

Caring for Rosie the Riveter's Children

Bill MacKenzie

During the Second World War, women in the United States who worked in the war industries in such jobs as welders, riveters, heavy machinery operators, and parachute riggers were heralded in the media as “Rosie the Riveter.” From 1943 to 1945 a fortunate few of these workplace pioneers participated in a memorable experiment in child care at Kaiser shipyards. Here, two of the most ambitious, business-run, on-site child care centers in the United States were established to meet family needs. The centers operated 24 hours a day, 364 days a year. They were called “a new [employer-employee] development in industrial relations” (Kaiser, n.d.) and



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“a model for child care in the post-war world” (*New York Times* 1944).

Lisa Gilbert, Southwest Washington Medical Center in Vancouver, Washington, recalls that her mother, a welder, and her father, a machinist, both worked at one of the two Kaiser Portland, Oregon, shipyards. She remembers the child care center she attended as a child: “My mother said care at the shipyard was a whole lot better an environment than leaving me at home” (Gilbert, pers. interview).

Eleanor Roosevelt urged on-site child care

The war escalated, and by early 1943 the Kaiser Company employed twelve thousand women at its Portland-area shipyards. Four thousand were mothers, and many had preschool-age children. Accessible, affordable child care on site meant that Kaiser could reduce worker lateness, absenteeism to care for a sick child, and early departures to meet family needs (Kaiser, n.d.).

Eleanor Roosevelt encouraged Henry Kaiser to build modern, model centers for child care at his two Oregon shipyards to encourage other businesses around the country to follow his lead (Goodwin 1994). The centers were a rarity of excellent care, with innovative features—an on-site infirmary, multiple outdoor play yards enclosed by the building, and the added service of prepared food that war workers could buy as a take-home family meal. (Hymes 1978).

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Today's Working Mothers and Their Children

- The number of working mothers with young children has significantly increased over the past 30 years—from 39 percent of the workforce in 1975 to more than 63 percent in 2009 (BLS 2010).
- 5.5 million children younger than age 5 and 2.3 million children ages 5 to 14 are in child care while their mothers work (US Census Bureau, n.d.).
- Half of all 9-month-old infants are enrolled in care outside the home (Halle et al. 2009).
- Less than 10 percent of employers across the country offer child care at or near the work site (Galinsky et al. 2008).

Kaiser child care faces some protests

Initially not everyone embraced the concept of group child care, including the Federal Security Agency and the Children's Bureau. The then US Office of Education asserted that group child care outside the home was "a danger to parental authority, particularly the mother-child relationship" (Tuttle 1995). Despite the opposition, Kaiser proposed that two centers be built, each with 15 rooms and serving 375 children on each of the three work shifts (Kaiser, n.d.).

Kaiser's son, Edgar, guided the project, and the centers took shape at two massive Portland shipyards, Swan Island and Oregonship. He won over his opponents, turning to them for names of the best person to act as consultant and overall director of the centers. Lois Meek Stoltz, child development educator, a researcher at the Institute for Child Welfare, University of California–Berkeley, and past president

of the National Association for Nursery Education (NANE [NAEYC's precursor]) was named on every list. "Right at the shipyard," Stoltz said, ". . . children will play and eat and sleep in an environment especially planned for them, while not far away, their mothers—welders, clerks, timekeepers, and secretaries—put in a full eight-hour shift" (*New York Times* 1943).

Because the centers were designed to accommodate the 24-hour-a-day shipyard schedule, children were accepted around-the-clock in a three-part schedule. Parents' fees were \$5.00 a child, additional children \$3.75 each, for a 6-day week. Operating costs not covered by fees were written into Kaiser's cost-plus-fixed-fee contracts with the federal government (Tuttle 1995).

Attention to the whole child and the family

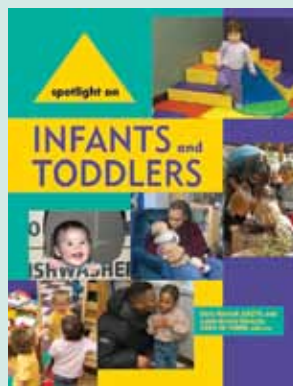
The Kaiser Centers were built with both the child and the family in mind. The centers' cutting-edge design incorporated 15 classrooms that radiated out from a center core of 15

separate playgrounds, like spokes on a wheel. Covered porch areas allowed children to play outdoors even during frequent Oregon rains.

A typical 24-hour day at the center started at 6:15 a.m. with day shift breakfast followed by indoor and outdoor play, a break for fruit/juice and cod liver oil, lunch, nap, and snack, with pick-up time at 4:00 p.m. (Kaiser, n.d.). Shifts varied. Stoltz describes how some children "arrived about 4:30 p.m. . . . played, had supper, played some more, and then slept until their mothers called for them sometime after 1:30 a.m." (Hymes 1978, 48).

The Kaiser Centers were initially intended to serve children from ages 2 to 6 years. After finding that many mothers needed care for younger children, they lowered the age level to 18 months. The age range widened as the center identified other needs. School-age children ages 6 to 12, for example, were enrolled during their parents' swing and graveyard shifts and on weekends and school holidays when parents worked. In the summer vacation months, 6- and 7-year-old children were accepted by both centers as a separate play group. Center directors

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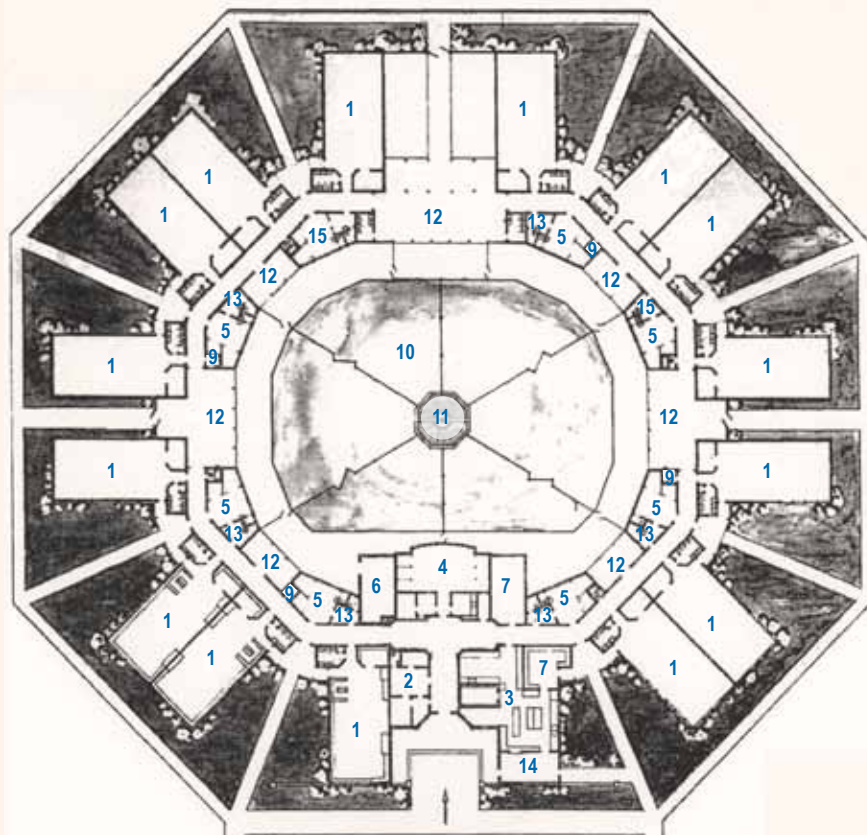
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Kaiser Child Service Centers Floor Plan

- | | | |
|--------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| 1 = Play room | 6 = Boiler room | 11 = Wading pool |
| 2 = Administration | 7 = Storage | 12 = Play porch |
| 3 = Kitchen | 8 = Bath | 13 = Teachers |
| 4 = Infirmary | 9 = Laundry | 14 = Home Service |
| 5 = Auxiliary | 10 = Play court | 15 = Teachers |

Reprinted from *Child Service Centers, Oregon Shipbuilding* (Portland, OR: Kaiser Company Inc., n.d.), p. 1.

also created Special Service Rooms for parents who needed only short-term child care for a day or two.

Quality staffing and support

Center staff included one hundred trained nursery and kindergarten teachers from 25 major colleges (Hurwitz 1998). They worked a 48-hour week, 50 weeks a year. Kaiser insisted on raising teachers' salaries to match those of workers in his yards. "They made us feel like treasured members of the profession," recalled teacher Ruth Berkman (Zinsser 1984, 78).

On the health front, 10 registered nurses staffed infirmaries in each center, along with a medical consultant and five child nutritionists. Nutritionists prepared food for the children and prepackaged meals for

a fee for the busy women workers (Kaiser, n.d.).

The Kaiser centers did just about everything for the parents and children. "The notion of thinking not only of children, [but of] their parents, was for many of us a relatively new idea," wrote James L. Hymes Jr., manager of the Child Service Department of the two centers (1995, 29).

Kaiser's legacy

The Kaiser Child Service Centers paid attention to the whole child, including social, emotional, mental, and physical needs. Equipment and materials for children in the centers were state of the art, models for the future. At the war's end, servicemen came home, and most women left their industry jobs to return to their

families and homemaking. Kaiser's shipyard Child Service Centers were dismantled.

Today, however, as families depend on two salaries to meet higher costs of living, even more American women are working, but on-site child care tied to workplaces remains limited. Kaiser's legacy provides a model not only for superior child care, but for care in a setting supportive of the *whole* family.

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