Campus Staff Child Care Initiative Gains Momentum

by Janine Gibbons

Once her four-year-old son was born, Tarble employee Kate Corbett had to start working nights, as it was almost impossible to find daytime quality child care at a reasonable price. Students receive calls constantly from members of the Swarthmore community — faculty, staff, and families in the borough — looking for someone to watch their children while they are at work or otherwise busy. These sitting jobs often start as early as 6:00 a.m.

Presently, the issue of who cares for children when both parents work is receiving national attention. The government is beginning to recognize companies and employers who assist their employees in getting access to quality care by offering them tax credits. Being a tax-exempt institution, Swarthmore cannot qualify for the same benefits. For several years, however, the Women's Concern Committee has been campaigning for a campus child care facility, where quality care would be accessible to all members of the Swarthmore community.

The Women's Concerns Committee (WCC) was formed in 1981, and has dealt with such issues as sexual misconduct, personal safety, and maternity leave. Each year, the committee chooses a specific area to focus its time and effort on, and at the suggestion of President Al Bloom, this year's WCC decided to reevaluate campus child care options. According to committee member Julia Welbon, "At present we are trying to determine the best possible way to use a fixed sum of money that was set aside for this very purpose a number of years ago, to best meet the child care needs of this community."

The Women's Concerns Committee (WCC) was formed in 1981, and has dealt with such issues as sexual misconduct, personal safety, and maternity leave. The WCC recognizes that financial aid for child care is still a major stumbling block and members see no point in pursuing a center if it could not be made accessible to all members of the community. Thus, the committee has continued to discuss the issue for the College could offer a financial aid program that would make care available to all employees. At the suggestion of Vice President for Finance and Planning Paul Aslian, the College decided to convert the money that was set aside in 1988 from a static account to an income-bearing account. By acting as a quasi-endowment, the account could produce an income of around $10,000 a year without touching the capital. It is anticipated that this money will enable the College to develop a program that would assist lower-paid staff. Financial aid for child care would be offered on a sliding scale as it is currently offered to students for tuition.

The committee is also hoping to raise funds among the alumni. "Many of them would be interested in seeing that good, quality child care is available," believes Welbon. "They themselves are contending with how to meet the demands of career and family in a balanced way. They would like to see Swarthmore as part of the solution."

The committee continues to work with the Trinity Cooperative Day Nursery as it decides how to meet child care needs and demonstrate the demand for greater resources. In the long run says Welbon, "We expect the center to strengthen and very much enhance the College community. It could be a place where students could work, train, and be exposed to good, quality care." Students on campus agree. According to Annie Kittler '01, "Good child care seems hard to come by. You're always reading or hearing about some awful incident of neglect or abuse that occurs at certain facilities."

While there has not been considerable dialogue on the topic, the community has shown support whenever it has come under discussion. Faculty and staff realize just how fragile child care arrangements can be on a day-to-day basis: if any one thing goes awry with a child care plan, the whole day can fall apart. Kate Corbett would be thrilled to see the College open a facility: "I could go back to working days and even get to see my son at lunch, spending some quality time with him."

Thompson, who continues to work with the College as a longtime child care specialist and consultant, presently assists the community by helping low-income employees with child care needs to apply for government-subsidized child care. Once they are eligible, they are directed to a program fit to meet their needs. She also assists those employees who do not qualify for subsidized care. In addition, the College offers a phone service called Carebridge that provides employees with a list of resources that help them identify child care providers appropriate to their needs. The WCC has drafted a policy describing this employee benefit, but recent changes in government subsidies have forced them to modify their original plans. The committee is having a group of College lawyers look at the policy to make sure that they are on a productive track. At present, the policy is under consideration as part of the College's long-range planning initiative, and is in the hands of the Benefits Committee and Barbara Carroll, Director of Human Resources.