

Child Care Options

This guide provides basic information on what you need to know before you begin your search for quality child care.

Your Needs

The process of selecting a child care provider begins with assessing your personal situation. Consider the following:

- **Your children**—How many, their ages and any special requirements?
- **Your priorities**—What’s important to you in a care setting (e.g., age grouping, educational and physical activities, discipline philosophy, structure, etc.)?
- **Your schedule**—When do you need care and how consistent is your schedule?
- **Your transportation**—How will your child get from home to care and back?
- **Your backup**—Who can take care of things in an emergency?
- **Your home**—Should you consider care in your home?
- **Your budget**—How much are you prepared to spend on care?

Your Child’s Needs

A child’s developmental needs vary with age and personality. Understanding these needs and determining a caregiver’s ability to satisfy them will be important considerations influencing your ultimate selection of a child care provider.

Lorraine and Dennis celebrated the birth of their third child last month. Lorraine is due back to work in six weeks and needs to make child care arrangements. Previously, Lorraine’s parents provided care for her two children, but the anticipated demands of caring for an infant have necessitated new child care arrangements. Lorraine explains, “We’ve never had to think about outside sources for child care. Where do we begin?”

Infants (Birth to 12 Months)

Infants thrive in an environment with a caring adult who consistently responds to their need for food and comfort. They need one-on-one interaction in an environment filled with soothing sounds, colors and activities. Infants are most content when someone reads, sings or just talks to them; they love to be touched, held and carried throughout the day.

Toddlers (12 Months to Three Years)

Most toddlers demonstrate boundless energy, incredible curiosity and a strong need to be independent. They need stable, long-term relationships with caring adults to help satisfy an intense need to feel secure. Toddlers need caregivers who are patient, encouraging and generous in their praise. A wide variety of activities managed by the caregiver will help them enhance both their physical and communicative skills.

Preschoolers (Three to Four Years)

Three- and four-year-olds spend a lot of time learning to do things for themselves. They need to be with warm, supportive adults who will help them develop self-control and who will support their growing need for independence. Pre-schoolers need opportunities to practice their newly developed self-help skills and they need caregivers who are patient when faced with occasional spills, toilet accidents and unfinished activities.

School-Aged Children (Five Years and Older)

Elementary school-aged children are motivated by achievement and success and by peer acceptance and approval. They need to learn through active exploration and interaction with adults, other children and materials. Involvement in games and organized activities is important. School-aged children are developing social skills such as cooperation, support, negotiation and conversation. Teachers and caregivers need to structure activities that foster these skills.

Special Considerations for Children with Special Needs

A child with special needs may have atypical developmental needs warranting extra attention by a caregiver. Managing the daily challenges posed by a child with special needs requires an adequate supply of caregivers who are sensitive, experienced and confident. They need caregivers who can make accommodations as needed and handle unexpected emergencies. The caregivers must be capable of creating an atmosphere of tolerance and understanding among the child's peer group by educating the other children about the child's special needs.

Note—While inclusive programs can be beneficial to many, they may not be appropriate for all children. Parents and professionals should evaluate a child's individual needs prior to enrollment. For more information about services for children with special needs, contact your local school district.

Caregiver to Child Ratio

The caregiver to child ratio refers to the number of caregivers in relation to the number of children present at any one time in a care setting. Ratio requirements are usually set by each state and depend on the ages of the children. A classroom in a child care center with two caregivers and 16 children has a caregiver to child ratio of 2:16 or 1:8. The ratio is a good indicator of how much individual attention you can expect your child to receive. Due to state variations in the regulation of ratios, it is strongly recommended that you contact your state or local licensing bureau (or other appropriate agency) and request all pertinent information.

Your Options

Types of child care providers include:

- **Child Care Centers**—A child care center is any child care program in a setting other than a residence. Centers are typically open 10 to 12 hours a day, five days a week, and provide care year round (holiday and summer policies may vary). Child care centers offer organized educational and physical activities within age-defined “classrooms,” each with adult supervision.
- **Family Child Care**—Family child care is a child care program that is set in a caregiver's home. In most cases, a family child care provider can be registered or licensed to care for up to six children, or up to 12 children if a second supervising adult is present. Family child care homes are typically open 10 to 12 hours a day, five days a week, and provide care year round.

- **In-Home Care**—In-home care is an arrangement in which the caregiver works in your personal residence. The caregiver (e.g., a nanny), either commutes to your home daily or lives in your home. If you employ a live-in caregiver, you are responsible for providing comfortable living arrangements. In-home caregivers have varying degrees of experience and expertise, and salaries may vary based on your needs and the caregiver’s credentials. In most cases, you serve as the employer and are responsible for tax issues that accompany this status. You are also responsible for providing adequate liability insurance coverage on your residence.

Evaluating Providers

When evaluating a provider’s ability to meet your needs you should consider:

- Convenience
- Exposure to illness
- Hours of operation
- Atmosphere
- Size of facility
- Equipment (e.g., toys, games, computers, television)
- Staffing (caregiver to child ratio)
- Parental involvement
- Age grouping
- Licensing/regulation
- Staff turnover
- Safety and security
- Staff education
- Emergency procedures
- Staff experience

- Discipline philosophy
- Reliability
- Special needs accommodations
- Cleanliness of facility
- Cost
- Visiting policy

Note—Licensing and/or registration for child care providers varies state by state.

Some child care providers may belong to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Members of NAEYC voluntarily agree to adhere to common operating standards determined by the association, and the association may issue accreditation based on compliance. Keep in mind that NAEYC accreditation is just one tool to help you evaluate the appropriateness of a provider or facility. While it means that a provider has met certain quality standards, it does not ensure that the provider is right for your family. Conversely, if a provider is not accredited by NAEYC it does not necessarily mean it is substandard.

When evaluating child care providers, consider also your backup care needs. Situations will arise that require you to find backup child care on a temporary basis. These include:

- Temporary business assignments
- Vacations
- Family emergencies
- Holidays
- Illness of a child
- Family moves
- Illness of a caregiver
- Major residential repair/construction

Many child care providers offer backup care, so be sure to ask when evaluating providers. However, keep in mind that children who have experienced illness, a medical emergency, or other extraordinary events may require professional care that is unavailable in the typical child care setting.

Choosing a Provider

The variety of child care facilities available and the quality of care offered will vary depending on where you live. Your decision as to which caregivers to research is influenced by how many choices are available to you. As you become aware of various providers in your area, make sure you record them for future access.

While you may choose to contact any and all providers you locate for comparative reference, there are typically three fundamental criteria that immediately disqualify a child care center, family child care home or in-home caregiver from further consideration:

- **Cost**—The provider’s cost is well beyond your acceptable range.
- **Location**—The provider’s location is simply too far away or too inconvenient for day-to-day transportation.
- **Overriding Negatives**—You have information (from a trusted source) that negates your interest in a particular provider.

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