

**RESOURCES
ON CALL**



The
Child Care Kit

*A comprehensive
guide to finding,
evaluating,
and choosing
quality
child care*

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CHILD CARE OPTIONS

Before you begin looking at programs, it is important to know your options! Two types of licensed or regulated programs provide child care outside of your home: Family Day Care and Child Care Centers. Caregivers are licensed by the Office for Children in Massachusetts. Both options offer many positive features - the right one for you and your child is the one that feels most comfortable.

Family Day Care

Family day care is offered in a caregiver's home for a group of no more than six children, often of mixed ages. A family day care setting offers a home-like atmosphere.

A provider who is devoted to his/her work will have toys and equipment for all ages in his/her care. Television is kept to a minimum. S/he recognizes the importance of play and finds ways to center the day around it. Cooking can serve as a beginning lab course in math as she and the children measure the flour for homemade biscuits. A walk around the block can serve as a lesson in observing and talking about the natural world.

A good provider will have a definite pattern to the day, which children can anticipate. The normal rhythm of the household and neighborhood, (older children coming home from school, mail being delivered, etc.) are woven into the children's routine.

Another important aspect to family day care is a sense of partnership between you and the provider. You are both caring for your child, and there needs to be communication and accord. Your child's caregiver can be an important source of support and information for you.

Child Care Centers

Center-based care is more formal and larger in scale than family day care. Centers vary greatly in size. Small ones may take as few as fifteen children, and large programs can enroll up to two hundred and fifty.

Child care centers have traditionally grouped children by age, with children "moving up" to the next group when they are ready. The ratio of adults to children will vary with the age of the children.

When looking at center based infant care, check for caregivers who do a lot of rocking and holding, and space designed for playing, rolling and crawling. Toddlers also need specially designed environments that give them the freedom to explore in a safe setting.

The routine at day care centers is usually well-defined. If there is not a schedule posted, you can ask to see one. Important activities include art projects, music, science projects, sand and water play, dress-up and block corners.

Your child may have several caregivers in the course of the day. Try to arrange to have your child's primary caregiver present either at drop-off or pick-up to facilitate communication. The Center's Director or Head Teacher will also be a source of both information and communication for you.

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Adapted with permission from The Working Parents Handbook

WHAT'S RIGHT ABOUT DAY CARE

I remember the exact moment I realized my toddler's day care center was doing a lot more than just keeping him while I worked.

It was five o'clock on a Friday afternoon, and I was picking up Ben from the child care cooperative we had joined several weeks earlier. The parents gathered in a circle for a meeting and I sat down with him on my lap. To my surprise, he didn't want to stay there. Instead, he got up and cruised around the room, settling down to cuddle first with one caregiver and then another, looking at me and smiling the whole time. He was obviously having a wonderful time with the people who took care of him during the day.

It was clear to me right then that my 18-month-old had entered a new phase of development. Thanks to day care, he was learning to trust other adults and form relationships with them. Just as important, he saw the world as a good place where people besides his parents cared about him.

I didn't know it at the time, but we were experiencing what experts call "Aunt Mary syndrome." That's when "caregivers become so close to the children they care for that they almost become part of the extended family - like a dear Aunt Mary," explains Barbara Bowman, president of the Erikson Institute for Child Development, a Chicago-based graduate school and research center, who coined the phrase. "We now know through research that children benefit greatly from the consistent relationships they form with adults besides their parents."

Another mom who sees the benefits of her child's day care attachments is Tricia Crimminger, a public relations specialist for Roper Hospital in Charleston, South Carolina. Her three-year-old son, John, has attended the Roper - St. Francis Child Care Center since he was two months old.

"I always knew this center was where I wanted my child to be," Crimminger says. "In fact, when I found out I was pregnant, I called my husband, my mother and the director of the center, in that order."

Since enrolling her son, Crimminger says she feels she's joined a huge supportive, loving family. "I can talk to the staff members at the center about anything," she explains. "They're all like John's aunts. In fact, when he turned one, his caregiver, who'd taken care of him since he was two months old, came to his birthday party. She's a gospel singer and she sang *You Are So Beautiful* to him. I really felt we were part of her family, and she was part of ours. Now even though my son is not in the infant room anymore, we still go by to see her. She's always so happy to see John. They have a special bond."

Day Care Under Fire

Although the news media often concentrates on negative findings, children who get quality care benefit tremendously from it. Clearly, when child care is provided in a loving, nurturing environment children blossom in ways they might not otherwise. Debby Cryer, a researcher at the University of North Carolina, feels that "parents have to become better informed consumers, and that society has to support quality child care more than it does now."

Kids learn important skills

Experts agree that when day care is good, children stand to reap significant advantages. “Preschoolers who attend a high quality center or family day care home, usually have many more chances for socialization than kids who stay home,” notes Cryer. “They can be exposed to more ideas, experiences and people than they otherwise would be.”

In addition, long-term studies such as the one conducted by Tiffany Field, Ph.D., professor of psychology pediatrics and psychiatry at the University of Miami, show that kids in high quality care not only learn to get along with others, they develop leadership abilities and a general sense of well-being that extends beyond the preschool years.

Other research shows that children make developmental strides when they have an opportunity to interact with children of different ages, notes Linda G. Miller, Ed.D, director of education for KinderCare Learning Centers. “They learn a lot from watching and listening to each other,” she says. “Young ones particularly like hanging around with older children and seeing what they can do.”

Indeed, increasing competence and mastering the give-and-take of everyday interactions is becoming more of a necessity as kids prepare for kindergarten. “In the old days children were expected to learn social skills, such as sharing and taking turns in kindergarten,” says Barbara Bowman. “But times have changed. Now kindergartens are full of kids who have already acquired these skills in day care. A child coming to kindergarten without basic social skills is already lagging behind. Even young children need a social group.”

Sarah Albee, a senior editor for the Children's Television Workshop in New York City and the mother of two-year-old Sam, agrees. She says she chose to send Sam to the Brooklyn Friends Family Center when he turned 18 months old rather than continue with an in-home caregiver.

“It wasn't that his nanny wasn't working out. She was great,” says Albee. “Sending him to the Family Center was a philosophical decision. I wanted him to have lots of friends to play with, and not just spend his days in the apartment with one person.” She's been delighted with the decision. “I love to watch him there,” she says. “When I drop him off, he's always happy to see his friends, and even though he can't really talk yet--he's just on the verge - I watch him playing with his little pals and they jabber to each other, all excited. I can see he's getting along just fine.”

Intellectual opportunities abound

Not only does good child care help kids socially, it also cultivates cognitive skills. “Studies have shown that children in high-quality centers have enhanced vocabularies, speak more clearly and learn to listen to and follow directions,” says Bowman.

Experts point out that quality care also contributes to school readiness by providing educational materials such as books for encouraging pre-reading skills and water tables for imaginative play and developing pre-math skills, such as measuring.

Indeed, research shows that the benefits of good child care can have long-lasting effects: In one study, conducted at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill over 100 high risk children were tracked from infancy through age 15. Half attended a high-quality preschool program while the other half stayed home or had other arrangements until kindergarten. The investigators found that by age eight, the youngsters who attended preschool scored 10 points higher on standardized reading tests and about five points higher on math tests, compared to the other group. And at age 15, those who had

attended preschool still outscored the other children by about five points in reading and math.

Children have fun

With all this talk about socialization and cognitive skills, it's important to remember one key point about high-quality centers: They are fun places to be, designed to be enjoyed by the children who attend.

“Day care isn't the place where kids should hear 'No! No! No!' all the time,” says Bowman. “In good day care, children can explore and be active and there's always someone paying attention.”

As Sarah Albee puts it, “Sam's center has two gymnasiums and a rooftop playground--fenced in, of course, where they set up wading pools in the summer. There are rabbits to play with, the receptionist to visit on another floor, plus lots of friends and toys and people who love him all day long. On the days when he and I are home together, when he's sick or on snow days, often a trip to the laundry room is the best I can offer for entertainment.”

Even children themselves see the advantages of good child care. I was taking a walk the other day with my six-year-old daughter, Stephanie, who attended a day care center from the time she was 18 months old. She was talking about a friend of hers who has been having a difficult time adjusting to kindergarten and doesn't seem to have fun when friends come to her house to play.

“What do you think the problem is?” I asked.

“*I know* what the problem is,” said Stephanie. “She never got to go to day care. That's where you learn how to be a friend and have fun with other kids.”

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IS GRANDMA ALWAYS THE BEST BABYSITTER?

For many stressed-out working moms, leaving the kids with a close relative offers great peace of mind. After all, who could be more attentive to your child than your own mother or a favorite aunt. Right? Wrong, according to a recently released landmark study, the first in-depth look at family day care in over a decade.

Researchers of the five-year *Study of Children in Family Child Care and Relative Care* observed 226 home based child care situations involving related or unrelated providers. Here are the surprising discoveries:

Relatives are not always better.

“Just because the provider is a relative doesn't mean it's going to be a good situation for the child,” says Ellen Galinsky, co-president of the Families and Work Institute, in New York City, and project director of the study. The key to high quality care is a warm, caring relationship between child and provider. A child is no more likely to form a secure attachment with a relative than with another caregiver.

What distinguishes a good provider is the degree of commitment that he or she has to caring for children - or what the study calls “intentionality.” explains Galinsky, “Whether or not Grandma *wants* to be taking care of kids is critical.” Although many relatives are excellent providers, there are some who may view baby-sitting as a favor to the mother - not something that they want to be doing.

When it comes to the number of children, less isn't always more.

The study found that providers who have *more* children in their charge, three to six at a time as opposed to one or two, often give kids more personal attention than caregivers with fewer. This is because most of these providers have chosen child care as a profession; and as a result, they have more training and take it more seriously than those who may be watching fewer kids but are not as committed to the job.

Being regulated is often more important than being related.

Contrary to what most parents think, regulation by a state's licensing system - not blood relationship - is what most seems to affect the quality of care that a provider will give. “A regulated provider is more likely to take an active interest in the field by taking courses, and to plan activities for children,” says Betty Cassidy, vice-president of the National Association for Family Child Care.

Based on these findings, the Families and Work Institute suggests that you look for the following qualities when selecting a caregiver

- **Sensitivity and caring toward your child** A warm attachment is likely to have a positive impact on a child's feelings of security; a poor one can be harmful.

- **Attentiveness and responsiveness toward your child** When caregivers really listen to kids and encourage self-expression, the children are more likely to display higher levels of cognitive growth.
- **A desire to take care of children** A provider should be in the business of caring for children because he or she truly enjoys it.
- **A daily schedule of activities** The provider's approach should involve advance planning, and the day's activities should be a good mix of the creative, physical, and educational.
- **An ongoing interest in the field** A committed caregiver will seek training in and read about child care.
- **A support system of other providers** It is beneficial for a caregiver to have a group of other caregivers - such as a child care association - to turn to for advice.
- **Adherence to standard business practice** A professional would, for example, make sure that your child has been immunized, and have a schedule for being paid.
- **Regulation** The best caregivers tend to be licensed by or registered with their states. This usually means the home has been inspected for safety, and they may have attended child care workshops.

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Reprinted with permission from "Is Grandma Always the Best Babysitter" by Eileen Ogintz in Parents Magazine, September

GETTING THE BASICS BY PHONE

You've received your child care referrals from Resources on Call. After looking them over, your next step is to begin calling the programs. Try calling family day care providers during naptime or in the evening. Centers usually have the director or head teacher available to talk during business hours. We have provided the contact person for a child care center. You can save a lot of time by asking potential caregivers key questions - eliminating obvious mismatches without having to make time consuming visits.

Your initial call is an opportunity to:

- / Get an overview of the program
- / Get an initial impression of the provider or director
- / Give the provider or director an initial sense of you and your child care needs

You'll want to begin by introducing yourself and briefly describing your situation - your child's age, the type of care you need (full-time, part-time, etc.), the drop-off and pick-up time and any special requirements you might have.

Ask for a description of the program - How many children are there? What is the maximum cared for? What are the ages of the children in the program? How many are full-time? How many come part-time?

Ask the provider or director to describe the character of the program - is it: Highly organized? Laid back? Active and energetic? Calm and quiet? Are activities divided by age group or geared for mixed ages?

Does the provider or teacher work alone, or with a co-teacher or aide? If there is an aide: Is the aide always present? Only present at special times (just mornings or when there is more than one infant, etc.?) Only there when acting as a "substitute" during the provider's absence or illness? If the provider works alone, is there back-up in case of an emergency?

Ask about the location - quiet street, busy avenue, private home, office building, etc.

Above all, don't make snap judgments. Remember that the person at the other end of the line *may* have six little ones doing all sorts of things to get her attention. Even a nurturing person can sound short on the phone if she's distracted.

If the phone conversation sounds promising, make arrangements to visit in person.

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By June Solnit Sale and Kit Kollenberg

PLANNING A VISIT

No issue is more pressing for working parents than that of choosing a child care program. But while it's relatively easy to rate a program in terms of its convenience to you - including price, location, and hours- it is considerably more difficult to determine whether a program meets the needs of your child. The best way to make that decision is to spend time in a classroom during a regular operating day. Keep in mind the best time to visit is in the morning. Try to include drop-off time in your observations so you can see how the children, parents, and caregivers interact.

Here's a list of qualities you should look for in a first-rate program:

The proper environment. A quick look around ought to reveal that the home or center is clean, safe, and well organized. There should be plenty of toys and supplies, such as blocks, books, and art materials. In a child care center there is usually a playhouse or a special space where children can “keep house.” All of the toys and supplies should be clean and in good repair.

Comfort with the parents. When you enter the room, the caregiver should greet you. Your conversations with her, whether about important or trivial matters, should be comfortable. When children are arriving or departing, the relationship between the caregiver and parents should be an easy, friendly one, with both sides willing to share information and insights with each other.

A feel for children. A good day care provider understands how important it is to respond to children as individuals with varying needs. When she sees them heading through the classroom doorway, she should call all of the children by name and invite them into the room in a pleasant way. She has empathy for the clingy child and enthusiasm for the outgoing, active one. You can generally sense when an atmosphere is warm and friendly and when children are at ease with a teacher.

A language rich environment. Between the ages of two and three, your child will make giant strides in language ability, given the chance. The best day care providers know this and talk and read to children in a way that encourages them to respond.

A structured day. All children, but particularly two-year-olds, need predictability and routine. Children in a good center seem to have some expectation about what will happen in the course of a day. In addition to structured activities, the schedule should include some time for children to follow their own pursuits.

If your daycare program possesses all of these qualities, you've found a situation that will work for your child - and for you - through the preschool years.

WHAT TYPE OF CHILDCARE SHOULD I CHOOSE?

Choosing a childcare program is a subjective decision. Remember that you know your child's character and needs better than anybody else and therefore you as a parent is best able to determine whether a home environment or a "school" environment is best.

Safe, high quality care can be found in both family day care and childcare centers – neither type is inherently “better” than the other. What is important is finding the program that is right for *your* child.

A Director's Perspective On Center Care

“I would like to comment on the subject of child care center. I am a childcare director and I strongly believe that a child care center with a good reputation is the best way to go for working parents. The reasons I feel this way are as follows:

- Children can attend from birth until school age, or beyond.
- The center offers a routine; children know the rules, surroundings and the other children.
- The childcare center is always there. The center doesn't call in sick or want days off.
- Activities at centers are great for socialization and self esteem; more kids mean more friends.
- A childcare center is focused completely on children, and nothing else. There are set break times for staff to use the phone, take lunch breaks or time off.”

P. Riedel, Mendham, New Jersey

A Parent's Perspective On Family Day Care

“Since the realities of life force many of us to entrust the care of our children to „strangers,” it seemed desirable for my wife and I to place our son in a setting that resembled our home as much as possible. We were referred to several providers and interviewed three. Although we liked two of the women, we choose the provider whom we felt more comfortable with her personality and style. It ended up being a “gut feeling.” She cares for 5 other children in the, one of them being an infant but 6 months older than our son. She is flexible with respect to hours and very accommodating to our son's nutritional requirements. Most importantly, I can call her anytime during the day, or when I have questions regarding his behavior and eating habits. She has become an extension of our family!”

P. Brookes, Phoenix, Arizona

CHOOSING GOOD CHILD CARE

No matter what type of child care you consider, look for these basic ingredients of quality:

- a safe, protective environment
- the opportunity for your child to form a stable relationships with the caring adult(s) and other children
- and adequate stimulation that is appropriate to your child's age

Once you have identified several child care alternatives, visit each program, observe it carefully, and talk to the adults who will provide the care. Do they like their work? Do they have special training that helps them understand child development? Do they plan activities every day?

Providers you meet should invite you to drop in at any time and encourage you to take part in activities and decisions about the program. Head Start, the nation's successful early childhood program, attributes much of its success to parental involvement.

Plan to visit at least two programs to learn what is important to you before making a choice. Personal reactions vary greatly. When you visit each program, take enough time to observe it carefully.

SAFETY AND HEALTH ISSUES

- Child care settings should be safe, and designed to encourage children to engage in different activities, both alone and with other children. Look for fences around outside play areas and well-constructed playground equipment on a forgiving surface. Dangerous and toxic substances should be locked out of children's reach and electrical outlets and radiators should be covered.
- Handwashing is the most important defense against the spread of disease. Children and adults should wash their hands before eating, after touching their mouths and noses, after toileting. Staff should wash before feeding, handling food, diapering,.
- The identity of the parent or guardian responsible for picking up the child should be well established with the caregiver.

LOOK AT CHILD CARE FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE

- Look at the program from the perspective of your child. Is it bright and cheerful? Plenty of toys, games, and arts-and-crafts materials? Are they easy to see and reach?
- Are the children absorbed in what they are doing? Listen for the sounds of children talking and playing. Do they sound happy?
- Are adults talking to children respectfully, encouraging them to ask questions and express their thoughts and feelings?
- Are providers holding, talking, and singing to infants? Getting down on the floor to play with toddlers and preschoolers? Helping school-age children develop skills, talents, and creativity?
- Avoid programs where children run to any adult who enters the room or wander aimlessly from one place to another.

CHILD CARE CHECKLIST

Finding the right child care program involves spending time talking to providers, visiting homes or centers, and evaluating programs. The time and effort you spend will ensure that your child is in a situation that helps him/her to grow and thrive and that you can go to work feeling confident about the quality of care.

You can use the checklist below to evaluate family day care homes and child care centers. Before you start, explain to the caregiver or director that you're using the checklist to help you remember what you've seen. You may wish to leave a blank copy for the caregiver to look over later. If your child is already in child care, you can use the checklist to evaluate his or her current situation.

The list is quite comprehensive and may at first appear a little overwhelming. Read through it and prioritize - decide what aspects are most important to you. Remember, no center or day care home is likely to meet every qualification on the list.

Apply the *“five senses test”* whenever you visit a child care program. Your senses can tell you a lot!

- ™ Take a big whiff - does the place smell good?
- ™ Check the menus, look at the snacks -are they appetizing and nutritious?
- ™ Consider the visual appeal - is children's artwork displayed, and if so, is it individualized?
- ™ Does the room have a pleasant hum, or does it sound wild, slightly out of control, with lots of yelling by the teachers?
- ™ Finally, checkout the overall feel of the place - are the materials the children work with appealing? Are there soft, comfortable places for children to take breaks?

Above all, trust your “gut feelings” and ask yourself, “Would I want to spend my days here?”

SUGGESTIONS FOR USING THE CHECKLIST

- / Plan to visit at least two programs
- / Plan to visit each program for at least one hour
- / Bring this checklist along to refer to
- / Most of the information you need can be obtained through observation and casual conversation with the provider or teacher
- / Jot down notes on a piece of paper to help you remember details
- / Re-visit or call if you have questions or are confused about aspects of the program

As part of your visit, make an appointment to talk with the caregiver for about fifteen minutes after you've had time to observe the program. This may have to be during the children's naptime, with a follow-up conversation by telephone.

THE CAREGIVER: *Caregivers are the most important factor in the quality of care.*

The Caregiver(s) should:

- have some training/experience in child care, child development, or early childhood education.
- continue to learn about children by reading books and articles, taking courses, and/or belonging to a professional organization.
- have good character references. A background check has been done if your state requires one.
- be warm, affectionate, and seem to enjoy being with children.
- pay attention to the children and interact with them, rather than chatting with other caregivers or attending to personal things.
- use a pleasant tone of voice and talk a lot to the children, including babies and toddlers.
- provide supervision to suit the age and abilities of the child - very close supervision for infants and toddlers, more independence for three and four year-olds.
- never leave children unsupervised.
- be easy to talk to and work with.
- be energetic, in good physical health, keep up with the children.
- plan on staying in the child care profession so there is low staff turnover.

EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND DISCIPLINE

- Reasonable discipline is maintained through careful supervision, clear limits, age-appropriate explanations, and use of “time out.” No spanking or corporal punishment is ever used, nor is harsh discipline such as shouting, shaming or withholding of food.
- Caregivers avoid conflicts between children by listening and watching carefully so that they can step in early, before the situation escalates.
- Caregivers appropriately use praise and attention to encourage cooperation and helpfulness.
- There is a pleasant, generally happy tone in the group much of the day. Caregivers show warmth and affection by smiling, talking to, and hugging children. Infants and toddlers are held often.
- Caregivers are patient when annoying and unanticipated events happen, such as spills at the table or accidents with toileting.
- Caregivers are able to talk with parents about discipline methods, and are willing to work with parents and other staff to find ways to solve a child's problems.

PLAY ACTIVITIES

- Toys are organized so that they are easy to find and easy to put away.
- Children - including babies and toddlers - have easy access to some safe toys kept for them on open shelves or organized boxes.
- There are age-appropriate toys and games including:
 - ™ grasping toys for infants; nesting cups for toddlers; and puzzles, small building toys, and safe scissors for older children.
 - ™ safe and easy-to-use art materials, such as non-toxic crayons, paints, and play dough, so that children can create their own work as soon as they are able.
 - ™ records for listening, singing along and dancing to - as well as musical toys and instruments. The caregiver sings simple songs with children of all ages.
 - ™ building toys, such as blocks, toy people, cars, and other accessories to enhance imaginary play.
 - ™ soft toys and dolls, toy dishes, and dress-up clothes for imaginary play.
 - ™ clean sand and water for play outdoors, and sometimes indoors.
 - ™ challenging materials, such as scissors or toys with many pieces. These are introduced as children are ready for them. A caregiver stays with the children while they use them.
- There is enough safe, crawling space to encourage infant and toddler exploration of their environment.
- Space is provided for children to play alone or in small groups, protected from the pressure and competition of other children.
- There are rugs and soft, comfortable furniture for the children to relax on.
- Colorful pictures of everyday things are hung at the child's eye level without the use of sharp objects such as tacks.
- Children's artwork is displayed where it is visible to children.

FACILITY OPERATION AND POLICIES

- The indoor care-giving area is large enough for the group, and is clearly organized so that children know where different activities take place.
- The children play outdoors in a safe area every day, except in bad weather.
- There is a schedule that covers the basic care routines and play periods (both indoors and outdoors), including some daily planned activities, like story time for preschoolers or singing time for babies. An alternative activity is available for children who do not want to join the group activity.
- There are substitute caregivers with whom the children are familiar, who are knowledgeable about the program, and who are available when the main caregiver is absent.

SAFETY

- Electrical outlets and heaters are covered, and stairs have safety gates.
- Equipment is maintained to ensure safety, and there is enough space for active physical play outdoors (and to some degree, indoors) for all age groups.
- Cleaning fluids, medicines, and other harmful substances are stored in locked cabinets out of the reach of children.
- The outdoor play area is fenced-in or enclosed and cleared of debris and poisonous plants.
- The outdoor area is protected from animal contamination, including covering the sandbox when not in use.
- There are fire extinguishers in the building and an adequate number of working smoke detectors.
- Emergency numbers for the fire station, rescue squad, police, poison control, etc. are posted near the telephone.
- There is an emergency exit plan so that the caregiver can get all the children out quickly. Fire drills are held monthly, so that children and caregivers know what to do in case of an emergency.
- Safety restraints and car seats are used every time a child is in a car, bus, van, or other moving vehicle.

MANAGEMENT POLICIES

- There is an “open door” policy for parents: you are welcome to visit at any time of the day.
- The facility is registered or licensed if required.
- Policies covering fees, hours of operation, procedure if a child becomes ill, vacations, and meals are available.
- Information about the program including discipline methods used, the children's schedule of activities, and weekly menus is available to you.
- The caregiver will regularly report to you about your child's activities and interests while at the center or family day care home.
- The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), has an accreditation system for child care centers that are willing to meet high standards. Ask the centers you visit whether they are involved in the NAEYC accreditation process.

HEALTH AND NUTRITION

- Telephone numbers of parents and another relative or friend are recorded and are easily accessible for contact in an emergency.
- Parents are told immediately about any accident that occurs. They are also told about any contagious illnesses in the group.
- Caregivers wash their hands with soap and water each time they change a diaper or toilet a child and before they prepare or serve food to prevent the spread of germs.
- The caregiver will give the child medicine only with a parent's permission, and following precise written instructions.
- Wholesome, nutritious meals and snacks are served daily, on a suitable schedule.
- If a caregiver provides food, weekly menus are posted where parents can see them. Caregivers also discuss a child's eating habits with parents, and make note of any allergies or other special food needs.
- Babies are held while being bottle fed. Babies and toddlers are not put to bed with bottles; this can cause tooth decay and ear infections.
- Caregivers supervise a suitable nap/rest time. and provide each child with a cot or bed with clean linen. Quiet activities are planned for non-nappers.

REFERENCES: *Always check references! Try to get specific descriptions*

- How did s/he handle feeding, discipline, napping?
- Did s/he have to deal with any emergencies? How were they handled?
- What did you like best about him/her? What did you like least?

INFANT CARE

Looking for childcare for an infant involves some special considerations. Obviously, a great music curriculum or new slide in the playground won't be of much interest right now. What is most important is finding a provider who enjoys your baby and is comfortable communicating with you about him. Since your child is too young to tell you about her day, you'll need to rely on her caregiver to let you know about her experiences and moods. You'll want to find a provider who is experienced in caring for babies and is knowledgeable about infants and their patterns of development. Most of all, you'll want a provider who handles and interacts with the baby in a way that is loving and responsive.

Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, of Children's Hospital in Boston, has this advice for parents looking for infant care:

"In evaluating day care for an infant, you will want to watch for consistency of caregiving behavior, the emotional investment from the caregiver, and the ability of each caregiver to respect the individuality of the baby. The qualities of warmth and empathy are the most critical thing in any caregiver. Does she respect each baby in her care? Watch her when she holds the baby to see if she observes and adjusts her rhythms to the baby's. Is she sensitive to each child's varying needs for food, a diaper change, sleep and playful interactions.

Next I'd want to know whether the caregiver can also respect and nurture you as involved parents. Can she allow you time to tell her what your baby has been like at home the evening before? Will she sit down to tell you about your baby's day when you pick him up? I would look for a person who can understand your anguish (at leaving your child) and can accept your reasons for going back to work. The sort of person you want would say „You know, I think he's about to start to walk,“ instead of, „He just walked for me today.“*

Although it can be difficult to think about leaving your baby in someone else's care, many, many families have found that their provider has not only nurtured their children, but has also been a tremendous source of information, support and reassurance for parents as they work together in "sharing the caring."

* Brazelton, T. Berry. *Touchpoints*. Reading Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley

STARTING NEW CHILD CARE

For a young child, any change in his daily routine is a challenge, and entering day care certainly qualifies as a change.

Before your child starts day care, ask the caregiver how she makes new kids feel comfortable. If you believe that her methods may not work for your child, here is a way to acclimate him to his new environment that is recommended by Diane Lusk, of the Meeting House Childcare Center, in Newton, Massachusetts. You will need to keep your schedule flexible for the first week or so, but the long-term benefits will be worth the short-term effort.

- **First morning**
Come prepared to stay until lunchtime. Then take your child home and give him lunch and a nap there.
- **Second morning**
Stay for an hour or so, leave for a brief time, then return. Take your child home before lunch again. "You're showing him that this is a place that people leave and come back to," Lusk says.
- **Third morning**
Stay for about 45 minutes in the morning, leave, then return when your child will be awakening from his nap and bring him home.
- **Fourth morning**
Let him get settled, then say good-bye. If he fusses when you leave, ask for the caregiver's help. And remember, your child may be upset for a few minutes, but by now he is also familiar enough with the day-care center that he will rebound quickly.

Also, be sensitive to any change in your child's day care situation, from being moved into a new room to meeting a new provider. As Lusk says, "The child's point of view is, „This is my provider and this is my favorite toy. Here is where I eat and sleep.“ Switch any of those things, and it's a whole new ball game.”

PROVIDER/PARENT PARTNERSHIP

Parents with infants in day care can be our own worst enemy.

On the one hand, we want more than anything for our baby to be happy, not just safe, and we know that only happens if he has a close bond with the caregiver. But the thought (not to mention sight) of him smiling and cooing in her arms can make our skin crawl. Jealous, guilty, and threatened, we unwittingly withhold information, which leads to diminished care.

Which is the last thing in the world we want.

There are some parents who never work their way out of this box. For those who do, the key lies in one word: partnership.

“The ideal is if both providers and parents come into the relationship as partners,” says early childhood educator Marilou Hyson.

For parents, this means taming our jealousy. Luckily, there's reassuring research that infants can form attachments to more than one person without being confused about who their parents are. But Hyson also encourages parents to acknowledge our feelings to ourselves and to our caregiver.

Expect a caring, empathetic response, whether your provider is in family day care, works at a center, or lives in your house.

Reaching out to parents is so important that at a National Association for the Education of Young Children conference, childcare director Cindy Lea told a seminar of 300 providers, "Caregivers who work with infants need to be as sensitive to parents' needs as they are to babies."

Lea, who is director of the McKendree United Methodist Church Day Care in Nashville, elaborates in an interview: “No parents should feel a caregiver has an attitude or that she's judging you. That gets in the way of a partnership.”

Sometimes in a visit to prospective programs there are tip-offs that a caregiver doesn't plan to be a partner, says early childhood educator Lillian Sugarman. For instance:

You can't drop in unannounced. Under the guise of “It makes the baby cry,” this policy smacks of “We know best.”

All babies are on the same schedule for naps, feeding, or changing. "That tells you a center values convenience more than child development," says Sugarman.

“Under 14 months babies can't be pushed into group schedules.”

For her, these are reasons not to choose a program. But even when you feel you've chosen the perfect place, sooner or later something will bother you.

Bridging the gap

"When there's different foods at home, for instance, suddenly you see a baby refusing to eat at the center," she says. In a good partnership, a provider won't just comment that he's not eating but takes it one step further: "Does he eat at home? What do you feed him?" Then, she says, it's up to the two of you together to find a way to bridge the gap.

While it's up to parents to speak up, Anthony places ultimate responsibility on the caregiver "to create opportunity and a sense of comfort." It starts on the first day by acknowledging parents' importance and encouraging them to share information. Then, when an issue comes up, there's a foundation for communication. Lea offers examples of how this can play out:

An environmentally conscious family told her center they wanted to use only cloth diapers. Teachers agreed. After the baby soaked through his diaper two days in a row during nap, however, the caregiver decided to use disposable diapers for the nap only. At pickup, she blurted to the mom, "I had this brainstorm" and told her the story.

The parent was upset, and rightly so, says Lea. "It speaks to who's in charge, it's about power," she says. As it was, the caregiver apologized and the mom went along with her solution.

A baby at her center recently was ready for finger feeding. He was using a spoon at home so his parents were happy to have him do that at day care. When the mom came to visit, however, says Lea, "she was appalled that the baby had applesauce in his eyebrows and hair. The caregiver quickly went to her side: "I can see this mess is more than you expected!"

The mom nodded. "I want him to learn to feed himself, but not like this," she said. A compromise was reached: He could use a spoon, but a caregiver would guide his hand and wipe his face.

Whatever you're uneasy about, your baby's caregiver is the first person to talk to. If you're worried a provider will react angrily and take it out on your baby, that's a sign of a serious lack of trust, and that alone is reason to talk to the director or family day care provider, says Lea. "Don't expect every request to be implemented, but expect it to be treated with respect and importance," she says.

When to look elsewhere

Any parent who feels uneasy also wonders how to judge when it's time to leave a program. This is when reality and theory don't always converge. "There are times when you tolerate something less than ideal because it's convenient or because there's nothing better," says Anthony. She says it's one thing if the fit between you and the provider isn't terrific, but unease about your child's care is never appropriate. Hyson tells parents. "No program will be exactly what you want, so be clear about what your bottom-line issues are."

Aside from safety, issues that would prompt her or Sugarman to leave a caregiver revolve around healthy infant development: A provider who doesn't talk to or read to a baby, or puts babies in front of the TV; whose policy is to let a baby cry for more than five minutes; who yells or scolds "You naughty baby! I just changed your diaper!"

"Quality infant day care is never about blame, either of the child or parent. It's about respect and trust," says Anthony. Lea always reminds her caregivers, "It takes two to share." With caregivers that sensitive, a parent could never be her own worst enemy.

CHILD CARE FRIENDLY: 10 WAYS TO BE A WELL-LOVED CLIENT

1. **Have confidence in yourself and your provider.** Child care cannot be exactly like home. Caregivers have noticeably different methods of structuring meals, setting limits, settling children down for naps, and comforting children than parents.

I prefer the parent who is confident in choosing me for my expertise and knowledge of developmentally appropriate practice - the parent who doesn't feel challenged or threatened by the inevitable differences in "care-style."

Similarly, the best evidence that you, the parent, have made the best choice is that your child loves day care and asks to go to day care when it's your day off or can't wait for Monday morning. He may call you my name or call me "mama" occasionally. It doesn't mean he loves you any less. Be secure in that!

2. **Seek a long-term commitment.** I look for the parent who intends on staying with me. Granted, lay-offs and relocation unavoidably occur, but there is the parent who sees a program as simply a stepping stone to the next one, as if the "ultimate" child care experience hovers somewhere just over the rainbow. Consistency is your child's best bet.
3. **Be willing to communicate and share information.** Give details about your child's homelife and weekend activities. Share with me his past experiences and developmental history. Let me know what your child communicates to you about day care.
4. **Respect the need for organization in the caregiver's day.** Take responsibility for ensuring that your child has appropriate outerwear and footwear for the day's weather, changes of clothing, diapers, and other personal items on hand in his cubby. I need that stuff there when I need it.
5. **Be honest with your child.** Don't sneak off in the morning but say goodbye firmly and cheerfully. Don't promise to come early or show up for lunch if this isn't probable. Answer those innocent questions truthfully, however difficult they might be!
6. **Drop off and pick up your child on time.** If you are not here at the appointed hour, I worry about what happened to you, and so might your child. For unavoidable delays, call with an explanation and an estimated time of arrival.
7. **Pay your bill on time.** If you have financial difficulties, approach me honestly and ask about payment plans, scholarship monies, or sliding scale fees. I work hard for a living (!) and I need my paycheck on time, just as you do.

8. **Support the program.** Donate your recyclables such as egg cartons, shoe boxes, paper towel rolls and the like for art activities. Share some storybooks from home that relate to a topic we've been learning about.
9. **Practice discretion.** Don't gossip about other parents or children while visiting in the classroom. Don't speak negatively about a child, including your own, in front of the children or within their earshot.
10. **Show your appreciation.** Let me know what you like about me, my program, or the way I set up an activity or handled a particular situation. Don't overlook me at the holidays, I'm a very important part of your family. And above all, remember to say "thank you" on your way out the door. I return your child to you happy, healthy and whole at the end of each and every day.

By M. Christine Fajkowsky, a family day care provider in Billerica, MA.

DAILY QUESTIONS FOR YOUR CAREGIVER

No matter how rushed you are when you pick up your child, remember to take a few minutes to speak to his caregiver. Asking even basic questions will give you a good idea of what your child's day was like and will help you plan the evening with him. It will also help you develop a trusting relationship with your caregiver.

Jerlean Daniel, a longtime director of the University of Pittsburgh's day care center, suggests that you ask these questions:

- What did my child do today? What did she enjoy most?
- What did he eat for lunch? How much did he eat?
- Did she nap? For how long?
- If your child is a baby, ask if he had a bowel movement. If he's being toilet trained, ask if he used the potty.
- And don't forget to ask, How was *your* day?

DAY CARE DO'S AND DON'T'S FOR PARENTS

- Expect a caregiver to honor your schedule for weaning or introducing solid foods.
- When you ask, "What can I expect when my baby cries?" here are responses you want to hear: "We respond as quickly as we can; our ratio allows for a provider to attend to any crying baby within three minutes; we try to learn each baby's cry." Also, look for cribs to be close enough together so a provider can be holding one crying baby and patting another one's back.
- If you want your child to be bilingual, don't go to a monolingual program and expect special attention.
- The first time something minor bothers you, make a mental note; the second time, tell the provider; the third time, remind her; the fourth time, go to the director. If it's something major, go to the director sooner.
- Language to use with a provider: "I was uncomfortable yesterday when this happened..." "Can we talk about..."
- Language to expect her to use with you: "I don't know if this is working for us; let me tell you what we're seeing."
- High staff turnover (six months or less) is bad for infant development.
- Be sure to give your caregiver positive feedback.
- *Red flags. No day care will ever be exactly what you want, so compromise is always important. But there also are some bottom-line issues. Here are things you don't want to see:*

Babies in front of the TV

Yelling or scolding

A ban on unannounced visits

Regimented group schedules for babies under 14 months

Babies left unattended

“COME AND GET YOUR CHILD”

My partner, Dr. Kathy Brockett, is a cool-headed pediatrician who always handles our patients' medical emergencies with calm confidence. She is also the mother of a 6-year old. So a few weeks ago, when she hung up the phone with a look of barely concealed panic, I knew it was the mother, not the pediatrician, I was seeing. “That was Vanessa's school. She's vomiting. I have to pick her up,” she exclaimed as she flew out of the office. It wasn't until she got to the school and found just a mildly ill daughter that she was able to resume her usual calm demeanor.

The only thing worse than a sick or injured child is one who gets sick or injured when Mom's away at work. The call that summons her raises her blood pressure and squeezes her heart.

Unavoidable Emergencies

Under age 2, children in day care may get sick 6 to 10 times a year, slightly less for children 2 to 5. Illness spreads easily for several reasons: Young children put hands and toys in their mouths and seldom wash. They also don't have antibodies to protect them from many common infections. Schools and child care centers tend to call parents to pick up their children for illnesses that pediatricians would consider unimportant. Temperatures under 100° F, minor headaches or mild abdominal pains aren't serious enough to prompt immediate removal, though they often do. Injuries are always a risk, but less than parents might think. Children at home are twice as likely to be injured as in school or day care. The only injury more likely to happen in day care is the human bite. One study found that 46% of all children in day care suffer at least one bite from another child. A toddler enrolled full-time may be bitten as often as nine times a year.

What to Do

Parents who've received the dreaded pick-up call often tell me that until they actually saw the child, their hearts were in their throats as they imagined things worse than they turned out to be. The farther away the parents were, the worse their panic level. For a modicum of peace of mind:

- **Prepare for emergencies.** Be sure the school has a list not only of both parents' phone numbers at work and home but the names and numbers of relatives or trusted friends who are authorized to pick your child up if necessary. If your school or day care allows it, sign authorization to administer routine, over-the-counter medications like acetaminophen for pain or fever. Be sure the school knows the name and number of your child's pediatrician. If your child's life were in danger, no emergency facility would wait for your permission to treat in case you can't be reached. But most mishaps are less than life threatening. Leave dated and signed notes with sitters, grandparents or anyone else you trust that permit them to obtain medical care if necessary. And specify the doctors and hospitals you prefer.

- **Ask as much as you can over the phone before you leave work.** One of the most common childhood injuries requiring stitches is a gash under the chin. It is easily fixed and leaves no significant scar. However, if the message you receive says, “Your child just split her chin open,” you are likely to imagine a huge, disfiguring wound across her entire face. Ask if your child is sitting up and talking, is calm or crying, is vomiting or not, has stopped bleeding. Remember that cuts on the scalp bleed like crazy from even a tiny wound. Besides informing yourself about how badly your child is hurt, this allows you to figure out the best course of action. You may ask a relative or friend who lives near the school to take the child to your pediatrician, where you can meet her. Waiting could mean that the pediatrician's office will be closed, and you will have to go to the unfamiliar and often more frightening emergency room.
- **Don't panic-at least outwardly.** Jumping in the car and speeding to the rescue risks an accident or the further delay of a speeding ticket. If it will take a significant amount of time to get there, ask if you can talk to your child over the phone. That way, you can give a little reassurance and an estimated arrival time while reassuring yourself.

TERRIFIC TIPS AND HELPFUL HINTS

Even if some of these tips aren't relevant to your life right now, store this piece away. The timeless advice will continue to be helpful weeks, months or even 15 years from now!

Child Care

- To cover child care during week-long school holidays trade with other parents. Two couples can cover four days if each person takes just one day off work. On the fifth day, consider bringing your child to the office with you.
- Work out a sitter swap with a friend when your caregivers take vacations. Her caregiver watches your kids one week; yours watches hers another time.
- Always keep your caregiver apprised of what's going on at home. A grandparent's death or Dad's new job may affect your child's behavior.
- If you have differing opinions about whether your child is ready for toilet training, resolve it up front. Your youngster will be confused if he's in diapers at home and in training pants at child care.
- Work out a contingency plan for someone to pick up your child if you'll be late. Make sure your caregiver is clear about who has permission to pick up your child.
- Do little things for your caregiver to show you like and respect her: Always greet her when you drop off your child; if you stop for takeout coffee in the morning, bring her a cup once in a while.
- Post clear "house rules" in regard to meals, snacks, bedtimes and television for the teenagers who watch your children on the weekends. This will prevent your youngsters from arguing with the teen about what you allow.

Separation Suggestions

- When it's time for you to return to work after your leave for childbirth, try to introduce your baby gradually to her new caregiver. If you can, start two weeks before, and have them spend an hour together, then increase the time everyday.
- Make a list for your caregiver of your baby's feeding timetable, sleeping habits, diapering style and favorite games so she can accommodate his routine.
- Supply your caregiver with items your baby is familiar with to make her feel happy and secure, such as a pacifier labeled with her initials, her best loved cuddly toy or a mobile for her crib.
- Say goodbye cheerfully and matter-of-factly when you leave your preschooler at his new child care arrangement. He will pick up on your upbeat feeling and that will make him feel safer and more confident.
- Never "slip away," even if your child seems absorbed in play. A wordless getaway, even when well-intentioned, can make her lose trust in you.
- Devise a goodbye ritual - anything from giving a big hug to waving goodbye at the window. Let your child have a hand in inventing the routine so he will feel in control of the parting.
- Leave something of yours--a scarf or photograph - in your child's cubby and encourage her to look at it or hold it if she misses you during the day.
- Reassure your child that it's OK to feel sad when you say goodbye in the morning. When he's particularly upset, try saying "I understand you don't want me to go. But I'll be back at the usual time, and I know you'll have fun here today."

In the Workplace

- When you decide to make your pregnancy public, tell your immediate superior first. Confiding in your friends at the office may be rewarding, but the gossip could reach your boss long before you do, undermining your relationship.
- Try to stop in the office a few days before you return to work after your leave for childbirth to check on the status of current projects. At the least, call your supervisor just to say “See you Monday. I’m looking forward to coming back.”
- Prove you’re a hardworking employee even if your child care arrangement prevents you from staying at the office past five p.m. If other employees regularly work overtime, offer to take work home with you or work through lunch.
- Remind your boss through memos and informal conversations just how productive you are, particularly if you’re a part-timer. This will confirm your commitment to the company and your career.
- If you feel your boss is distressed about the amount of time you spend on your kids’ calls from home, you might confront the issue head on: “I sense you’re concerned about the time I spend checking up on my children,” and then explain how you make up the time in other ways.
- Try to make sure that your work can continue if you have to leave unexpectedly for a child-related emergency. Enlist a coworker to cover for you until you return. Agree to do the same for her.

Morning Madness

- Before your preschooler goes to bed, have her choose the clothes she needs for the next day. This not only hastens things along in the morning, but allows her to exercise her decision-making skills.
- Wake up your preschooler 10 minutes earlier in the morning to allow him some extra time to dawdle when he gets dressed. It will help him feel a little more in charge of what needs to be done and how long he can take to do it.
- Make a cubby for your child at home. Use it for items that must be taken to school or child care in the morning.
- Set an alarm clock or kitchen timer in the morning to warn your child that it’s time to head out the door. This helps prevent arguments with you since the clock is “neutral.”

Surviving Coming Home

- Give yourself a little transition time *before* you come home to your family. Do anything that you find relaxing: Take a walk, listen to music or read for 10 minutes in your car before you have to jump into your household responsibilities.
- Try not to nag or criticize - or mention homework - for the first hour after you get home. You’ll ruin a positive reconnection by focusing on what your kids haven’t done.
- Set a “15 minute rule” for your school-age children. Tell them you need the time to yourself to read the mail or just sit quietly before you can totally focus your attention on them and hear about their day.
- Offer your kids a small snack as soon as you get home from work. This way they won’t complain that they’re “starving” before dinnertime.

For a Peaceful Dinner Hour

- Suggest that each family member tell a story of the funniest thing that happened to them during the day. The good conversation will make dinner more enjoyable.
- Build family rituals into dinnertime. Serving juice in wineglasses or eating by candlelight to celebrate being together will put everyone in a pleasant mood.
- Come up with a set of three or four dinner menus that your family likes. Try to keep the ingredients on hand at all times so you'll never have that “What to fix...” dilemma.

Getting Closer to Your Mate

- Reconnect every evening. Even if you're so tired you're ready to drop, try to spend a few minutes with your mate sharing the highs and lows of your day.
- If it's tough for you and your husband to have a private conversation together at home, try to set aside a morning “coffee break” to talk on the phone at work.

Family Connections

- Invite your children to come “help” you at work once in a while. They'll gain insight into who you are when you're separated from them, and it will open up new topics for conversation.
- Make time to play with your kids - race them to the end of the block or make angels in the snow. You'll come away feeling good about yourself and your children.
- Develop an interest that just you and your children share. Whether it's hiking or watching old movies, the interest will always help you reconnect.
- Instead of simply asking “How was your day?” try asking something specific for more illuminating answers: “What was the best thing about your day? The worst thing? The middle thing?”

GOOD-BYES AND HELLOS

No matter how many times you do it, leaving your child in day care is never easy. That moment is the beginning of your day apart, and you may not see each other until evening. Still, you can take much of the sting out of leave-taking – as well as the stress out of reuniting at the end of the day--by following these suggestions.

- Sometimes, a young child needs reminding that parents will come back. To give him that help, leave a snapshot of you or your family with him. His provider can keep it in a safe place so that he can look at it when he needs to. You could also encourage him to take a much loved item from home – a blanket, a stuffed animal, even one of your old scarves.
- Don't rush in the mornings. If you are worried about getting to work on time, your child will pick up on your tension in a second. Allow yourself enough time to do everything necessary. If you need to, simplify and streamline your routine. Pack the diaper bag the night before. And if you put a basket of necessary items by the front door, you'll be less likely to forget something crucial – such as diapers – as you dash to the car.
- Give your child time to settle in at day care. As you ease off your toddler's jacket and get him started in an activity, chat about the things he's going to do that day – play with blocks, have snacks. Take a few minutes to talk with the caregiver. This lets your child know that you are nearby, while allowing you to inform the caregiver of any concerns you have.
- Make your parting short and sweet. Stay as long as you feel is necessary, but when you decide to go, don't prolong the moment. Be honest when you say good-bye. There's nothing wrong with admitting that it's hard to say good-bye. Just say, "I'm going to miss you, and I can't wait to see you again."

"Good" good-byes are not just valuable in their own right; they also make hellos easier when you join your child later in the day.

- Don't anticipate what your reunion will be like. When you arrive to pick up your toddler, she may be playing and not want to leave. And if she really missed you that day, she may burst into tears the moment you walk through the door. These are normal reactions, but they are not the big hug and sloppy kiss that you imagined.
- Play with your child for a few minutes before you leave. Let her show you what she did that day. Chat with her caregiver, especially if you didn't get a chance to do it that morning.
- Establish daily routines. Keep treats – a cup of juice, a special toy – in the car to welcome your child. During the drive, sing silly songs together, or listen to a favorite tape.
- And when you get home, have a snack together, or go say hello to all the stuffed animals she left behind that morning. If your reunion is a calm, happy one, you'll find that the rest of the evening flows more smoothly.

Not only that, but you'll find that tomorrow's good-bye will be that much easier for both of you.

LONG DISTANCE PARENTING

For parents, business trips often turn into guilt trips: guilt about missing important family events, guilt about missing everyday routines, guilt about leaving your loved ones behind. But there are positive parenting steps you can take to make your business travel less stressful and more enjoyable for the entire family.

Phone home

As obvious as it might seem, there are some proven guidelines that make phoning home more productive. If you simply ask, "How are you?" when you call, you'll probably hear "I'm fine." End of conversation. Instead, ask specific questions like "Did you play on the jungle gym at school?" and "How was the T-ball game?" Talk about a current event you and your family might have seen on TV or in the newspaper. Talk about the weather at home and where you are. Use the same "separation sayings" you use at home. If you say "See you later, alligator" at home, say it before you hang up the phone.

Get the facts via fax

Fax machines are a great way to send or receive detailed messages. You can use them to help with homework even when you're in another city. They're also a terrific way to send personalized notes or other greetings - perhaps even a comic strip you can all chuckle over.

Play your cards right

Many parents make it a point to send postcards from all their travel destinations. Kids love getting mail addressed to them. You can make scrapbooks of all the postcards, personalizing them by adding: "When I was here, you were playing in the soccer championship."

Tell them a story

Many parents record stories on tape for their younger kids to play back while the parents are gone. This is perfect for a tuck-in, to make the child feel more comfortable about going to sleep. An appealing alternative to pre-taping a bedtime story is to take a duplicate storybook with you so you can read it over the phone while your little one follows along.

Return to normal

When you return home, keep in mind that there is an inevitable readjustment period, regardless of how long you've been gone. This is a great time to gather the family and look at videotapes of events you might have missed while you were away. Break out the popcorn. Put together your postcard scrapbooks. Make a party of it. Have fun!

WHEN YOU NEED TO MAKE A CHANGE

There are many reasons why you might have to make a change in your child's day care situation. A change in your working hours or a move to a new house may mean that the program is no longer convenient.

Sometimes a child outgrows a program. The quiet, calm atmosphere that was perfect for your baby may not offer enough stimulation for your rough and tumble preschooler.

When making a change for reasons like these, you can take your time to help your child through a smooth transition from one program to another. Your child's provider has been a key person in his/her life, and separating from the previous program is as important as acclimating to the new one. It may help to call or visit occasionally to help your little one understand that the person s/he loves has not "disappeared" from their lives.

The circumstance that calls for immediate action, however, is any situation in which you feel your child is not safe or not adequately cared for. Even after you've selected child care, continue to monitor and observe the care your child receives. The quality of a program can vary greatly over time, especially if there is staff turnover. Here are some danger signals to check on immediately:

WARNING SIGNS OF POOR CHILD CARE

- Parents are not allowed to drop in unannounced at all times of the day. You are required to call before visiting or coming to pick up your child at a different time.
- Parents must drop off the child in the office and may not come into the care giving areas.
- The care seems lax and indifferent. You see children being made to wait for long periods of time or left to play unattended indoors or outdoors.
- Caregiver's voice or manner seems harsh, rude, or indifferent toward any child
- There are insufficient toys for the children to play with or few interesting activities.
- When you express any concerns, the caregiver becomes upset or defensive and cannot discuss the matter appropriately with you.
- You feel uneasy about the care, are not confident about the caregivers, or just don't feel comfortable with the situation.
- After several months, your child continues to be unhappy about going to day care, or suddenly becomes unhappy. This may or may not be a danger sign, since children often have problems with separation, but it should be attended to.
- Your child talks about being afraid of or disliking a particular caregiver, or seems quiet and fearful in her presence.
- There is frequent staff turnover and you notice unfamiliar people caring for the children when you drop off or pick up your child.
- Your child has an excessive number of injuries that the caregiver cannot explain adequately.