

## Preschool Posh

Contributed by Jen Pilla Taylor  
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What will \$1,100 per child per month get you? Access to a \$5 million day care

For the children at south Charlotte's Rainbow Station child-care center, every day is like a ride aboard a luxury early-educational locomotive.

To get into the main building at the school's four-acre, \$5 million, Ballantyne-area campus -- designed to resemble an old-timey train depot -- their parents must first enter their name and a four-digit security code into the front-desk computer.

If they've got the sniffles or a fever, children can spend the day with the center's full-time pediatric nurse in "The Get Well Place," which has a separate ventilation system from the rest of the building to minimize the spread of germs. But most will go to one of the cheerfully decorated classrooms, where even the infants have individualized lesson plans developed for them by their teacher and the center's full-time curriculum coordinator.

Outside, they play in spacious, age-segregated areas with poured rubber and artificial-turf ground coverings, for maximum boo-boo prevention.

Think of Rainbow Station as the Orient Express of child-care centers—the poshest of the upscale facilities that have become popular here during the last decade. When it opened in August, it introduced a new level of amenities and educational programming to the local day-care market.

And it's been well received. Even at \$275 a week—nearly \$100 above the Mecklenburg County average—there has been a waiting list for spots in the infant room since before Rainbow Station opened. (There are 173 kids there currently.)

Janet Singerman, president of Child Care Resources Inc., a nonprofit area resource and referral agency, says parents in the Charlotte market are willing to pay extra for high-quality child care. She says it's nice to have the upscale amenities that many have come to expect—such as expertly decorated play areas, high-tech computer labs, and foreign-language classes.

More important to look for is a highly qualified, well-compensated staff that has lots of positive interaction with the center's children. A program should have a clearly outlined, developmentally appropriate curriculum, and there should be good communication between staff and parents, she says.

Michelle Mistele, executive director of Rainbow Station, says the center requires that all lead teachers have college degrees in education or a related field. And their teacher-child ratios are better than state standards for all age groups (in the infant room, the teacher-student ratio is one to four. The state requires one to five). But what parents have really been floored by is "The Village," the building where Rainbow Station has its after-school and part-day preschool programs, says Mistele.

There, the Village Green area (with park bench, lamp post, and artificial lawn) is surrounded by several rooms, each with its own storefront. Among them: the Apothecary (for science and math activities), the Toy Shoppe (with board games and puzzles), the Village Theater (with stage, microphone, and dress-up clothes), and Café Rainbow (a learning kitchen).

But other cities have taken the trend beyond what's been seen in Charlotte. Colorado-based chain Crème de la Crème has twenty child-care centers in eight states. In the tony Atlanta suburb of Alpharetta, the Crème de la Crème boasts a 200-gallon saltwater aquarium, a WEE TV studio with real video equipment, and Catchacreamer Creek, an outdoor splash park. Tuition at the Alpharetta center is \$358 a week for a two-year-old, more than double the average rate in Charlotte.

Peter Lungo, Crème's chief operating officer, says the chain is eyeing North Carolina for expansion possibilities.

"We've been in touch with the state licensing folks there already," he says. "So you may be hearing from us soon."