



Mary Raebel
Yoga and dance class for 3-year-olds at Momentum Early Learning Center in Sussex.

The evolution of DAY CARE

From babysitting service to learning center

BY MARY RAEBEL

It's early morning and babies arrive wide-eyed in their car seats. Toddlers scurry through the door, looking for friends. A kiss good-bye for mom or dad, and another school day starts.

That's right—school. It may not be school like the big kids' school. There are no tiny textbooks or pencils stuffed in those diaper bags, but more and more day care centers refer to themselves as learning centers. They have teachers educated for and committed to helping even the youngest—the diaper set—develop to their full potential.

Kim, a Sussex mother of two, says they've called their day care "school" from the very beginning. Last summer she enrolled her then 6-month-old and 2-

year-old at Momentum Early Learning. Like many parents, Kim says cost and location were important factors when considering which day care to choose, but so was finding care with an educational lean. "We felt there might be some missed positive opportunities without a Momentum-like structure. The lesson plans and structured activities have been wonderful."

Stimulating babies' brains

UW-Milwaukee early childhood expert, Pam Boulton, EdD,

says as the need for day care has grown through the years, people have realized it isn't just about watching the kids, but also making it a great experience for them. She says what defines a great experience is the result of brain research in the past five to 10 years.

"We are much more aware now of what it is babies are learning during the first parts of their lives—which parts of the brain are firing up, how it is that their central nervous systems are being wired, and what we need to do to enhance those things."

Dr. Boulton says an important and necessary experience for a baby is called "serve and return." When a baby babbles and makes facial expressions, an adult is right there responding to those sounds and movements. This back and forth communication is fundamental to the wiring of the brain which helps form a strong foundation for learning.

Alex Mazur, owner of the new Kids Rule Academy in Mequon, likens a baby's complex brain circuits to filing cabinets. "They're developing filing cabinets for information—billions and trillions of filing cabinets. The more filing cabinets they develop, the easier it will be for them to receive, process and store information."

That's why Mazur brought in a "methodist" with a master's

degree in early childhood education for his infant/toddler program. "She makes up her own educational toys and tutorials. She does brain stimulation activities and exercises: foot massage, back massage, stretching exercises ... she's constantly stimulating child brain activity."

Curriculum. Lesson plans. Learning objectives. Goals.

These are words found on day care websites. Chris Moldenhauer, education and development specialist at Momentum Early Learning, says their curriculum is all about individual growth. "Instead of giving a blanket curriculum and blanket education, saying everybody is the same, we're saying everybody's different. We need to foster a child's learning based on her needs and not the group as a whole."

But Moldenhauer isn't talking about teaching babies to read or drilling toddlers with math facts. "It's all play-based," she says. "It could be as simple as doing a block activity in the block center where they are working on stacking skills."

Dr. Boulton says adults tend to think play is frivolous—it's something fun, but not necessary. "But with babies and children, play is absolutely essential. It's how they work. They work out all the things they need to know through their play."

Parents say **COST** and **LOCATION** are the top considerations when looking for child care.

Here are some other things to consider:

- a caring relationship between adults and children
- caregiver to child ratio
- group size
- classroom space
- training and education of caregivers
- equipment
- cleanliness
- healthy food

For more tips, go to <http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/childcare/licensed/Choosing.htm>



Mary Raebel
Meghan Ryba leads yoga and dance class at Momentum Early Learning in Sussex.



Kate Gralton
Real life skills are taught at MorningStar Montessori Academy in Cedarburg.

Kate Gralton, business coordinator for the new MorningStar Montessori Academy in Cedarburg, says sometimes adults underestimate the abilities of children. "We've been trained to think we have to protect our children by telling them they can't touch this or do that. However, what we might be doing is teaching children that they are limited."

MorningStar is only the second AMI (Association Montessori International) accredited child care facility in Wisconsin, where children as young as 15-months can begin the Montessori program.

"We take off their diapers. They put on new, organic underpants, and essentially we give them the opportunity and guidance to practice real life skills." Gralton says those life skills include hanging up their coats in their own child-sized closets, and washing their hands at small sinks, built just 18 inches off the ground.

In a light-filled, glass-walled environment, children sweep, make salads, wash dishes and even load small towels into the washing machine. No one tells them to do these things. Gralton says it's all self-directed.

"We believe a child should be shown how to do a multitude of different things and we engage all of the senses," she says. "Everything is hands on learning." Children aren't just told $2+2=4$. They are shown why with beads.

Rachel Wise of Cedarburg transferred her 4-year-old from a more traditional day care to

MorningStar when it opened in January. "We love that the school teaches independence, self-motivated learning, communication and respect. These are things as parents we work very hard to instill in our children, but as working parents we are not with our children all day. Knowing there are teachers who reinforce these things with our children is incredible."

Early child care learning centers say their programs make a difference. Not only are children more than prepared when they begin elementary school, but the benefits of quality care are long lasting. A 2010 study by the U.S. National Institutes of Health found that teenagers who were in high quality child care as young kids scored slightly higher on measures of academic and cognitive achievement than teens who had been in lower quality child care. "Quality" was measured by how much time the care giver spent interacting with the children, as well as warmth, support and cognitive stimulation.

Enriching extras

From art to zumba, day care centers are finding enrichment programs not only fun for the kids but accommodating to time-crunched parents. "It's nice because if parents pick up at 6,

they don't have to run and take their child to another program after school," says Momentum administrator Crystal Towler.

"They're not losing out on any of the activities or the academics that we do throughout the day."

"Namaste," say the 3-year-olds at Momentum Early Learning at the start of their yoga and dance class. Teacher Meghan Ryba leads them in the ABCs of yoga with poses like the cobra, the tree and superhero. Afterward, the kids freestyle dance or learn routines like the electric slide.

Kim enrolled her 3-year-old in Spanish class at Momentum, as well. "We felt that being bilingual could only help her in the future and that it would be best to start early while she's learning so rapidly."

Webcams in every classroom are also a feature popping up in day care centers. Parents get a password and can check on their kids any time during the day using their cell phones or computers.

"We do have parents who tell us, 'I have it up on my screen all day—minimized,'" says Towler. Others say they only check in if their child had a rough night or morning.

Mazur knows from personal experience that webcams are a good idea. When his daughter

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Indoor playroom at Kids Rule Academy in Mequon.

went into day care several years ago, his wife would find every reason to drop in during the day. "She said she couldn't work, she constantly worried about our daughter. Finally, the director called me and said 'I think your wife has parked her car outside where she can clearly peek through the window.'"

Cindy Orlando of Cedarburg says Kids Rule Academy gave her an iPad when she registered her 2-year-old son, Hunter. "Just for me to be able to tap into the camera system to see what my son is doing during the day when I have a break at work is absolutely awesome. I can see him eating snacks. I can see him engaging with other kids. I can see him cuddling with the teachers. It's really nice."

Organic, vegetarian, gluten-free menus: These are options parents consider when choosing child care, too. Kids Rule Academy only serves organic food, delivered daily from a caterer in

Crystal Lake, IL.

At MorningStar Montessori, meals are vegetarian. Gralton says they want the children to learn that veggies are delicious. "So we have a lot of soups, salads, little pizzas, little tacos—a lot of colorful, flavorful foods." MorningStar has plans for its own garden. The children also have tea time and make bread every day.

So how is a parent to choose? Are all these amenities essential? Dr. Boulton says parents need to visit to find out for themselves. "You need to see if the children are delighted with what they are doing and whether the teachers are completely engaged with those kids—down on the floor, working with them. If you feel it's a wonderful place to be, then that's a good place for you."

For parents like Cindy Orlando it's knowing the teachers really care about her son. "I trust them. They're like family."