

Demand has surged in recent years as parents prefer the structured learning environment and trained caregivers



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Ms Jothi Letchimi Ramakrishnan, 40, started looking for infant care even before her daughter was born in January.

The human resource manager had heard good things about the E-Bridge Pre-School centre near her home in Punggol, but there were no available slots. “I called them every other day to ask if they had a vacancy. I think they remembered my name by heart,” she says.

Just before her maternity leave was up in May, the centre called her as someone had dropped out. She rushed down to enrol Diya Jaylyn, her first child, who was then four months old.

Demand for infant care from parents such as Ms Jothi has led to exponential growth in the industry and waiting lists in some popular centres.

Infant-care places for babies aged two to 17 months old have surged by 66 per cent in five years, from 6,200 in 2015 to about 10,500 places last year, says a spokesman for the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) in response to questions from The Straits Times.

Punggol and Sengkang, in particular, have seen a 90 per cent increase in infant-care and childcare places, it adds.

ECDA expects to add another 10,000 new full-day pre-school places by 2023. These will be “concentrated in areas with more young families”, although it declined to say how many of those places will be for infant care.

What is it about infant care that is attracting so many families, who prefer it over hiring “auntie” babysitters or domestic helpers?

After all, some may argue that babies who eat, sleep and poo on repeat need only simple child minding.

Public servant Angelyn Tan, 31, employs a helper, but chose to enrol both her daughters in infant care at My First Skool in Buangkok Crescent.

She says she wanted them to have social interaction with others and exposure to different types of learning activities.

“We were looking at something a bit more structured in terms of how they spend their days,” she says. Her elder child turns three next month and started infant care at almost 12 months old, while her younger girl is eight months old and enrolled last month.

Similarly, Ms Rozana Ishak, in her 30s, likes that infant-care educators are professionally trained and there is a “wide range of activities” every day.

Her daughter Amirah Naura, 19 months, recently graduated from infant care at PCF Sparkletots @ Sengkang East Block 103.

Her son, Adam Amsyar, who turns three next month and attends childcare at the same centre, did not attend infant care.

PCF offers infant care at 177 of its 268 full-day childcare centres, with a curriculum that includes unusual aspects such as key word signing.

As they talk to babies, PCF educators weave in Singapore Sign Language and natural gestures to support language development of children with communication difficulties, says Ms Angela Yang, PCF’s deputy director of Professional & Education Development.

In September, it started a Music For Early Years pilot programme in three Early Years Centres that cater to infants and pre-schoolers up to Nursery 2. While there is already a music curriculum, the pilot adds additional music classes that focus on executive function skills to boost language exposure.

Parents also appreciate the regular communication that centres provide. Ms Jothi gets updates via an app “at least twice a day” on Diya’s routine at E-Bridge, from

CHOOSING AN INFANT-CARE CENTRE: WHAT PARENTS MUST KNOW

“Deliberating whether to enrol your child in infant care is often fraught with a quiet but lingering sense of guilt or doubt, especially for first-time parents,” says Dr Geraldine Teo-Zuzarte, vice-president of Curriculum & Research at Pre-School By-The-Park.

Parents should remember that infant care is ultimately group care, she adds. The officially mandated ratio is one educator to five infants, although many centres claim to offer more favourable ratios.

However, studies have shown that “children cared for in infant care do not fare any worse than children being cared for at home”, notes Dr Teo-Zuzarte. She is also an Early Childhood Development Agency Fellow who partners the agency to raise the quality of the sector.

Managing the transition to ensure continuity is critical, so parents should find out how the centre manages this process, she says. “Be explicit about the means of communication you are comfortable with and, where applicable, see how you can also accommodate what the infant centre practises.”

Building a solid relationship with an infant-care centre takes time, she adds.

“The effort put in in the beginning months when your child is enrolled in infant care will benefit not just him or her, but also give you peace of mind knowing that he or she is cared for by professionals you trust.”

She suggests the following checklist when scouting for a centre:

The environment

- Is the environment warm, friendly and nurturing?
 - Are there spaces for active exploration, nap time, diapering and showering?
 - Do the furnishings support children’s development?
- For example, is there furniture that is sturdy and low enough for crawling infants to pull to stand? Is there equipment or furniture that encourages babies to cruise around as they gain strength and skill for walking?

The programme

- Other than the routines of feeding, diapering, showering and napping, what else does the centre provide in terms of developing your child’s early language acquisition, curiosity, physical and motor development?

Meals

- Infants spend much of their day feeding as they are growing rapidly. Does the centre have a clear plan of transitioning your infant from milk to semi-solid to solid food?

Educators

- Talk to your baby’s prospective educator. Is she warm and responsive? How does she spend the day with the infants in her care and how does she communicate their development to parents?
- How does the centre manage incidents and emergencies?

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feeding – she still drinks breast milk that her mother leaves at the centre – to toileting habits.

E-Bridge, which is part of the EtonHouse group, offers affordable infant care at 18 of its 21 centres under the Anchor Operator Scheme.

Like EtonHouse, it offers a Reggio Emilia-inspired curriculum that believes in child-led learning and the environment as the third

teacher, among other core values.

While Ms Rozana and her husband Muhammad Amin Ismail, 32, missed seeing their baby’s milestones as they both work full-time, Amirah’s teachers uploaded videos in PCF’s Parent Engagement Portal so they could share in the joy.

One of the most memorable videos showed her turning from a tummy-down position and sitting independently, at between three

and five months, Mr Amin recalls.

They were also impressed when she was “able to speak one sentence” when she was 17 or 18 months old, he says. The couple declined to reveal their occupations.

During quarterly parent-teacher meetings, PCF says its educators would also prep Amirah’s parents on upcoming skills and milestones, such as teaching her to shower while standing, so they could anticipate and practise them at home too.

Amirah has progressed by leaps and bounds since her first two weeks at the centre last year, when she had separation anxiety at three months old. Mr Amin says: “It’s been a fruitful journey for us.”

However, ever-changing pandemic regulations have affected the transition into infant care for some parents.

Ms Tan recalls being able to accompany elder daughter Cara for the first two half-days when she entered infant care at the start of the pandemic.

But when it came time to enrol Tara last month, parents were not allowed in the centre because of prevailing restrictions. So, she and her husband, engineer Choo Jek Bao, 34, decided to take it slow as they are working from home.

“In the morning, we take her to infant care and pick her up about an hour later. We started off with like 10 to 15 minutes,” she says.

“The teachers told us that she was improving. She started observing the environment instead of just crying. And she’ll sit and observe the other babies.”

Mr Choo adds that “trust and communication” are vital for a smooth transition to infant care. Parents should not be afraid of approaching centre staff with their concerns.

Despite Covid-19-related challenges like not being able to observe the classroom in person, as well as perennial issues such as catching “the usual sniffles” from other children, Ms Jothi is pleased at how much Diya has blossomed into a curious, sociable child.

“I feel that she wouldn’t be what she is today if I had kept her at home with a helper because of the interaction with the teachers and other babies there,” she says.

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