
Choosing Child Care: Birth to Three

Building Bright Futures for Children

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CHOOSING CHILD CARE: Birth to Three

Like all difficult decisions, choosing child care can seem overwhelming, and this is particularly true when choosing care for children under three. The better you understand what your child's and your own personal needs are, and what is available and affordable to you, the more confident you will become in your decision-making process. This booklet will help you weigh the options you have for your child's care. It will give you tools for assessing those options, and aid you with steps for beginning your search. Finally, it will offer tips for starting your child in care, and maintaining a positive relationship with your child's provider.

Finding and choosing child care for your young child may be a challenging experience, but the child care resource and referral (CCR&R) counselors can help you in this search. Besides providing you with referrals to specific types of child care, they can answer your questions and listen to your concerns. It is comforting for parents to know that, when searching for a solution to their child care needs, someone with expertise is there to offer helpful information.

STEP ONE

Considering Options

There are four possible options of care for young children. Because each offers distinct advantages and poses potential concerns, you may want to consider more than one option before making a final decision.

The four basic types of child care are:

- 1. CENTER-BASED CARE**
- 2. FAMILY CHILD CARE**
- 3. INFORMAL CHILD CARE (relatives, friends or neighbors)**
- 4. IN-HOME CARE**

In selecting quality child care for your child, bear in mind that it not the type of care but rather the quality of the care provider and the environment that should be your determining factor.

CENTERS

Centers provide care for a number of children in a group setting within a child care facility. Children are usually grouped by age with two providers to a group. Infant/toddler centers are most often part of a larger preschool program, so children may continue on at the same program until they are old enough for kindergarten. Centers tend to be regulated, so minimum standards must be met for staffing, group size, and basic health and safety. (See insert)

Possible Advantages

- There may be teachers on staff that have studied child development.
- The program's continuity is not disrupted because of a staff person's absence, as substitutes are usually available.
- There are several providers available to handle emergency situations.

Possible Concerns

- Care can be very expensive, difficult to find, or in short supply.
- Centers have set hours and typically cannot accommodate flexible schedules.
- Babies may not be eligible for care until they are six months old, so you may need alternate arrangements until your child reaches the minimum age.
- Most centers are closed for certain holidays, vacations, and you may need to make alternate arrangements for care on those days.

FAMILY CHILD CARE

FAMILY CHILD CARE takes place in the home of the child care provider and is the most common type of care for infants and toddlers. The family child care provider may be someone you have located to care for your child, or someone to whom you were referred by a child care referral agency or family child care network. A provider may take care of a small group of children (usually up to 6), or-with one or two assistants –a larger group (Group Family Child Care) with a maximum of 12 children. Providers must meet legal requirements, which vary from state to state. In New York State, a provider who cares for more than two children must undergo a registration process.

Possible Advantages

- Family child care has a home-like atmosphere.
- Care may be less expensive than in-home or center care.
- Flexible hours and schedules are possible.
- Sometimes a provider can care for a mildly ill child.
- There may be opportunity for multi-age interaction.
- Typically, the setting has single provider for your child to relate to.

Possible Concerns

- Back-up care may be needed when the provider is ill or has a family emergency.
- The provider usually works alone, which may make the handling of emergencies more difficult.
- Taking children outdoors consistently may be difficult.

INFORMAL CHILD CARE

Relatives, Neighbors, and Friends

Informal child care is usually provided by a relative, friend or neighbor. These providers are not required to be registered as long as they do not care for more than two children who are not related to them. Informal child care can take place in the provider's home or in the child's. If you expect to use Informal care on a regular basis, you should discuss beforehand the fees* as well as hours and days for care; you should also come to an agreement about who will provide supplies that your child may need (food, clothing, toys, diapers, etc.).

Whether your child care arrangement is with a relative, friend, neighbor, you and the provider should respect whatever arrangement you have mutually agreed upon. *If you are a TANF (public assistance) recipient, special guidelines apply ask you Child Care Referral Specialist about your child care benefits – contact us at **(212) 929-6911** or **parinfo@ccinyc.org**.

Possible Advantages

- Provider is usually someone the child knows
- Hours can be flexible
- Provider may be willing to care for mildly ill child

Possible Concerns

- Provider's home has not been inspected for any regulatory requirements
- Individual may have limited training and experience in caring for children
- Child rearing styles may vary (between parent, relative or neighbor)
- These arrangements are often less stable than other child care options

IN-HOME CARE

In-home care takes place in your own home. An in-home care provider may live with your family or travel to your home each day. In-home providers may be specially trained nannies, experienced parents or grandparents, or young adults with an interest in children.

When you choose an in-home care arrangement, you become the employer, which means that you determine the hours, the responsibilities (child care and possibly other household duties), and the salary.

Possible Advantages

- Your child gets more one-on-one attention
- Child is in his/her own surroundings.
- Child can follow an individual schedule for eating, napping, and play.
- When child is ill, care is not disrupted.
- Long or irregular hours can often be accommodated.

Possible Concerns

- You may want your child to be with other children.
- If your provider is late or sick, you will be without care.
- There are no licensing standards or qualifications required for in-home providers; you must rely solely on your own judgment for hiring, evaluating or firing an employee.
- In-home care is typically the most expensive form of care.

STEP TWO

Beginning the Search

After you have reviewed your options for care and weighed the advantages and disadvantages you must consider your child's developmental needs. There are many ways to locate care for your child. Calling your local child care referral service is a good beginning, but don't forget the importance of obtaining leads from neighbors, friends, and family members. You may also consider placing an ad in your neighborhood or city newspapers.

Regardless of the type of care you choose, the steps you take when assessing the care will be similar:

THINK about the information you need to make a decision. This may include general questions such as hours of operation, number of children enrolled, or how many years' experience a provider has working with young children. You may wish to include questions about child rearing philosophy and discipline, licenses, insurance, and cost. **MAKE A LIST**

SCREEN the provider or program by telephone, but make sure that it is a convenient time for both of you to speak. You don't want to feel rushed nor should you distract the provider performing her child care duties. If the telephone screening leads you to think that the provider is competent and that this may be a possible arrangement for your child, you should schedule an appointment. **MAKE AN APPOINTMENT**

OBSERVE the teacher or provider interacting with your child and/or other children. Allow yourself plenty of time to see the facility or provider's home first-hand, or show the provider your home. If you are visiting a program outside of your home, you should examine the equipment as well as the outside space. Take notes during the conversation so that you can later discuss your concerns with the provider. If possible, visit a program more than once and at different times of the day. **TAKE A LOOK**

TALK in depth with the teacher or provider after the observation has been completed; what you learn will help you make a more informed decision. You can ask specific questions at this time and have clarified anything you didn't understand during your observation. Ask open-ended questions to get a sense of the provider's feelings about child care issues that are important to you. Some of these issues may include: how to respond to a child's cries, methods of discipline and toilet training, how to respond to various behaviors, handling emergency situations, etc. You should also ask how you will be kept abreast of daily events. **TALK A LOT!**

After speaking with the provider, have a talk with other parents who have first-hand knowledge of the provider's experience with young children. Again, you should ask open-ended as well as specific questions.

Did you find that the provider:

- Has a warm, positive personality and appears to enjoy being with babies and young children?
- Is flexible, patient and understanding?
- Responds quickly to a child's physical needs?
- Understands different stages of development and related needs?
- Values parents as experts on their own children?
- Has an approach and attitude toward children that fosters individual development and self-esteem?
- Has safe sleeping and play areas for babies?
- Practices cleanliness? (Especially in regards to diapering, food areas, toys, etc.)
- Has sufficient safety equipment (fire extinguishers, outlet covers, first aid kit, etc.)?
- Has space for quiet time?

STEP THREE

Helping Your Child get Started

Once you have found a child care arrangement, you need to consider how you will help your child make the transition to being in someone else's care. At various stages of development, toddlers react differently to separation and meeting new people. A child under six months of age can usually adapt quite easily to new people and new situations. Babies between seven and nine months of age often have a harder time adjusting, because they are so connected to their parents that new situations may frighten them. Toddlers may feel alternately independent and scared in new situations.

Whatever your child's age or stage is when care begins, there are steps you can take that will help ease the transition for both of you. Regardless of the type of care you choose, you should plan to spend time with your child and the provider together before you return to work. This may mean hiring the in-home provider for a week before you leave her alone with your child, or staying several mornings with your child at the out-of-home setting.

STARTING THE CARE ARRANGEMENT

Regardless of the type of arrangement you select, it is important that you help your child adjust in steps. For example, during the first week, you may spend the whole first day with your child and the provider, leave for a short time on the second day, and then gradually lengthen the time of separation each day thereafter. This can benefit both you and your child, for it will give you the chance to observe your child's interactions with the provider, get a sense of the daily routine, and show the provider or teacher your methods of comforting, encouraging, and disciplining your child. It will also help your child feel safe while becoming familiar with the new surroundings and/or provider.

When you are ready to leave your child, there are some ways to make the transition easier:

- If your child is in an infant, make sure all the necessary items (pacifier, bottles, blankets, etc.) are readily available to the provider.
- Make sure that the provider knows you are leaving, in case your child needs support.
- Say goodbye clearly to both your child and the provider.
- Never sneak away from your child.
- Confirm a good time for you to call and check in on your child's status.

Maintaining a good relationship with the provider or teacher helps to assure the best care for your child. The challenging task of caring for your young child calls for mutual support, including respect and trust two important aspects of building and maintaining a positive relationship. It doesn't happen overnight, but there are ways to foster a successful, cooperative relationship. Make sure that you arrive at the agreed upon time. Ensure that your child has all the diapers, food, etc., needed for the day. If you are taking your child out of your home, plan on spending a few minutes at the beginning and end of each day to exchange information on your child's mood, how the child slept, ate, etc.

It is important to keep the lines of communication open, so set aside time with your provider at least once a month to talk in detail about how things are going. If something is bothering you or you have a question about something that happened while you were away, bring it up promptly. You and the provider should be open to suggestions for improving the care and life of your child.

NOTE

Early childhood programs have different policies about how to handle the adjustment period. Some ask parents to stay with a child for the first day; others ask parents to be available for several days. Regardless of the program's general policy, it is important for you to consider your child's individual needs. Be sure to discuss with the teacher how you want to handle your child's adjustment to the center.

Some general guidelines are:

- Talk with your child about the kinds of activities she/he will engage in at the center of provider home.
- Plan on spending some time at the center with your child. If you cannot be available, ask another trusted adult—a relative or friend—to stay with the child.

When you and the provider or teacher agrees that your child is ready to stay on her/his own:

- Make sure they know where you can be reached.
- Tell your child and the provider/teacher exactly when you will return. Since young children cannot tell time, it is helpful to give your child a concrete guideline, such as after your snack or when you come back from the park.
- Say goodbye directly-never sneak out while your child is involved in play.

STEP FOUR

Written Agreements

WRITTEN AGREEMENTS

When you have found a provider or program that you like and trust, make a clear agreement regarding the conditions of care. Good child care arrangements require open communication between parent and provider. The more explicit you are with one another, the less likely you will be to run into misunderstandings that might disrupt your child's care.

Ask the provider or program to give you the following information in writing:

- Regular hours, fees and payment policies
- Overtime policy and charges
- Vacation and holiday schedule
- Names and phone numbers of substitute providers (if applicable).
- Policies on food, clothing and equipment—who providers what, and when.
- Emergency backup plan. Is there another adult on call? Does the provider or program have contact with a local doctor?
- Sick child care policy.
- Under what circumstances will you are expected to pick up your child early, or not bring the child to the provider/program?
- Are there circumstances under which care is provided for your child during an illness?

Make sure the provider or program has the following written information about you and your child before you leave the child in their care:

- Your full name, address, and phone number.
- Your work address, phone number, title and schedule (and the same information on your spouse, if applicable.)
- The name, address, and phone number of your pediatrician or health center, and their hospital affiliation.
- At least two emergency contacts: relatives, friends, or neighbors who can be called if you cannot be reached.
- The names of any people who have permission to pick up your child. Be sure to tell the provider/program how to notify them in case you change your established pick-up arrangement.
- Appropriate medical information about your child, i.e. allergies, special conditions, medications.
- Your child's current eating and sleeping patterns. **Ask the provider if forms to cover these situations are available. If not, discuss using the enclosed forms.**

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

The single most important factor to consider is how you feel about the child care arrangement you have selected. Whether you have chosen a nanny, day care center, nursery school, or family child care provider, do you feel confident that your child will be given a safe and caring environment? Remember that you are the best judge of what you and your child need. **TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS!**

In summing up all the information you have gathered, consider carefully the bottom line: what does it all add up to? No arrangement is perfect if every way, but it is essential that you choose a place or person who you feel treat your child with respect.

About Center for Children's Initiatives (CCI) Parent Services

CCI's Parent Services is designed to help you make the best possible child care arrangements. Our Referral Specialists use their knowledge and experience to assist over 3,000 parents each year with the challenge of finding and choosing care.

We do this by working closely with child care practitioners across New York City to understand their capabilities and programs and then sharing that information with families, providing them with the latest information and a comprehensive view of all their options.

By contacting our Referral Specialists, we can help you understand what child care options are available for your family, what it will cost, and how to pay for it.

Do you have questions about how you can develop your best child care plan? Please contact our referral specialists at **212.929.6911** or **parinfo@ccinyc.org** for more information.

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