



Chrissy Klaus, owner of the newly opened FIO 360, a green conscious pre-school facility in Atlantic Station, stands with her hand behind the glass made with organic material in the doors to their classrooms, Tuesday May 13, 2008, in Atlanta. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS/John Amis

Eco-daycare centre introduces toddlers to 'green'

2 days ago

ATLANTA — There are plenty of signs that FIO 360 isn't the typical daycare centre, but perhaps most telling are the blue slippers visitors wear to keep out chemicals they might track in on their shoes.

Then there's the custom-made organic mattresses free of formaldehyde and other chemicals, imported organic wool rugs, organic wooden toys and hormone-free meals made by an in-house chef with - you guessed it - organic foods.

The centre's owners bill themselves as the first "eco-early care" centre in the United States, and although there's no way to know whether they merit the title, it's clear they have gone to great lengths in the name of going green.

The Atlanta centre has no PVC plastic products, only natural and organic toys, floors that emit radiant heat and environmentally friendly cleaning products. Kids here open the day with an affirmation, take yoga lessons and recycling classes, eat meals like red pepper quiche and then round out the afternoon with a massage to help them sleep.

It seems like a bit much for a group of infants and toddlers, but founder Crissy Klaus says the daycare centre's offerings are more than perks.

"They're necessities," she says. "Can you be too safe when it comes to your children? Will they be OK if they don't eat organic food? I don't know. But why not offer it if you have the opportunity?"

Parents' growing concerns about the environment and their children's health mean a lot of daycare centres are going green. The Oregon Environmental Council put together an Eco-Healthy Childcare program encouraging centres to take measures like buying only non-toxic art supplies, restricting aerosol sprays and chlorine bleach, and no wall-to-wall carpeting.

The program has so far endorsed more than 230 daycare centres, most of them in Oregon.

"It's a growing trend among daycare centres - and what parents are asking for," said Sara Leverette, the program's director. "They're increasingly concerned with different environmental factors, especially with all the recent toy recalls. And child-care centres are making these changes."

Creative Environment Day Care of Macedon, N.Y., has courses that teach the centre's 120 children about their role in the environment and their interaction with different ecosystems.

"We try to teach our children what their impact is on the environment and what their impact is on the future," said Noelle Brown, the centre's program director. "It's becoming a trend - there's a few other daycare centres I'm seeing that are trying to go green."

It's an expensive premise. Monthly costs at FIO 360 range between \$1,529 for preschoolers and \$1,708 for infants. Klaus says her business charges about \$35 more a week than other high-end child-care centres in Atlanta.

Klaus pitched the idea of a green daycare centre two years ago and began searching with co-owner Brett Radosta for vendors to import New Zealand lamb's wool for rugs and place durable floors from virgin rubber plants.

She named it FIO, after the Latin root word "to become."

The finished product cost \$3.7 million and, ironically, rises in what was once a hazardous waste site on the ground of an old steel mill that's been recycled into a walkable mini-city. The development, called Atlantic Station, is a bustling centre with office towers, multi-storey condo buildings, restaurants, retail and now a daycare centre.

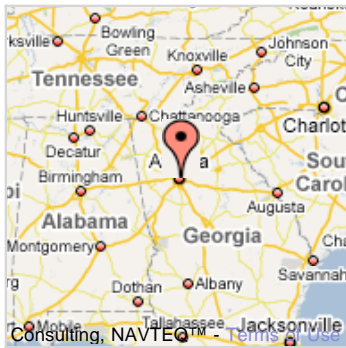
A half-dozen families have signed up since the centre opened a few weeks ago, and some of the parents are quick to say they're not rabid environmentalists. Alyson Fuchs, who enrolled her six-month-old daughter, Sadie, says she was attracted by the building's cleanliness.

"I'm not a gung-ho environmentalist," said Fuchs. "But when we were looking at other daycares, we went into an infant room and it smelled like they had washed the room in bleach, and that made me sad."

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Back in the centre's lobby, the blue slippers come off and there's a gathering in the "imagination" playroom, complete with a bubbling fountain and a stage where children can perform.

Klaus sits at the foot of a miniature treehouse, doing a bit of imagining herself. Her business has plenty of growth to go - there's room for 268 children - and she's already working on plans for summer camps, for a kindergarten class, for a "family concierge" to co-ordinate doctor's appointments and other events.

"We've crafted the perfect child-care centre for me," she says with a smile.

She'll soon find out how many others share her green vision.

On the Net:

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