



First Steps

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Choosing Child Care

Our children do not come with instructions. Parents Reaching Out provides resources that help families make informed decisions about the care and education of their children. We thank the Parent Education Network, a project of Parents Helping Parents of Wyoming, Inc. for permitting us to share their *Thoughts for Tots* in this information series.

Most moms and dads would choose to take care of their children in their own home. However, that is not always possible if both parents need to work to support the family. In such cases, then, it is necessary to find an excellent child caregiver who can provide for the needs of the child (or children). Finding the right child caregiver is important for the comfort of both children and parents. When parents are comfortable and happy with the caregiver, it is easier for the children to be comfortable and happy with the caregiver, too.



What Kinds of Care Providers Are Available?

Home Family Childcare: The caregiver, who is often a parent, provides care in his or her home. Family childcare homes voluntarily choose to register with the state and agree to meet certain minimum standards. Registered family childcare homes usually care for a small group of children (usually six or less) and offer a cozy, home-like setting and the opportunity for siblings to stay together.

In-Home Care: The caregiver comes to or lives in your home. In-home care works well if you need care for an infant or toddler, after-school care, or evening and weekend care. In-home care is convenient, but costly. In-home caregivers are not regulated by the state and you may be responsible for paying social security and other benefits.

Childcare Cooperatives: These arrangements offer childcare to suit one group of parents. The parents usually incorporate and hire a director. The parents set the policies and procedures, pay fees, and volunteer their services in return for quality childcare. Rural communities find that cooperatives work well.

Drop-In Care: Some family providers and center programs allow drop-care. You will usually need to visit with the provider and sign your child up beforehand. When you need childcare, you can call to see if the provider or center has an opening that day. It is a back up for times when your regular care won't work.

Child Care Centers: Childcare centers care for larger groups of children. Children are usually separated by age groups and usually only play with children of their own age. As children grow older, they may be moved to a different age group. In most cases this also means they will have a different caregiver every year. Because young children develop very strong attachments to their caregivers, this practice can be unsettling for some children. Childcare centers are state licensed and required certain basic standards for health and safety.

Our booklet, *Next Steps to Success*, provides information about transition from early intervention services to early childhood programs. *Mission Transition* helps families prepare for the steps from Head Start to public school. Call PRO to get your copy!

What questions do parents need to ask?

- Does the caregiver really like children?
- Does the caregiver greet the children when they arrive?
- Is the caregiver trained in CPR, first aid, and early childhood education?
- Is the caregiver willing to answer your questions?
- Will the caregiver tell you what your child is doing every day?
- Are parents' ideas welcome?
- Does the caregiver enjoy being with children all day?
- Is there enough staff to serve the needs of each child?
- Are the meals and snacks nutritious?
- Are caregivers trained and experienced?
- Is the environment safe, clean, and pleasant?
- Is there enough space for resting, quiet play, and active play?
- Is there a balance of play time, story time, activity time, and rest time?
- Are the activities suitable for the ages of the children?
- Are there enough toys? Are the toys kept clean and safe?
- Do you agree with the discipline practices of the caregiver?
- During your visit, do you hear the sounds of happy children there?
- Will your child be happy there?



Take these steps to find quality childcare for your children:

1. **Visit several childcare homes or centers.** On each visit, think about your first impression: Are the other children happy? Does the place look safe? Is it clean and well lit? Do the caregivers enjoy talking and playing with children? Are there plenty of toys and learning materials?
2. **Visit more than once.** Go at a different time of day when you visit a second or third time. Consider the same questions asked in #1. If you have any doubts about the childcare center, listen to your gut feelings and cross it off your list.
3. **When you visit, stay for more than just a few minutes.** The longer you stay, (within reason) the better feel you will have for the kind of care your child will get. Even after you start using the child care site, continue to make frequent visits.
4. **Listen to the sounds of the children.** Do they sound happy and involved? Do the caregivers sound cheerful and patient?
5. **Count the number of children present.** Count the number of staff members. A small number of children per adult is very important, especially for babies and toddlers.
6. **Ask about the background and experience of the staff.** Find out about the special training each one has and whether the program is accredited.

Source: Child Care Aware, 1-800-424-2246 sponsored by Cheerios and Scholastic

For more information call Parents Reaching Out. We offer phone consultations and provide workshops in English or Spanish to communities throughout New Mexico. This publication was developed under a grant from the New Mexico Department of Health Family Infant Toddler program. However, the views here expressed do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Health and should not be assumed to be an endorsement by the New Mexico Department of Health.