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Child care fills 24/7 needs

Facilities reflect LV schedules

By Mark Hansel

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Michael Rexroad leads a pretty good life.

He is 31 years old, happily married and works as a dealer at a major Strip resort. His wife works at the same casino, and they have a 2 1/2-year-old daughter, whom Rexroad calls the joy of their lives.

Like many casino employees in this 24-hour town, however, Rexroad and his wife often work some unusual hours, and finding dependable child care can be challenging.

Fortunately, there are options available for the city's second- and third-shifters. Clark County has 12 child-care centers licensed for 24-hour service, according to Clark County Social Services.

Many, such as the Children's Choice Learning Center at the MGM Grand, are located on or near casinos and work closely with the resorts.

Rexroad doesn't work for MGM Grand, but the resort has opened the center to other Strip casino employees, and his daughter goes there three days a week.

She has adjusted well to the challenging schedule that can be a way of life for casino employees. Rexroad says she is often asleep when she is dropped off and she seems content with the arrangement.

"She really isn't even aware most of the time until the next morning when she wakes up," he says. "She's never fussed or asked us to take her home or acted like she didn't want to go. We were surprised at how much she enjoys it."

Tania Whitaker, human resources manager for Employee Services and Benefits at MGM Grand, says the company recognized a need for the service:

"We wanted to provide employees an option for child care that was 24 hours, seven days a week. It also provides a place for those employees that have school-age children. It's very difficult sometimes to



Teacher Kelly Nolan helps a toddler go to sleep as Malia Holman, left, watches at the Children's Choice Learning Center near Sunset Station in Henderson

find child care when they have (school) track breaks or summer breaks."

She says the availability of child care also offers MGM Grand a recruiting advantage.

"It makes it very convenient to be able to go to work and have your children on site," Whitaker says. "At any time of day, the day care is very welcoming and encouraging if parents want to come in and visit their children."

Rexroad says the prospect of having his child on the property while he works is appealing. He can see how it would be a strong enticement for casino employees with children.

"My wife and I have both considered going back to one of the MGM properties just so we could take advantage of the (child-care) discounts that they offer their employees," he says.

Those benefits include an employee discount for the care, payroll deduction and a pretax flex-spending account.

Not all of the people who use the 24-hour day care in Las Vegas work at casinos, and not all parents find it to be an easy transition.

Summer Hartshorn put her son Devin, now 4, in day care last year at a Children's Choice facility at Sunset Station. The transition was complicated by the fact she worked different jobs and shifts in a short period of time.

"It was tough for me," Hartshorn says. "Especially at first, when he had trouble getting to sleep."

Hartshorn says that the support she received from other parents and the Children's Choice staff helped her adjust, and she continues to send Devin to the facility even though she recently stopped working. She is expecting her second child soon and plans to return to work at some point, so she said it just made sense for her to keep him enrolled.



Nikki Brown, 7, pretends to be a vampire as she plays with Alec Neitz, 5, at a child-care center near Sunset Station, one of 12 in the county licensed to operate twenty four hours

While having someone else tuck their children in at night is hard for some parents to deal with, in many cases, regular child care, even overnight, can actually provide stability.

"One of the things that we've understood about children who need care in nontraditional hours is that they typically have had a hodgepodge of arrangements," says Donna McClintock, chief operating officer for Children's Choice Learning Centers. "There's a lot of stress because they haven't had high quality as an option, and there's a lot of stress because they don't have a predictable schedule."

McClintock says it was this dearth of reliable child-care options and the encouragement of a casino executive that persuaded company officials to move into the Las Vegas market.

Valerie Murzl, vice president of human resources for Station Casinos, approached company officials about starting a 24-hour day-care program in 1997.

She had moved to Las Vegas from Chicago and, when she became pregnant, began looking for child-care services. She was surprised that an industry that relied so heavily on off-shift employees did not have day care available.

"All of the services that were available were full, and they all closed at 6 p.m.," Murzl recalls. "It was ridiculous."

Murzl asked her bosses whether they would consider on-site child-care facilities, and they encouraged her to look into the idea.

The phenomenal growth of the region, the demand for employees around the clock and the large number of people without extended family support groups made the idea an easy sell.

Children's Choice began an arrangement with Station Casinos in 1998 and now provides service for casino employees at four of its properties. The centers at Texas Station and Sunset Station offer 24-hour care, while the Palace Station and Boulder Station centers have more traditional hours.



Children show off hands covered with coffee grinds after playing in a "sensory table" at the Children's Choice Learning Center in Henderson. The company provides service for casino employees at four Station Casino properties.

MGM Grand also expressed an interest and opened its center in 2001. All five facilities can accommodate up to 300 children each at any one time, and over the course of a day often take in more than 350 children.

The secure facilities are on casino property but are separated from the casino area. They have modern kitchen facilities, brightly decorated common areas and Murphy beds for overnight guests. The centers include separate sections for infants and toddlers, and preschool and school-age children.

While Murzl, like Whitaker at MGM Grand, recognizes the competitive advantage on-site child care brings to her company, she says that she is disappointed that more in her industry have not followed suit.

Station Casinos employed 11,000 people before the recent addition of Red Rock Resort. Those employees have 505 children in the four Children's Choice Learning Centers, and many the age groups have waiting lists.

"The other companies need to step up to the plate," Murzl says. "It's no different than home availability. These are issues that involve community needs, and everybody needs to address them together."

The MGM Grand facility continues to serve gaming employees only, but the centers at the four Station Casinos are now open to the community as the need for after-hours child care extends well beyond the casinos.

Sherry Overby owns the Tinker Town Learn and Play Centers, which also provide 24-hour care at three locations (soon to be four) in the valley. She estimates that at least 45 percent of the more than 400 families she serves use the after-hours service.

"Just about any business that is open 24 hours is going to have some people that need this service," Overby says. "Hospitals, the police department, restaurants - even if they aren't open all night are open later than traditional day cares."

She points out that even people who work more conventional hours are often asked to work overtime. With a day care on a traditional schedule, this could require a lot of shuffling or maybe even a missed opportunity to earn some extra money.

"All we ask for is a courtesy call," Overby says.

Any reputable child-care facility is expected to offer certain services, including a meal plan that meets government guidelines and employees who are certified in first aid and CPR. Most centers accept children between the ages of 6 weeks and 12 years.

Rates vary slightly at the different centers and are based on several factors, including the age of the children and the number of days the service is used. For example, a parent would pay \$155 for five full days of care (up to 10 hours per day) for a child 1 year or younger at Tinker Town. For a child of 3 to 5 years, the same care would cost \$115. Parents of school-age children pay \$70 for five half days of four hours or less, which includes busing.

At Children's Choice, community rates range from \$190 per week for an infant to \$145 a week for school age. Corporate rates are about 20 percent to 25 percent lower.

Parents should also explore what, if any, additional services are available.

Children's Choice, for example, offers a Sniffles and Snuggles program for mildly ill children. In addition to providing a quieter, less-active environment supervised by a nursing staff, the program ensures that children who are slightly ill are isolated from the rest of the kids.

It is also important to find out what kind of arrangements the care centers have with schools. Children's Choice works to facilitate transportation to schools, and Tinker Town provides transportation. Children's Choice has also begun to offer accredited schooling for children in the lower grades at its facilities.

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