

## Child Care

### Summer Daycare

Finding an arrangement that's both safe and fun

By Teresa Pitman

Single mother Margie Beatty-Collins works full-time days, one evening shift a week, plus one extra evening shift each month. That variable schedule means she has to have fairly flexible child care for seven-year-old Owen and six-year-old Tessa. “When school is on, it’s pretty manageable,” she says. “I can drop them off at school in the morning, and they go to the Y daycare after school. It closes at six, though, so on the nights I have to work late I have to make other plans.”

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But once the school doors close for the summer, “it all falls apart.”

When summer holidays arrive many parents find themselves piecing together a patchwork of camp, babysitters and time off work to provide care for their children. For six to eight-year-olds, it can be tough to find an arrangement that’s both safe and fun.

Here are some pieces that might fit into your school-ager’s summer care quilt:

**Day camps.** Most larger communities run day camp programs, sometimes through the local YMCA or Parks and Recreation. They usually offer plenty of outdoor activities and often have a theme designed to appeal to kids in this age group. But they do have their limitations.

“There are day camps, but they only run from nine until three,” says Beatty-Collins. “They’ll keep the kids until five o’clock for an extra fee, but I can’t get there until six, so that isn’t any good to me.”

Even if you find a camp that fits your hours, you also need to ensure it fits your child. Come summer, Laura Cannon, president of the Early Childhood Development Association of Prince Edward Island, expands her child care centre’s after-school programs to full-day sessions. “We provide lots of outdoor activities,” she says. “We have a pool right at the centre, but we also go to the beach frequently. I think that helps parents feel less guilty — they aren’t thinking, ‘I should be taking my child to

the beach on this gorgeous day,' because they know their children are out at the beach and being active. At the end of the day, the kids are all dirty, tired and happy.”

Cannon’s summer program isn’t just about having fun. Because she thinks it’s important to “keep the learning going all summer,” school-aged children at her centre write in journals, read books and do crafts and other activities to help keep up their reading and math skills.

Options like the centre Cannon runs tend to be more available in larger communities. Some places, like Peel Region in southern Ontario, have a network of child care providers offering a variety of summer care choices. Parents can call Child Care Info Peel and receive a list of programs in their area; many offer subsidies for lower-income families.

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**Babysitters.** Beatty-Collins used babysitters last summer. “I knew a family with some teenagers who had babysat my kids when they were younger, and they were willing to look after Tessa and Owen for the summer. I’d drop the kids off in the morning and pick them up at the end of the day.”

It worked, but her feelings about the situation were mixed. “They were just basically hanging out with a bunch of teenagers and their friends. Tessa learned some funky dances, had her nails painted and tried out new hairstyles. Owen learned skateboarding and mastered riding bikes up and down ramps. I would really have preferred some more structure to their days and some activities more geared to their age,” she admits.

You can also hire a teen to care for your kids in your home. Grandparents and other relatives will sometimes pitch in to provide summer daycare as well.

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**Time off.** Many parents try to minimize their need for summer child care. Sometimes mom and dad take different holidays so that at least one parent can be home for much of the summer — saving money on child care at the expense of having no vacation time together. One of Beatty-Collins' friends arranged to take a little less pay during the year; she then takes the entire summer off and her employer pays her the money withheld during the other 10 months.

Beatty-Collins tries to take as much vacation time as possible when school's out, but finds that staff with seniority claim the summer weeks first.

Your access to some of these options will depend, in part, on where you live. Rural families, or those living in small towns, generally have fewer choices. A 2001 report by the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association, entitled "*Child Care and Child Developmental Services in Rural Canada*," pointed out that during the summer, often the busiest season in farming communities, many families have no available care near their homes. (A list of child care resources and pilot projects is available from the Canadian Rural Information Service at 1-888-757-8725.)

When she thinks about child care options, Beatty-Collins has a dream. "I look down our street in the summer, and there's the school, just sitting there empty all summer long. It already has a nice playground and all the facilities, and we could walk there. If there was something available there in the summer, a program that was regulated and fun for the kids, and affordable," She sighs. "That would make a big difference."

Meanwhile, like many other families, she continues with a patchwork quilt of child care, trying to create a design that will match her changeable work schedule, meet her children's needs and fit her budget. It requires some fancy piecework, patching and stitching at times, but so far the fabric is holding together.

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