

# Child Care Checklist for Parents

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If you are looking for child care, you probably have a good idea of what you want — a place that is safe, happy, and loving, where children can learn and have fun. At the same time, child care must also meet your needs. Child care should be convenient, affordable, and offer care when you need it.

Finding child care that has the quality and convenience you want—at a reasonable cost—can be a real challenge. It is rare to find the perfect situation but it is possible to find a very good situation that will meet your needs.

## Know Your Options

**Family child care home** The caregiver, who is often a parent, provides care in his or her home. Family child care homes that voluntarily choose to register with the state will agree to meet certain minimum standards. Registered family child care homes usually care for a small group of children—usually six or less. Family child care homes offer a cozy, home-like setting and the opportunity for siblings to stay together.

**Child care centers** Child care centers care for larger groups of children. Children are usually separated by age groups and play only with children of their own age. As children grow older, they may be moved to a different age group. In most cases this also means they will have a different caregiver every year. Because young children develop very strong attachments to their caregivers, this practice can be unsettling for some children. Child care centers are licensed by the state, which requires certain basic standards for health and safety.

**In-home care** The caregiver comes to or lives in your home. In-home care works well if you need care for an infant or toddler, after-school care, or evening and weekend care. In-home care is convenient, but can be costly. You also may be responsible for paying social security and workers compensation for your in-home provider. In-home caregivers are not regulated by the state.

**Drop-in care** Some family providers and center programs allow drop-in care. You will usually need to visit with the provider and sign your child up beforehand. Then when you need child care, you can call to see if the provider or center happens to have an opening that day. This type of child care works well as a back-up for times when your regular care won't work.

### *Other Programs*

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**Head Start** is a full day or part day program that cares for children and provides educational learning activities. Head Start programs can be located in centers, schools, or family child care homes. Services are usually free. Families who have low income or who have a child with special needs may be eligible.

**Public schools** in many communities offer programs for pre-kindergarten children and some also offer before- and after-school programs for school-age children.

# Five Steps to Selecting Good Child Care

## 1 Get Organized

Finding quality child care is going to take a little homework. If possible, begin gathering basic information several months before you think you will need child care.

- Ask your friends and co-workers for recommendations.
- Contact your child care resource and referral agency for names of family providers, center programs, and other helpful information.
- Check to see if your community has a Head Start program or a public school sponsored pre-kindergarten or after-school program.

### Recommended Ratios\*

*Family child care homes* with one caregiver generally should have 6 or fewer children (maximum of 4 children under 24 months). An additional 5 school-age children may be cared for less than 2 hours at any one time.

#### Center Adult-Child Ratios

Child's age	Adult/Child ratio
2 wks–2 yrs	1:4
2 yrs	1:6
3 yrs	1:8
4 yrs	1:12
5–10 yrs	1:15
10 yrs+	1:20

\*Iowa Department of Human Services – as of December 1999

## 2 Conduct a Telephone Interview

Save time and energy by using the phone to narrow your search. It is a good idea to contact at least three different caregivers. To get the best response, avoid calling at busy times such as arrival, departure, or lunch time.

	Caregiver		
	#1	#2	#3
<b>Availability</b>			
What ages are accepted?			
Are there any openings?			
Is there a waiting list?			
<b>Hours and Location</b>			
What are hours for full- or part-time care?			
Is child care close to home?			
Is child care close to work?			
Is transportation provided for before- or after-school programs?			
<b>Cost</b>			
When are fees due? How much?			
Are there different fees for part-time or full-time care?			
Are there different fees for children of different ages? (Infant care usually costs more)			
Do fees include lunch and/or breakfast?			
Do fees include formula or diapers?			
Is there still a charge when a child is sick or on vacation?			
Are there discounts for siblings?			
Are there extra fees — supply fees, picking-up-late fees?			
Are there any financial aid/scholarships?			
<b>Quality Issues</b>			
How many children are cared for and what are their ages?			
How many adults are there per child?			
What type of education or experience do caregivers have?			
Is it OK to visit the site and when?			
Are you registered, licensed, or accredited? For how long?			
Do you smoke?			
Do you have pets?			

### 3 Make a Visit

Visit at least three caregivers or child care programs. Be prepared to spend some time — at least an hour or longer. You should expect:

- a warm greeting
- short introductions to both adults and children
- a brief tour
- an explanation of fees and policies
- an invitation to stay awhile to see the daily routine and children playing

Questions to ask:

- Please describe a typical day.
- How much TV are the children allowed to watch?
- How do you discipline children?
- How do you handle nap times?
- How do you handle toilet training?
- What types of play or learning activities do you have?
- Do you have CPR and First Aid Training?
- What child proofing have you done to prevent accidents?
- What types of foods do you serve for meals and snacks?
- Do you participate in the Adult and Child Care Food Program?
- Are children ever transported in a vehicle? Do you use seatbelts or car seats?
- How do you handle emergencies?

	Caregiver		
	#1	#2	#3
<b>Health and safety</b>			
Clean and comfortable			
Enough space			
Handwashing encouraged			
Toys and furniture in good shape			
Medicines and cleansers locked up			
Safety gates			
Safety caps on electrical outlets			
Up-to-date childcare license/registration			
Safe, fenced, and litter free outdoor play areas			
Nutritious meals and snacks			
First aid kit			
Smoke detectors			
Covered radiators or heaters			
Good light, heat, and ventilation			
Alternative exit for fire			
<b>Daily routines</b>			
Greeted warmly upon arrival			
Opportunities for parents to share information or ask questions			
Lunch and snack times relaxed and pleasant			
Nap times relaxed and NOT stressful			
Consistent, predictable schedule			
Times and places to play quietly or actively			
Times and places to play alone or with others			
Small group sizes			
<b>Fun and learning</b>			
Toys that children enjoy			
Singing or finger plays			
Pretend play			
Outdoor play			
Books to read			
Blocks, puzzles, and games			
Drawing, painting, crafts			
Caregivers talk, describe, read aloud			
Caregivers ask and answer questions			
Interesting age-appropriate activities			
Field trips or interesting visitors			
<b>Affection and attention</b>			
Individual attention			
Calm voice			
Relaxed, flexible			
Patience			
Listening			
Gentle touch			
Sense of humor			
Respectful of children and parents			
Good adult supervision			

## 4 Check References

Don't be shy about checking references. Selecting a caregiver for your child is one of the most important things you will ever do. Ask each caregiver for at least two parent references and their phone numbers. Most parents are happy to share information with other parents and can be a wonderful resource. Parents who check references say they often get information they couldn't have gathered any other way.

Parent #1 \_\_\_\_\_

Parent #2 \_\_\_\_\_

Parent #3 \_\_\_\_\_

Parent #4 \_\_\_\_\_

## 5 Make a Decision

Remember that it is OK to be choosy. Review the information you have gathered and call back if you have questions that were not answered. Trust your gut instinct. If you are not comfortable with what you have found thus far, keep looking. If a child care arrangement you like is full, put your name on a waiting list. Even if you must use another program temporarily, you will have this as an option if things don't work out.

Prepare your children by talking positively about the new child care situation and by letting them visit the place beforehand. Ask your new caregiver if it would be OK for your child to bring a favorite toy, teddy bear, or blanket to help ease the transition.

## If Problems Arise

Sometimes child care programs that are wonderful take a sudden turn for the worse. That's why it is important to keep a watchful eye and to continually monitor your child care situation. If you believe that your child care arrangement is not safe, take immediate action. If the situation is serious, do not hesitate to find alternative care right away. After all, you alone are most responsible for your child's health and safety.

Remember also that you have a responsibility to other children to see that they are well cared for. Express your concerns to the caregiver, and report concerns to the Department of Human Services or your local licensing agency. It may feel uncomfortable at first, but it is the right thing to do. Our children deserve the very best care that we can give them.

## Resources

Find additional information about child care, development, and parenting at the Extension Store, [store.extension.iastate.edu](http://store.extension.iastate.edu)

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