

SO YOU WANT TO START A

CHILDCARE

CENTER!



WHY? The answer to this one-word question will influence everything you do. Why *are* you thinking of starting a center? Will it be an outreach to the community? Will it provide a Seventh-day Adventist environment for the children of the congregation? Are you looking for a feeder program for the church school? Or are you hoping to establish a money-maker to support the school or another ministry of the church?

If you are looking for a money raiser, try something else. Doing early childhood education right will cost money, not make it. Unless the church or school (hereafter referred to as the “parent organization”) has a clear idea of the commitment it must make in time and resources, there will be misunderstandings that will produce hurt and angry feelings, monetary loss, and a failure to establish a credible and permanent center.

Each of the other reasons cited above are valid ones; but the parent organization must be very clear about the purpose of the childcare center. Whatever reason a

group chooses for starting a center, it has a moral imperative to make that location the very best possible environment for children. A Christian school or church can do no less and maintain its integrity.

Until fairly recently, churches operated preschools as an outreach ministry. Wives of professionals volunteered their time for half days as staff. Most churches that now operate centers do so full-time, and the volunteer worker is rare.

Historically, Adventists have opposed out-of-home care for young children. Admittedly, a Christian home with competent, devoted parents is the best place for young children, but where are people to turn when they cannot provide full-time care? If they entrust their children to you, this is an enormous and sacred responsibility.

What Steps Should You Take? Commit to Operating a Quality Center

1. *A quality center regards the safety of children, both physical and emotional, as its paramount responsibility.* Administrators’ familiarity with accepted health and safety practices will help ensure wise decisions about the fa-

BY MARILYN BEACH



Whatever reason a group chooses for starting a center, it has a moral imperative to make that location the very best possible environment for children.

cility and its personnel. Health and safety issues will vary according to culture and locale, but there is a core of generally accepted practices to safeguard children in group care. They include:

- Someone trained in first aid and cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR) should be present at the center at all times.
- Because frequent hand washing is the most effective way of preventing the spread of disease, employees should wash their hands when they arrive at the center, and both employees and children should wash before and after handling food, and after wiping noses, attending to toileting tasks, and handling animals. The staff should teach and model proper hand-washing technique.
- Surfaces used for meals should be wiped down with

a solution of one part bleach to 10 parts water after being used for other purposes. Diapering areas need to be wiped down with bleach solution between each use.

- Bathrooms must be cleaned and sanitized daily.
- All substances marked “poison” or “keep out of the reach of children” must be stored in a locked cupboard.
- Areas should be straightened up between activities that require different configurations of space. For example, teachers and children should work together to put things away between free-choice activity time and mealtime, and between mealtime and naptime. The teachers should remain alert to remove hazards in the pathways to the bathroom, playground, and eating area.
- Children should be screened upon arrival to detect contagious illnesses or infections. Parents must be notified if one of the children at the center has an infectious disease.
- An area separate from other children, but still within the visual supervision of an adult, should be provided for sick children until they can be picked up from the center.
- Children must be under adult supervision at all times.
- Each meal served at a center should contain one-third of the daily required nutrients for a child. The administrator should ask parents about their children’s food allergies, and this information should be posted at the center.

- Each snack should include two food groups, with drinks being 100 percent juice.
- Outdoor play equipment, such as swings, slides, and climbing structures should have 7-11 inches of cushioning material underneath and at varying distances around the structure, depending upon the use, to prevent injuries from falls.
- Playground equipment should be regularly inspected to ensure that it is free from cracks, splinters, protruding screws, and sharp corners. Climbing equipment, swings, and slides must be firmly anchored.
- Play equipment should be placed far enough apart for children to circulate without risk of collisions.
- Children should be signed in and out of group care only by an authorized adult (see section on legal issues).
- The center should have a system for reporting in-

juries and illnesses to parents.

- Each child should have an emergency card with contact information and signed consent for treatment.

2. *A quality center employs professionally trained staff who love children and promote their optimal physical, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual development.*

3. *A quality center uses a developmentally appropriate curriculum.* It resists the current political push for formal academics. Young children need to use their senses to explore and manipulate their environment. Because preschoolers learn best by doing, not by hearing or seeing, the curriculum should provide hands-on experiences that employ these methods. More abstract activities, such as workbooks and symbol recognition, should be reserved until children's eyes and brain are ready to learn in that manner, usually around Grade 1. Finally, 2- to 4-year-olds learn best by working with the familiar; therefore, the curriculum should vary by locality, with adaptations to fit geography and culture.

The parent organization must be willing to follow the advice of people who are knowledgeable about quality

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childcare programs. The National Association for the Education of Young Children has a document outlining standards for early childhood programs and curriculum¹ and guidelines for appropriate curriculum.² The American Public Health Association, in cooperation with the American Academy of Pediatrics, has an excellent and comprehensive book about safety, health, and nutrition.³

Decide Who the Center Will Hire.

Will the center have an all-Adventist staff? Many centers hire non-Adventist Christians or even non-Christians. To avoid conflicts with the values and beliefs of the parent organization, it is highly recommended that all staff be members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The center should employ only people with appropriate academic training in early childhood education. Even



the aides should have completed some training in this area. Every applicant should undergo a background check before being hired. Check your local government agencies' licensing requirements.⁴

Write a Mission Statement.

A helpful first step is to write a mission statement, as this will give direction to everything that follows. A core reason for operating a Seventh-day Adventist Child Development Center (CDC) is to provide a safe place for children to live and grow. It should, as closely as possible, model itself after a high-quality Seventh-day Adventist Christian home.

Contact the Local Licensing Agency.

In many locations, centers must meet specific licensure requirements. Talking to the appropriate agency can save much time. For example, I know of one organization that wanted to start a center, but did not have the required square footage for a playground. Finding this out before they began to renovate their building saved them time and money. Another organization built a center and had already chosen paint and carpeting before contacting the licensing agency, only to discover that the facility could

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not be licensed without extensive remodeling. The building now houses a junior high school, and plans for a childcare center have been abandoned.

Contact Your Local Conference.

Some conferences have financial and legal protocols that must be followed in establishing a center. Talk to them before trying to open a center. Keeping the conference informed of your plans will make the process go more smoothly.

Form a Feasibility Committee.

This group should look at space, finances, potential personnel, needs of the community, and church members' attitudes about establishing a center. The committee should develop a survey instrument and poll the parents of potential enrollees. The questionnaire in the book, *When Churches Mind the Children*,⁵ can be used as a guideline.

Survey the Neighborhood.

The community may not need another childcare center; there may be a greater need for after-school or infant care. Contact centers within a five-mile radius to see if they are operating at capacity or have many openings.

This will help you decide what type of center to operate.

Investigate Funding Options.

Who will actually operate the center? The best plan is for the director to report directly to a church or school board (or a subcommittee of one of these groups), rather than to a pastor or principal. Sometimes the interests of the center will conflict with other programs of the parent organization, so the center should have a group of people willing to champion its needs.

Some churches operate centers with local control and support. Schools often operate centers as an extension of their program. A few conferences in the United States assume responsibility for childcare centers, giving guidance as well as administrative and financial support. Some centers, especially outside of the United States, are partially funded by governments.

Some centers are stand-alone programs, but most are connected with a parent organization; a few are operated by a constituency of churches. Some churches rent space to private, for-profit programs.

Renting space to a privately operated group has pros and cons. The advantage is a steady income with minimum effort by the landlord. The



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disadvantage is the likelihood of philosophical conflict and legal risk. If a congregation or its officers become involved with the operation of a center to which the church rents space, it automatically becomes liable for the actions of the center. Another possible disadvantage: The center will be identified as Adventist because of its location when, in fact, it may be diametrically opposed to the practice and philosophy of the parent organization. Renting to a church member does not ensure that he or she will not subcontract or sell the business to someone who may be unaware of or hostile to the values and beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. When renting to an organization or individual, consult with a lawyer first to ascertain your level of risk.

Plan for the Use of Space.

Will the center will have its own rooms or share the space? It is possible for a Sabbath school and a childcare center to coexist, but this arrangement often causes difficulties. Providing separate locked storage areas for each program solves the problem of unauthorized or unintentional use of supplies. Since the room configuration will be different for the two programs, the childcare administrators and Sabbath school leaders must work out in advance who sets up the room for each program and when this is to be done, as well as who chooses the room decorations. As petty as it seems, centers have closed because of squabbles over bulletin boards.

Different local agencies may have varying requirements for the physical space of a center. At minimum, each room must be on the ground floor, have two exits, running water, and toilets. Bathrooms must have child-sized sinks with stools or steps provided for each. The number of children that can be accommodated depends on the unencumbered square footage of the room.

Create Budgets.

Both a start-up budget and an operation budget are necessary. The operation budget should reflect the likelihood that the center will start with a few children and then grow. It should indicate where money will come from until the center's finances have stabilized.

Investigate the types and amounts of subsidies. Most parent organizations provide in-kind subsidies, such as space and utilities. Some provide custodial service. Telephone, room, and equipment repair are usually the responsibility of the center. Building maintenance is usually handled by the parent organization.

A financial subsidy also will be needed, with a larger amount of money allocated for the first two years. Most centers take about this long to reach their enrollment capacity. It may take longer, depending on location. By querying existing centers and governmental regulating agencies, you will be able to obtain an accurate estimate of

what is normal for your area. I visited a new center that had been open for six days and had a waiting list. A local church had just closed its center, and its director and children all moved to the Adventist center. The same director

later established a beautiful childcare center in another town that took two years to reach its licensed capacity.

Be as realistic as possible in estimating costs and income. This will prevent unpleasant surprises later on. When estimating the cost of equipment for the center, take into account the cost of institutional-grade furniture and toys. Avoid the temptation to furnish a center with donated, outgrown home equipment and items from garage sales. Poorly constructed, aging equipment can become a hazard and will need to be replaced.

Buy tables (not desks) with adjustable legs to accommodate the different-sized children. Check with the conference to see if they can get you a discount on equipment, or try to acquire good-quality equipment from a center that is closing.⁶

Write a Proposal.

The proposal should contain as much information as you can obtain on possible enrollment, costs, income, space to be used, type of program, hours of operation, ages of children to be served, personnel to be hired, and the impact on the parent organization.

Choose a Name.

The name should indicate the focus of the program. The name of the parent organization can be included—for instance, _____ Children's Center, or _____ Child Development Center. These names imply that the program focuses on children and their nurture. The term *Day Care Center* has acquired negative connotations and should be avoided. It implies custodial rather than nurturing care. If a less-obvious title is used, such as "Children's Discovery Center," be sure the name does not already belong to a center or a chain of centers.

Present Your Proposal to the Parent Organization.

To succeed, the proposed center needs not only approval, but also commitment by the members of the parent organization's constituency. This is a good time to update the local conference on your plans and progress. Once you have obtained constituency support, it is time to

Create an Implementation Committee.

This committee can act as the board of the center. Whether or not it answers to the board of the parent organization, the tasks are complex enough that it is prudent to choose a group of people with the sole responsibility of getting the center up and going. This

committee will be charged with preparing the facility, obtaining necessary agency and building code approvals, setting up financial records, hiring a director, advertising the center, and providing finances to equip and prepare the center.

Hire a Director.

The director should come on board two months before the center's projected opening date. It is his or her responsibility to create forms⁷ and lists of needed equipment and supplies, set up the room(s), and hire staff. However, the director will need help in marketing the center.

The committee needs to decide whether all staff must be members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. (This will, of course, depend upon the rules of the country in which the center is located.) To have an all-Adventist staff has distinct advantages: (1) there is harmony of purpose and philosophy; (2) depending on the organizational structure, there is a cleaner legal situation; and (3) financially, the staff can be linked with the fiscal procedures of the parent organization.

The biggest problem is finding qualified church members to work at the center. It may be necessary to identify people with potential and train them. In the United States, this is not difficult or expensive. Most community colleges offer the training at a minimal cost.

The committee and director should select a developmentally appropriate curriculum for the center. See other articles in this issue for resources and recommendations.

Obtain the Backing of the School Board or Local Congregation.

If the group with financial responsibility for a center is not solidly behind the endeavor, it will fail. The only exception is when a foundation or an individual bankrolls the program. Be sure to determine the stability of their commitment, as well. People pass away, move on, or change their minds. This can be devastating to a center.

Investigate Local Requirements.

In most places, local governmental agencies set the standards of the centers in its territory. In California, for example, all centers must be licensed and must comply with minimum health and safety standards. The state also regulates the qualifications of directors and staff.

Determine Whether Help Is Available From the Conference.

Some conferences, including Southeastern California Conference (SECC), provide oversight of their child-development centers (CDCs). Identifying its program as

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“Preschool through 12,” the SECC education board has approved a manual codifying the operation of these centers. The center staff are conference employees; their wage scale is based on experience, education, and certification. Staff members thus earn retirement credit and are entitled to health and tuition benefits. Directors have a separate pay scale and receive an administrative budget based on the size of their center. Personnel from the SECC office of education sit on the boards of the centers, and assist in recruiting and hiring employees. The conference sponsors occasional workshops and seminars for childcare employees

and subsidizes the centers whose remuneration is commensurate with the training and experience of the teachers.

When the conference began supervising centers in 1986, childcare teachers with comparable qualifications were receiving 49 percent of the pay of elementary teachers. Currently, the conference pays center staff 85 percent of the elementary teacher pay scale. The goal is to pay CDC teachers with equivalent experience and certification the same as elementary and academy teachers.

Become Conversant With Legal Issues.

Like other institutions in society, childcare centers are vulnerable to legal action by disgruntled clients. Angry parents can cause considerable grief and inconvenience. Even a frivolous lawsuit can cost the center a great deal of money in legal fees.

A center can protect itself against litigation in several ways:

1. *Be scrupulous about following laws and regulations.* This one safeguard will prevent most lawsuits.
2. *Keep good documentation.* This includes (a) records of immunizations, (b) daily sign-in and sign-out sheets that show who brought and picked up each child, and at what time, (c) a list of persons authorized to pick up each child (including copies of custody and restraining orders limiting who can pick up a child); (d) up-to-date lists of work, home, and cell phone numbers for parents and guardians; (e) incident reports on any injury sustained while a child is at the center (minor incidents can be reported verbally to the parent, but keep a written report of all injuries in the child's file).
3. *If there is any chance a staff member could be accused of mistreating a child, contact the police.* In many cases, a police report of an incident will absolve the center of responsibility and prevent a lawsuit.
4. *Notify the local authorities if you suspect a child in your care has been sexually or physically abused.*
5. *Invite a lawyer to serve on the board or keep one on re-*

tainer. Your conference can offer helpful advice and assistance regarding legal issues if you keep them informed from the start of planning.

Obtain Insurance.

Every child-care center needs insurance that covers property, liability, injuries, and accidents. The local school or church may be able to include the center in its coverage. Contact the conference for advice. In the United States, most child-care centers obtain some or all of their insurance from Adventist Risk Management, which has operational requirements to minimize hazards and risk.⁸

Time Frame

Does starting a center sound like a complicated and lengthy process? It is. It can take from two months to more than a year.

More Questions?

What you have just read may raise more questions. This article is not the definitive document on centers, but only an introduction to the subject. It is only fair, in closing, to answer one of the most frequently asked questions:

Why can't a childcare center make money? You say that isn't possible, but I know of centers that do make money.

I said that quality centers won't make money. If you pay teachers minimum wage, have a high ratio of children to adults, and scrimp on equipment and supplies, you may make money; but you will be able to hire only marginally qualified teachers, and you will have high staff turnover, neither of which is good for children.

Remember, a center is open for 11 or more hours a day. Most localities limit the number of children per adult. The highest ratio permitted throughout most of the U.S. is 12 children to 1 adult for 2- to 5-year-olds and 4 to 1 for infants. National accreditation standards do not allow more than 10:1 for older preschool children and 3:1 for infants.

I don't know of any church school in session up to seven hours a day with as many as 25-30 students in a classroom that is not subsidized. How, then, could a center with smaller ratios that is open longer hours with more staff members be expected to be self-sufficient?

Putting together a center sounds like a lot of work. It is.

It sounds as if you are trying to discourage us from trying. I'm not. I am just trying to provide a realistic view of what is involved so that your organization will go into the process with its eyes open and not be disillusioned.

It is possible to establish and operate a quality Christian center that is uniquely Adventist—provided the parent organization is willing to give ongoing resources and support to make it happen. The many good centers already in existence prove that it is possible.

A well-run, quality Adventist center can provide a safe, nurturing place for young children and help supplement parental efforts to maintain a full-time loving, caring envi-

ronment in which their most precious possessions, their children, can grow and thrive emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. ✍



Marilyn Beach is a semi-retired Early Childhood Specialist who has spent the majority of her career teaching both young children and teachers of young children. She has a Ph.D. in Early Childhood Education from Claremont Graduate University and has taught in public and church schools at every level from preschool to graduate school. She served as Associate Superintendent of Education in the South-eastern California Conference for 16 years. A passionate advocate for children, Dr. Beach continues to teach on a part-time basis at La Sierra University in Riverside, California, and to serve as a consultant for child-development centers in California.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. National Association for the Education of Young Children, "Early Childhood Program Standards: Draft" (Washington, D.C., 2005).
2. Sue Bredekamp and Carol Copple, eds., *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Education Programs* (Washington, D.C.: NAEYC, 1997).
3. *Safety Performance Standards: Guidelines of Out-of-Home Child Care Programs* (Washington D.C.: American Public Health Association and American Academy of Pediatrics, 1992).
4. States and countries differ as to which agency has this responsibility. In many places in the U.S., it is the county Health and Human Services or the state department of education. In others, it is the department of social services. Because of the wide variation, make your initial contact with the local social services agency or county department of education, or ask a local center for advice.
5. Eileen Lindner, *When Churches Mind the Children* (Ypsilanti, Mich.: High/Scope Press, 2004).
6. Two reliable sources for equipment and supplies are Constructive Playthings and Lakeshore Learning Materials. Both have comprehensive catalogues, and at least one of them has two lists of equipment needed to start a center: a basic list, and items to add as a center grows: Constructive Playthings, 13201 Arrington Road, Grandview, MO 64030 (<http://www.cptoy.com>); and Lake Shore Learning Materials, 2695 E. Dominguez Street, Carson, CA 90895 (<http://www.lakeshorelearning.com>).
7. See Kathleen Pullan Watkins and Lucius Durant, *The Complete Book of Forms for Managing the Early Childhood Program* (West Nyack, N.Y.: Center for Applied Research in Education, 1990): forms, checklists, and worksheets for program administration; Wendy Biasetto, *The Ultimate Guide to Forms for Early Childhood Programs: Hundreds of Forms Prepared by Nationally Accredited Programs* (Aurora, Colo.: Learning Expo Publishing, 1995): hundreds of forms used in NAEYC accredited early-childhood programs, plus sample handbooks for parents and staff; and Dorothy June Sciarra and Anne G. Dorsey, *Opening and Operating an Early Childhood Center* (Clifton Park, N.Y.: Thomson Delmar Learning, 2003): <http://www.EarlyChildEd.delmar.com>; and Rebecca Graff, *Pre-school Director's Survival Guide* (West Nyack, N.Y.: Center for Applied Research in Education).
8. Personnel in Adventist Risk Management suggest that anyone interested in operating a childcare center should check the following Websites: <http://www.daycarestarterkit.com>; <http://www.PCDIcourses.com> (Free Info Kit, "Learn How to Run a Child Day Care"). You can also contact your conference office or Gary Hile, ARM Risk Control Director (ghile@adventistrisk.org or 301-680-6852). In addition to the state approval process, U.S. applicants will need to fulfill the requirement in the North American Division Working Policy - P50: (GC WP S60) relating to (1) Property; (2) General Liability; (3) Student Accident; (4) Employers Practices Liability; and (5) Sexual Misconduct and Molestation.