

Evaluating Providers

When determining the kind of child care that will suit the needs of you and your child, you should consider these factors.

- When do you need care? Part-time, full-time, off-hours?
- When is the best age for a particular type of care?
- Where is the most convenient location for the care? Near work or home?
- What is the best environment for your child?
- How much will the care cost and what can you afford?
- How many days/hours will your child spend in child care?

The answers to these questions are uniquely personal, so take some time to think them through.

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

1. Use research as well as instinct.
2. Money matters, but use cost to choose between two equally desirable alternatives.
3. 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 by identifying a list of potential providers. Ask friends or your pediatrician for referrals. Oftentimes, local parenting magazines include a list of providers. Your Employee Assistance Program can also help you research options that meet your criteria.

Step 2: Screening

Once you've identified potential providers, call ahead to begin the screening process.

For out-of-home care, ask about these 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

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- Location
- Availability
- Services provided
- Supplies provided (i.e. meals, snacks, diapers, 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 down your in-home choices to the best two or three, check their references.

Step 4: Choosing

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

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to choose between two highly qualified centers, essentially equal in all respects but cost, then choosing the most affordable makes 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.

Source: Workplace Options. (Reviewed 2013). Evaluating providers. Raleigh, NC: Author