

Choosing Child Care That's Right for Your Child's Age

Overview

How to choose care that's right for your child's age -- whether you have an infant, a toddler, or a child about to start school.

- Choosing quality care -- whatever your child's age
- Infants (up to 18 months)
- Toddlers (18 months to 3 years)
- Preschoolers (3 to 5 years)

Choosing child care that's right for your child -- and your child's age -- is very important and can be difficult. You have to examine your own values and beliefs about bringing up children. And you must be confident that the caregiver you choose will give your child individual, caring attention, whatever your child's age. Not all child care programs take children of all ages. Understanding the types of care available and your child's developmental needs will help you make the choice that's right for your child.

Choosing quality care -- whatever your child's age

Right from the beginning you will want to look for

- caring people who like children
- a steady, reliable arrangement
- a healthy and safe environment
- interesting, challenging daily activities for your child

These qualities can come in many different forms and types of care. You may find safe, nurturing, educational care in any one of the following types of arrangements:

- a family child care home
- an in-home provider
- shared child care
- a child care center
- a school-age program

The type of care that's best for your child will depend not only on your child's age and temperament, but also on your needs and what you can afford. Your needs and wants may also change over time as your child grows older.

Infants (up to 18 months)

Leaving an infant in someone else's care can be difficult, but it is usually harder for the parent than for the young infant. Finding an arrangement that you feel

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comfortable with is more important than the age at which your child begins care. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- *Sometime between the ages of 7 and 15 months, you can expect that your baby will become very aware of the difference between you and strangers.* Many babies become upset whenever their parent leaves the room. This is a normal and important milestone in your baby's development. Fortunately, this stage doesn't last long, and babies' reactions vary. Although it can be difficult to start a new child care arrangement at this time, these separations and reunions help your baby learn that you will come back again.
- *If you feel happy and positive about your baby's care arrangement, your baby is more likely to be happy with it, too.*
- *Look for a caregiver who is warm, caring, attentive, and patient.* Does the caregiver make eye contact with you and your baby? Will she spend a lot of time holding and cuddling your baby? Will she sing and talk to your baby, and provide her with interesting sounds and experiences?
- *Look for a caregiver who has experience caring for infants.*
- *Look for a healthy and safe environment.* Does the caregiver respond right away when a baby cries or is upset? Is the home or center clean and safe? Are electrical outlets covered? Is the diaper-changing area clean and well organized?
- *Choose a place where parents are welcome to drop in while the child is in care.* Quality care depends on parents and caregivers working closely together.
- *Look at the number of children per adult in the center or home.* The infants per adult ratio is important because it has a direct impact on how much individual attention your baby receives. Most experts feel that one family child care provider should care for no more than six children, and no more than two of those children should be under the age of 15 months. In centers, the recommended child: staff ratio for infants under the age of 15 months is 3:1 and should not be more than 4:1.

Toddlers (18 months to 3 years)

During the toddler years, your child will learn to explore, color, enjoy books and stories, build, and play with other children. There are many different ideas and philosophies about learning and child care. Most are based on a belief that children learn by doing. In choosing care for your toddler, you'll want to

- *Look for adults who are warm, caring, knowledgeable, and attentive.* Do children sit on the provider's lap? Does the provider offer frequent praise and encouragement? Does the provider genuinely seem to love children this age?
- *Look for a provider who is patient and skilled in helping children learn self-control and self-discipline.* Guidance and discipline should be applied in a positive way that

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helps the child. Rules should be clear and fairly enforced. Providers who use positive ways of disciplining children generally provide a higher quality of care.

- *Look for a caregiver who has experience caring for toddlers.* Caregivers who provide quality care must understand children's needs and have the energy for lots of inventive activities -- characteristics that can come from a background as a parent, from training, from practice, or from a combination of the three. Ideally, caregivers should have special training for the age groups they work with.
- *Choose a program or provider that offers safe challenges and a variety of activities.* Your toddler needs opportunities to test new skills and explore new things. Look for a range of activities, from group play to individual play, from games to music, from quiet activities to noisy ones.
- *Look for a healthy, safe, and child-friendly environment.* Does the caregiver respond right away when a toddler cries, is upset, or is angry? Does the provider always keep an eye on the children? Is the space organized so that toddlers know where things can be found and can reach what they need? Are there small places where children can get away from the group sometimes, where they can have quiet time by themselves?
- *Choose a place where parents feel welcome to drop in while the child is in care.* And look for providers who openly share information with parents.
- *Look at the number of children per adult in the center, home, or program.* Again, most experts feel that one family child care provider should care for no more than six children, and no more than two of those children should be under the age of 15 months. In centers, the recommended child: staff ratio for toddlers is 4:1 and should be no more than 5:1. For two-year-olds, the recommended ratio is 5:1 and should not be more than 6:1.

Preschoolers (3 to 5 years)

There are many different types of educational programs for preschoolers. Some are highly structured and some are more informal. It has not yet been proven that any one type of program is more effective than others. What matters is that you choose a program that suits your child's needs and temperament.

When choosing a preschool program for your child,

- *Ask yourself if the school or program is a good fit for your child.* For example, if your child has trouble dealing with other children, he may not thrive in a large classroom. If he can't yet control his hands well enough to draw pictures, he may not do well in a preschool that expects him to learn to write.
- *Look for a program that offers many different opportunities for your child to learn.* Are there books, blocks, art supplies, and a variety of toys and materials available to

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children? Do teachers read to the children every day? Does the program provide opportunities for singing, dance, and drama?

- *Look at the number of children per adult in the center, school, or program.* The recommended child: staff ratio for preschoolers is 8:1 and should not be more than 10:1.
- *Keep in mind that in general, children do better in small groups.* So no matter how many adults are on hand, the total number of children who are grouped together for care is important. For 3-to-5-year-olds, groups of 12 to 18 children are recommended -- the quality of care goes up as the group gets smaller; quality begins to deteriorate when preschool groups have 20 children or more.
- *Are the teachers nurturing and experienced with children this age?* Do they talk to the children and listen to them? Do they help the children communicate with one another, resolve conflicts, and develop social skills?
- *Do the teachers use positive discipline?* Teachers, like caregivers, must be patient and skilled in helping children learn self-control and self-discipline. Guidance and discipline should be applied in a positive way that helps the child. Rules should be clear and fairly enforced. Teachers who use positive ways of disciplining children generally provide a higher quality of care.
- *Is there a lot of opportunity for physical exercise and play?* Preschoolers need plenty of time and space to play, run, and explore.
- *Choose a program or school where parents feel welcome to drop in and visit.* And look for teachers who openly share information with parents and who welcome parent suggestions.
- *Look for a healthy, safe, and child-friendly environment.* Do teachers respond right away when a child cries, is upset, or is angry? Do they always keep an eye on the children? Is the space organized so that children know where things can be found and can reach what they need? Do teachers follow safety precautions when children are baking cookies or playing outdoors?

Finally, keep in mind the importance of continuity of care when choosing a care arrangement for your child. Children do better when they can continue to be with a caregiver they trust over a period of time. A family child care or in-home provider who only plans to be a caregiver for a short time, or a center or program with unusually high staff turnover, can have a negative effect on the quality of care. It's important for your baby, toddler, or preschooler to stay with the same people as long as the arrangement seems right.

Communicating with Your Child Care Provider

Overview

Open communication between you and your child's caregiver lays the groundwork for a successful relationship and can help you feel more confident about leaving your child in someone else's care.

- Establishing a relationship
- Ongoing communication
- Communicating by phone, fax, and e-mail
- Handling problems

Your relationship with your child care provider can be one of the most important that you will have as a working parent. As with any relationship, good communication is the key -- to working out problems and to making sure that you, your child, and your caregiver are satisfied with the arrangement.

Establishing a relationship

The way you communicate with your child care provider from the beginning can set the tone for the relationship you will have. You can show that you value your provider by listening to her ideas, sharing yours, and taking the time to talk and get to know one another. To help get things off to a positive start, here are some things you might want to talk about with your provider:

- *Your child's personality.* You can help your caregiver get to know your child by describing his personality. Is he outgoing or shy? Does he like groups or does he prefer to play one-on-one? Giving your caregiver a clear description of your child will help her to be more sensitive to his needs.
- *Your child's preferences and routines.* Your caregiver and your child will get along better if the caregiver knows ahead of time your child's likes and dislikes. Talk about your child's typical schedule and habits, what she likes to eat, how much sleep she needs, and whether she has a hard time saying goodbye.
- *Your family's circumstances.* It can be very helpful to let your caregiver know if you are a single parent, if there have been recent or important changes in your family life, and other details such as how many other children you have and their ages. Talk about any other situation that may affect your child's behavior.
- *Practical details.* Discuss what foods and snacks your child will eat, any medications he requires, whether he requires a special stuffed animal or blanket at naptime, and other day-to-day details. If your caregiver comes to your home, you'll also want to talk about any house rules you have for such things as smoking, using the car or computer, and watching television, videos, or DVDs.
- *Illnesses and emergencies.* Make sure to talk with your provider about what to do if she or your child is sick. What if your child gets sick during the day in her care? What do you want her to do if your child has an accident requiring medical care or gets a sudden fever? Be sure to discuss who your emergency backup person is in case your child needs to be picked up and you can't get there right away. Leave important phone numbers where you can be reached and those of backup people.

At home it's a good idea to post these on a refrigerator, bulletin board, or in a similar spot.

- *Special needs.* Talk with your provider about any special circumstances or needs your child may have and how to handle them.
- *Your priorities.* A caregiver who comes to your home may perform tasks for you that go beyond caring for your child, such as doing light housework or starting dinner. The more responsibilities she has, the more important it is that you make your priorities clear. For example, you might say that your top priority is making sure your child stays safe and healthy while you're at work, or that having a spotless house is less important than that your child receives warm and loving care. This will help her decide how to make the best use of her time, especially on extremely busy days when she has a lot to accomplish.

Ongoing communication

To know how things are going each day, it is important to have ongoing communication with your provider. Here are some tips:

- *Touch base each day.* It can be very helpful to touch base briefly at the beginning and end of each day. This will allow you and your caregiver to exchange important day-to-day information about your child.
- *Set up a regular time, away from your child, to discuss with your provider in more detail how things are going.* You might start your conversations by asking your provider how he thinks things are going. This will reassure him that you value his ideas and aren't going to give him a lecture every time you talk.
- *Depending on your child's age and the situation, your provider might keep a record of your child's daily activities to share with you.* How many diaper changes did your child have? What did she have for lunch? How long was her nap? Talk about a way to get this information from your provider if it is important to you.
- *Minor illnesses.* If your child is mildly sick and able to be with his provider, make sure you explain clearly what his symptoms are and what you want him to do if the symptoms worsen.
- *If you are going to be late picking up your child or you have a schedule change, call to let your provider know with as much notice as possible.* Explain how late you think you'll be. This will allow the provider to adjust his schedule, or allow you to make arrangements to have your backup relative or friend pick up your child if necessary. Try to respect your provider's schedule and not to be late often.
- *If there is a big change in your family life, let your provider know.* Family changes, such as a marital separation, illness, or a move, can affect your child's behavior. Let your provider know about these or any other changes in your child's life that might cause her behavior, schedule, or mood to be different.

- *Show your appreciation.* Your provider is working hard to take care of your child. It is very important to let him know that you respect and appreciate all that he does for you and your child. Try to thank him at the end of each day and to give special thanks when he does something extra for your child. Notes, cards, and remembering a birthday or holiday are all ways to show appreciation. Remember that extra work deserves extra pay and that many child care providers get a holiday bonus at the end of the year. Remember too that well-deserved praise makes everyone feel good.

Communicating by phone, fax, and e-mail

At times, you and your caregiver may need to stay in touch by phone, fax, or e-mail. Good communication by any of these methods begins with letting your caregiver know if she can use them to reach you at work. If you can't take calls at work except in emergencies, or aren't allowed to send personal fax or e-mail messages, make sure your caregiver knows this. Here are some other tips:

- *Phone and fax.* If your caregiver comes to your home, you may want to choose the "call waiting" option for your phone, so your caregiver will know when you're trying to call. Or you might get a cell phone for your caregiver and explain how to use any helpful functions, such as text messaging. (If you do this, you'll probably want to set some limits on calls that are unrelated to your child's care.) You'll also want to explain how to use your home fax machine before the need arises.
- *E-mail.* E-mail can make it easier to communicate with your child care provider. If your child goes to a child care center, ask at the start of the year if you can send e-mail messages to the staff if you have questions about your child. You might want to save copies of the responses so you don't forget something important. If your child receives care in your home, find out if your caregiver feels comfortable using a computer. Then work out a system to make sure that neither of you misses an important message. For example, you might agree that your caregiver will check your computer each day at 4:30 p.m. to find out what time you're coming home from work. You might also talk to your caregiver about whether instant messaging would ever be helpful and, if so, when.

Even if you have to communicate a lot by phone or e-mail, be sure to make time for some regular face-to-face conversations with your caregiver. Your child care provider may hesitate to bring up some subjects on the phone or in e-mail, and you'll have a better sense of her views if you can watch for visual cues. Sitting down for face-to-face conversations shows your caregiver that you're willing to take time to listen to her views on a subject that is extremely important to both of you.

Handling problems

No matter how much you like your child care provider, you'll probably disagree at some point about something related to your child's care. You may pick your baby up and find half the lunch you packed uneaten. Your toddler may come home in tears because her provider told her that her favorite blanket is "just for babies." Your 4-year-old may stay up until midnight because his preschool insists that all children take naps in the afternoon. What can you do? Here are some guidelines:

- *Use a positive, problem-solving approach.* Whatever your concern may be, you and your provider can work it out more successfully if you treat it as a solvable problem. Try to describe the behavior you're concerned about in a neutral way ("I noticed that Mary has been fussy lately when I come to pick her up."). Then ask your provider for her ideas about what might be causing the problem and what suggestions she may have about resolving it.
- *Choose your battles.* Everyone's parenting style is different. You may sometimes want to overlook minor differences, such as your provider allowing a snack when you wouldn't, if things are otherwise going well.
- *Address small problems before they become big ones.* No matter what your concerns are, try to deal with them right away. Don't let things build up to the point where you're very angry before you talk with your provider. If, for instance, you feel that your son is not being greeted with enough enthusiasm each morning, you might tell your provider that he seems to be feeling lost at the beginning of the day. She may be able to resolve the problem simply by your pointing it out.
- *Make an appointment to talk over bigger issues.* If you are concerned about an issue that you need to talk over in detail, arrange a time to talk with your provider when your child isn't there. Don't try to solve problems in front of your child -- especially during drop-off and pick-up times.
- *Try to be as specific as possible about what's bothering you.* Be honest about how you feel, but try to see things from your provider's point of view, too.
- *Talk about your concerns and work together to come up with another way to handle things.* Agree on a solution and set a short time period to try it out.
- *Get back together to share information about how your solution is working -- for both of you.*
- *To keep the problem from occurring again, schedule a time to talk regularly with your provider.*
- *If a problem can't be resolved and you are at a child care center, speak with the director or supervisor.* If your child's provider does something that you feel is inappropriate, discuss it with her first. Then, if it can't be resolved, you may need to speak with the supervisor or director of the center.

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- *If you have serious concerns or feel your child is unsafe, take him out of the child care setting immediately.* Occasionally, a parent is faced with a serious problem, such as negligence, abuse, or licensing violations. If you think that your provider is not complying with state licensing regulations, let her (or the director of the center) know about your concern. If the provider does not resolve it, you can contact your state's licensing authorities.

If you've found someone you feel good about to take care of your child while you work, it's worth taking the time to communicate openly and with care. You'll all benefit.

Looking for Child Care: When to Start, What to Do

Overview

Guidelines on when to start looking for child care arrangements and the steps to take.

- When to start
- Step 1: Decide what's important to you
- Step 2: Gather your resources
- Step 3: Visit programs and providers
- Step 4: Finalize your plans

When you are looking for child care, timing can be important. If you start too early, your arrangements may fall through or no longer fit your needs when you're ready to start care. If you start too late, you may not find the openings you need. The "right time" to start looking generally depends on several different things, including your child's age, the care that is available in your area, and how much time you can devote to your search.

When to start

Of course, everyone's circumstances are different. Your search may take a little less time, or a little more. Please note that these times are approximate.

- *Family child care providers*, who offer care in their own homes, may not know very far in advance if they will have an opening. In most areas, six to eight weeks before you need the care is enough time to find a provider. Some providers will not even meet with parents who are looking for care more than two months ahead of time.
- *Child care centers* generally have contracts with families and know how many openings they will have about a year in advance. Full-time openings for infants and toddlers are generally limited, and part-time openings are even harder to find in most areas, so looking for child care centers a year in advance is a good idea. Don't panic if you have less time to look, especially if your child is older than 3 years of age. Many child care centers keep waiting lists to fill unexpected openings.
- *Preschool or nursery school programs* for 3- to 5-year-olds usually enroll children during the winter for the following fall. In most areas, these programs only run during the school year, for a few hours each day, two to three days per week.
- *In-home care*, which is provided in your home by someone you hire -- perhaps a sitter, a housekeeper, a nanny, or an au pair -- generally takes about eight weeks to set up, whether you are recruiting on your own or working with an agency. You may need an additional four to eight weeks if you are looking for a nanny to move in with you.

Regardless of the kind of child care you might be looking for, most searches follow four basic steps.

Step 1: Decide what's important to you

- Think about the type of schedule you would like for your child. Will you need full or part weeks, full or part days? What is the earliest you may need to drop off and the latest you may need to pick up?
- Decide what you can afford for child care per week or per month. Talk with friends who use child care about how much they pay. Find out if you are eligible for any programs such as a Dependent Care Assistance Plan (DCAP), the child care tax credit, sliding scale fees, discounts, or subsidies, which might help make child care more affordable.
- Decide where you would like to look for care -- near home, near work, or somewhere between the two.

Step 2: Gather your resources

- Tell everyone you know that you are looking for child care. Ask them to tell you about their experiences and give you references to programs or providers they have used *recently*.
- Use the Child Care Locator on this site to identify options in your community.

Step 3: Visit programs and providers

- Call each program or provider referred to you, and interview the director or provider. It's generally a good idea to ask one or two important questions -- such as what a typical day is like or how long the provider has been caring for children -- before you decide to visit.
- Ask for any literature or materials they may have available. Read the brochures, contract, and handbooks from each program.
- Schedule visits to the programs and people that sound most interesting. Ask lots of questions! Allow yourself enough time to sit in the room and watch how the children and the provider act together.
- When you've narrowed your search down to one, two, or three choices, ask the program director or provider for references from other parents who are using or have recently used their services. Check at least three references.
- Visit your final choice again at a different time of the day.

Step 4: Finalize your plans

- Register and sign the contract.
- If your company offers a DCAP spending account, and if you haven't already done so, this is a good time to contact your human resources department and ask about procedures and timing for enrollment.

Child Care Center Questions

Overview

Guidelines on screening child care centers.

- Getting background information
- Pre-screening by phone
- Questions to ask when you visit the center
- Things to look for when you visit
- Questions to ask yourself
- Questions to ask when calling other parents who have used the center

Use this questionnaire to help screen child care centers as you look for care for your child. You may want to photocopy it before you use it. That way, you'll have clean copies to make notes on as you compare different centers.

Getting background information

Before you call any centers, you may want to get information through your employee resource program or employee assistance program (EAP) or from community sources that will help you to focus your search on programs that are most likely to meet your family's needs. These sources can provide you with the following:

- *The child care licensing requirements in your state.* These are the minimum standards every center must meet to provide services to children ages 5 and under. The standards will describe the number of staff members centers must have for each age group of children and the maximum allowed group sizes, as well as health and safety requirements and a description of the kind of program that must be offered to provide children with social, intellectual, and physical stimulation and support. The standards will also describe the qualifications and training required for the staff of child care centers. Check to see whether your state requires staff to have specific training in first aid and CPR, including infant CPR, and how often they have to update that training.
- *Information about centers in your area.* You may be able to get information about which programs actually have available spaces, their costs and fees, the age groups served, and the number of children at the center.
- *Written materials prepared by child care centers.* Many centers produce brochures or booklets that tell about their service hours, age groups served, staff, program and facilities, and sometimes about the history of the center.

Once you have reviewed these materials, you will probably find that you have enough information to create a "short list" of centers that seem to have what you are looking for.

Pre-screening by phone

Use an initial telephone interview to screen possible centers or programs for your child. At a minimum, find out the following:

Do you have an opening? _____

What ages do you take? _____

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What are the weekly costs? _____

What is the ratio of children to providers? _____

If the center seems like a possibility, schedule a visit during which you can meet the director and teachers and ask more detailed questions. You can also use the visit as an opportunity to look carefully at the facility, see how the teachers interact with the children, and get a sense of what it might be like for your child.

Questions to ask when you visit the center

Enrollment and placement

How many children are currently enrolled at the center? _____

How many children are enrolled full-time? _____

How many are enrolled part-time? _____

How does the center group the children? (*By age? Stage of development? Some other approach?*) _____

How would you decide where to place my child? _____

How many children will be in my child's group? _____

How many different teachers would my child be with during the course of a day? _

Schedule and activities

What would a typical day be like for my child? (*Find out about schedules, activities, meals, naps, outside play time, and field trips.*) _____

Do children spend part of each day outdoors, even in cold weather?

Is there quiet time as well as active play? _____

Do you take the children on field trips? _____

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Staff experience and training: questions for the director

What is your experience and education? How long have you been at the center? _

What are the qualifications of the teachers you have on staff? _____

How long does the average teacher stay at the center? _____

How many teachers are new this year? _____

How many teachers have been at the center for more than five years?

Do the teachers have ongoing training in child development and early childhood education? What kind of training do they have? _____

Approach to working with toddlers and preschoolers

What are your rules for children's behavior in my child's age group? _____

How do the teachers discipline children in my child's age group? _____

What do you do if a child is upset or having a temper tantrum? _____

How do you handle a disagreement between two children? _____

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How do you handle a child who is sad about being away from home?

Do you expect children to be toilet trained before they come to the center?

If not, will you work with me to help toilet train my child? *(If your child is not already trained)* _____

Fees, hours, policies, and relations with parents

How do you communicate with parents? *(Ask about daily conversations, notes at drop-off and pick-up times, regular parent/teacher conferences, parent meetings, and a parent advisory board.)* _____

What are your fees and what do they include? *(Find out whether there are extra charges for diapers, food, or field trips; whether parents pay for care when a child is sick or on vacation.)* _____

Do you supply meals and snacks? _____

What is the policy about releasing children to parents and other adults? Is there a sign-in/sign-out sheet? What if I am late because of traffic, or have to work overtime? _____

Can parents drop in any time? _____

What days are you closed during the year? _____

Do you have a backup system for emergency closings? _____

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What happens if my child is sick? Can children come in if they have a cold? A fever? Diarrhea? _____

Will you let me know if other children are sick? Who cares for a child who gets sick at school? _____

Can you give me the names of two or three parents to call for references?

Things to look for when you visit

- | Yes | No | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Is the center licensed or registered according to state regulations? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Are meals and snacks nutritious? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Does the center seem safe? <i>Look for:</i> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Smoke alarms and fire extinguishers on every floor |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Posted fire procedures |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Two exits in case of fire |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Adequate security at the entrance |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Secure fence around outside play areas |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Is the play equipment safe, with protections in case a child falls? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Is there enough room, indoors and outdoors, for children to play? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Are the rooms clean, bright, and well-ventilated? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Is the food preparation area clean? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Is there a strict practice of washing hands before preparing food? |

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Yes

No

For infants:

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Is there a strict practice of washing hands after diapering? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Is the changing area thoroughly cleaned after each diaper change? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Does each child have her own crib? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Is the space set up to provide enough room for babies to safely crawl, "travel" (holding on while walking), and walk? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Is the space organized to provide separate areas for sleeping and for play? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Are infants fed and napped according to individual schedules, so that some babies are awake and playing while others are asleep? |

For toddlers:

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Is there a strict practice of washing hands after diapering? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Is the changing area thoroughly cleaned after each diaper change? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Are outlets and wires protected from toddlers? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Are the cabinets secured? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Does each child have his own crib or cot for napping? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Do the teachers allow some individual variation in when and how long each toddler naps? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Is the room set up to provide safety features for different stages of development of walking and running? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Are the toys and equipment specifically appropriate for toddlers rather than preschoolers? (larger and softer blocks, no scissors, large crayons, books with very simple stories) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Are the activities specifically appropriate for toddlers rather than preschoolers? (very short group activities, lots of time for toddlers to choose their own activities) |

For preschoolers:

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Is there a variety of toys and activities your child would enjoy? Are the toys right for your child's age? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Will your child have a chance to make things, color, build with blocks, put on costumes, listen to stories, dig in sand, play with water, or make music? |

7 • Child Care Center Questions

- | Yes | No | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Do the children have opportunities to choose their own activities during part of the day? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Are the children encouraged to talk spontaneously about their play with the teachers and with the other children? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Do children appear to be able to get help from a teacher when they need it? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Do the children seem comfortable with "making messes" during play and then helping to clean them up? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Are children involved in preparing some of their food during the day? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Do teachers provide some flexibility for differences in the amount of napping time children may need? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Do the children seem happy and involved in their activities? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Does each child have her own cot or mat for nap time? |

The staff:

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Do the providers pay individual attention to each child? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Do they sit with them and give them hugs when they need comfort? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Do they know the children's likes and dislikes? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | - Do they play and talk with the children? |

Other questions:

- | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Questions to ask yourself

Are you comfortable with the center and staff? _____

Would you trust them to take care of your child? _____

Do the rules seem reasonable and clear? _____

8 • Child Care Center Questions

Are you happy with the activities? _____

Will the staff listen to and understand your concerns? _____

Are you comfortable with the other children? _____

Will this be a good group for your child? _____

Does the place seem right for your child? _____

Will your child be comfortable and happy there? _____

Do the references check out? _____

Questions to ask when calling other parents who have used the center

Was your child happy there? _____

Did you feel that the staff got to know your child as an individual and were interested in your family? _____

Were you able to talk with your child's teachers and the directors when you had questions or concerns? _____

Were you happy with the program and activities the center provided for your child? _____

Did you have any problems with the staff? _____

9 • Child Care Center Questions

Would you send another child to the center? _____

Written with the help of Joan Costley, M.Ed. and doctoral candidate at Harvard Graduate School of Education. Ms. Costley has been working in the field of child development, early care, and education for 40 years as a teacher, researcher, program director, consultant, and author.

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Comparing Types of Child Care

Overview

The different types of child care that may be available in a community.

- Family child care homes
- Child care centers and nursery schools
- In-home child care (nannies, sitters, and au pairs)
- Family and friends
- School-age programs and care combinations

Choosing child care that's right for your child and that meets your schedule and budget requirements can be one of your most important jobs as a parent -- and one of the most challenging. You need to understand and explain what kind of care you want. You need to examine your own values and beliefs about raising children. And you need to be confident that the caregiver you choose has values you respect and will give your child individual, caring attention.

This article offers an overview of the types of child care offered in many communities. It is important to remember that all of these forms of care have advantages and disadvantages, and that within each you are likely to find a tremendous range of quality. You may find safe, nurturing, educational care in any one of the different types of care in your community, and you may find care in that same type that's of such poor quality that it is harmful to your child.

Knowing more about all the types of care that are available to you may help you decide what seems best for your child. It will also give you more choices when you need to find backup care, when your child grows older and needs or wants a different kind of care, or if your work schedule changes and you need to make new care arrangements.

Family child care homes

Family child care homes typically care for up to six children, including the caregiver's own young children. The care is offered in the home of the person who provides the care, who is often called a provider. Family child care is usually managed independently by each provider, although some providers may work through a sponsoring agency in a family child care system.

Large family child care homes usually have one caregiver and one assistant providing care for 7 to 12 children in the home of the caregiver. In most states large family child care homes (also called group child care homes) are considered a separate type of care; in other states they are regulated as small child care centers.

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Some advantages of family child care include

- *A home-like setting.* Care is generally offered in the provider's home.
- *A small group of children, often of different ages.* Babies, preschoolers, and school-age children are able to spend time together as they might in their own home or neighborhood.
- *Cost savings.* Family child care is usually less expensive than center care.
- *Flexibility.* Family child care providers may have more flexible schedules than child care centers. They may open earlier or offer part-time, evening, or weekend care.

Disadvantages of family child care may include:

- *Irregular schedules.* If the child care provider is sick or takes a vacation, there is usually no one to take her place.
- *Sudden closings.* Family child care providers sometimes go out of business and leave families with little time to make new arrangements.
- *Variability of quality.* Some states require only voluntary registration of family providers, while some require training and a home check.
- *Unclear rules or fees.* To avoid misunderstandings, it may be wise to develop a written contract with the provider, clarifying fees for meals and snacks and nailing down other important issues.

Child care centers and nursery schools

Full-day child care centers offer care and educational activities to groups of children in non-residential settings. They are often open all day and all year long to cover the hours needed by working parents. They offer children a place to play and learn away from home, with staff who are trained in child development. Most serve children from three to five years old. Some are designed just for infants, or just for school-age children. Others combine these different age groups. Some full-day child care centers now offer part-time options for parents who don't need full-time care for their children.

Part-day child care centers, often called nursery schools or preschools, are for children three to five years old and generally offer a program of educational activities for only three or four hours a day. They are usually open only during the school year. Often registration begins in January or February for September enrollment.

The advantages of child care centers include

- *Structure.* Children are usually grouped by age. Most centers have set hours, typically within the range of 6:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m.

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- *Enrichment activities.* Many centers provide enrichment activities. At some centers these might include music, swim, dance, or computer lessons.
- *Stability.* Because centers have many staff members, they are open even if one teacher is ill or leaves suddenly.

Some disadvantages of child care centers include:

- *Cost.* Child care centers are almost always more expensive than family child care homes, especially for infants. Many centers do, however, offer scholarship programs or discounts for siblings.
- *Rigid schedules.* Child care centers are generally less willing to be flexible with schedules than are family child care homes. Parents with long or varied work hours may not find a center that can accommodate these needs. Very few centers are open in the evening or on weekends, although offering extended hours is a new and growing trend.
- *Frequent staff turnover.* At some centers, staff members regularly leave, so a child may have many different caregivers while at the center.

In-home child care (nannies, sitters, and au pairs)

In-home care is child care provided in your own home by someone you have hired -- perhaps a nanny, a student, a foreign au pair, or a sitter. In-home care may be provided by someone who comes in every day, or by someone who lives in your home. Although in-home care can be the most flexible and convenient type of child care, it is usually the most expensive. Some people find their caregivers by word-of-mouth, advertising, or by hiring a nanny placement agency. Since there are no state or national regulations or standards for in-home care, careful recruiting, interviewing, and reference checks on your part are essential.

Some families make arrangements to hire one caregiver together. A shared care provider generally cares for all the children in one of the families' homes. Your state may place some restrictions on shared care arrangements. Be sure to check your state's regulations for family child care to see whether they affect shared care.

The advantages of an in-home caregiver include:

- *Convenience.* Your child is able to remain in your home, in familiar and comfortable surroundings.
- *Flexibility.* Many families decide to use a nanny or au pair because of their unusual work schedules: they know that the caregiver will be "on duty" and can accommodate schedule changes.
- *One-on-one care.* An in-home caregiver can focus on the needs of your child or children.

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- *Exposure to a different culture or language.* Some families choose an au pair or a bilingual nanny to give their child exposure to a different language or culture.

Some disadvantages of in-home care include:

- *Cost.* Nannies are expensive. Families must pay the nanny a salary, in addition to paying her taxes, insurance, unemployment compensation, and worker's compensation.
- *Becoming an employer.* Hiring a nanny means locating, training, supervising, and paying for an employee.
- *Loss of privacy.* Some families are uncomfortable with the idea that another adult will be coming into their homes.
- *No standard of quality.* In-home caregivers are not licensed or registered, and it is therefore important that parents carefully monitor the quality of care.

Family and friends

Many parents rely on extended family, friends, or neighbors for child care, in informal arrangements that fall outside the scope of state regulation and licensing. This may include a grandparent who watches your child for a couple of hours every afternoon, or a neighbor who cares for your child while she's home with her own. Parents who work evenings and nights often rely on family and friends to provide a safe place for their children overnight or during the evening or early morning hours. Many parents rely on family and friends as one element in a combination of child care arrangements, using grandparents two days a week, for example, and taking a child to a nursery school the rest of the week.

For many families, the advantages of having a relative or neighbor care for their child include

- *A sense of security.* If you have a parent or other relative who is willing and able to care for your child, you're lucky. You've found care with someone who shares your values and who loves and cares about your child.
- *Flexible hours.* Family members and friends may be willing to care for children at times when child care centers and family child care homes are not open -- evenings, overnight, or on weekends or holidays.
- *Cost.* Family members and neighbors are usually less expensive than regulated care.

Disadvantages of license-exempt care include:

- *Irregularity of care.* Because these arrangements rely on family ties and friendships, they can be looser than formal care arrangements, and they tend to break down more frequently -- when a grandparent decides to take an extended vacation or a neighbor gets a better-paying job.

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- *Personal issues.* It is often difficult to turn a friendship or relationship with a relative into a business arrangement. Conflicts and disagreements about care can be emotional and can get tangled up with other aspects of the relationship.
- *Quality and safety.* Even though the caregiver is a relative or neighbor, it is important to make sure the care provided is good and safe. And since informal care is not regulated, it is up to you to be the monitor.

School-age programs and care combinations

School-age programs provide supervised activities for children between the ages of 5 and 13 at elementary and middle schools, community youth centers, or child care centers. These programs usually cover the daytime hours when school is not in session: before and after school and, sometimes, school vacations, holidays, and weather emergencies. Some have full- or part-day summer programs as well.

Summer camps and programs offer a variety of full- or part-day summer activities as well as overnight or residential experiences. Both day and overnight camps often combine fun and learning, and some focus on special interests, ranging from computers or sports to drama or art. These programs are generally for children between the ages of 5 and 13, although some camps are open just for preschoolers, and others include teenagers.

Combinations are situations when you use more than one type of care to cover a day or a week. For example, you might choose a nursery school or kindergarten in the morning and family child care in the afternoon, or take your child to a neighbor's house for a few days each week and use a child care center the rest of the time.