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After a Santa Barbara child care provider was charged with abusing her own adopted children, local parents are now facing a

DAY CARE DILEMMA



RAFAEL MALDONADO / NEWS-PRESS

Easter Moorman had arranged to send her 15-month-old son Jonathan Timothy to the day care center operated by Sylvia Jovanna Vasquez, but Ms. Vasquez was arrested before the boy's first day.

"I thought I asked the right questions," one mother says

By THOMAS SCHULTZ
NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

Easter Moorman asked probing questions and visited the Foothill Road home, trusting a referral that led her to Sylvia Jovanna Vasquez's day care operation before enrolling her 15-month-old son there.

"I thought I asked the right questions," said Ms. Moorman, marketing and public relations manager at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. "I thought I did the right things to ensure my son would be safe."

She asked if assistant caregivers had undergone background checks. She made sure broken glass from a broken table was removed. Among other precautions, Ms. Moorman spoke with other parents with children there, she said.

It was the sort of effort experts say all parents should make before leaving a child for hours, day in and day out, with someone they may not really know.

Following the Jan. 6 arrest of Ms. Vasquez, now charged with three counts of abusing her own adopted children at the site, state officials shut down her day care center. Since then, the Sheriff's Department has received dozens of calls from worried parents who had left their children in Ms. Vasquez's care.

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WHAT TO ASK

Key questions to ask before deciding on a day care:

- Does the caregiver have a license?
- Have criminal record and child abuse index checks been done for all adults at the facility?
- Have you checked references for both the provider and facility?
- Does the caregiver encourage visits?
- How does the caregiver handle discipline? Is this in line with your attitudes and beliefs?
- Does the caregiver give individual attention to each child?
- Does the caregiver provide nutritional meals and snacks?
- Is the facility organized and child safe?
- How many children is the caregiver responsible for and what are their ages? Will your child get enough attention?
- How does your child feel about the day care provider?

SOURCE: Child Abuse Listening and Mediation; UC Davis Division of Human Resources; California Child Care Licensing Division

ON THE NET

For more information, visit:
www.ccid.ca.gov
<http://www.trustline.org/tips.htm>
For referrals to day care centers, phone 211 or visit fsasb.webinform.net/Client/FamilyServiceAgencySantaBarbara/

At suspect's church, some parishioners shocked by charges

By CHUCK SCHULTZ
NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

Without mentioning Sylvia Jovanna Vasquez's name, her Seventh day Adventist Church pastor urged dozens of people attending a Saturday morning service to pray

"especially for the children" but not rush to judgment on child abuse charges against the Santa Barbara day care provider. As parishioners streamed out of the cavernous sanctuary on Arroyo Road, two who have known Ms. Vasquez for years said they were stunned by the arrest of the woman, they saw as a kind and loving mother.

"Personally, I was shocked," said one woman, Mary, who declined to give her last name. She has been a member of the church since 1967 and recalled that Ms. Vasquez has been regularly attending there for more than a decade.

"I see her and I see her children and they seemed very happy," she said. "She dressed them very nicely and they were very involved in music."

One of Ms. Vasquez's adopted daughters regularly played violin in the church orchestra, sometimes performing solos.

"Never would I have guessed in a million years" that Ms. Vasquez would be the target of such disturbing allegations, Mary said. "I personally don't see how any of this can be

Please see **CHURCH** on A16

Day care centers should welcome parents' visits

■ PRECAUTIONS

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Although the charges don't involve any of those children, child care specialists across Santa Barbara are anxious to get the word out to parents about what steps they can take to determine if a facility is safe and healthy.

High on the list was rejecting any home or center without an open-door policy. Parents by law have the right to drop by any time during business hours, something Ms. Vasquez apparently discouraged, according to parents.

"That is a huge red flag," said psychologist Anna Kokotovic, executive director of the nonprofit Child Abuse Listening Mediation, which aims to prevent cruelty and counsel troubled youths. "You have to be able to drop by any time, announced or unannounced. It's highly advised that you do drop by unannounced."

"If parents are not welcome, 'I would just say forget it,' said Ruth Ambriz, a day care provider who currently cares for six children at her Mellifont Avenue home in Santa Barbara. "The parents should be able to come over any time. I always tell my parents to come over any time. That is the big red flag I would see. I mean, another adult coming, fantastic. Another parent, that's even better."

In hindsight, Ms. Moorman said she wishes she had spoken with at least one former Vasquez client — to find out why the parent left.

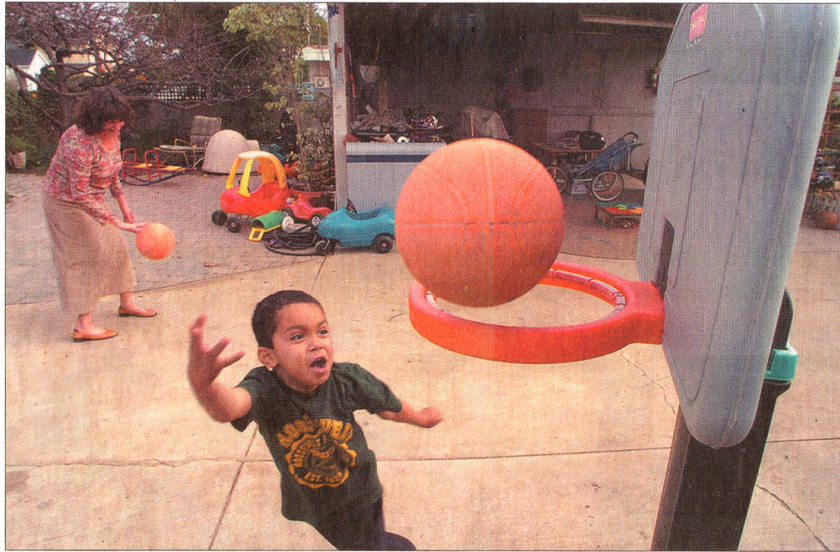
Ms. Kokotovic said this, too, is a good idea.

"Were there things they were concerned about? Would they change anything?"

Is the facility licensed? If so, is the permit posted as required? What is the center's capacity, and has that number been exceeded?

All these are important considerations, Ms. Kokotovic said.

Parents can check on each provider with the state Community Care Licensing Division, a branch of the Department of Social Services, to view files listing any violations or complaints. The local phone number is



RAFAEL MALDONADO / NEWS-PRESS

Ruth Ambriz operates a day care center out of her Mellifont Avenue home in Santa Barbara where 5-year-old Raul Alvarado makes a basket.

682-7647.

"This is a lot of work," Ms. Kokotovic said. "This isn't easy. It's too bad, but it's not easy."

Reviewing state records is key, said Alyssa Binder, an instructor at the Kinko's Early Learning Center, a day care center for Santa Barbara City College students and staff and the lab for the school's Early Childhood Education program. The facility is licensed to care for up to 52 children at a time.

"Find out if there's been any

infractions," Ms. Bindersaid. Further,

"I would really tell parents to go on their gut feelings. Trust your instincts."

"Sometimes you get what you pay for," she said.

"A lot of parents are finding it really difficult to find adequate care at a cost they can afford. It's something to be aware of. A lot of really good places do cost more money."

Ms. Vasquez is accused of locking two of her children in small quarters and confining a third in squalid conditions. The three—a boy, 13, and two

girls, 9 and 6 — are in the county's protective custody, along with a fourth adopted child, a 12-year-old girl.

Ms. Vasquez on Monday pleaded not guilty to three counts of felony child abuse in Santa Barbara Superior Court. On Wednesday, a judge raised her bail to \$1 million, and she remains in Santa Barbara County Jail.

Although investigators have focused so far on the downstairs living quarters of the Foothill home — where two of the children apparently slept — Santa Barbara County

Sheriff's Sgt. Eric Raney said there are some concerns about evidence upstairs, where the day care operated. Authorities found two cribs stored in the closet, as well as the wall cabinet where Ms. Vasquez's 6-year-old allegedly slept.

"Whether that was used for anybody else other than the 6-year-old, we're still trying to figure that out," Sgt. Raney said last week.

Sheriff's officials are investigating whether there was any mistreatment of the 12-year-old. At Ms. Vasquez's

bail hearing Wednesday, Senior Deputy District Attorney Joyce Dudley said the girl had been injected with Lupron, a drug that blocks the onset of puberty.

Some parents, meanwhile, said they were frustrated that they were given little information about the investigation.

Ms. Moorman said her baby son, "J.T." for Jonathan Timothy, was to have started at the day care Monday, the same day Ms. Vasquez was arraigned.

After meeting with Ms. Vasquez in November, Ms. Moorman agreed to pay the woman \$700 a month and gave her \$150 in advance to hold a spot for the boy until his first day, scheduled for last week.

Ms. Vasquez told her all the children in her day care went on to become gifted GATE students, Ms. Moorman said.

It was during an initial visit that Ms. Moorman met Ms. Vasquez's 12-year-old girl.

"The girl told me she was 10," she said. "To me, she did look like a 10-year-old, not a 12-year-old. Joanna never alluded to the other three kids."

When the appointed day came and Ms. Moorman arrived to drop J.T. off for the first time, the house was empty. On Tuesday, the state officially closed the facility.

"I showed up on Monday," Ms. Moorman said. The gate was locked, nobody at the door. "I was like, 'whoa.' I thought it was odd that I didn't hear any kids."

Told by Ms. Vasquez's grown son William Vasquez that his mother had a family emergency, Ms. Moorman said she had no other option but to take J.T. with her to work.

After news of the arrest broke Tuesday afternoon, her husband called. He asked if she was sitting down.

"I was completely floored," Ms. Moorman said. "We basically said, 'Well, the Lord was watching over our family.'"

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