

Childcare Provider Evaluation Checklist

Preliminary Questions

These are questions you should ask right away. Inquire when you first contact the facility, so that you do not waste time visiting centers that clearly will not meet your family's needs.

- Where is the day care center or family day care located?*
Take into account the proximity of the facility to either your work or home. An extra 20-minute commute twice a day may not seem like much until you have made the trip day after day for a period of time. Of course, you do not want to sacrifice quality childcare for a shorter drive, but keep this factor in mind when evaluating your day care options.
- Are there currently any openings at the facility for your child's age group?*
If there are none, ask if there is a waiting list, and how long the facility expects the wait to be for a space.
- Does the facility hold a current state day care license?*
Also, verify this with your state's childcare licensing agency.
- Is the center accredited by the appropriate organization?*
Again, this information is easy to verify.
- What are the facility's hours of operation?*
Be sure that the hours are expansive enough to allow you to time to drop off and pick up your child without stress.
- During what holidays is the facility closed?*
Also, ask if you will be charged for holidays when the facility is not open. Most childcare providers account for holidays in the amount of tuition that is charged.
- What is the tuition?*
Do you pay by the week? Every two weeks? Ask when tuition is payable. Also, find out if there is a grace period for payment. Some facilities will require payment the first week of the month, but will actually accept payment for a week or two afterward without subjecting the parents to a monetary penalty.
- Does the tuition decrease as your child gets older and is more independent?*
- If necessary, does the facility accept part-time clients?*
- How many children is the facility equipped for? How many are enrolled?*
If there is a large number of available spaces, inquire as to why there are not more children enrolled in the facility.
- How are the children separated?*
Where possible, children should be divided into separate areas according to age, for example, so that toddlers are together, apart from school-aged children.
- What is the staff-to-child ratio? How many children per room?*
In general, the fewer children each caregiver has, the better the care each child receives. Be aware of regulations in each state, limiting the number of children per staff member in a particular age group.

Director and Staff

- What is the director's educational and employment background?*
For a day care director, you should look for education and work experience that indicates both the understanding of early childhood education and the ability to administer a childcare facility. The larger the facility, the more formal training the director should have. For a home-based family day care, simply having the experience of operating the business for a certain period of time may be enough of an administrative background. For a large day care center, states are likely to require a certain number of semester hours of college credit in early childhood education.
- Does the director teach in the facility as well, or is she solely an administrator?*
The larger the facility, the more you will want to see a director whose only job is to run the center, rather than to teach as well. Again, your state may have requirements in this area.

- What level of education and childcare experience do the staff members have?*
- How long have the staff members been employed at this particular facility?*
Look for a facility with low turnover in staff. The longer the caregivers have been employed at the facility, the better the quality is likely to be.
- If high turnover, what are the reasons staff members keep leaving?*
Talk to staff as well as the director about this, if possible. Low pay and difficult working conditions can be major determining factors in the quality of care.
- Are director and staff expected to take continuing education courses?*
This may be a state requirement or it may just be a policy of the facility.
- What background checks or other evaluations are performed on potential staff applicants?*
The more evaluation tools the facility uses—references, employment and school history, criminal checks, credit checks, and psychological profiles—the better.
- How are staff members trained?*
The director should have an entire training process that she can explain to you. Better yet, it should be in writing for you to examine. At the least, staff should:
 - receive orientation;
 - be trained in the basics of childcare, such as diapering, toileting, feeding, and so on; and,
 - have knowledge of child development, facility policies, expectations regarding lesson plans and/or daily activities, appropriate discipline, emergency procedures, food handling, biohazards, recognizing and reporting of abuse, and recognizing illness or injury.
- Is staff certified in first aid and CPR?*
All staff members should be certified (and have up-to-date documentation to prove it) as having completed training in infant and pediatric cardiopulmonary resuscitation, as well as in first aid procedures.

Premises

Many of the following items are governed by state day care regulations.

- Is the facility decorated in a welcoming manner?*
Child-oriented décor or artwork and bright or pastel colors create a happy mood for children attending day care.
- Is the furniture comfortable?*
Remember that your child is going to spend a number of hours using the chairs, cribs, and other furniture in the facility each day. Do not underestimate the importance of a comfortable environment to your child's well-being.
- Is the facility clean?*
Look particularly closely at bathrooms, food preparation areas, and diaper-changing areas. Also, inquire as to what chemical compounds are used to clean the premises. Bleach is preferable, so long as there is adequate ventilation.
- Are there any strong odors in the premises?*
Obviously, bad odors indicate a lack of cleanliness. However, even a good scent should raise a red flag if it is very strong—it could simply be an air freshener used to mask a foul aroma.
- What is the temperature in the premises?*
This is another overlooked comfort item. Step into your child's shoes for a moment, and consider how you would like to spend your day in a room that is either too warm or too cold. If the temperature cannot be helped, inquire as to how the staff can make your child more comfortable.
- Are floors and stairs skid-resistant?*
Especially if you have a very young child, you may prefer a facility that does not have stairs. If it does have a stairwell, or if any part of the facility is not carpeted, be sure that the floor is not made up of any sort of slick material that might cause falls.
- Are chemicals such as cleaning compounds or medicine, as well as other dangerous items such as scissors, locked up or placed out of reach of children?*
Any potentially dangerous items should be kept out of reach of children. Especially dangerous drugs and chemicals should be in childproof containers or locked cabinets that children cannot access.

- Is there a sturdy, clean changing table available?*
Diapering areas should be equipped with disposable pads that can be changed with each diaper change, as well as a safety rail and safety belt.
- Is there a covered diaper pail available for discarding soiled diapers? If both cloth and disposable diapers are used, are there separate pails for each type?*
Check to see if the diaper pails are out of reach of infants and toddlers.
- Are hand-washing materials, such as soap and paper towels, readily available?*
Also, inquire whether proper hand washing techniques are taught to new staff and to the children.
- How are the care areas, toys, and so on disinfected, and how often?*
Again, bleach is an effective means of disinfecting. Once toys have been in a child's mouth or on the floor, they should be removed from the reach of children until they can be properly cleaned.
- Is there an adequate number of toilets and sinks to accommodate the number of children enrolled?*
One toilet and sink for every 10-15 children is a reasonable number, but your state may regulate a different number.
- Is there a tub or shower available in case of accidents?*
- Is there adequate space in the premises for the number of children enrolled?*
The American Academy of Pediatrics, for example, recommends 50 square feet of space per child.
- Does each child have a locker, cubby, or other separate area to store his or her own personal belongings?*
This is important if the child wishes to keep a blanket, family picture, or special toy at the facility.
- Are there emergency exits and emergency lighting?*
Older children should be able to point out emergency exits on their own. Emergency lights should be low enough to be easily seen by children.
- Is the lighting bright enough for activity without being glaring?*
Also, ask whether the light can be adjusted for nap or quiet time.
- Is there a playground area?*
Ask to see an inspection report from the local or county building department.
- If playground equipment is available, is it well-constructed and in good repair?*
Be sure that there are no protruding or sharp objects, that swing seats and chains are in good shape, that ladders and climbing apparatus are tightly bolted and steady, and that no rust or splinters are present.
- Is the playground fenced in?*
Fencing needs to be high enough and solid enough to keep children in and intruders out.
- Is the ground beneath the playground covered with a soft material?*
Some recommended materials are wood chips, recycled tires, or sand.
- If there is a sandbox, is it clean?*
Check to see that it is free of debris and excess water.
- If there is pool or other water hazard, such as a koi pond or fountain, is the water inaccessible to the children?*
- Are there areas of sun and shade available in the play area?*
- Are children supervised at all times when on the playground?*

Daily Activities

- What is the schedule of activities for a typical day?*
Ask for a written daily or weekly activity plan, and note whether the activities are play-based, academically-based, or both. The schedule should include indoor as well as outdoor activities— weather permitting—and should give children the opportunity to work with fine, as well as gross, motor skills.
- Is there a written curriculum or lesson plan that is followed?*

- Are the activities appropriate for the ages and abilities of the children?*
- Are the children taken off of the premises for field trips?*
If so, how are they transported? You will want to thoroughly check the driving and criminal records of all drivers employed by the facility, and be certain that the facility has vehicle insurance in appropriate amounts. Also, ask how the facility would handle a situation in which you were not comfortable allowing your child to participate in a particular outing.
- Do third parties or groups come onto the premises to provide recreational activities or educational presentations for the children?*
- How much time do children spend watching television or videos?*
This, of course, should not be a regular activity.
- Is time set aside for children to nap, or to have quiet time?*
Ask also whether children may engage in other activities if they do not feel like napping.
- Are children encouraged to participate in activities, and may they do something else if they do not wish to participate?*
- Do school-aged children have the opportunity to do homework in a quiet setting?*
- Are meals and snacks provided?*
Ask to see a typical menu of food served to the children. Some facilities will ask the parent to send in a snack for the child. Snacks should be nutritious. Also, ask if there is a limit to the number of snacks a child will be given.
- Where are meals prepared?*
Particularly in a family day care home, you will want to know who else in the home has access to the kitchen area.
- Is food properly handled?*
This means that hot food is kept hot, and cold food remains cold. Also, dishes must be properly washed and sanitized.
- Is there fresh food available or is it all processed?*
For example, real cheese is usually preferable to cheese spread, and fresh or dried fruit should be given instead of fruit snacks.
- Is there a variety of food and balanced choices?*
- Are there alternatives for picky eaters?*
- Can special dietary requirements be accommodated?*
- How often is a meal repeated?*
- Are food allergy precautions taken?*
Many facilities are considered *peanut-free zones*. However, there are many common allergies that occur in children, and the facility should have a policy to deal with them. For example, there should be a rule that prohibits children from trading snacks they have brought from home with other children.
- Is the staff willing to give stored breast milk to an infant at the parents' request?*
This should not be an issue in a quality childcare setting.
- If an infant is formula-fed, are the parents required to provide bottles? Prepared formula?*
Some facilities require only that the formula be premixed, while others will insist that the bottles themselves be brought in each day already made up and measured out.
- Is there proper storage equipment for breast milk or formula?*
- Are children supervised at all times, whether inside or outside?*
This means not just that the caregiver is watching the children, but that she is physically present in the same area that they are, in case of emergency.

Policies

- Are policies in writing and available for review by families?*
Ask for a copy to take home and review at your leisure. Write down and return later with any questions you may have after reading the policy.
- What steps does the facility take to ensure confidentiality of information pertaining to each child?*
Personal information, disciplinary actions, and family financial information should never be disclosed to other families with children in the center. Files should be kept in a locked office or cabinet. Staff should be trained not to discuss any child attending the center with anyone other than that child's parents or guardian.
- Are parents welcome to visit at any time?*
There is no reasonable explanation for a childcare provider to discourage parents' visiting the facility at any time, so long as the visits are not disruptive to the staff or children.
- How is discipline handled?*
It is important that you understand exactly what the childcare staff considers acceptable and unacceptable in terms of discipline of children. This item can be stated simply—never allow the caregiver to use physical discipline, threats of physical discipline, verbal belittling or abuse, humiliation, or the withholding of food or water as punishment for misbehavior. No child should be restrained unless he or she is an immediate danger to him- or herself or others, and must stop being restrained as soon as the danger is eradicated. Ideally, discipline should be limited to so-called positive discipline, which encourages and rewards behavior that is courteous and respectful. Time-outs are to be used not as punishment, but as a means of removing a misbehaving or agitated child from a volatile situation, so that he or she can calm down and have a *fresh start* using appropriate behavior. Children who are misbehaving also can be steered toward another activity until they have managed to regain control over their own actions.
- How is toilet training handled by the staff?*
Occasionally, an overworked caregiver may keep a child in diapers or training pants rather than making the effort to put him or her on the toilet. Conversely, a provider might push a child to potty-train when he or she is not ready. Ask for the specific policy of the facility and be sure that it is in accord with your own toilet-training philosophy.
- What is the procedure for a sick child?*
Ask for the policies regarding both a child who is sick before coming to day care and one who becomes sick after arriving. For example, if your child has a fever, some childcare providers require that he or she be fever-free for 24 hours before returning to day care. Again, these procedures may be mandated by state law.
- What is the policy for administering medicine?*
No medicine should be given unless specifically requested by the parents, and only according to the parents' written directions. All medications that are to be given to children must be clearly labeled and stored out of reach of the children.
- Are infants placed on their backs to sleep?*
Most parents are aware that this is the preferred sleep position for children who are not yet able to roll over, unless there is a medical condition that requires another position. All caregivers should be aware of this as well.
- Are infants held or placed in sitting positions when being given bottles? Are bottles hand-held?*
Infants should not be fed in a horizontal position. Moreover, bottles should never be propped for feeding.
- Are staff and children trained in proper hand-washing techniques?*
Facilities should have a written staff policy requiring staff and children to wash hands whenever necessary, but especially after using the restroom, after changing diapers, and before and after handling food or eating. Look for signs near sinks encouraging children to use proper hand-washing techniques. One technique, for example, is to have children rub their hands together with soap and warm water for as long as it takes to sing the Alphabet Song. Only an air-dryer or paper towels should be used to dry hands. Reusable cloth towels are harbors for bacteria and should never be used in a day care setting.
- Is staff trained in handling biohazards, such as blood or fecal material?*
- Is staff trained to recognize signs of illness or injury?*
Day care workers should be able to recognize symptoms of a number of possible illnesses or injuries in children. Asthma, allergic reactions, and insect bites are all examples of ailments that a childcare provider needs to be on the alert for. Of course, if there is a child in the facility with a specific condition, such as epilepsy, the entire staff should be made aware of what to look for and how to handle a seizure.

- Is staff trained to recognize signs of physical or sexual abuse in children?*
Ask the director what specific training the staff has received in recognizing and reporting abuse of children.
- Are children provided with sunscreen when going outdoors in warm weather months?*
- What steps does the facility take to prevent lice infestation?*
Children should never share hats, pillows, dress-up headgear, combs, or brushes. If a child gets head lice, he or she should be required to stay home until the infestation has been completely eradicated.
- How much notice is given if there is a fee increase? How often can an increase be expected?*
- How are disputes between parents and staff handled?*
Ask if there is an appeal process if you are unhappy with the resolution to a dispute that is offered by the facility. This may not be a possibility with a smaller center or family day care home, but there may be an appeals board with a larger, franchised day care provider. Ask to see the policy on dispute resolution before placing your child with the caregiver.
- Under what circumstances can a family be requested to remove their child from the day care facility?*
There should be a policy specifically stating when the child can be expelled from the program. It will likely be allowed when a child presents a danger to him- or herself or others, or when the parents' account with the facility has become delinquent.

Interactions with the Staff

If you are evaluating a new childcare situation, you may not be able to answer some of the following questions by an inspection of the premises. Ask the director for references from other families with children who are enrolled. Better yet, also ask for references from families who no longer have children in the facility, and inquire as to why the families left.

- How do the children in the facility appear? Do they seem happy and relaxed for the most part, or are many of them anxious or crying?*
Although anyone can have a bad day, if repeated visits show that the children tend to be more unhappy than happy in the facility, this should raise a red flag for you.
- Is the childcare staff responsive to the children?*
Do the caregivers bend down to talk to the children at the children's level, or do they tower over the children? Does it take them a long time to answer a child's question or request for assistance? Do not base an opinion on a five-minute visit. Any parent knows that there are moments during the day that can be overwhelming when caring for several children at one time. Visit more than once, and make sure that nonresponsive conduct on the part of the staff is not a pattern at the facility.
- Does the staff provide parents with written daily reports of the child's activities?*
If not, there should at least be a written report on a weekly basis or more often as needed.
- Does the staff respond to parents' concerns about their child's progress?*
If the staff or director seems to be dismissive to your concerns about either the facility or your child's experience in the center, you may want to consider whether this is the best day care environment for your child.

Safety and Security Concerns

- Are working smoke and carbon monoxide detectors in place in the facility?*
- Are there emergency exits in the facility?*
- Is there a security alarm on doors and windows in the facility?*
There should be some method by which the staff can monitor who comes in and out of the facility to be sure that only authorized persons have access to the children. Also, the facility needs to have a means of keeping children from wandering off. If there is not a receptionist at the main entrance at all times, there should be an alarm that indicates the door is being opened.
- In the case of a day care center, is there a locked interior door and intercom or other system by which a visitor can be identified before entrance to the facility is allowed?*

- Are toys, games, and other supplies used by the children safe and in good working order?*
- Are crayons, play dough, paint, and markers nontoxic?*
- Are electrical outlets covered when not in use?*
Similarly, are electrical cords out of reach of toddlers? What about appliances, such as a coffeepot or hot plate, in the break room?
- Are steps protected by child safety gates?*
- Are cribs designed to conform to federal guidelines?*
According to the federal Consumer Product Safety Commission, the slats on cribs must be no more than 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ s inches apart.
- Does staff ensure that none of the children are wearing clothing with drawstrings on them?*
Drawstrings on shirts and jackets pose a strangulation hazard to young children.
- If the premises was built before 1978, does the facility provide documentation of lead and asbestos screening, showing that neither material is present on the premises?*
Many states have regulations concerning the presence of lead and asbestos in day care facilities.

Emergencies

- Does the facility have an emergency plan for disasters?*
The facility's disaster plan should be written and available for inspection. Natural disaster plans will differ according to the part of the country in which you are located. For instance, midwestern day care centers do not need a plan for hurricanes, but will have to have a plan for tornadoes. Other nonweather related emergencies, such as natural gas leaks or fires, should have separate written action plans. Whatever the plan involves, there must be a procedure for contacting parents should such an emergency occur. The director should have a system for keeping contact information, such as cell phone and emergency contact numbers for working parents, updated at all times.
- Does the facility conduct emergency drills with staff and children?*
- What is the facility's written policy regarding medical emergencies, such as injury to a child during the course of the day?*
Inquire as to which hospital the child would be taken to, and whether there is a physician and dentist that the facility uses in case of emergency.

Miscellaneous Concerns

- What documents are required to register?*
Often, you will be required to present your child's birth certificate, photo identification of yourself, and immunization records for your child in order to register for day care. Some public programs may require proof of residency to show that you are entitled to taxpayer supported benefits. Also, if your child is enrolled in a program geared toward low-income families, you may have to show proof of your income and perhaps proof of your monthly living expenses as well.
- What supplies are included with the cost?*
Some facilities provide lunches for the children in the tuition costs, others may charge extra for meals. Diapers and wipes may also have to be provided by parents or may be available for a charge. Field trips or other outings may also be charged to parents over and above the basic day care fees. Inquire up front as to what specifically is included in the cost of childcare to avoid surprises later on.