



QUALITY CHILD CARE

Making The Right Choice
For You & Your Child

Finding the right place and people to nurture your child's healthy development.

In today's world, more and more parents who work outside the home are faced with the challenge of finding quality child care for their children. Studies show that children's earliest experiences have a profound impact on the way their brains develop, and can affect their ability to learn and succeed in school and later in life. Quality child care is important to young children's healthy social, emotional and intellectual development.

In this booklet, we provide some general tips on finding quality child care – what to look for, what options are available, and what questions to ask. As you begin your search, we suggest that you contact your local child care resource and referral agency for specific answers to your questions and for up-to-date information about the resources that are available in your community. For help in locating your local child care resource and referral agency, contact Child Care Aware at 1-800-424-2246 (www.childcareaware.org).



Types of child care programs for infants and toddlers

You may want to visit several different child care programs before you decide which one is best for you and your child. There are several options available for child care outside of your home*, including:

CHILD CARE CENTERS

Child care centers provide care for groups of children. Centers generally offer your child the opportunity to interact with other children. Most states require child care centers to meet certain minimal health and safety standards, which vary from state to state, in order to be licensed. Just because centers meet licensing criteria, however, doesn't mean that they are "quality" centers. Accredited child care centers and caregivers go beyond the minimum licensing standards and meet national standards of quality and caregiver training. See the "For more help" section at the end of this booklet for information on finding accredited caregivers and child care centers.

* This booklet focuses on finding care outside the home. In-home caregivers, including live-in and live-out nannies, babysitters or au-pairs, are usually found by placing an ad in a newspaper, on a college job board, through an employment agency, or through friends and relatives. Most states do not regulate in-home caregivers.

FAMILY CHILD CARE PROVIDERS

A child care provider who cares for children in the provider's home is often called a "Family Child Care Provider". There may be one caregiver, or a caregiver with one or more assistants. Many states set standards for family child care providers. Check with your local child care resource and referral agency to find out what the standards are in your state.

Things to think about



Call each program or family child care provider and schedule an appointment for your first visit. Once you are there, stay for at least an hour to watch activities, observe the surroundings, and ask questions. This way you can get a feel for what your child's experience would be in the program. Note: it's always a good idea to visit more than once before you make a decision. Also, after you narrow down your choices, try to make an unannounced visit at a critical time such as naptime, or when other parents are picking up or dropping off their children.

Here are some important things to consider when looking for a caregiver and/or a child care center. We encourage you to take this list along with you and write down notes. If you have questions about some of the answers you get, ask someone – a friend or relative, a local child care resource and referral agency, a pediatrician, or someone else in your community whose opinions you value.

Questions about the program:

- What would a typical day be like for your child?
- Is the setting too quiet? Too noisy?
- How many children are being cared for? How many caregivers are there? (The fewer the number of children for each adult, the more attention your child will get. A small number of children per adult is most important for babies and younger children).
- Is the facility safe and clean? For example, do the caregivers wash their hands after every diaper change and before preparing food?
- Do the caregivers follow safe sleeping procedures, such as putting infants on their backs to sleep?
- How does the center handle illnesses and medical emergencies?
- Are parents welcome to drop in at any time? (Note: the answer to this question should always be yes).

- Are children supervised at all times? (Note: the answer to this question should always be yes).
- Do the children spend time outside on a regular basis? If there is a yard, is it fenced in? Is the playground equipment safe?
- Is the program accredited? (Does it meet national standards of quality?)

Questions about the staff:

- Does the caregiver seem to like working with children? Does he/she talk with each child at the child's eye level? Is he/she really involved in their play or just watching?
- What training does the caregiver have in early childhood education? What experience does the caregiver have in caring for children?
- Are the caregivers trained in CPR and first aid?
- Is there one person on the staff who is responsible for your child (a primary caregiver)? Who else will have contact with your child?
- Does the caregiver respect the language, culture and values of your family?
- Does the caregiver agree with you on important issues such as discipline and feeding?

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Parents and caregivers: working together as partners

By developing a trusting, respectful, working relationship, parents and caregivers can make child care a very positive



The Power of Communicating with your Child's Caregiver

Keeping in close touch allows parent and caregivers to:

- Share observations about your child's interests, abilities and needs.
- Ask questions and learn from each other.
- Figure out ways to help your child learn through daily routines, play and activities in child care and at home.
- Try to understand, then share ideas to deal with issues such as biting, hitting and grabbing.
- Show children how people work together.
- Share the joys and challenges of helping a child grow.

experience for young children. By working together, parent and caregivers can build a bridge between home and the child care setting. This helps a child to feel safe and secure.

In order to make sure that your child will have the kind of learning experiences and nurturing that will support her healthy development, you should choose a caregiver who shares your beliefs about the best way to care for young children, and who is open to talking with you and working through differences. Take the time to talk with your caregiver and make sure you agree about how important it is to:

1) *Be warm, caring and responsive to your child.*

Children who receive warm, responsive care are more likely to feel safe and secure with adults who care for them. These early relationships affect the way a child's brain works and grows.

Infants can't use words to express their needs, but they send signals to their caregivers with the sounds they make, the way they move, their facial expressions and the way they make (or avoid) eye contact. When caregivers respond sensitively to a child's cues, she feels safe and secure. The child begins to trust that when she smiles, someone will smile back; when she is upset, she will be comforted; and when she is hungry, she will be fed. Paying close attention to a child's signals helps her feel secure with her caregiver.

2) *Talk, sing and read to your child.*

Making up stories, singing songs, talking about what is happening during daily routines ("Now we're washing our hands")– these "conversations" are important for your child's language, social, emotional and cognitive development and give children a solid basis for later learning. Infants may not understand the meaning of words, but when you speak to them, the parts of the brain that handle speech and language are stimulated. Talking, singing and reading to a child are important for brain development. They also provide wonderful opportunities for closeness between a child and a caregiver.

3) *Establish routines and rituals.*

Positive routines and rituals form strong connections in the brain and help children feel secure. Children are reassured by daily routines and rituals – especially at meals and nap times. Singing special songs, following the same simple routines and activities, saying the same comforting words – all these things help a child learn what to expect from his environment and how to understand and feel in control of the world around him.

4) *Limit TV-watching.*

Studies show that children who learn best in school don't spend a lot of time watching TV. Very young children are still learning what is real and

what is not, and may find many TV images frightening or confusing. If children watch TV, it's best to have adults watch with them and talk with them about what they're seeing.

5) *Encourage your child's safe exploration and play.*

Children learn about how the world works by playing and exploring. And the more caregivers get involved in a child's play, the more they help a child learn. For example, when a caregiver helps a child "feed" his teddy bear a snack (as she holds out some pretend food) she encourages the child to take the next step into the world of pretend play, which is building both language and cognitive skills. She also helps the child develop socially and emotionally by letting the child know that he is important and fun to be with.

6) *Discipline your child with love and understanding.*

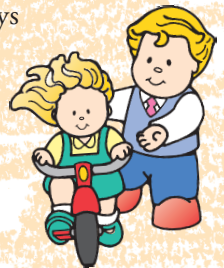
Crying infants can be frustrating for a caregiver. If a baby is crying uncontrollably and the caregiver has met his basic needs and done everything she can to calm him, she can put him in his crib or other safe place and walk away for a few minutes. It's best if a caregiver takes a deep breath and counts to ten before coming back to see if she can offer additional comfort. A caregiver should never shake an infant. Infants' necks are too weak to support their heads, so if they are shaken, the result can be blindness, brain damage, or even death. When babies are crying, they are not trying to manipulate anyone – they are trying to tell you what they need. A caregiver can never spoil an infant by responding to those needs.

As infants grow into toddlers, they spend more time exploring their world, which naturally leads to confusion and frustration from time to time. And they can express these feelings very intensely. Providing limits and consistent, loving adult supervision help children learn to manage their emotions and to feel safe. A caregiver should never hit a child. Hitting can have long-term negative emotional effects. Discipline means "to teach", and the way children are taught to deal with their feelings is important to their later development.

Children's feelings of frustration and anger are often stronger than their ability to control their feelings, so they may hit, yell, or have tantrums. When caregivers respond in a supportive, consistent and firm way, and help children find other ways to express their feelings, they help children to feel safe in the world.

7) *Recognize that your child is unique.*

Children's ideas and feelings about themselves reflect their caregiver's attitude towards them. Children have different temperaments and grow at



different rates. They feel good about themselves when the adults in their world understand and respect who they are and delight in their accomplishments.



Finding and choosing the right child care situation is not always easy. And once you do, it will probably take time for you and your child to adjust. Make an unannounced visit from time to time to make sure everything is going well. Continue to talk with your caregiver. Pay attention to how your child acts when seeing his caregiver every day. Is he happy and excited? Does he seem comfortable around her? This is the best indication that you have made a good choice.

For More Help

Call Child Care Aware at 1-800-424-2246 for information on how to contact your local child care resource and referral agency. That agency can provide you with a list of licensed child care facilities and information about services that are available in your area. They can also give you more information about accreditation, licensing, finding child care for non-traditional schedules, and a variety of tools and publications to help you with your search for child care.

You can also contact any of the following national organizations for information about caregivers and early childhood programs that have met standards beyond those required by licensing.

Child Care Aware (www.childcareaware.org) (800-424-2246)

National Association for Family Child Care (www.nafcc.org)

National Association for the Education of Young Children (www.naeyc.org)
(800-424-2460)

National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care (800-598-KIDS)

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*For more information, or to order the
I Am Your Child series of educational materials,
visit our website at www.parentsaction.org
or call 888-447-3400.*