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Parents Scramble as Ax Falls on After-School Programs

A critical safety net for working parents is unraveling, and many are bracing to pay a hefty price.

As schools open their doors this month and next, closings and cutbacks at thousands of after-school programs nationwide have parents scrambling to make alternative arrangements. Some are forging new child-care alliances with neighbors, or turning their work or sleep schedules upside down to watch their children after school. A growing number will leave young schoolchildren home alone, or in the care of siblings.

Taken together, the trend will mark a significant shift this fall in the quality of family and neighborhood life in some locales, forcing parents to find new ways of coping.

Parents who can afford it are digging deep to hire sitters, sparking a record surge in August job postings on child-care Web sites. Staffers at "... " were astonished by a 50% increase in child-care postings between July and August, twice the usual seasonal rise, largely because of after-school cuts, says Chief Executive "... ". On **Sittercity.com**, child-care postings are up 37% from a year ago, says Chief Executive Genevieve Thiers, reflecting "a domino effect" of cutbacks.

Child-care costs will triple for some families. Parents typically pay about \$3 to \$4 an hour for after-school programs, located in settings ranging from schools to community centers, Ms. Marcelo says, based on a recent survey of 1,297 parents conducted by her Web site and a nonprofit child-care group. That cost compares with \$10 to \$15 an hour to hire a sitter, she says.

The cost spiral will take a heavy toll on Brigid Ehrenberg. Her 6-year-old son, Brandon, will likely be dropped from his New York City after-school program when school opens next week, because of fewer spaces due to funding cuts, says Ms. Ehrenberg, a bank client-service worker. Forced to hire a sitter at an estimated \$200 a week, Ms. Ehrenberg says she will have to cut her budget somewhere else—most likely by dropping out of the college studies she has been pursuing on weekends to earn a stockbroker's license.

"My heart just stopped when I heard" about the cuts, she says. Brandon's father works evenings and can't care for him after school either.

Other parents will turn their schedules upside down. Philippe Zamor is looking at a sharp drop in his sleep hours. If his two children's after-school program closes as expected, the

Brooklyn, N.Y., father, who works nights as a production worker for a Wall Street firm, will have to pick them up at 3 p.m., cutting his sleep to less than five hours a day. His wife works 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. as a health-care aide, and the family can't afford \$200 a week for a sitter for the kids, who are 5 and 8.

"In this work environment, you can't really afford to go to your boss and say, 'I want my schedule changed,' " Mr. Zamor says. "You are grateful to have a job."

In Tucson, Ariz., where schools have already opened, Andrea Ludwig has cut her hours at her clothing-store job so she can meet her children, 7 and 10, at the school bus every day, she says. Her kids loved attending an after-school program last year, but subsidy cuts have put the program's cost beyond her reach. When she can't leave work early, she has to beg relatives and friends to keep an eye on them, saying, "can you please, please do this for me?" she says. "It's embarrassing."

After-school programs are diverse, drawing funding from a patchwork of government, school, nonprofit and philanthropic sources. The programs provide supervision, activities and homework help for more than one in six U.S. schoolchildren—nearly four times as many as are cared for by nannies or sitters.

Among programs that get outside funding, three-fifths have been hit by cutbacks, according to a survey in April and May of 1,447 officials who oversee programs serving a total of 1.2 million children. Some 10% were planning at the time to close or shrink programs, and the outlook since has "probably gotten worse," says Jodi Grant, executive director of the Afterschool Alliance, a nonprofit advocacy group that conducted the survey. The recession is squeezing other, tuition-based programs too, amid a wave of cutbacks and shutdowns at child-care centers nationwide.

Soar to Success, an after-school program in Clinton, Iowa, has shuttered three of its six sites because of funding problems, says Loras Osterhaus, project director. In Los Angeles, \$2.5 million in budget cuts at a 180-school program called LA's Best are forcing cuts and longer waits, says Carla Sanger, president. In South Carolina, officials are planning to close 15 after-school centers, says Brett McGargle, a state official.

Expansion of such programs in the past decade has helped reduce the proportion of schoolchildren left home alone; 5- to 11-year-old kids regularly in "self-care" after school fell to about 5.4% in 2005, the latest data available, from about 7% in 2002, Census Bureau data show.

Cutbacks risk reversing that trend. "A lot of parents don't have a choice," Mr. Osterhaus says. Most states stop short of setting specific age limits for leaving children home alone; the decision should rest on a child's capabilities, the safety of his or her neighborhood and the resources available there. But regulators generally frown on the practice before children are at least 10 to 12 years old.

One Tucson mother who was dropped from an after-school program began last spring to send her kindergartener home with her second-grader after school, says Martha Petty, executive director of Flowing Wells Extension Programs, a nonprofit that has cut its elementary-level after-school programs to five from six. The kids stayed unsupervised for nearly five hours until the mother got home from her job in a neighborhood market, Ms. Petty says. Asked what they eat, Ms. Petty adds, such children often "talk about Captain Crunch sandwiches, or whatever they find in the cupboard."

Other parents will ask children to take more responsibility in other ways, sending them to public libraries or malls after school. When organized programs aren't available, after-school care reverts to "the Wild, Wild West," says Lucy Friedman, president of The After-School Corp., a nonprofit funding and support organization in New York.

Parent protests have led to reopening of some programs. In Clay County, N.C., officials rescued after-school care from the budget ax by combining two programs into one, raising fees and cutting staff, says schools superintendent Scott Penland; "Parents were saying, 'We've got to have this,' " he says.

Another solution are "share-care" setups, with two or three parents banding together to hire one sitter, says Sittercity.com's Ms. Thiers. The sitter gets premium pay, while parents can cut their costs, often to about \$5 an hour. Dismayed to learn that her kindergartener's school lacked funding for after-school care, Karen Russell and another mother there, who both have 3- and 5-year-old children, are recruiting a sitter who will alternate between their two houses. They plan to split the projected \$12,000 cost for the school year, Ms. Russell says. To make it work, they are striving for "100% consensus" on whom to hire, ground rules and other plans, says the Chicago marketing executive.

Other families are forming co-ops and trading off child-care duties with neighbors, says "... " Ms. Marcelo. Working parents, for example, might watch neighbors' kids on weekends in return for some help during the week.

For next year, Ms. Russell is working with a committee in hopes of setting up after-school care at her children's school. The odds, however, are daunting. At the moment, most schools are hard pressed just to provide the basics, and competition for funding is fierce. In New York, for example, says a spokeswoman for The After-School Corp., programs applying for after-school funds outnumber available federal and state grants by three to six times.