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- New daycare caters to parents' irregular work schedules
- Occasional care model offers flexible alternative to rigid full-time, part-time child-care options
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• By VIVIAN LUK

From Monday's Globe and Mail

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- VANCOUVER — Zeenat Jetha started working from home right after her maternity leave was over so she could spend more time with her baby daughter, Isla.

As a software engineer, doing programming work from home is easy enough for Ms. Jetha to arrange. And since her husband, Chris Hannan, a graphic designer, also has a flexible work schedule, the two can take turns looking after 15-month-old Isla without outside help.

Except when they can't. On days when both parents are on a tight deadline, and Ms. Jetha's mother can't look after Isla for a few hours, they're stuck in a limbo.

They have company: Many parents who are self-employed or have irregular work schedules often struggle to find the right kind of daycare for their children.

A new, flexible daycare set to open in Vancouver in October, however, may provide an answer. Budding Children's Garden and Daycare works like a car co-op, but instead of car share, it's care-share. Co-founder Talia Erickson says parents can register their child and buy 10, 20, 30 or 40 hours worth of monthly care. Then they can book the hours online, and reservations and cancellations can be made as late as an hour in advance.

Ms. Erickson came up with the idea after she had trouble finding suitable daycare for her stepson during his monthly visits. "It just seems like there could easily be a way to

offer service to people that didn't require them to reschedule their entire work life around daycare."

Hours that are not used up within the month can be carried on to the next, but they cannot exceed 40 hours a month. The centre can accommodate up to 20 children, will be staffed by four full-time workers at all times, and will, like many daycares, offer art activities, books, toys and circle time.

For Ms. Jetha, who heard about Budding through a friend of a friend, the pay-as-you-go option is perfect because Isla does not need to be in full-time daycare, and while part-time daycare is an option, the rigid Monday-Wednesday-Friday structure can't accommodate her and her husband's changing schedules.

"Sometimes I just need to send [Isla] to daycare in the morning for a couple of hours because maybe Chris also has a deadline, but I don't know when those days are [early in advance] and the daycares need me to set those dates," she said.

But convenience comes at a price – a 40-hour package costs \$660 a month. According to the Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre – and depending on the children's age range, the quality of care, and location – full-time daycare in Vancouver costs, on average, just under \$800 a month.

At Sunset Daycare in East Vancouver, parents of children ages three to five pay \$710 a month for full-time care, and, depending on the number of days, either \$485 or \$385 for part-time care.

Despite the higher fees, Ms. Jetha said she would rather pay more for the flexibility and for the opportunity to spend as much time as possible with her daughter. Isla is still too young to attend Budding, which only takes three- to five-year-olds, but Ms. Jetha is eager to get on the waiting list.

"As soon as Isla's ready for this, she's going there," she said. "This is perfect for me because I don't have a fixed schedule, so I would just go from day to day to see what workload my husband and I have and see if we're both really busy this month, let's get 20 hours instead of 10."

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