

PARENTING/FAMILY MANAGEMENT

The ‘Dream’ of Affordable, Reliable Child Care

How one local company is changing the local child-care landscape

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PUBLISHED ON: JULY 28, 2023



Editor's note: This article was sponsored by [DreamCare](https://www.dreamcare.com/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content) (https://www.dreamcare.com/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content).

Finding reliable, affordable child care has always been the hardest part of maintaining a dual-income family. The pandemic, the changing nature of work and recent policies mandating that remote workers return to the office have only made things worse. But

one local company is looking to change that, with an innovative new approach that makes life easier for families and for child-care providers.

Child care and the American Dream

The founders of the company [DreamCare \(https://www.dreamcare.com/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content\)](https://www.dreamcare.com/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content) set out to revitalize the way child care works because of their own firsthand experience. As working parents, they noticed a distressing pattern: Child care was often a limiting factor in women's careers. The women who were able to excel were the ones who had access to flexible, reliable care for their children. That realization led to the establishment of DreamCare, a comprehensive live-in child-care solution that aims to help both families and caregivers.

"Ever since the pandemic, there has been a massive crunch on child-care resources," says Kenyatta Allison, DreamCare's executive director. "Parents had to scramble when COVID-19 hit, and things still haven't really returned to normal." For parents who switched to working from home, driving back and forth to day care became their new daily commute, a dedicated trip that could take an hour or more out of their day.

Day care centers had to change attendance policies and sometimes shut down when infection rates were high. As elementary-school teachers quit in record numbers, many pre-K teachers moved up, creating a staffing vacuum that preschools have yet to fill, even three years later. The result has been skyrocketing costs and lengthening waitlists, even as reliability has decreased.

In this landscape, parents have had to get creative. Some tried out nanny shares. Others switched their work schedules around, with parents staggering their days off or consolidating to a 4/10 work schedule to reduce the number of days they needed child care. Many families have recruited relatives for pickups or to provide part-time, or even full-time, care. While these creative solutions are working for some people, ad hoc fixes have drawbacks – chiefly unreliability.

The DreamCare solution

The DreamCare team designed the service specifically to provide the best aspects of having an au pair or live-in nanny, without the drawbacks. Like au pairs, DreamCare caregivers live in the home with the family. Kids get 40 hours of one-on-one care per week. There is no commute, and the hours are flexible.

Au pairs have expensive and cumbersome visa requirements and must leave the country (and therefore leave their jobs) after a year or two. All DreamCare child-care providers are American college students who can reside with the family for a longer

period – usually for the two to four years they need to finish their degree. This means no broken hearts when visas run out. It also means major cost savings; au pair staffing agencies routinely charge \$10,000 or more upfront for each placement.

“The cost is designed to be similar to having two kids in full-time day care,” adds Allison. Right now, the average day care center in Washington state costs about \$1,500 per month (<https://www.axios.com/local/seattle/2023/06/20/child-care-costs-washington-state>). Nannies charge \$25–\$35 per hour in the Seattle area – that’s 40 percent higher than before the pandemic. DreamCare charges \$3,000 per month. This pays the child-care provider and covers program overhead, as well as takes care of taxes and other legal matters that parents who hire nannies directly have to take care of themselves.

How it works

Unique among child-care programs, DreamCare partners with two online universities (https://www.dreamcare.com/universitypartners/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content), to recruit caregivers, and to pay tuition for all DreamCare child-care providers. Since instruction is entirely remote and asynchronous, providers can be flexible to the needs of their families, while working toward the degree of their choice. While DreamCare has placed providers of all ages and a variety of backgrounds, the typical DreamCare nanny is a returning student in their mid-twenties.

After passing the DreamCare interview and providing references, selected providers must pass a thorough background check (hiring parents also must do this). Since parents are selecting a housemate as well as a nanny, both parents and providers also fill out a personal profile to make matches based on mutual compatibility.

“We developed a system that matches on 25 criteria that we’ve identified for a successful match,” explains Allison. The factors range from practical matters, such as the ability to drive a car and dietary restrictions, to more personal preferences, such as tidiness and comfort with pets. Using these profiles, DreamCare presents families with three potential matches for a final round of interviews. Once a match is made, DreamCare pays relocation costs for the provider, provides training and, if things don’t work out, even offers a reconnection process to rematch both parties.

More than an employee

Careful selection eliminates most problems, but DreamCare is clear that there are limits to its current scope. Logistically, it’s only an option for families that have a suitable spare room where a person can live with reasonable privacy and comfort. And not everyone is temperamentally suited to the arrangement. For parents who don’t want to share their home, or who are looking for a live-in helper to take care of the children and additionally do all the housework, a DreamCare provider is not a good fit.

“DreamCare was the door that opened and introduced me to a life I never knew I could have. I moved from rural Texas to Seattle – a dream city! – I’m earning my bachelor’s degree without debt, I live in a beautiful home with a wonderful, supportive family, and I absolutely love my job,” says Brista Mangum, a DreamCare caregiver.

“The ideal family wants to mentor a young person. This is someone who is living with you, and you should care about them,” adds Allison. A DreamCare family doesn’t just share their space with their caregiver while they are at work. Caregivers become part of their family’s household for an extended period of time.

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