



Globegarden co-founders Kristina Hempel, Christina Weber, Caroline Weber, Karin Hempel

Globegarden breaks new ground in bilingual childcare

Globegarden, a network of bilingual nursery/kindergartens that caters to the needs of working parents is the new concept in early childhood care that a group of young business women have started in Zurich. Zoug and Schaffhausen are next and Geneva may be considered. The offer of day centres with long hours is completed by a web platform that provides solutions for babysitting, emergency care and host families. www.swisster.com

With the idea that modern families need a better support system and that young children learn languages quickly, Globegarden a young startup in Zurich has organized a bilingual quality childcare centre for 2 to 6 year olds open 365 days a year from 7am to 9pm. It aims to make it easier to combine family and work. Modeled on the phenomenally successful American model Bright Horizons, Globegarden is responding to market forces, but with a Swiss touch.

“In Switzerland we have not yet understood that families need to be supported” indicates Christina Weber, co-founder of Globegarden with fellow business school graduate Kristina Hempel and their respective sisters, Caroline Weber and Karin Hempel.

“The organisation of childcare here is not in tune with the times” Christina Weber explains, adding “When our friends started to have babies, we realized that there was a serious problem. In order to secure a place in a care centre, future parents have to enrol their children before they are even born”.

Difficulties also arise when the opening hours of nurseries or kindergartens are not compatible with the work schedule of either parent. Children must then be transferred to alternative care before they can be picked up.

“The organisation of child care becomes very complicated for young families, which explains why a lot of women with academic backgrounds give up their careers to look after their children” she adds.

By offering flexibility and quality care, including over holiday periods, Globegarden claims that it is contributing to ensuring “the survival of the family”.

“Kristina and I both come from families where both parents worked hard and I can assure you that along with our sisters we remain very close” says Weber emphasizing that “time alone does not create a valuable relationship with a child.”

Responding to the suggestion that generous opening hours might lead parents to use the childcare centres as a garage for their kids, Christina Weber points out that 99 percent of parents pick up their children between 6 pm and 7 pm. “What we guarantee is a presence in the event of an emergency.”

As for the week-end programme that concentrates on playful and artistic activities, it is rarely used by the same families that use the week days.

Although Christina Weber and her partners believe strongly that the decision to work or not after a child is born is a very personal one and should not be judged, they also defend the principle that the choice must exist. “Society must move on” she insists.

“We organized several sessions and workshops with our friends and neighbours to define their dream childcare system. We listened and then put it all together” she explains.

With their backgrounds in finance, marketing, banking and event management the four partners were well equipped to set up their business venture and obtain seed money from Crédit Suisse (“They have been tremendously helpful”) as well as other sponsors.

They have also received the backing from the Swiss federal programme of nurseries.

But what about the pedagogical programme asked Swisster? Each canton has its own, indicates Christine Weber, although Harmos, the aptly-named federal project that a number of cantons have adopted aims to iron out the differences between different school systems. “We complete the objectives with those defined by the International Baccalaureate programme” indicates Weber.

Two fully qualified teacher/carers look after the children in each Globegarden centre, one who speaks the local language, the other – generally of mother tongue – who speaks in English to the children. The idea is that they pick up the two languages simultaneously.

Another interesting idea applied by Globegarden is a mentoring programme whereby an older child is assigned a younger one to look after. “We prefer this to the age-mixed tradition in Switzerland where children from the ages of 2 to 6 are all treated in the same way. We like the idea that older children take younger ones under their wing. It gives them a sense of responsibility” Christina Weber adds.

Such an ambitious programme naturally comes at a cost, so count on spending about 125 Swiss francs a day to have your little one looked after fulltime, although the beauty is that each family can negotiate a custom-tailored programme.

Globegarden also caters to the needs of corporations that need to set up childcare centres or that want to offer their employees access to the valuable babysitting, emergency care and host families web platform.

The large population of expats in Switzerland with many highly-qualified trailing spouses with young children who find it too complicated to work may find that Globegarden is just what they need to get back in the saddle.

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