PROVIDING CARE FOR YOUR CHILDREN

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
College of Agriculture
Cooperative Extension Service
Circular 1255
“I think you have to choose child care very, very carefully and think what's best for your child.”

Finding quality child care may be one of your most important responsibilities. While the search for warm, loving, and knowledgeable people to care for your child may require time and effort, the results can be rewarding for both you and your child. Parents who are happy with the care of their children feel better about themselves and their work. Furthermore, research findings indicate that children in quality child care are well adjusted and secure.

In this issue we will compare two types of day care commonly used by parents and will provide information on how to identify quality care. We will also offer information on helping your child adjust to day care and on how children in day care fare compared to those raised in the home. For those families with older children, a section on self-care by children is also included.

Day-Care Centers Versus Family Day-Care Homes

One of the first decisions you will need to make is what type of care is best for your child. The two most common types of care for children outside the home are day-care centers and family day-care homes.

Quality care can be found in both settings. In most states both types of facilities must meet certain requirements to be licensed. Furthermore, care givers who are actively involved with the children in teaching, talking, and playing can be found in both centers and homes. Which you choose will depend on factors such as your goals and values as a parent, the needs and interests of your child, the amount you wish to pay, and your work schedule.

For example, family day-care homes often provide more flexible operating hours than centers and are more likely to offer evening and weekend care. This flexibility may be an important factor in your choice. However, alternative arrangements for care may be needed if the family day-care provider becomes ill or goes on vacation. When considering this type of care it is important to discuss how such situations will be handled.

Family day-care providers also offer a more homelike atmosphere for the children and may be more willing to care for infants. The relationship between the care giver and the parents may also be somewhat closer in home care than in center care. You will need to assess how important these characteristics are for both you and your child.

In contrast, day-care centers usually provide a wide variety of formal learning activities and are more likely to have some staff trained in child development or early childhood education. Day-care centers also tend to be somewhat more expensive than family day-care homes. While quality centers foster growth in all areas of development (physical, mental, social, and emotional), some centers may give special attention to certain areas. This also may enter into your decision. For example, if your child is hesitant around other children, you may decide to select a center that places special emphasis on helping the child develop effective social skills.

Each type of care has something special to offer your child. Which you choose depends on what is best for you and your child. However, regardless of whether you choose a day-care center or a family day-care home, you will want to select a quality facility.
Quality Care

Each state has responsibility for setting standards that must be met in order for day-care centers and family day-care homes to be licensed. These standards are aimed primarily at assuring the safety and good health of the children. You will want to contact the state agency responsible for licensing child-care facilities in order to find out the specific requirements for your state.

Many factors contribute to quality care. Among these are:

**Stability.** Children adjust most easily to day-care situations that are stable over time. Like adults, children need the assurance that the world is consistent and predictable. Going to the same home or center and interacting with the same adults over long time periods assures that there will be consistency in routines and activities. It also allows the child to develop close relationships with his or her care givers. Therefore, when selecting day care it is important to choose a place that will meet the needs of your family and your child for a fairly long time period and one in which few staff changes are expected.

**Small groups and sufficient staff.** It is important that children in day care receive individual care and attention. To achieve this it is necessary to limit the total number of children in the group to a manageable size and to provide sufficient staff to meet their needs. For preschool children in day-care centers there is more active questioning, responding, praising, and comforting, and less routine monitoring when there are fewer than fifteen to eighteen children in the group and more than one care giver is present. However, the size of the group and the number of adults needed also depend on the age of the children being cared for. For example, for infants the group's size should be much smaller and the adult-child ratio closer to one adult for every four infants.

**Care-giver characteristics.** The most important aspect of day care is the care giver. In high-quality centers and family day-care homes you will find individuals who are actively involved with the children in talking, teaching, and playing. They help the children develop their interests, are responsive to their questions, encourage their independence, and guide, rather than control, their behavior. Staff members who have some training in child development or early childhood education and several years of experience are especially likely to provide this level of interaction.

**Variety of materials.** An environment that offers children many things to do is important. Such an environment prevents boredom and also helps the child learn and develop new skills. Alison Clarke-Stewart, a child-care researcher, recommends that the following materials be available: building materials (blocks, construction sets); structured materials (puzzles, books); artistic materials (paints, musical instruments); manipulative materials (clay, sand); make-believe materials (dolls, dress-up clothes); active play equipment (slides, tricycles); and soft, cuddly materials (cushions, pillows). It is also important that children have enough space for activities and that the environment be both safe and pleasant.

**Care that meets the needs of the child.** The best type of care meets the needs of the individual child. Children who are slow to warm up will probably do best in an unpressured, supportive atmosphere. Children who are difficult to handle will most likely fare better in a more structured and consistent setting. Active children need room to play and less restrictiveness. Shy children may benefit from sensitive care giving in a busy, cheerful place.

"I know that there are teachers there that he really likes - that go out of their way to give him extra kisses and hugs and make sure he's feeling all right. They've been very supportive."
Child-Care Observation Checklist

The best way to select quality child care is to observe. The following checklist developed by Allison Clarke-Stewart is appropriate for use with homes or centers. It should be possible to rate the home or center in a thirty-minute visit. You will want to visit several places and then compare your ratings to decide which setting offers the best care for your child. It is best to read through the following checklist and identify items that are especially important to you before you begin your observations. Be sure to obtain at least this information for all places you visit. In the space provided under “Location,” enter the name of each place visited.

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<th>Location 1</th>
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**Health and Safety**

- Adults do not smoke in a room in which children are present.  
- Floors are clean.  
- Floors are carpeted or have nonskid covering.  
- Children’s eating area is clean and attractive.  
- No children with soiled diapers or pants.  
- At least one adult present at all times to supervise children.  
- Detergents, medicines, drugs kept out of reach of children (high shelf or locked cabinet).  
- Electrical outlets covered with safety caps.  
- First aid supplies (soap, bandage, gauze, thermometer) available. Ask about this.  
- Toys and equipment in good repair (no sharp edges, splinters, paint chips, electrical wires, loose parts on toys).  
- Heavy pieces of furniture (cabinets, bookcases) secure and stable, can’t tip over on children.  
- Staff keeps records on each child (emergency phone numbers, medical information).  
- Woodworking or kitchen tools (hammers, scissors) and other sharp objects used only with adult supervision.
### Physical Space

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<th>Requirement</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tr>
<td>Individual space (locker, drawer, cubicle) for each child to store personal belongings.</td>
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<td>Dark and quiet space to allow children to nap (shades or curtains can be closed, cots can be set up in separate area, or there are bedrooms).</td>
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<td>Storage space available for children to return toys and equipment to shelves after use.</td>
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<td>Windows low enough for children to see outside.</td>
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<td>Temperature and humidity comfortable (approximately 68° to 70°F).</td>
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<td>A variety of pictures, posters, mobiles in view.</td>
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<td>Toileting area easy for children to get to.</td>
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<td>Direct access to enclosed outdoor play area from the building.</td>
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<td>Outdoor play area with open space for sunny days.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outdoor play area with covered space for rainy days.</td>
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<td>Outdoor play area easy to supervise (no hidden areas where children cannot be seen).</td>
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<td>Outdoor play area well drained and covered with a soft surface (sand, bark, grass for tumbling, running, sitting) in one place and a hard surface (for riding toys) in another place.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indoor play area with soft surfaces (pillows, cushions, rugs, easy chairs, couches).</td>
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<td>Physical space not overcrowded (too many children, too much large equipment).</td>
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### Materials, Equipment, and Activities

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<th>Requirement</th>
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<tr>
<td>Attractive and well-written story and picture books.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Materials and equipment for quiet play (books, puzzles) and active play (riding toys, climbing structures).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enough materials and equipment so that children do not have to wait more than a few minutes to use them.</td>
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<td>Opportunities to run and climb both indoors and outdoors.</td>
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Choice of several activities (story, music, painting, puzzles) much of the time, except during naps, mealtime, lessons.

Full range of activities available to both boys and girls (dress-ups, housekeeping, dolls, climbing and riding equipment, cars, trucks, tools).

Both children and adults involved in cleaning up after activities (clearing table, folding laundry, putting away paints).

Some or all of the following materials: paints, crayons, pencils, paste, clay or dough, sand, water, scissors, paper, buttons.

Two or more of the following toys and equipment: riding toys, climbing equipment, pull toys, balance beam, pounding toys, stringing toys, nested boxes.

Building or construction materials: wood, cardboard, boxes, blocks, building toys.

In outdoor play area two or more of the following: blocks, cartons or boards for building, sandbox and sand toys, slides, riding toys, seesaw, balance beam, tires.

Play area indoors where no furniture or objects are off limits.

Toys and play materials accessible without asking (on low, open shelves, in toy chests).

**Teachers, Adult Staff, and Care Givers**

Enough adults to provide individual attention (probably at least one for every six children, more for children under three years).

Adults explain clearly what they want in words children can understand, often kneeling or bending to the child's eye level when speaking.

Adults use encouragement, suggestions, and praise rather than orders, commands, prohibitions, criticism, or reprimands.

Adults respond to children's questions.

Adults are observed to teach children sometimes but not all the time (teaching may be informal, explaining, labeling, reading).

Some sort of educational program in evidence.

Adults have had some training in child care and child development. Ask about this.
Adults are interested in child care as a career (attend meetings, read books, are part of a day-care support network, have ties to other community agencies), not just a temporary job. Ask about this.

Adults do not spend all their time with one child while other children have nothing to do.

Male as well as female adults are employed by the center or available in the home.

No physical punishment.

**Children**

Children appear happy (laughing, joking) around adults.

Children are busy and involved (not wandering aimlessly, just sitting and staring blankly, waiting for a long time).

Each child spends some time interacting (playing, talking, working together) with other children.

Children seem to enjoy one another (help, smile, show approval, play).

No fighting (hitting, pinching, kicking, grabbing toys).

Children are in relatively small classes or groups in the center (no more than eighteen preschoolers or eleven toddlers or seven infants); in a day-care home, a small number of children attending (probably not more than three).

Both boys and girls present.

Age spread of children is about two years.

Children are observed choosing a new activity on their own.

**Parents**

Staff encourages parents to visit any time.

Staff is willing to answer parents' questions or talk about the program.

Staff agrees with parent about discipline and child management.

**Individual Child**

Program is appropriate for particular needs and temperament of child (fill in for individual child).

**Totals**

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You and the Care Giver

Selecting quality child care is only the first step in seeing that your child is getting the best care. Your relationship with the care giver is important as well. Your care giver needs to know what is happening at home and you need to know what is happening in day care. One study found that parents spend only about eight minutes in day-care centers picking up or dropping off their children. This is probably not enough time to really know what is taking place each day. When both you and the care giver know what is happening, it will be easier to understand your child. There will probably be fewer surprises. Take time to get to know your care givers and let them know about you.

The Child’s Adjustment to Child Care

Anyone who has ever observed a young child dropped off at a sitter or at child care for the first time knows that the child is likely to be upset. Some children cry and cling to the parent while others are fussy and irritable. These separation behaviors are especially intense for children younger than three. It will take some time for your child to adjust to the new setting. It was once thought that the adjustment period was over once the child stopped crying when the parent left. However, recent studies indicate that most children take about six months to adjust to a new child-care setting. Of course this time will vary according to the child’s age and personality. During this adjustment period there may be changes at home in eating, sleeping, and play. Gradually your child begins to feel comfortable in this new situation and realizes that you will return each day.

You can help your child adapt to this new situation. Before your child begins attending a center or home, stop in for a short visit during which you introduce your child to the care giver and the other children. Also show the child all the interesting things he or she will be able to play with. If you are working part time and have some flexibility in your hours, discuss with the care giver what schedule would make your child’s adjustment easiest. Coming on three consecutive days may provide more continuity than a Monday, Wednesday, Friday schedule.

If it is agreeable with the day-care provider, you may want to stay with your child for a while during the first few days, gradually decreasing the amount of time you stay each day. It may also help to bring along a favorite toy or security blanket for the child. Be sure to let your child know when you will return and answer any other questions your child may have. When it is time for you to leave, it is best if you have a warm, positive, and matter-of-fact attitude. Prolonged leave-taking and concerned looks can communicate to your child that there is something to worry about in this situation.

Remember, all children go through this adjustment period. Eventually your child will become comfortable in the day-care situation and will eagerly join the group upon arrival.
"I feel good because when I drop her off she doesn’t cry; she says ‘See ya’ and I feel good when I pick her up because she tells me all the things she’s done -- all the way home."

**How Do Children Fare in Day Care?**

One of the questions you may have is how being in day care might affect your child. Studies in the last twenty years indicate only a few differences between children who are raised at home and those cared for outside of the home.

Home-reared and center-reared children differ little in terms of mental functioning. In the few cases where differences have been found, children in day care tend to perform somewhat better. You may also wonder whether being away for long periods of time will affect the relationship you have with your child. However, there is little evidence that quality day care has any lasting negative effects on the parent-child bond.

One area in which day-care children do appear to be different from home-reared children is the children’s ability to get along with others (social development). Most children raised in day care are in contact with a large number of children and adults, which provides a somewhat different experience for them than for children who remain in the home. Because of this broader social contact, children in day care usually are more confident with unfamiliar adults and tend to be somewhat more cooperative with both adults and children. There is also some indication that they are more aggressive with their playmates. However, this is not always the case.

These effects depend a great deal on the setting and type of child-rearing practices that are being used. As a parent you will want to pay close attention to the type of interactions among the children and between the care givers and the children. Are there positive interactions? Does the care giver teach, talk, and play with children in ways that fit your ideas? All of these issues will influence the child’s social development in the day-care setting.

A second area in which day care affects children is the frequency with which they develop some types of illnesses. Preliminary research indicates that for children younger than three years, some types of illnesses, such as diarrhea and ear infections, may be more common in day-care settings. However, there also is evidence that older children in day care may develop somewhat fewer illnesses than do home-reared children.

Two factors that have been shown to be associated with lower rates of illness in day-care settings are smaller group size and the use of good sanitation procedures. These factors are especially important in centers that care for infants and toddlers, since infectious germs are often present in children’s bowel movements. As a parent you should determine that day-care personnel observe good hygiene procedures, especially when diapering children, and that older children are taught to wash their hands frequently, especially after toileting and before eating. Using these same procedures at home will make it easier for your child to learn these routines and will minimize the spread of germs in the home environment as well.
When Are Children Able to Care for Themselves?

At some point during the school years, parents begin to consider the possibility of having children care for themselves rather than being cared for by others. Self-care can be a rewarding experience for children who are ready for it. It can help them develop independence and responsibility and can give them confidence in their own abilities. However, if the child is not ready, self-care can be a frightening and potentially dangerous situation.

How can you tell if your child is ready?
Unfortunately, there is no magic age at which children develop the maturity and good sense needed in order to stay alone. However, there are some signs that your child may be ready. First, your child should indicate a desire and willingness to stay alone. Children who are easily frightened or who express an unwillingness to stay alone are probably not ready for this responsibility. In addition, your child should be showing signs of accepting responsibility and being aware of the needs of others.

Second, children who are able to get ready for school on time, solve problems on their own, complete homework and household chores with a minimum of supervision, and remember to tell you where they are going and when they will be back are demonstrating some of the skills they will need to care for themselves. Finally, your child should be able to talk easily with you about interests and concerns. Good parent-child communication is needed to assure that any fears or problems that arise because of staying alone can be quickly discussed and dealt with.

If your children show signs of independence, you may want to consider having them care for themselves. However, several other factors must also enter into your decision. These are (1) the neighborhood in which you live, (2) the availability of adults nearby, and (3) how long your child will be alone. If your neighborhood is unsafe, if there are no adults nearby to call in case of an emergency, or if your child must remain alone for a very long time, it is probably best to continue to use some form of child care even if your child seems ready to stay alone.

Preparing your child to stay alone. If you and your child agree that self-care is appropriate, the next step is providing your child with the knowledge and training needed for this new responsibility.

Children who stay alone need to know:
- How to react in situations such as
  - being locked out
  - being afraid
  - being bored
  - being lonely
  - arguments with brothers and sisters
- House rules about
  - leaving the house
  - having friends in
  - appropriate snacks and meals
  - talking with friends on the phone
  - duties to be completed while home alone

Children who stay alone need to have:
- Good telephone skills
  - a list of emergency numbers
  - knowledge of what to say in an emergency situation
  - how to respond if someone calls
  - understanding of appropriate and inappropriate reasons for calling parents or other adults for help
- Good personal safety skills
  - how to answer the door when alone
  - how to lock and unlock doors and windows
  - what to do if approached by a stranger on the way home
  - what to do if they think someone is in the house when they get home
  - what to do if someone touches them inappropriately
- Good home safety skills
  - kitchen safety (use of appliances, knives, and tools)
  - what to do if they smell smoke or gas
  - basic first aid techniques and how to know when to get help

Providing your children with this knowledge gives them confidence in their abilities and helps them deal with any emergencies that may arise. When teaching children, give information gradually rather than all at once. Too much information at one time is difficult to remember. Present
your children with a number of situations and have them act out their responses. For example, pretend you are a stranger at the door asking to use the phone to call a tow truck, and then pretend you are a salesman wanting to leave some free samples. Giving many examples and having your children actually respond to the situation will help them respond quickly and flexibly if the situation actually occurs when they are alone.

After you have helped your child acquire the skills and knowledge needed to stay alone, set up a trial period of self-care in order to see how your child adjusts to the situation. Initially presenting it as a temporary arrangement lets children know they can choose not to continue if they are uncomfortable staying alone and also allows parents to more easily end the arrangement if they feel children are unable to handle the situation.

Throughout the trial period, and afterwards if you continue the arrangement, talk frequently with your child about his or her feelings. This will allow you to deal with problems quickly and will help you remain close to your child.

Children who are mentally and emotionally ready to stay alone, who have been taught the skills and knowledge needed to deal with this new responsibility, and who are able to talk easily with their parents about fears or concerns that may arise can gain much from the opportunity to care for themselves.

For Further Reading


This circular was prepared by Christine M. Todd, Assistant Professor of Child Development Extension, and by Robert Hughes, Jr., Assistant Professor of Family Relations Extension. Acknowledgment is also given to the parents and children who enthusiastically shared their experiences through photographs and personal responses.

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