



Tips and Tools for Selecting Quality Child Care

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Making choices about child care and education is not easy. Having tools to assist in making your decisions is important.

Use the resources in this publication to assist you in preparing to make a sound and responsible choice in the selection of child care environments for children.

When My Child is in Child Care

The choice of a child care and education setting for your child is extremely important. Trusting the care of your child to another is a choice that takes time, research and persistence for parents or caregivers. Finding a good-quality setting that will meet your child's needs is vital.

Selecting child care can be challenging for parents or caregivers. However, too often not enough care and attention is given to selecting a good-quality environment where children will spend time each day. Taking the time now to make a good selection that works for your family situation will have long-term benefits for you and your child.

Visit several types of child care facilities and ask questions. Talk to other parents and learn what they have experienced or recommend. Learn about what is available in your area through Child Care Resource and Referral or child care licensing agencies. Contact community professionals and ask them to share their views. Then be aware of rights and responsibilities that accompany a child's entrance into a child care and education program.

Your rights are to:

- Be involved in your child's education and care.
- Receive information regarding your child's progress and development.
- Share in decisions about the care and guidance of your child.
- Have frequent contact with teachers/caregivers about your child and his or her daily experiences.
- Have access to your child's classroom or care setting through visits and observation.
- Be recognized as the "expert" about your child.
- Be informed when a communicable disease or traumatic situation has arisen at the program.
- Be informed by the teacher/caregiver when your child has a problem or difficult day and share in the problem-solving process.
- Be informed about changes in fees, teachers/caregivers, programming or curriculum, or schedules and routines.

Your responsibilities are to:

- Be involved in your child's education and learning.
Be an advocate for your child.
- Let the teacher/caregiver know you are concerned and interested in your child's development and learning.

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- Set goals with the teacher/caregiver and share in decisions about your child's care and routines.
- Share information about the child and home that may affect behavior. Further, share things from home that may affect your child at child care.
- Discuss problems and concerns with your child's teacher/caregiver.
- Show appreciation and gratitude for the teachers/caregivers.
- Continually upgrade your parenting skills and understanding of children and their development.
- Ask about ways to become involved in the child care setting.
- Volunteer to assist the teacher/caregiver in some way, such as with field trips, reading books to children or sharing something about your home or culture.
- Follow the child care program's policies and procedures and reread the contract and policy manual regularly.
- Keep your child home when sick (unless sick care is provided) or an alternative agreement is reached. Pick up your child from the program when a caregiver calls and indicates your child is not feeling well.
- Read to your child and spend time talking and playing together.
- Take time to communicate with teachers/caregivers every day at drop-off and pick-up times.
- Return all enrollment forms on or before the date they are due and any other information requested.
- Update child emergency information and phone numbers as needed.

Child Care Program Evaluation – By Phone

What do I ask about on the telephone?

Questions to Ask	Program 1	Program 2	Program 3
• Does the program have an opening at the time I will need child care?			
• Does the program have a waiting list for care in the future?			
• How many children do you care for? What are their ages (including the provider's own children)?			
• What experience do you have in providing child-care services?			
• What training have you had related to child care services? (ask about specifics) <i>(Examples: infant/toddler, school-age child care, special needs, infant CPR, first aid, etc.)</i>			
• Is your facility licensed?			
• What hours/days are you open? Can you be flexible?			
• Do you provide transportation? To which schools/activities? Do you charge an additional fee for that service?			
• Is your home/facility smoke-free 24 hours a day?			
• Do you have any pets in the home/facility?			
• What meals and snacks are provided? Are they included in your fee?			
• When can I visit my child while at care?			
• What are your rates? Do you have a minimum charge?			
• What is the payment policy for holidays, vacation and sick days?			
Additional Questions			
• When is a good time to visit your program and arrange an interview? <i>(If visiting a center, visit both the director and the staff person who will be your child's teacher).</i>			
• Other –			
• Other –			

Source: Adapted from North Dakota Child Care Resource and Referral (reprinted with permission).

Child Care Program Evaluation – By Visit

What do I look for and ask during a program visit?

Observations to Make and Questions to Ask

	Program 1	Program 2	Program 3	Best Practice
Health and Safety <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your emergency procedures (for fire, tornado, etc.)? Are they posted? Do you have practice evacuation drills? How would I be notified in case of an emergency? • Are children taken off the premises? How and when would I be notified? How are children transported? • What is your policy for administering medication? • Are hands always washed before eating and after diapering? (<i>Do you see hands being washed?</i>) • Where, and how frequently, will my baby's diaper be changed or my child taken to the toilet? • What precautions are taken to reduce the spread of illness? What do you use to sanitize? 				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good child care providers make health and safety a priority. • Evacuation procedures should be posted and practiced on a monthly basis. • Babies need to sleep, be changed and be fed according to their body's time clock, not an imposed schedule. • Ways to decrease the spread of germs include routine hand washing using soap and water by the adults and children, regular sanitizing with a bleach/water solution for toys and surfaces, proper handling of food and bottles of formula or breast milk, and proper diapering. • All toys and equipment should be cleaned, sanitized and inspected for safety on a weekly basis (mouthed toys should be sanitized daily). • Diapers should be changed on a washable surface close to a sink for hand washing, but away from food and bottle preparations.
Space and Environment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on your observation, is the space clean, safe and comfortable (<i>for young children</i>)? • Where will the children wash, sleep, play and eat? Are babies always put to sleep on their back on a firm, flat surface in a crib or playpen? • How are children supervised at all times? • How often do you take the children outdoors? Are children taken off the premises for play or field trips? If yes, how are they transported? 				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children need enough space to work on projects and participate in activities both indoors and outdoors. • Child-sized furniture encourages independence in children. • Babies should not be confined to car seats, swings or bouncy seats and should not be allowed to sleep in these objects. • Children should be checked on regularly during naps. • The caregiver always should see where children are and what they are doing, indoors and outdoors. • Year-round outdoor activities provide a change of pace and fresh air (which decreases the spread of illness), as well as exposure to nature and the larger community.

continued

	Program 1	Program 2	Program 3	Best Practice
Activities and Materials				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe a typical day in your program. What activities are children involved in? Are planned activities posted? 				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children learn through using play materials that are of interest to them and that challenge their minds and bodies without frustrating them. Children develop independence and responsibility when allowed to make choices about what they want to do. They need activities that develop thinking skills, large motor (running, jumping, riding trikes) and fine motor skills (drawing, writing, putting toys or puzzles together). A variety of books should be available for all children to use on their own, in addition to being read to daily, individually and in groups. A skilled provider asks open-ended questions, encouraging a lot of language and extended learning. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no TV viewing for children under 2 years old, and for older children, no more than one to two hours per day of educational, nonviolent programs. Frequent use of video games and computer time replaces activities that contribute to healthy development and increases the risk for obesity.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you provide areas for quiet play as well as active play? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are items displayed at the child's level so the child can easily choose toys and materials to play with? How do you decide which toys are appropriate? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can children bring a special item from home, such as a toy or blanket? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How often do you read with the children? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tell me how you plan activities to promote children's development. 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is TV/computer allowed? If yes, how much screen time (TV, computer, video games) is typical? 				
Interactions				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observe how the caregiver responds to the children. 				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Warm, loving care is needed for all children. A skilled provider is patient and gives children time to adjust from one activity to the next. Providers generally involve the children in setting fair rules and limits and are clear and consistent in applying them. A variety of guidance techniques are used, such as sticking to a daily routine or schedule, redirection and positive reinforcement, which help children feel ready to take on new challenges and learn new skills. Physical punishment, belittling or shaming never should be used.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is your philosophy and policy on guidance and discipline? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the (facility or classroom) rules and how do the children know what the rules are? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do you settle disputes or disagreements between children? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the feelings of you and other staff on toilet learning, thumb-sucking, pacifiers, finishing meals, biting, etc.? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask "what if" questions. (What if my child hits you? What if my child bites another child? What if my child won't take his nap? etc.) 				
Training and Experience				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tell me about your experiences caring for children. Do you have a philosophy on child rearing? 				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good caregivers are eager to learn about child development through books, professional journals, training and education. Research shows that the more child development training a caregiver has, the better care your child is likely to receive. Training should include a variety of topic areas – how children grow, learn and form relationships.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How many hours of training are you required to have? How many hours did you attend in the past year? Get specific information on the caregivers who will be with your child. 				

Training and Experience continued on next page

	Program 1	Program 2	Program 3	Best Practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me what you've learned in recent training. How will you keep me updated on your training? 				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training certificates often are displayed for parents and others to view in a prominent area or otherwise accessible manner. • Care providers or teachers have substantive experience with children of a similar age or educational training and background in areas such as child development, early childhood education, special education or related areas.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How long do you anticipate providing child care? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What training or education have you had related to child care and education services? (ask about specifics) (Examples: infant/toddler, school-age child care, special needs, infant CPR, first aid, etc.) 				
<p>Security</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can I drop in any time unannounced? 				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents should feel welcome at the child-care program. You should feel comfortable with all of the adults who will be in contact with your child. • Doing a thorough reference check and contacting current and past users of the child care program, as well as the licensing entity at county social services, is essential. • Drop in unannounced to compare what actually is happening at the child care program with your expectations for good care.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are all of the people who would be around my child? Are they screened? May I meet them? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is your license posted? Would I be informed if you were out of compliance with the child-care rules? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you provide me with contact information for references? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After the interview, contact county social services to find out if the provider has been in compliance with the rules. Child Care Resource and Referral can provide you with the phone number. 				
<p>Program Management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have written policies, procedures and contracts? Please explain them. 				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear policies and procedures help establish guidelines for operation and management. • Good communication between parents and providers is essential so that the caregiver can give individualized care to your child. • Talking at the beginning and end of the day is very helpful. • Many providers use daily communication forms to inform parents of their child's routines, mood and activities. • Parent involvement and support is encouraged and facilitated by the program. • License, menu and activity schedules are posted and shared with families so they are aware of how things operate daily.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would you be willing to accept advice from professionals/support services that work with my child? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will we build effective communication? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would any dispute between us be settled? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are parents encouraged to become involved with the program? How? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are your license and food menu posted? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is your daily schedule? Is it posted? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is your payment policy (charge for holidays, vacations, sick days, etc.)? 				

Source: Adapted from North Dakota Child Care Resource and Referral (reprinted with permission).

Making Your Child Care Decision – Things to Consider After a Visit

Look at all of the information that you have gathered and call the providers back if you have any unanswered questions. Being careful in making your decision is OK. Consider the following:

- What is my overall impression of each program?
- How did I feel about the program as I visited?
- Do you think this program will meet the needs of your child? Your family?
- Will my child be happy here? Do children seem happy and content?
- Did I feel comfortable when I'm here? Do my children feel comfortable?
- How would my child fit in with the routines and with other children?
- Do the people seem to care about my child as an individual?
- How did the teacher/caregiver and other staff members respond to children at the setting?
- Does the teacher/caregiver sit with and talk to children? Read to them?
- Does the program have a variety of age-appropriate toys and materials that are accessible to children?
- Are children playing with toys? Do children have enough space to move and play?
- Does the schedule have activities that would benefit my child? Would my child be interested and occupied in a positive manner each day?
- Am I going to feel comfortable leaving my child each day?
- Would I be able to spend many hours a day comfortably in this environment? Would my child?
- Do I feel welcome and valued?
- Do I have any doubts?
- What did the references tell me?
- Did the program pose any problems for my child or me?
- Based on my visit to the program, have any impressions changed?

Trust your instincts.

If you are not comfortable with what you have found, keep looking.

Contact Child Care Resource and Referral for a list of additional programs.

If a program that you like is full, ask to put your name on a waiting list.

This may be an option for you
if things don't work out with your current program.

Child Care – Consumer Checklist

The following checklist provides another tool for things to look for during a visit to a potential child care program.

▼ The Program

- Written policies and procedures concerning fees, services, health procedures, discipline, curriculum, etc., are available.
- Staff turnover is minimal.
- Group size and age ratios are within state guidelines. Check with your county social service agency to find appropriate ratios.
- Children seem happy, comfortable and involved with teachers/ caregivers and each other.
- Space and developmentally appropriate materials are available for such activities as art, dramatic play, music, nature, discovery and reading.
- The program has a flexible daily plan or schedule balancing structured and free-choice activities and active and quiet time.
- Infants and toddlers can crawl, walk and play instead of being confined in a crib, playpen, walker or swing.
- Diversity is encouraged so children can expand their understanding of the world.
- Meals and snacks are nutritious and age appropriate. Menus are available.

▼ The Teacher/Caregiver

- Provides references on request
- Has a positive and comfortable parenting style while encouraging and supporting diversity
- Has training and experience in caring for children of a similar age as yours
- Seems warm, friendly, calm and gentle with a relaxed sense of humor
- Gets down to the child's level, speaks in a respectful tone, listens well and responds to questions/comments
- Is firm, consistent and yet flexible in discipline; does not use physical punishment or shaming
- Is patient helping children learn to respect others' rights and feelings, take turns and share, and stand up for themselves when necessary
- Accepts children's feelings and encourages expression in an appropriate manner
- Encourages self-help skills (dressing, toileting, washing, eating and resting) as children are ready
- Handles toilet learning gently and respectfully at an appropriate age, following the parents' lead; works with family to help child learn new skills
- Encourages but does not force children to try new activities and foods
- Treats each child as an individual and with respect
- Knows and understands each child's strengths and needs

▼ The Place

- The facility has a sufficient supply of equipment and toys that are age appropriate, safe and in good repair.
- Cleaning supplies, medicine, poisons and sharp objects and weapons are stored in child-proof or latched containers or otherwise put in locked areas away from children.
- Electrical outlets are covered.
- Glass doors have decals to prevent collisions; wood stoves and heaters are screened to protect children.
- Smoke alarms and fire extinguishers are on each level and in working order.
- The outdoor play area is fenced.
- The environment is reasonably neat; toys and floors are clean; heat, lights and ventilation are comfortable.
- Each child has his or her own clean, safe place to sleep.
- Each child has a place to store personal belongings.
- Bathrooms are clean and children can reach the toilet and sink.
- Hand washing is practiced by the teacher and children. It is encouraged upon arrival at the program, after toileting and nose wiping, before and after meals and food experiences, and before and after diaper changes.
- Policies and practices are in place to ensure the health and safety of staff and children.

Recommended Resources

■ Web Sites and Organizations

Child Care Resource and Referral.

The national network of child care resource and referral offices is available in most counties and states across the nation. These groups have a great deal of information on child-care availability and quality. For further information, simply contact your local resource and referral (often called "R and R") agency.

Child Care Online. This is a rich online resource with information for parents, care providers and others seeking to learn about child care issues and options. It can be located at <http://childcare.net>.

National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies.

This national organization provides a rich menu of resources and information on child care in the United States for everyone from the advocate to the parent to the care provider. It operates the Child Care Aware initiative, a national consumer education parent hotline, (800) 424-2246, and Web resource.

The organization's Web site can be accessed at www.childcareaware.org.

National Association for the Education of Young Children. This national organization serves parents, teachers and others in sharing information about the care and education of young children. Many resources are available from NAEYC.

The organization's Web site can be accessed at www.naeyc.org.

National Child Care Information Center.

NCCIC, a service of the federal government's Child Care Bureau, is a national clearinghouse and technical assistance center that links parents, providers, policymakers, researchers and the public to early care and education information.

Its Web site can be accessed at <http://nccic.org>.

National Network for Child Care.

This network and resource of the national Cooperative Extension System makes dozens of resources available on high-quality child care. The organization's Web site can be accessed at www.nncc.org.

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