

Choosing a child care program

No two child care programs are identical. Each setting offers unique advantages and disadvantages. Understanding the basic differences between organized child care centers and home child care providers can help you choose the setting that best meets your needs.

Child care homes

This type of setting offers a smaller, more intimate environment. Because fewer children are present, your child may benefit from more individualized attention from the provider. However, children of different age-groups may not be separated. Children in home care may watch more television than those who attend an organized child care program.

Since neither the state nor the federal government regulates most child care homes, there are usually no rules excluding a sick child from care. This means that if your child has a mild cold, you do not have to worry about missing work to stay home and take care of him or her. But it also means your child is likely to be exposed to other sick children, which may increase the risk of infection.

Because child care homes are usually not regulated, they may not take the same precautions for preventing the spread of infection as child care centers. For example, in child care homes the person who changes diapers may also prepare food. This increases the risk of infection, especially if diapers are changed near the food preparation area.

Community child care centers

These programs are larger and enroll more children. This increases the chances that your child may be exposed to an infection. On the other hand, children in diapers are usually separated from older children, decreasing the risk of spreading an infection to an older child.

Child care centers tend to have more structured activities than day-care homes. There is usually a greater emphasis on educational activities, and television watching is limited.

Child care facilities must often meet certain guidelines that are specific for each state. As a result, they may follow strict rules for prevent-



ing infection—such as requiring frequent hand washing. Most child care centers also are required to have a separate changing area with a nearby sink. Some centers divide work responsibilities so that food handlers never come in contact with children in diapers. Child care facilities are more likely to exclude a sick child, even if the illness is just a minor cold.

Evaluating a child care center

Before you choose a particular child care center, visit a few. Ask if you can observe a class. It may be a good idea to drop by without an appointment and ask to look at the different rooms in which your child would be placed. Think about these questions:

- Do the hours of operation meet your needs?
- How important is it that the program be open every day?
- If you choose a home care setting, do you have a backup plan in case the person in charge is ill and closes for the day?
- Would you feel more comfortable knowing that child care workers were certified in CPR?
- What is the staff turnover rate?
- Does the facility have a designated diaper-changing area that is close to a sink but far from the kitchen area?
- Are children of different ages grouped together before and after regular hours?
- Is there a separate room where a sick child could wait for a parent?

It is also helpful to talk to other parents about what they like or dislike about the program. Consider the qualifications the staff has and whether they can provide references.