

# Caring for kids requires parents' juggling act



Bonnie Eslinger, The Examiner  
Sep 28, 2007 3:00 AM (14 days ago)

## SAN FRANCISCO -

Luis Nex and his wife work alternate schedules to ensure one parent is always available to take care of their children.

(Cindy Chew/The Examiner)  
Elston Drummer, who lives in the Bayview, works as a SuperShuttle driver to support his son, his mother and a caregiver as a single father.

While she's working her lunch shift as a cashier at a local taqueria, he is with their 3-year-old daughter. He also picks up their preteen son after school. At nights, Luis works a full-time job as a pastry chef at an upscale restaurant near Fisherman's Wharf, making \$12 an hour.

With her part-time minimum-wage salary, the two parents bring in about \$2,872 a month, before taxes. Nearly half of their wages goes to pay for a one-bedroom apartment in the Western Addition that

costs \$1,200 a month. Nex said their economic outlook in the United States is much better than if they lived in Mexico.

"I want a better life for my son and daughter," said Luis, who had stopped by John Muir Elementary for free groceries, part of a weekly program sponsored by the San Francisco Food Bank. "And maybe save some money for me and my wife, for a small business, maybe a small bakery."

In San Francisco — where the average annual rate for full-time licensed, center-based child care for a preschooler costs on average more than \$11,000 — child care is a significant expense for families in most income brackets. San Francisco has the third-highest child care rates of all counties statewide, according to the California Care Resource and Referral Network.

Demand for subsidized child care exceeds supply, according to city data, which in 2005 showed a waiting list of 3,864 children for low-cost care. Without subsidized child care, many low-income families in San Francisco struggle to participate in the workplace or seek opportunities to improve their career opportunities — particularly single parents.

Elston Drummer, 50, has been the primary caretaker of his 9-year-old son since the boy was born. Two years ago, he became a subcontractor for Super Shuttle, driving his own van to provide passengers with transportation to and from the airport. Working without medical benefits, he drives six days a week, 12 hours a day, he said, and after paying up to \$800 a week in fees to SuperShuttle, takes home about \$4,000 a month.

Although Drummer doesn't pay rent, because he lives with his elderly mother, his salary supports four people: his 77-year-old mother, himself, his son and a family friend who takes care of his mother and son because he is working most of the day.

According to 2004 U.S. Census data, 44 percent of the population ages 25 to 44 did not work, citing a need to stay home and take care of children or others.

“You see people rely on other family members [for child care], like a mother or more extended family members,” said Karin Martinson, a researcher for the Urban Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank focused on social policy. “There are a lot of [other] people that don’t have that support.”

Nearly one-fourth of all unscheduled absenteeism, which nationally costs businesses an average of \$610 per employee, is due to family issues, including child care problems, according to a 2004 study by CCH Inc.

Martinson said San Francisco’s new paid sick-leave law was an example of a public-private strategy to ease the burden of low-income families. The law, which was passed by San Francisco voters in November, requires employers to provide one leave hour for every 30 hours worked.

## Free preschool program to aid parents early

After a three-year rollout, San Francisco’s free preschool program will be open to families in all ZIP codes starting next school year, instead of in 2009, as originally planned.

“We’re very excited,” said Gloria Corral, the deputy director of First 5 San Francisco, the agency overseeing The City’s Preschool for All program. “We’re rolling out a year early.”

Paid for with voter-approved education funds, this year families within 18 targeted ZIP codes — offering 80 preschool sites — can enroll in the free, half-day preschool program.

Neighborhoods that have had to wait — including the Sunset, the Richmond, Marina, Nob Hill, Noe Valley, Sir Francis Wood, South Beach, the Financial District and North Beach — will be eligible to sign up starting with the 2008-09 school year.

Available only to 4-year-old children, First 5 is preparing to serve approximately 4,800 children when the program is open to all families. Corral said the goal is to serve 80 percent of The City’s 4-year-olds, “because we know some families will opt not to participate in the public system.”

This year, there is funding to serve 1,800 children; to date, approximately 1,650 have signed up, she said.

More information about the Preschool for All program is available by calling (415) 354-3873.

## Working to survive

*Thousands of Bay Area residents live in poverty despite working full time. The Examiner looks at the choices they make to pay for necessities.*

**Monday:** Introduction

**Tuesday:** Health care

**Wednesday:** Housing

**Thursday:** Transportation

**Today:** Child care

[beslinger@examiner.com](mailto:beslinger@examiner.com)

*Examiner*