



Tips for Choosing and Using Quality Child Care

Take Your Time

Quality child care makes a big difference in the future of your child. By choosing quality child care now, you give your child a head start on a strong mind, body and spirit. So take your time in choosing child care. Compare your options, and ask plenty of questions.

High Quality is Not a Given

The first thing you will learn is that high quality child care is difficult to find! It is estimated that only 15% of all child care meets “quality care” standards. First appearances are not always what they seem, so plan to spend enough time visiting potential child care sites to assess their programs. Take Child Care Resources’ *Quality Checklist* brochure and the provider profile along with you on your visit so you can refer to them. Take notes! Remember, not all aspects of quality child care can be objectively measured. You have to get a feel for the personality of the provider, and how he or she will get along with your child and you. Stay as long as possible so you can experience what the care will be like for your child.

Training Matters

Adults trained in child development who offer a warm, nurturing environment are best able to provide a quality program. Through training, providers learn how to plan for children who have different needs at different stages. Ask about the background and experience of all staff. Find out about the special training each one has and whether the program is ‘Star Quality’ rated. Can the provider give you the names of parent references? Quality providers will be happy you asked.

Your Child is Worth It!

Research on brain development shows that babies are born with an “unfinished” brain. The parts of the brain that handle thinking, remembering, emotions, and social behaviors are undeveloped at birth. The first five years are critical for the developing brain.

The brain’s growth is affected by early experiences with both parents and other caregivers. The quality of non-parental care is measured by the same indicators as care by mothers and fathers: warm, responsive, consistent caregiving, attentive to the needs of the individual child.

Recent research shows that the quality of child care has a lasting impact on children’s well-being and ability to learn. Children in poor quality child care lag behind their peers in language and reading skills and display more aggression toward other children and adults.

The quality of child care matters! Babies who are held, talked to, sung to and read to simply do better later in school.

In other words, you and your early care and education professional influence your child’s brain structure, and shape learning, thinking, and behavior for life!

For additional information, please contact Child Care Resources:

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Common Business Practices

Child care is a business, and every early care and education professional is a business owner who relies on profits to stay afloat. It is important that parents respect their early care and education professional's business policies.

You should expect to sign a contract. Providers usually require a deposit or advanced payment, as well as a specific amount of advance notice before a child is withdrawn from child care. Some providers charge by the day, some by the month. Some bill weekly, some bill monthly. There may be a late payment fee, late pick up fee, transportation or meal fee.

Types of Child Care

Montana law recognizes licensed and registered child care settings. The ratio of adults to children is a very important factor in determining the quality of child care; in licensed and registered settings it is regulated.

The adult-to-child ratio is based on the type of setting and the ages of the children in their care:

Family Child Care Home

Registered for up to 6 children

One adult cares for up to 6 children; no more than 3 of the children may be under age 2.

Group Child Care Home

Registered for up to 12 children

Two adults care for up to 12 children; no more than 6 of the children may be under age 2.

A family or group home may be registered to allow some overlap time, when they can take extra children at specific hours of the day, such as before and after school.

Child Care Center

Licensed for 13 or more children

Staffing ratios according to age of children:

4:1	Infants	0-2 years
8:1	Children	2-3 years
10:1	Children	4-6 years
14:1	Children	6+ years

Emergency Back-Up

Every parent encounters child care emergencies. Be prepared by having back-up child care arranged for those days when you have to work late, or your child care provider's facility is closed because of illness.

Rates and Fees

Child care is an expensive service, and can be one of a family's largest monthly costs. Montana child care averages between \$5,800 and \$6,475 per year per child for full-time care.

In shopping for child care, parents find a range of costs. Southwestern Montana's daily child care rates range from \$15/day to \$34/day.

Some types of child care are more expensive than others. For example, infant-toddler care usually costs more per hour than preschool care. Part-time care usually costs more than full-time care. Center care may cost more than family or group home care.

Location influences the cost of care also. Child care usually costs less in rural or outlying areas.

The state rate of payment for child care subsidy programs is set at the 75th percentile of the range. This means that 25% of Montana providers charge more than the state will pay.

Your child care provider is not getting rich! Most providers struggle to cover their costs. Their average hourly wage is estimated to be \$7.25/hour regardless of education and experience.

Monitor Your Child's Care

Well-informed consumers are the best monitors of child care. Parents must learn to recognize the warning signs of poor quality care so they can avoid low quality settings and demand a high quality child care system.

A variety of mechanisms monitor the quality of child care programs, including state standards, local health and safety codes, the USDA Child Care Food Program and professional accreditation programs. For this reason, it pays to look for a registered or licensed facility. Ask about staff qualifications and training.

Parents cannot rely on the state to guarantee health and safety in child care. In Montana, licensors do not inspect all facilities annually. Before you begin working with an early care and education professional, telephone the local Quality Assurance Division-Child Care Licensing office to learn of any history of substantiated complaints against that provider.

If you see a problem in a child care setting, it is your responsibility to report it to the Quality Assurance Division so they can investigate and protect children.

Please contact Brandi at the Quality Assurance Division, 329.1590, to report any concerns for a facility in Missoula, Mineral or Ravalli County.

Best Beginnings Scholarship Program

The State of Montana offers the Best Beginnings Child Care Scholarship program for parents with low income who are working **or** participating in TANF. Eligibility guidelines may change depending on availability of funding. Providers participating in the scholarship program must be registered, licensed, or a legally unregistered provider. Parents pay a monthly co-payment based on family income. For more information and income guidelines, contact Child Care Resources.



Quality Child Care Definitions

National Accreditation

Accredited homes and centers voluntarily meet national standards of quality that are much higher than Montana's state regulations. Accredited programs have developmentally appropriate environmental considerations, quality factors, better child-staff ratios, and stricter staff training qualifications.

Group and family child care programs are accredited by the National Association of Family Child Care (NAFCC). For more information, please visit www.nafcc.org.

Child care centers are accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). For more information, please visit www.naeyc.org.

Early Child Care and Career Path

The Early Child Care and Career Path provides guidelines to document and recognize experience, education and training accomplishments of child care practitioners. Providers achieve higher Levels on the Career Path for more education and training. Find additional information at <http://www.mtecp.org/>.

Extended License

A two- or three-year license may be granted after an inspection finds the facility to be in compliance with state regulations and there is no history of substantiated complaints. A facility with an extended license is working toward quality indicators in cognitive, physical, social/emotional and creative development.

Merit Pay Award

The Merit Pay incentive program rewards child care professionals for receiving training. Providers may choose to participate in either a 23 or 50 hour track of early child care and education training during the year.



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