Choosing Child Care

WHEN CHOOSING CHILD CARE, PLAN AS FAR IN ADVANCE AS POSSIBLE. Choosing the right child care and finding help with child care expenses can take some time. Call your local Child Care Resource and Referral agency for help, or contact **Florida's Office of Early Learning at www.floridaearlylearning.com or Child Care Aware at 1-800-424-2246 or www.childcareaware.org.**

You may also want to ask your employer, family members, friends, church or school for recommendations. Consider all your child care options. After you find a few child care programs that meet your family's budget, schedule and special needs, call to arrange an appointment to visit the child care centers or family homes you have selected.

At the same time you set up your regular child care, look at your options for back-up care. Consider which of your relatives, friends or neighbors might be available to help you out on an emergency basis. Talk to them about when it might be okay for you to call on them. It is best to identify more than one back-up arrangement if possible.

An overview of the types of child care typically available and a checklist of things to look for in quality child care providers is provided on the following pages. For additional tips on quality child care settings and programs, please visit the Florida Children's Forum at **www.thechildrensforum.com.** For additional information on child care standards and licensing requirements, visit **www.myflorida.com/childcare.**

Types of Child Care

IN-HOME CARE PROVIDERS
In Florida, when one adult cares for one family's children other than their own, there are no state guidelines or inspections.

Relative Care. Parents may choose a relative caregiver because...
> Their children are comfortable with the relative.
> Parents trust the relative.
> Relative caregivers may be more flexible and willing to work around their schedule, especially for parents who work non-traditional hours.

Relative child care may raise unexpected and sensitive issues...
> Discipline: Clearly outline your ideas about discipline with your relative, including rules you want them to use to guide your child.
> Daily routines: Discuss your feelings about television, reading, friends and chores.
> Child safety: Use a safety checklist to assess the safety of your relative's home and educate relative caregivers on the dangers of shaking babies and children.

Signed agreements that cover when and how payment will be provided and how sick days and vacations will be handled will help eliminate misunderstandings.

Nannies and Au-pairs. Parents may choose these in-home care providers because they believe their children will be safer and more secure in their own home. They believe that if they employ the caregiver to work in their home, they have more control over the kind of care their children will receive. Some parents find in-home care is a more convenient arrangement for the family and may provide more flexibility. If there are several children involved, they may find that in-home care is not significantly more expensive than other forms of care.

Family Child Care Providers. Family child care is regulated care that takes place in a caregiver's home. (Florida law also recognizes large family child care homes with two adults providing care. All large family child care homes must be licensed.) The age of children in care often varies, although some caregivers service only a specific age group, such as infants, toddlers, preschoolers or school-agers.

Parents may choose family child care because they want to keep their children in a home-like environment, they prefer to relate to a single caregiver, or they believe that children are healthier, happier and more secure in smaller groups.
Some parents like having all their children in the same group. Parents may also find family child care is closer to home, less expensive or more flexible than other care options.

Registered Homes. Registered child care homes must meet state statute requirements, and must:
> Register annually
> Administer screening/background checks of all adults in household
> Keep current immunization records of children on file
> Complete a 30-hour family child care course

Licensed Homes. Licensed child care homes must meet all requirements for registration and must pass an initial state inspection to ensure that all standards required by statute have been met. In addition, they must:
> Follow health, safety and nutrition guidelines
> Maintain admissions and record keeping
> Maintain current certification of a CPR and first aid course
> Receive an initial inspection prior to receiving a license
> Comply with two routine inspections per year
> Allow access to children in care
> Adhere to all other standards in statute

CHILD CARE CENTERS
Parents may choose child care centers because they believe that larger groups, multiple caregivers, and state inspections make programs safer for their children and make the arrangement more dependable; or because they respect the reputation of the child care program or the institution sponsoring the program. Many parents believe that more staff, space, equipment, toys and organized activities provide a better learning environment for their children.

Key Ingredients

No matter which options you are considering for your child, you should always visit a home or center more than once before deciding to place your child there. Important features to look for in any child care program include:

> **Supervision:** Children should be supervised at all times, even when sleeping.

> **Sanitation:** Caregivers should wash their hands often, especially after diapering and before handling food. Children should also wash hands before eating.

> **Discipline:** Discipline should be positive, clear, consistent and fair. Florida law prohibits any form of discipline that is severe, humiliating, frightening, or associated with food, rest or toileting. Spanking or any other form of physical punishment is prohibited by all child care personnel.

> **Safety:** Toxic substances and medications should be clearly labeled and stored out of child's reach. Caregivers should know first aid and CPR. The child care location should be free of radon, lead and asbestos. Indoor and outdoor play areas should be inspected regularly for safety hazards.

> **Responsiveness of the caregiver:** Caring staff should adapt their approach to meet your child's needs.

> **Appropriateness of the learning activities:** Activities should be appropriate to your child's age and stage of development.

> **Ratio of children to adults:** Good staff-to-child ratios allow for individual attention and help build strong relationships with caring, consistent adults.

> **Qualifications of teachers and caregivers:** Ask about the background and experience of all staff. Is the program accredited? Accreditation means the home or center voluntarily measures up to national standards of quality beyond the minimum licensing requirements. Caregivers in accredited programs take part in on-going child development training and are more likely to provide positive guidance for children.

> **Turnover rate for staff and families:** Why do families leave? How does the program help children adjust to staff turnover?

> **Transportation:** Appropriate child restraints and seat belts must be used when transporting children and a log must be kept of children being transported to ensure all children have arrived safely at the destination and have exited the vehicle. Logs are required to be maintained for four months.

Staff-to-Child Ratios

Florida Statutes require child care providers not exceed the following staff-to-child ratios (Note: Some counties may have more restrictive ratios than those required by the state.)

For licensed child care facilities:

Children under 12 months:	1 to 4
Children age 12 to 23 months:	1 to 6
Children age 24 to 35 months:	1 to 11
Children age 36 to 47 months:	1 to 15
Children age 48 months to 59 months:	1 to 20
Children age 60 months (5 years old) or older:	1 to 25

A family child care provider may care for one of the following groups of children:

1 to 4:	from birth to 12 months of age
1 to 6:	if no more than three are under 12 months
1 to 10:	as long as at least five children are school-age and no more than two are under 12 months of age
2 to 8:	if more than 4 children under 24 months old
2 to 12:	if no more than 4 children are under 24 months old

After you have placed your child in care, continue to visit your child care provider unannounced from time to time.

The following checklist will help you measure the quality of a child care home or center:

- Do the children look happy and appear well-cared for?
- Are the children involved in age-appropriate activities?
- Are there plenty of clean, safe toys within reach of children?
- Is the program in a safe and clean environment?
- Is the space decorated in an inviting way?
- Is there a fenced outdoor play area?
- Are nutritious snacks or meals provided?
- Do children get a chance to make choices about their activities, allowing them as much independence as they're ready for?
- What is the typical daily schedule?
- How often do children play outdoors?
- How do caregivers resolve conflicts between children?
- What is the discipline policy?
- Do caregivers listen and talk to children individually?
- Do caregivers play with children?
- Do children receive individual attention?
- Are there opportunities for parents to help with the program, and are parents encouraged to drop in at any time?
- How long has each caregiver worked there?
- Are reference and background checks performed on all staff?
- Is the program licensed or accredited?
- What are the rates?
- Are there any additional fees?
- Is there any financial assistance available?

SPECIAL CONCERNS FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS

- Are infants' and toddlers' toys washed and disinfected regularly?
- Are all infants put to sleep on their backs?
- Are daily progress reports provided to parents?
- Will the caregiver make accommodations to support you if you wish to continue breastfeeding?

What is VPK?

VPK stands for the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program. If you live in Florida and your child turns four years of age by September 1, your child is eligible to participate in Florida's FREE Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program. Parents have the option of choosing from a wide range of participating providers that meet their family's needs including private and faith-based child care centers, private and public schools and licensed family child care homes. Parents can enroll their children in either the school-year program, which provides a total of 540 instructional hours, or the summer program, which provides 300 instructional hours. Instructor ratios for VPK are 1 instructor to 10 children with class size not to exceed 18 children in the school-year program or 10 children for the summer program. To learn more about the VPK program, visit **www.floridaearlylearning.com.**