

# Rural child care in Ontario—

By Carol Stewart-Kirkby

Over the last few years, interest in providing rural child care has increased. Although no blanket policy or service became available across the province, several local projects have been developed and are operating successfully. Because residents of one county need something slightly different than the residents of another county, the projects are unique. In this issue of **Home & Country**, we will take a close look at two rural child care services. In future issues, other projects will be examined. Perhaps you will find here the information for a suitable child care project in your locality.

## KENT COUNTY (around Ridgetown)

Marg Eberle, a Palmyra WI member, is the vice-chairman of the board which directs the child care project around Ridgetown. She says the seed for the service was planted over a year ago. "In February 1987, we held a Women's Development Day for rural women. One of the workshops covered rural day care initiatives. We found the workshop participants wanted to learn more and go farther with this, so we organized a public meeting," Marg explained.

From the meeting came the 11-member board and soon a needs

assessment survey was being conducted in the area within a 15 mile radius of Ridgetown. During those early stages, advice came by way of a representative of the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS). "It was important to have input from Community and Social Services because they give approval to the funding, and helped steer our decisions so we would receive that approval," Marg said.

What was also important, according to Marg, was the support to form the board and the enthusiasm and energy of volunteers to carry out the survey. "Being able to determine a need and then produce it in writing are essential first steps," she added.

Once the need was established, the search for a facility for the day care centre began. "This was perhaps our biggest problem. We spent all last summer looking for a place," said Marg. At first, the board looked into renting, then investigated buying an existing building, and then discussed building a new facility. Finally, with the approval of MCSS, the board bought an old house with the idea of renovating it. In the proposal to MCSS, the board outlined the purchase price of the house and estimates on the renovations. It took about three months to get the funding approved, said Marg.

On Feb. 1, the renovations began.

This included painting and wall-papering throughout, as well as the installation of fire doors, fencing and playground equipment.

The centre opened for business on April 1 with seven professional child care workers, a part-time cook and caretaker. Thirty-five children were using the facility shortly after opening day.

As well as funding the purchase of the house and the renovations, MCSS will pay the operating expenses of the centre for its first three months. After that, the centre is expected to be self-sufficient. Marg explained fees were guesstimated based on hydro, gas, property tax and insurance payments, as well as salaries. "It's almost impossible to know exactly how many children will register. We have made it clear to our parents that fees may increase, based on actual costs and numbers of children," Marg added.

Some of the spots in the centre are subsidized by the county, but it is up to the individual, not the day care centre to apply for the subsidy.

Children are registered on a first-come, first-served basis and the centre is open from 6:30 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday to Friday.

A philosophy for the centre was developed by the board before opening day. "We are aiming to achieve a home-like atmosphere for the children. This is not a school. We do have some

