

BANANAS

Choosing Family Child Care

Relatives, neighbors and friends caring for each other's children is the "oldest" form of child care and family child care is an extension of this tradition. There are several approaches to family child care. Some providers are "family style" providers. Their care most closely resembles the care given in the child's own home. The day's events usually consist of the normal daily activities children might engage in if they were home with parents and relatives – playing, eating, napping, etc. Other providers plan a more structured or activity-based program that resembles the experience children might have in a center-based program. There is no "better" or "right" way to do family child care – either style can be a positive experience for children. It is up to parents to decide which is the best fit.

Because family child care takes place in a person's home, it can take on a more intimate quality than care in a center setting. As a parent, you are choosing more than just the provider. The home atmosphere, family members, the neighborhood, etc. also play a role in the decision-making process. The most important criteria in selecting family child care is whether you feel comfortable with the provider and her family caring for your child. If that basic trust and acceptance is missing when you visit and chat with a potential provider, then the physical facility, the program and the rates don't really matter. You must like the person caring for your child or you will never be satisfied with the child care. That doesn't mean the provider has to have the same values and parenting style as you do – differences can be complementary. But the provider's views about children must be compatible with yours for trust to exist. If you find several providers you like, then other factors such as group size, physical setting, discipline, cost, etc. come into play in making your final decision.

Family child care is regulated by the State Department of Social Services. The screening process regulates the health and safety of the home and does not evaluate the program's content or quality. Such a screening would be difficult since individual taste and perception of program "quality" might vary widely from one evaluator to the next. Parents can, however, contact the Community Care Licensing Division of the State Department of Social Services at **1-844-538-8766** to request the complaint history of any licensed child care provider. This does not eliminate the need for parents to visit and evaluate programs when choosing any form of child care. Only you know what you are looking for; only you can decide what type of care and what type of provider will be best for your child.

Group Size

How many children is the provider caring for? Most family child care providers are licensed as either "small" family child care homes caring for six or eight children or "large" family child care homes caring for 12 or 14 children. Some providers care just for infants under two years of age and their group size is limited to four. The count is based on the number of children in attendance at any one time. For example, a provider licensed for six could care for six children in the morning and a different six children in the afternoon. Providers can care for fewer children than their licensed capacity allows, but most do not for

financial reasons. The provider's own children under 10 years of age count in the licensed capacity when they are present in the home. So an important question a parent needs to ask about group size is, "What is the maximum number of children you care for at any one time?" Our Handout *How Many Children Can Be Cared For In Licensed Family Child Care Homes?* explains the rules in more detail. BANANAS' Handouts are available at our office, by mail or from our website, www.bananasbunch.org.

But numbers don't tell the whole story. Some providers handle six children with ease (the same way many of our grandparents reared six to ten children), while others have difficulty with four or five. How many children are being cared for is one question, and the provider's ability to handle that number of children is another. The only way to judge this is to visit and observe during a regular day.

Use of an assistant

The rules are somewhat complicated: a provider running a small family child care program who cares for up to six children is **not required to hire an assistant** – neither is a family child care provider who cares for eight children if two of the children are at least school-age and no more than two of the children are infants under the age of two years. **In all other cases**, an assistant is required in a large family child care home with more than six children. If your provider employs an assistant, whether she's required to or not, you should meet the assistant and feel comfortable with him or her as well.

Age Range of Children

Most providers are flexible about the ages of the children they care for. The typical family child care group resembles a family with children of different ages. Providers licensed for six can serve three children under two; providers who care for eight children can only serve two infants. Large family child care homes licensed for 12 can serve four children under two; large homes serving 14 children are limited to no more than three infants. Some providers strictly limit their groups to children of a certain age (i.e. all two- and three- year olds, only school-age children, etc.). The age range of the children may be very important to you or it may not really matter. Little children love being around older children and learn from them just as they do from older siblings, and vice versa. You need to look at the age range of children in a prospective provider's home and decide if that grouping would be good for your child.

Physical Setting

How has the provider adapted the home to accommodate for child care? Are rooms set aside for children to play in or is the whole house open for play? Either approach can lead to good care.

Have adequate safety measures been taken?

- Are vents and fireplaces screened off?
- Are unused electrical outlets capped?
- Are stairs fenced or barricaded off in homes that care for young children?

- Does the provider have a fire extinguisher and a smoke detector? A fire drill and earthquake plan?
- Are poisons and cleaning products locked away? Don't be shy about asking if the provider keeps such substances in a cupboard with a child-proof lock; this is required by state regulations. Guns must also be kept in locked cabinets.
- Is the yard fenced? If it isn't, what precautions has the provider taken? (Legally, no children in care may be left unsupervised in an unfenced yard.)
- If there is no yard or only a small one, does the provider have alternatives for outdoor play (a park nearby, etc.)?

Are you comfortable with the cleanliness of the house? Let's face it, having six or more children play in one's home every day doesn't usually result in a "house beautiful." Also, one person's clutter may be another person's unacceptable "mess." If you cringe at the state of the house (too squeaky clean, too messy), you are probably going to worry about other aspects of the care.

Training and Experience

Has the provider taken any child development classes? Did she work in other programs before opening her own? Is her CPR certificate current?

Program

Is the care "family style" or does it have a formal structure? What events take place each day? Does the child have a choice about participating in certain activities?

Discipline

Acceptance of a provider's style and philosophy of discipline is crucial to a good parent-provider relationship. Ask potential providers what they do when a child is rude, disruptive or refuses to participate. (Corporal punishment, verbal abuse or humiliation are forbidden in any type of child care.) How do you feel about what you see and hear in regard to rules and discipline?

Meals

What meals are served? Who provides the food – the parents or the provider? If the provider does, is there nutritious meal planning? Is special food served for children with allergies? Does a child have to eat everything? Can a child have second helpings?

Fees, Contracts and Rules

Never commit yourself to a child care situation without first reading the contract and agreeing to the rules. Be sure to get and keep a copy of the contract and any attachments.

Make sure to find out the following:

- What are the fees? When are they due?
- Do you pay when your child is absent due to illness or vacation? (In most cases, you do.)
- Will the provider charge extra for a late pickup?
- Is the program full-time or is there a part-time option?
- Is there an initial probationary period?
- What happens when your provider is ill or goes on vacation? (Does she hire a replacement or do the parents have to find alternate care?) Does the provider charge the parents when she is on vacation?
- What is the provider's policy about sick children? When are children excluded from child care?
- How much notice is required to leave the program?

Family child care is a business; each provider sets the tone for her program. You cannot change a provider's lifestyle or attitudes. If you don't like a family child care and she is not going to change her approach, don't leave your child in her care. Having a child care provider you like and trust means that you can work, go to school or take time for yourself without having to feel guilty or worried about your child. Finding such a provider means putting in the time and energy to visit a number of homes. There are many fine family child care homes and it is possible to find "the right one" for your child. Start early (some providers have waiting lists), take your time and trust your feelings. Call BANANAS at (510) 658-0381 for as many referrals as you need. We will be glad to assist you in your search.

See our Handout *A Closer Look at Large Family Child Care Homes* for more information. *What Children Need In Child Care* helps parents identify child care that addresses their children's developmental needs.