

CHOOSING CHILD CARE

As a parent, you know more about your child than any other person. By carefully looking into available care and matching up services with your child's individual needs, you will be able to select the best situation for your child. You will find it well worth the extra time to choose carefully, because if your child is receiving happy and secure care, you and the rest of your family will find your lives enriched as well.

HOW TO START: There are three different kinds of care you might choose.

- 1) A child care center
- 2) A family day care home
- 3) An individual sitter in your home

WHERE TO LOOK: Contact the Child Care License Board in your county.

HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY - 272-6487, PINELLAS COUNTY - 521-1853. Both child care centers and family day care homes are required to be licensed, know the regulations. Look through the yellow pages for centers near your home or office, depending on which location would be more convenient for you. Some churches have child care services also. Another good source of information is other working parents. Find out where their children stay and what they think of the care. If you need before and after school care, check to see if your school has an after-school program, or you might ask your child's teacher if she knows of a classmate's parents who provide such care.

Perhaps the most difficult kind of care to locate is a reliable sitter to come to your home. Check the "situations wanted" ads in the newspaper or place a "help wanted" ad of your own.

INITIAL SCREENING: As you make out a list of child care possibilities, keep these four thoughts in mind. You will need to find care that is affordable. Cost and quality do not always go hand in hand. The most expensive is not necessarily the best. On the other hand, it may be better to spend a few more dollars to get superior care. Remember to consider hidden costs, like extra time and gasoline to get to a center clear across town.

Accessibility is the second factor to keep in mind. If you have to leave home an hour early and fight traffic to get to the center, your emotional energy as well as your gasoline may be in short supply.

A third factor is reliability. Will the care be available when you need it? Will you be able to trust the sitter or staff with your child's well-being? Is there a back up person if you are choosing a family day care home?

The fourth and last factor is consistency. It is important for your child's sense of security to have at least one consistent caregiver, someone that you and your child can count on. Will this be a place where your child will receive consistent care with a minimum of problems and a maximum of opportunities for growth and development?

If you are choosing care for a preschooler, you may also want to consider your needs in 2-4

years. If you are eventually going to need after-school care for your child, you may want to find a center that cares for children up to age 12 and that provides transportation from school to center. Starting school and changing child care centers at the same time may be too much for some children.

When you have narrowed down your list, be sure to visit, using the checklists in this series. Ask questions, find out how the center or home or sitter feels to you, and get references wherever possible.

PREPARE FOR SEPARATION: Once you have selected care, begin to prepare your child for the new or changed experience. Take your child to visit the new center or home at least once before you leave him or her there for an entire day. Give your child time to get to know the people who will be taking care of him or her. Leave your child for an hour or so to show him or her that you will return. You might say, "Soon we will be leaving right after breakfast for my new job, and you get to go to your new school where there will be lots of fun things to do. You will even get to eat lunch there. Then I will pick you up before dinner." Find some books about day cares or baby sitters at your library or book store and read them with your child. A skilled staff will help your child make this transition.

Take an extra change of clothing (including socks and underwear) in a bag marked with your child's name. Also be sure to fill out the enrollment card completely, including your work number and the name and phone of a friend or relative to call in case you can't be reached.

Don't panic at the first problem. Talk over your concerns with the caregiver and don't be surprised if it takes your child several weeks to get used to the new situation.

IS YOUR CHILD HAPPY? If your child is happy and looks forward to going to the place of care, you know you've made a good choice. You can also check by asking the staff how your child is doing, what he likes the most or doesn't like, and whether there is a new friend to invite over to play on the weekend. Get to know one or two other parents that you see at drop-off and pick-up times. Be sure to spend some relaxed time each evening (or at least twice a week) having your child show you around his room. Don't always be in such a hurry that you can't show your child that his world is important to you.

You might also tell the staff about experiences your child is having at home so that the caregiver understands your child as an individual. Stressful situations will cause a change in your child's behavior (such as death of a pet or family member, a family move, divorce, etc). If, for any reason, the situation is not working out for you or your child after three or four weeks, let the caregiver know about the problems. Then look elsewhere for an alternative. If the problems are extreme and they aren't solved, you may decide to move your child. Be sure to let the caregiver know and explain the reasons for the move.

CHILD CARE AND INCOME TAX: Check with the Internal Revenue Service regarding income tax credits for child care. Your employer may offer child care incentives, such as deducting the cost of your child care before taking out taxes. Considering the tax breaks, child care may cost less than it seems at first.

FAMILY DAY CARE HOME

It is a good idea to visit several family day care homes before selecting one. Before you visit, read and be familiar with the items on the check list. You will also want to be familiar with the laws concerning family day care homes in your county. Phone the homes to see if you are welcome to visit and set up an appointment, allowing 20-30 minutes per home. Tell the caregiver how old your children are and what hours you will need care. If the caregiver doesn't have an opening which meets your needs, she may anticipate one in the future or may be able to refer you to another caregiver. Sometimes it's more convenient to visit without a child. Should you take your child along, however, note if and how the caregiver greets your child and whether your child finds the home attractive and friendly.

Remember, when visiting a family care home, the caregiver will probably be alone with the children. You might say, "I know that you are busy with the children. I would appreciate just being able to sit quietly and watch how the children are playing together. Then if you have some time, I might have a few questions to ask." You wouldn't want your child in a home where the caregiver would ignore the children and devote full attention to visitors and other adults for long periods. Some considerations when choosing family day care include:

1. Name/address/phone number of home.
2. Fees charged and what they include (meals, snacks, etc.)
3. Hours care is provided.
4. Number of and ages of children in the home.
5. Openings.
6. What happens when children or caregiver is sick?
7. Is the location easy to reach?
8. Is the home licensed?
9. Is she willing to provide you with names of parents already using her services?

CHECKLIST: For the following items, use a rating score of:

0 - Can't tell 1 - No, not in home 2 - Somewhat 3 - Yes, in home

Physical Facility/Health/Safety

- 1. The home is reasonably clean, orderly, and odor free.
- 2. No children are seen with soiled diapers or training pants.
- 3. Detergents, cleaners and medicines are out of reach or locked up.
- 4. Electrical outlets are covered with safety caps.
- 5. Household items like knives, scissors, curling irons are stored out of reach of children.
- 6. Toys and equipment are in good repair with no sharp edges, splinters, or loose parts.
- 7. There is a quiet area that can be darkened for naps with clean bedding for each child.
- 8. The toilet area is easy for children to get to with potty chairs, safety steps, etc.
- 9. There is an area of the home where children can play out of the way of other family members.
- 10. There is a fenced, outdoor play area in which the caregiver can see all areas of the yard easily. If the home has a pool, there is a safety fence around it.
- 11. The home is warm, cheerful, and inviting.

Caregiver Competencies

- 12. The caregiver spends time with the children rather than ignoring them to carry out household duties or talk on the telephone.
- 13. The caregiver provides individual attention when needed. For example, an upset child is held, talked to, etc.
- 14. You can see the caregiver praising the children. For example, saying, "You did a good job hanging up your jacket."
- 15. You can see the caregiver communicating effectively with the children, explaining in clear steps

what she wants the children to do, answering children's questions patiently, frequently bending or kneeling down to the child's level when talking.

- 16. The children appear happy, comfortable, and relaxed - laughing, smiling, and involved in play.
- 17. The children enjoy one another - smile at each other, hold hands, hug, help each other more than they fight or argue.
- 18. The caregiver uses the children's first names when talking to or about them. She does not refer to the children by unpleasant names, such as "smarty," or "brat," etc.
- 19. The caregiver seems warm and affectionate with the children, smiling, cuddling, speaking pleasantly.
- 20. The caregiver encourages children to do some things for themselves, patiently giving time, help and praise so that the child can learn to master skills, such as getting drinks, washing hands, putting away a toy.
- 21. The caregiver holds infants when feeding them rather than propping up their bottles.
- 22. The caregiver is a person you would like your child to copy or imitate. She should also be someone you would want to spend a good part of your day with.

Program Materials

- 24. Attractive and well-written story and picture books are available for the children.
- 25. The caregiver encourages listening and talking through planned activities like story-telling, word games, doll playing.
- 26. The home has materials for quiet play, such as puzzles, and active play, such as riding toys.
- 27. Children can get at least some materials for themselves, and they are encouraged to take care of the materials and put them away when finished.
- 28. There are enough toys and materials so that each child can play without having to wait more than a few minutes.
- 29. The caregiver encourages both boys and girls to play with all the materials, such as riding toys, dress-up clothes, dolls, cars and trucks. Caregivers do not give children the idea that a certain activity is only for boys or only for girls.
- 30. Children sometimes can use creative materials, such as crayons, paste, clay, scissors, pencils, and big blank pieces of paper instead of coloring books, etc.
- 31. Three or more of the following toys are available for the children's use: large and small riding toys, pull toys, pounding toys, beads for stringing, puzzles, small and large blocks, nested toys, and small building toys.
- 32. Children may watch only appropriate television programs and are not forced or encouraged to sit in front of the TV for long periods of time.
- 33. The caregiver plans at least one activity for the children each day which your child would enjoy.

Home Center Coordination

- 34. The caregiver can tell you what meals and snacks will be served to the children this week.
- 35. The menus sound nutritious and contain foods your child likes.
- 36. If you have an infant, the caregiver refrigerates infant bottles and foods and will feed according to your directions.
- 37. If possible, ask what the caregiver does if a child does not like a certain food being served to see if you agree with her method.
- 38. The caregiver uses discipline and guidance methods similar to your own and is consistent and fair with the children.
- 39. The caregiver answers questions in a friendly, open way.
- 40. You feel comfortable and could expect to share concerns about your child with the caregiver.

For more information contact Diana Converse, Family Life Educator, University of Florida Extension Service, Hillsborough County, 5339 S. County Road 579, Seffner, FL 33584, phone 744-5519.

MONITORING YOUR CHILD'S DAY CARE

What do you look for once your child is already in care?

1. Does the child cry on the way to the caretaker or center or after you leave? How long?
2. Anything out of the ordinary that lasts more than a month or two in a new situation should be examined. Crying? Bring to attention of teacher or caregiver. A good caregiver will help your child ease into his day by calmly taking his or her hand and directing your child's attention to something fun, such as, "I need your help feeding the hamster" or "Let's pick out a puzzle to work on."
3. How does the child greet you when you arrive?
4. What are the child's habits like at home? Overly cranky or irritable? Does the child eat and sleep well?
5. How does he compare in terms of development with other children his age? Is he within a "normal range"?
6. For a baby - - is baby clean and neat? Have bowel movements been taken care of?
7. What does the verbal child say about her experiences? What indirect signs do you detect from her experiences? (Does she sing a new song or do something new?)
8. Has caregiver dropped hints or complained about something?
9. Have there been any major schedule changes (yours, caregiver's or school's)?
10. Is there anything happening in caregiver's or teacher's life that may affect child-care functioning, for example, divorce, illness, new baby?
11. Do you detect a change in household standards of your caretaker, teacher, or school?
12. Do you have regular teacher conferences that keep you up-dated on your child's development and behavior? Are these usually positive?

HINTS:

Children go through stages. For example, eight months to 15 months is particularly known for separation anxiety.

When your child begins to verbalize, you must sort out what is real and what is imaginary.

Drop in unexpectedly as often as you can. A center or home should have an "open-door policy".

Source: University of Nevada Cooperative Extension Service

CHECKLIST FOR CHILD CARE CENTERS

You should visit several child care centers before selecting one. This checklist will help you, as a parent, look at certain aspects of each center. Then compare one center with another. Before you visit, read and be familiar with the items on this list. Phone the center you would like to visit and set up an appointment at each one, allowing yourself 20-30 minutes per visit. Let the director know the ages of your children and that you are interested in learning more about the program.

Sometimes it is more convenient to visit without your child. However, if you do take your child along, note if and how the adults greet your child and whether your child finds the center attractive and friendly. Practical considerations to help narrow down your search include:

1. Name/address/phone number of center.
2. Hours center is open.
3. Fees charged.
4. Ages of children licensed for.
5. Care of sick children?
6. Location easy to reach?

For the following items use a rating of:

0 - Can't tell 1 - No, not in center 2 - Somewhat 3 - Yes, center has

Facility, Health, Safety

- 1. Floors are carpeted or have nonskid covering.
- 2. The center is clean. No foul odors linger in the air.
- 3. Adults do not smoke in the same room with children.
- 4. No children are seen in the center with soiled diapers or training pants.
- 5. Detergents, cleanser, and medicines are out of reach or locked up.
- 6. Electrical outlets are covered with safety caps.
- 7. Toys & equipment are in good repair with no sharp edges, splinters, loose parts.
- 8. At least one adult in the center has first-aid training and first-aid supplies are available.
- 9. Each child has an individual space to store coats and belongings, such as a cubbie.
- 10. A space can be made dark and quiet for naptime and a clean cot is set up in this space for each napping child.
- 11. The toilet is easy for the children to get to.
- 12. The outdoor play area has both a hard surface for riding toys and a soft surface such as sand or grass for playing.
- 13. The center is homey, warm, cheerful, and inviting.

Caregiver Competencies

- 14. Enough caregivers are with the children so that individual attention can be given if needed. For example, an upset child can be held, talked to, etc.
- 15. You can see caregivers praising children. For example, saying, "You did a good job putting away those blocks, Daniel."
- 16. You can see caregivers communicating effectively with children - - explaining in clear steps what they want the children to do, answering children's questions patiently, frequently kneeling down to the child's eye level when talking.
- 17. Children appear happy, comfortable & relaxed, they are laughing, smiling & involved in play.
- 18. Children enjoy one another - - smile at each other, hold hands, hug, help each other more than they fight or argue.

- __19. Caregivers seem warm and affectionate with the children, smiling, cuddling, speaking pleasantly.
- __20. Caregivers do not refer to children by unpleasant names, such as "smarty, brat, etc."

- __21. Caregivers are seen working and playing with the children more than standing back and directing or ordering them around.
- __22. At least one caregiver knows where all the children are. For example, if a parent comes to pick up a child, a caregiver knows who and where the child is.
- __23. Caregivers encourage children to do some things for themselves, patiently giving time and help and praise so that children can learn to master skills, such as getting a drink alone, washing hands, putting away a toy.
- __24. The caregivers are people you would like for your child to copy or imitate. They are also people you would want to spend a good part of your day with.

Program Materials

- __25. Attractive and well-written story and picture books are available for children.
- __26. Caregivers encourage listening and talking through planned activities like story-telling, word games, puppetry, doll play, and show and tell.
- __27. The center has materials for quiet play, such as puzzles, and active play, such as riding toys.
- __28. Children can get at least some materials by themselves, and are encouraged to take care of and put away materials.
- __29. There are enough toys and materials so that each child can participate without having to wait more than a few minutes.
- __30. For at least part of the day children can choose what they want to do either individually or in small groups.
- __31. Caregivers encourage both boys and girls to play with all the materials - -such as climbing and riding toys, dress-up clothes, tools, dolls, cars, and trucks. Caregivers do not give children the idea that a certain activity is only for boys or only for girls.
- __32. Children have the opportunity to use creative materials, such as paint, crayons, clay, big blank pieces of paper rather than coloring books.
- __33. The children's art work is displayed in the center and is also sent home for parents.
- __34. Three or more of the following are available for the children's use: large and small riding toys, pull toys, pounding toys, beads for stringing, puzzles, small and large blocks, nested toys, small building toys, dress-up clothes, dolls.
- __35. The outdoor play area has three or more of the following: sandbox, low slide, riding toys, balance beams, tires, see-saw, climbing toys.
- __36. Children are in small enough groups within the center so that the children appear to be secure and "at home" rather than lost in a crowd.
- __37. Children may watch only appropriate television programs if there is a TV. They are not encouraged to sit in front of the TV for long periods of time.
- __38. The educational program is developmentally appropriate for each age group.

Home Center Coordination

- __39. Meal and snack menus are posted so that parents know what the children are eating.
- __40. The menus are nutritious and contain foods your child likes.
- __41. If possible, ask what the caregivers do if a child does not like a certain food being served and see if you agree with their methods.
- __42. The caregivers use discipline and guidance methods similar to your own and are consistent and fair with the children.
- __43. The center has a bulletin board for parents and posts the program schedule and other messages.

Above all, trust your own judgment and feeling about a center. You know your child best and can tell which center will be right for your family.

5339 S. County Road 579, Seffner, FL 33584
(813) 744-5519