


Child Care Connections

Five steps to finding quality child care

**Canadian Union of Postal Workers
Union of Postal Communication Employees -
Public Service Alliance of Canada**

■ Quality makes all the difference

Quality child care can give you peace of mind and help you balance family and work. What's more, it has a positive impact on your child's physical, emotional, social and intellectual development.

Finding a quality child care setting takes time, research and hard work. But it's well worth the effort since your child's well-being is at stake. This step-by-step guide can help you find quality child care. But it's by no means comprehensive. Parents are strongly encouraged to do more research on quality care. The local's child care resource centre is a good place to start.



Step 1: Look at your needs

- What days and hours do you need child care?
- Do you want your child care to be close to home, school or work?
- Does your child have any special needs or allergies?
- Are there any cultural, linguistic or religious factors that you want respected?
- Do you prefer a group or home-based child care setting?
- What can you afford?
- Are you eligible for a government subsidy? (Subsidies are sometimes available in regulated settings. Eligibility criteria are complex so don't assume eligibility or ineligibility based solely on your income level.)



Step 2: Find out what's available

- All child care centres are regulated. A limited number of family home child care settings are affiliated with and supervised by a licensed home child care agency.
- While licensed child care is monitored to meet at least minimum standards, some families decide to use a relative, friend or neighbour, or they look for a caregiver in the newspaper or community bulletin board. In unlicensed settings, parents are the only ones monitoring the care. Because of this, they should be very thorough in assessing and monitoring the arrangement to ensure it consistently meets high quality standards.

Step 3: Assess the environment and program

- Make appointments to visit the child-care centres or caregivers' homes that may meet your needs. Observe the facility and the program closely. Take your time. Ask lots of probing questions. Remember that even if the care is being provided in someone's home, you're paying for a service that's vital to your child's well-being, safety and development. You have a right to expect an environment and program that meet high standards.
- Quality child care has common features whether it's provided in a home or group setting. However, there are also some different specific things to look for, depending on the setting. Some extra questions specific to family home child care and centre-based care are provided below, in addition to questions common to both.
- Regulated settings tend to quality because they are supposed to meet minimum provincial standards. However, it's still important to know what to look for and ask about, no matter what the setting.

The environment

- Do the children seem happy and relaxed?
- Is there lots of co-operative interaction between the children themselves and between the children and the caregiver?
- Does the overall atmosphere seem friendly and warm?
- Is the home or centre clean? Does it smell fresh?
- Are hygienic routines followed, such as regular (ideally daily) disinfection of toys, a policy of washing hands before meals and after going to the washroom?

Additional question for family home child care:

- Is the caregiver or any one in the family a smoker? If so, is smoking banned inside the house?

Make sure it's safe

- Are smoke alarms operational?
- Are windows and screens secure?
- Are doors to outside or unsafe areas secure?
- Are hazardous substances out of reach?
- Are kitchens off limits?

Additional questions for family home child care:

- Are there gates on stairwells?
- Are balconies locked and off limits?
- Is there a routine in case of fire? What is it? How often is there a fire drill?

A good program

- Are there spaces for quiet times, active play, outdoor play?
- Is there a choice of toys and equipment? Books?
- Is there a varied daily routine? The children should be busy but not overly controlled or programmed. At the same time, they should not be wandering around aimlessly. If you walk into the program and the children look at you and go back to what they're doing, that's a good sign. It shows that they're engaged and interested in their play.

Look for:

- play periods that include toys, crafts, puzzles, painting, drawing, reading, music, singing, cooking
- supervised outdoor play
- scheduled rest, meal and snack times
- occasional field trips

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- Does the program or caregiver accommodate children with special needs, allergies or diets? How are they accommodated?
 - Does the program include and respect children from other cultures and varied religious backgrounds? How?
 - Do children with special needs and from other cultures see themselves reflected in the program's books, pictures and toys?
 - Can you visit unannounced while your child is in care?
 - How are meal times handled? (A visit at meal or snack time can reveal a lot about a program. Are the children encouraged to serve themselves? Do caregivers sit down with the children at lunch and talk with them? Are meal times used as opportunities for learning about social interaction through conversation and about consideration for others?)
 - Are meals and snacks nutritious? (Ask for examples)
 - Are there regular meetings with parents to discuss the program and any concerns parents have?

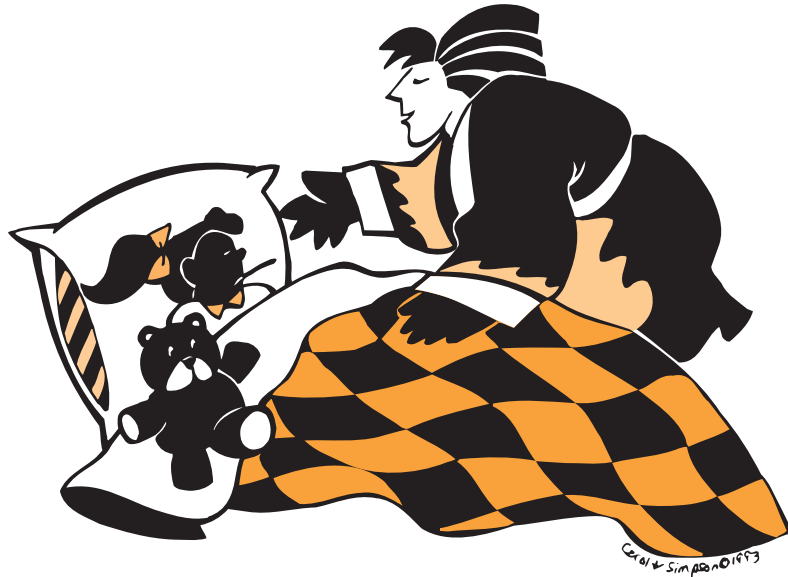
Additional questions for child-care centres:

- Is the daily routine posted?
- Is the weekly menu posted?
- Is the centre's license posted and clearly legible?
- Is the centre profit-making or non-profit? (In order for a profit centre to make money, it must cut costs. Non-profit centres put all the money they receive back into the child care program.)



Additional questions for family home child care:

- Is the caregiver looking after a small number of children?
(Unregulated caregivers can legally look after a maximum of five children, excluding their own. Licensed child care centres and homes affiliated with an agency have stricter legal requirements for numbers and ages.)
- Is the caregiver the only person in the family providing care while your child is there? (In general, it's not a good idea for other family members to assist the caregiver. If they are assisting, find out who they are and what their role is. It should be minimal.)



Illness

- Is there a consistent procedure for dealing with illness or accident? Does it include notifying parents immediately?
- Is there an arrangement for caring for a child who's mildly ill?
- Can the caregiver or centre help with back-up care for parents who can't easily leave work to pick up ill children?

Additional question for family home child care:

- Is there a back-up arrangement if the caregiver is ill or on vacation?

Step 4: Assess the caregivers

Observe the home-based caregiver or child-care centre staff's interaction with children. Look for nurturing, humour, warmth, genuine interest, a willingness to listen and energy.

Do the caregiver or the centre staff:

- Listen to the children and value their input?
- Respect the children and make them feel good about themselves?
- Encourage co-operation, problem-solving and independence?
- Respond sensitively when a child is hurt, frightened, angry or upset?
- Talk to the children about things other than instructions and announcements?
- Give children choices?
- Give children individual attention?

Ask the caregiver or centre director:

- Can you describe your child care philosophy? (Look for an emphasis on: co-operative play, providing a safe, healthy, stimulating and caring environment, encouraging children to learn through playing, openness to developing common goals with parents communicating daily with parents about their child)
- How do you deal with a child who is behaving inappropriately? (Look for a focus on guiding the child to appropriate behaviour or activities that help her/him cope.)
- Which child-care community resources do you use to get ideas for your program, further your understanding of early childhood development and meet with other caregivers?

Additional questions for family home child care providers:

The home atmosphere sometimes makes a caregiver seem more like a friend than a service provider. That isn't all bad, as long as parents still feel free to probe, especially in unregulated settings, where parents are the only ones doing the screening. You want to make sure your child's caregiver is knowledgeable, dependable and completely trustworthy.



- Have you taken any courses on working with children or done any professional development in early childhood education?
- Have you taken a first aid course? How recently?
- How many years of experience do you have caring for children? (While experience does not necessarily mean quality, it does give an indication of dependability and consistency, so that your child won't likely end up with frequent changes in caregivers.)
- Can you provide references and a police check? (In addition to checking references, parents using unlicensed care should ask the caregiver to provide them with a police check. A Criminal Investigation check is already a requirement for caregivers working for licensed home-care agencies and centres.)

Additional questions for child-care centres:

- What wages and benefits do child care staff receive? (Good wages are related to low staff turnover, qualified staff and good morale—things you want in a quality child care setting.)
- How many staff have a diploma or degree in early childhood education?
- How long have most of your staff worked at the centre?

Step 5: wrapping up the details

Once you've chosen your child care arrangement:

- Clarify your expectations; and understand what's expected of you.
- Find out about procedures, policies and rules, including policies for late pick-up, illness and vacation.
- Make sure you understand the payment expectations if your child is ill or on vacation. The people who care for your children are workers too. Like you, they rely on and deserve consistent compensation.
- Sign an agreement that outlines fees and payment dates, vacation and illness arrangements, and respective responsibilities.



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