

FACTSHEET 19

What to look for and questions to ask when choosing childcare

CHOOSING AND ARRANGING

Choosing childcare and early learning is a big step for you and your child. Finding the right type of childcare to suit you and your child is crucial, especially when there is so much to consider - what the place is like, will your child really like it there? There will be different options available in every area - what's important is to give yourself plenty of time to research them.

Draw up a list of all registered childcare and early learning services in your area from your Childcare or Family Information Service and have a list of questions ready to ask when you visit prospective child care providers - everything from opening hours to taking up references. (You can view information on registered childcare providers and early learning services in Dundee at our pages on www.families.scot)

There are lots of differences between different types of childcare, early learning or pre-school services and also between individual childminders, nurseries, nursery classes or out of school clubs. Try to give yourself enough time to visit several possible options in your area to get a good idea of what could suit your child. Don't forget you are the expert on your child and trust your feelings.

It can be a good idea to take your child with you when you visit a setting to see how staff talk to him or her. Try to go when children are there so you can see if they are calm, happy and busy. Try to visit the setting more than once.

SOME DO'S AND DON'T'S OF CHOOSING AND ARRANGING CHILDCARE

DON'T leave it until the last minute. Even if you're not yet ready for childcare, give yourself plenty of time to make your choice. If it's popular, expect long waiting lists.

DO research the options. Contact your local Childcare or Family Information Service (or look at www.families.scot for the Dundee area) for information on registered childcare in your area. Jot down basic requirements e.g. opening hours, costs, location, and make those your first questions when you phone around. You will immediately discount some of them.

DO think about your child's age and personality. This is particularly advisable when it comes to small babies and children under two, who need a close one-on-one relationship. You know your child best, so keep in mind your gut instinct too.

DO shop around. Aim to visit at least two or three places to meet the carer and compare what's on offer. Make a formal appointment when you can see how the children behave, and take a list of prepared questions - see further on the fact sheet for some examples. Where possible (for instance, at nurseries) drop in randomly to see exactly what you walk into.

DON'T rule out combining care. If playgroups, nurseries, etc. can't offer you five-days-a-week care, think about merging your care e.g. nursery (two days) and childminder (three days).

DO check references. This is vital. Most carers (including nurseries, pre-schools, etc.) will be happy to give you names of other parents to speak to about their work, so take up references for peace of mind.

DON'T feel guilty about double checks. Go back for a second or third look once you've narrowed down your choices. This gives you the time to confirm that they meet all your requirements.

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DO get it all in writing once a decision has been made. Nurseries will ask you to sign a contract/letter, outlining details such as costs, rules, hours, etc. Read it carefully before signing.

YOUR CHECKLIST...suggested questions to ask when you visit

Qualifications and Training - What training and experience does the carer/team have? How long have you been working with children? How long have staff been working in the setting?

Ask how many staff have level 2 or level 3 qualifications. The National Care Standards outline minimum qualification requirements for day care settings, but staff training in many settings will go beyond minimum requirements. For more information about qualification requirements go to www.sssc.uk.com. For more information about the National Care Standards go to <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Health/Support-Social-Care/Regulate/Standards>

Environment - Is it secure, does it feel nurturing, are there pets? Enough space? Can I look around the building to see the rooms and outside play space? (If there is no outside space, how will you make sure my child gets the chance to play outside?) Where will my child rest?

Diet - What's on the menu? What kind of food and drink will you give? Fresh fruit and vegetables? Access to water when they want it? Cater for special requirements?

Supervision - Who supervises and how? What is the staff-to-child ratio? Do you enjoy being with children and why?

Emotional care - What are the routines? Will my child be with a regular group of children? How old are they? How do you encourage good behaviour? How do you deal with difficult and challenging behaviour? There should be a written policy. Are staff warm, joining in, showing affection?

Equipment - Is it creative, varied, plentiful, of a high standard? Do displays show different cultures in a positive way?

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Physical Activities - Is there outside secure space? If not, where will they play in fresh air? What will my child do all day?

Health habits - Are the toilets and basins clean, child-sized? And facilities for potty training/baby changing?

Expectations - Lay all yours out, such as your working hours, time-keeping, meal preparation, washing etc. Policy on late pick-ups? How will your timetables fit in with my child? How will I make sure I know how my child is getting on?

Safety - What happens in the case of an emergency or accident? What safety procedures do they have in place?

Inspection reports - Ask to see a copy of the latest Care Inspectorate Inspection Report. These are also available to view online at www.careinspectorate.com.

TOP TEN QUALITY POINTERS

When you visit possible childcare options, look for these Quality Pointers. You could add your own as well.

1. Children appear happy, content and actively engaged with what they are doing.
2. Child care providers have genuinely caring and friendly relationship with the children; a calm atmosphere with no raised voices.
3. The setting is safe, adequately lit and maintained to a good standard of hygiene.
4. A broad range and generous supply of toys and equipment easily accessible to children.
5. Adequate personal space for children to play.
6. Calm area with subdued lighting where very young children can rest and sleep.
7. Comfortable area where children can relax.
8. Toys, books and display that represent and promote different cultures in a positive way.
9. Clean, appropriately sized toilets and hand basins with individual or disposable towels provided.

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10. A secure and safe outdoor recreation area.

Good childcare staff expect you to ask questions and will be happy to answer them.

Top Tips

- Always take up references. You could ask for names of other parents to talk to about your chosen service.
- Listen to your child and find out more if he or she seems unhappy.
- Always trust your own feelings about your childcare - you know your child best.

Original Source: Sure Start

For further information about childcare services available in Dundee City please go to www.families.scot, or contact DUNDEE CHILDREN & FAMILIES INFORMATION SERVICE at cis@dundeecity.gov.uk or telephone 01382 433900.

Information is available on our local Dundee pages of the national website where alongside details about childcare services you can also access our Online Directory for further advice, groups, activities and other services available for families locally and nationally

www.families.scot

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