

Choosing Child Care

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If you're looking for child care, the choices can feel overwhelming. Here's a five step process to help guide you through narrowing down your options.

Step 1 – Learn the Basics

For an infant or young toddler, you may be considering options including: family or friends, a nanny or au pair, a family child care in a home, or a child care center.

Family, Friend or Neighbor Care

The most common form of child care is children being cared for by grandparents, aunts/uncles, or family friends. This care might be provided in the child's home or the home of the caregiver.

The advantages are that the caregiver is someone that the parents have a long history with who will also likely continue to be a part of the child's life for many years. So it can be part of a loving, connected relationship built on trust. There may be shared language, culture, and traditions. This type of care tends to be the most flexible schedule option so can work especially well for people with non-traditional work schedules or on-call responsibilities. Plus, family care is often offered free of charge or in exchange for room and board or other arrangements.

Some disadvantages are that the caregiver can sometimes feel unappreciated or feel like they're being taken advantage of, and the parents and caregivers may have conflict over the "right way" to care for the child. These can be navigated but it's important to be sensitive to the need for open, honest dialogue. Also, while some family members provide excellent, stimulating learning environments for the children, that is not always the case, since family members are less likely to have training in child development and child safety. (Note: Zero to Three has great resources: <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/series/family-friend-neighbor-care>)

Tips for choosing this care: <https://www.childcareaware.org/families/types-child-care/> and making it work: [www.childcareaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/All in the Family.pdf](http://www.childcareaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/All_in_the_Family.pdf)

Nanny

A nanny is a professional child care provider, who comes to the child's home to provide care (some nannies are live-in care providers). The parents are the employer and they set the terms of a contract: what the schedule will be, what services will be provided (e.g. will the nanny provide any housekeeping or meal prep in addition to child care) and hire a nanny that agrees to that contract. The advantages are that you can customize the agreement to your own needs, the nanny has chosen child care as their profession and typically has a passion for caring for children, and the same nanny may remain with your family for years, providing continuity of care. The disadvantage is that the hiring process can be quite lengthy (and you have to understand taxes and insurance - though working with a nanny agency can ease some of the burden). And if the nanny is sick or quits suddenly, you may have to scramble for a new plan.

Some families nanny share - this plays out a lot of different ways, for example, the nanny is with family A on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and with family B on Thursday and Friday - this is good for families with part-time work. Or the nanny watches both children every day in family A's home - this is good for parents who want a playmate for their child.

Learn more: <https://lifestyle.howstuffworks.com/family/parenting/parenting-tips/choose-a-nanny.htm>.
And www.whattoexpect.com/first-year/childcare-options/interview-questions-for-nannies.aspx.

Au Pair

Au pair refers to someone from a foreign country, typically between the ages of 18 and 26. Like an exchange student, they live in a host family's home and attend school part-time (6 credits) while also providing child care as "part of the family." They stay with a family for 12 months. The family provides room, board, and a small salary. (~ \$350 a week) The schedule can be more flexible, working around the parent's work schedule and the au pair's classes, but with a maximum of 45 hours of child care provided each week. Advantages: exposing your family to a foreign culture and possibly another language, low cost. Disadvantages: the au pair may or may not be as interested in child care as a nanny. One year commitment.

Au pairs are more for older children than for babies. They cannot be placed with newborns, and can only be placed with an under 2 year old if they've had special training.

Learn more about nannies and au pairs: www.msn.com/en-us/news/other/how-to-choose-whether-a-nanny-or-an-au-pair-is-a-better-fit-for-your-family/ar-BB18DQQd; and www.care.com/c/live-in-nanny-vs-au-pair-whats-the-difference.

Family Child Care in a Home

Providers care for children in a home / residential setting. Typically there are one or two caregivers and a small number of children, with a range of ages. Some are licensed and follow safety and health requirements, some are not.

Advantages: many families like the home-like environment, in a smaller setting your child receives more individualized care. If you have two children of different ages, they can be together rather than separated into age groups as they would be in a larger child care setting. Fewer people in the child care setting means less potential for exposure to illnesses. Typically a consistent caregiver, with less turnover. Often lower cost than nannies or child care centers.

Disadvantages - if you're reliant upon one person for child care, then if they get sick or go on vacation, you may not have child care - be sure you know what their plans are for these contingencies. Because there's only one (or two) caregivers, if they aren't good, it's not a good situation. It's especially important that the parent and caregiver have a respectful relationship and feel they can trust each other.

Some family childcares have flexible schedules, some inflexible schedules. It depends.

Here's an excellent checklist to help you evaluate: <https://www.childcareaware.org/families/choosing-quality-child-care/selecting-child-care-program/family-child-care-home-checklist/>

Child Care Centers

Child care centers are larger facilities, typically with a director and many care providers. Children are typically divided by age group - for example, the infants' room, the toddler room, the preschool age, etc. Some centers are non-profits run by churches, schools, or non-profit agencies. Others are for profit and may be owned by an individual or a chain.

Advantages: If a caregiver is ill or has a vacation, typically their absence can be easily covered by someone else, so your childcare needs are consistently met. Some parents prefer the single-age groupings where all the toys and activities are specialized to that age group. Some (more expensive) centers may offer lots of activities such as gymnastics classes or music classes. They have to follow the most safety regulations and have more regular inspections.

Disadvantages: There may be a higher level of turnover of staff members and less chance for your child to develop a relationship with a consistent caregiver. Less individualized care. More exposure to illness may mean your child is sick more in their early years (but may be sick less as they get older, since their immune system has had lots of training.)

Check out Child Care Aware's checklist <https://www.childcareaware.org/families/choosing-quality-child-care/selecting-child-care-program/child-care-center-checklist/>

Step 2 – What do you need?

Before you start looking at specific options, think about your concrete needs / basic logistics. Think about your "can do" and "really can't do" list. Start with these, because otherwise you might fall in love with a program and *then* discover that you can't make the logistics work. (I know many people who talked themselves into something, saying "it'll be OK, I'm sure we can make it work" and then had to give up when it proved unsustainable and start all over again.)

Location

How far are you willing to drive? How far is your child willing to be driven (some children do fine in the car, others are miserable)? Does it make sense to choose a caregiver who can come to your home? A location near your home or one near your work? Is the location convenient for other family members or friends if you need them to pick up?

Schedule

How many days a week? Do you have specific days of the week you can or can't do? What time do you need care to start and end? Do you need flexibility on the end time if you sometimes run late leaving work, or if you're caught in traffic? Can your schedule change from week to week or is it pretty predictable?

Cost

What's manageable? Cost ranges hugely, so think through carefully what is manageable for you, and don't spend time looking at options that are outside your price point.

It's important to know that lower cost doesn't have to mean lower quality of care. There are some amazing childcare providers who provide lower cost care. Their buildings may not be as beautiful, their equipment might not all be shiny and new, but it's all clean and well cared for. The key factor in excellent child care is the people who provide the care.

Some child cares offer a sliding scale based on parent income. Some states, municipalities, and tribes have child care subsidies available.

Step 3 – Gather Your Options

It's worth looking at ads in parenting magazines and online but it's also worth knowing that you'll mostly see ads for large chains and expensive daycares, because they have money for ad budgets. To find the local, smaller, low cost options you don't look at paid ads. You ask around – ask friends, family, co-workers, people in birth classes or parents at the park. If they say they LOVE a program, ask why! It could be that you'd love it for the same reason, or it could turn out that something they love would totally turn you off.

You can do web searches – some small day care have a good web presence, but many don't.

If you have local child care referral services, use them! If the referral service is something that providers have to pay to be a part of, then it's just another form of advertising, really, and you'll get referred to the larger chains and more expensive providers. Referral services run by non-profits and governmental agencies may offer referrals to a much wider array of small providers.

Step 4 – Research your top choices

Once you've got a list of four or five possibilities, do more research. Read the programs' websites in detail, if they have one. Call to ask specific questions. Go to open houses or tours or ask to observe, if possible. Here are questions to consider:

Are there openings? What is the enrollment process?

What is the cost? When are payments due?

What is the schedule?

- What time could your child start? What time could you pick up?
- For infants: Are infants fed on demand? If your child is breastfeeding, how do they support that? Where do babies sleep? Are baby's cries responded to promptly?
- For toddlers: How is time divided between activities? Play time? Quiet time? Outdoors? Snack? What activities are available? What do caregivers do to support the child's learning? If meals will be provided to your child, when, where, and what will be included? Is there nap time – when? where?
- Are there days / times of year when care is not available? (holidays, caregiver vacations, etc.) What happens if a caregiver is sick?

Who are the childcare providers?

- Training: What is their training? Have they done safety training? Have they done additional training in supporting the child's learning and development? Do they have an AA or BA in early childhood? What experience do they have?
- Do they participate in continuing education or other opportunities to improve their skills and the care they provide?
- Longevity / turnover. As a general rule, the longer teachers have been there, the better.
- Do they enjoy kids? Do they sit on the floor with the kids, smile, and engage with them? Or are they standing on the edges talking to other adults.
- For toddler: How do they handle discipline? What are the rules/how are they reinforced?
- For some families, it is important that caregivers share their cultural background or faith beliefs. Some families seek out diversity, such as a caregiver who speaks a different language. Meeting the caregivers may give you a sense of if your goals will be met.

Who are the children?

- How many children? How many teachers? (In Washington state child care centers, the maximums for babies under one year old is four babies per adult, with a maximum group size of 8 babies and two adults. For 12-29 month old children, it's 7 children per adult, max of 14 children in a group. But those are the maximums. Your child would get more individualized attention if there are fewer children for each adult to tend to.)
- What is the age range of the class? Some parents prefer that all the kids be as close as possible in age, but many programs point out the benefits of multi-age classrooms.
- What are the cut-off dates for age? Your child may do best if you choose a program where they are right in the middle of the age range rather than youngest or oldest. Many parents push their child ahead to the next program the second they reach the minimum age... but I don't recommend this – if your child is always the youngest one in the room, they may often also feel like the slowest, least coordinated one in the room.
- In a childcare center, how is the transition from one age group to the next managed?

What is the environment like?

- Is it clean? Safe? What are their policies for illness and cleaning? Where are diapers changed? For infants, are safer sleep practices followed?
- Is there a wide range of materials and supplies that are appropriate to your child's age and abilities? Are materials in good condition?
- Are there areas for quiet play / resting and areas for active play?
- Is there an opportunity for time outdoors? What is that space like?

Parent Partnership

- Are parents welcome to visit any time?
- Can parents be involved in the program?
- Do caregivers share and talk to parents about their child's daily activities, either at drop-off or pick-up?

- If parents or caregivers have particular questions or concerns, can they schedule a time to speak in depth (this may need to be at a time when the caregiver does not have children to care for)?
- How do providers work with parents to incorporate the family's culture and values into the classroom?
- Can parents be involved in a child's birthday celebration? special events? field trips?

Note: some facilities have cameras where parents can watch the child at any time. These are not essential – if you trust your caregivers and can visit at any time, these “nanny cams” shouldn't be a big part of your decision making. Some facilities provide lots of written reports to parents, and while those can be nice, remember that time spent filling out reports may be time that could be spent interacting with your child. Having a quick moment to chat with the caregiver each day can be just as informative.

Licensing?

Licensing requirements vary by state and by type of childcare provider. But, if they are licensed, you may be able to view their licensing records to see if there have been any complaints. (In Washington, use <https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/services/earlylearning-childcare/childcare-check>.)

Step 5: Making the Choice

After you've done your research on your options, if possible, don't narrow it down to a single choice. If you fall in love with one and rule out all others, and then it turns out that one doesn't have availability, that can be really stressful. Instead, make a list with multiple options, ranked from your favorite on down, and then contact your top choice. A lot of this process is intellectual and practical, comparing things like price and location. But in the end, sometimes it comes down to trusting your gut.

Vibe The most important thing you're “looking” for is something you can't see. How does it *feel*? Is it warm, nurturing, full of exciting learning experiences, and full of happy children and teachers? Or is it cold, disconnected, uninvolved? We know from the science of brain development that children learn best when they feel safe and are happy, so look for a place where they will be happy and engaged. You should also look for a place where *you* would feel great every time you drop them off to spend time there. That's the one to choose.

On-Going

Even once you've found an option, the evaluation goes on... as your child's developmental needs change, and perhaps your work schedule or other logistical needs change, does it still seem like a good fit? Or do you feel like something else would be a better match?

If you have concerns, you can approach the caregiver to try to work them out. Sometimes things work out perfectly, and sometimes they don't and you have to start the process again, so be sure to hold on to your notes, in case there's a next time to search.

Resources for Families in Washington State

Financial Support: Options for paying for child care: <https://childcare.org/family-services/pay-for-care.aspx> and <https://childcareawarewa.org/families/>

Low income families (income less than \$42K per year) can qualify for child care subsidies, including helping to pay a family caregiver. Learn more: <https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/services/earlylearning-childcare/getting-help/wccc>

Child Care Centers and Family Day Cares

- Child Care Resources website – <http://childcare.org/>. They operate Child Care and referral line to provide information on licensed childcare choices in King County Call at 206-329-5544 or 1-800-446-1114.
- Child Care Check from WA State Dept of Children Youth and Families – for licensing information and quality ratings of child care centers (<https://www.findchildcarewa.org>)
- Information about childcare centers in WA state: <https://childcareawarewa.org/families>
- For Washington State Families, Child Care Aware offers a very helpful brochure on Choosing a Child Care on Child Care Centers and Family Child Care. It includes info on steps to finding quality child care, staff to child ratios and group size (in WA, for babies under one year, there's a maximum of four babies per adult caregiver and a maximum group size of 8 children), and financial options.

Nannies and Au Pairs

- Seattle Nanny Parent Connection Facebook Group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/SeattleNannyParentConnection>
- Annie's Nannies (<http://anniesnannies.com/>)
- Au Pairs: Info from Cultural Care (<https://culturalcare.com/>)
- Au Pair in America (<http://www.aupairinamerica.com/state/washington.asp>)