



Child Care Centers

A child care center is any child care program that provides services in a setting other than a home. Child care centers offer physical, activity-oriented and educational programs under adult supervision, most often within age-defined “classrooms,” and are typically open during the local school year or year round, 10 to 12 hours a day, five days a week. This guide will provide you with in-depth information about child care centers, a popular child care option.

Types of Child Care Centers

Child care centers and the programs they offer vary. Depending on your family’s needs and your child’s personality, you may want to look for centers with particular characteristics regarding:

Number of Children—A center may serve a dozen children or a few hundred.

Setting—Centers may operate in specially designed buildings, or use space in corporate buildings, schools, churches, community/recreation centers, non-residential houses, etc.

Size and Condition of Facility—Centers vary in square footage, number and functions of rooms, handicap accessibility, outdoor play area, parking and the overall condition.

Sponsors—Centers may be managed by a government agency, national chain, individual proprietor, religious group, school district, or a community or non-profit organization.

Anne and James are looking for new care options for their two children. “I know that child care centers are a popular choice among my co-workers,” says James, “but we are hesitant about enrolling our children in this type of care. What kind of services and care can our family expect from a center?”

Activities—Some centers have specific age-appropriate learning curricula; others offer more informal learning programs.

Philosophy—Center-based programs may have particular teaching methods or discipline policies, which can be center-wide or caregiver-specific.

Cost—Fees vary depending on available programs and services, staff credentials and regional demographics.

Staff Training—Requisite credentials vary from state to state. Centers may or may not require that staff be trained in early childhood development or special needs issues.

Age Limits—Centers may limit services to specific age groups (i.e., only infants or only children three to five years old). Some centers set a minimum age for infant enrollment while others will admit all children up to a certain age.

Child Care Center Services

Child care centers may provide the following services:

Full-Time Child Care—Care is typically available Monday through Friday from 6:30 or 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 or 6:30 p.m. Some centers may be open later.

Part-Time Child Care/Half-Day

Programs—A child attends the center on certain days for a set number of hours (i.e., Monday through Friday, from 6:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.). This schedule may cost as much as a full-time program if the center is unable to fill the remaining program hours.

Flexible Scheduling—Parents, usually on a weekly basis, are allowed the option to choose what hours and days their child will attend the center. The cost of this service may equal the cost of a full-time program.

Extended Hours—Care may be available before or after the normal operating hours of the center, usually for an additional fee.

Before-and/or After-School Care—This usually means school-aged children can attend the center outside of school hours. Transportation to and from school may be an issue as not all centers are serviced by school bus routes.

Shared Care—Although uncommon, some child care centers allow “cost splitting,” where two families split the cost and a child from each family attends part time, equaling one full-time slot.

Emergency/Backup Care:

- **Weekend Care**—A select number of childcare centers have weekend hours.
- **24-Hour Care**—A very select number of child care centers offer 24-hour service.
Note—Some states limit the number of hours a child can spend in a child care facility.

- **Drop-In Care**—Some centers offer care on a drop-in or emergency basis. Often, pre-registration is necessary for this arrangement. Other centers may have an area dedicated to caring for mildly ill children who cannot participate in the normal activities. There are select centers whose sole business is to provide temporary, emergency or sick care.

Child Care Center Organization

Children in a center are usually grouped by age, and classrooms are tailored to meet the needs of that age group. State guidelines addressing age “classification,” along with the practices of individual centers may vary; for instance, in one center, a 14-month-old child may be cared for in the infant room while in another, he or she may be part of the toddler group. Age-group distinctions among children are generally acknowledged as follows:

Infants (Birth to 12 Months)

A child between birth and 12 months of age is usually considered an infant. Some centers separate younger and older infants, but infant rooms normally operate independently from the rest of a center. In the event that an emergency evacuation is necessary, infant rooms are usually located on the perimeter of the facility’s floor plan near an exit. The room may also be sound buffered or heavily insulated to facilitate quiet and a consistent temperature. Infant rooms are furnished with cribs, highchairs, a changing table, playpens, and carpet or floor mats for crawling and playing. Infant rooms usually have their own sinks, refrigerators, stoves and/or microwave ovens. Infant rooms should be decorated with brightly colored objects, pictures and mobiles to provide visual stimulation. The room should provide a “cubby” for each child to stock a change of clothes, bottles, diapers and other personal items.

Toddlers (12 Months to Three Years)

Toddlers are generally defined as children between the ages of 12 months and three years. Some centers place one- and two-year-olds in separate rooms. Typically, toddler rooms are separate from rooms for older children. Within each room, there may be smaller areas designated for different activities such as a block section, a creative play corner, a reading “room” and a kitchen/eating area. The room should contain small tables and chairs for eating and playing. At least part of the room may be carpeted for circle activities, quiet play and rest time. The room may be decorated with brightly colored pictures and the children’s art work. There should be cribs, cots or mats available for rest time. Each child should have a designated and labeled space for a change of clothes, diapers, lunch, a coat and other personal items.

Preschoolers (Three to Four Years)

Preschoolers are usually defined as children between the ages of three and four years. Some kindergarten programs require children to be five years of age on or before the start of school, so some five-year-olds with October, November and December birthdays may be included in the preschool group. The preschool room is usually similar to the toddler room, but offers activities appropriate for children in this age group. The room may have additional tables and supplies for writing, coloring and other activities. There should be carpeted areas for floor play and cots or mats for rest time. Children’s art work often decorates the walls. Each child usually has his or her own storage space for clothes, lunch, projects and other personal items. In most centers, children in a preschool room must be toilet trained.

School-Aged Children (Five Years and Older)

School-aged children are usually considered to be age five and older. Generally, this age group attends a center for before- or after-school care or possibly for full-time kindergarten or backup care. Kindergarten rooms facilitate specialized activities and the physical layout is tailored to the needs of five-year-olds. Rooms used for backup or before- and after-school care accommodate a wide range of ages and are set up accordingly. All rooms for school-aged children will have tables and chairs (possibly of varying sizes) and a broad selection of supplies, toys and books. These rooms may be divided into different areas including a homework section, a book nook, a toy area, an art zone and a snack area. Depending upon the ages of the children, there may be accommodations for rest time. Each child usually has his or her own “locker” to keep personal belongings. Wall decorations and bulletin board displays will contain art work appropriate for older children.

A Note About Children With Special Needs

Children with special needs are placed in the appropriate “classrooms” as dictated by their age or developmental needs. Accommodations to the physical environment or curriculum changes may need to be made for a child with special needs. Books, room decorations and caregiver “lessons” should address topics like tolerance and understanding of the child’s special needs. Caregivers should have experience caring for children with a variety of unique needs.

Licensing and Regulation

Regulatory codes for child care centers vary from state to state. Depending on the state, child care centers are subject to various licensing requirements that typically address:

- Caregiver to child ratio
- Health and safety codes
- Caregiver certification/qualification requirements
- Registration or accreditation standards

The fact that a child care center has met licensing requirements is a positive sign that the center's equipment and facilities are in satisfactory working condition. Meeting these requirements, however, is not an endorsement or guarantee of the quality of the center's programs or curriculum.

One important caveat is the fact that some states do not require religiously affiliated child care centers, nursery schools and pre-kindergartens to be regulated. Due to the variations in the regulation of child care centers, it is recommended that you contact your state and local licensing bureaus (or other appropriate agency) and request all pertinent information about the regulation of centers in your area.

Identifying a Quality Child Care Center

When identifying a quality child care center, careful consideration should be given to staff qualifications, classrooms, outdoor area, communication practices, curriculum and discipline philosophy. Here are some things to look for in each category:

Staff Qualifications

The staff members, especially the director, assistant directors and head teachers, should have experience working with children as well as educational backgrounds in early childhood development. Generally, all staff members should have first-aid and CPR training.

In many cases, this is required by law. If not, at least one staff member who is trained in CPR and first-aid should be present at all times. A relatively low staff turnover rate and ongoing training programs are important to ensure a consistent and secure environment. Teachers should develop and plan lessons, activities, daily routines, age-appropriate tasks, etc., for the age group for which they are responsible.

Classrooms

Classrooms should maintain a comfortable temperature and have windows to allow for fresh air and natural light. Safe and suitable age-appropriate toys, books and games should be accessible to the children. Bright decorations and a logical physical layout are other signs of quality. Exit doors should not be easily accessible to an unsupervised child. The center should be held to high standards of hygiene, particularly in the bathrooms and kitchen area. The center should meet or exceed all safety standards. Facilities should be tested/inspected for radon, asbestos and lead; electrical outlets in classrooms should be child-proofed; and shelves, drawers and closets containing potentially hazardous items should be secured. Fire alarms and carbon monoxide detectors should be strategically placed and in working order, and fire extinguishers and first-aid kits should be accessible.

The center should have a posted emergency evacuation plan and a strict security policy at pickup times.

Outdoor Play Areas

An enclosed outdoor play area should be available to all children. If playground equipment is present, there should be a soft surface such as sand, grass or wood chips under all equipment to break falls. Ideally, very young children should play isolated from older children to reduce the risk of injury. There should be proper security measures, appropriate adult supervision and outdoor lighting as needed. For additional playground safety tips, please refer to the guide *Outdoor Safety*.

Parent/Teacher Communication

The need to maintain a high degree of consistency of care between a child's home and the child care center requires frequent and substantive communication between parents and center staff. Many centers offer activity sheets or daily reports that inform parents of their child's nap schedule, meals, activities, changes and moods for the day. A center may have a system for parent/caregiver communication that includes a verbal report upon arrival and retrieval and a log book that contains daily written progress reports. It is very important that parents inform their child's teachers of problems at home that may be affecting their child (i.e., a divorce, illness or emergency). Parents should also inform caregivers of any special care needs the child requires and talk regularly with caregivers about their child's behavior and progress.

Curriculum

The curriculum should include a variety of developmentally appropriate activities. Many centers alternate between time for quiet and active play and individual and group activities. Ideally children should participate in staff-directed, structured activities as well as unstructured, free play time when teachers merely observe and intervene when necessary. The curriculum should include arts and crafts, stories, music, creative play, motor skill activities, science (animals and nature), and academic work (learning letters, numbers,

colors and shapes). In all areas of play, children should be encouraged, but never forced, to participate.

Discipline Philosophy

Most centers have a formal, written discipline policy (typically governed by law) and every parent should discuss this policy with the center's director. When and where possible, the center's disciplinary actions should approximate the positive disciplinary practices exercised by the parents at home. The method of discipline should not be punitive, humiliating or physically harmful to the child. It may include redirection, time-out or behavior discussions with the child. Centers may also accommodate any predetermined behavior modification practices needed by a child with special needs.

The Finer Details

When comparing costs, each center should provide a written fee schedule. Calculate all applicable fees for the level of service you require and convert these fees into a per child/per hour figure in order to accurately compare costs. Highlight those centers that offer or accept discounts, subsidies or sliding fee enrollment programs that may help lower child care costs. For more information about costs and related issues, please refer to the guide *Reducing Child Care Costs*.

Completing a Registration Application/ Signing a Contract

The management of the child care center will request that parents sign an agreement. The agreement may be very comprehensive, both in the information requested from the parents and the description of the center's policies and procedures.

Child care center agreements vary from center to center, and state by state, but typically include:

Information provided by the parents:

- Names, addresses, telephone numbers and relationship of emergency backups (*Note*—The driver’s license number and/or photo identification of all adults authorized to pick up the child in a parent’s absence may be required.)
- Transportation details: make, model and license plate number of all transporting vehicles
- Names, telephone numbers and locations of family physicians and other pertinent health care professionals
- Parental authorization for emergency treatment
- Preferred medical facility
- Child’s medical and immunization history
- Explanation of any special needs (asthma, seizures, Attention Deficit Disorder, orthopedic impairments, etc.)
- Parental employment information
- Insurance documentation and policy numbers
- Instructions about special requirements (e.g., dietary restrictions, nap schedule, assistive devices, etc.)
- Communication agreement (i.e., notifying the caregiver of disruptive events in the child’s routine)

Information provided by the child care center:

- Health requirements, illness policies, emergency procedures
- Policies regarding medication administration (prescription and over-the counter)
- Hours of operation, holidays, special arrangements
- Documentation of adherence to applicable state/local regulations
- Costs (payment schedule, overtime, late charges, policies regarding nonpayment, etc.)
- Discontinuance of care (reasons and notification policies)
- Methods of communication
- Visitation policies
- Policies regarding meals, snacks, clothing and personal property
- Schedule of routine activities
- Disciplinary procedures

Parents should thoroughly review the agreement with a provider and, as with any legal document, if you feel it is appropriate to do so, consult your lawyer before signing it.

Before You Take the Next Step

A child care center is one of a number of child care options available to parents in search of quality child care. For more information about types of caregivers, child care costs, visiting and interviewing caregivers and backup care, please consult the other publications in our education series.

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