

Visiting and Interviewing Potential Providers

Perhaps the most significant step in selecting the best child care arrangement for your family is visiting the child care facility, observing how it operates and meeting the caregiver(s). This guide describes what to look for and what to ask potential care providers.

Preliminary Screening

Performing an in-depth evaluation of a caregiver takes time. To most efficiently pinpoint those providers who deserve an in-depth investigation, perform a preliminary telephone screening. Confirm basic information about a care program by asking about:

- Days and hours of operation
- Cost of care
- Location
- Availability
- Name(s) of the director/owner
- Services provided
- Supplies provided (i.e., meals, diapers/wipes)

If a care program seems to meet your basic needs, make an appointment for a visit and interview.

Visitation Tips

Visiting a caregiver is an important step in your search for quality child care. Depending on the number of prospective caregivers, your time frame, and care urgency, visit as many caregivers as possible.

Each child care operation will handle your visit differently. A family child care provider, being the sole caregiver, may be available only before or after the main operating hours.

Anita has found two family child care homes and one child care center in her community that are potential candidates to care for Stephanie, her three-year-old daughter. “I’m on my own in deciding where Stephanie will be during the day while I work, and I intend to visit each of these child care providers before making a final decision,” says Anita. “What questions should I ask, and how much time should I schedule for each visit?”

At child care centers, on the other hand, staff members may be able to accommodate a prearranged interview during business hours.

Typically, parents schedule the first visit without their child. Plan on one hour to conduct an interview and tour the facility. Schedule a second shorter visit with your child, during operating hours if possible, with those caregivers who remain candidates. Observe your child’s behavior and his or her interactions with the caregiver(s) and children.

You may want to consider an additional unannounced visit to observe the caregiver and his or her charges on a typical day when children are awake and active and parents are not expected to be present. Keep in mind that unannounced visits are an ideal time to answer observation-related questions, but do not lend themselves to an extensive interview since caregivers should be wholly focused on supervising the children.

For security reasons, some caregivers may not allow unannounced visits until your child is enrolled.

Evaluating Providers

In some cases you may need to interview only one caregiver. In other cases, you may need to speak with other staff members, directors, assistant directors and teachers to form an opinion about the facility and its staff. Question providers you are considering about each of the criteria listed in the following pages. The responses you elicit from your questions, combined with your comfort level with the facilities, are usually the determining factors in qualifying or disqualifying a caregiver from further consideration. For your convenience, a sample provider checklist is provided at the end of this guide. Simply make as many copies as you need, and use them to evaluate potential providers.

Qualifications and Credentials

- **Education and training**—Find out about the caregiver’s background and training. What type of education does he or she have, and is it related to child care? Caregivers with formal education may have studied in areas such as child development or early childhood education. Many other providers possess vocational and occupational training in fields directly related to child care, or have backgrounds in social sciences or human and family studies.
- **Experience**—Education is important, but experience is a must. Find a provider who has significant experience in caring for children. In many cases, experience can preclude a formal education in child care. For example, many parents re-enter the workforce in the child care industry or open their own child care businesses after their own children are grown. A lifetime of raising and caring for children and grandchildren is often more valuable than a formal education.
- **Proof of licensure**—Make sure any caregiver you are considering can show proof of a current license. Bear in mind, however, that child care licensing varies greatly from state to state, and certain types of providers may not be required to hold a formal license at all. For more information on child care licensing, please contact your state’s local licensing agency.
- **References**—Ask each caregiver to provide at least three parent references, including two for parents of currently enrolled children. Call these parents to get their feedback about the provider. When contacting references, refer to the sample questions we’ve provided later in this guide.
- **High quality staff**—If you are considering providers who employ additional caregivers, find out about the staff’s education and training. Ask the caregivers to describe what qualities they look for when hiring staff members, and talk to a few employees in person to get a feel for their level of dedication and job satisfaction. If multiple staff members care for your child, it’s important that the quality of care is maintained.
- **Low staff turnover**—Ask about staff turnover as well. A high turnover rate may indicate that the director does not hire staff with appropriate qualifications, that the staff is underpaid, or that the director is unconcerned about establishing continuity in the relationships between staff and children. Low turnover, on the other hand, is an indicator of caregiver dedication and job satisfaction, which often translates into long-term, meaningful relationships with the children in their care.
- **Continuing education/training**—Find out whether the provider and staff participate in ongoing training or education to stay abreast of important child care and early education trends. Professional caregivers who are committed to their work and the children in their care should place value on continuing education.
- **Acceptable goals and teaching philosophies**—Ask providers to describe their caregiving goals and philosophies. Ask about their teaching styles and methods. Do they fit with your own philosophies and your child’s needs? A program that sets tangible and realistic goals for children helps prepare them for future education and is a sign of high quality care.

Health and Safety

- **Follows state-mandated staff to child ratios**—Make sure that children in a care facility are never left alone under any circumstances, and that the provider maintains state-regulated staff to child ratios at all times. The ratio refers to the number of caregivers in relation to the number of children present at any one time in a care setting. It ensures that children of all ages are properly supervised and given appropriate individual attention. For more information on your state's staff to child ratio regulations, contact your state's local licensing agency.
- **Facility inspected for asbestos, radon and lead**—Find out whether the care facility has ever been tested for the presence of these hazardous substances. If so, were any detected and removed, and in what concentrations? When was the facility last inspected? Since asbestos, radon and lead may be hazardous to your child's health, any facility you choose should be free of these substances.
- **Working smoke alarms, carbon monoxide (CO) detectors, fire extinguisher**—The care facility should be equipped with smoke alarms, CO detectors and fire extinguishers—all in working order. Ask providers to test the smoke alarms and CO detectors, and have them show you the inspection/refill records for the fire extinguishers. These safety measures save lives.
- **Emergency lighting**—All child care centers should have emergency lighting in place in the event of a fire or power loss. Because of the cost, most family child care providers do not have emergency lighting installed in their homes, but some may. Emergency lighting is less critical in a home setting as there are fewer ways children may be separated.
- **Clearly marked exits**—Exits should be clearly marked and easily accessible from all areas of the care facility.
- **Staff CPR and first aid training**—Ideally, all caregivers should be fully trained in CPR and first aid. However, this is not required in every state. Find out if at least one full-time staff member is trained in these areas in the event your child should require these life-saving skills.
- **Posted emergency instructions**—Look around the care facility to make sure that emergency instructions are displayed. Emergency telephone numbers, evacuation routes, and CPR and Heimlich/choking instructions should be posted prominently in various areas so that emergencies are handled effectively wherever they may occur.
- **Fire drills/evacuations**—Similar to schools, providers should regularly practice fire drills and evacuations so both staff and children know what to do in the event of an emergency.
- **Proper security**—Both the care facility and outdoor property should be secure from unauthorized entrance. Many child care centers have coded locks or card-key systems. Family child care providers should have strong, secure doors and locks, and possibly a home alarm system. Also, take note of the surrounding neighborhood when determining the safety of a facility.
- **Authorization required to pick up children**—Caregivers should require parents to supply a written statement (including photo identification) authorizing those persons who may pick up children from their facility. Many providers also institute a sign-in/sign-out system and/or driver's license check upon pickup to further safeguard children from strangers or unauthorized adults.
- **Ill children separated from others**—If providers care for sick children, make sure they are kept apart from the other children while they are ill. This practice keeps disease from spreading and allows ill children to receive the specialized care they need.
- **Nonsmoking environment**—There should be no smoking allowed around the children. If any of the caregiving staff smoke, there should be a designated area, away from areas occupied by the children.
- **Nutritious meals and snacks**—What types of foods do the caregivers serve the children? Would you serve these foods to your child? Nutritious, well-balanced meals and snacks are important for your child's growth and development.

- **Adequate space**—The care facility should provide enough room for children to move around freely and safely. Ask the caregiver to tell you the dimensions of the area(s) where your child would receive care. Consult your state’s local licensing agency for information on square footage regulations.
- **Safe playground equipment**—Outdoor play areas should be kept clean and free of dangerous debris such as glass or loose pavement and gravel. There should be sand, grass, mats or wood chips under all equipment to break falls. Playground equipment should be in good repair and safe for use by children of all ages. Make sure equipment is free of sharp edges, fastened together tightly, and securely anchored. To reduce the risk of injury, older children should play separately from younger children whenever possible.
- **Sanitary restrooms, diaper-changing tables, sinks, eating areas, etc.**—How often are these areas cleaned? Do the staff and children wash their hands before and after going to the bathroom and eating? Do staff members wash their hands before and after changing a diaper and preparing food? Utensils and dishes should be disposable, or the facility should be equipped with a dishwasher so that they are regularly cleaned and disinfected. Sleeping areas (mats, cots, etc.), diaper-changing areas, floors, walls, furniture and toys should all be regularly cleaned and sanitized. These measures are crucial to promoting your child’s health.
- **Facility is “child-proofed”**—For your child’s safety and protection, make sure that stairs have barricades, windows are securely closed, radiators are covered, and that any chemicals, cleaning materials, medications, etc., are kept out of the children’s reach. Furniture should be free of sharp edges and stabilized so it can’t tip. Appliances such as stoves and coffee pots should be safeguarded or inaccessible to children.
- **Procedures exist for reporting suspected child abuse**—Similar to teachers and doctors, child care providers should be trained to recognize signs of possible child abuse and/or neglect. Formal policies and procedures should be in place for reporting these observations to the proper authorities.
- **Provider record free of complaints and litigation**—Ask providers whether they have ever been the subject of a complaint or regulation violation. Check with your state or local licensing authority or Better Business Bureau to confirm the answer you received.

Care Program

- **Age-appropriate toys and books**—Toys and books provided by the facility should be commensurate with the children’s level of development (i.e., blocks for young children; beginner novels for older children).
- **Educational and skill-building activities**—The care program you choose should engage children in activities that help develop listening skills, fine motor skills, reading comprehension, and the ability to follow instructions. This type of curriculum will help prepare your child for school.
- **Mix of independent and group play**—There should be an appropriate mix of group and independent play to help children develop both cooperative skills, individuality and self-reliance.
- **Mix of indoor and outdoor activities**—Unless restricted by weather, children should participate in both indoor and outdoor activities every day. Outdoor activities teach the importance of physical fitness and aid a child’s physical development.
- **Well-rounded curriculum**—The daily curriculum should teach a variety of educational and personal skills, including problem-solving, independent thinking and cooperation. It should also promote self-esteem, teach personal care skills such as dressing and toileting, and foster respect for the rights and feelings of others. All of these skills, learned at an early age, will contribute to your child’s future academic and social success.

- **Multicultural curriculum**—A quality child care curriculum should teach children about diverse cultures, religions, holidays and ceremonies so children enter school, and the world beyond, with global awareness.
- **Appropriate use of television and computers**—Do the providers you are considering offer children the use of television and computers? If so, make sure that they are used appropriately. Television shows and videos should be carefully monitored and caregivers should watch them along with children. Computers can be a valuable asset to any care program. Make sure the available computer games and activities are educational and fun.
- **Children choose activities**—Children should always have plenty of activity choices and should not be forced to participate in any activity. When given choices, children learn decision-making and problem-solving skills and develop a sense of autonomy.
- **Special events planned**—Ask whether the providers ever plan special events such as parent’s night, field trips and outings, or special visitors and guests. A variety of activities provides a change of pace and valuable enrichment experiences.
- **Toys and materials in good shape and in sufficient supply**—There should be plenty of toys, books and other educational materials so children do not have to compete for them. Shortages of toys and materials result in their overuse and premature deterioration. Make sure that toys and other materials are in good shape.
- **Scheduled “quiet” and/or nap time**—There should be a period of “quiet” or nap time each day to give children a break from the day’s activities.
- **Clear discipline policy, rules and behavior expectations**—Have providers explain their discipline policies and methods. A discipline policy should be positive in nature, not punitive, and should not humiliate or physically harm the children. Look for indications of “positive” discipline, such as redirection, reprimands that criticize actions (not the child), reinforcement of good behavior, and the setting of clear and fair limits. Compare each caregiver’s discipline philosophies with your own to be sure they are compatible.
- **Caregiver consistency**—Ask providers about staff turnover rates. Children are most comfortable when they are regularly cared for by the same caregivers. Caregiver consistency helps children form strong relationships with their caregivers and helps make the care experience a positive one. Make sure that your child will be cared for by the same people each day, and that there won’t be a lot of substituting or shift changes.

Policies and Procedures

- **Schedule of holidays and closings**—Ask caregivers to provide you with a schedule of holidays and other planned closings so you can prepare an appropriate backup plan should any of these closings conflict with your care needs.
- **Plan for delayed openings and unexpected closings**—Caregivers should have an established network with other providers to form backup plans and safety nets in the event that they are temporarily unable to provide care. Ask whether they can provide a list of other caregivers that you—or they—can contact on short notice. If backup care is unavailable, find out if program fees are refunded for the period when care is not provided.
- **Acceptable fee policy when child is absent**—Find out what the providers’ policies are regarding payment when a child is absent due to illness, holiday, vacation or weather. If you know of specific instances when your child will not be able to attend, find out whether these dates can be excluded from the payment plan.

- **Caregiver offers and/or is affiliated with discount program(s)**—Many providers offer discount and cost-saving programs to parents, such as a sibling discount, a food program or a sliding fee schedule based on income. Ask providers if they are affiliated with one or more local or statewide child care subsidy programs. These programs can make a real difference in reducing child care costs.
- **Policy exists for administering medication**—Whether providers care for sick children or not, they should have a policy regarding administering medications to children. Usually this is state-mandated, so check for compliance.
- **Written copies of policies and procedures**—Ask the providers you interview to give you written copies of all their policies and procedures. Keep them on file and refer to them when making your final decision—and any time in the future, if the need arises.

Parent/Caregiver Communication

- **Caregiver greets parents and children**—Caregivers should pleasantly greet both children and parents upon arrival and pickup. This helps ease the care transition for children and helps solidify the partnership between caregivers and parents.
- **Caregivers communicate children’s progress**—To establish continuity between the home and care environments, providers should supply parents with constant feedback and insight on how their children are doing, what skills and abilities they are developing, and what takes place during a typical day. Caregivers should provide parents with regular (weekly, monthly) written progress reports, and schedule regular conferences with parents to keep them informed.
- **Problems addressed appropriately**—Caregivers should bring any issues or potential problems to a parent’s attention immediately so they may help address the problem and offer solutions. Ask providers to share examples of how they addressed some recent challenges.
- **Unannounced visits welcome**—While you may have to make an appointment for your initial visit with a provider, ask if there is an “open-door policy” once your child is enrolled in a care program. These policies allow parents to drop in unannounced at any time.
- **Parental involvement welcome**—Parents should play an active role in their child’s care. Find out whether the providers encourage parents to observe and participate in activities, discuss policies and offer suggestions.

Special Situations (if applicable):

Infant Care

- **Caregivers hold infants during feeding**—Caregivers should hold infants during feeding, instead of laying them down and propping up their bottles. Infants need the warmth, comfort and security that familiar adults provide when holding them. Hand-held bottle feeding also keeps the bottle from slipping and prevents overeating and excessive spitting up.
- **Babies free to crawl around safely**—Facilities should have sufficient space for babies to move around freely and safely on the floor without the threat of accidental injury by older children. Infants need to actively explore their environment and should spend minimal time in high chairs, bassinets or play pens. Naturally, floors should be soft—either carpeted or padded in some way. Low-lying cushions and soft railings that babies can use to pull themselves upright are helpful for developing arm and leg muscles.
- **Infant feedings, naps and changings documented**—Ask caregivers if they provide parents with a daily log of their baby’s feeding and changing times, napping schedule and activities. Daily logs are required by law in many states and are especially helpful for parents and caregivers alike to monitor an infant’s health.
- **Infant toys free of small parts**—All toys used by infants and very small children should be free of small parts that may break off and be ingested, causing the risk of choking. In general, children should only play with those toys that are appropriate for their age and development.

Care for Children With Special Needs

- **Willingness to care for children with special needs**—If your child has any special needs, you should get a feel for the provider's attitude and willingness to care for children with special needs. First try to gauge this on a general level and then go into specifics about your child's particular needs.
- **Experienced in caring for children with special needs**—Depending on the type or severity of your child's needs, you may want a provider with significant experience in caring for children with special needs.

Personal Observations

Keep your eyes and ears open during your visits with providers—especially if you make an unannounced visit—and make mental notes of what life is like under each provider's care. Observe the children and how they interact with one another and their caregivers. There should be a feeling of mutual respect among the children, and between the staff and the children. Take note of how the staff handle a troubled or upset child, how they address the children's questions or concerns, and how efficiently they spread their time and attention among the children. Observations, combined with the provider's answers to your questions should provide you with a clear and accurate picture of each care program you are considering.

Telephoning References

Verification of a caregiver's references is a critical step in selecting a quality child care arrangement. References can provide valuable information and insights about a caregiver that you may not get during the interview process. Try to call at least three references for each caregiver you are considering. Consider the following questions in your conversations with current and past patrons:

1. How old is your child?
2. Are you currently using this provider?
3. If not, why did you stop using this provider's services?

4. How long was your child in this provider's care?
5. What did you like best about this provider?
6. Did you have any problems with this provider?
7. Were there any caregiver or staff problems such as high turnover or frequent absences?
8. How would you rate the quality of the care and activities offered by this provider?
9. If the provider supplied backup or substitute caregivers, were you happy with them? How often was it necessary to use their services?
10. How would you rate the cleanliness of the facility (floors, toys, restrooms, etc.)?
11. Did this provider demonstrate age-appropriate expectations for the children?
12. Were you comfortable with the provider's discipline policy?
13. Did you feel that your child was cared for appropriately when sick or unhappy?

Making a Decision

After reviewing the information you have obtained in provider visits and reference interviews, you should be prepared to decide where to enroll your child. If any doubts or questions remain about your first choice, follow up by telephone or visit and discuss your concerns.

Make your decision, then contact your selected provider to coordinate the details of enrollment. You should feel comfortable and confident that you have devoted the appropriate time and research to this important task and, indeed, made the right decision. As a courtesy, notify the other caregivers you were considering of your decision. Retain contact names and program information in the event your first choice does not work out.

Provider Evaluation Checklist

Provider Name: _____

Qualifications and Credentials

Yes No

Education and training

Experience

Notes: _____

Yes No

Proof of licensure

References (including current clients)

Health and Safety

Yes No

Follows state-mandated staff to child ratios

Facility inspected for asbestos, radon and lead

Working smoke alarms, CO detectors,
and fire extinguishers

Emergency lighting (centers)

Exits clearly marked

Staff CPR and first aid training

Posted emergency instructions

Fire drills/evacuations practiced

Proper security

Authorization required to pick up children

Notes: _____

Yes No

Ill children separated from others

Nonsmoking environment

Nutritious meals and snacks

Adequate space

Safe playground equipment

Sanitary restrooms, diaper-changing tables,
sinks, eating areas, etc.

Facility is "child-proofed"

Procedures exist for reporting suspected
child abuse

Provider record free of complaints/litigation

Care Program

Yes No

Age-appropriate toys and books

Educational and skill-building activities

Mix of independent and group play

Mix of indoor and outdoor activities

Notes: _____

Yes No

Well-rounded curriculum

Multicultural curriculum

Appropriate use of television and computers

Policies and Procedures

Yes No

Schedule of holidays and closings

Plan for delayed openings and
unexpected closings

Acceptable fee policy when child is absent

Yes No

Caregiver offers and/or is affiliated with
discount program(s)

Policy exists for administering medication

Written copies of policies and procedures

Notes: _____

Parent/Caregiver Communication

Yes No

- Caregiver greets parents and children
- Caregivers communicate children's progress
- Problems addressed appropriately

Yes No

- Unannounced visits welcome
- Parental involvement welcome

Notes: _____

Special Situations (if applicable)

Infant Care

Yes No

- Caregivers hold infants during feeding
- Babies free to crawl around safely
- Infant feedings, naps and changings are documented
- Infant toys free of small parts

Special Needs Care

Yes No

- Willing to care for children with special needs
- Experienced in caring for children with special needs

Notes: _____

Personal Observations

Yes No

- Children appear happy
- Caregiver/staff listen to children
- Caregiver/staff talk with children, not at them
- Children receive individual attention
- Caregiver/staff aware of each child's likes and dislikes

Yes No

- Caregiver/staff respond appropriately to distressed children
- Children's questions answered promptly and appropriately
- Discipline administered appropriately
- Diversity among children and staff

Notes: _____

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