they would call me to come pick her up, or Halie would sit in the office all day."

Luckily, Eggers found child care through Family YMCA of the Desert, where the caregivers have developed a rapport with her daughter.

"At least I can go to work and do my job," she said. "I don't have to worry that I'm going to get called all the time."

Other parents aren't so lucky. But Aytch said the situation could improve if more providers

were given extra training in working with special needs children.

"Training and continuing education is clearly important in providing high-quality service," she said.

"Not only do they need some basic education, they also need some ongoing support and consultation in terms of meeting the needs of young children with disabilities."

She added, "Even the very best center would benefit from having some additional information and expertise in working with those children."

Get started now

The need for child care is only going to increase as the population of the Coachella Valley -- and California -- continues to grow.

In a 2001 study, the National Economic Development and Law Center in Oakland predicted that California's population of those younger than 4 would increase by more than 325,000 during this decade. The number of working parents will also mushroom.

So Smith recommends that parents-to-be start searching for child care as soon as they know a baby is on the way -- or even earlier, if they can.

"Don't wait until you've had a baby to start looking for child care," she said.

"People don't understand what a short supply there is in this country, so they tend to wait," she said. "So they have fewer options than if they started looking earlier."

The Bermuda Dunes Learning Center's Clark agreed.

"We have mothers who are pregnant right now who are waiting to get in," she said.

Her center is always full, so she recommends that parents get on the waiting list as soon as possible. In fact, in January, she'll begin accepting applications for summer and fall 2005.

But parents shouldn't assume that a waiting list spot will eventually guarantee them a child care spot.

Rose Werk, owner of Busy Bees Family Child Day Care in Cathedral City, has about 10 names on her waiting list. She currently cares for six children in her home, but she said it's nearly impossible to predict when a spot will come open.

"I tell my customers that I don't really know when I'll have an opening," Werk said.

"It's first come, first served."

Three desert families offer lessons from their child care searches

The Desert Sun
December 5th, 2004



Name: Sarah Mosley
Children: Sean, 17, Porsha, 15, and Joshua, 8
City: Cathedral City

What experiences did you have in searching for child care for your family? When Mosley's children were small, she often worked many evenings, as did her then-husband. She didn't know about family-based child care providers, so she hired a private nanny for about eight months. It eventually proved to be too expensive. She just couldn't keep paying more than \$350 per week.

What solution did you find? Eight years ago, Mosley took matters into her own hands. She opened a family-based child-care center, Family First Child Care, in her home.

What advice would you give to parents who are looking for care? Keep quality and safety in mind when looking for child care, not just the cost.

"Do a thorough background check. You can call licensing," Mosley said, referring to the state's Community Care Licensing Division. "They can confirm that the license is in good standing and if there are any founded or unfounded complaints."

Name: Irma and Juan Lopez
Children: Vanessa, 14, Juan, 8, and Alejandro, 6
City: La Quinta

What experiences did you have in searching for child care for your family? Irma Lopez hired a private baby sitter when her children were small, and that worked out for a while. "My baby sitter decided to get a job," she said. "I was facing either quitting my job or taking my kids to work with me. I was in a very tight situation at that time."

What solution did you find? About a year ago, Lopez was able to enroll her two younger children in a child care program operated by Family YMCA of the Desert in La Quinta. It was just slightly more expensive than the private baby sitter -- she now pays about \$420 each month -- but Lopez believes it's worth it. The Y's child care is much more reliable, she said.

"You don't have to worry because today (the sitter) has a doctor's appointment," she added.

"You don't have to worry that, oh, I have nobody to baby-sit my kids."

What advice would you give to parents who are looking for care? "I would highly recommend the YMCA," Lopez said. "Go to the YMCA and talk with their representative. They are willing to help you. I know they were willing to help me."

Name: Kathryn Low

Children: Robert, 8, and Matthew, 6

City: La Quinta

What experiences did you have in searching for child care for your family? When Kathryn Low went back to work after a divorce, she first placed Matthew in a nearby child care center, but she found it was expensive. Plus, she had to find a place for Robert to go after kindergarten ended at lunchtime, all while juggling her job.

What solution did you find? She managed to get Robert enrolled in a YMCA program operated on the campus of Carter Elementary School, which turned out to be cheaper than the center where she had placed Matthew. When Matthew entered kindergarten, he also started participating in the Y program. "Just the fact that you didn't have to transport them from one place to another made it a godsend," Low said.

She said that the Y does cost a little bit less, but the convenience factor of having the child care available through the school was what really won her over.

"It was much more convenient because it was all right there," she said.

What advice would you give to parents who are looking for care? "I would call other mothers," Low said. "I would call the YMCA to see what they have to offer ... and the park and rec district."

Low also suggested that parents check child care Web sites for ideas, as well as their children's schools for possible recommendations.

"It's probably going to be difficult," she said. "I would probably recommend an in-home day care while the child is very young."
