



Child Care Aware Series

Selecting Quality Child Care Centers

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Selecting a child care center requires more than comparing costs and locations. Take time to visit and to interview directors and to observe caregivers. It is important that both you and your child be happy with your choice. The right choice can benefit you and your child for several years.

Child care centers may be in private homes, churches or buildings built especially for child care. Hours of operation may vary. Some care for infants, special needs children and school age children, depending on the program. Although centers are different, all must meet Oklahoma licensing standards. Licensing requires minimal standards for health and safety, adult-child ratios, training for staff, equipment, nutrition, daily program, and behavior and guidance. Many centers meet additional national standards for accreditation by the National Association of Early Childhood Programs. Be sure to look for both the license and accreditation certificate. Ask about both licensing and accreditation when making your selection.

Child Care Information Resources

Child Care Aware - By calling 1-800-799-1699, Oklahoma parents can receive printed information on how to choose quality care, as well as how to contact the resource and referral agencies serving some Oklahoma counties. Oklahoma's Child Care Aware also tells families how to reach the Department of Human Services licensing representative serving their area. Parents can learn how to reach the Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension office in their county for more local information.

Resource and Referral Agencies - These agencies serve certain counties in Oklahoma and can offer information on licensed child care centers near your home or work site. Through a telephone interview, a referral specialist will match your family's specific needs with local child care cen-



Look for staff who can extend the child's play with personal attention.

ters. Call Oklahoma Child Care Aware at 1-800-799-1699 for the name and phone number of resource and referral agencies in Oklahoma. There may be one serving your area. Call the National Child Care Aware at 1-800-424-2246 for resource and referral agency numbers outside Oklahoma.

Department of Human Services - The local and state DHS offices have lists of licensed child care centers. The local office has records for each center. By making an appointment with the licensing agent, you can and should go to the office and read the records on centers you are considering. Their publications "Quality Child Care: Handbook for Parents" and "Choosing a Day Care Center for Your Child" help parents evaluate child care.

Oklahoma State University Extension Offices - Your county Extension office gives parents research-based information about child care. The home economist at the extension center presents talks on child development and child care issues. The home economist also refers parents to other helpful resources and helps local groups organize to improve the quality of child care.

National Academy of Early Childhood Programs — Call 1-800-424-2460 for the names and locations of accredited programs nationwide. Call Child Care Aware 1-800-799-1699 for accredited programs in Oklahoma. If the same program has several sites, accreditation goes to each site separately. As of Spring 1995, Oklahoma had 35 accredited programs.

Visiting Child Care Centers

When you visit a child care center, the director will provide written policies and other materials. You will want to consider how each center's practices will work with your family's beliefs and attitudes. Be sure to ask about discipline, education, nutrition, and caregiver training.

Licensing standards protect consumers. Licensing representatives check each center at least three times a year. They check on certain standards of quality. All child care centers in Oklahoma must follow specific staff and child ratios and maximum group size guidelines. Most programs operate at the maximum to reduce costs. Make sure your child does not change caregivers or rooms frequently to maintain these ratios.

Oklahoma Licensing Requirements

	<i>Staff to Child Ratio:</i>	<i>Maximum Group Size:</i>
Infants (0-9 months)	1:4	8
Toddlers (10-23 months)	1:6	12
2-year-olds	1:8	16
3-year-olds	1:12	24
4 and 5-year-olds	1:15	30
6 years and over	1:20	40

Most centers operate at the maximum group size to reduce costs.

Oklahoma Licensing Standards

Caregivers must attend a minimum of ten hours of training a year. Oklahoma professionals are proud that this requirement continually increases. New staff receive specific training in first aid, airway passage obstruction, and other health and safety issues. Centers follow specific guidelines for food service, diaper changing, and hand washing to minimize illness and spread of disease.

In quality child care programs caregivers use positive discipline. They redirect children and offer choices when behavior is wrong. Using physical punishment or threatening children is not acceptable in child care centers. Standards for number and type of equipment and supplies mean a good play space for each age group. Play equipment helps children develop large and small muscles, language ability, and creative expression. Children learn best through block-building, music, art, pretend, and other play experiences. The standards specify a minimum amount of space indoors and outdoors for the number of children served at the center. Meals must meet one third of a child's daily nutrition needs. Staff must give second servings to children who want them. Staff post current menus of all food served to children. Read the menus so you know what foods they serve to the children.

Telephone the Center

Ask how long the director and caregiver of your child's group have been at the center. How many different caregivers will your child have? What are the number and ages of the children who will be in your child's group? The director will answer your questions about the center. Ask for names and phone numbers of families who placed their children in the center for at least a year. Call these families and ask about the child care center.

Visit the Center

You must see the center in operation before you make your final decision. Call and schedule a visit with the director. Once a director knows you and that you may enroll your child, you may visit without calling first. Your first visit must be at a set time. The director must be sure that it is safe for you to be in the center. The director must protect the children from harm. Once the staff know you, you may drop in for a visit.

You need to visit with the caregiver(s) and children in your child's group. If possible, plan to do so at different times of the day, such as lunch, nap, and outdoor times. Ask the director **and** caregiver such questions as:

What do you try to develop in the children?

What happens when a child hits, bites, or uses bad language?

What if a child refuses to eat or does not nap anymore?

How do you handle a toilet accident?

Why do you do this work?

What training have you had?

The National Association for the Education of Young Children has compiled research findings that indicate what quality child care means. Here are some important signs of good programs.

Caregivers are the most important sign of quality in a program. This relates directly to child care training. Observe the specific caregiver(s) that your child will have. Caregivers should:

- Greet each child and parent as they arrive.
- Show warmth and friendliness by smiling, hugging, and talking to children at their eye level.
- Give simple, positive directions and guidance without yelling or saying negative things.
- Not rush the children from one activity to another.
- Show they understand what children are like at this age level.
- Listen to parents and share the day's happenings.
- Attend several hours of training each year.

A quality program is mostly **play** and learning through experiences with materials, other chil-

dren, and adults. The daily program does not have a highly controlled, “sit and listen” approach. Children should have choices of what they want to do. They should not have to do activities that everyone does at the same time. Passive and structured activities, such as using workbooks, are too stressful and not appropriate for preschool children. Observe the children.

- Are the children content?
- Are they involved in a variety of activities in small groups?
- Is the setting more like a home or an institution?
- Would the noise level be comfortable for your child?
- Is the group small enough so that children receive individual attention, or would the number of children be too much for your child?
- Is there enough equipment for children and is it available for them on low shelves, or must they wait for an adult to hand things to them?
- Are the rooms clean, safe, comfortable, and not crowded?
- Is the day’s schedule posted and are activities right for your child?
- Does there seem to be a balance of indoor and outdoor, active and quiet, and child-selected and teacher-directed activity?
- Are TV time, video games, and other structured activities limited and appropriate for the children’s ages?
- Do children have many chances to be creative?
- Is there a safe and pleasant place for outdoor play?

Discipline helps children develop self control and:

- Guides children to appropriate behavior.
- Prevents problems by arranging the center to show children where to put things and how to behave.
- Encourages and rewards positive behavior.
- Helps and encourages children to solve their own problems.
- Sets a few rules that are easily understood and that children of their age group are able to follow.
- Corrects a child’s behavior privately and kindly.
- Never compares one child to another, criticizes, ridicules, threatens, or physically punishes a child.

Meals and Snacks should be nutritious and avoid foods high in sugar, salt, or fat.

- A menu should be posted.
- Are second helpings allowed?

If your child is an infant or toddler, consider these features:

- Do adults respond to children quickly?
- Are children crawling and moving about in safe areas?

- Are children left in cribs when awake?
- Are infants’ individual sleep and feeding patterns respected?
- Do adults wash their hands after each diaper change or nose wipe?
- Do adults hold, talk to, and play with the children?
- Are the toys cleaned daily?

Visit with Your Child

After you have selected several possible programs that you like, talk with your child. Arrange for you and your child to visit one or two centers. Listen and watch to see what your child likes. Notice how your child responds to the adults, children and equipment in each center. Put yourself in your child’s position. Is this a program you would be happy in if you were your child?

Adjusting

It will take time for your child to adjust to child care. All children have some problems with being away from the home and family. Spend some time with your child the first few days. Do not be rushed to leave. If your child cries and clings, say when you will be back. Make sure you come when you say you will. Call later in the day to see how your child is doing. Often the tears only last until you are out of the door. A sensitive caregiver will help your child become involved in interesting activities.

Stay Involved

You worked hard to select quality child care for your family and to develop open communication with your child care provider. Keep involved by asking how things are going, saying thanks, and offering help, suggestions and materials. If problems arise, set aside time to visit with the caregiver. It is difficult to solve problems at pickup time with everyone tired, hungry, and in a hurry. Ask the caregiver to call you when time allows.

Visit with your child about his day’s activities during your evening routines. Make a special time for your child, perhaps just before bed, for a story and to talk about the best part of the day. Your attention and interest in your child’s day are important in developing a sense of security and well being. Your child needs plenty of physical warmth and affection from you and to know you are there to help with problems.

Sometimes, even when parents have selected a quality program that should meet theirs and their child’s needs, their child is unhappy beyond an expected adjustment period. Listen to your child. Talk to the caregiver and director. You know your child best. Follow your intuition and seek another type of program for your child. Perhaps your child

would be happier in a family child care home. No single type of program is best for all children.

You may need to change child care because your needs or your child's needs change. Be sure to work with your child and the caregiver to prepare for the change. Take your child to visit the new setting. Give your child time to say "good-bye" to the previous child care setting. It is important that your child gain a sense of closure or end one child care relationship before beginning another. This is very important when you and your child have bonded with the provider. End or change this relationship carefully, even if you are parting on unhappy terms. Consider whether any of these activities would be appropriate:

- Take photographs of the child care program.
- Give a good-bye gift to the provider, the program, or the children.
- Return to visit the program.
- Write letters to the provider and children.
- Make a book or scrapbook about the child care experience.

Check Your Consumer Wisdom

Are you and your family becoming wise consumers of child care? Do you feel good about your knowledge of child care centers? Do you know how to measure the quality of the program?

Here are some factors to consider. All of these factors are important. Try to think about their importance to you both before and after receiving this information. Put a "1" beside the item of greatest importance to you. Put "2" beside the second most important quality. Continue ranking. Place "5" beside the last item, which is still an important aspect of child care, but is the last in importance for your family.

	Before:	After:
Health and safety	_____	_____
A play program that fits the child's age	_____	_____
Group size and number of staff	_____	_____
Staff training and turnover	_____	_____
Cost and convenience	_____	_____

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Charles B. Browning, Director of Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Dean of the Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of \$412.00 for 5,000 copies. #0167 0395 CC. Revised.

Resources

OSU Cooperative Extension Fact Sheets -

Call your local Cooperative Extension office.

T-2322 Selecting Quality Child Care

T-2343 Home Alone: Working Parents and School Age Child Care

OSU Cooperative Extension Videotape

Library - Call your local Cooperative Extension office.

VT 312 Child Care Alternatives

VT 440 Choosing Quality Child Care

VT 281 Home Alone

VT 304 Take Charge: A Program for Latchkey Children and Parents

Oklahoma Department of Human Services

Publications - Call your county DHS office.

Quality Child Care: A Handbook for Parents: 87-91

Choosing a Day Care Center for Your Child: 87-50

Children's Books

Oxenbury, H. (1983). First day of school. New York: E. P. Dutton, Inc.

Phillips, T. (1989). Day care ABC. Niles, IL: Albert Whitman and Co.

Rogers, F. (1985). Going to day care. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

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Bredenkamp, S. (Ed.) (1989). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age eight*. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Manfred-Petitt, L. A. (1993). Child care: It's more than the sum of its tasks. *Young Children*, 49, 40-42.

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YOUR PARTNER FOR QUALITY CHILD CARE

1-800-799-1699

