

Considerations in the Child-care Decision

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Parents have at least three options to consider when making alternative care arrangements for their children:

- Caregiver in the home
- Family child care
- Center-based care

Each alternative has its advantages and disadvantages. Choosing the right option for your child depends on your child's needs, your family income, and the feelings or attitudes that you have about child care.

Caregiver in the home

Some families may decide to hire a caregiver to come into their home to provide care for their young child.

Children are able to remain in the home environment and can continue to play with familiar neighborhood children. There may be more time for adult/child interaction, and children will not be exposed to other children's infections.

However, finding alternate care when the caregiver is ill, minimum or no supervision of the caregiver, lack of planned activities for the child, potential loneliness and isolation of the caregiver, and limited educational experiences may present problems for the family.

Family-care homes

Family day-care home providers offer care for children in the homes of the caregivers. Some parents select family day-care homes because the homelike atmosphere may be less

frightening to the child and because children will have a single caregiver.

In family day-care homes, children often have the chance to play with children of different ages so they can learn from the older children and help teach the younger ones. The home environment may be similar to the lifestyles and values of the child's family.

But, the caregiver will be unsupervised, may have less training, there may be less variety in equipment, materials, and activities, and there may be more children present than one adult can reasonably care for. Making alternate care arrangements may be a problem when the caregiver is sick.

Center-based care

Center-based care is usually more expensive than family child care, but less expensive than care in the child's home by a single caregiver.

In child-care centers, it is more likely that the center is licensed or regulated, that the child will be constantly supervised, and that a wide

variety of equipment, materials, activities, and programs will be available.

It is also more likely that the staff is well trained and that a caregiver will always be available. The program usually has an educational focus.

However, children will be expected to adjust to a schedule, there will be larger groups of children, and there will be more than one caregiver responsible for the care of your child.

Making the child-care decision

In making the child-care decision, there are several factors to think about.

First, who will care for your child? What are the caregiver's qualifications?

Most parents look for a warm, caring person who has a good understanding of child development and guidance and discipline. They expect a safe and healthy home or center, with enough toys and educational materials for all of the children.

Knowing first aid and emergency procedures and serving appealing and nutritious foods are also important. Are there enough adults to meet children's needs?

Second, are the daily activities provided for the children appropriate for them?

In addition to having their basic needs met, children should feel secure and confident to feel and express their emotions.

Children should have daily opportunities for indoor and outdoor play, to express their creativity in art and block

play, and to experience books and music.

The home or center should be language rich, with many opportunities to listen and speak to others. Children should receive individual attention and have time and space to play by themselves or just be alone.

Third, what is the facility like?

Because children will spend a major part of their day at this site, it is important that the setting is safe, attractive, and functional for the care of children.

There should be space for children to play safely indoors and out. Appropriate play equipment and materials should be readily available to the children.

Ask if the home or center is licensed, which means that it meets minimum state standards for health and safety. Some homes or centers are also accredited, which means they meet even higher standards of quality.

Fourth, do you and the potential child-care provider share a common approach to child care?

The discipline policy should be acceptable to you. Attitudes about toilet training and feeding and eating patterns should be consistent. Business details, such as fees and financial assistance, should be clear.

Finally, there should be an open door policy so that parents are welcome at any time to visit without an appointment in advance.

Hints for a good start

Before a final decision is made, be sure to take the child for a visit to the home or center to meet the caregiver. This will help the child know what to expect and make separation from the parent easier. It will also give you a better chance to see how well the program fits your child.

Once child care begins, make visits to the facility at times when the care-

giver is not expecting you. In this way, you'll be able to see what your child typically experiences during the day.

Be sure to talk to your child about what he or she did during the day and what the caregiver did and said. Be aware of your child's feelings about the home or center. Is your child eager and happy to go to child care in the morning and happy to return home in the evening?

If your child's eating and sleeping patterns change drastically, there could be reason for concern. Other possible signs of concern include if your child appears bored or tired, starts thumb sucking or bed wetting, becomes afraid to let you out of sight, or cries when taken to the home or center.

A parent should talk with the child-care provider(s) to assess how the child is adjusting to the home or center. Not every place, no matter how high the quality of care provided, can meet the needs of every child.

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