

# Evaluating Providers

Equipped with a firm idea of what quality care is, you should be ready to evaluate child care providers. But first, you must determine the kind of child care that will suit the needs of you and your child. Generally, you should consider three factors.

## When?

- When do you need care? Part-time, full-time, off-hours?
- When is the best age for a particular type of care?

## Where?

- Where is the most convenient location for the care?
- Where is the best place for your child?

## How much?

- How much will the care cost and what can you afford?
- How much time should your child spend in child care?

With the exception of the best age for a particular type of care, the answers to these questions are uniquely personal. Among professionals in the field of child development, prevailing opinion is that no child under the age of 3 needs group care, though many children of all ages thrive in and enjoy a group situation.

Finally, before you get to the actual process of looking, here are three bits of advice to follow:

**Use research over instinct.** Certainly instinct is important, but it should complement, and not replace thorough research.

**Money matters, but** use cost to choose between two equally desirable alternatives. When initially determining your options, set cost considerations aside. Expensive care is not necessarily good care or vice versa.

**There's no substitute for time.** Finding, evaluating, and choosing quality child care is a labor-intensive process. Don't rush it.

## The Evaluation Process

Just like any large project, evaluating child care options can be broken down into smaller, more manageable segments. These four steps cover all the bases.

### Step 1: Finding

Start your search. Once you have identified a list of potential providers, proceed to the next step.

## **Step 2: Screening**

Whether you're interested in a day care center, family day care, or in-home care, use the telephone to screen potential providers. Face-to-face interviews (in the case of in-home care) or site visitation is time consuming. That time can be used most productively with a smaller list of screened candidates.

For out-of-home care, ask about these 10 areas to determine whether an option is worth looking into further:

Days and hours of operation

Name(s) of the director or owner

Years in business

Rate of staff turnover

Staff qualifications

Cost

Location

Availability

Services provided

Supplies provided, such as meals, snacks, diapers, or wipes

For in-home care, you will want to encourage the provider to talk at some length about the following:

- Educational background
- Years of experience
- Reasons for leaving last position
- References

## **Step 3: Assessment—Visiting & Interviewing**

Visitation or in-home interviewing is the single most time consuming step in evaluating providers. This step may actually be subdivided into two phases. Certain candidates will undoubtedly be eliminated after the first visit or interview. You will then be left with the finalists who warrant additional evaluation.

For out-of-home care options you will want to make multiple visits. Presumably, during your first visit, you will tour the facility and speak with the director and staff. Next you want to observe. A second visit should allow at least an hour of watching. You want to see how the caregivers and children interact. Are the caregivers respectful? Do the children sound happy? Count the number of children and the staff caring for them. Do the numbers match the size and ratios promised? What about television? Does it seem to be used as a babysitter?

Once you have narrowed your choices to two or three, a short unannounced visit is an excellent opportunity to verify your impressions from the longer observational visit. Don't expect to engage the staff in lengthy conversation. These visits are a way of making sure that unannounced visits are acceptable and that what you have seen so far is everyday practice. Unfortunately, some caregivers may

not permit unannounced visits until your child is enrolled however.

For in-home interviewing, be sure to allow adequate time. You want an opportunity for discussions to evolve beyond the initial answers to questions. The better acquainted you become with your in-home provider, the more comfortable you will feel.

You should also show the candidate your home and discuss its advantages and weaknesses as a child care environment. If this is to be a live-in arrangement, the candidate's living quarters and access to common areas of the home must be discussed. When you have narrowed your in-home choices to the best two or three, check their references.

#### **Step 4: Choosing**

This is often the easiest part! It's quite possible that by the time you've finished your visitation or interviewing, you'll be left with only one choice. If not, here's where intuition and cost can play important factors. For example, if you're trying to choose between two highly qualified centers, essentially equal in all respects but cost, then choosing the most affordable make sense. Sometimes, of course, you'll prefer one provider over another for no reason you can put your finger on. Go with that. You've done your homework; now it's time to trust your instincts.

The last step before choosing an in-home care provider should be a criminal background check performed by a professional agency or investigator. Agencies require the subject of a background check to sign a release authorizing the investigation. Typically such a form is provided by the agency, but it is your responsibility to obtain the signature.

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