

The ABC's of Choosing Child Care

One of the most difficult decisions you will ever have to make as a parent is choosing the right child care for your youngster. If you approach your search in a careful and organized way, you are more likely to make a good choice.

First, identify your basic requirements, such as location, hours, type of care, and how much you can afford to pay. Among the advantages of a center are the grouping together of children of the same age, a school-like setting, educational programs and planned activities, and a back-up provided by a larger staff. Benefits of a family child care home include small groups, and a home-like atmosphere with flexibility. Many family child care providers also offer educational programs and planned activities.

Once you have identified providers who meet your basic needs and who have an opening for your child, you should schedule an in-person interview. In addition, try to find time for one or more separately scheduled observation periods. These allow a parent to remain in the background and watch the provider's body language, the level of supervision provided, the interaction between provider and children, and forms of discipline.

Although much of your decision-making process is subjective, there are also objective indicators of quality child care. Studies show that children do better in smaller groups. The surroundings should include age-appropriate toys that encourage make-believe and creativity. The daily routine should be varied and should give youngsters opportunities to make choices. Parents should choose knowledgeable, loving, and consistent caregivers who treat the children with respect. Ultimately, listen to your own feelings. If you don't feel comfortable with a particular program, look elsewhere.