

# Child Care in the Washington Area Navigating Through the Choices

by Erin Mantz

When Lorraine Marshall of Oakton wanted to go back to work part-time, she thought about child care for her three daughters – and found a quick, easy option that was affordable, comfortable and reliable: the in-town grandmas. Her mother and mother-in-law happily volunteered to come over and watch the girls. For Marshall, the benefits of this choice were clear: no crazy costs, no schlepping bags of baby stuff, no worries about the girls feeling safe and loved. If only child care decisions were that easy and crystal clear for everyone in the Washington area.

Many parents come to a point where they need child care. Perhaps mom is returning to work full- or part-time, a second or third baby arrives or she wants some much needed time alone. But contemplating who will watch the children is fraught with anxiety, confusion and fear. Luckily for Washington area families, many choices are available: nannies, day care centers, au pairs, in-town grandparents and more. It's just that navigating through the choices can be time-consuming, tricky and full of second-guessing and unexpected scenarios. We will take a look at child care from the perspectives of moms who've been there. If you're considering options for a baby on the way, thinking of making a change or just wondering if the grass is greener, read on!

## Nanny Care

Depending on the word-of-mouth you hear, your impressions of nanny care can swing from one extreme to the next. For instance, visit <http://isawournanny.blogspot.com>, and you may be blown away by the secret sighting reports moms post about what they observe nannies doing at the playground. Some descriptions are surprising, some reassuring, some unsettling. Other stories highlight nannies' decisions that are not so great, like the North Potomac nanny who gave one baby girl her first haircut one day – without asking the mom. Imagine the mom's shock and sadness about missing her daughter's first haircut, to say nothing about the style or judgment in question!

But throughout every neighborhood, great stories of amazing nannies shine through. Many moms point out key benefits of having a nanny, such as care devoted solely to your child, the convenience of someone coming to your home and extra help for weekly errands and household stuff. Sharon Reis of McLean has a full-time nanny for daughters Cassandra, 6, and Julia, 4. Originally, Reis looked at day care centers, nanny shares and home-based care. Working full-time, Reis knew she would need a nanny's consistency and availability to work a bit around her demanding schedule. One day a meeting at the office could run late, or bad traffic could mean a later pick-up – factors she didn't want to have to juggle with a day care center's closing time. "Mavis, our first nanny, was with us for more than five years and became part of the family," Reis says. Mavis was so devoted that when snow was forecast, she'd bring her clothes and sleep at Reis's house. Mavis didn't drive in the snow, and she didn't want to risk missing work when Reis was

counting on her. Mavis moved away, but new nanny Dani is also a success. "Having a nanny is expensive, but it's well worth it. My kids are happy – and she makes my life less stressful!" Reis says. Dani runs errands and helps out around the house, and her social network of other nannies reassures Reis that her kids are staying active with friends.

Nanny shares are increasingly popping up across the area as an almost-perfect option when part-time needs arise – and when the match is right. A Potomac mom was due with her second child and wanted some help a few days a week. She chose a nanny share because it gave her the flexibility she was looking for and access to a well-qualified caregiver who needed more hours and income than she could offer. She successfully shared the nanny with a friend for years. Her advice to moms? "Make sure you and the mom you are sharing with have a good relationship and understand the boundaries that go along with sharing a sitter." When issues or scheduling needs come up – and some will – communication is key.

So, what are the cons of nannies? Having a full-time nanny is expensive. In our area, nannies often earn anywhere from \$12 to \$19 an hour, plus, in some cases, gas money, generous bonuses at holiday time, birthday gifts, health insurance payments and the same weekly paycheck whether the family is away on vacation or not. Plus, moms trying to navigate the mom-nanny relationship may struggle to build a bond with their nannies without crossing the line. Some get almost too close and feel guilty about criticizing the little things. Some communicate too much like friends. Another factor comes into play – a kind of cutthroat mentality when it comes to finding, keeping and stealing the best nannies. One McLean mom resorted to a signing bonus. A Potomac mom who gave her part-time nanny a glowing reference to a family who wanted the nanny the other two days discovered her nanny was gone the next week – after three years as part of the family. The other mom had suddenly realized she needed full-time care and offered the much-loved nanny extra days and an almost unheard of hourly rate.

## **Day Care Centers**

Corporate-sponsored day care is a boon for some area parents working and searching for reliable, convenient child care. When Ali Weitzman was pregnant and working a demanding job at AOL's Sterling campus, she mapped out her child care plan. Luckily for Weitzman, AOL's opening of an on-campus day care center by well-regarded Knowledge Beginnings coincided perfectly with her return to work. She enrolled her baby-to-be and secured a coveted slot. Upon return from maternity leave, Weitzman commuted from her Silver Spring home with daughter Hannah, bottles and diapers beside her laptop.

She chose day care for several reasons. Having a center right on her company's campus meant she could see Hannah any time, and there was comfort in knowing she was close by (she began right around 9/11). She was not comfortable with the idea of a nanny in her house all day. "I was concerned about someone being there and me being gone, not knowing what the kids were doing or how they were being treated – from sitting in front of the television all day to any kind of abuse occurring," Weitzman recalls. Six years

later, she's thrilled with how well Hannah's experience went, and son Sam has been at the center for three years. She cites the social interaction and development that day care provides. Her somewhat shy son steps outside his boundaries as he interacts daily with kids in resource rooms for science and imaginary play. The center even brings in soccer classes, perfect for working moms who can't schlep their kids to places late in the afternoon.

Torey Phillips of Alexandria recently took advantage of her company-sponsored day care, too, placing 4-month-old Samantha in a brand-new Bright Horizons child care center. Washington, D.C., law firm Crowell & Moring LLP recognized child care was a perk many employees would love and secured spots in a Bright Horizons center next door – even offering subsidies to help offset employees' costs. So far, Phillips is impressed with Bright Horizons' staff, communication and curriculum. "The first day, Samantha's teacher sent me an e-mail with pictures and described what she was doing," she says. "E-mail alerts parents when a child is diagnosed with an illness, and I receive daily wrap-ups noting Samantha's mood, feelings and activities."

Choosing day care was the right decision for Phillips. Knowing her employer trusted Bright Horizons gave her a comfort level with day care, and she knew the firm would have done due diligence in screening center providers. Michael Day, senior vice president of client services for Bright Horizons Family Solutions, believes the employer-employee relationship can play an important role not only in the work/life balance, but also in a level of reassurance. "Employees often trust their employers when it comes to benefits," Day explains. "Finding a high-quality child care and early education provider is a very thorough process that includes many checks and balances."

When Phillips had originally considered a nanny, it made her a bit nervous. "I heard so many things about nannies and recalled that 'Dateline NBC' story. Parents can do background checks on nannies until they are blue in the face, but something can still go wrong," she says. Plus, she had gotten her baby on a schedule and trusted a day care center provider to stick to it better than a nanny might. Day care does present some challenges to parents, of course, like concerns about playmates getting sick. Doing the drop-off and pick-up thing can get hectic, but Phillips has found that getting out of the house in the morning has been easier than she anticipated. She offers parents and expectant parents who are interested in a day care center this advice: Get on the waiting list now!

Carolyn Van Damme of Mount Vernon found her solution in Morningstar Daycare, a small, in-home center, and has been so happy with this arrangement that she's had three daughters there over a nine-year period. She knew she didn't want a big day care center; she'd seen facilities that felt too rigid and worried that her children would not get enough attention. She heard Fairfax County published a list of licensed in-home child care providers and used it. (Monday Morning Moms of Montgomery County also offers a great checklist regarding in-home day care criteria.) "My kids made lots of good friends there," she says. "It's flexible, and the center owner even picks my daughter up at preschool on agreed upon days." Her 9-year-old daughter formed a close bond with four

other kids there years ago. Referred to as the "Fab Five," they still play together, even though they are in different schools. Perhaps Van Damme's biggest issue was the policy – understandable but no less problematic– that sick kids have to immediately go or stay home, which can wreak havoc on a parent's schedule.

## **Back-Up Care**

When Meg Riley-Jamison of Arlington faced unexpected changes with her daughters' regular care, she found a short-term solution at the Lipton Back-Up Child Care Center in Washington. Her employer, Ballard Spahr Andrews & Ingersoll, LLP, offered back-up care at Lipton as an employee benefit. "Initially, my biggest worry was that my daughter would not receive the same level of care she had with her in-home provider," Riley-Jamison says. "Then I toured Lipton and was impressed with the teachers, facility and activities. They make children feel welcome, even though it's a back-up center." On days her regular care has fallen through over the past two years, she has placed her two daughters there, and they love going. Riley-Jamison recommends that parents "get over your own fears and take advantage of back-up care if you can. It's a great resource for parents, and your children will enjoy the experience."

Not every parent can afford or get her top choice in child care. Some kinds are costly, ideal spots may have waiting lists or one bad experience may change a perspective. But it's nice to know options are out there – and that every parent faces some kind of challenge at some point, whether she is struggling or satisfied with her decision.

---

## **Finding Child Care**

Because finding child care is an issue unto itself, *Washington Parent* offers a Child Care Guide and Source Book describing area resources. Pick up a copy, or view them online at [www.washingtonparent.com](http://www.washingtonparent.com).

---

## **Looking for a nanny?**

Don't forget to leverage area resources.

- Word-of mouth/talking with other moms.
- Nanny agencies.
- Preschool and community boards.
- Flyers at playgrounds.
- Classifieds in local newspapers.
- Community listserves.
- The DC Urban Moms web site at [www.dcurbanmom.com](http://www.dcurbanmom.com).
- Craigslist child care section.
- *Washington Parent* online at [www.washingtonparent.com](http://www.washingtonparent.com).

- Online babysitting job boards at local colleges and universities.