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Wheels for hire

Kids Kab takes over the chore that drives parents to distraction

By Rose McMills
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Somewhere between ballet class and soccer practice, it became obvious. Harried suburban families need a chauffeur.

Kids Kab of Westmont stepped into the void a year ago with its tiny fleet of white vans "For Kids Who Are Going Places." Frazzled parents breathed a sigh of relief.

The "kabs" move along suburban streets, carrying about 80 children a day to and from school and activities. Children as young as 3 are brought home when ill or are run to orthodontists in Darien, Downers Grove, Clarendon Hills, Burr Ridge, Willowbrook, Oak Brook, Lisle and Naperville.

"Life is so hectic today," Dilip Desai of Downers Grove said. "Both parents have to work to survive. Either they must deny their children activities or drive themselves crazy. It's a real nightmare."

He and wife Shilpee decided it was an idea whose time had come based on first-hand experience with sons Anuj, 14, and Amol, 12.

"We tried car pooling but I always felt I was asking for favors," Shilpee said.

The Desais advertised for private drivers but found them unreliable, then resorted to cabs but felt uneasy.

"We figured other people must be going through the same thing," Shilpee said.

Dilip, a chemist, was ready for a career change. Shilpee, a medical technologist at Elmhurst Hospital, devoted her spare time to the venture.

Now, thanks to their Kids Kab business, their sons never miss karate or music lessons and are always on time for school.

So is Caroline Fisher, 13, who attends Avery Coonley School, Downers Grove, with sister Courtney, 9. Susan and Richard Fisher both work at the Cancer Center at Loyola Medical Center.



Tribune photo by John Dziekan

Dilip Desai, who runs a transportation company for children, takes on passengers in his Kids Kab at Coonley School in Downers Grove.

"Before Kids Kab, my parents drove us everywhere and it got . . . interesting," Caroline said diplomatically.

She uses the service before school for yearbook and drama club and catches tennis lessons afterward.

"I don't have to stand on the corner and freeze anymore," she said. "The vans are nice and clean and quiet inside. We have to use seat belts, so no one is running around and fighting."

Brandon Pettus, 13, of Hinsdale is equally pleased: "We tried cabs, but the drivers were different every day and not always very nice. All the kids were crammed in."

Ed and Roxanne Pettus, both teachers at Glenbard West High School in Glen Ellyn, have to be at school an hour before Brandon is due at Avery Coonley. "Frankly, I don't know how we managed before," Ed said.

Convenience is a big factor for Mary Miles, Downers Grove, a stay-at-home mom. She and husband John have four children: Elizabeth, 8; Cathleen, 5; Irene, 2; and Peter, 13 months.

Elizabeth and Cathleen attend Avery Coonley.

"I always had to wake up the younger kids and drag them out to pick up the girls," Mary said. "Now they don't have to sit in the car half the day."

Elizabeth heads out early for chess club. Mom then drives Cathleen to junior kindergarten before hustling the little ones home for naps. Kids Kab brings both girls back, except on Tuesday when Elizabeth is bused to religious education class at Our Lady of Peace in Darien.

These are paranoid times, and Dilip Desai carefully screens and trains drivers. The hiring process includes a criminal background and driving record check, a drug test and road test.

Desai insists that drivers meet all receiving adults and never turn over their precious cargo to someone unfamiliar. This has ruffled a few feathers but earned accolades from parents.

Rusty Ryan, a single parent, has care of daughters Laura, 10, and Sandy, 5. Kids Kab drives them to and from their Downers Grove home to their aunt's in Naperville and later to their respective schools while Ryan works in Rosemont.

One morning the girls' mother unexpectedly met Sandy's van at the Peter Pan Early Learning Center in Downers Grove. She wasn't on Desai's list, so he delivered the child to school personnel.

"It's exactly what I would expect as a parent," said Ryan. "I don't worry at all about Kids Kab transporting my daughters. One headache in my life is now gone."

Another time Desai took a child home to discover that the babysitter had suddenly quit and Grandma was the emergency

stand-in. He wouldn't turn over his charge.

"I had no way of knowing it was Grandma," he said with no apologies. "Nowadays the world is different and we don't trust anyone. We are not delivering packages or a pizza."

Safety of the vans is also a parental concern, given the recent rash of school bus accidents. Desai's brand-new vans are subjected to a 48-point check before they roll each morning and carry cellular phones and fire extinguishers.

A regulations sheet outlining expected behavior en route is issued to each family before the child steps on board.

Driver Ruth Horvath of Stickney finds the vans a welcome relief after driving for the public schools for 20 years. "The kids were so rowdy that it was dangerous," she said.

Only in name does the service resemble a cab company. Customers are under contract, and rides are prearranged. Children carry a photo ID.

"Customers buy a spot and time in the van. It's like having reserved seats on an airline," Desai said.

Parents don't seem to mind the cost (about \$5.50 for under five miles) or the stringent rules. It buys them peace of mind.

"They treat the children like their own," said Ryan.

For more information, call Kids Kab at 708-654-2543.