Choosing High-Quality Child Care

Visiting and Interviewing Family Child Care Providers
Eva Cochran, Mon Cochran, and Nancy Torp

Family child care is care provided in someone else's home for a small number of children, usually of various ages. This type of care offers several possible benefits to children and their parents. Children are usually cared for in small groups, making it easier to meet their individual needs. The setting can be warm, intimate, and informal, like part of the extended family. This makes it particularly attractive for infants and toddlers, who need to be held and helped on their own personal schedules. Because the groups are small, children who are very susceptible to colds and other illness may stay healthier in a family setting than in a center. Often child care homes serve children of various ages, including school-aged kids before and after school, which adds to the family-like experience. Family-based providers may have more flexible schedules than child care centers, making it easier to arrange care outside the typical 7:30 A.M. to 5:30 P.M. time frame. Finally, family child care is less expensive than center care in many parts of the country, although you may want to pay extra so as to help your caregiver provide the highest level of care possible.

Family child care also has disadvantages. Most important, states and localities have only very basic rules governing who can look after children at home and how that care is provided. (Several states have no regulations at all.) What rules exist are not enforced well and are ignored by many home care providers. Often you may be the only judge of the health and safety of a provider's home and how much she knows about looking after children. In most cases the family child care provider works alone. If she gets sick, you'll need a backup arrangement. If she goes out of business, you have to scramble to find someone else. And many of the people who look after children in their own homes have no education or training in child development or child care. This isn't necessarily bad, but in general, trained providers are better at what they do than caregivers without those educational experiences.

Group Family Child Care

Group family child care is provided in someone else's home by two or more adults, one of whom lives in the home. Some states have a special licensing category for group family child care arrangements, while others simply consider them a type of family child care.

The number of children in a group family child care setting is larger than in regular family child care—often including as many as twelve children. But because there are at least two caregivers, the ratio of children to adults should be about the same, one adult for every six children.

Group family child care homes often function as mini-child care centers, with one or more rooms set aside for child care and environments designed specifically to meet the needs of preschool children (individual storage cubbies, child-sized tables and chairs, designated activity areas). They are usually run by adults who have specialized training in early childhood education and a strong professional orientation. Frequently these providers will have a well-thought-out educational philosophy, which is clearly expressed in writing and reflected in the way they work with children. Often the owner of the home functions as the head teacher of the child care program, with a second adult hired as an assistant.

The licensed group family child care home is a rather new addition to the American child care scene. This alternative has many good things to offer families. If well organized, it has many of the advantages of regular family child care without the disadvantages. The group is a manageable size, and the adult-to-child ratio is good. The family-like environment is easy to maintain, and mixed age groupings (infancy to school age) are possible. Overhead costs are likely to be lower than those of a center, so fees will be a bit lower. But children are not cared for by a lone provider so there is less need to make backup arrangements when a caregiver is sick. The program is almost certain to be licensed and the caregivers to have received some training.
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It is a good idea to begin comparing family child care programs well in advance of when your child will need care. Give yourself plenty of lead time—at least three months, more if you are looking for infant care. The good family child care programs are popular, so you need to reserve space well in advance.

Five steps are involved in selecting a family care provider:

Step 1: Contact providers by telephone and check references.

Step 2: Visit selected homes.

Step 3: Interview providers.

Step 4: Make a choice.

Step 5: Get it in writing.

**Step 1: Contact Providers by Telephone and Check References**

There may be a large number of family-based providers in your community. If you are working through a resource and referral agency, the referral specialist should have some idea of which providers have openings for a child the age of yours. Try to get as many names as possible from the referral agency, through newspaper ads, and via your own personal network. Once you have those names and telephone numbers, you can do some telephone screening.

It is important to remember that you are calling someone at her place of work and that she is responsible for as many as five or six children. Always ask whether it is a good time for her to talk or whether it would be better if you called back at another time. (Use the form on page 3.)

Each question for the reference has a very specific purpose. The “how long” question will tell you how much experience the reference had with the provider. The “how old” question will tell you whether the provider worked with children your child’s age. Answers to “What did you like?” and “What were you not happy with?” should give you some feel for strengths and weaknesses. But remember that these comments are shaped by the background and previous experience of the reference person, who you probably don’t know. You should also assume that the provider gave you the names of parents likely to have the most positive feelings about her abilities as a caregiver.

Child care always has its difficult moments—both for parents and for providers—so you need to feel that you can raise challenging issues with the caregiver. Do you get a feeling that this will be easy to do? Is she flexible enough to adjust her ways to meet the particular needs of your child?

The words to describe how the provider is with children and the activities she does with them should give you a feel for whether her approach to children matches yours and whether your child will feel both secure and stimulated (happy) in her care.

Sometimes caregivers who look after other children along with their own favor their own kids or have a hard time handling feelings of jealousy in their own children. It is important to know whether these problems will be issues for this provider.

Use your own instincts as you listen to the reference talk about her or his experiences with the provider. Try to read between the lines of what you are hearing. Is this person excited about and thankful for the experience with the provider or does she sound unenthusiastic? Is the person volunteering positive examples or giving you only the information you ask for and no more? Does the person sound guarded or protective? What is your own gut reaction to what this person is saying?

**Step 2: Visit Selected Homes**

It is best to make the first visit to your “finalist” homes without your child or children. As you can see from the checklist, there is much to look for and ask about, so you will have enough to do without also needing to be concerned about your own child. A get-acquainted visit to see how a potential caregiver and child respond to each other will be important once you have found a home that seems like a real possibility.

Visit at least two homes, even if you are lucky enough to find someone you like on the first try. You learn a lot, for better or for worse, by being able to make comparisons. Remember, part of this process is to educate yourself. Each visit to an additional home will expand your knowledge and sharpen your own definition of what you like and dislike in family child care.

Try to visit homes during a time when children are coming or going so that you can see how the child care provider interacts with parents as well as children. See if you can arrange to visit for at least 90 minutes; say from 8:00 until 9:30 in the morning or 4:00 to 5:30 in the afternoon.

You will want to interview the provider about what you see and don’t see during your visit. That may be difficult if she is very busy working with the children. When you set up the visit, ask whether there will be a chance for discussion. If not, arrange to call in the evening following your visit to ask follow-up questions.

Begin by confirming the information that you learned through your telephone interview—whether the home is licensed or certified, if there is space for your child during the hours you need care, and whether the costs will be what you expected.

Concern for safety requires that you poke around in the house and think about what could go wrong. You may feel somewhat guilty at having to be so nosy, but remember that the point is the safety of your child. Also keep the team concept in mind—if something needs fixing or replacing, maybe you can help out.
**Telephone Contact Form for Family Child Care**

Name of provider __________________________________________ Telephone ______________________

Address ____________________________________________________

Is space available for a child the age of mine when I need it? yes____ no____

Number and ages of children cared for now __________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________

Number of children enrolled full-time ______________________________________________________

Is provider licensed or certified? yes_____ no____ Working toward a license? ____________

How many years has she been providing care? _______________________________________________

Fee (hourly, daily, weekly) ____________

Names of two references (and phone numbers if possible)

______________________________________________________________

Reference and background checks are critical. You want to talk with parents who have actually used the provider—not character references from people who haven’t used her as a caregiver.

**Questions to Ask References**

Provider's name: __________________________________________ Date: ____________

Name of reference: ____________________________

Address: ____________________________________ Phone: ____________________________

How long have you had (did you have) your child with [provider]?

__________________________________________________________________________

How old was your child when she or he started in this care?

__________________________________________________________________________

What did you like about the care provided?

__________________________________________________________________________

What were you not happy with about this care?

__________________________________________________________________________

How easy is [provider] to approach about problems?

__________________________________________________________________________

How flexible is the personality of [provider]?

__________________________________________________________________________

What words would you use to describe how [provider] is with children?

__________________________________________________________________________

Does [provider] organize activities for children? Please describe some of those activities.

__________________________________________________________________________

Is [provider] also looking after her own children? How does that work out?

__________________________________________________________________________

Would you choose [provider] again, knowing what you do now?

__________________________________________________________________________
Remember to spend time outside walking around the house and examining any outdoor play area. Is it safe? Are there things for a child the age of yours to do? If the provider uses the facilities of a nearby park, can the children get there safely? How safe is the playground?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How many children are in the home, and how old are they? Here are the minimum standards suggested by the National Association for Family Day Care.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• A home with one provider should contain no more than six children, including the provider's own children. No more than two of these children should be under age two.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A group home, with two or more adult providers, should have no more than twelve children, including those of the providers. No more than four of these children should be under age two.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• A family child care provider should be at least eighteen years old.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• This provider must have at least basic training in first aid, safety, and child development.</td>
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A schedule that includes
• active play, such as dancing, building with big blocks, and playing outdoors.
• quiet play, such as looking at books, drawing, and playing with small toys.
• a quiet period, with nap or rest depending on the age of the children.
• snacks and meals.

**What You Shouldn't See**
• Children left unsupervised, even for a minute.
• Children running around for no reason.
• Children sitting quietly with nothing to do.
• Children hurting each other, without an adult intervening.
• Toys that children can't reach, or that are unsafe, or that are not appropriate for the age of the children.
• Candy, soda, or other sweets as snacks unless it is a special occasion.
• Food that infants and toddlers can choke on such as grapes, peanuts, and popcorn.
• Any physical discipline.
• Children isolated as punishment.
• Any invasion of children's physical privacy.
• Any use of words to shame or embarrass a child or any excessive shouting.

By physical discipline we mean yanking children by their arms and pushing them around as well as hitting or shaking them. Even if you see a child do something that you would spank your own child for doing, no one else should be spanking your child. Child care providers must know and use other ways of correcting behavior. If they do not have those skills, don't leave your child in their care.

Isolating a child in another room, or in a chair facing the wall, or standing in a corner is not a good idea. A child who is being disruptive or hurting another child might need to be taken out of the group and redirected into another activity. If the child is very upset and unable to control herself, the caregiver may need to stay with her and even hold her until she calms down enough to rejoin the group.

Physical privacy is an issue because of concerns about inappropriate sexual contact. Young children need and enjoy physical contact with adults. But the child should seek out the contact or show a need for contact that is appropriate. Caregivers should not continue to hug or kiss a child who shows discomfort or is trying to get away from them.

**What You Should See**
Caregivers who
• help young children find enjoyable activities.
• talk and play directly with the children.
• respond right away if a child is in difficulty or has a question.
• manage disputes between children fairly and calmly.
Family Child Care Checklist

Name of provider ____________________________

Address __________________________________

Date ______________________________________

Yes  No  Basic Information
❑  ❑  Is the program licensed?
❑  ❑  Are the hours compatible with yours?
❑  ❑  Is the weekly rate affordable?

Health and Safety
❑  ❑  Is the home secure?
❑  ❑  Is the home well maintained?
❑  ❑  Are there working smoke detectors and fire extinguishers?
❑  ❑  Are electrical outlets covered?
❑  ❑  Are there safe windows and gated stairs?
❑  ❑  Are medicines and cleaning agents locked away?
❑  ❑  Are emergency exits clear?
❑  ❑  Are the kitchen and bathroom sanitary?
❑  ❑  Is the play area clean and uncluttered?

Indoor Play Area
❑  ❑  Are toys safe and appropriate?
❑  ❑  Is there adequate space for children to play?
❑  ❑  Is there a variety of toys and materials available?
❑  ❑  Can children be seen easily?
❑  ❑  Are lighting, windows, and ventilation adequate?
❑  ❑  Are bathrooms accessible?
❑  ❑  Is there space for personal belongings?

Outdoor Play Area
❑  ❑  Is it enclosed and secure?
❑  ❑  Are climbers, swings, and slides safe and supervised?
❑  ❑  Can children be seen easily?
❑  ❑  Is it uncluttered so children can run?

Nap Area
❑  ❑  Are there individual cots and cribs?
❑  ❑  Are cots and cribs clean and in good order?
❑  ❑  Are they in a quiet location that can be observed?

Care Providers
❑  ❑  Do the children seem happy around the provider?
❑  ❑  Is the provider positive and open?
❑  ❑  Is the provider willing to talk to you?
❑  ❑  Does the provider invite you to drop in?
❑  ❑  Does the provider seem organized?
❑  ❑  Does the provider seem genuinely to like children?

If Working with Infants and Toddlers
❑  ❑  Does the provider respond quickly to signs of unhappiness or distress?
❑  ❑  Does the provider hold infants and toddlers often and in a caring way?
❑  ❑  Are babies who are too young to hold their bottles fed in the arms of the provider?
❑  ❑  Does the provider talk directly to the infants and toddlers, responding to their sounds and vocalizations?
❑  ❑  Does the provider set limits gently and consistently?
❑  ❑  Does the provider allow children to explore and give help when they need it?
❑  ❑  Are babies allowed to nap when they are tired?
❑  ❑  Does the provider wash her hands after every diaper change and before feedings?

Program
❑  ❑  Is there a clear daily schedule?
❑  ❑  Are activities varied and age-appropriate?
❑  ❑  Does the provider serve nutritious meals and snacks?
❑  ❑  Is there a program policy on discipline?

Step 3: Interview Providers

This interview should come after you have had a good chance to examine the home and observe the provider in action. Don't ask a lot of questions while the caregiver is trying to work with the children; she will be too busy to give you the details you would like. Catch her after the children have left at the end of the day or make an appointment to call her in the evening.

Write out your questions in advance. Work from your checklist and any notes you have written in the margins. Feel free to ask why she did certain things. Give her lots of chances to talk about children and how she feels about them. Here is a sample list of questions to ask the provider. Add others that occur to you.
Questions to Ask a Child Care Provider
What is a typical day like at your child care home?
What activities are best for a child the age of mine?
How often do you take the children outside?
What happens during outside time?
How do you handle mealtimes?
What if a child won’t eat what you offer?
How do you handle nap times?
Do all children have to sleep? How long?
What happens when a child refuses to do what you ask?
(If you have an infant or toddler) How do you feel about pacifiers?
How do you feel about security blankets and favorite stuffed animals?
How do you meet the various needs of children of different ages?
Do you expect the older children to help with the younger ones?
What are your policies regarding TV watching?
(If the provider has her own children at home) How do your own children feel about other children who want your time and attention?
If they get jealous or upset, how do you handle those situations?
Do they have to share their own toys, or do you have day care toys?
Is the provider interested in your child’s likes, dislikes, habits, needs, personality?
Do they matter to her?
Does she want to learn from you how you manage them or simply have her own set way of handling things?

The provider should be able to give you a sense of a daily routine. But she should also point out that what happens depends in part on the needs and desires of the children, especially the infants and toddlers.

When asked what activities are best for your child, the caregiver ought to talk about stages of development. She should provide infants with lots of chances for face-to-face “talking” and opportunities to touch and handle different objects. Holding, rocking, and bouncing are also important—it is impossible to “spoil” a baby with too much holding and carrying. Older infants need opportunities to scoot and crawl with supervision, pull up to a standing position, and practice their first steps. Toddlers need chances to practice walking and have many blocks and other small (but not small enough to swallow) objects to put into and dump out of cups, baskets, and other containers. The back and forth of vocalizing and talking is very important for language development. The child will want to take over control of feeding and drinking during this stage. Will the provider allow this to happen despite the mess that results? Children three and older need more organized activities like art, storybook reading, and music and free time with dolls, dress-up clothing, puzzles, and building materials. School-aged children may need a quiet place to do homework and lots of opportunity for outside exercise. A good provider will understand these developmental needs and organize activities to meet them.

Answers to the question about how the provider deals with a child who refuses to do what she asks should give you a feel for how this person thinks about guidance and discipline. The provider should be able to handle these situations without using physical discipline (slapping, shaking, spanking), verbal aggression (“You’re a bad boy!”), or punishment through isolation. Your child may need a chance to cool down but should always be free to rejoin the group when he or she feels ready.

As the caregiver answers these questions she should also be
Parent-Provider Child Care Contract

I. The following contract is between

1. Mother/legal guardian__________________________
   Home phone________ Work phone________
   Home address________________________________________
   Mailing address if different__________________________
   Employer/school name and address____________________

And

2. Father/legal guardian__________________________
   Home phone________ Work phone________
   Home address________________________________________
   Mailing address if different__________________________
   Employer/school name and address____________________

3. Child care provider____________________________
   Phone________________________
   Address______________________________________________

For the care of

4. Child's name and birth date_____________________
   Child's name and birth date_____________________
   Child's name and birth date_____________________
   Child's name and birth date_____________________

5. Start date of this contract______________________

End date of this contract (may be renewed at this time if all parties agree)_______________________

II. Standard Rates and Payment Policies

1. A deposit of $_________ is required. It will be applied to the last week's payment or to the termination notice period if proper notice is given. (See termination procedure below.)

2. The pay will be $3 per hour or $_________ per day or $_________ per week. Child care will be provided
   Mon.____ Tues.____ Wed.____ Thurs.____ Fri.____ Sat.____ Sun.____
   Hours:__________________________ (circle appropriate days)

3. Payment is due weekly____ biweekly____ other____ (day of week)

4. The provider will provide Breakfast____ Morning snack____ Lunch____ Afternoon snack____ Dinner____ (check all that apply)

   The provider is informal/registered with state/licensed with state (circle one)

   Provider will notify parent/guardian in writing if status changes. If registered or licensed, provider will comply with all day
   care regulations and will make a copy of the regulations available to the parent/guardian upon request.

5. The parent/guardian will provide Formula____ Infant food____ Diapers (type ___) and Wipes____ Change of
   clothes____ Other____ or will pay an additional weekly fee of $_________ to cover.
Other special arrangements:________________________________________________________________________

Parent/guardian must supply a current medical form, completed by the child's doctor and updated annually.

III. Rates for Holidays, Absences, Vacations, Overtime
1. Care will not be provided, but payment is due, on the following holidays when they occur on a day the child(ren) is/are regularly scheduled for care: ______________________________________________________

The provider will be notified by ______ (time) if the child(ren) will be absent. 
Policy for payment for absences is ___________________________________________________________

3. Fees and policies for provider's vacation: ___________________________________________________

4. Fees and policies for parent/guardian's vacation: _____________________________________________

5. If the provider is unable to provide care because of illness or emergency, the policy is: ________________________________

6. If the parent/guardian drops off the child earlier or picks up later than the times specified, the following overtime rate will be charged: $__________ per__________ or portion thereof.

IV. Damages
The policy on damage caused by the child(ren) while in the provider's care unless caused by the negligence of the provider is: ________________________________________________________________

This does not apply to normal wear and tear on toys or furniture, only to damage.

Termination procedure
This contract may be terminated by either parent/guardian or provider by giving ______ weeks' written notice. The provider may terminate the contract without notice if the parent/guardian is more than ______ week(s) late with scheduled payments. Parent/guardian may terminate the contract without notice if the provider does not comply with day care regulations. Changes to the contract, desired by either provider or parent/guardian, must be made in writing and acknowledged in writing by the other parties at least two weeks before the desired change takes effect.

V. Signatures
By signing this contract, all parties agree to all of the above terms and policies, including financial responsibility for care provided. The provider is responsible for giving/sending all signers a copy of the signed contract.

Provider's signature_________________________________________ Date________

Mother/legal guardian's signature____________________________ Date________

Father/legal guardian's signature____________________________ Date________

Cosigner's signature_______________________________________ Date________

(required if parent/legal guardian is under 18 years old. Cosigner must be 18 or older and by signing assumes financial responsibility in case the parent fails to pay for care provided)

Both of you should also have copies of a form containing the names and telephone numbers of the people authorized to pick up your child at the provider's home, who to contact in case of emergency, the name and number of the child's pediatrician, and any pertinent health information about the child. You also need to sign a form giving your consent in case your child needs emergency medical treatment. Your provider may already have a form for you to fill out.
asking what you think about the same situations and how you handle them. The goal is to have as much consistency between you and the provider as possible. The provider can’t help to create that consistency if she doesn’t know or care about how you organize your child’s life at home.

TV should not be used as a baby-sitter or to entertain the provider when she should be engaged in activities with the children. The caregiver should be able to tell you which programs the children watch (if any) and why these shows help the children’s development. We feel strongly that children should watch as little as TV as possible and no more than thirty minutes at a time. A longer video might used as an occasional treat for an older child on a rainy day.

If the provider takes care of her own children as well as yours, she needs to be extra sensitive to the conflicts that might result. Her children deserve to have their own private space and private toys that the child care children cannot touch. These toys should be put away during the time that the child care children are present unless the provider’s children want to share them. Providers who show an awareness of this issue in the interview by discussing how they handle situations involving jealousy and competition are usually able to manage those conflicts when they occur.

Once you have found a home that you like, you should make arrangements to visit again, this time with your child. If possible, pick a different time of day so you can observe more of the daily routine. Watch closely as the provider approaches your child for the first time. Does she force herself on the child or take time to sense the child’s comfort level? Does she get down to the child’s level and engage in respectful dialogue, or does she talk to you as if the child isn’t in the room? Does she accept and validate the nonverbal signals and verbal messages your child is sending, or does she ignore these signals? How does your child react to the provider, to the other children, and to any other adults in the home?

One further precaution you should take is to make sure the backgrounds of providers you are seriously considering have been checked for any criminal records or confirmed reports of child maltreatment. If the provider is licensed, certified, or registered, this may (or may not) have been done as part of that process. The child care referral counselor at your local or state child care resource and referral agency can tell you whether it has been done. If no background check has been conducted, contact your local law enforcement agency (criminal background) and social services agency (child maltreatment) for advice on how to obtain this information.

Step 4: Make a Choice

If you have found several family child care providers who meet the general requirements outlined here, you should feel pleased with yourself. When choosing among them, begin by making a list to compare them on all the criteria included on the checklist and in the interview. If one provider is clearly better than another in a category, give that person a +. Add up the pluses and see who comes out ahead.

Then let your feelings and intuition take over. Which caregiver feels best to you? Which home is it easiest to imagine your child in while you are away at work or in school? Remember that you will need to feel comfortable sharing concerns with this person and working through disagreements and misunderstandings when they occur. Do you sense that this will be easier with one of these providers than with the other? Keep in mind that this decision is not carved in stone—you can try out the arrangement for a month and then take an honest look at how it is working out. But the right decision now will prevent later discomfort and unhappiness. Both your objective assessment and your feelings should influence your final decision.

Step 5: Get It in Writing

Once you have accepted a place in a family child care home, make sure that you complete a written agreement that spells out both your expectations and those of the provider. The days and hours when care will be provided, the payment plan, illness policies, food arrangements, and notification in case you or she wish to end the agreement should be described in this contract. Most experienced providers will have an agreement form available for use. If the provider you have chosen doesn’t have such a form, make several copies of the form included (one for each of you) and fill it out together with your new caregiver.

Nobody’s Perfect

If you have found a family child care provider who is trustworthy, knows a lot about children, and accepts your feelings about how best to care for your child, don’t worry too much about the little things. Susan Dynerman, author of Are Our Kids All Right: Answers to the Tough Questions about Child Care Today, put it this way: “Say you find a warm, hearty soul who loves children, comes highly recommended, and has three or four kids in her care who are just the right age mix for your own. She gives her kitchen to mixing dough and finger painting. She has a well-stocked toy shelf and a sprawling backyard full of climbing equipment and swings, and she spends countless hours reading, playing games, and engaging and stimulating her kids. But she gives them lollipops every day after lunch (and you don’t like sweets), or they watch a one-hour Barney video every day (and you don’t like TV at all), or her grammar is not that great (and you are an English teacher), or there are no riding toys (and Janie loves riding toys). You can’t have everything.”
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Cornell Cooperative Extension

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