



by Karen Stephens

Choosing Child Care: Questions Parents Should Ask

When looking for child care, learning the signs of quality is the first step in the selection process. Next comes observing programs and interviewing staff. It's a time consuming, tiring, even frustrating task. It takes as much planning and legwork as selecting the right car or home. And it should. Nothing is more valuable — or vulnerable — than your child.

I know that when child care providers quit with little or no notice, it's next to impossible to find the luxury of shop around time. And many work sites don't like parents taking personal days off to look for child care. But if that's what you have to do, I recommend it. After all, child cares aren't open weekends for comparison shopping! Increasingly, child care centers are setting up web sites which will allow you to find out more about their services. It can be a good time saver when time off from work is scarce.

Regrettably, some parents select child care by walking fingers through the Yellow Pages, then jumping at the first program with an opening. That can lead to a succession of bad choices and experiences. And it's emotionally hard on kids, not to mention parents' nerves. It's far better to be a wise consumer from the start. Sure it takes more effort to find a best fit program, but it's worth it; and your child deserves it.

When deciding among child cares, typical questions relate to price, location, operation hours, licensing, and accreditation status. Once preferences (and affordable options) are narrowed, make an appointment to tour programs you're interested in. Walk through classrooms and the play yard to get a sense of overall atmosphere. Look for quality indicators you believe are important. Talk with the director, caregivers, and teachers. Before final selection, conduct an unannounced visit to see staff in action on a typical day.

Following are interview questions to ask of child care providers. Pick and choose which apply to your needs. Depending on your child's needs, you may think of others. If you ask even a few, most child care staff will be delighted over your interest in their program and your child's welfare. But if a director hesitates to answer them, or acts like you are being too demanding or picky, move on. It's your JOB to be picky about your child's care. If not you, then who?

SEPARATION ANXIETY: How do staff cope with children who have trouble separating in the morning? May parents call to see how a child is doing after a difficult separation?

CHILD RELEASE: If the program releases your child to someone other than you, how will staff confirm their identity at the time of pick-up?

SMOKING: If smoking is allowed, is it away from children's indoor and outdoor play spaces? Are staff restricted from smoking during van transportation?

PETS: Are classroom pets healthy and safe around children? Do they have required veterinarian care, such as a yearly rabies shot? Are they and their cages clean?

DISCIPLINE ISSUES: How does staff respond to potty mouth or cussing? What happens when children hit or bite? How are children protected from others who are verbally aggressive? How do staff react when a child talks back or is disrespectful? How do staff deal with high energy children? Are parents notified of behavior changes or concerns?

MEAL SERVICE: What types of snacks and meals are offered? How do staff handle picky

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eaters? If a child has a food allergy, will staff make menu substitutions? Are menus posted? Are cooks or the cook's supervisor certified in food sanitation?

MEDICATIONS: Is over-the-counter or prescription medication administered? How are medications stored? How do staff prevent giving a child another child's medicine? How will you know if your child received his dosage? How are duplicate doses prevented?

NAPPING: Where and on what do children nap? How are resistant nappers handled? What happens if a child wakes up long before the others? How are naptime toilet accidents handled? How often is cot bedding washed? Are stuffed animals allowed?

DIAPERING AND TOILET TRAINING: How often do staff change diapers? Are staff trained in sanitary diapering? How do staff decide if a child is ready to be toilet-trained? How do staff work with parents to carry out toilet training?

ACTIVITY CHOICES: Is there a regular schedule of activities? What activities are children typically offered? What happens if a child isn't interested in a planned activity? How will staff respond if a child comes to child care a little tired and wants to relax rather than play?

OUTDOOR PLAY: How often do children play outdoors? What kind of weather prohibits outdoor play? How are children kept safe and healthy during outdoor play?

TELEVISION, VIDEOS, AND MUSIC: Is television used? If so, how often and how long? If families bring videos or music from home, are they screened for suitability? For child care homes: What happens if the provider's teenage child wants to watch his own movie, or listen to his own music? Will it take place in the children's play area?

ILLNESS AND ABSENCES: What illness excludes children from attending? What happens if other parents bring ill children to a classroom? How soon will staff notify parents if children become ill? Are parents notified if a classmate has a contagious illness? For day care homes: What happens if the provider is ill and can't take care of the children? Is there a qualified substitute?

EMERGENCIES: Are first aid and CPR certified staff on the premises at all times? How are emergencies handled? Are parents contacted immediately? What happens if parents are out of reach? How are children transported for emergency care?

DIVERSITY: Do staff represent diverse gender, culture, or race? How are children taught to appreciate all people? How do staff respond if someone is teased about racial heritage, gender, cultural, or physical characteristics?

DISABILITIES: Are staff trained to respond to your child's disability or special need? If not, are they willing to obtain training? Is the facility accessible? Will staff make program accommodations? How are other children taught about disabilities? How will the program respond to classmates' parents who have questions about a child's disability?

STAFF QUALIFICATIONS AND SCREENING: What are staff qualifications? How often are they trained, and in what? How long have they worked in the program? How are staff screened prior to employment (such as references and background checks)?

PARENT INVOLVEMENT: May parents visit at any time? How may parents participate in the program? Is there a list of parents to serve as references? What methods are used for parent-staff communication? In cases of divorce, what policies address non-custodial parent involvement?

BILLING: When are bills due? How much notice is given for rate increases? Do you pay for days your child is absent due to illness or vacation? Is there a yearly vacation closure? What holidays are observed, and are parents charged for those days?

LATE DEPARTURE: What will happen if you arrive after closing hours due to an emergency? What happens if it was not an emergency?

TERMINATION OF SERVICES: How much notice is required if a parent discontinues using care? How much notice is required if the program ends a child's enrollment or the provider quits?

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.