

Quality Indicators for Family Child Care

One of the most important decisions that working parents make in the lives of their children is the selection of a quality child care provider. This person will be of key importance in your child's daily life and will give peace of mind to you as working parents. There are many different child care and early learning settings for working parents to consider.

Many parents turn to their immediate relatives, neighbors, and friends to find an appropriate care giver for their children during short time periods. However, when considering child care on a more than casual basis, it is important to consider a number of factors including: quality, convenience, affordability and your comfort Level.

Organized, formal family child care is an extension of the family, friends and neighbor care model. Within the United States, most child care is provided in a private home by one caregiver, typically called "a family child care home". It is referred to this way because it most resembles the care given in a child's own home. Daily routines usually consist of the normal activities a child would experience if they were at home with you, plus various age appropriate learning activities. Family child care can take on a more "at home" quality than care given in a child care center. While no provider will share the identical values and parenting style you may have, the differences can be very complimentary.

Licensed Exempt Family Child Care:

It is important to understand that family child care providers are in fact business owners and operators. Providing child care is the service their business provides. In New Hampshire, family child care providers are permitted to care for up to three children (who are not related to them) in their home without becoming licensed with the NH Bureau of Child Care Licensing. These providers are referred to as "licensed exempt family child care homes". Exempt child care providers who care for children who are enrolled in the state child care assistance scholarship program are required to have the state conduct a criminal records and background check on all members of their household who are over 10 years of age and they must also provide parents with a proof of general liability insurance or provide a written statement to parents stating that they do not have such insurance. While a provider may choose to remain legally licensed-exempt, parents must understand that these programs are not monitored in any way by any state or local officials.

Licensed Family Child Care:

If an individual is caring for more than three children who are not related, the NH Bureau of Child Care Licensing must license the program. In addition, some cities and towns also have regulations that may be even more stringent than the state regulatory standards. It is important to determine whether your choice of provider is actually legally licensed-exempt or maintains an active and appropriate license from the Bureau of Child Care Licensing.

Understanding the requirements in general of the NH child care licensing standards is an important step in your search for quality. The list below is abbreviated, but should give you the general idea of these requirements:

- ❖ Licensed family child care providers are subject to a criminal records and background check on all family members above 10 years of age.
- ❖ Licensed family child care providers must hold current Infant/Child CPR and 1st Aid certifications.
- ❖ Health & Fire Inspections of the premise are conducted every 3 years.
- ❖ A physical exam and TB test every 3 years is required of each licensed family child care provider and any assistant or staff.
- ❖ A Licensed family child care provider and any assistant or staff member must document 6 or more hours of annual training each year.

- ❖ By federal law, child care providers must claim income and issue a W-10 (report of child care expenditures) to parents by January 31 each year or as requested by you as parents.
- ❖ Providers may participate in the USDA Child & Adult Care Food Program known as CACFP or comply with the licensing regulations nutritional food service guidelines.
- ❖ Licensed family child care providers must provide you with written Parent/Provider agreements or a contract and policy package, which they use as a legally binding contract to provide certain services.
- ❖ Licensed family child care providers must repeat this licensing process every three years.

The Bureau is available for more detailed consumer information by calling 1-800-852-3345, ext. 4624. However, it is important to note that licensing is a basic and vital safety net for your child. It is the first step in providing a safe, quality and nurturing environment for young children.

Finding a family child care provider you feel will provide your child with the experiences that they need and is someone that you like and trust can mean that you can go to work without having to feel concerned about your child and his/her day or feel guilty for leaving them. In order to find a quality family child care provider, you must put in the time and energy to visit a number of providers even if they do not currently have openings. Once you locate several family providers that are convenient to your home or route to work, it will be an important next step to determine the quality of care provided at each. The following is a list of quality indicators for the family child care setting.

Things to look for in a Quality Family Child Care Setting

Child-to-Provider Ratio: Licensed family child care providers normally are licensed for no more than 6 full time children under age 6 and 3 school-aged children up to age 13. In a group family child care situation, two providers may care for up to 12 full time children under age 6 and up to 5 additional school-aged children up to age 13. Other stipulations apply to family child care homes regarding the quantity of children under two years old that a provider may have in each setting. The lower the child-to-provider ratio is in any early care and education setting, the better.

The Physical Environment: When visiting a provider's home for the first time, note whether the house makes you feel relaxed and calm. Is the child care space organized for a full day of activities with young children? It is a good idea to experience the space on a child's level and while you are there, ask yourself:

1. How does the space make you feel?
2. Are there interesting things to see at this level?
3. Are there some child-size furniture available and a cozy place to relax and read books?
4. Are playthings stored at a height that is accessible to young children?
5. Are dangerous items inaccessible to them?

The answers to these questions will assist you in completing your assessment of the physical environment.

Experience, Education and Training: Family child care providers have a wide variety of experience, education and training. Experience refers to the number of years that a child care provider has worked as either a family child care provider or worked with a specific age group in a child care center. Education refers to college level work completed by the provider specific to early childhood education, as well as any courses that are relevant to caring for and educating children up to age 13. Training refers to continued professional development seminars, workshops and conferences attended by the provider on an annual basis. All three are extremely valuable, especially in combination and have been linked directly to the quality of care that a provider can offer in any setting.

During your visit to each program, pay close attention to the interactions between the provider and the children in the program, the children with each other, and the children with their environment. See how the provider speaks with the children:

1. Does he/she offer encouraging words to them and help them work out their problems?
2. If your child accompanies you on the visit, note how your child is reacting to the caregiver?
3. In turn, how does the caregiver react to your child?
4. Look closely at what the children are doing?
5. Does the provider seem aware of what each child is doing?
6. Are there a variety of toys to play with?
7. Are the toys age appropriate, clean and hazard free?

Ask yourself, "Would I be happy here every day?" Ask the provider to show you the programs activity and learning plan for the week or month. Inquire about receiving a monthly parent update newsletter that will help you to prepare your child for each coming days activities at the child care home. Experienced and educated family child care providers find it easy to care for and create positive experiences for this wide age range of children. They can be very creative about scheduling and planning these activities so that each child is challenged at the level that is appropriate for them.

Program Structure: This refers to the flexibility built into the program schedule each day. An ***unstructured environment*** means that the provider follows the children's lead for the entire day regarding activities. A ***semi-structured environment*** allows for some scheduled activities during the program day, but also allows for some "free-choice" time as well. Participation in a particular activity may be optional. A ***structured environment*** allows for little or no "free-choice" time during the day and generally activities are scheduled for particular times during every day. They are also usually scheduled a week or more in advance.

Child Care Philosophy: This refers to a clear, written description of each child care provider's thoughts regarding child care and child rearing. It should also tell you how strongly these beliefs are held. It should describe what they believe is best for all children. It may also describe how they deal with any communication to parents about concerns they may have regarding the children in their care, as well as describe their beliefs and application of any type of discipline procedures. Most of all it should tell you what about child care and child rearing they believe to be most important to raising a happy, healthy, well adjusted, ready to learn child. This will tell you much about how compatible you and your potential child care provider might be

Nutrition: Family Child Care Providers of varying levels of early childhood education professionalism range widely when it comes to their knowledge of nutrition and their food service to enrolled children. It is ideal if your provider develops and posts a weekly or monthly menu that will list exactly what will be served each day. Providers who are licensed must create weekly menus and follow USDA guidelines on nutrition and serving size. Many also join the Child & Adult Food Program that monitors food service through training, mentoring and monitoring. Participation is voluntary and the USDA does offer small reimbursements to providers monthly based on how many children are served and how many meals and snacks are served. Each provider may have particular procedures regarding the necessity of participation in these programs or may be able to be more flexible should you wish to bring food and drinks for your child to have each day. Either way, nutrition is a very important part of your child's day.

Parent/Provider Agreements and Business Contracts: An experienced provider will present a formal parent/provider agreement and/or business contract that set out policies regarding payments, absenteeism, emergencies, discipline, transportation/field trip, and health requirements and many other important items. As parents you must assess your own ability to respect and follow these legally binding documents. An experienced early child care and education professional develops thorough and clear business policies for good reasons. Professional contracts clarify the parent and providers responsibilities to the relationship. This clear communication leads to a satisfying and stable relationship between the provider and parents. The quality of this relationship

is one of the more important components to understanding the mutual goals of families and the provider's programmatic goals.

These are only the beginning steps to finding the right child care for your family. Give yourself and your child the time to know a caregiver. This settling in period can last for as little as a week or as much as a month. The time frame for settling in is dependent on several factors:

1. How well your child bonds to new caregivers
2. How well your child adjusts to the new environment and new limits.
3. How many other factors have recently changed in your child's life. (ie; have you recently moved or had a new baby in the family?)

If possible, gradually ease yourself and your child into the new arrangement. Perhaps, starting the child care program on a part-time basis at first would give all a chance to adapt to the new routine. Asking questions, talking to your child's caregiver everyday, will help you find and keep quality child care that meets your family's early care and education needs. Maintaining consistent, stable, quality child care is very beneficial to your child's appropriate development and happiness.