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The Cost of Care

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Three-year-old Justin lets out a scream of excitement as he runs across the kitchen floor to greet his mother. Justin, who has short brown hair and wears navy sweatpants and a matching shirt, collides with his mother, Amy Mullica. She is picking him up from daycare, after attending class and meeting with her advisor.

Mullica, a 26-year-old senior in management, is a single parent. On days she has class, it takes her an additional hour in the morning to get ready and take her son to daycare.

"Usually he's just waking up at about 8 or 8:15, with just enough time to go. We get him dressed real fast. And all this time, we're like, running, of course he's a slow poke, so it takes twice as long. Then I come back home — usually I take a shower before I leave, I guess — then I come back home and eat breakfast," Mullica explains.

Mullica's schedule could have been eased if she'd sent Justin to one of Iowa State's two campus daycare centers — University Community Childcare at either Pammel Court or Vet Med — rather than the off-campus, in-home one he attends now. But because of the cost at the time, that wasn't an option.

"When I was looking for childcare on campus, it was very expensive, and I didn't know that there was help to pay for it," says Mullica, who makes ends meet on limited income. Currently, she pays $300 per month for full-time daycare for Justin, and that includes the financial help she gets from school loans, grants and state aid.

"It is expensive," Mullica says. "It's half your paycheck for going full time."

Mullica would pay $437 per month to send Justin to an on-campus center. And without the aid she receives, off-campus programs are just as expensive.

So what are the childcare options for single mothers? Does the university provide adequate opportunities for them?

Julie Hagen says yes — for the most part. Hagen is the child care coordinator in charge of ISU Child Care Resources. She says the goal is to make sure that 60 percent of the kids enrolled there are children of students, the remaining 40 percent, the children of
faculty and staff. And this goal is consistently met.

Laura, who is six years old and also a child of a single mother, sits in front of a 12-inch television watching an episode of Friends, with her mother, Cherene Jordan, a 26-year-old single mother and a senior in child and family services.

When her mom is either at class or doing volunteer work, Laura goes to the YWCA for after-school daycare.

"The amount I pay for daycare varies during the year," Jordan says. "It depends on my needs for it. I currently pay 25 percent of the cost of daycare since where I have my daughter go for childcare can get support from the United Way. I believe I save about $11 to $16 every day by not taking my daughter to a campus childcare center."

There are numerous ways the university attempts to make its childcare centers affordable for student parents, who, on average, graduate with 49 percent more debt than a traditional student, Hagen says.

Already, some measures are in place to ease the burden on students trying to balance life as a parent and life as a college student. For example, University Child Care offers a sliding-fee scale, which is a tuition assistance program that cuts low-income families a break for daycare costs. The Ames Social Services Evaluation Team (ASSET), reimburses the difference to the center.

Through their student fees, all ISU students help fund the sliding-fee program. Each year, the ISU Government of the Student Body allocates student-fee dollars to ASSET.

The Child Care Assistance Program (CAP), is a new program for students who are financially responsible for a child. It is funded by student fees, collected via U-Bill and distributed via GSB, from the pocketbooks of every student at Iowa State. CAP reimburses parents who have children under kindergarten age who attend daycare.

Last spring, GSB's Special Fees Allocations Committee voted to earmark 32 cents out of each student's fee money for campus childcare. The funding went into effect at the beginning of the 2003 fiscal year, which gives the CAP program about $16,500, Hagen says.

"To reimburse parents with children under age two, if we reimburse them $500 a semester, you can see from the figures I gave you, you're lucky if that's a month of care. Now, no one's going to deny it...they jump for joy if I gave them 25 bucks because they're always strapped [for cash]," she adds.

The childcare program at Iowa State has been untouched by budget cuts. "I think they [the administration] have been very supportive when we've had budget cuts," Hagen says. "I've been protected; childcare's been protected."

Yet childcare rates on campus continue to climb about 3 to 5 percent each year, she continues. "That money goes right into raising the salary of the [daycare] teachers."

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Amy Mullica | student mother

Rates are also upped based on the increasing costs of everything from garbage removal to insurance.

"Every time we increase it, we know it comes straight out of the pockets of these people paying, so that's why we try to keep it to exactly a minimum," Hagen says.

"There is no money in childcare. No one's making a killing and a big living off of this, and that's what's hard. And it's hard to be able to charge, to continue to raise rates, because we know where it's coming from."