

Selection of child care is an important task for Kansas parents. The series *Choosing Care for Your Children* is designed to help you be a better-informed consumer.

Start by thinking about your own needs

What is your schedule?

Child care plans should be made before you begin to work, if possible. This allows time to explore possibilities, await an opening, arrange for financing, transportation, and other details.

If you work nights and weekends or travel frequently, it will be more difficult for you to arrange child care than if you work weekdays from nine to five. A child care center that closes at six or a sitter who must catch a bus will limit your flexibility and prohibit “staying until the job is finished.”

Where do you live and work?

If a person comes to your home or if you have live-in help, transportation is not a factor. While it is wonderful to find child care near your home or on the way to the job, look for quality care as well as convenience. If you plan to continue breast-feeding during the day, it is important to have the baby near your work so you can nurse during lunch time and get there quickly after work.

What is your support system?

It isn't easy to balance work, home, and family. Some guilt is inevitable—an “occupational hazard” says one child care professional. You will need the support of your family, friends, and other working parents. Ideally you will also have the support of your colleagues and supervisors at work; however, their focus is a job done, not the care of your family. A competent caregiver will help avoid a great deal of potential frustration and anxiety.

What can you afford to pay?

Though child care can take a chunk out of your paycheck, caregivers are among the most poorly paid workers in this country. Any person who works more than 90 hours a month is entitled to the minimum hourly wage. There are those who will provide in-home care for less, but there is enough demand that well-qualified caregivers can earn at least the minimum wage.

Child care centers may be subsidized or have a sliding fee schedule that can reduce your costs. Sliding fee schedules adjust payments in relation to gross income and family size. Also, an increasing number of employers are offering child care at reduced rates or supporting their workers by helping with child care costs.

If you are a marginal income family, contact the local office of the State Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services to see if you are eligible for partial day care reimbursements. If you are eligible, you will need to select a licensed or registered day care home or center that has already or is willing to contract with SRS for payment.

What are the needs of your children?

Infants:

Because growth is more rapid during first year of life, what your baby eats is very important. However, there is more to caring for an infant than feeding, diapering, and bathing.

When you look for someone to take care of your baby, you'll want a warm, loving person who understands child development, who enjoys being with a baby, who respects your wishes, and who has both the patience and energy to do the job.

A baby needs a caregiver who will consistently understand the baby's signals and meet his or her demands. For this reason, you want whoever takes care of your child to be committed to doing so over a period of time and to develop a relationship based on love and trust.

Babies are not passive. From the moment of birth, they respond to a variety of stimuli that contribute to their knowledge and understanding of the world. They need an interesting, clean, and safe environment with a variety of sounds, colors, and things to explore. And they need a caregiver who will spend time holding, rocking, singing, and playing with them during infancy.

Toddlers:

Sometimes known as the “terrible twos,” toddlers have almost unlimited energy, incredible curiosity, and a desire for independence. They need a stable relationship with a few adults who will actively play, talk, and listen to them in a “child proof” environment. Your toddler needs a variety of age-appropriate activities, materials, and toys for developing skills.

Preschoolers:

The 3- to 5-year-olds spend a lot of time learning to do things for themselves. They need to be with warm, supportive adults who will help them develop self-control and independence. They need a program that provides a variety of activities; consistent age-appropriate limits; an opportunity to be creative, make choices, and to do things for themselves alone or in a small group.

School age children:

Elementary age children are interested in succeeding at chosen activities, and being liked and included by their friends. Involvement in sports and other organized games and activities is important to them. They need a caregiver who provides supervision and security while understanding their growing need for independence.

They need freedom to choose between individual and group activities, opportunities for special interests like sports, music, dance, crafts, books, homework, and attending outside activities and clubs. They also need space away from younger children where they can keep their equipment and do special activities.

Look at the options

Quality child care is not just “child's play.” Children need more than custodial care that meets minimum requirements for nutritious food and a clean, safe environment. All children need attention from adults who will care listen, praise, love, and set behavior limits.

To choose quality care in your particular situation, look at the alternatives. There are four basic types of care.

Live-in help:

The first consideration is whether your home will accommodate live-in help and whether you can afford it. The advantage is that your child receives individual attention and care from one person who is there when you cannot be. Live-in help provides maximum scheduling flexibility, which some parents' work demands.

In-home caregiver:

The term “baby-sitter” may describe the teenager who stays with your child while you are at the movie. It does not describe the scope of care and responsibility from someone who will spend many hours with your child each day. Finding a competent caregiver who has experience and who will provide the kind of attention described earlier is not easy.

If you have three or more children needing care, in-home care may be less expensive than other kinds of care. It can also save you the worry of getting several children to and from different day care arrangements. You may also want to consider in-home care if your child has a health problem, needs care at night, or only after school.

Licensed/registered day care home:

A license or certificate of registration does not guarantee quality child care, but it does let you know that the caregiver is abiding by Kansas law to have a license or certificate of registration when nonrelated children are cared for on a regular basis in a place other than the child's own home.

The maximum number of children that may be cared for is stated on the license or certificate of registration. The number depends on the ages of the children in care, number of caregivers, available space, and the preference of the caregiver to be licensed or registered. Many home caregivers are women with young children who have received specialized training related to child care and want to stay home with their own children while contributing to the family budget.

Children are likely to have many of the same experiences they would have at home in this setting:

- Hours are flexible
- Number of children is limited
- Activities are more informal than in a larger setting.
- Location may be near your home or school.
- Children are usually not separated by age.

Child care center or preschool:

There has been a significant increase in the number of children attending child care centers and preschools. They may be franchises, employer-sponsored, parent coops, community nonprofit organizations, or privately owned. Care is provided for 13 or more children by staff who have received training in child development. The director often has a college degree in early childhood education.

A center may be the most stable option. In this setting:

- Children may be separated according to age.
- Hours may be less flexible.
- Activities may be planned for each age group.
- Other support services may be provided (e.g. specialized services for a child having a physical handicap, transportation, parent discussion groups).

Interview and visit before choosing

Research has demonstrated that the quality of care affects children. Ask friends, a referral service, or your local public health nurse, social service worker, or Extension home economist for the names of providers in the category you choose, and call to arrange for a visit.

There are three areas to look at when you visit a day care home, center or preschool:

- Relationship between caregiver and children.
- Type of activities: Does the daily schedule include experiences you think are important?
- Physical aspects, health, nutrition, and safety.

Talk with providers about your child's needs, your expectations, and their services. Ask questions:

- What experience and training do caregivers have?
- What parents names can they give as references?
- How many children is each caregiver responsible for?
- If nonrelated children are in care, is the home or center currently registered or licensed? If not, is the caregiver willing to apply?

Keep looking for the right caregiver

If your first choice isn't available, put your name on a waiting list. If your second choice does not work out, you can plan on changing as soon as possible.

Once you've considered the options, your own needs, and made contact with several caregivers, you'll have a good idea of what you do and don't want.

A good day care provider relieves some of the anxiety about home. Parents who feel good about both work and home are more affectionate, playful, stimulating, and involved with their children than those who are unhappy.

Hold on to a good caregiver and work to make day care meet your needs and expectations.

Other publications in this series

MF-839: Child Abuse and Neglect

MF-840: Day Care Homes

MF-84I: Child Care Centers and Preschools

Prepared by the Education for Parenthood Committee of Kansas Child Care Training Opportunities Inc. in cooperation with Charles A Smith, Extension Specialist, Human Development, Department of Family Studies and Human Services, Kansas State University.

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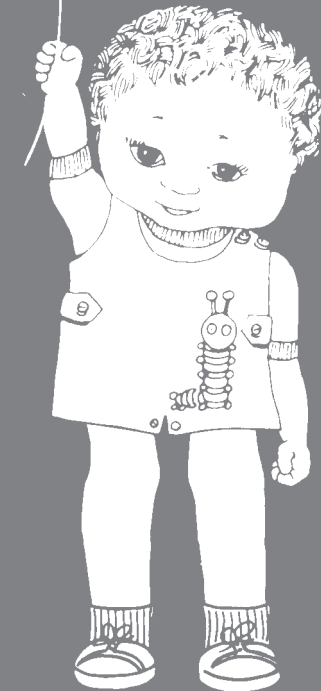
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A Guide for Parents



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