

Supporting families who work non-traditional hours

Caring for Children 24/7, 365

by Phil Acord

When you go out to eat, do your shopping, or take in a movie, do you ever wonder who is caring for the children of that waitress, salesperson, and concession worker? If you live in Chattanooga, Tennessee, chances are the children are being cared for at the Children's Home Extended Child Care Program. In America today a higher percentage of mothers with young children are working, and not only are a significant percentage of those mothers single heads of household, but many of them are working non-conventional hours. The final factor to place in the equation is that recently the United States has experienced a mini baby boom, and families are reproducing at a higher rate than they have in several decades.

Loosely translated that means there are a larger number of children that need early childhood education and care services and with everything being proportionate, more odd hour and weekend care is needed. The Children's Home program is unique in that it is open 24 hours, 365 days a year, providing care for children from six weeks to 12 years of age on a sliding fee scale. We have designed the program to eliminate the usual access barriers to care: hours, ages cared for, and affordability.

There seem to be a number of extended hour programs and many of them are associated with hospitals, institutions of higher learning, or part of an entertain-

ment entity such as an amusement park or gambling establishment. Recently I got a call from a prison that had been granted funds to do an extended early education and care program for the children of their guards.

If you are thinking about doing some type of extended care program in your community, there are several considerations for you to process.

Hours of Operation

First, decide what hours you are going to operate; 24/7, 365 is a heavy schedule that requires a lot of people and support. You need to fix your hours

based on the service market of your community. If most of the jobs are in retail, then probably 18 hours per day are all that are needed, but you might need to provide care on weekends or at least on Saturday until 9:30 or 10:00 p.m. The idea is to set your hours according to the needs of the families in the community you are serving.

One of the problems that you run into when you provide extended hours care is children often are left in care longer than they need to be. A single mother working more than one job will go from her 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. job to her part time job at a retail store from 6 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. and will want to leave her child in care from 8:30 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. In Tennessee a parent has to get special permission to leave a child in care for more than 12 hours. Check with your licensing counselor to find out what the rule is about extended care in your state.

Ages of Children Served

One of the most important issues to decide when you provide extended care is what ages of children you are going to serve. In most states you cannot mix children under three years of age with children three and older. Presently, we are not doing care for children under three after 6:00 p.m. because the demand is not there. When we have

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served this age child we have had a separate room and teacher because Tennessee regulations will not allow us to mix this age with children three and older. Unless we have at least four children under three requesting care after 6:00 p.m. we cannot afford to open a classroom, hire a staff person, and serve that age. The structure at this time includes a classroom for three and four year olds and a separate classroom for school-age children.

The number of staff with each group depends upon the number of children being served. Usually after 9:30 p.m. you can combine groups because that is about the time you start putting children to bed. By 11:00 p.m. you can function with one staff because the numbers are low and the children are all sleeping. This is possible for us to do because we have a residential program in an adjoining building and the staff in that program are back-up in case of an emergency. Check with the regulations of your state to find out what is allowed during these hours.

Staffing Schedule

Most of the teaching staff in the early childhood education and care program work the normal eight hour day and the typical 260 day per year schedule. Like most programs, the staff come in on staggered schedules with the first teacher arriving at about 6:00 a.m. and the last teacher coming in at about 9:00 a.m. They have an hour break in the middle of the day. The over-night staff come in at 5:30 p.m. and work till 6:30 a.m. We have two full-time staff that function in that capacity, one works Sunday-Tuesday and the other person works Wednesday-Friday. We have a regular part-time staff person that works just Saturday night. We also use regular part-time staff to work the day shift on Saturday and Sunday. Parents have to let us know if their children are going to be attending the

program on the weekend, which allows us to staff accordingly.

As you hire staff and put in place credential requirements, keep in mind that the needs of the children are different at night and on weekends than they are during the weekdays. During the day you operate a normal classroom with lesson plans and the focus is on education; but at night there is more of a family/home atmosphere where you play games and watch a movie, eat some popcorn and get ready for bed. On weekends you operate in the *kick back mode* with the focus being on letting the children play outside, go on a field trip, do a cooking project, or go swimming.

Odds and Ends of Extended Care

■ **Meals.** When you care for children around the clock, it changes the way you do business. The Children's Home serves three meals a day plus two snacks seven days a week. As you know, USDA will only reimburse for two meals a day and a snack. There are very specific regulations about how often children have to be given the opportunity to eat. Most states comply with USDA recommendations of feeding children at least every four hours. We serve supper at about 4:00 p.m. and then do a night snack at about 8:00 p.m. For those children sleeping overnight we don't awaken them at 2:00 a.m. to give them another snack; it's okay to let them wait until the breakfast meal, just like you would in a normal home situation. Again, your particular arrangement would dictate how you feed the children.

■ **Cleaning.** Cleaning is somewhat of a problem when you are using your space 24/7, 365. It makes it very difficult to do a good cleaning when you are always having to work around the children. As children leave and you close down certain classrooms for the day, your cleaning has to be coordinated around that schedule.

■ **Security.** Security is another issue that has to be addressed when you operate an extended care program. You will have staff in your building after dark and when the office will probably be closed. We lock all of our outside doors at 6:00 p.m. and direct parents picking up their children after 6:00 p.m. to come through our main front door. That door has a camera that shows the entire area and will work in full light or with the porch light. We also have an electronic door lock that can be released by the staff person working the night dismissal area. The night dismissal area is where the monitor for the front porch camera is located as well as the monitor for the cameras we have in all of our hallways. So, at midnight when we are down to one or two staff in our 50,000 square foot building one person from one location can monitor the entire building. This makes the staff and parents feel more secure.

Sometimes we keep the doors locked on the weekends and sometimes we don't. This depends on the number of children in the weekend program and the number of adults present.

■ **Funding.** Funding is another major issue, especially if you are an independent program trying to serve the general community. The Children's Home is a non-profit, 501(C)3, with a governing board of directors. We receive United Way and Hamilton County Government Funds. We also have an endowment fund and we do fundraisers that contribute about \$186,000 annually to our budget. The parents pay on a sliding fee scale regardless of the age of their child or the hours they need care.

Some states still have not incorporated licensing standards that address the extended hour early childhood education and care programs into their regular standards. If you are thinking about doing an extended care program you need to first check with your licensing

department to see if they have standards for extended care and, if not, how they would apply the regular standards to care around the clock.

Extended education and care is a wonderful resource for parents who work odd hours and especially for single parents who do not have help while they work these odd hours. As our society switches to more of a service and communication oriented workplace, extended care is going to be in greater demand than ever before. Those of us who provide education and care programs need to be willing to extend our hours to support these families that work these non-traditional hours.