



Amber Bilby former owner/operator of Amber's Kids in Arvada, Colorado

Colorado Can't Work Without Her

I opened my business 15 years ago at a time when my husband had a good job and covered our family for health insurance. Initially, I was licensed for six kids, and then when I got more experience, I expanded to nine children. I had a really good reputation and have cared for hundreds of children over the years. Families tended to stay with me for a long time. I also served a lot of children with disabilities who are harder to find care for. This past year, I had two children with Down syndrome, children with behavioral challenges who hadn't thrived in

"The parents are working just as hard as I am at low-wage jobs—at Walmart, McDonald's, or the school cafeteria. I open up at 4 a.m. to accommodate their schedules. ... Some of the older kids come early too, and I take them to school. I actually bought a bus so that I can do the transportation to and from school! What families like about my program is the consistency, the continuity of care. I'm like another mom to these kids. We are all one big family, and that trusting relationship makes a big difference in the quality of care."

other child care settings, and a child who uses a wheelchair. The state doesn't offer any special training for providers on those issues, but I learned a lot from their specialists. Often I had a therapist coming to my house to work with a child one-on-one nearly every day of the week. Whatever the therapist was doing with them, I would try to incorporate it into my program.

Even though I love taking care of children, I decided to close my business this year. I feel sad about it, but since the pandemic, it just got harder and harder to sustain my business and my own well-being. In 2023, my husband lost his job of 20 years. That loss piled onto the stress we were just recovering from after the pandemic. In 2020, many of the parents whose kids I cared for were essential workers—firefighters, nurses, and such. So they had to keep working, which meant I had to keep working. Schools closed in our area, so the four preschool kiddos I had who normally were there for half days came to my house full time. And then my own kids, who were in third grade and seventh grade, were home. So it went from me taking care of six kids to me taking care

of six kids plus my whole family, and all of us were stressed. I thought, *'OK, I have to provide for these people and I have to take care of my family, so I'll just keep going. I'll just keep going.'*

Finally, last year I realized I wasn't sleeping, I wasn't feeling good, I was driving kids to school in my van. It would take me three or four trips from the house to the car just to get kids with disabilities in the car and buckled in. So my first big change was that I stopped doing the school run, which was hard on me and on the younger kids. That was a scheduling problem for some parents. A lot of parents wanted part-time care, which had never been my intent to offer as a provider. Half of my children were on subsidy and in Colorado, subsidy is based on attendance. So, I was working from 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. every day but losing money with the part-time kids. I had put my own family and health on the back burner for way too long, and I just couldn't keep going.

What finally helped me decide to close was that I had kids moving up to school age and would have had to take on more infants to sustain my income. At the same time, my own children are getting older and my husband has a new job, so we have health insurance through him again. Instead of starting with a new crew of kids, I helped my families find new placements for their children, so I know they have quality care. And I gave them two weeks after they found a place to make the transition, so they weren't left in the lurch.

Since closing, I've taken two new jobs. I work at a toy shop full time and also do some coaching and training part time. I'm actually making less than I did as a child care provider, but I'm working fewer hours. I have health insurance, and I have sick days. Most importantly, I have my happiness back. I can take care of my family and focus on my own health and well-being.

Even though I closed my program, I know how important the child care profession is, so I want to pass on everything I learned from this experience. I'll be giving away a lot of my child care equipment to new providers who can't afford to get all the stuff you need right away. Over the years, regulations have changed to increase the materials you have to have to open up. What I'd like to see is more support for providers' physical and mental well-being as well as their financial health so that new providers are getting into the system when veterans leave. Otherwise, there is no incentive for someone to go into child care in the first place. We need to recruit and train family child care providers to be business owners as well to take care of their personal and professional well-being. We need free or subsidized coursework in business management and opportunities to get health insurance or just go to the doctor when we need to.

What I would most like policymakers to do is to look at the whole picture of what makes a healthy society and economy. There are so many parts to the care of young children. If parents don't have quality care to go to work, then they can't contribute to the economy. But child care providers also need to have sustainable work and be able to stay healthy while they are working. All these pieces are connected. A happy caregiver is holding up a whole lot of happy families and they are holding up a happy economy.