





Who's Minding the kids?

Long waiting lists and high tuition are producing a child care crisis for Aquidneck's working parents.

By Annie Sherman

Melissa Bowley didn't think it would be that bad. The working mother of two and her husband, Chris, had good jobs and could afford private child care. But living in Newport and working off-island made it difficult to find a convenient, affordable option for their two young sons. So in 2018 they enrolled their 2-year-old in the available day care facility with the latest pickup time, while their 4-month-old had a nanny because no on-island facility could accommodate two more children. Her child care expenses that year totaled well into five figures.

"It was the best of both worlds. We had flexibility, the nanny gave attention to our son, educated him, and took him out into the world every day," she raves. "But it was nerve-racking and down to the wire to get my older son in care, and it wasn't financially sustainable." Once their youngest turned 18 months old, the Bowleys enrolled their children in a facility that could accommodate both ages, as well as working parents' schedules.



Coggeshall Club is a child care facility that includes coworking and fitness facilities for parents, co-founded by Britt Riley (below).

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Newporter Aly Oakley suffered a similar child care crisis. It cost \$14,000 to send two of her three young children to day care two days a week during the school year – after spending nine months on the waiting list just to get them enrolled. Newport mom and early childhood educator Sarah Evans sent her daughter to a home day care at a cost of \$30 per day – or nearly \$7,000 for the school year. She added her name to the waiting list when she was just four months pregnant.

As special as Aquidneck Island is, these narratives are not unique. Child care is in crisis nationwide, with costs tripling since 1990. Forty percent of families dedicate more than 15 percent of their income to care. Waiting lists are the norm everywhere, and are to be expected – unless you don’t expect it.



“Child care is not affordable for most families in Rhode Island or the U.S.,” says Rep. Grace Diaz, D-Providence, who is chairperson of the state’s Permanent Legislative Commission on Child Care. This body has worked to maintain the Child Care Assistance Program to qualify families based on income, although it will take \$7 million in additional funding to expand this program to those who need it. “Trying to find a place that fits what

you need, that has space available when you need it and at an affordable price, is truly rare,” laments Oakley, an early childhood educator who left her job to stay home with her children because she earned less than the cost of their private care. “There are not enough options on the island,” she says. “And when you do find it, it can cost more than in-state college tuition. But most parents have to do it because they don’t want to lose their job. Or they decide it’s not worth it and one of them stays home.”

Providers recognize that child care is a significant portion of the average family’s budget. “But it is impossible to charge less while maintaining high quality,” says Karen Davis, director of Countryside Children’s Center in Portsmouth, which cares for children from 6 weeks to grade 2. “The dichotomy this industry faces is a balancing act between making child care affordable for families, while also providing employees with a livable wage.”

Britt Riley struggles every day with the balance between teacher wages and parent costs. “Child care facilities everywhere don’t want to charge parents more, because they’re already being gouged. But they

Peter Silvia (2)

don't want to pay their employees less," says Riley, co-founder of the Coggeshall Club in Middletown, a child care facility that serves infants to age 5, and provides coworking and fitness for parents. "It's mind-blowing to me that college grads are making just over minimum wage to take care of our babies."

From downtown to Island Park, parents and child care providers alike echo the need for more infant care options. With only six facilities offering care for infants to age 18 months on Aquidneck Island—all of which have limited capacity, varying educational pedagogies, and different daily and calendar year schedules—families rush to find a suitable spot up to a year in advance. Davis, for example, encourages families to secure care more than six months in advance of need, especially for infants.

The growing number of at-home providers across the island, like the one Evans chose, is a likely indicator of a need for more services in general. These providers offer care in their home, and often have professional backgrounds in early childhood education. If the provider is caring for more than three children, there are limitations on the number and ages of the children they can accept, and they're obliged to register their operation with the state—although many do not.

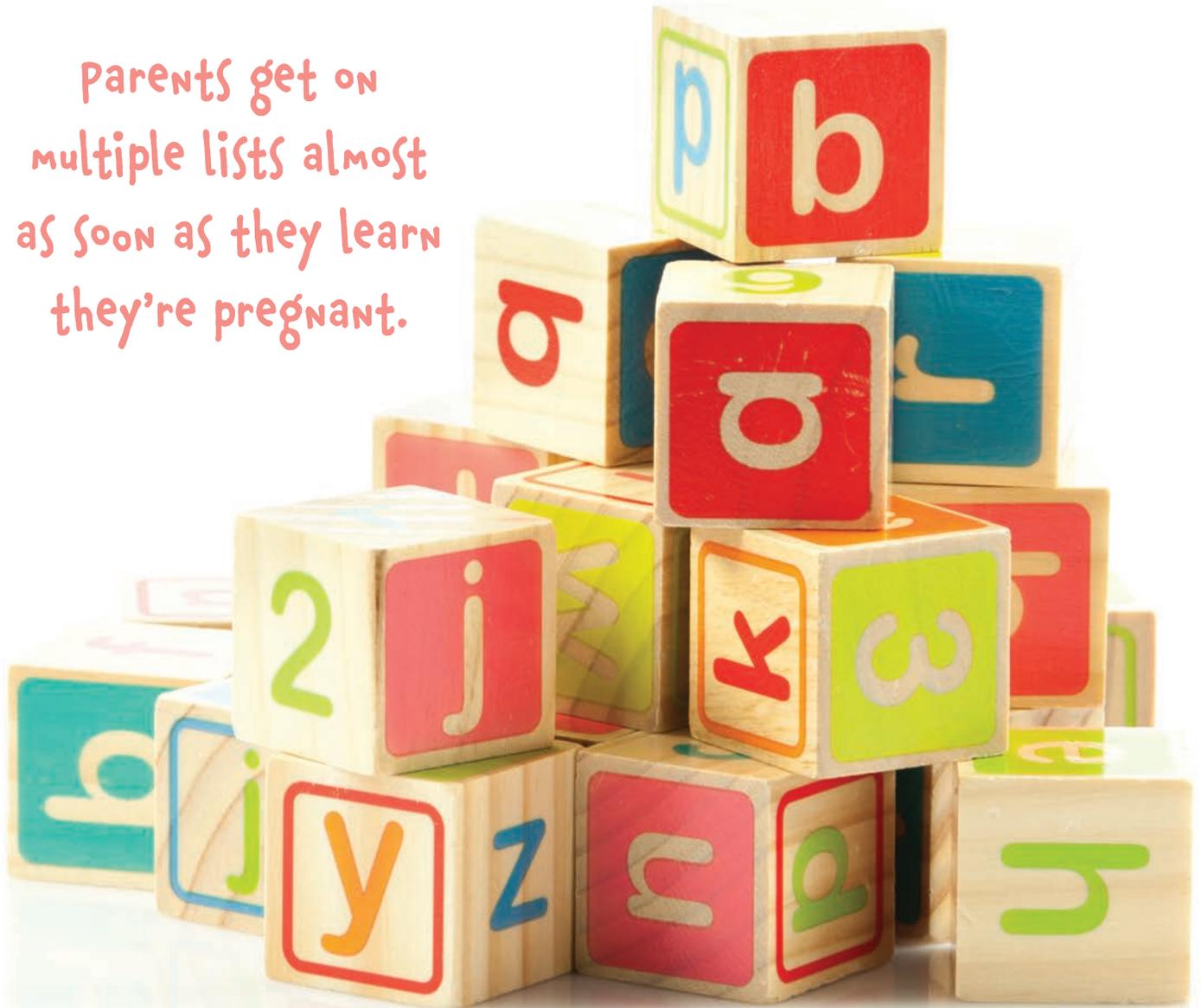
"There are not a lot of options for children under 3 here. It's hard to find places to recommend because so many places here have wait lists," says Carissa Perkowski, director of Emmanuel Day School in Newport, which cares for children ages 3–5. "There is a real need here in infant and toddler care, and I don't know why that is. My perspective is that

standards are pretty rigorous and meeting those standards is very tough and expensive."

Increased demand was the reason that the Twice As Nice Preschool at the Newport County YMCA in Middletown expanded to include 2-to-5-year-olds. "There is definitely a high demand, especially from 0 months to age 3," says Twice As Nice Director Andrea Florendo, adding that they have had wait lists for all their classrooms for many months. "We were being proactive when we decided to expand our coverage, because there is a more significant need for full-time care. We are now full in that program, as well."

Most, if not all, facilities have a waitlist on Aquidneck Island, and like Oakley and Evans, parents get on multiple lists almost as soon as they learn they're pregnant. This leaves little room for life circumstances, as

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was the case with working Newport mother Alana Hearn. When her nanny abruptly quit, Hearn tried to find a local facility that could care for her child, but all of them were full.

“I was astounded and frustrated to find centers as overbooked as they were. I would expect it in New York, but not here,” Hearn says. “I grew up here, and I had a misconception that it’s a summer community, so I’d find care easily. That landscape has changed.”

It has indeed. The early childhood care models have not been updated in decades, since dual-income households became commonplace, Riley says. While the workforce is making progress with remote work or flexible schedules, she adds, the same advancements to work/life services have been slow to catch on. “People have had a hard time evolving this industry. Facilities are functionally traditional and don’t successfully utilize technology and

it as affordable as I can, while providing a high-quality early childhood education and maintaining this family business,” she says.

Ultimately, there is not a single answer to this ongoing national issue, but providers and parents say there needs to be more: more options, more guidance and answers, more support for everyone in the child care spectrum. The goal is quality care with a quality staff that shows up consistently and has proper training — all of which costs money. Universal preschool, government subsidies and tax credit conversations have dotted the horizon and legislative agendas, including Gov. Gina Raimondo’s aggressive pre-K plan for 2020, which could shave off a year and an average of \$18,000 of child care costs for numerous families, Riley says. While many say these are a good start, children need care before pre-K, and tax credits barely scratch the budget surface.

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flexible scheduling to support today’s workforce,” she says. “There is a broken integration of work and life, and addressing this aspect of family care will do nothing but good for our work/life integration.”

Being an island community with a fluctuating seasonal population brings its own unique set of variables, too, which can be very hard for a provider to predict. “We have a transient population, with the Naval War College and military families that come and go throughout the year,” explains Theresa Silveira Spengler of Silveira Kindergarten and Nursery School in Middletown, which responded to community demand four years ago by expanding to include care for 18-month-olds, and is now near capacity with 69 children across four classrooms. “Because pre-kindergarten is so important for children to get an early start in education, I try not to raise tuition annually to make

“The national conundrum is affordable child care. So how do we fix it?” asks Tracey Brown at Apple Blossom Preschool and Early Learning Center in Barrington, which experiences the same waiting list and pricing frustrations as Newport County. “We are caring for the youngest children; this is their foundation, where their education begins. So parents and providers need to work together, not as competitors. We need to talk about things we can do together, for the community, and for our kids.”

Rep. Diaz agrees that finding quality, affordable care is a huge national problem. “I would like to see more middle-class families qualify for state subsidy quality child care assistance,” she says. “The state child care program should be based on children, not on family income. Every child in Rhode Island should be granted early quality education.” ❖