



Child Care Issues and Options

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If you had an expensive diamond ring to be taken care of for a day, what would you do with it? With whom would you leave it? Why? These questions would be important for taking care of any valuable asset, but they become even more important when talking about care of young children.

The Need for Quality Child Care

Millions of young children need high-quality care each day as their parents go to work and engage in other activities. In referring to “quality” child care, we mean care that is good, caring and positive. Selecting a quality care environment for young children is among the most important decisions faced by parents and caregivers.

Parents and caregivers have many critical reasons for acquiring the knowledge they need to choose quality care environments for their children. For example:

- The latest brain research on young children indicates the importance of good early care and experiences.
- Studies show good-quality child care positively impacts young children in terms of their physical development and social-emotional skills.
- With more than two-thirds of women with young children in most of the United States having a job outside the home, the need for quality child care is obvious.
- Parents want the best for their children. Choosing child care can be one of the most important decisions that parents or caregivers make on behalf of a child.

Those who care for children cannot always choose exactly what they might want for their children. However, they can make the effort to determine carefully which of the child care options available to them will most directly meet their specific needs and wishes. (See page 2.)

A Quality Child Care Option

What type of an environment contributes to a child’s well-being while attending child care? Parents want to select an environment that is conducive to positive outcomes for children. The National Association for the Education of Young Children has established guidelines to promote high-quality environments for child care programs. The NAEYC states the following:

“A high-quality early childhood program provides a safe, nurturing environment that promotes the physical, social, emotional and cognitive development of young children while responding to the needs of families.”

In other words, high-quality programs meet the needs of the whole child – they go far beyond just “caring” for the child.

Child care settings that are **licensed** or **accredited** help encourage care of high quality. A **licensed** child-care program or facility must meet **minimum** state (or local) standards for the care and protection of children. Such settings are checked regularly for compliance with licensing guidelines, which typically include standards for health and safety, adult-to-child ratios, training for staff, equipment, nutrition, and behavior and guidance. In addition, an **accredited** child care setting has met additional standards of quality care for children beyond minimum licensing requirements. Accreditation can be issued only by the National Association for the

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APRIL 2009

Education of Young Children (NAEYC). These guidelines help programs understand and create a quality care setting for children, and parents and caregivers should consider such options when making child care decisions.

Types of Child Care Options

Parents and other adults have a number of different options when selecting a care environment for a child. Each family

has different needs and priorities based on its own particular circumstances. Families should become familiar with the different child care options and find one that will best fit their needs and circumstances. Sometimes, distinguishing between **formal** care options and **informal** care options for children is helpful.

Formal child care options generally refer to care settings that have applied to be licensed for child care, are guided by local and state guidelines, and involve

various levels of activities, structure and family support. Such settings are monitored regularly for compliance with child care guidelines and standards. These settings may vary widely, however, ranging from child care programs in church buildings or local businesses to licensed home facilities.

Informal child care options generally refer to care settings that involve assistance and support from family members, friends or neighbors. Caring for one's own children in the home might be considered an informal option. Some families who examine the cost and opportunities associated with child care may decide the best option is simply for the parents or caregivers to care for children in their own home. Other parents may need limited child care, so make arrangements with family members (grandparents, other relatives, etc.) or close friends to provide a child care setting that is needed. Someone else might come into the family's own home or apartment, or else the child might be taken to another home or setting for care.

Whether the care option is formal or informal, parents and caregivers should be attentive to the health, safety and well-being of their children. They should take steps to ensure safety and encourage an enriched and positive learning environment for their child. A brief list of differing child care options is included in the box on page 3.

Some Types of Licensed Child Care

Each state has its own guidelines and options related to child care environments. Becoming familiar with the options in your state or community is important. The regulations related to design and operation of child-care environments vary by state and sometimes even within states by locale (county or city guidelines). Some examples of the main types of licensed child care include the following:

Center-based programs

Many states provide for group care in schools, churches and private buildings. This type of care refers to a "child

Choose Your Child Care Priorities – A Discussion Exercise

Parents have many important issues to consider when selecting child care. Children may have particular needs that require a certain kind of environment, and parents also may have individual preferences that influence their decisions. Parents need to decide their top priorities for child care and discuss them with a spouse, family member, friend or other caregiver. Select from the Child Care Priorities list and identify the "top 4" issues for yourself, then have a partner or friend do the same. Compare your responses and discuss the options available to you.

Child Care Priorities – Top 4

Personal List

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Child Care Priorities – Top 4

Partner/Friend List

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Child Care Issues List

- Location is close and accessible
- Care environment is a licensed facility
- A flexible routine is followed
- The group size is not too large for my child
- A high quality of care and attention is given to children
- Frequent and clear communication between caregivers and parents
- Cost of the setting is affordable
- Care setting is developmentally appropriate to my child
- Staff or caregivers are warm and caring with my child
- Care setting has sufficient toys and activities to keep my child engaged
- A variety of possible care options are available in my area
- Quality, quality, quality
- Ratio of caregivers to children is small
- Care setting accepts my child's individualized needs (infant care needed, special-needs child, etc.)
- Staff or caregivers are trained in child care or early childhood education
- Children have both free time and learning opportunities
- Nutritional needs of my child are met
- Care setting is clean and safe
- Schedule of the care setting meets my family needs
- Prefer family care or a family setting

Child Care Options

A rich menu of options for child care is available and parents must determine the option that best fits the needs of their family. All of these options may not be available in your local area, but awareness of different options is helpful. Options include:

- **Family child care homes** – This option provides care for smaller numbers of children of various ages in the provider’s home (usually six to seven children or fewer). It is popular for infant and toddler care and provides more individual attention and flexibility. It also usually provides smaller group sizes.
- **Child care centers** – They provide care in a facility such as a school, church or other setting, usually serving more children and have specific requirements to follow. Programs may specialize in service to children of certain ages or family needs.
- **Head Start** – This is a program that offers educational programs for children and supplemental health and social service supports for families, with an emphasis on low-income families. This option includes health, nutrition, education and social services.
- **Military child care centers** – These child care programs serve military families in varying branches of military service, typically on a local base.
- **Employer-supported child care** – These programs are supported or sponsored by a local employer, which may include on-site child care centers, subsidized care for employees’ children at local care sites or other options.
- **Nursery/preschools and kindergartens** – Various preschool programs may exist for children under age 5 in your community, meeting two to five days a week for a few hours and providing developmental activities for children. Kindergartens serve children age 5 and older in a structured learning environment.
- **Child care cooperatives** – This option involves a group of families sharing child care who may form a cooperative that sets policies and guidelines, hours of care, volunteer service, etc. This is a popular option in some rural communities.
- **In-home child care** – Parents may hire an adult caregiver, perhaps a relative or neighbor, to provide care in their own home. Care providers can be located through referrals or placement agencies and must be paid minimum wage and Social Security if working regularly (20 hours or more a week).
- **School-age child care** – Serving children in elementary and middle school, this care option typically involves supervision and activities for children before and after school or on school holidays. It may be offered in schools, churches, youth recreation programs, community centers and other settings.
- **Play groups** – This is an option in which parents take turns providing activities and a play setting for children while allowing free time for other parents or caregivers.

care center” or center-based program. Children primarily interact in groups with children close to the same age, although age groupings may vary based on the program. The ratio of adults to children allowed in such programs often varies based on differing state guidelines. For example, in North Dakota, the ratio is 1-to-4 (one adult for every four children) for children 0 to 2 years old,

1-to-5 for children 2 to 3 years old, 1-to-7 for children 3 to 4 years old, 1-to-10 for children 4 to 5 years old, 1-to-12 for children 5 to 6 years old and 1-to-18 for children 6 to 12 years old. Yet in Minnesota, the ratio is 1-to-4 for children 6 weeks to 16 months old, 1-to-7 for children 16 to 33 months old, 1-to-10 for children 33 months to under kindergarten and 1-to-15 for children

kindergarten to under age 13. Learn the requirements for your state or region by talking to your local or state child care resource and referral agency.

Family child care homes

Many states offer the option of providing care for several unrelated families of children in the care provider’s home, with children who are ages infant through school-age being cared for together. Such home-based programs usually involve one care provider and a smaller number of children than in a center. They also may be somewhat more flexible and less expensive than a center.

Most states have requirements regarding number and ages of children allowed. For example, in North Dakota, family child care homes can have no more than seven children under school age (with no more than three of them under age 2), plus two school-aged children, **OR** a provider may take four children under age 2 and no older children. These numbers must include the care provider’s own children. Learn the guidelines for your area and check out available options.

Group child care home/facility

Many states now give the option of a group family child care setting. This is a program often located in a home with more of a child care center-style atmosphere. It is typically (not always) care provided in someone else’s home by two or more adults, one of whom lives in the home. Often at least one person has more specialized training in early childhood care.

This option has more children than in a family child care setting but not as many as in a center. The care environment more closely resembles a center but with many aspects of home-based care. Each state has different guidelines relating to adult-to-child ratios in such settings. This is a relatively new child care option that is becoming increasingly common in many areas.

Conclusion

No one type of care is the best for all families. In-home care by relatives or friends is among the most common choices made by parents or caregivers, but many options exist and should be considered. Parents should choose the quality and type of care that will meet the needs of their child and their values as a family. In addition to care options suggested here, a variety of additional options for specific situations (migrant families, families with special-needs children, etc.) may be available and families may wish to learn about and explore them. In learning about the issues in making child care decisions and selecting a child care option, parents should seek information and then communicate with each other and care providers to make a meaningful decision that will be best for their child and family situation.

Recommended Resources

■ Books and pamphlets

Child Care Resources from the University of Minnesota. (2006). Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Extension.

A series of 15 short publications designed for parents providing information on a variety of issues related to child care. These publications can be accessed on the Internet at www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/familydevelopment/DE7268.html

■ Videos/DVDs

Quality Child Care: Making the Right Choice for You & Your Child. (27 minutes). Parents' Action for Children (formerly I Am Your Child), P.O. Box 2096, Culver City, CA 90231. Telephone: (888) 447-3400. (Cost: \$10). Can order on-line at <http://store.parentsactionstore.org/prostores/serolet/StoreFront>

■ Web sites and organizations

- *Child Care Resource and Referral.* The national network of child care resource and referral offices are 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.* A rich on-line 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 at (800) 424-2246 and Web resources. 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 the 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.* A network and resource of the national Cooperative Extension System, it provides dozens of resources on child care and related issues. The organization's Web site can be accessed at www.nncc.org.

■ References

- Child Care Resource and Referral. *Child Care Program Evaluation.* 715 11th St. N., Suite 402, Moorhead, MN 56560. Phone: (218) 299-7025 or (800) 452-3646.
- Child Care Resource & Referral. *Choosing Quality Child Care (North Dakota and Minnesota).* 500 Stanford Road, P.O. Box 13453, Grand Forks, ND 58208-3453. Phone: (800) 543-7382.
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