



**Melanie Wong**  
**[mwong@vaildaily.com](mailto:mwong@vaildaily.com)**

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## Searching for affordability



Studies have shown that development and learning for pre-kindergarten children has long-lasting impacts on their futures. A number of federal and state grants help provide affordable early childhood development for lower income children, but many families earning middle-range incomes struggle to afford early education for their children, too.

This is the last article in a three-part series examining the challenges of finding and affording child care in the Vail Valley. Read the other articles at [www.vaildaily.com](http://www.vaildaily.com).

**EAGLE COUNTY** — Child care advocate and worker Carrie Benway says the stories she's heard from kindergarten teachers are striking. These Eagle County teachers report stark contrasts in the five year olds that they see entering elementary school depending on what kind of early childhood education they've had. Some children arrive knowing how to read and having traveled around the world, while others have rarely interacted with people outside of their family circle and have never even held a crayon.

Benway, the program development specialist at [The Family Learning Center in Edwards](#), said that such stories show that early childhood development is fundamental in preparing them for kindergarten and beyond.

“All the research shows that the developmental years of 0 to 5 are so important,” she said. “(In our county) we have a high percentage of families who live in poverty, and we have some second-language learners, so we want these kids to be set up for success before they enter elementary schools. It doesn’t just help that individual child but entire classrooms and other children down the line.”

## Changes from the top down

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However, when it comes to providing that early childhood education — whether in a preschool class or a day care learning center — cost becomes a problem. Child care centers struggle to make ends meet while still keeping rates affordable for lower- and middle-income families. At the same time, child care centers want to provide high quality programs, which is a tough proposition in a state that ranks among the lowest when it comes to spending on education.

“These problems are systematic across the country, which is why Obama has a focus on early childhood, and there are many programs to address this,” said Jonathan Godes, of the Early Childhood Network, referring to Barack Obama’s announcement in December to provide \$1 billion in public-private spending on programs for young learners. “However, in Colorado, we’re one of the most expensive states for child care in the nation. It has to do with our tax base and a number of factors, but in the end, no state spends less on education — and especially on early childhood education — than Colorado.”

The good news is a number of lawmakers, from the county to federal level, are working for increased funding for early childhood education. In Eagle County, a number of lower-income families receive child care assistance through federal programs that include Early Head Start and the Child Care Assistance Program. Earlier this year, the county received a grant to include eight more infants to Early Head Start, adding to the 82 kids who are already in the program.

At a local level, with the high costs in resort communities, towns and counties have had to step in to provide even more assistance. Both Eagle County and the town of Vail have provided subsidies and land for child care centers to help with costs, and some surrounding counties even have a tax dedicated to early childhood education.

“We see problems with child care affordability in these resort towns with high costs of living,” said Liz McGillvray of the Rocky Mountain Early Childhood Council. “Pitkin and Summit counties both have taxes in place to address that.”

## Seeking more funds

The Women’s Foundation of Colorado, Colorado Children’s Campaign and Qualistar recently completed a report on accessing affordable child care in the state and made several recommendations, many of which called for more investment in early childhood from the federal, state and private business levels.

“Our recommendations for increasing access to affordable care cross all sectors of our state because the issue of affordable child care is one that impacts so many Coloradans,” said Louise Myrland, vice president of community investments and initiatives at The Women’s Foundation. “After a year of research, we found the answers to the affordability question were complex and nuanced. That’s why we are asking for solutions from the public and private sectors at the national, state and local levels. Everyone needs to bring something to the table, including policy makers, business leaders and advocates.”

The report’s top strategy called for expanded access to the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program. The program helps families pay for child care through a combination of county and state funds. In Eagle County, qualifying families cannot earn more than \$3,677 per month for a family of four. The CCCAP funds, along with a number of other grants, help many lower income families in Eagle County, but as Eagle County economic services manager Megan Burch admits, it doesn’t help middle income families who earn too much to qualify for federal help.

“These programs are structured to help low income folks, and it’s hard to say no to a middle-income family here that you know is struggling,” she said.

### Businesses step in

Realizing the struggle that many families face, some businesses have come up with their own solutions. Knowing that there are often long waiting lists for infant day care spots, Edwards-based Slifer Designs has partnered with the Miller Ranch Child Care Center to pre-purchase a number of spots for their employees. Slifer’s human resource and payroll manager Cyndi Gershenoff said that employees pay the company for the day care spot and in turn the company puts that money toward reserving spots for the following year. She said that so far none of the spots have gone unused.

In addition, the company offers flex-spending accounts that let employees save pre-tax money to pay for child care, and flexible schedules so that parents can either work part-time from home, work four days a week or take unconventional days off to fit the their day care schedule.

“I know a couple examples of husbands taking Mondays off and wives taking Friday off so that they are down to three days of child care, which is much more affordable than five days,” said Gershenhoff. “I think it fills a very important niche. Especially with traditional family roles changing, with so many families needing to have dual incomes, if you don’t follow that trend, that’s when you start losing employees.”

Assistant Managing Editor Melanie Wong can be reached at 970-748-2927 and [mwong@vaildaily.com](mailto:mwong@vaildaily.com). Follow her on Twitter @mwongvail.

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