

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO SEARCHING FOR CHILD CARE



**Presented by the
University of Massachusetts Medical School
Employee Assistance Program**

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important decisions you will make as a parent is to choose the right child care for you and your family. Many parents are apprehensive about starting a child care search. You may wonder where to begin; what to look for; etc. It can be overwhelming. Like many important decisions choosing child care can be broken down into manageable steps.

BECOME INFORMED

First, it is essential to be informed about your options and clearly understand what each provider offers in the areas of health, safety and education. Through personal research, discussion and observation you can make an informed decision. Selecting the right child care provider will allow you to feel comfortable that your child is in good hands. Here are some steps to help you through the process of making your child care journey a successful one. Remember you are not alone. The EAP (800-322-5327) is here to support and guide you through this important journey.

OBTAIN A LIST OF CHILD CARE PROVIDERS

You can develop a list of potential child care options in several ways. Ask friends and family for suggestions; research accredited child care options at the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care. Call the EAP and request a list of providers in your area. You will be asked general information such as: demographics, locations, financial needs, and transportation needs, hours of need and type of child care you are interested in.

- **Child Care Centers** care for children in groups. All states require centers to be licensed.
- **Family Child Care** providers offer care for children in the provider's home.
- **In-Home Caregivers** provide care for children in the child's home. They include live-in and live-out nannies and housekeepers.

Once you have a list of providers, you can begin to narrow your search through telephone screening.

TELEPHONE SCREENING

Start by screening providers on the telephone before you visit them. Plan to spend 15 minutes on the phone with each provider (Sample Questions Page 3). Narrow your list to three to five providers.

Contact the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care, for reports on the providers you like. Ask if there are any complaints, or concerns noted (In Central Mass (508) 798-5180; in Boston (617) 988-6600; in Western Mass (413) 788-8401).

With this information you may be able to narrow your list further.

FACE TO FACE: EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

Face-to-face interviews and site visits are time-consuming. Child Care Centers, Family Child Care Providers and In Home Caregiver providers expect and welcome potential parents to visit and interview. This is the single most time-consuming step in the evaluation process and one of the most important (Sample Questions Page7).

Take the list of 3-5 providers and make an appointment to visit them. Don't rush through your visits, allow yourself to get a good sense of the environment.

Observation

- 1) Health and Safety
 - a) Hand washing and diapering
 - b) Immunizations
 - c) Staff Training/First Aid
 - d) Staffing/ Supervision
 - e) Director Qualifications
 - f) Lead Teacher Qualifications
 - g) Child: Staff Ratio and Group Size
 - h) Medications
 - i) Toxic Substances
 - j) Emergency Plan
 - k) Fire Drills
 - l) Child Abuse
 - m) Playgrounds

- 2) Education
 - a) Age Appropriate Activities
 - b) Children receive attention, affection, and respect from their caregivers
 - c) Children have opportunities to learn

Making the Decision

This is often the easiest part! It's quite possible that by the time you've finished interviewing, visiting and observing potential providers, you'll be left with only one choice. Sometimes you'll prefer one provider over another for no reason you can put your finger on—one just feels right. You've done your homework; now it's time to trust your instincts. Ask yourself these last few questions.

- 1) Would I trust this provider to care for my child?
- 2) Will my child be comfortable and happy in this setting?
- 3) Have I examined the policies and do they fit with my needs and the needs of my family?
- 4) Has my child had a chance to visit the child care setting and does my child like it?
- 5) Are references available? (If so contact them!)
- 6) Once you are confident with your decision, enroll your child!

AREAS TO THINK ABOUT

Here are some things to keep in mind throughout your child care journey, and some questions you may want to ask the providers.

For Child Care Centers and Family Child Care

- 1) Plan to visit the center multiples times prior to making your decision.
- 2) During your first visit, tour the facility and speak with the director and staff, or family day care owner.
- 3) On a subsequent visit, observe and ask questions. (Samples questions below)
- 4) Once you have narrowed your choices to two or three centers, a short unscheduled drop-in visit is an excellent opportunity to verify your impressions.

For In Home Child Care

- 1) Plan on adequate time. You want an opportunity for discussions to evolve beyond the initial question and answer session.
- 2) Become acquainted with the In-Home provider and assess your comfort level with the provider candidate.
- 3) After interviewing the candidate at length, allow your child to interact with the in home provider. Observe both your child and the provider candidate as they interact.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO ASK CHILD CARE PROVIDERS

Ask Child Care Centers Providers and Family Child Care Providers

Basic Program Information Related Questions

- 1) Is the program licensed by the state?
 - a) Costs and fees (Are vouchers accepted? Is there a fee for picking up your child late?)
 - b) Daily routines
 - c) Educational philosophies
 - d) Hours of operation, (including holidays, inclement weather)
 - e) Limit setting/Disciplinary methods
 - f) Locations
 - g) Program diversity
 - h) Staff to child ratios
 - i) Transportation availability

2) Health Related Questions

- a) Hand washing and diapering
 - i) Is careful and vigilant attention paid to hand washing and sanitation in conjunction with diapering, playing and eating?
 - ii) Is the diaper changing area clean and sanitized after each use?
 - iii) Do caregivers remove the soiled diaper without dirtying any surface not already in contact with stool or urine?
 - iv) Do caregivers clean and sanitize the surface after finishing the changing process? (Hint: Hands should be scrubbed with soap and water for at least 10 seconds and then rinsed and dried. The water faucet should be turned off with a paper towel.)
- b) Immunizations
 - i) Is your child up-to-date on all of the required immunizations?
 - ii) Does the child care program have records proving that the other children in care are up-to-date on all their required immunizations?
- c) Staff Training/First Aid
 - i) Has all child care staff been trained to ensure child health and keep children safe from injury and illness? Are they trained in first aid and CPR for the age of the children?

3) Safety Related Questions

- a) Staffing/ Supervision
 - i) Do caregivers always keep a hand on the child while diapering?
 - ii) Are children supervised at all times, even when they are sleeping?
 - iii) How do the caregivers discipline children? (Hint: Discipline should be positive, clear, consistent, and fair.)
 - iv) Are emergency numbers visible and easily accessible?

- b) Director Qualifications
 - i) Does the director of the child care center have a bachelor's degree in a child-related field?
 - ii) Has the director worked in child care for at least 2 years?
 - iii) Does the director understand what children need to grow and learn?
- c) Lead Teacher Qualifications
 - i) Does the lead teacher in a child care center have a bachelor's degree in a child-related field?
 - ii) Has the teacher worked in child care for at least 1 year?
 - iii) Does the teacher give children play, toys and verbal cues that are developmentally and age appropriate?
- d) Child: Staff Ratio and Group Size
 - i) How many children are being cared for in the child care program?
 - ii) How many caregivers are there? (Hint: Your child will get more attention if each caregiver has fewer children to take care of. The younger the children are, the more caregivers there should be. For example, one family home caregiver should only take care of two babies.)
- e) Medications
 - i) Does the child care program keep medications locked and out of children's reach?
 - ii) Are the caregivers trained and the medications labeled to make sure the right child gets the right amount of the right medication at the right time?
- f) Toxic Substances
 - i) Are toxic substances like cleaning supplies and pest killers kept locked and out of children's reach?
 - ii) Has the building been checked for dangerous substances like radon, lead, and asbestos?
 - iii) Is poison control information posted?
- g) Emergency Plan
 - i) Does the child care program have an emergency plan if a child is injured, sick, lost or abducted?
 - ii) Does the child care program have first aid kits?
 - iii) Does the child care program have information about who to contact in an emergency?
 - iv) Fire Drills
 - (1) Does the child care program have a plan in case of a disaster like a fire, tornado, flood, blizzard, or earthquake?
 - (2) Does the child care program do practice drills a minimum of once every month?

- h) Child Abuse
 - i) Can caregivers be seen by others at all times, so a child is never alone with one caregiver?
 - ii) Have all caregivers gone through a background check?
 - iii) Have the caregivers been trained how to prevent child abuse, how to recognize signs of child abuse, and how to report suspected child abuse?

- i) Playgrounds
 - i) Is the playground inspected for safety often and on a frequent and regular basis?
 - ii) Are the soil and playground surfaces frequently and regularly checked for dangerous substances and hazards?
 - iii) Is the playground surrounded by a fence?
 - iv) If there is a sandbox, is it clean?
 - v) Is equipment the right size and type for the age of children who use it?

4) Education (Components and Structure) Related Questions

- i) What creative experiences such as dramatic play, music, reading and art activities do they incorporate into curriculum?
- ii) Are the teachers and caregivers actively encouraging and promoting children's language development?
- iii) Do teachers and caregivers encourage children's play and view care giving routines as opportunities for learning?
- iv) Do teachers and caregivers understand principles of child development and learning and how to apply them to specific situations?
- v) Are groups of children and adults consistent over the course of the day and over time?
- vi) Are there plenty of toys and learning materials that offer interesting and challenging activities to children that are also safe and achievable?
- vii) Do parents, teachers and caregivers regularly share information about children and work together effectively on behalf of children?

Ask In Home Child Care Provider

- 1) Is the program licensed by the state?

- 2) Ask basic program information, such as:
 - a) Costs and fees (Are vouchers accepted? Is there a fee for picking up your child late?)
 - b) Daily routines
 - c) Educational philosophies
 - d) Hours of operation, (including holidays, inclement weather)
 - e) Location
 - f) Program diversity
 - g) Safety
 - h) Staff to child ratios

Web References

- 1) Child Care Aware
 - a) www.childcareaware.org
- 2) Department of Early Education and Care Mass Gov
 - a) www.eec.state.ma.us
- 3) National Association for the Education of Young Children
 - a) www.naeyc.org
- 4) National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care
 - a) nrc.uchsc.edu
- 5) The Beehive
 - a) www.thebeehive.org
- 6) UMass Employee Assistance Child Care Provider Search
 - a) www.umassmed.edu/eap