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## **Child-care service there when nanny isn't**

Kids + Company offers backup care to employees of corporate clients

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Toronto entrepreneur Victoria Sopik has come up with an "insurance policy" against sick nannies, babysitters who suddenly quit and snow days that close schools -- leaving parents in the lurch and unable to work.

Her "kids + Company" child-care centres, which are preparing to expand to Ottawa, offer backup or emergency child-care services to employees of companies that partner with her.

It is an option that helps employees balance their work and family lives and is a benefit companies can offer that helps them and their workers, she said in an interview.

Kids + Company also offers full- and part-time regular day-care services to the employees of companies that sign on. Those day-care rates aren't subsidized by employers, but will be "competitive" with the market, she said.

Five-day-a-week care for an infant, for example, will cost \$1,285 a month.

But kids + Company guarantees child-care spots to employees of participating companies. No waiting lists and a flexible attitude toward schedules for part-time workers are part of the deal, she said.

Toronto law firm Blake, Cassels & Graydon has used the emergency backup service in Toronto and plans to use it in Ottawa and other cities when it becomes available. The law firm subsidizes emergency care, which is good for the company and helps take the pressure off employees, said Julie Bean, the firm's chief administrative officer.



CREDIT: Bruno Schlumberger, The Ottawa Citizen

Victoria Sopik, founder and CEO of kids+Company, says her corporate-sponsored child-care centres help employees balance their work and family lives.

"In the three years we've been using them, we have used over 1,000 days," Ms. Bean said. "It speaks for itself how much employees need this service."

While the Ottawa Blake, Cassels & Graydon office has only 20 staff, compared to 700 in Toronto, they include a mother of triplets, another with twins and several mothers of new babies, she said.

Ms. Sopik was in Ottawa last week meeting with officials and parents at Blake, Ernst & Young, Mercer Human Resource Consulting, Ogilvy Renault and others about two planned day cares, at 161 Elgin St. and 360 Albert St., designed to serve downtown clients. Her priority is to offer services to her existing Toronto clients who have offices in Ottawa.

She hopes to open the downtown centres by the summer as part of a national rollout of day-care centres in eight Canadian cities. A third site in this region is planned for Kanata sometime later, she said.

The idea has taken root in Toronto, where kids + Company has expanded to seven locations in the past four years and signed on 160 corporate clients, including major banks, insurance companies, law firms and consultants, Ms. Sopik said. By expanding her business across the country, she hopes to offer her services to national companies and slowly grow her client base.

Kids + Company wouldn't be the first company in Ottawa to offer child care to sponsoring clients or provide emergency backup services. But it may be the first to offer both in one package.

Andrew Fleck Child Care Services, for example, runs a short-term care program that provides caretakers in the home when a child is mildly sick or the parents' regular child care is not available. The Ottawa-Carleton School Board is the largest of several clients served by the program, which is available only to sponsoring organizations and companies, said Lyne Tremblay, manager of family support services at Andrew Fleck.

The Kanata Research Park Family Centre gives priority to employees of companies that work on the Kanata Research Park campus in exchange for rent-free space from the landlord, who views it as an amenity for the business park, says Kim Hiscott, executive director.

Similar services exist in some government buildings at Dow's Lake, Tunney's Pasture and elsewhere. A point system gives extra weight to Statistics Canada employees for spots at the Garderie Tunney's Day Care, which operates rent-free in the Statistics Canada building, said director Carmen Perron. About 70 per cent of its spots are for children of federal employees, with the rest open to the community.

The way companies partner with kids + Company varies. Large firms, for example, may pay an annual fee to reserve a certain number of emergency child-care spots for its employees. They may pay for the service as a benefit to employees, share the cost or have employees pick up the tab for backup child care for children up to age 12.

Some companies use the emergency service rarely, Ms. Sopik said, but the average use is about five times a year. The day cares, which typically have the capacity for 60 children, determine how much space to leave open for emergency care based on the needs of their client base, she said.

Landlords where the centres are located can also offer the child-care services to all tenants in the building in exchange for concessions on rent or amenities, Ms. Sopik said.

That also helps offset the cost of locating in the downtown core, which is close to where many parents work, but is often expensive for child-care centres, which need indoor and outdoor play space.

The lack of child-care centres in downtown Ottawa was one reason kids + Company is targeting the city for its first expansion, she said.

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