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Day-care operator changes the game

Kids + Company comes to Calgary

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For many harried working parents, life revolves around the rush hour -- the mad dash across town after work to pick up the kiddies from day care before the late fee witching hour sets in.

Victoria Sopik, president of corporate sponsored childcare chain Kids + Company, intends to change that and plenty of other child care related gripes this summer when she opens the first of five locations planned for Calgary.

"It's entrepreneurial; it's basically changing up the rules in terms of the offerings," Sopik said of the flexible, service-oriented childcare offered by Toronto-based Kids + Company.

The 9,000-square-foot facility, located downtown on the second floor of London House, will offer high-quality full-time, part-time or back-up child care for more than 100 children, from newborns to 13-year-olds when it opens post-renovations in July, said Sopik.

The facilities aren't intended for the general public, however, only employees of corporations who sign membership agreements with Kids + Company.

In addition to making life easier for parents, Kids + Company enables corporations to maintain diversity by retaining key staff after maternity leave, thus saving the expense of headhunting and retraining, Sopik said.

It's also a way to create a more attractive work environment, said David Fulton, general manager of human resources at Shell Canada Ltd., the first major Calgary corporation to sign on with Kids + Company.

Shell Canada purchased backup child care space for its employees, a deal that will help the company manage work-life balance and stress by giving employees peace of mind on the child care front, he said.

"One thing any working parent would know is if your normal child care system breaks down, as they all do occasionally . . . that we can offer a Plan B," Fulton said, adding the program has been well received by employees.

The privately held Kids + Company operates seven facilities in Toronto and has 150 member companies, including about 60 national clients.

Clients include everything from law firms Blakes, Cassels & Graydon to Manulife Financial to GAP Canada.

Participating corporations don't pay for full-time child care, they just offer the service to their employees, Sopik said. However, like Shell Canada, employers can elect to pay up front to secure a specific number of spaces for backup child care.

Between 60 and 70 per cent of Kids + Company clients choose this option, Sopik said. If they don't, registered employees can still pay the fee themselves, she said.

Kids + Company plans to open 10 new locations across Canada this year, for a total of 18 locations across the country by the end of 2005.

Sopik said she included Calgary in her expansion plans because there seems to be a real need for child-care space.

"In Calgary, my impression is that parents don't have a choice. They're lucky to get a spot and so they just kind of take it and deal with the ramifications," she said.

Plans are to have 50 locations across Canada in the next four years, she said.

Sopik said she's certain the business will do well, given that Kids + Company is modelled after successful customer service-oriented, child-care chains in the U.S.

This philosophy includes no late fees, with Kids + Company paying its staff to stay an extra half hour past closing time to accommodate life's little hiccups.

Sopik, herself a mother of eight, acknowledges parents don't choose to pick up their children at 6:30 at night.

"It's not their choice, they're stuck," she said. "And so as much as we can, we just want to be flexible so they have a smiling face when they come in, and not a child and teacher sitting on the front steps with a cranky look on their face."

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Child care chain

Kids + Company:

- New facility: 9,000 square feet located downtown on the second floor of London House;
- For: Employees of member corporations;
- Offers: High-quality, full-time, part-time, or back-up child care for more than 100 children, from newborns to 13-year-olds;
- When: Slated to open for business post-renovations in July.



CREDIT: Tim Fraser, Calgary Herald

Victoria Sopik is the president of the national day-care chain known as Kids + Company and is opening a new facility in Calgary at London House this summer.