



MARYLAND
FAMILY
NETWORK

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO CHOOSING CHILD CARE

Special Needs Enhanced Service



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**LOCATE: CHILD CARE
SPECIAL NEEDS**
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CHOOSING CHILD CARE FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Choosing child care for a child with special needs can be a difficult task. LOCATE: Child Care referral specialists can help you define your needs and evaluate child care options; they can suggest questions to ask potential caregivers. Yet the real job of deciding which program best matches the unique needs of your child and your family is up to you.

WHAT IS INCLUSIVE CARE?

Inclusive child care is dedicated to giving the best early childhood education and care to all children, including those with special needs and disabilities, by ensuring each child feels welcomed and important. Inclusive child care allows all children to learn together in an atmosphere that supports and nurtures the individual strengths of each child and allows participation in the daily routines and activities of the program. In Maryland, the goal is inclusive child care. Due to the goal of inclusive child care there are a limited number of specialized child care programs. Therefore, parents need to partner with their child care providers to help make inclusive child care successful.

HOW DO YOU IDENTIFY INCLUSIVE CHILD CARE?

Selecting child care for a child with a special need or a special health care need is generally the same as the search for other children. Still, there may be some added things to look for during your interview and tour. For example:

- Does the provider seem open to learning about your child's unique abilities and needs?
- Does the provider have training or experience relevant to your child's needs? If not, is there openness to training or learning new information from you or someone who works with your child?
- Will your child participate as fully as possible in all the routines and activities, including field trips?
- Does the provider have resources in place that support your child's needs? For example, if an older child needs assistance with toileting is there a private changing area?
- Do the written policies, parent handbooks, and other materials encourage inclusion and diversity?

WHAT SHOULD YOU SHARE WITH A CAREGIVER?

Describe your child positively, emphasizing strengths to prospective caregivers. Share enough information with a caregiver to allow for a mutual decision on whether the program is appropriate for your child and can accommodate your child's special needs. Present the basic information to each prospective provider to realistically discuss child care arrangements. It is not necessary to give extensive details about your child's special needs until you and the caregiver have agreed on the child's placement. Just be sure to give enough information about your child's needs so the provider can make a fair assessment about providing care for your child.

What is Quality Child Care?

LOOK FOR A SAFE ENVIRONMENT WHERE YOUR CHILD CAN LEARN, PLAY, AND EXPLORE

LOOK FOR AN OPPORTUNITY FOR YOUR CHILD TO DEVELOP STABLE RELATIONSHIPS WITH CARING ADULTS AND OTHER CHILDREN

LOOK FOR ADEQUATE STIMULATION THAT IS APPROPRIATE FOR YOUR CHILD'S AGE AND DEVELOPMENTAL LEVEL

Child care is a necessity for many families in today's working world. For you, as parents, the decision about who will care for your child during the time you are away is a major one. Where your child spends the day is perhaps more important than where you work. All parents want the best care for their children.

High quality early childhood programs benefit children, families and communities in many ways. Your child's social, emotional, educational and physical development will be nurtured and healthy growth will be fostered in a well-planned program. Quality child care has been proven to be an important part of the foundation for later learning. As a parent, you will feel more confident and less stressed if your child care choice is well thought out, carefully researched, and fits the needs of your family. Communities reap long-term social and economic benefits from the presence of quality early childhood programs.

There are several important tenets of early childhood education that parents should keep in mind when searching for a child care program.



PLAY IS THE WORK OF CHILDREN.

Whether looking for a structured or non-structured program, keep in mind that children grasp basic learning skills by having the opportunity to explore, feel, smell, measure, pour, sing and dance!

SOCIALIZATION IS THE FOUNDATION FOR COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT.

Children benefit from sharing treasures from home, reading to each other, taking turns, learning to listen, and eating meals family-style. The importance of learning how to get along with others and function as an individual in society cannot be overlooked.

ACTIVITIES MUST BE AGE-APPROPRIATE.

Just as you would not expect a preteen to drive a car, you would not expect a toddler to neatly color a ditto sheet of hearts for Valentine's Day! Look for caregivers who understand the stages of child development and offer age appropriate activities to stimulate development.

This guide presents information to help parents make wise choices about child care for their children. A good provider for one child and one family may not be the best choice for another. Parents who have done their "homework" in researching child care programs and who trust their instincts of what is right for their children, are well on the way to making a good choice!



BEFORE YOU DECIDE — A NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The child care you select will vary based on the current needs of your family. You may want to consider the following.

YOUR CHILD'S NEEDS

- **WHAT IS THE DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE OF YOUR CHILD?** Developmental stage will dictate the level of attention needed and the need for interaction with other children. It will also help determine readiness for structured learning programs.
- **WHAT TYPE OF PERSONALITY AND TEMPERAMENT DOES YOUR CHILD HAVE?** An outgoing and talkative child may thrive in one environment and a shy and quiet child in another.
- **DOES YOUR CHILD HAVE PRIOR EXPERIENCE IN A CHILD CARE SETTING?** Children who are new to child care may be more comfortable starting off in a smaller group situation or on a part-time schedule.
- **DOES YOUR CHILD HAVE ANY SPECIAL NEEDS?** Because of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), child care programs should try to accommodate children with special needs (unless it would cause them economic hardship - the cost to install a wheelchair ramp, for example). You may want to inquire about the level of experience and training the staff has in working with children with special needs.



PARENT'S NEEDS

- **PERSONAL PRIORITIES.** Determine the value you place on the level of cleanliness, a home-like setting vs. a group or classroom atmosphere and methods of discipline.
- **READINESS.** Determine your own readiness to separate from your child.
- **PART-TIME/FULL-TIME.** For what hours do you need care? Some programs or providers offer extended hours of care, while others offer more traditional hours. If you desire a half-day preschool program but work full-time and need care before and after preschool, is there a way to combine alternative forms of care to provide wrap-around care?
- **COST, HOURS, LOCATION.** Determine your cost limits, needs and preferences before starting to make your calls.
- **WORKPLACE BENEFITS.** Find out if your employer offers any dependent care assistance. It could be in the form of child care vouchers to help subsidize a portion of tuition at certain programs, pre-tax money deducted from your paycheck and set aside for child care costs, resource and referral to help find care, or other types of assistance.



TYPES OF CHILD CARE

FAMILY CHILD CARE is child care provided in the caregiver's home. Regulations allow her/him to take care of as many as eight children at any one time. However, the specific number of children a provider is allowed to care for will be indicated on her/his registration certificate. No more than two of these children, including the provider's own, may be under two years old.

GROUP CHILD CARE CENTERS are operated in non-home settings such as churches, synagogues, schools, and other buildings. Centers tend to be open on a fixed schedule of eight or more hours a day, year round. Children at centers are usually grouped with others of the same age.

SCHOOL-AGE CARE refers to programs for children before and/ or after school hours and during school holidays and vacations. Both family child care and center-based settings can offer this kind of care.

NURSERY SCHOOLS provide programs with an educational focus for children one or two years before they enter kindergarten. They usually operate part-day, nine months a year.

KINDERGARTENS, both public and private, offer children the year of schooling before first grade.

SUMMER PROGRAMS refer to center- or school-based settings for school-age children, licensed by the Office of Child Care. The programs are offered during the summer months of June, July and August.

CAMPS refer to day, residential, travel or trip camps certified by the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, that provide primarily outdoor recreation activities and accommodate campers who are unrelated to the youth camp operator.

SELECTING CHILD CARE

THE INITIAL CALL

Your LOCATE: Child Care referral specialist will provide several referrals to providers or programs meeting your basic needs; we encourage you to call all of the referrals given. Use your first call to explore with a potential provider your child care needs:

- Does the provider/program have a vacancy for the age(s) of your child(ren)?
- Do the hours of operation meet your needs?
- Is part-time care available or is the provider's schedule flexible enough to meet your needs?
- What are the ages of the other children in care?

Make appointments to visit several programs. Ideally, plan to visit twice: once by yourself (to interview), and again with your child (to observe). If it is only possible to make one visit, be sure to take your child(ren) along with you.

All licensed programs are required to have an "open door" policy. Except in the case of an initial interview which takes quite a bit of time, providers should welcome impromptu visits from parents.

THE VISIT

If possible, all of the child's parents or guardians should arrange to be present for the visit because family members may have different viewpoints. Set aside several hours for each program you visit. The morning hours are especially recommended, as children are most active then. Ask to see all rooms where your child may spend time. If you are visiting a center, be sure to talk with teachers as well as the director of the program. Inquire about the turnover rate of staff because teacher longevity is a proven indicator of quality in early childhood programs.

The provider and/or staff may be interviewing you as well. They may want to make sure that your communication styles are compatible. They will be assessing whether your child(ren) will fit in with the dynamics of their current group of children.

Use the checklist on the following pages to guide your observations and questions. Keep in mind that even though a program may be licensed, that is not a guarantee of quality. Go and check it out for yourself!



CAREGIVER

- Greets children when they arrive.
- Talks to children in a calm, positive manner; makes eye contact and listens to what children have to say; shows respect for children and encourages it among them.
- Interacts warmly with children, giving praise, hugs, words of encouragement, and comfort.
- Provides children with individual attention, allows them to make choices, and meets needs quickly.
- The child care provider has positive attitudes toward children with special needs in general and toward your child's specific special need.
- Communicates openly with parent to answer questions and address concerns; keeps parent informed of child's daily activities and progress.
- Has values and a child-rearing philosophy that are compatible with the parent's.
- Understanding principles of child development and has training and experience working with children with special needs.
- Participates in child development classes and continuing education on such topics as literacy and school readiness.
- Is sensitive to the unique needs of parents of children with special needs.
- Appears to be open to adapting activities to enable the child to full participate.
- Deals with behavioral special needs in a positive manner. Although there is consistency, the caregiver is flexible in the way behavior concerns are addressed.

the checklist

ENVIRONMENT

- Offers a clean, safe environment—both indoors and out—especially napping, eating, and toileting/diaper-changing areas.
- Is child-friendly, with enough indoor and outdoor space for children to move freely and safely.
- Provides different areas for resting and quiet or active play with separate space for younger and older children.
- Offers an adequate amount of furniture and equipment, in good condition, appropriate for all ages and sizes of children in care.
- Has a regular cleaning routine to disinfect toys, cribs/cots/mats, surfaces, rugs, etc.
- Allows for adequate supervision at all times.
- Is in compliance with licensed capacity, adult-to-child ratio, age limits, and other restrictions listed on license certificate.
- Has sufficient space for adaptive equipment.
- Is wheelchair accessible or is willing to make provisions for entry and exit.
- Arrangements can be made for special dietary needs.

PROGRAM

- Provides inclusive child care: all children are welcomed.
- Children are stimulated, happily involved and enjoying themselves.
- Adapts to children's changing interests.
- Provides a variety of clean and safe toys, learning materials, supplies, and planned activities, accessible to and appropriate for each age group.
- Displays a daily schedule that reflects a balance of activities— active/quiet, indoor/outdoor, adult/child-directed—yet allows for flexibility.
- Welcomes parents' ideas and encourages involvement and drop-in visits.
- There are other children in care with special needs.
- Able to incorporate the information and requirements of the child's Individual Education Plan (IEP) or an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP).
- Serves nutritious food and makes a menu available.

CHILD CARE REGULATIONS IN MARYLAND

In Maryland, child care is regulated by the Department of Education/Office of Child Care (OCC). OCC registers family child care homes and licenses center-based programs, such as child care centers, part-day programs, school-age programs, and non-public nursery schools.

Family child care providers are required:

- to be registered if they care for non-related children regularly, for more than 20 hours per month.
- to have a criminal background check and child abuse and neglect clearances for themselves and all adult residents of the home, age 18 and older.
- to have no more than 8 children in care at one time. Of these children, only 2 may be under the age of 2 years. The providers' children under 6 years old are considered child care children.
- to have First Aid and CPR training, and if they are caring for infants, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) training.
- to complete continuing training on a yearly basis.



- to be inspected by OCC and the State Fire Marshal.
- to display their registration certificates in a visible location.
- to have an “open door” policy which allows parents to visit and/or observe at any time when the provider is operating, without prior arrangement.

Center-based programs are required:

- to be licensed if the establishment provides care for all or part of the day on a regular schedule at least twice a week.
- to have a criminal records check and child abuse and neglect clearances on all employees and volunteers age 18 and over.
- to have one staff member per every 20 children trained in First Aid and CPR.
- to be inspected by OCC and the State Fire Marshal.
- to display the license in a visible location.
- to have an “open door” policy which allows parents to visit and/or observe at any time when the program is operating, without prior arrangement.



CHILD CARE FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Child care is a major household expense—exceeded only by housing, food and taxes. Many families who need child care find that the costs strain, if not overwhelm, their budgets. Therefore, it is important for parents to become knowledgeable about sources of financial help.

GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

CHILD CARE SUBSIDY—This is a state-funded financial assistance system which assists parents who have limited incomes and need child care in order to work or to attend school or certain job training programs. Financial eligibility is dependent on family size and income.

FEDERAL CHILD AND DEPENDENT CARE TAX CREDIT—If the parent has a child (ren) under the age of 13 years, he/she may be eligible for a federal, as well as a state, tax credit. Generally, the tax credit is set up for parents who need child care in order to work. For details, consult IRS Publication 503 or call an area IRS office.

FEDERAL EARNED INCOME TAX CREDIT (EITC)—

The Earned Income Credit is a tax credit for low- and moderate-income workers. It lets taxpayers get back some or all of the taxes that were withheld from their paychecks during the year. To qualify, a parent must be working full- or part-time. Income guidelines are based on family size. For more information, call 1.800.492.0618.



FEDERAL CHILD TAX CREDIT (CTC)—If a parent has a dependent child under age 17, the parent may be eligible to receive the Federal Child Tax Credit. For details, consult IRS Publication 972 or call a local IRS office.

DEPENDENT CARE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS (DCAPs)—Employers may offer a Dependent Care Assistance Program to employees to assist with their child care expenses. This plan allows an employee to have money taken out of his/her paycheck tax-free and put it into a special account to be used for child care expenses reimbursement. The purpose of this plan is to help a parent lower the amount of taxes paid during the year.

PRIVATE ASSISTANCE

SCHOLARSHIPS—In the event of a hardship, programs may offer assistance to parents in paying for child care through private funding sources.

SIBLING DISCOUNT—This refers to a discount that a provider/program may offer to a parent if a provider/program is caring for more than one child in the family.

SLIDING FEE—This refers to the availability of a flexible fee structure typically linked to family income.

EMPLOYER SUPPORTED CHILD CARE—Employers may offer on-site child care or may have special arrangements with local child care centers to reserve slots or offer slots at a discounted rate for their employees.



PARENT/PROVIDER COMMUNICATION

THE WRITTEN AGREEMENT

Before placing your child in any child care arrangement, the provider/center director will ask you to sign a contract. The contract should specify the responsibilities of both you and the provider/center.

Make sure you discuss the contract and understand it before you sign it. If you want to make any changes, make them in writing. You should receive a copy of the signed contract to keep.

The agreement should include the following:

- The hours that your child will be in the provider's care;
- A list of days when the center or provider is closed;
- The fee and method of payment, including when the payment is due; when late fees, if any, would be assessed; and the amount of the late fee;
- A policy regarding whether or not payment is required for days the child does not attend due to illness or vacation;
- Advance notice or fee that may be required if you terminate the child care arrangement;
- What meals and/or snacks are offered by the provider/center and which are the parent's responsibility;
- Pre-admission requirements (evidence of up-to-date immunizations, etc.);
- Items the parent needs to supply (diapers, wipes, change of clothing, etc.);
- Illness policy and policy on administering medication; and
- Provision for a trial period during which parent and/or provider can terminate arrangement without notice (typically 2-3 weeks).

PARENT/PROVIDER RESPONSIBILITIES

Mutual respect is critical in the parent/provider relationship. Keep in mind that both you and the provider should be working together to provide the best child care situation for your child.

The Provider should:

- Provide continuous supervision.
- Provide the name of the person who will substitute for them.
- Provide the names of center staff, if applicable.
- Advise known dates when care will not be available.
- Make adaptations for children with special needs.
- Obtain written permission for your child to travel in the provider's care and/or to receive any medication during child care hours.
- Notify parent(s) promptly if the child is injured while in the provider's care.

The Parent should:

- Arrive and depart promptly each day. When a child is waiting alone and is picked up late, she/he may become anxious.
- Provide the names of other adults who may be authorized to pick up the child.
- Follow through on agreement to provide items from home, such as diapers, formula or other supplies.
- Alert the provider of any special medical needs or dietary restrictions the child may have.
- Supply the provider with emergency phone numbers, including doctors, dentist, and other family members.
- Provide updated immunization records.
- Make payments promptly and accurately.
- Maintain a list of several providers who would be able to provide back-up care in case of illness/emergency of the provider.
- Inform the provider of significant events that might affect your child during child care hours, for example, nightmares, death of a loved one, family crisis.

FOSTERING THE ONGOING RELATIONSHIP

The following suggestions will help you to maintain an open, honest relationship with your child's provider.

- Get involved in your child's care. Your involvement shows your child that what happens to her/him is important to you. Share a skill or expertise you have with the provider and other children in her care.
- Thank your provider - often! Let her know she is important to you. Show your appreciation of your provider by remembering her birthday, holidays, etc.
- Communicate with your provider. Open communication will ward off misunderstandings. Let her know immediately when something she does is not satisfactory rather than keeping it to yourself and letting tension build.
- Take constructive criticism about your child's behavior in a positive manner.

MONITORING THE ARRANGEMENT

What to look for once you have enrolled your child...

- Does your child cry on the way to the provider's home or center and/or after you leave? Does he/she settle in as soon as you leave?
- How does the child greet you when you arrive?
- For an infant: Is he/she clean and dry when you arrive? Have bowel movements been taken care of properly?
- What does the verbal child say about his/her experiences?
- What indirect signs do you detect from him/her? (Does he/she sing a new song or do something new?)
- What are the child's habits at home? Is he/she overly cranky or irritable? Does he/she eat and sleep well?
- Has the provider/teacher dropped hints or complained about your child?
- Is there anything happening in the provider/teacher's life that may affect the child care environment (e.g., divorce, illness)?
- Do you detect a change in your provider's environmental standards?



CONCERNS

Open communication is key to a good relationship with your child's caregiver. To avoid potential problems, you should discuss any concerns or changes in the care you may have noticed with the provider or center staff. LOCATE referral specialists may also be able to help you with questions you may have concerning customary provider policies or practices.

If after talking to your caregiver you still have concerns, please call your local Office of Child Care. This is particularly important if your concerns are related to health and/or safety issues or regulations governing child care providers or centers. If you prefer, you may contact LOCATE and speak with a child care referral specialist about your concerns. The specialist will give you the telephone number of the Office of Child Care in your area.

Any concerns involving possible child abuse or neglect should be reported to your local Department of Social Services or law enforcement agency.

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

Every program should have a plan in place to prepare for any type of emergency or disaster. According to Child Care Aware of America, the following are recommended questions to ask your child care provider about their emergency preparedness plan:

- Do you have an emergency plan in place? May I see a written copy?
- In the event of severe damage to the home or center, how will my child be taken to a new and safe location?
- How will you communicate with me in case of an emergency? Make sure your caregiver always has your updated contact information.
- What will happen if my child must stay with you because of an emergency? If I am not able to pick my child up immediately, are you capable of properly caring for my child for 72 hours? Do you have a disaster kit and/or supplies for the children in your care?
- What emergency preparedness training have you and/or your staff had?
- How can I help to create or carry out the plan?
- How will I be notified when your program is re-opened?

THE MISSION OF MARYLAND FAMILY NETWORK
IS TO ENSURE THAT YOUNG CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES
HAVE THE RESOURCES TO LEARN AND SUCCEED.

OUR PROGRAMS:

LOCATE: Child Care helps parents find quality child care that meets their family's needs.

Family Support Centers help parents become economically self-sufficient and raise healthy, successful children.

Training and e-learning services help early childhood professionals improve their skills and their programs.

Technical Assistance helps programs, communities and individuals develop or expand high quality programs for children.

CONFIDENTIALITY STATEMENT

LOCATE is a free and confidential service available to any parent searching for regulated child care. The users' names, telephone numbers and email addresses are collected for follow-up purposes only and are never shared with individuals or organizations outside of Maryland Family Network.



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