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Tech for tots

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By Nathan Hansen, editor, editor1@farmingtonindependent.com

Daycare is not traditionally a high-tech business, but for Jan Karmann handheld computers and web cameras are as much a part of the day as nap time and craft projects.

Karmann opened Just Kidding Around Daycare and Preschool July 19. The center, located on 208th Street in the Farmington Industrial Park, is the result of three years of planning and preparation. And while Karmann used that time to design several kid-friendly features - everything from child-size toilets and sinks to separate playgrounds for different age groups to a giant fish tank that is a favorite among students - it is the features designed for parents that really set Just Kidding Around apart.

Take the computers. Every teacher and staff member at Just Kidding Around has one, and they use them to keep track of where the students are at all times. If a teacher takes her class to the playground, she can use her computer to record that. If a student goes to the bathroom, she can record that. Those changes feed into a computer in Karmann's office, where each student shows up as a dot on the building's floor plan. At any time Karmann can find out which students are where.

Staff members will use the computers to keep track of everything, from what a student eats each day to how often a child's diaper is changed and how messy those diapers are. All of that information will be available online to parents who want to make sure their children are well taken care of.

The computers are also tied into a system of web cameras, which are located in nearly every room. Parents can log into the Just Kidding Around web site (www.justkiddingaround.net) and see their children, but they can only access the web cameras when their child is in school, and then only for the room in which their child is located. The site will also include photos from activities children have participated in during the day.

According to Karmann and office manager Jessica Faber, the system is designed to help parents feel comfortable leaving their children at daycare.

"First time parents - it's very hard for them to entrust somebody else with their children," Faber said. "A lot of times they're scared to call us. They say, 'I don't want to be a bother,' or, 'I don't want to be overprotective mom.'" (With the cameras) they're able to focus on their job and we can do our job." The handheld computers also play a role in security at the center. Each one will have pictures of parents and other people authorized to pick up each child, along with days and times they are allowed to pick the child up. If an unauthorized person shows up, or if a child's parents are divorced and mom or dad shows up on the wrong day, staff know to check things out before releasing the child. "It's just something to make it easier for everybody ... and still let parents know absolutely everything that's going on," Karmann said.

Planning

Karmann, the mother of three daughters, started planning Just Kidding Around because she didn't like the childcare options available in Farmington. She took a class on running a daycare and, she says, "talked to every person I know that would be in childcare or had children."

The result is a building with soft colors and toys attached to the walls where young hands are likely to end up anyway. Karmann polled her daughters and Faber recruited her son to help pick out toys for the center.

There is a kitchen in the building, and both Karmann and Faber are certified food handlers. They make breakfast and lunch for the students, who often lend a hand.

The ground under the playground equipment is covered with recycled tires, making it soft and springy for students who tumble. So far, though, the fish tank has been the center's most popular feature, at least among students. They say hello to the fish when they arrive, and good bye when they leave. One student's reward while he is toilet training is to tell the fish when he has done things right.

The process has not always been easy. Karmann had trouble finding land, and there were some people who felt the industrial park was not the right place for a daycare center. There were also some questions about whether the siding Karmann originally wanted to use would be appropriate for the industrial park.

Karmann, though, said the industrial park site is perfect. Students have seen deer behind the building, and the site has been popular among parents who work in the park.

Ultimately, Karmann has enjoyed herself.

"It's been a lot of fun just knowing how it's going to be for my children and having them involved in the process, asking, 'What color do you like?'" Karmann said. "They just really have enjoyed it." Karmann said she designed the center to make the parents who see it say, "Wow." So far, it seems like they have. Karmann and Faber said more than 90 percent of parents who attended a recent open house enrolled their children at the center.

"It's a big responsibility, and I think we are definitely living up to it and more," Karmann said. "(Opening) was a little scary. It was very scary, but every day I learn new things. I've told that to parents. I may not do everything right the first time, but I'll do it right the second time."

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