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Child Care Resource and Referral  
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## SIGNS OF A POOR QUALITY CHILD CARE CENTER

Be picky when you choose child care for your baby or toddler. Child care centers can run the gamut from outstanding to, well, much worse. Start making the rounds about six months before you'll need child care (good centers fill up fast), and watch for the warning signs listed below; if you see any, keep looking.

### • A SO-SO REPUTATION

Don't hesitate to judge a center based on what you've heard from other parents. This is the kind of situation where word of mouth comes into its own. And if you're even the slightest bit reluctant to leave your child at a center, pass.

**Bottom line:** If other parents aren't thrilled with the center, it's best to keep looking.

### • LOOSE RULES

Rules and regulations are important for any institution, whether it's the federal government or your local child care center. Centers without clearly established guidelines for everything from operating hours to how they handle emergencies are likely to have other organizational problems as well.

Similarly, you should cross centers with a lax sick-child policy off your list. If children (and staff) who come down with a fever or the flu don't have to stay home for at least 24 hours, your child is more likely to catch something. The center should require children (and staff) to have current immunizations and regular checkups; this is a good indication of how seriously it takes health and cleanliness.

If you run into a closed-door policy, keep looking. Any center that balks at having parents drop by unannounced is probably hiding something.

**Bottom line:** If a child care center doesn't have rules and organization, it's not likely to be right for you. Keep looking.

### • A CURRICULUM IN HIDING

Skip centers that either have no daily program or offer one that is static and unchallenging. Children need variety, change, and a chance to grow. The best centers offer a wide range of both group and individual activities. If babies spend most of their time in swings, infant seats, or other "baby holders," if the center doesn't offer organized activities that change regularly, or if television and videos are a big part of the day's agenda, cross the facility off your list.

Don't linger at centers with a poor selection of age-appropriate toys. Having enough of the right playthings not only encourages your child's development by stimulating creative, imaginative play, but may also help prevent kids from getting in too many tussles over who gets to play with what when. As a general rule, be sure the toys don't have small parts that could choke a baby or toddler.

**Bottom line:** Your child needs age-appropriate activities to encourage his development. If the center doesn't offer them, move on.

### • AN UNQUALIFIED STAFF

If a center's employees seem under qualified, keep looking. A staff that isn't educated (ideally, at least two years of college and a background in early childhood development), responsible, enthusiastic, and well prepared won't provide the best care for your child. Caregivers should also be trained in CPR and share your philosophies on child development issues such as sleep, discipline, and feeding. Watch how the staff interacts with the children in their care. Two sure signs of a less-than-ideal situation are caregivers who speak to children only in baby talk and who yell at or hit kids.

If a center is understaffed, it's not for you. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has set these guidelines:

- > For babies, the ratio is one caregiver for every three children if a group has six infants, one for every four if a group has eight babies.
- > For toddlers (12 to 24 months), the ratio is 1:3 for six children, 1:4 for eight children, 1:5 for ten children, and 1:4 for 12 children.

> For children between 24 and 36 months, the ratio should be 1:4 for a group of eight children, 1:5 for a group of ten, and 1:6 for a group of 12.

**Bottom line:** When you tour the facility, watch carefully to see whether babies are tended to quickly when they cry or if the staff, overworked and overwhelmed, lets them wail.

### • **AN UNDER COMPENSATED STAFF**

Poor staff benefits lead to high turnover, which you don't want. Of course, even the best centers sometimes find it hard to hire (and keep) dedicated employees -- most child care workers are paid very little (usually just above minimum wage), and the demands of keeping up with several babies and toddlers each day can be wearying. But centers that don't offer vacation and health insurance are even less likely to have a loyal staff that will care for your child long-term.

**Bottom line:** If the staff's training isn't up to snuff, they seem overworked, or they don't stick around very long, the center isn't for you.

### • **DIRTY, UNSAFE FACILITIES**

If the center seems dreary and rundown, keep looking. Here's a quick checklist:

Food preparation areas should be far from toilets and diaper changing stations.

Floors, walls, and the kitchen area should be clean.

Heat, light, and ventilation should be adequate.

Equipment should be well maintained.

If you don't see staff washing their hands after every diaper change (and sanitizing the changing area, too), or if the center generally looks poorly kept, don't linger. Look for plenty of space, too. According to NAEYC, centers should have at least 35 square feet of indoor space per child and 75 square feet per child outside.

Skip centers with safety problems. Toys and play equipment should be in good repair, upstairs windows (if any) should have screens or bars, all medicines and other hazardous substances should be out of reach, bedding should be fresh and firm (to reduce the risk of SIDS for babies), the outdoor play area should be level and secure, smoke detectors should be present and working, radiators and heaters should be covered or otherwise protected, a first-aid kit and fire extinguisher should be close at hand, and all standard childproofing techniques should be in place (covered outlets, safety gates, door latches, etc.).

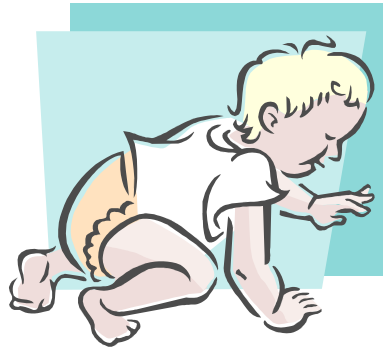
Strangers should not be able to just walk in off the street.

**Bottom line:** If the center seems dingy, cramped, or dangerous, move on.

### • **AN EXPIRED LICENSE**

If a center's license is out of date, cross it off your list. Call your local resource and referral service or social services department to check. A license in itself doesn't guarantee quality care, but since most states require proper credentials, centers that don't have them aren't fulfilling the most basic criteria. Child care centers are also required to meet state licensing regulations for health and safety. Facilities that have passed the stringent accreditation process required by NAEYC, a benchmark of quality, may be worth a second look.

**Bottom line:** A license isn't everything, but if a center doesn't have one, it's not for you.



The Family Enrichment Network offers this information to help you determine the best care for your child. We do not recommend or endorse any particular program. For additional information, questions or concerns please contact the Child Care Resource and Referral Service at the Family Enrichment Network. (607) 723-8313 ext. 829 or toll free 1-800-281-8714 serving Broome, Chenango and Tioga Counties.

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