

Day-Care Guide

There are a lot of factors to think about when choosing a day-care provider for your child. There are several options for day care, each with advantages and disadvantages. For most families, the decision depends on factors such as cost, distance from home, and safety. This chapter reviews some of the important questions to ask when evaluating day-care options.

What is day care?

Many families rely on day care to look after their children during the day or after school so that they can work. Children of all ages may spend at least part of their day in child care. Day care may be provided in several settings, such as private homes or child-care centers. Most larger child-care centers are licensed by the states.

Choosing a day-care center is a big decision. Some important questions to ask include how many children are cared for in the center, how many caregivers are present, what the caregivers' experience is, and whether the day-care provider is accredited. Standards and guidelines vary by state.

Once you have chosen a day-care provider, it's important to pay attention to how your child is doing there and to stay involved with your child's caregivers. The best type of day care for your child may change as he or she grows.

What types of day-care options are there?

Although local options vary, day-care settings fall into some general categories:

- *Family-home day care.* Many caregivers provide day-care services in their homes. It's important to make sure there are enough adults to care for the number of children present. If toddlers are present, there needs to be more supervision. Make sure that the home has been "childproofed."
- *Day-care centers.* Other facilities provide care for larger numbers of children. Some day-care centers are private businesses, independent or part of a chain. Others are sponsored by the government, a church or a religious organization, or an employer. Each state has its own licensing regulations.
- *In-home day care.* Some families hire a nanny or regular babysitter to watch children in their own home. This is usually the most expensive option.

Other types of day-care situations include:

- "Drop-in" facilities, which generally provide only occasional care.

- Various types of facilities that provide after-school care.
- Other types of facilities for children with medical problems or other special needs.

How do I choose a day-care provider?

Start early. Day care can be hard to find in some communities, and high-quality day care may be even harder to find. Some important questions to ask are:

- *How many children are present?* Especially for babies and toddlers, smaller groups of children are better. Larger groups may increase the risk of catching infections and other diseases.
- *How many caregivers are present?* Recommended numbers of staff members per child often vary according to the children's age:
 - Birth to 12 months: At least one staff member for every three infants.
 - Ages 13 to 30 months: At least one staff member for every four children.
 - Ages 31 to 35 months: At least one staff member for every five children.
 - Age 3 years: At least one staff member for every seven children.
 - Ages 4 to 5 years: At least one staff member for every eight children.
 - Ages 6 to 8 years: At least one staff member for every ten children.
 - Ages 9 to 12 years: At least one staff member for every twelve children.
- *Are the caregivers qualified?* Do they have experience and/or training in the care and education of children?
- *Is the facility licensed,* if required by state regulations? Is it accredited by national organizations, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) or the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC)?
- *What is the facility like?* Make visits to the centers. Does the facility look safe, clean, and well-maintained? How are the children behaving? Do the setting and activities look appropriate and inviting for your children? Ask the caregiver to give you the names of other parents as references.
- *How is your child doing?* After your child starts day care, pay attention to how your child seems to be doing. Does he or she seem well cared for at pickup time? Have there been any types of changes in his or her behavior since starting day care? Especially if it's your child's first

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experience with day care, he or she may be a little anxious at first. Normally, children get used to the change within a few days.

Stay involved with your child's day-care center or provider. Talk to and meet with caregivers on a regular basis. Ask questions and voice any concerns you may have.

When should I call your office?

Call our office if you have questions or concerns about day care or need advice about choosing a day-care provider.

Where can I get more information?

A good place to start is the National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education. Visit its new "Healthy Kids, Healthy Care" website at www.healthykids.us, or call 1-800-598-KIDS (1-800-598-5437). The website offers lots of useful information, including a parents' guide, state licensing regulations, and more.