

Choosing Child Care: What's Best for Your Family?



The child care that you choose for your family will play a key role in your child's health and development. Finding high-quality child care is very important, but not always easy. You will need to consider many questions. But you are not alone—an increasing number of parents rely on quality child care so that they can work or attend school. The following information may help you in your search for the child care option that is best for your family.

Types of child care

You can choose from the following 3 types of care:

- **In-home care**—the caregiver comes into your home.
- **Family child care**—you take your child to the home of the caregiver.
- **Center-based care**—you take your child to a place that is organized and staffed specifically to care for a group or groups of children.

Consider the pros and cons of each type of care with your child's and your family's needs in mind.

In-home care

Having the caregiver come to or live in your home can be very convenient. In-home caregivers often can arrange their schedules to match your needs. Your child stays at home and does not have to adjust to a new setting. Your child will not be exposed to many seasonal illnesses because he will not be with groups of children. Your child may receive more individual attention, especially if the caregiver does not pursue other interests while caring for your child. If your caregiver also does housekeeping for your family, stress that your child's needs come first.

Your in-home caregiver needs to know exactly what you expect. Discuss the following issues specifically with prospective caregivers:

- Activities and interactions that you want for your child, such as reading and playtime.
- How to use positive, effective discipline with your child, and what rules and limits you have set for your child.
- What the caregiver will and will not do in your home.
- Outings that are acceptable for your child and how to use the proper car safety seat, booster seat, or seat belt for your child in motor vehicles.
- **Limits for television**, video games, or other media. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) does not recommend television for children younger than 2 years. For older children, the AAP recommends no more than 1 to 2 hours per day of educational, nonviolent programs.
- How and when the caregiver can contact you with questions or if there is an emergency.

The caregiver should provide you with a daily schedule of what is planned and a daily report of what occurred. However, it is hard to know for sure what the caregiver does when you are not there. You will want to arrange for frequent, unannounced visits by a friend or family member who can observe how the caregiver interacts with your child and tell you about it. Keep in mind that relationships with in-home caregivers tend to be very personal.

Your caregiver

Selecting the right person to care for your child is one of the most important decisions you will make. Caregivers can be family members, people you knew before considering them as caregivers, or people with whom you will develop new relationships. Whatever type of care you choose, the relationship between you and your child's caregiver will be an important aspect of your life. Plan to spend some time together with your caregiver and your child so that you can learn about each other.

It is important to check your caregiver's background, training, and references. The **training of caregivers** should include the following:

- Child development and early education (ie, the types of behavior that are typical for children your child's age and the types of activities that will help your child learn and grow)
- Using positive, effective discipline (including how to handle challenging behavior)
- Recognizing signs of illness
- Cleanliness and safety standards to prevent illness and injury (including how to use the proper car seats, booster seats, and seat belts for children in motor vehicles)
- First aid and proper response to choking and other emergencies
- How to evacuate the home or child care center safely in an emergency

At times you may function as both employer and friend or extended family for the caregiver.

Skilled in-home caregivers are difficult to find. You will need a backup plan for the times when the caregiver is sick, has a personal need for time off, or goes on vacation. In some areas, agencies may provide training, placement, and supervision for in-home caregivers.

Family child care

This type of care takes place in the caregiver's home. Many family child care providers have young children of their own. They may care for children who are the same age as their own children or for children of different ages. Carefully review the program, policies, caregiver's qualifications, and condition of the home. Ask about children, teenagers, or other adults who live in the home. Who are they, what are their backgrounds, and how may they interact with your child?

The AAP recommends that a child care home should not have more than 6 children per adult caregiver, including the caregiver's own children. (Some states allow more children when at least 2 adults are available at all times in larger family child care homes.) The total number of children should be fewer when infants and toddlers are included. No caregiver working alone should handle more than 2 children younger than 2 years.

Because there usually is only 1 adult, backup care in an emergency situation must be nearby. In some areas, caregivers belong to a network of

family child care providers who may provide training, shared toys, and backup help.

Family child care providers usually work alone. This makes it hard to judge their work. Look for caregivers who are licensed or registered with the state and, as a result, have unannounced visits by an inspector. Some family child care providers have earned accreditation as well. (See "Accreditation", right.)

Center-based care

Center-based care has many names—child care center, preschool, nursery school, or learning center. Center-based care also may have different sponsors, including churches, schools, colleges, universities, social service agencies, Head Start, independent owners and chains, and employers.

Regardless of what type of center-based care you choose, there are some basic things to consider. Centers should be licensed and inspected regularly for health, safety, cleanliness, staffing, and program content. (Some programs are exempt from state licensing.) Just because a center is licensed, do not assume it is regularly inspected. Check to see how often the center had announced and unannounced inspections in the past year and what was checked.

Keep in mind that state licensing regulations set the lowest legal limit for staying in business. High-quality care requires more than complying with regulations. To find out about what is covered by the regulations in your area, contact your city, county, or state department of social services. State licensing regulations can also be reviewed at the local licensing agency. Most are listed at the National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care Web site at nrc.uchsc.edu.

High-quality centers should be accredited or in the process of obtaining accreditation. (See "Accreditation", above right.)

Parents should be welcome to make unannounced visits to the center to see their child, and they should be notified quickly if their child needs medical attention. Policies should be written and should explain how the center's staff promotes positive, effective discipline and responds to sick children. There should be a daily schedule that is used and posted for review by parents. Toys and activities should be suited to the children's ages and abilities. The facility should follow safety guidelines. Caregivers and center directors should be trained (see "Your caregiver" on page 1). Look for centers that have at least 2 caregivers per group and 1 group per room, a window or glass door for supervisors to view activities, and a plan for ongoing staff training.

Where to begin

When you start to look for child care, you may wish to contact a group such as Child Care Aware by phone at 800/424-2246 or online at www.childcareaware.org. This group can provide resources on high-quality child care and tell you if there is a local Child Care Resource and Referral agency in your community. All types of child care may be listed through this agency.

Once you receive a list of caregivers in your area, review written material that these caregivers make available, then call them. Ask questions on the phone to help you select those that you want to visit. Whatever type of child care you choose—in-home, family, or center-based—consider the following factors as you begin your search:

- **Location**—How far is the child care from home? From your work? Is this convenient for both parents? Can either parent get there quickly in an emergency?

Accreditation

Accreditation means that an outside observer has determined that the facility generally meets the criteria for high-quality child care. Family child care providers can be accredited through the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC).

Several independent groups of early childhood care and education professionals offer accreditation for centers. These include the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Child Care Association (NCCA). If a seemingly good center is not accredited by either of these organizations, ask why. Encourage the staff to consider seeking accreditation.

- **Hours**—What hours of care are available? What happens if you are late in picking up your child? How are vacations and holidays scheduled?
- **Licensing/accreditation**—Is the facility or home licensed or registered with the appropriate local government agencies? Are there any outstanding violations? Is the program currently accredited; if so, by what organization?
- **Inspections/consultations**—Is there a qualified health professional, such as a doctor or nurse, who serves as a consultant for the child care program? (The national standard is that center-based infant-toddler programs should be visited by a health professional at least monthly, and all other child care programs should be visited at least quarterly.)
- **Visiting policy**—Are you welcome to visit during normal operating hours before and after enrolling your child? Can you see all the areas that your child will use?
- **Caregiver experience and training**—What education, training, and experience do the caregiver or center director and staff have? (See "Your caregiver" on page 1.) What type of training has the staff had during the past year? Do outside experts provide training?
- **Adequate staffing**—Are there enough trained adults available to children on a regular basis? Are there enough caregivers to fill in if one is ill or on vacation?

Do the child-staff ratios and the size of the groups of children fall within nationally recognized standards? (See chart below. For the recommended child-caregiver ratio for family child care homes, see "Family Child Care" on page 1.)

Age	Child-staff ratio*	Maximum group size*
Birth–12 months	3:1	6
13–30 months	4:1	8
31–35 months	5:1	10
3-year-olds	7:1	14
4–5-year-olds	8:1	16
6–8-year-olds	10:1	20
9–12-year-olds	12:1	24

*As recommended by the AAP. For more information, see *Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards: Guidelines for Out-of-Home Child Care Programs*, listed in "Resources" on page 13.