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Day care caters to business elite

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After raising eight children of her own and caring for thousands more on the job, some might question why Toronto entrepreneur **Victoria Sopik** was in Ottawa last week looking for more runny noses to wipe.

Nevertheless, she'll be reaching for the Kleenex in a number of new day care centres across Canada in the next few years, as Kids + Company's expansion plans get rolling in three cities this summer.

"We were meeting with clients and confirming plans for construction and the location in Ottawa will open sometime this summer, and we will be the first childcare in that area," said the chief executive of the four-year-old outfit last week while she was in town to visit the future site of her first Ottawa day-care centre.

"We are expanding across the country and the first will be in Ottawa and we are thrilled to be here. "

While there are day-care centres on Parliament Hill and others in the University of Ottawa area, Ms. Sopik chose the Albert at Kent Street location for her latest venture because she found there were no similar child minding operations in the downtown business core.

Kids + Company caters to corporate employees. The company's client list reads like a who's who of the business elite in Toronto. It includes many of the top law firms, financial services outfits, insurance companies, and large multinational corporations.

"We saw the need because corporations want to provide childcare for their employees and some very progressive organizations over time have built their own childcare and managed them but more and more want to outsource because running day care is not what they do," she said.

"So, we set up a location and then we go to the companies and ask them to be members. We then offer guaranteed space to their employees. "

When a corporation becomes a member, its employees are asked to register with Kids + Company so the day care knows the make-up of the workforce and its potential childcare needs. There is no waiting list and the company guarantees spots for all corporate clients' children provided they are given six months notice.

The company has negotiated more than 100 agreements with corporate partners. It cares for infants to 12-year-olds in eight facilities in Toronto. In addition to Ottawa, it will add other locations in Waterloo and Calgary this summer.

Other expansion targets for the company in 2005 are Edmonton, London, Montreal, Vancouver, and Winnipeg. By the end of the year, Ms. Sopik plans to double her payroll to 200 people.

Because it is a privately-owned operation, Ms. Sopik declined to share any financial information, such as the company's revenues or the amount that it will be investing in the expansion across Canada.

Part of the long-term plan has clients dropping their children at any location across the country when required. People leaving their children in unfamiliar surroundings will be able to keep an eye on their progress throughout the day using video links.

"All of our locations have webcams throughout, so you can be back in your office, log on, and watch your child, " Ms. Sopik said.

"You need a password to login, but it's a nice benefit because you're not leaving your child at a strange place where you have no way of knowing what's happening. "

Many clients in Toronto with relatives living in other cities or even overseas, often instruct parents to use the webcam service to catch glimpses of their far-away grandchildren. The system also allows the managers to monitor the care given to children in the different locations.

While she originally thought the cost of running a facility would be cheaper in Ottawa than in Toronto, the price of rental real estate in the capital made her rethink the idea.

The fees for infant day care will be about \$1,285 monthly, which is less than some services already available in the city. In cities such as Calgary and Edmonton for example, she predicted the fees would be significantly less than in Ottawa.

While she's providing day-care services, Ms. Sopik insisted the federal government's childcare initiative will not have much affect on her operations. The typical Kids + Company clients are dual income earners in high-paying jobs such as lawyers and bankers.

"Most of our childcare is paid for by the parents and not something to do with the government. All of the stuff with the national childcare program is geared to low- and middle- income earners who can't afford the service as well as our parents can, " Ms. Sopik said.

"It's a great thing and is good that all people will have access to high- quality childcare, but our (service) is elite to some degree because it's only available to parents of companies that link to us, so you need to be working for a good employer. "