

Babysitters' Club

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From a nanny to NANA, the price of childcare options varies widely. A home-based daycare situation in Galewood can cost twice as much as one in Hanover Park. Prekindergarten at the Latin School costs twice as much as the Chicago Public Schools' pre-K program. The wide range, though, still has some high prices at the bottom.

"We hear a lot about affordable housing or higher education, but [childcare] can cost about the same and it doesn't get a lot of press," says Peter Gray, a new father and spokesman for Illinois Action for Children, an advocacy and public-policy organization that helps parents locate and pay for childcare.

The average annual cost of care for a two-year-old in a Chicago daycare center in 2006 was \$7,700. And that rate is on the rise, up 14 percent in the city and 10 percent in real terms in suburban centers between 2000 and 2006. Families earning the median Illinois income for two-parent households (\$73,798) can expect to pay between 9.2 and 12.8 percent of it toward childcare costs. For a single working parent, that figure can rise as high as 44 percent. Publicly funded childcare assistance programs aim to reduce out-of-pocket payments to 10 percent of a family's income—about what most families pay for food.

Among the states, Illinois is sixth highest in the average cost of care for an infant, and it's 15th highest for four-year-olds. Progress is being made to lessen the hit for Illinois working families: \$45 million more in state subsidies for childcare and \$32 million for the Preschool for All program were allocated this year. "Illinois is miles ahead [of the rest of the country] in terms of how we approach early childhood and how we support families," says Maria Whelan, the president of Illinois Action for Children, "but we still have a long way to go."

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By the Numbers

471,662

Number of Cook County residents under age 5

28%

Percentage of household income spent on average-price daycare for an infant by an Illinois family of four making \$37,000

27%

Percentage of parents who say their biggest problem in finding childcare is availability

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Costs R Us

Options for childcare and prekindergarten have hugely different price tags. Here's a sampling of costs in various categories, from the most expensive to the (relatively) inexpensive. Prices vary according to many factors, including neighborhood, demand, and family needs. Some businesses preferred not to be named because they had no openings for children at presstime.

<p>Professional Nanny Full-time caretaker in your home, exclusive to one family</p>	<p>Home-Based Childcare Service for small groups of children</p>	<p>Center-Based Daycare Private, state-licensed care for larger groups of children</p>	<p>Preschool Curriculum-based daycare at schools</p>
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HIGH	Live-in with 2+ years of experience. Chores, schedule negotiable. 40 to 60 hours a week + overtime. Through First Class Care, 847-733-2700. \$500-1,000/week + 10% of that in fees + room/board	Based in Galewood, with weekly art, music, or language classes; field trips and play-based curriculum. 17+ years of experience and early childhood education degree. \$275/week	Wicker Park-based half-day Montessori program for 2-year-olds. Low student/teacher ratios and certified teachers. Multiple-child discounts. \$257/week + 1-time \$2,000 fee	Daily half-day junior kindergarten instruction for 4-year-olds at the Latin School, in the Gold Coast. \$526/week
MIDDLE	Daytime professional with 2+ years of experience. Light household chores, driving, cooking, and a long-term commitment. Through First Class Care, 847-733-2700. \$600-\$750/week	Hanover Park-based mother of three with CPR/first aid certification offering full-time care for 4 additional children. Multi-child discount, and flexible schedule. \$135-150/week	Penny Lane School: up to 12 hours of weekday care between 6 a.m. and midnight, based in Chicago Ridge. Certified teachers, meals, outdoor play, and bedtime at 8:45. \$193/week	Up to 10 hours per day of tuition-based instruction. Three adults per 20-student class. Meals. Available at 15 CPS locations. \$250/week
LOW	A live-in foreign-born au pair with minimal childcare experience. Short-term contract. Through Au Pair USA, 212-924-0446. \$177/week + \$7,650 in agency fees + room/board	State-subsidized childcare for low-income families, based in Brainerd. May work with parents to find public funding. Copay (percentage of monthly income) + state subsidy	Subsidized full-day care for low-income families' kids up to age 5 at 11 city YMCAs. Nutrition and mental-health support. Care for disabled children. \$1-\$61/week + state subsidy	CPS's 2 1/2 -hour "Preschool for All" program for 3- to 5-year-olds whose Chicago-based families earn less than \$60,000. Free

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The average annual cost for infant care at a Chicago center in 2005 was \$9,100. Other amounts, for comparison: median annual rent in Chicago in 2005, \$9,396; one year's salary (2,000 hours) at the Illinois minimum wage, \$15,500. Sources: Illinois Action for Children, U.S. Department of Labor