

ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Finding a child care provider you can trust takes investigation

By Karen Gaspers

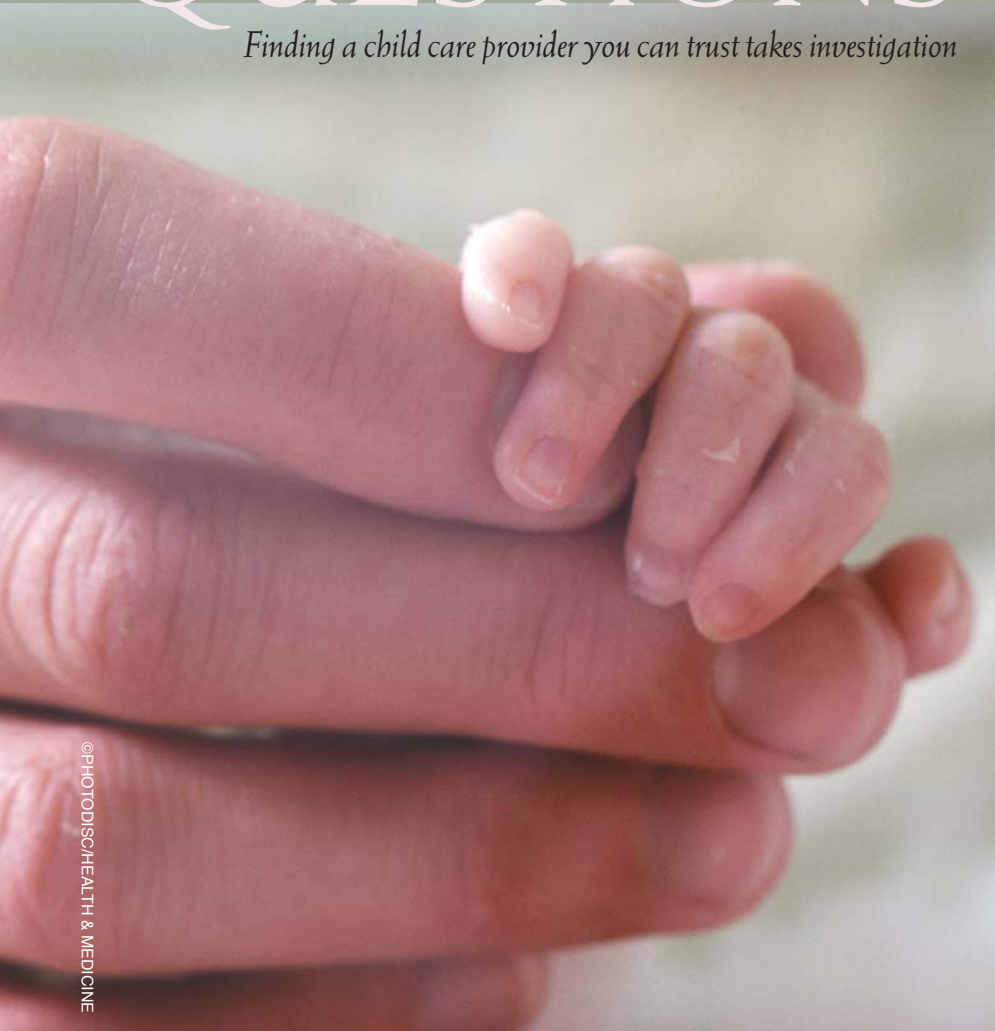
When I was pregnant, several experienced moms advised me to begin looking for a child care provider before my son was even born. They warned me it takes a while to find the right situation, but I had other things on my agenda that seemed so much more pressing at the time, such as setting up the nursery. Besides, I had three months of maternity leave. I'd have plenty of time then, I thought.

Little did I realize how quickly those three months would come and go. My husband and I canvassed friends and neighbors for references, made call after call and visited child care sites. There was so much to consider, so many questions to ask. We were learning the hard way how difficult it can be for parents to find someone they are willing to entrust with the safety of their child. I was due back at work in two weeks, and we still had no one.

It's not unusual for parents to find themselves in similar situations, noted Stacy Minott, outreach and implementation manager for Child Care Aware, a national child care consumer education program based in Washington.

"That's definitely common. We hear similar situations on our hotline. Some parents wait until too late. It is especially difficult for those looking for infant care, which is definitely in short supply. That's a national problem," Minott said. The organization supports a toll-free hotline at (800) 424-2246 where parents can call for help in finding a child care provider in their area.

Child Care Aware encourages parents to begin looking for care as soon as possible. "You can start telephone interviews fairly soon, before the child is born," Minott said, adding that in some cases you can secure a space for your child before birth.



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Planning and research

Finding quality child care also means using the time you do have wisely — asking the right questions and knowing what to look for during onsite visits. “Parents can do a lot of planning and research prior to the birth of their child,” Minott said.

One place to start is the National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care. Researchers have identified 13 basic guidelines as a minimum starting point for choosing child care, and the center has compiled these into a checklist for parents. The 13 areas include supervision, hand-washing and diapering, director qualifications, lead teacher qualifications, child/staff ratio and group size, immunizations, toxic substances, emergency plan, fire drills, child abuse, medications, first aid and playgrounds.

“These are the core things to look for,” explained Barbara Hamilton, assistant director for the Aurora, CO-based center. “Those were found through research to be very important indicators of providers’ compliance with child care health and safety regulations.”

Hamilton encouraged parents to look at other checklists available online, and to check with their pediatrician to see if he or she has a guide they could use. “There’s no one single resource,” she said. “Gather the ones that fit your circumstances.”

When evaluating child care sites, Minott said parents are good about asking for reference checks, checking for safety issues and observing how providers interact with the children. What parents often forget, however, is to inquire about criminal background checks for staff and licensing violations.

If you have an infant, Hamilton said another oversight is the practice of placing an infant to sleep on its back rather than the stomach to reduce the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. This is so widely taught today in hospitals and parenting classes, she said, that parents can easily forget that this is still an issue, especially in family child care settings. “Provider training is increasing and we’re seeing fewer and fewer infants being placed on their stomachs for sleeping,” Hamilton said, “but there are cases where

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parents were placing their infant on the back, then went to child care and the provider put the infant on its stomach. You just need to clarify.”

Another area parents may overlook is policies and procedures, Minott said. For example, parents may not ask if the program has an open-door policy, which would allow them to drop by unannounced, or how the provider handles the administration of



What kinds of care are available?

Different kinds of care go by different names and fit different parameters depending on the state. Even so, here are the basics:

Child care centers — Licensed facilities for large groups of children, outside both the provider’s and child’s home. These also include workplace-based care centers. Keep in mind that licensing does not guarantee quality care; it simply means the provider meets basic safety and health standards as set by the state. Usually they are well staffed with multiple caregivers, and have more space, equipment and organized activities.

Family child care — Providers offer care in their home. These caregivers may be licensed or unlicensed, depending on how the state regulates such care. In general, if a provider has more than four children in the home, it must be regulated. This type of care usually means a smaller home-like setting for the child and may be more flexible than a child care center. However, an emergency backup provider for when a caregiver is sick or otherwise unable to take children is a good idea.

In-home care — Live-in and live-out nannies and housekeepers provide care in the child’s home. Most states do not regulate in-home care, but some states regulate nanny placement agencies. Parents often find such an arrangement convenient and flexible, and generally believe it is safer and more secure for their child. While people usually consider this a cost-prohibitive route, if several children are involved it may not cost that much more than other types of child care.

Kids and kin — Care provided by relatives, friends or neighbors in either the child’s home or the provider’s home. Most states do not regulate this type of care. These caregivers are familiar to the child and family, and usually share similar values. One drawback is that relatives and friends may not be up-to-date regarding child care issues — for example, putting infants to sleep on their backs rather than stomachs.

Steps to choosing safe and healthy child care

1 Look. Visit several different child care programs before you decide which one is best for you. Do they look safe? Are the children supervised at all times, even while they are sleeping? Do all caregivers and children wash their hands often, especially before and after eating and after using the restroom or changing diapers?

2 Check. Are toxic substances like cleaning supplies and pest killers kept away from children? Does the program have first aid kits? Does the program perform practice drills once every month? Is the playground equipment, if any, safe and in good shape? Are medications kept out of the reach of children?

3 Count. What is the ratio of adults to children under their supervision? Be certain there are enough adults to supervise all the different activities that are planned. Infants need an adult to child ratio of no more than 1:4, while a four-year-old can do well with a 1:10 ratio. Usually the smaller the group, the better the care.

4 Ask. Find out about the training and experience of all adults who will be with your children. Do they know first aid and rescue breathing? Are their discipline policies compatible with your philosophy? Are children able to choose among activities? What do the adults know about child development? Have all caregivers gone through background checks? Are records of required immunizations on file and up to date?

Source: *Child Care Aware*, 2004



medication. "Parents don't think about it, or they assume, or they are afraid to ask about these issues," Minott explained.

One way for parents to get around any initial awkwardness and avoid what could be perceived as a confrontational attitude is to substitute scenarios for direct questions, said Hamilton. Rather than inquire directly about medication, ask how the provider handles sick children. Ask how they handle emergencies and what the contact procedures are for different situations. If you are concerned about food safety or related issues, ask if you can observe a meal. You also might ask to see where toxic substances, such as cleaning supplies, are stored, rather than simply asking if such items are properly secured.

"No one would think that's odd," Hamilton said.

Parents aren't the only ones that should be asking questions. A good child care provider will ask about a child's special needs, such as food allergies, sleep issues, medications or behavioral issues. "They should be asking as much information as needed to get a sense of your child before they start care," Minott said.

Visit, visit, visit

Most experts agree there is no substitute for actually visiting the site. "You want to see how your child is being engaged," Minott explained. "This is a very important time in development. You want to make sure they are participating in appropriate activities for their age and stage of development. We encourage parents to drop in because you want to know what's going on at any give time."

For infants, Minott said to make sure the site is very clean — babies put everything in their mouths — there is room to crawl and explore, everything is childproof, and the provider is spending a lot of time interacting with the infants. For toddlers, check that materials are at their eye level and the provider gets down on the child's eye level to talk and play with them. Also, toddler activities should encourage and promote language skills.


When visiting, keep in mind that your presence may be disruptive, Hamilton said. While the provider should be open to a parent coming in to observe, you have a "responsibility to be considerate," she said. Also, take into account that children's behaviors may be different because someone new is there, Hamilton added.

The process doesn't end once you've made your choice, however. Parents need to stay involved, meeting regularly with caregivers and asking them questions. Take advantage of the open-door policy to drop in whenever you can to observe. Volunteer. If you can't get away during the day, make a point to chat with the provider at drop-off or pick-up times. All of these activities help ensure that ongoing care meets your expectations.

As for my son, my husband found a family child care provider where Max, who is now three years old, happily played until the provider retired last fall. He now attends nursery school.

For more information

 Child Care Aware
www.ChildCareAware.org
(800) 424-2246

 National Resource Center for
Health and Safety in Child Care
<http://nrc.uchsc.edu>
(800) 598-KIDS