

# *Quality Child Care Choices:*



*What Every Parent  
Should Know*

*A Publication of . . .*





207 West Jefferson, Suite 301  
Bloomington, Illinois 61701  
www.ccrn.com

(309) 828-1892 or (800) 437-8256

Promoting quality child care in the counties of:

♦ DeWitt ♦ Ford ♦ Livingston ♦ McLean

CCRRN provides free child care referrals or options to parents in a professional manner, respecting the clientele we serve. Referrals are available online, by email, phone, fax or in person. If you have any comments about our agency's services or concerns about providers please contact the Parent Services Manager at (800) 437-8256. Your feedback is important to us and we will make every effort to address your concerns. Information provided to CCRRN is confidential and used only for referral purposes or technical assistance.

*Funded in part by:*



A United Way of McLean County agency  
A United Way of Pontiac agency

The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) operates a Day Care Information Line that provides parents with licensing compliance information about licensed programs. We encourage you to call the Information Line at (877) 746-0829

#### LICENSE EXEMPT PROVIDERS

All child care is not required to be licensed. The referrals you receive from the CCRRN may include some license-exempt child care providers. License-exempt child care programs are not supervised or regulated by the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). The following options do not require a license in Illinois:

- care provided in the child's home or by relatives
- church-sponsored child care programs operated as part of a religious, non-profit elementary school that serve only children over the age of three and choose not to apply for voluntary licensing
- family day care for three or less children under the age of twelve (including the provider's children); or for the children of just one family; or for relatives only
- programs operated by institutions of higher learning or by a school which is registered with the Illinois State Board of Education

A license-exempt family child care home provider must meet the following requirements to be included in CCRRN referrals:

- ✓ be at least 18 years of age
- ✓ submit a health report from a physician & a negative TB test
- ✓ provide three letters of positive reference
- ✓ attest that the home has an operable phone with emergency numbers posted; a fire extinguisher, smoke detector(s), and an emergency evacuation plan; and that the provider will create a warm, caring & respecting environment for children.

Some child care programs are "accredited". This means striving and achieving standards beyond licensing. Accreditation may be received through various agencies such as NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children), NAA (National After-school Association) or NAFCC (National Association for Family Child Care) and others.

# Understand the Licensing Regulations



## LICENSED PROVIDERS

Minimum standards for child care are set by licensing requirements. A license means that the provider has met the State of Illinois' basic requirements. Below is just an excerpt of the licensing standards.

The Department of Children & Family Services (DCFS) is the licensing and regulatory agency for child care programs. For specific questions or licensing information, the county numbers are: McLean & Livingston- (309) 828-0522; DeWitt- (217) 875-6750; Ford- (217) 278-5300.

The provider must be at least 18 years of age and have three people who will provide character references. The provider and other adult family members must have physical exams and agree to a background check to be certain that there has been no past conviction for child abuse or neglect.

### Provider: Child Ratios

Providers alone can care for a maximum of eight children, including their own, under 12 years of age. The ages must be limited to (a) no more than five children under 5 years of age and no more than 3 of those children under 24 months of age; or (b) no more than six children under 5 years of age and 2 children under 30 months of age.

A caregiver and an assistant 18 years of age or older may care for:

- 1) one of the groupings in subsection (b) and 4 additional children who are attending school full-time; or
- 2) eight children under 5 years of age of which up to 5 children may be under 24 months of age, and 4 additional children who are attending school full-time

A caregiver and an assistant under 18 years of age may care for:

- 1) one of the groupings in subsection (b) and 4 additional children who are attending school full-time; or
- 2) a total of 8 children under 5 years of age of which up to 5 children may be under 24 months of age

Care provided for the additional before and after school children is limited to children who attend school full-time and it is limited to before and/or after school, holidays, weekends, during unforeseen school closings, and during the summer.

Group child care homes can be licensed for a maximum of 16 children. Group homes differ from family child care homes in several ways including square footage, first aid and CPR certification, the number of children that are permitted and the group home provider/assistant qualifications.

Dear Parent,

Choosing child care is a very personal decision. There are no set rules. What may meet the needs of one child might not meet the needs of another. Choosing child care involves a lot of "leg work"; most child care experts suggest that you explore several programs.

Locating a child care provider with whom you are confident is well worth the search. Child care is the first major, long-range experience your child will have outside the home. So, after you have visited several places and weighed the advantages and disadvantages of each, go with your instincts. Trust your feelings. Would you be happy there as a child? If a situation seems inappropriate to you, it probably is. If, on the other hand, it makes you feel comfortable and welcome, your child will probably feel the same way.

This booklet is designed to help you in your child care search. It contains information on the types of child care available, things to consider when selecting a child care arrangement, and what you can do to make child care successful for your child and your family. Although no booklet can make you an expert on child care, we hope this will help you make an informed decision.

Good luck in your child care search!

Pam Womack, Executive Director  
Child Care Resource & Referral Network



# What Are Your Child Care Options?

## CHILD CARE CENTERS

Child care centers provide full or part-time care in a group setting with planned educational activities. Centers provide longer hours and year round care. Licensed centers must meet minimal health, safety and staffing requirements. Local services conduct regular inspections of licensed centers to ensure they meet these standards. Children are grouped together by age. A variety of staff is employed to supervise the children during hours of operation and provide necessary services.

## FAMILY CHILD CARE

Family child care takes place in the provider's home, allowing the child to be cared for in a home-like setting. Some providers include planned curriculum in their schedules, while others are less structured. They may care for up to their licensed capacity, which is determined by the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS).

In Illinois, family day care providers are required to be licensed by DCFS. If the provider cares for 3 or fewer children (or the children are all from one family or are all related to the provider), the provider is not required to be licensed and is considered a license-exempt home.

If you have unusual working hours, the family child care provider may offer care during your early morning or late evening hours. Some even offer overnight and/or weekend care.

## WHEN YOU NEED BACK-UP CARE

No matter what child care program you choose, you will need a back-up arrangement. Whether you are currently using a relative, a family child care provider, or an in-home provider, they will have family emergencies, personal needs, and vacation days when you will need substitute care. If you are using a center, it may close for snow days or holidays when you have to work.

You should also consider the times when your children will be too sick to attend a group care situation. Infants have an average of 10 upper-respiratory infections each year, preschoolers have about 7 colds annually, and children enrolled in their first group experience will have an increased chance of illness because of the exposure to their children.

You will be much more relaxed about these situations if you plan for them ahead of time. What are your options?



You may have a friend, relative, or neighbor (perhaps a retiree or some one at home with their own children) who may be willing to provide temporary care for your child.



Perhaps there are sick-child care services for this type of emergency. Contact these services in advance to arrange for the unexpected. Ask where care will be provided and what the fee will be.



Ask your child care provider if she has back-up care arranged or if she might know someone you can contact.

It is important for you and your child to meet the back-up caregiver on a casual basis beforehand so that you are comfortable about the arrangement. They might provide care occasionally for your child when you go out in the evening or offer part-time care on a weekend when you have a special event to attend.

You should also plan what you are going to do when your child is too sick for back-up care. You and your spouse will want to discuss the options for this situation before it happens. Does it make more sense for one of you to always be the parent to stay home, or can you and your spouse share this responsibility when necessary?

If you have a back-up arrangement for child care ready to go, the stress of unexpected events is less likely to interfere with your judgment. You will be making a decision with your child's and family's best interest in mind.



# Parent / Provider Relationship



## WHAT TO EXPECT FROM YOUR PROVIDER

- ☞ a commitment to provide a loving, warm, and nurturing environment in which to care for your child
- ☞ attention to your child's individual needs and a willingness to be flexible in order to meet these needs
- ☞ a willingness to cooperate, listen to and respond to your questions and concerns in a positive manner
- ☞ a clear communication of policies and procedures (written and verbal)
- ☞ attention to health and safety issues including procedure to minimize the spread of contagious diseases
- ☞ regular and open communication about your child's activities, growth and development
- ☞ a minimum of 2 weeks notice when there is a change in policies, fees, procedures, or schedule
- ☞ open door policy for accessibility to your child

## WHAT YOUR PROVIDER SHOULD EXPECT FROM YOU

- ☺ a commitment to work cooperatively to ensure the best possible care for your child
- ☺ a willingness to review and abide by all procedures and policies
- ☺ payments made in an adequate and timely manner; and when this is not possible, written arrangements should be made for alternate payment schedules
- ☺ constructive attempts to resolve problems and misunderstandings in a timely manner
- ☺ sick-child care arrangements made when your child is ill or unable to participate in a day's regularly scheduled activities
- ☺ provision of necessary supplies / clothing to adequately care for your child (diapers, changes of clothing, coats, hats, mittens, etc. )

The key to a successful caregiver / parent relationship is mutual respect and open communication. Making it work is well worth the effort!

## IN-HOME CARE

You may decide to hire someone to take care of your child in your own home—a housekeeper, babysitter, live-in student or trained caregiver (nanny). It is important to find someone you can trust in your home all day. For information on searching for an in-home caregiver, call the CCRRN for in-home caregiver search suggestions.

## PRESCHOOLS

Preschools (also know as nursery schools) usually provide group programs for children 3—5 years of age. Morning or afternoon sessions may be offered, each lasting 2 to 3 hours. Programs operate from one to five days a week and usually follow the public school calendar. Preschools must follow the same Department of Children and Family Services regulations as child care centers.

## SCHOOL-AGE PROGRAMS

Before and after school programs or extended programs are designed for children 6 to 12 years old. Children attend these programs before and/or after the regular school day, during school holidays, and during summer vacation. Some school systems provide an “extended day” program immediately after school. Community centers and other social service groups have similar programs. These programs are also licensed by the Department of Children and Family Services.

# Preparing for the Interview

---

Before the interviews . . . . .

## Consider these important factors:



the age and personality of your child. Some children are most comfortable in a small, home-like setting; others will do well in a larger, more structured environment.



your family's values. The caregiver's beliefs about raising children should be similar to yours.



your family's work and school schedule. The program's hours of operation must meet your needs.



the location of your home, workplace(s), and, if you have school-age children, their school, in relation to the child care location.



transportation. Who will take your child to and from child care, and/or to and from school?

what can you afford to pay. The fees for child care vary greatly depending on the child care option you choose, experience of the provider, and location. Child care expenses can be a burden on a family's budget. Your local CCRRN staff can provide you with current average costs of childcare.



Your family may be eligible for financial assistance. CCRRN staff can provide details/applications for the Illinois Child Care Assistance Program, Illinois Department of Children & Family Services vouchers for foster children, TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), flexible rate programs that offer scholarships, sliding fee scales, state & federal income tax credits (EIC-Earned Income Credit or CTC-Child Tax Credit), and employer discounts or support.

## MAKING YOUR DECISION

Now that you have visited several providers, you may be ready to make your decision. Review the information you gathered on each care arrangement. Trust your instincts!

Contact the provider and confirm your child care arrangements as soon as possible. A deposit or special fees may be required to guarantee enrollment. You may need to complete and return enrollment forms and your child may need a physical examination. Taking care of these details in a timely manner is a good beginning in establishing a successful relationship with your provider.

Feel free to call the CCRRN if you have any concerns.

## SOME TIPS FOR A SMOOTH TRANSITION

Starting a new child care arrangement, like any new experience, can be stressful, creating new demands on you and your family. Giving yourself and your child the opportunity to respond to this experience gradually will help make the transition easier for you all.

During the process of selecting child care, you should visit the program with your child. Try to make several short visits with your child before you plan to leave him or her there.

For children with past child care experiences, a gradual introduction to the new arrangement will help them adapt more quickly. If your child is changing child care programs, he or she is leaving playmates, providers, and a familiar environment. It is important to help children understand how to say good-bye to old friends as well as how to make new ones.

From birth, children have different temperaments that affect their responses to change. Some adapt quickly while others need more time to warm up. Children who adjust slower will need more gradual introductions to the new setting and more time to make the transition.

All children need the opportunity to develop close relationships. Children's deep attachments to their parents enable them to form attachments to their providers. All of these attachments form the basis for children's trust in themselves. It is a real advantage for children and their parents to build long-term, caring relationships with providers.



## Learn About the Signs of Quality Child Care

Once you have determined your child care needs, you will want to become familiar with what constitutes a quality program. The two most important factors influencing care are (1) caring, responsible adults who understand young children and (2) a safe and healthy environment. Although people differ on their definitions of quality and the ideal environment for children, there are some general characteristics to examine.

### GROUP SIZE

Children generally do better in small groups - the younger the child, the smaller the group. Infants and toddlers do better in groups of 3 to 10 children, preschoolers do better in groups of 12 to 18 children. Quality generally diminishes whenever a group is larger than 20 children.

### CHILD:STAFF RATIO

The number of children compared with the number of adults is called the child-staff ratio. For example, if the group size is 20, and there are 2 staff members, the child-staff ratio is 20:2 or 10:1. Generally, more individual attention is given to children in programs with lower child:staff ratios. The Illinois DCFS licensing standards set minimum child:staff ratios. See page 13.

### STAFF

Providers trained in child development or early childhood education generally do a better job with young children than those who aren't. College degrees usually do not affect quality unless there is a particular coursework dealing with the growth and development of children. Ongoing training of providers and professional association membership helps to keep staff up to date on the developments and trend of the child care field.

## The Telephone Interview



The purpose of the telephone interview is to gather basic information about the child care provider/teacher and the services he/she provides. The phone call cannot determine the quality of child care that would be given. That should be assessed during the personal interview by the parent.

Begin your interview by introducing yourself, giving your child's age and your scheduling needs. Inquire about vacancies. You may want to continue with some of these sample questions:

- ❏ How do the children spend their day?
- ❏ What type of discipline do you use?
- ❏ Do you provide meals and snacks?
- ❏ Do you provide transportation?
- ❏ What is the provider/child ratio?
- ❏ How long have you been in business?
- ❏ What are your fees? What do they include? When are the fees due?

Schedule an appointment for a personal interview.



## The Personal Interview

The personal interview will help you determine whether the quality of care is appropriate for your child's needs.

- † Schedule a visit and plan to spend ample time observing the whole setting. Make sure the provider or other staff members will be available to spend time with you.
- † Schedule a time when the children are present. Observe the group your child will be in.
- † Bring your child with you, if possible.
- † Ask to see the facility (both indoors and outdoors).
- † Ask to meet the people who may have contact with your child.
- † Ask for any written policies (admission and discharge policies, emergency procedures, payment policies, daily procedures, etc.)
- † Ask for references, including at least one parent who has used the program.
- † Use the checklist included in this booklet when you visit to help you determine which situation has met most of your needs.



# Checklist for the Child Care Search

## BASIC INFORMATION

The director/caregiver should be able to tell you:

- If the center or home is licensed by the State.
- Hours/days the center/home is open (no more than 12 hours/day).
- A list of daily activities for the children.
- The rates/fees and when they are due.
- Charges for holidays, sick days, and late pick-ups.
- How parent involvement is encouraged.
- If toilet training is required or they assist with potty training.
- Naps may or may not be given.
- If transportation is provided.
- Their early childhood education and experience.
- How many children each adult cares for (adult:child ratios).
- Cribs, high chairs, and toys are safe and in good condition.

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Center/home setting:

- An up-to-date license is posted where parents can see it.
- The Center or home needs to be comfortable and inviting.
- The center or home needs to be clean and safe.
- A space for children to nap and for mildly ill children.

Social Climate:

- The provider and parents need to keep rules and discipline the same for the child.
- Every boy and girls needs to play in a variety of activities.
- Conflict should be handled positively and appropriately.
- Children are encouraged to express feelings openly.
- The provider needs to be patient, warm and have a sense of humor.
- The children should appear relaxed and happy.
- The provider must be respectful of ethnic and cultural differences.

Learning and Playing:

- Supplies and learning materials for the children's ages and abilities.
- The children are encouraged to be creative.
- There is a balance of free play and guided learning.
- There should be a balance of active and quiet activities.
- Children are allowed to make decisions.
- Program activities are planned ahead of time.
- Parents and caregivers discuss children's progress.
- A consistent schedule is kept from day to day.
- The provider has a sense of pride in caring for children.

Health, Nutrition, and Safety:

- Health and illness policies are in place.
- The kitchen needs to be clean and safe.
- First aid gear and fire extinguishers are supplied.
- Emergency procedures must be practiced.
- Diapering and toilet training routines are consistent.
- All staff must have CPR and first aid training.
- Safety equipment is in place: gates on stairs, caps on electrical outlets, and a locked cabinet for medicine. All poisons and cleaning products must be kept away from children and locked up.

Warning Signals:

- Parents are not allowed to visit the center or family home during the day.
- The provider seems physically abusive or rough with the children.
- The caregiver scolds, orders, and makes children feel guilty instead of being nice to the children.
- Children seem to have an unusual interest or knowledge of sexual matters.
- There is a high staff turnover rate.

