

Adding Back-Up Care to Your Center

by Liz Kinstlinger

A problem that frequently confronts parents is what to do when their regular child care arrangements break down. Back-up child care, which supplements, rather than replaces, regular child care arrangements, is increasingly becoming the solution. Many full-service child care centers are opening their programs to families on an as-needed, space-available basis and thereby evolving into dual full-service and back-up centers.

A Growing Need

The need for back-up child care has increased dramatically in recent years and continues to grow along with the demand for traditional child care. As the following examples show, back-up child care is necessary for all parents, whether or not they work full time or part time, have a nanny or a family member take care of their children, use a full-time child care center, or have preschool or school-age children.

Parents often unexpectedly need to arrange for alternate child care but

cannot find care on their own or cannot take the time off from work to stay with their children. Such unexpected situations include:

- an ill provider.
- an in-home provider quits without giving notice or is fired.
- snow days.
- regular child care center or school closes due to an emergency such as loss of heat or electricity.
- part-time working parent, who normally cares for the child, has

an emergency work obligation or becomes ill.

Sometimes parents know in advance that they will need to arrange for alternate child care but still cannot find alternate care on their own in a number of situations.

Such situations include:

- a child care provider goes on vacation.
- school closings for the holidays or vacation weeks.
- regular day care center staff professional days or early release days.
- summer vacation.

In all of these situations, parents would benefit greatly from the availability of a back-up child care center.



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Benefits to Your Center

Adding a back-up child care program to your center has numerous benefits.

Increased Profits

A back-up program can increase your center's profits by generating additional fees from families who use back-up care, without adding substantial increases to your center's operating costs. The additional money back-up care brings in can go towards supplies, staff, and special programs for your center. Back-up care can also provide economic growth and development for the larger community by expanding new resources for families and children and by creating additional jobs in the community. Including a back-up plan in your center also has these benefits:

- increased exposure of your center.
- potential for back-up clients to choose your center for full-time care.
- marketability of your center as flexible and unique.
- ability to offer back-up space to local companies for use by their employees.
- ability to offer back-up space to local schools to assist parents with holiday/vacation care.

Expanding your full-time center to accommodate back-up needs is worthwhile not only for the center's financial well-being but also for the needs of the parents and children of the center and your community. The following information will assist you in starting a back-up child care component in your full-service center.

Marketing Your Back-Up Program

Word of mouth. The best way to initially market your program is through word of mouth. Start by telling parents who currently use your center that you are introducing a back-up component to your program. Full-time parents might have older children who could use your back-up component when their older child's school is closed due to vacation weeks or holidays. They can also tell their friends who have children. At the same time, be ready to answer the full-time parents' questions as they will wonder how the back-up program will affect their child's routine.

Resource and referral agencies. Contact your local child care resource and referral agency and make them aware of your back-up program. Parents use resource and referral agencies to find vacancies in centers for their children. The agencies often refer parents to various emergency child care options such as back-up programs.

Publications. Write an article or a description about your back-up care service in your center newsletter. If you currently do not have a newsletter, you can write an announcement and send it home with the children or use whatever method you currently use to relay information to parents.

Write an article or announcement for your local public school district or PTA newspaper or newsletter. You will reach parents in your neighborhood who have preschool and school-age children. Your local parents' paper will also reach parents in your community as well as outer communities. If you currently advertise in your parents' paper, update the ad to include an announcement of your new back-up

service. If you currently advertise in the yellow pages, include an announcement of your back-up service in the ad.

Include the back-up service in any published materials you currently have. Start by including it in your parent handbook. If you have brochures about your center, note the back-up program as a new service. Circulate the brochures to real estate offices, pediatricians' offices, busy transportation sites, libraries, the department of health, and the personnel departments of your full-time parents' companies. Remember that back-up care is a highly necessary service, but parents will have to be educated about its existence.

Open house. One way of increasing visibility in your community is to host open houses on Saturday mornings and invite parents and their children to visit your center. It is a good idea to do this when you first announce your back-up program. An open house not only allows parents to see your center but, more importantly, it allows children to play in the center and meet the staff prior to using it on a back-up basis.

New parents to the center will be more likely to use the center on a back-up basis if they see that the children will be safe and enjoy going to your center. In addition, the first time that parents pay to use the service, the children will already have been exposed to your center and acclimating will be less stressful for them. I often recommend hiring a clown (or, if you have outdoor space, a pony) to attract parents to bring their children to the open house. Remember to have enough staff and try to use your full-time staff so the children will meet the teachers they would be likely to have when using the back-up service. The open house is a good time for parents to ask questions, take registration materials, and to generally feel comfortable with the program you are

operating. It is a wonderful marketing tool.

Local employers. Market your program to local employers who often struggle when their employees are absent due to breakdowns in child care arrangements. Introduce to local employers the idea of subsidizing part or all of back-up care costs for employees who need your program in order to get to work.

Explain to the employer that the availability of low-cost back-up care will increase productivity and allow parents to go to work rather than stay home because they could not find emergency child care. Another way to partner your service with local employers is to have the company pay your center directly to reserve a certain number of back-up slots.

Signage: Finally, if you have a sign outside of your center, advertise your back-up service on the sign. This will attract people who pass by.

As inquiries about your back-up service come in, always ask how the caller heard about the service. This is a good way of tracking what marketing procedures are working and worth continuing.

Scheduling Back-Up Staff

Begin with a review of the staff-to-child ratio requirements for your state. The easiest situation to staff is when you have vacant slots in any of your classrooms on a given day due to full-time children being absent. You can fill these slots with back-up children without going over the staff-to-child ratio, and you will not need to make any changes to the staffing schedule.

If you are licensed to accept more full-time children in your classrooms than you currently have enrolled, and you decide to take children on a back-up basis to fill those slots, you

may have to call in substitute teachers or part-time teachers as you fill those back-up slots in order to stay within the required staff-to-child ratio.

The most challenging part of staff scheduling is usually tied to the last-minute nature of back-up care needs. If parents know that they will need back-up care on certain days and register with your program in advance, it is easy for you to preplan staffing needs. However, it is the unanticipated back-up care needs that can leave you spinning in different directions trying to find providers.

Have no fear! You can plan for these situations. Build your staff list with a combination of providers who have different schedules. Recruit from universities, retired teacher associations, in-home care agencies, and local newspapers. The solution to unanticipated staffing needs is to hire people with flexibility in their schedules. Some providers have jobs that start in the late afternoon, or only work in the mornings. Parents who have stayed home to raise their children and are now slowly working their way back in to the workforce often welcome the flexible hours.

Once you have built a dependable list of providers, which list should include staff phone numbers and hours of availability, make sure that all back-up care staffing coordinators have a copy of the list both at work and at their homes. If, at night, parents leave a message on your center's voice mail that they need back-up care the next day and staff coordinators need to bring in extra staff, they will have the list of availability with them. Continuously update your staff list. For instance, it is common for staff to find full-time jobs, decide to enroll at a university full time, or to juggle

part-time teaching positions at more than one center. It is important to keep up with your staff's availability and schedule even if you do not use the back-up staff on a regular basis. This will make it easier for you to know when you need to expand your list of available back-up care providers.

There are ways to prepare staffing for some of those unanticipated back-up needs. For instance, obtain a copy of the public school calendars in your community and surrounding neighborhoods for school closings. Always listen to the weather reports, especially in the winter for reports of anticipated inclement weather, which could close schools. Stay informed of public transportation strikes, board of education strikes, and other situations that might restrict children from getting to their regular programs.

Maximizing a Separate Room

The space allocated to back-up child care in your center must meet the same laws for the physical design and program policies as your full-service program. Providing back-up care in a separate space brings up the issue of mixing various age groups in the same space. Most states have laws against mixing preschoolers and school-agers in the same space because of the high risk of injury to the children. When schools are in session, only infants, toddlers, and preschoolers will use the back-up program.

During school vacation weeks and weeks during the beginning and end of the summer, there will be a high demand for school-age care, children ages five to twelve. Rather than take back-up children of all ages during these periods, it will be more profitable to temporarily convert your back-up room into a school-age pro-

gram or “vacation camp” during those weeks, and to only enroll school-age children. Because space requirements and staff-to-child ratios are much lower, you can enroll more children, employ less staff, and turn a higher profit. Most importantly, you will be meeting a critical need of working parents in your community.

Determining Fees

Fees from back-up child care vary based on many factors. One constant, of course, is the need to charge enough to make a profit and for non-profit centers to generate enough income to cover the costs of running a back-up program. Research any other back-up programs in your community and consider setting standard fees based on what similar programs are charging, especially for school-age programs.

The easiest method to determine a fee is to pro-rate your current weekly full-time fees (by age group) and add your estimated additional costs to run the back-up program. For instance, if you normally charge a full time toddler \$100 per week, then a daily utilization back-up fee for a toddler would be \$20 per day plus additional costs.

Additional fixed costs for your back-up program, regardless of how many children you enroll at a given time, include advertising costs to promote your back-up program in various media, and the cost of running an employment ad in your local paper on a regular basis to continuously hire additional part-time staff members. In addition, on a given day you may have only a few back-up children, but they may be numerous enough to require an additional teacher to meet staff-to-child ratio requirements. Your additional cost above the pro-rated fee should also take into account the

potential costs for additional teachers.

On the other hand, you need to know the financial ability of your clientele. I have seen many programs charge too much money compared to what the parents in their community could afford and not get any business. These centers put a lot of time and money into advertising but because the fees were set too high after the initial inquiries, parents opted not to use the service. I have also seen centers charge too little and not cover the additional costs of a back-up program. Be very careful and educate yourself on what fees will bring your center a profit while at the same time making the back-up service affordable.

Finally, always take payment from parents each day in the morning prior to leaving their child, even if the parent plans on bringing the child for the rest of the week. Because of the nature of back-up care, a parent’s plans might change. You might never see the parent after the initial use and delaying payment to the next day might mean extra time in seeking payment or never getting paid at all.

Tackling Problems

Initially you might feel some resistance from the full-time parents who question how the back-up program will affect the full-time children. Explain to these parents that their children’s teachers, programs, and teacher-to-child ratios will remain the same.

Teachers in your program might question the impact on their routine in the classrooms with the children. Explain to the teachers that the back-up service helps parents in your community and will bring in additional income to the program. After parents and teachers under-

stand the benefits, everyone adjusts well.

Last-minute cancellations by parents are unavoidable. However, if proper policies are implemented, you can still profit. For instance, if your center is in an urban area, chances are high that you will have a waiting list for back-up slots during busy periods such as vacation weeks and, given a day or two advance notice, filling a canceled slot will not be difficult.

The situation changes in the case of no-shows. When parents fail to cancel their reservation or do so less than a day in advance, you are left with a vacant slot and chances are people on the wait-list have already made alternate arrangements. You can avoid this problem by establishing some rules and procedures with parents when they register with your center. Call parents and confirm their reserved space a couple of days in advance.

You might want to state in your parent handbook that any parents who cancel less than 24 hours in advance will be charged a no-show fee and lose the privilege of using your back-up service if they fail to cancel more than once.

You will also be confronted with problems that arise when dealing with unregistered parents who need “unanticipated” care. These calls typically come from parents the night before they need care or early in the morning of the day they need back-up care and have failed to pre-register their children. Parents will come first thing in the morning with completed registration materials or have to fill out registration materials at your center.

Most unregistered parents do not have the necessary medical information for their child and it can be

difficult to obtain the necessary information by fax from the doctor that morning. Even if you obtain the medical information that morning, your staff will probably not have the time it takes to read the medical and other information to thoroughly learn about a new child. One way to avoid this is to encourage parents to pre-register their children and tell them if their materials are incomplete your center might not legally be able to accept them.

Patterns of Usage

Centers usually face drastic increase in utilization by school-age children during vacation weeks, Monday holidays, and the summer months. High utilization by school-age children also occurs when public schools close for parent-teacher conferences and professional staff days. Accordingly, you need to keep abreast of such events and plan staffing in advance.

Your busiest periods for all age groups will be during inclement weather. It is helpful if at least a few of your back-up staff live close enough to the center so that they can get to the center despite the weather. Such staff allows the center to remain open for parents who are able to get to work and to your center even though their child's school is closed or their child's regular provider is unable to travel due to the weather.

The summer months will also be very busy. Often there are weeks in which children are not enrolled in camp programs and need child care. The last two weeks of June (after school ends but before most summer camps begin) and the last two weeks of August and beginning of September (before school reopens) are very active periods. Summertime is also busy because many in-home providers and family child care providers take vacation time, leaving parents scurrying for alternate care.

ABC Back-Up Care

The American Business Collaboration for Quality Dependent Care (ABC) has been a pioneer in the field of back-up care, investing more than \$3.8 million since 1995 to implement more than 100 projects throughout the country serving over 26,000 children.

Initially focusing its efforts on the issues of back-up care for mildly ill children, ABC currently supports a wide range of back-up care programs to meet the needs of working parents.

Through self-initiated research, ABC has determined that the success of a back-up care program is dependent on three factors:

- making employees aware of the program.
- subsidizing the cost of back-up care for employees.
- making the registration process simple and family friendly.

With these issues in mind, ABC's initiatives have focused on training programs to build the supply of qualified back-up care providers. In addition, ABC has worked with providers in serving employees working non-traditional hours and those who travel for business.

ABC also funds back-up care programs that allow workers to call 24 hours a day to locate a provider. One such program, Just In Time Care, provides working parents with a range of subsidized care options that they can access with just one phone call.

In addition, ABC has developed resource materials to help guide managers on back-up care issues, including a how-to guide on developing a work-site emergency care program. Educational materials regarding back-up care have also been created for employees.

ABC is a \$127 million national initiative designed to improve the quality and expand the quantity of child and elder care services. The lead companies are: Aetna, Allstate, American Express, BP Amoco, AT&T, Citigroup, Chevron, Deloitte & Touche, Eastman Kodak, Exxon, GE Capital Services, IBM, Johnson & Johnson, Lucent Technologies, Mobil, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Texaco, Texas Instruments, and Xerox.

For more information about ABC's back-up care programs, please call the American Business Collaboration at (800) 767-9863.

Integrating Children

Transitioning back-up children into the formal routine of a classroom can be difficult. The most important tasks for teachers are to continue to focus on full-time children while remaining sensitive to the unfamiliar and different needs of the back-up children. Teachers should arrive early enough in the morning to read each back-up child's registration packet and familiarize themselves with the child's various needs,

schedules, and habits. Remind parents to periodically update this information. Keep this information with the child's other records in your files.

After a warm and inviting greeting, take parents and children on a brief tour of the center when they arrive in the morning even if they previously attended an open house or visited the center. This tour will help re-acclimate both parent and child. Children often experience some separation anxiety and may resist being in a new program.

A successful strategy to use during drop-off time is the buddy system, which works like a mentor/mentee approach. Match up each back-up child with a full-time child. The back-up child's full-time "buddy" can then familiarize him with the center and with the other children. It is often a privilege for the full-time children to be asked to be a "buddy." Usually if it is a good match, the two children will play together until the back-up child feels safe enough to go off on her own and explore.

In addition, the full-time child can learn from the experience of mentoring another child. The teacher should always formally introduce back-up children to the class after drop-off time and before the first structured activity begins. All children in new situations do well with structure. Therefore, by telling them in advance what the schedule is for the day, they will feel more in control and can safely transition with the class.

A few other small touches are recommended:

- Label extra cubbies the night before with the back-up children's names so the children will feel they are expected and feel a sense of belonging. Parents will also know where to put their child's items and will spend less time having to ask the staff questions at the busy time in the morning.

- Label shelves in a changing area where parents can put diaper bags and a change of clothes for the younger children.

- Using name tags is a good idea for the older children. Even if the other children cannot read, it ensures that the staff will know the child's name. I hesitate to use name tags on toddlers because they get torn off and usually end up in little mouths.

- Provide some direction for the

children. An activity should be going on at one of the tables in the morning so the back-up children can immediately be transitioned into the center by participating in an activity. Free play at drop-off time can leave a newcomer standing around not knowing what to do.

- Send children home with something they have made as a reminder of the fun they had. Parents can refer to it before the next time they might need to use your back-up program, ensuring content children, satisfied parents, and high rates of utilization.

Adding back-up care to your full-service center can be challenging at times, but once the back-up program has been set up, it should function smoothly — and the rewards, both for the center financially and for the needs of the community, outweigh the challenges.

Back-Up Care Providers

A number of national early childhood providers set up and manage back up programs in conjunction with employers and other organizations. Included among these are:

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