

Hand in Hand

FECs diversify the business model by adding child care

by Mike Bederka

IN 2017, AMANDA MILLER ANTICIPATED half of Castaway Play Cafe's revenue would come from the Howell Early Learning Center, the child care facility operating inside her family entertainment center (FEC). Not bad for an idea floated back in 2013 after brainstorming ways to use the empty party rooms during the week and boost revenue during the slow summer season.

"We needed to find a way to supplement our business and keep the money flowing year-round," explains Miller, general manager at the Howell, Michigan, facility.

The Howell Early Learning Center has 90 children enrolled from 6 weeks to 12 years old, with specific programs for infants/toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age kids, plus summer camps.

Miller believes children enrolled at her FEC will have an advantage over those attending a traditional child care center. With attractions like a rock wall, ninja course, and five-level play structure at their disposal, they can participate in activities not likely seen at traditional facilities. "They get a more well-rounded experience here," she says.

Larry Stottlemeyer, owner of Adventure Park USA in Monrovia, Maryland, agrees. He has operated Adventure Park Academy from the FEC's second floor for the past decade. The day care helped him stay afloat during the Great Recession, and the revenue has more than tripled since its inception, making it one of the most profitable components of his facility today. Currently, 80 children, ages 2 to 14, participate in preschool, pre-kindergarten, and school-age programs, as well as seasonal camps.



YVES MARC BRUNELLO

With numbers like that, he does not quite understand why other FEC owners hesitate to expand their offerings to a tangential service like child care.

"They think it's a problem—that it will be another worry, especially with insurance," he says, noting his umbrella policy seamlessly covers both ends. "But really, an FEC and child care center go hand in hand."

In the Director's Chair

Stottlemeyer proudly describes Adventure Park Academy's success, but he willingly acknowledges it would not be possible without his experienced program director, Melissa Brusini. She started at the FEC in 2011 after years of working in corporate child care centers.

"As an owner, you have to listen to your director's opinions and take them to heart," he says. "You don't want to micromanage, especially if you don't know anything about running a day care. She's the expert."

Strong communication plays an important role in the relationship between

Adventure Park USA operates a day care center on the second floor of its facility. Adventure Park Academy offers seasonal camps and preschool, pre-kindergarten, and school-age programs.

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CASTAWAY PLAYCAFE



Children enrolled in Castaway Play Cafe's Howell Early Learning Center can participate in activities not common at traditional child care facilities, such as climbing a rock wall and playing on a five-level play structure.

an owner and program director, Brusini says. She runs the big decisions by Stottlemeyer, but he does not have his hand in the day-to-day duties.

"Owners don't have to worry about it if you have an experienced director in place," she says. "We know the regulations and take care of parent relationships, curriculum, and all the things that go along with running a child care center."

Safety First

Miller, too, appreciates the value of a program director, admitting she went through a couple, initially.

"You have to find the right person for the seat," she says. "We weren't growing at all."

Fortunately, Miller eventually hired her current director, a person she describes as "phenomenal."

"You need someone with a dynamic personality—someone with charisma who will sell the center and be able to empathize with people's fears," she says.

Some parents have safety concerns, since they view an FEC as a non-traditional setting for a child care center (despite the fact

that children, in general, make up its core audience), Miller says.

To dispel any unease, the director details the strict rules in place. For example, child care kids—typically dropped off between 6 and 9 a.m.—get dibs on the play structure until the park opens to the public. After public opening, they go to their classrooms and will not mix with the regular guests. Teachers monitor all people coming to the rooms, and adults are required to show ID at pickup.

At Adventure Park Academy, security measures include:

- Code Adam training and walkie-talkies for all employees
- FEC-branded T-shirts worn by the children when out in the park, where staff closely monitor them
- A child care-only playground surrounded by a 6-foot-tall privacy fence
- Locked classroom doors

Increased Spending

Miller considers her child care rates comparable to most centers in the Howell, Michigan, area. "We're not here to rip people off," she says.

Castaway Play Cafe charges a daily rate, giving 10 percent off for siblings enrolled and a 5 percent discount for families who pay by the month. The FEC also offers perks to encourage business outside of regular child care, including free park passes, \$5 off meal combo deals every week, and 15 percent off birthday celebrations, which helps to increase the number of parties the facility hosts.

Stottlemeyer says he also works to keep the price of the program competitive for the community. His FEC does not offer any special discounts for child care families, but incremental spending frequently occurs at pickup when kids grab a snack for the road or play a few games before leaving.

In certain advertising campaigns for Adventure Park Academy, Stottlemeyer plugs Adventure Park USA, as well, to further drive interest in the FEC. "Never miss an opportunity to promote your park," he says. ●

Make Quality a Priority

At first, Castaway Play Cafe encountered a bit of a stumbling block in becoming a licensed child care center, says GM Amanda Miller. The agent's main concern centered on the kids' safety.

"It was foreign to them," she recalls. "They never dealt with a day care center where the general public is walking in and out."

Miller quickly ironed out any issues after she explained the safety measures in place (see main story) and showed how management put education first. "They saw how we weren't just trying to make a quick buck," she says.

She has 18 teachers on staff, many in college pursuing early-childhood education degrees. The more experienced instructors create the lesson plans based on comprehensive, research-based curricula. In addition, attractions like the play structure help encourage development of gross motor skills.

Adventure Park Academy also maintains high-quality staff and programming as a priority. Ninety percent of its teachers have either an associate or bachelor's degree.

"If you're not willing to go all in," stresses Adventure Park's Larry Stottlemeyer, "it's not going to work."