

BANANAS CHOOSING CHILD CARE HANDOUT

Choosing a Child Care Center

Choosing child care is a tough job for any parent. First you need to decide which type of child care (in-home caregiver, family child care, center-based) seems right for you and your child. It helps to look around and see different kinds of care firsthand before making a choice. Following are some considerations to help you determine whether a child care center would work for you and your family:

- Centers often provide more structured programs than family child care providers or in-home caregivers.
- Centers usually have a larger staff and more children than other types of care and this gives children more interaction.
- State regulations require teachers in child care centers to have a certain number of early childhood education (ECE) units. Though many family child care providers or in-home caregivers may decide to receive training in child development, it is not a requirement for those types of providers.
- Few centers take children under two years of age.
- Centers are usually less flexible about their hours and rules than other types of care.

Looking For Care

If you decide you want to look at child care centers, ask us for referrals. Make an appointment before visiting. If possible, visit first without your child. Then, after you have narrowed your choices, visit again with your child. We at BANANAS often hear the question: “How will I know when I’ve found the ‘right’ program?” Following are some suggestions to help answer that question:

First Impressions

- What were your first impressions (feelings and thoughts) about the center?
- Did these impressions change after being there a while? (Try to visit in the late afternoon or during a transition time, e.g., when children move from a group activity to snack, then to an outdoor activity.)
- Did children and staff seem to be enjoying themselves?

Physical Setting

- Is the center attractive? Well lighted?
- Does it feel like there is adequate space for the number of children – both inside and out?
- Do there seem to be enough toys and equipment?
- Does the center have clearly marked fire exits? Does the program have a written emergency plan?
- Are there any unsafe conditions?

Program

- Does the center have an overall philosophy about children and child development?
- How many children are in the program?
Although you should be checking that the center is not exceeding its licensed capacity, you also need to look for the number of children who are in each group or class. By dividing the children into smaller groups, a large center creates a better learning environment.
- Ask for the daily schedule and check to see if there is plenty of free play and outdoor time, along with some short structured activities. Can a child choose what activities to participate in?
- What methods of discipline are used? Are you comfortable with the discipline approaches you observe?
- What are the program guidelines about toilet training?
- Is there a nap or rest time, and if so, where do the children sleep? How does the program provide for non-sleepers?
- Are children encouraged to be active learners (finding things out for themselves) rather than passive learners (shown by the teacher)?

Meals

- Who provides the meals? If the center does, ask for a sample menu to see if meals are nutritious.
- Is the kitchen clean? Is there a refrigerator and microwave available if you have to pack and send lunch?
- What method is used for serving food? Do the children receive pre-filled plates or are they allowed to choose from the foods offered? Do the teachers eat with the children?
- Is special food served for children with allergies or other restrictions?
- Does a child have to eat everything given or can they decide when they are through?



Staff Considerations

- What is the staff's training and experience?
- Is there much staff turnover?
- Is the interaction between the staff and children warm and caring? Is staff attentive to the children?
- How many different people will care for your child during the day? (Try to meet most, if not all of them.)
- Who substitutes when staff is absent?
- Is the teaching staff diverse racially, culturally and in gender to provide role models for all children?
- Does staff seem sensitive to your situation (e.g. single parent, same-sex parents, interracial background, etc.)?

Staff to Child Ratios

Programs must meet certain teacher-child and staff-child ratios. The ratios differ depending on the type of center and the ages of children served. (The maximum adult to child ratio allowed for non-state funded centers is 1:4 for children under the age of 2 years; 1:6 when children 18-30 months are grouped together; 1:12 for ages 2 years to enrollment in first grade; and 1:14 for schoolage programs serving children in Kindergarten and up). Ask the director or call BANANAS for more information on the specific ratios of a particular center. In addition to the required number of staff, see for yourself whether the staff appears able to deal effectively with the number of children enrolled.

Parental Involvement

- Is parent participation required? If not required, is it welcomed?
- Are parents asked to help in any other ways, such as participating in bake sales, clean-ups or field trips?
- Are there parent education meetings? Are these meetings mandatory or voluntary?
- Does the center offer scheduled parent-teacher conferences once or twice a year?
- How does the center handle daily communications between staff and parents?

Health and Hygiene

- Are there sinks, soap dispensers and paper towels conveniently located for staff and children? Are there signs reminding staff to wash their hands?
- Is the diaper changing area near running water and away from the food storage or preparation area?
- How often are the toilets and potty chairs disinfected?
- Who prepares the food and is there a written policy about food handling?
- What dishwashing procedures are used?
- Are toys and equipment disinfected regularly?
- Are you comfortable with the overall health and hygiene practices of the center?

Program References

Ask the center director for a reference list of parents whose children are currently enrolled. (You may not want to consider programs which refuse this request.) Call some of the families and ask about their experiences. Pose

questions that elicit people's opinions, such as "What is the one thing you wish the center did differently?" or "What do you like best?"

Fees, Contracts, Rules

- Get copies of all of these. Do not commit yourself to a program without first reading the contract. Make sure you understand and agree with the rules.
- What are the fees? When are they due? Do you pay when your child is absent due to illness or vacation?
- Does the center offer lower rates for low-income families?
- Which holidays is the center closed? Are there other breaks during the year?
- Does the center charge an extra fee if you are late picking up your child or making fee payments?
- Is there a probationary and/or a transition period?
- How much notice is required to leave the program?

Important Regulations

- It is illegal to use corporal, humiliating or threatening forms of punishment in any child care setting (home or center-based).
- Every center has a set capacity listed on the program's license. There are no exceptions or reasons for having more children on the site at any time.
- Centers must meet the staff-child ratios required for their type of program. Only those actually working with children can be counted.
- By law, parents may visit a child care program anytime their child is on the premises.
- Parents have the right to ask any licensed provider for information on complaints and on any licensing visits. You also can contact Community Care Licensing, at (510)622-2614 to review this information.
- By law, child care providers in licensed child care centers or family child care homes must tell parents of any staff who have received an exemption for a criminal conviction. However, they don't have to tell parents the nature of the conviction.

Trust Your Instincts

You may find that despite "right" answers to every question suggested above, a center somehow feels "wrong." Personal feelings are very important in choosing care and we advise parents to trust their feelings and intuitions. Take time to visit a variety of centers to become more comfortable with the evaluation process. Start early and don't be afraid to ask questions. You can always call BANANAS for more referrals if the centers you visit don't fit your needs. You can also obtain more suggestions on how to evaluate programs from these BANANAS' Handouts: "Choosing Family Child Care," "Choosing Infant and Toddler Child Care," "Choosing a Preschool Setting" and "What Children Need in Child Care." Handouts are available at our office, by mail or by downloading from www.bananasinc.org.