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Choosing Childcare

Michigan State University Cooperative Extension Service

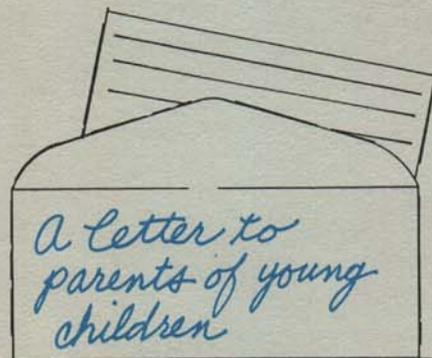
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Choosing Child Care

Dear parents,

Choosing child care for your infant, toddler or preschool child may be one of the most difficult decisions you make. Affordability and convenience are easily judged, but *quality*, that most important aspect of child care, involves a great deal of examination. A child learns more during the first five years of his/her life than at any other time, as values are formed and behavior styles are adopted. As surely as you take pride in your child's development, you'll want to carefully consider the options available for the hours when you cannot personally be there for guidance.

There are many types of child care. However, there are some basic criteria you can use to evaluate any setting and to monitor the care situation to insure that your child is happy, secure, safe and developing appropriately.

First, let's examine the two basic categories of child care and then look at the type of care in each category.

Outside the Home

Family Day Care Homes. These are private homes in which adults care for children for some portion of the day. There can be no more than six children in a family day care home if only one adult is caring for the children.

Home care may provide:

- A family/homelike environment,
- Some flexibility in hours and days care is offered,
- Child care from infancy through school age,
- Meals and snacks,
- Before and after school care,
- A setting where children are not separated by age.

Family day care homes should be registered with the Department of Social Services (DSS). To register, the home operator provides the department with three personal references. The department investigates applicants for possible child abuse, neglect and criminal convictions. There are also rules established by law which must be followed. They relate to discipline, program, equipment, food service and nutrition, child information records, health of the adult caregiver, emergency medical care and indoor and outdoor spaces for the children.

Group Day Care Homes. These are also private family homes. However, up to 12 children may be cared for if there are at least two adult care givers. Group day care homes must be licensed. This involves the previously mentioned registration process plus a visit from a Department of Social

Services child care licensing consultant. The consultant reviews the group home for compliance with state rules. The rules about exits, emergency procedures and fire safety are more clearly spelled out for group day care homes than for family day care homes.

IF YOU CHOOSE EITHER FORM OF HOME DAY CARE, ASK YOUR PROVIDER OR CONTACT YOUR COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES FOR A COPY OF THESE RULES MENTIONED. THEY HELP PROTECT YOUR CHILD.

Day Care Centers. Day care centers generally care for preschool age children; some centers may also care for infants and provide before and after school care. Michigan law requires day care centers to be licensed by DSS. The licensing rules cover the same general areas listed for family day care, with additional provisions to cover drop-in centers, swim programs, transportation, fire safety and sanitation. The required ratio of children to adults is as follows:

- Children 2 weeks to 2½ years old
1 adult for every 4 children
- Children 2½ years to 3 years old
1 adult for every 10 children
- Children 4 and 5 years old
1 adult for every 12 children
- Children 6 years old and older
1 adult for every 20 children

In centers you may find:

- Activities structured for different age groups,
- Specialized services such as field trips, swimming lessons and transportation to and from home or school,
- Parents involved in policy-making decisions and center operations,
- Meals and snacks provided.

In-Home Care

You may wish to have someone come into your home to care for your child. Relatives, friends and neighbors often are used by parents. The county DSS, the Michigan Employment Security Commission Domestic Placement Office, area schools, colleges, or churches may also be able to suggest possible care givers. You may also wish to advertise in the newspaper.

Interviewing possible care givers about child care beliefs, experience and personal background is very important. You may wish to consider a probationary period as a means of evaluating the situation, four to six weeks for example, and then decide whether both you and the care giver are willing to continue the employment. Schedule a meeting with the care giver to discuss the pros and cons of the situation and any changes that must be made.

In-home care may:

- Be very convenient,
- Provide more schedule flexibility than out-of-home providers,
- Give your child an increased feeling of security because of familiar surroundings.

Choosing the Right Child Care

Choosing the best setting for your child takes careful thought. Take your time and investigate. Consider the types of care available to you, your child's age, and his/her special needs. Once you've decided which type of care you want for your child, call your county DSS office, or other county referral service, for a list of licensed (center) or registered (home) care providers.

If you choose care outside your home, call several centers or homes to determine if they are places that might be acceptable to you. Questions to ask might be:

- How many children are in your care?
- What are their ages?
- How many adults take care of the children?
- What are your hours?
- What is the daily routine?
- What kinds of activities and special programs do you offer?
- Do you serve meals and snacks?
- What are your fees?
- Do you have an opening for my child?
- When is it possible to visit?

For those places that seem to fit your needs, make an appointment to visit. Good child care programs are open to visitors at any time. Visit as many places as you can before you make a choice.

Plan to spend an hour or more at each home or center to observe how the children are treated (look for positive adult/child interactions) and the activities presented (appropriate for the age of the children). This will help determine if the environment is suitable and if your child will benefit from this setting.

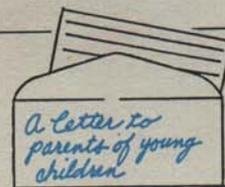
Things to check:

- The areas used for play, sleeping/napping, food preparation and bathroom(s) should be clean,

with adequate space for the number of children in care.

- The toys, table, chairs and other equipment should be appropriate for the age of the children and in good repair.
- Cleaning supplies, medicines and other hazardous materials should either be locked up or well out of the reach of children. Electrical outlets should have safety caps.
- If you have a very young child, observe the environment from his/her viewpoint. For example, make sure stairs are protected by a gate, that breakable and small diameter objects are kept out of reach, and things like cat litter boxes and ash trays are not in the child care area.
- Look for adequate and safe outdoor play space. Make sure there is no rusty or broken play equipment. Play yards should not be cluttered; this invites accidents. Make sure play areas on busy streets or near hazards, such as swimming pools, are protected by fencing.
- The center or home should have a current license or registration certificate. This helps assure that your child will have a safe and healthy place away from home.
- The center or home should have procedures for emergencies (including fire and tornado) and for contacting parents.
- Ask for a list of policies covering fees, holidays, vacations, TV viewing, meals, transportation, discipline, sick child or sick provider situations, etc.
- Ask for the names of parents who have agreed to serve as references (call several of these parents).

A partial check list to use when visiting facilities is at the end of this publication.



Ongoing Parent Responsibility

Once you have selected a suitable child care arrangement, continue to monitor and evaluate the care your child is receiving. A strong two-way communication link with the care provider(s) is the best way to help your child adjust to the new situation, to help the care giver learn about your child and to feel comfortable with the situation yourself. This is particularly true when situations arise at home that might affect the child's behavior. Let the provider know if your child is especially tired, angry, excited and why. (It may be helpful to write a short note if mornings tend to be a hectic time.)

In the evening, ask the care giver for information about the child's day. Make sure the provider knows you want to be told about difficult things as well as good things.

If your child is old enough, frequently talk to him/her about the home or center. Ask very specific questions about activities and events of the day. Listen carefully for feelings and concerns. Always encourage your child to share problems with you.

If you know or suspect that a state established rule has been violated, the following procedure is suggested. First, discuss your concerns with the center/home staff to see if the problem can be resolved. If you have reason to believe this did not end the violation, call or write to your county DSS. If you feel the problem requires immediate attention during a time when the DSS office is not open, call the 24-hour telephone number for children's protective services listed under your county's DSS heading in your telephone book. Always remove your child from a care setting you believe is physically or emotionally harmful to your child.

Caring for children is a business venture which might be termed

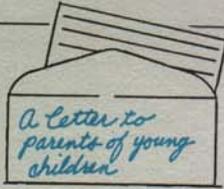
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Child Care Checklist

Use the following checklist to help you decide what is most important to you and your family. Then as you talk to a possible care giver or visit a home or center, decide whether the arrangement offers the elements you think are important.

The Caregiver:

- Seems to feel good about self and job. Yes No
- Seems to be someone with whom I can develop a relaxed, sharing relationship. Yes No
- Has child-rearing attitudes and methods similar to my own. Yes No
- Has previous experience or training in working with young children. Yes No
- Accepts and respects my family's cultural and/or religious values. Yes No
- Appears to be warm, friendly and has a sense of humor. Yes No
- Conducts self in a businesslike manner, and gives adequate explanation of policies. Yes No
- Seems calm and gentle—someone my child will enjoy being with. Yes No
- Treats each child as a special person, talking with them, not at them. Yes No
- Understands what children can and want to do at different stages of growth. Yes No
- Holds infants and interacts with them in a loving way during feeding, diapering and other times. Yes No
- Patiently helps children solve problems. Yes No
- Encourages children to express themselves through words. Yes No
- Helps children become independent by offering choices and encouraging self-help skills. Yes No
- Helps children learn to get along with and respect other people. Yes No
- Provides a routine and rules children can understand and follow. Yes No
- Encourages good health habits, such as washing hands before eating. Yes No
- Has materials, toys, and equipment suited to the ages of all children in care. Yes No
- Places importance on the value of nutritious meals and snacks. Yes No
- Respects my feelings about smoke-free environments. Yes No
- Handles diaper changing promptly. Yes No
- Seems to have enough time and energy to look after all children in care. Yes No



"love for a living." The vast majority of child care providers are very caring, concerned and committed professionals who give good, safe and nurturing care. You have a responsibility to respect their time (don't take it for granted), their policies (pay bills on time, pick up your child at the agreed upon time), and their opinions (usually they've had lots of experience).

Research indicates that children can thrive in child care as long as the quality is high. Do your best to make sure that the child care you select meets the needs of both you and your child.

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