

New Childcare Center Aims To Exceed Expectations



LAURA FRAZIER/Staff photo

By [Laura Frazier](#) of The Brandon News

Published: April 9, 2007

Five years ago, after the birth of their second child, Sherri and Joel Walston searched high and low for a childcare provider that would meet their standards. The couple knew their fairly discriminating checklist might make it difficult to find an acceptable facility, but they didn't expect it to be impossible.

They wanted to place their daughters, one an infant and the other about two years old at the time, in a professionally-run center with Christian values. Willing to pay extra for low child-to-teacher ratios, they also expected the staff to have Child Development Associate credentials. Enhanced security and vigilant supervision were musts. And when it came time for lunch, hot dogs and cheese puffs just wouldn't cut it.

The couple had the means to pay top-scale tuition for the level of care they sought, and to find it, they were willing to travel many miles from their Apollo Beach home.

When they couldn't find a single facility that offered the features they wanted, Sherri Walston set about brainstorming to create a center of her own someday.

Five years later, Walston's ideal childcare center materialized in Valrico. The couple opened The Peacock's Plume, in Plaza Bella on Bloomingdale Avenue, last week.

The 8,000-square-foot, 14-classroom facility was designed to meet the discriminating standards of the owners and their friends, particularly those with babies less than two years old.

"Babies are an underserved part of the (childcare center) population," Sherri Walston said. "It's not just that quality care isn't available for babies. It's hard to find anyplace that takes kids under two."

According to Walston, about 60 percent of childcare centers do not accept babies, and those that do often have waiting lists that extend 15 months or more.

"Even home daycares, the only other option, often won't take babies because it's just so much work. I kept hearing from my friends, 'I don't have anywhere to put my baby.'"

"That's a big part of the reason we opened this place. We have 40 spots for infants, 40 for toddlers and 24 for two-year-olds." In addition, there are 22 spots for three-year-olds and 20 for four-year-olds.

Walston intends to serve not only her students, but their families as well.

"We are going to provide to-go meals for the whole family. You pick up your kids at 6:00 p.m., everyone is really tired and hungry, so what do you do? Lots of times it's easiest to just drive through McDonald's. We're going to offer a much healthier option: homemade pizza. We'll have a different pizza every night. Half might be topped with teriyaki chicken for the parents, the other half plain cheese for the kids."

During the school day, a chef prepares mostly low-fat, low-sugar, whole grain fare in the facility's full commercial kitchen.

"We have no fryers, and when we serve PB and J sandwiches, it's natural peanut butter on whole grain bread. We do a lot of fresh fruits and vegetables, sweet potatoes, fruit muffins... and the kids really love it."

Busy moms and dads are sure to appreciate other services Walston plans to offer in the coming weeks, including dry cleaning drop-off, a diaper and wipe program and a birthday cupcake baking service.

"We want to make life easier for the parents."

Peace of mind is another parent benefit Walston hopes to offer, with the use of fingerprint-reader security systems, alarms on all exterior classroom doors and surveillance cameras mounted in every classroom. In her office, a jumbo high-resolution monitor allows her to observe all 14 classrooms.

Parents can log on to the secure closed-circuit network from work or home to check on their children.

"We have one dad who I think keeps the video (feed) up on his PC all day, because he's always asking me questions about things he wouldn't have seen if he wasn't constantly watching. I think that's great."

For all the high-tech perks, convenient services, qualified teachers and healthy food offered at The Peacock's Plume, the theme-based Christian curriculum has turned out to be the biggest draw, Walston said.

"A lot of people we're seeing really want that Christian environment. They like the fact that we sing Bible songs and have chapel once a week. They want their children to be able to celebrate Christmas without having to call it 'the winter holidays.'"

Walston is confident that many parents, like herself and her friends, will be more than willing to pay for the enhanced care and services.

"Our tuition is typically about ten percent higher than other top-rated child care centers in the Brandon area."

More than 30 children were enrolled during the center's first week open. Spaces are available for infants six weeks old through children of preschool and voluntary pre-kindergarten age.

Information: 684-0700 or www.thepeacocksplume.com.

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