

Brave new world of reality childminding in Dublin

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By Louise Holden

A new childcare facility about to open in Kimmage, Dublin, will allow parents to monitor their child's progress from the office desk.

A new crèche set to open in Dublin will be one of the first in the State to offer parents live internet viewing of their children's daily activities. Instead of logging onto Channel 4 to watch a bunch of strangers taking naps and eating their breakfast, parents will be able to monitor their children from work.

"This service has been available in the United States and Canada for some time, and it's very popular," says Robert Buckley, managing Director of the Cocoon Headstart Centre which will open its doors in Kimmage on December 1st. "We are one of the first companies to bring live online viewing of crèche facilities to Ireland – parents are intrigued by the idea of round-the-clock visual access to the children from wherever they are."

Employers may not be so keen. The temptation to peep at regular intervals during the day may lead to increased web use and reduced productivity by employees. Robert Buckley does not agree. "I believe that the peace of mind that parents will enjoy from this service will make them better employees."

The Cocoon Headstart website will be launched later in the year, but, Buckley insists, it will not be for general use. "Only our clients will have access to the webcam and security will be very tight. Everywhere there are children in the facility, there will be cameras and parents will be able to choose their own viewing locations and angles on the website."

This service has been available for about four years in the US, and offers parents the advantage of monitoring their children's care, chatting online with other parents about the service their children are receiving and following the progress of children during the day. Crèche websites are useful in other ways too – crèche managers can post up daily menus, activity programmes and news.

Some civil liberties groups have criticised the "kiddie cams" as an invasion of childcare workers' privacy. Some childcare specialists are also sceptical, saying that the cameras provide a false sense of security and that surprise personal visits are still the best way to check up on a childcare facility.

Crèche webcam users in the US report that after an initial obsession with the service visits to the site tend to fall off after a couple of weeks. Simply knowing that they can check in at any time is enough for most parents.

Robert Buckley views the service as an opportunity for parents to mark their children's progress, rather than to keep an eye on what the staff are up to. "All our staff are highly qualified – we have a full-time chef and consultant nutritionist and our child-to-minder ratio is higher than the statutory requirement."

The Cocoon Headstart centre has capacity for 80 children between the ages of 0 and five. Buckley has plans to open a number of Headstart centres around the country in the coming months and, thanks to kiddie cams, the Kimmage centre is already full up.