Day Care Centers Adapt to Round-the-Clock Demand

By SABRINA TAVERNISE

ELYRIA, Ohio — Dinner (chicken and mashed potatoes) was long over, teeth were brushed, and a rousing game of Monopoly had come to a close. It was 9 p.m., and the children nestled into bed under blankets emblazoned with superheroes.

The tranquil domestic scene plays out nightly here, not in a family home, but behind a brightly lighted storefront next to Tuffy’s auto repair, the site of a new child care center that is open 24 hours a day.

Day care is slowly becoming night care in today’s economy, as parents work ever longer days, take on second jobs and accept odd shifts to make ends meet.

“No one works Monday through Friday, 9 to 6 anymore,” said Tiffany Bickley, a cook whose 6-year-old daughter, Airalyn, recently started going to the center, ABC & Me Childcare. “No one.”

About 40 percent of the American labor force now works some form of nonstandard hours, including evenings, nights, weekends and early mornings, according to Harriet B. Presser, a professor of sociology at the University of Maryland. That share is expected to grow with the projected expansion of jobs in industries like nursing, retail and food service, which tend to require after-hours work.

At the same time, working hours are less predictable than they once were. “There’s a greater variability and irregularity of schedules,” said Lonnie Golden, a professor of economics and labor studies at Pennsylvania State University. “In surveys, more and more people are no longer able to specify a beginning or end of the workday.”

Yet for years it has been a frustrating reality for parents that child care services have failed to keep pace with the changing workday, with many centers still keeping a rigid 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. schedule. Experiments with nighttime care have come and gone over the years, but lingering ambivalence
about the concept led most centers to deem it financially untenable.

“You don’t want to put your 2-year-old at a child care center at 2 a.m.” said Gina Adams, a senior fellow at the Urban Institute. “It just doesn’t feel right.”

There are some indications now that this might be changing. The National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies said it was hearing from members that providers were offering more nontraditional hours, though it added that it did not formally track the data.

While overnight care is still relatively rare, evening hours are no longer so unusual, providers say. Donna McClintock, chief operating officer for Children’s Choice Learning Centers Inc., which runs 46 employer-sponsored child care centers across the country, said that demand for nontraditional hours had grown and that centers providing care after-hours care made up a large part of the company’s recent growth. About a fifth of the company’s centers have added nontraditional hours in the past few years, she said.

Demand for nonstandard child care hours tends to be highest in sectors where employees tend to work varying schedules, like universities, hospitals and casinos.

“It’s the wave of the future,” said Roger Neugebauer, publisher of Exchange Magazine, a trade journal for the early childhood care field. “The trend is to move beyond 9 to 5 because, with the changing economy, that’s where the need is.”

In Ohio, the number of centers offering nighttime hours is up by more than 50 percent since 2003, according to the Ohio Child Care Resource and Referral Association. Centers with overnight hours have doubled and those open on weekends have quadrupled, though the absolute numbers remain small. In all, about 7 percent of Ohio’s licensed child care centers offer some form of after-hours care, said Todd Barnhouse, executive director of the association.

Brianna Smith, who runs ABC & Me, said demand for such care had been strong in Elyria, a Rust Belt town that is part of Cleveland’s sprawling suburbs. And though the recession hit hard here — the median household income dropped by about 10 percent from 2006 to 2009, and unemployment rose to 11 percent in 2009 — the center decided to include all-night hours when it opened in a converted carpet and tile showroom in June.

“There’s a big need out there right now,” Ms. Smith said. “When I talk to parents, the first thing they ask is, ‘What are your hours?’ “
Now the center is busy, literally, around the clock.

On a recent day, a grandmother dropped off a first grader at 4:30 a.m. on the way to her early morning shift at Burger King. A mother picked up her 3-year-old at 11:30 p.m. after getting off work at a nursing home. Another mother came for her 2-year-old twins at 1:30 a.m., after her shift as a cleaner at a gym.

For some children, the center’s staff members act almost as surrogate parents — feeding them dinner, helping them with homework, brushing their teeth and putting them to sleep until their parents come to fetch them.

Many of the parents interviewed for this article said that they would prefer that their children be watched in their own homes, but that baby-sitting was too expensive. The child care center offered the best compromise.

“It’s really hard on nights when I don’t get out until late,” said Ms. Bickley, the cook. “It’s like, ‘Sorry, here’s your hug, now I got to get you to bed.’ ”

But, she added, “at least I know everything’s taken care of.”

In some states, though, the economic downturn has caused a drop in evening hours among child care centers; with fewer parents employed, there is less need for licensed care. Child Care Aware of Kansas, an agency that connects parents with providers, said requests for evening care had reached 17 percent of all calls by 2008, but had fallen by about half since then.

Still, the new realities of modern life are propelling demand for after-hours care. Many women are in college while they work, lengthening the time away from their children. Morgan Miller, a nurse’s aide who takes classes toward a nursing degree three mornings a week, says those hours, which are added to a workday in a nursing home that ends at 11 p.m., feel long to her 3-year-old son, Izaiah.

“Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, he is living in day care for the most part,” she said. “It’s hard, but I’m doing what I have to do to make his life better.”

The sharp increase in single-parent households has also driven the demand. Alicia Fuerstenberg, a single mother who is a waitress at a Bob Evans, said she was glad to find ABC & Me to care for her 6-year-old twins, Michael and Mateo, during her evening shifts. Their father, who lives separately, does not pay child support, Ms. Fuerstenberg said, though he sometimes baby-sits. The recession decimated her mother’s candle business, obliging her to take a job in a Harley-Davidson store and
making her less available to help with child care.

“In my mind, I’m thinking, ‘Day care is 6 to 6, and that’s not going to work,’ ” said Ms. Fuerstenberg, recalling her hunt for child care. “But these hours are wonderful.”

She added, “I probably wouldn’t be working without it.”