

PARENT'S GUIDE TO CHOOSING CHILD CARE



California Department of Social Services *Community Care Licensing Division* [Child Care Licensing Program](#)

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Introduction

Child care is a personal decision that must be made by many parents. Leaving your child in the care of another person for the first time can create feelings of sadness and nervousness, but the more information you have on what to expect and what to look for in child care, the better prepared you will be when the time comes to place your child in the care of another. With the right caregiver, you can look forward to a positive experience with the placement of your child in his or her first formal child care setting.

Purpose of this guide

The purpose of this guide is to provide important information that will assist you as a parent in making the best child care choice for your family and child. If you are planning to enroll your child in a child care setting for the first time, you may find this guide particularly useful. There are several topics in this guide which include: researching facility types, licensed and license-exempt care, subsidized and low-cost child care options, and common educational philosophies and program designs. If you have children currently in care you may also find useful information and resources, including common characteristics of quality child care programs and program accreditation.

Start Early!

Quality child care is always in demand. You should start researching options as soon as you know your family will need child care.

Child Care Licensing in California

Licensing regulations are in place to protect the health and safety of children in child care by establishing health and safety standards for child care facilities. These standards are found in California's Health and Safety Code and in the California Code of Regulations Title 22, Division 12. The standards include requirements for: facility operations, buildings and grounds, staff training and education, criminal background clearances, and staff first aid and CPR requirements.

Licensing regulations are enforced by the Community Care Licensing Division of the California Department of Social Services, which works to ensure that licensed facilities maintain healthy and safe environments for all children in care. Community Care Licensing does this through inspecting each facility prior to licensure, reviewing of staff requirements, investigating of complaints against facilities, and inspecting facilities regularly after a license is issued.

Licensed child care options

It is important to understand the different types of child care settings to determine appropriate options for your child. Child care, sometimes called day care, refers to the non-medical care and supervision of children for periods of less than 24 hours. In California, care is generally provided in licensed Family Child Care Homes or in licensed Child Care Centers.

- **Family Child Care Homes**

Family Child Care Homes provide care and supervision in the caregiver's home.

California has two types of Family Child Care Homes: Small Family Child Care Homes

(with up to 8 children) and Large Family Child Care Homes (with up to 14 children) that can provide care to children of different ages, including infants, toddlers, preschool, and school-age children.

- **Child Care Centers**

Child Care Centers provide care and supervision for children in a commercial setting, sometimes referred to as preschools. Services are provided in a school-like setting and children are commonly grouped by age and receive care in different rooms or classrooms. Care can be provided to infants, toddlers, preschool and school-age children depending on license types, and generally serves more children than are served in a Family Child Care Home.

License-exempt child care

There are child care providers in California that are classified as license-exempt caregivers and are therefore not subject to the same health and safety standards as the licensed care-givers. These caregivers can provide care in a variety of settings and include the following:

- **Relative Caregivers**

Your child's relatives (parents, adult siblings, aunts, uncles, first cousins, step-relatives, and grandparents) are license-exempt, regardless of where they provide child care for your children.

- **Nanny**

A nanny typically has a regular and involved relationship with the family. He or she may watch the child or children for multiple hours every day or on a consistent weekly schedule. In addition to experience, some nannies will have a formal education in child development or related fields. They may engage in developmental activities and supervision, as well as possibly cook or clean for the family. This type of care can be expensive.

- **Babysitters**

A babysitter is any individual you hire by the hour to care for your child. A babysitter may work during the day or night and may watch the child at your home or at theirs. A babysitter's responsibilities can include preparing food, putting kids down for naps or bedtime, assisting with homework, or providing transportation to or and from activities. Babysitting rates depend on where you live in the State, the age of the babysitter, as well as the ages and number of children being watched. This type of caregiver can provide license-exempt care **only if they provide care for a child or children from only one family in addition to their own child or children.**

- **Before School/After School Programs**

Many schools have before-school and after-school programs either on the school premises or close by, which, if operated by the school and run by qualified teachers employed by the school, may be license-exempt.

Examples of license-exempt caregivers, are available on our [website](#).

TrustLine Registry

Parents have the right to choose the type of child care that works best for their family including license-exempt care (reviewed above), which is not subject to the same health and safety standards as licensed care. Understanding this, the California Legislature created a powerful tool to assist all parents when selecting child care called the TrustLine Registry. The TrustLine Registry lists the names of caregivers who have passed a background and fingerprint check by the California Department of Justice and the FBI. Child care providers included on the TrustLine Registry have no disqualifying criminal convictions or verified (substantiated) child abuse reports in California. You can find out more about this incredibly important option online at (trustline.org/) or by calling 1-800-822-8490. .

Aspects of quality child care

Quality child care refers to Family Child Care Homes and Child Care Centers that have a loving, caring staff and a program that can meet the physical, social/emotional, and developmental needs of children in a healthy and safe environment. Research shows that 90 percent of a child's brain develops by age 5, a common time frame when many children are placed in child care. During this key time in their development, quality child care can prepare children for a lifetime of improved learning and development. Common characteristics of quality child care include:

- Adequate staff-to-child ratios which allow smaller groups or class sizes
- A well-maintained environment set up for children
- Opportunities for children to develop motor, social, language and cognitive skills through activities and play
- Practices that support positive interaction among children
- Staff educated in child development, early childhood education or related fields
- Experienced staff who receive ongoing training
- Good nutritional food services
- Respect for diversity and differences, gender equality, and the inclusion of children with disabilities
- Practices that exhibit superior concern for health & safety
- Programs that offer information freely to parents and always welcome their participation
- Accreditation*

**Accreditation is granted by independent organizations to facilities (including Family Child Care Homes) that exceed and maintain higher than expected standards (staffing, credentials, facilities, programs, curriculum, etc.) that contribute positively to a child's overall development and preparation for school and life. For more information visit [NAEYC's website](#).*

Paying for child care

Many parents may find that the cost of child care is often one of their most expensive household expenses.

Budgeting and deciding how you will pay for your child's care is an important aspect of making the child care decision. There are several child care payment options available to you as reviewed below.

Private Payment Option

Most parents pay for child care out-of-pocket, but there are ways those families who pay out of pocket may be able to reduce the child care payment costs. Some child care programs offer discounts to families with multiple children, or who provide referrals. There may also be annual fee waivers, scholarships for low-income families, or sliding scale fees based on family income, all of which, when eligible, can help reduce the expense of child care.

Subsidized Payment Option

Many families find it difficult to pay for quality child care, and some may need a child care subsidy. The subsidized child care payment option is based on need and income eligibility, as well as other criteria. This option uses public funding to help parents meet the need for child care while they work or attend educational or training programs.

- **CalWORKs Child Care** – Families participating in the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program receiving cash aid are eligible for CalWORKs child care as they engaged in work or welfare-to-work activities. CalWORKs Child Care is broken into three stages. **Stage One** is administered by the Department of Social Services. **Stages Two** and **Three** are administered by Alternative Payment Programs under contract from the California Department of Education (CDE).
- **Head Start** and **Early Head Start** – These are two well-known programs for low-income families. Head Start benefits are available through local programs and provide multiple supports enabling young children to prepare for school. Early Head Start provides similar services for children from 0-3 years of age. For detailed information visit the [Office of Head Start](#) page.
- **Employer Programs** – Additional help with child care costs may be available through your employer. Inquire with your human resources or finance office to find out if any child care benefits may be available.
- **Military Families** – Military families may qualify for a Department of Military Subsidy.

Additional subsidized programs

The California Department of Education administers additional programs, including:

- *General Child Care and Development*
- *Migrant Child Care and Development*
- *California State Preschool Program*
- *Alternative Payment Program*

For more information visit the [California Department of Education](#)

Subsidy Earned Income Tax Credit

Did you know that there is a new California tax credit for working families? The [California Earned Income Tax Credit](#) (CalEITC) is modeled after a federal tax credit designed to give money back to working families. With the combined tax credits, eligible families can get up to \$6,000. The amount of the tax credit depends on your income and family size. Get more information on qualifying for the tax credit and information on free tax assistance by visit their sit at the link above.

Gathering Information

In addition to child care setting options, types of child care (licensed or license-exempt) and payment assistance options, you should determine the following prior to researching facilities:

- What are your child's needs; physical, social and emotional needs?
- What you are looking for in a child care provider, including the following:
 - Program type and educational philosophy
 - Facility location
 - Hours of operation
 - Cost

All of these separate factors are important considerations in your child care placement decision.

Child care philosophies and program design

If you are looking for a facility that operates within a specific program or philosophy, you will generally find that the two main types are play-based or academic.

Play-Based

A play based philosophy promotes the belief that children learn through hands-on and child-directed play-based experiences, which help them develop knowledge naturally. Through play, children explore the environment, satisfying their natural curiosity about the world around them. Play is seen as critical to the development of physical, logical, and social understanding.

Academically Based

An academically based philosophy promotes teacher-lead activities that are structured. This philosophy focuses on school readiness. Children might learn letters, numbers, shapes and colors in a structured way.

Many parents like programs with a blend of both play-based and academic philosophies.

Common child care programs, with differing philosophies, include Developmental, Progressive, Montessori, Waldorf, Reggio Emilia, and Cooperative. Varying parents may feel differently about the level of structure that various child care programs offer. Remember, only you can best determine what is more appropriate for your family, and therefore it is important to be well-informed on the various types of programs and philosophies available to you.

Local Child Care Resource & Referral Programs

In every county in California, there is a state-funded Child Care Resource and Referral (R & R) agency that provides free information to parents who are looking for child care. R & R provides information that can help you choose a facility and offers other services such as referrals to child care centers and family child care homes. Visit the [R&R Network](#) online or call 1-800-KIDS-793. Your local R & R can also provide information on how to receive assistance [paying for child care](#).

Department of Social Services “facility search” function

In addition to referrals from local Resource and Referral programs, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) provides a [Facility Search](#) function to help you locate and research licensed facilities. This function allows you to search for facilities by geographical area, producing a list that will provide you with addresses, maps and contact information. Due to privacy restrictions, Small and Large Family Child Care Homes’ addresses are not made available online but may be requested from your local Resource and Referral program.

The CDSS Facility Search function also allows you to research the licensing history of a facility. This includes inspection reports and provides information regarding whether or not a facility has been cited for health and safety violations. The Licensing inspection reports document violations along with the severity of the violation. Violations including those that would present an immediate risk to the health, safety, or personal rights of children in care are cited as Type A violations, and violations that have the potential of becoming an immediate risk to the health, safety, or personal rights of the children in care, if not corrected, will be cited as Type B violations.

To get details about violations or view the hard-copy case file of any facility, contact your local [Child Care Regional Office](#). The regional office maintains facility files, including reports on substantiated and unsubstantiated violations documented by the Department.

Visiting facilities and making a decision

After you have completed your child care research, you should have a list of potential facilities to visit. Prior to placing your child in care, it is important to visit these facilities in order to observe their environments during hours of operation. This is when you will have a chance to ask questions of staff and administrators and review facility information, as well. The information you obtain, including the aspects covered in this guide, such as licensing history, staffing, programs, quality of care, and educational philosophy of each facility, is extremely important.

Facility preparedness for disasters and relocation

During times of uncertainty due to disasters, it is essential to be able to rely on well-prepared child care providers and resilient families, in order to best protect our children. Every child care facility should have an emergency plan to address their regional disaster risks (e.g. areas specifically prone to floods, fires, earthquakes, tsunamis, etc.) including current relocation procedures and contact information for parents to use when a disaster requires the facility to be evacuated. The provider is required to conduct disaster drills and it is recommended that they be conducted at different times during the day and for different emergency situations. Children should be able to learn age-appropriate, self-protective actions for disasters and practice their part in disaster preparedness drills. Specific planning for children with disabilities, and/or access and functional needs, should be addressed including emergency response, and reunification of children with parents.

Questions to ask a potential provider

- Is the facility licensed?
- What are the hours of operation?
 - Pick-up and drop-off times?
- What are the fees and admission policies
- Does the facility require a family contract?
- What is the educational philosophy of the facility?
- What would a typical day be like for my child?
- How many children are cared for at the facility at any given time?
- How do you help children feel secure and comfortable when they first begin your program or when they are sad?
- Can you show me your main play areas inside and outside?
- What items must be brought from home (food, toys, change of diapers, change of clothes, toothbrushes, etc.)?
- How does the facility accommodate medical issues and/or special dietary needs?
- How will a child be cared for if they get sick while at the facility?
- What form of discipline do you use?
- Does the facility keep a list of names of people who may pick up your child?
- Does the facility keep telephone numbers for home, work, spouse's work, doctor and neighbor?
- Does the facility have a plan for disasters preparedness, response and family reunification?
- What are the napping and rest arrangements?
- Do you help with toilet training?
- How does the facility keep

- parents informed about their child's time in care?
- Is parent involvement encouraged or required?
- What is the staff turnover rate at the facility?

The answers to these questions, along with your personal standards, and knowledge of your child, will help you make a more informed decision on whether a facility is a good fit for your child and family.

Please remember that this guide is an informative tool only. Ultimately, your conclusions, decisions, and comfort-level on child placement are your responsibility. For your convenience, there is a checklist at the end of this guide to help you gather information on multiple facilities on a single form.

Common information needed for enrollment

Once you choose a child care setting in which to place your child, the facility will need information about your child in order to enroll him or her. This information should include the following:

- Child's Medical Assessment
- Doctor and dentist information
- Who to call in case of an emergency
- Names and telephone numbers of people who may pick up your child
- Immunization history
- Other information your provider may request

Ensuring a positive child care experience

Once you place your child in care, you begin an important relationship with the caregiver, and it is important to stay involved with them frequently. Staying involved and communicating frequently should be a regular occurrence. You know your child best and it is crucial to ask your child about their care experience, listening and paying attention to their verbal and non-verbal cues. Monitoring your child's ability to thrive in a child care setting is essential to the successful pairing of facility and child. Other ways to help ensure a good fit include:

- Monitoring the condition of the facility frequently to make sure that it provides a setting that keeps your child safe, secure, and healthy.
- Observing your child in the facility. Does the caregiver appear to provide warm and loving care and guidance?
- Listening to what your child says about the care received.
- Discussing promptly any problems or concerns with the caregiver. Caregivers should be willing to work with families to make sure that children's mental, physical, social and emotional needs are met.
- Contacting the licensing agency for problems that cannot be resolved with the caregiver directly or for any serious concerns.
- Review the facilities files periodically. Facility files contain all annual field reports, deficiencies and complaints about the facility. It is important to stay informed.

- Use the “Stay Updated” feature of the Child Care website (within the Facility Search function) to receive email alerts about a particular facility.

Ensuring safe sleep practices are in place

Safe sleep is everyone’s responsibility and you can help reduce the risk of sleep related infant deaths by following safe sleep best practices and guidelines. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that families and caregivers follow safe sleep practices including the following:

- Placing the infant on their back when sleeping
- Using a firm sleep surface such as a mattress in a safety-approved crib or play yard
- Keeping soft bedding such as blankets, pillows, bumper pads, and soft toys out of the baby’s sleep area
- When using pacifiers, ensuring that nothing is attached to them
- Refraining from bed sharing

Below is a list of valuable resources that shed light on what one can do to help reduce the risk of sleep related infant deaths:

- [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) – Recommendations for a safe infant sleeping environment
- [California Department of Public Health \(CDPH\) Safe Sleep](#) – Safe sleep environments for infants
- [National Institute of Children's Health](#) – Safe sleep basics, printable and sharable materials, and safe to sleep campaign information
- [CDPH Sudden Infant Death Syndrome \(SIDS\) Program](#) – Information on Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and Sudden Unexpected Infant Death
- [CDPH Training Videos](#) – Training videos and resources

What to do if you have questions about your child’s care

In most cases, you should first ask your child’s provider any questions you might have regarding your child’s care. Your child’s caregiver has a relationship with you, and your child, and should want to discuss any concerns you may have about what’s best for all parties involved.

If your child’s caregiver is not responsive to your questions or you believe that something has happened at the child care facility that warrants a complaint against the provider you may consider the following:

- Contact your local [regional office](#) or,
- Contact the Centralized Complaint and Information Bureau (more information below), or
- Contact the [Child Care Advocate Program](#):
 - The Child Care Advocate Program is available to parents to help address issues, concerns, or questions. The program promotes the delivery of quality child care and provides a link between child care licensing and the community. A Child Care Advocate tailors activities to fit the needs of the local community and provides information to parents, child care providers, employers, educators and community groups.

What to do if you think your child's facility is violating licensing laws and/or regulations

- If you think a child care provider is violating licensing laws or regulations, you may file a complaint with the Centralized Complaint and Information Bureau. You can do this by calling 1-844-LET-US-NO (1-844-538-8766) or by emailing them at letusno@dss.ca.gov. You may submit a complaint anonymously or allow licensing to contact you if more information is needed to address the issue.
- Alternatively, you may call your local [regional office](#) and share your concerns or file a complaint against a facility.
- In both of these cases, your complaint will be investigated and you will be notified of the results when the investigation is complete.
- You can also visit the [Community Care Licensing website](#) to find more information about licensing laws and regulations.
- If you suspect your child has been physically or sexually abused, you should promptly report it to your local law enforcement agency in addition to the licensing program.

Parents: You and your child have rights too

Here are links to documents containing parents' and children's rights in licensed child care settings, as well as other great resources to help you start getting the quality care for your child.

- **Parent's Rights**
 - Child Care Centers – <http://www.cdss.ca.gov/cdssweb/entres/forms/English/LIC995.PDF>
 - Family Child Care Homes - <http://www.cdss.ca.gov/cdssweb/entres/forms/English/LIC995A.PDF>
- **Children's Rights**
<http://www.cdss.ca.gov/cdssweb/entres/forms/English/LIC613A.PDF>
- **Self-Assessment Guides**
 - The guides are designed as user-friendly tools to assist Child Care Center and Family Child Care Home providers (licensees) to assist with compliance. However, they are a great tool for parents to know what child care providers are required to provide. The [Self-Assessment Guides](#) are available in multiple languages.
 - As places of public accommodation, licensed child care facilities have obligations under federal and state disability laws, including Title III or the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). It is the responsibility of each child care licensee to determine the licensee's legal obligations under the ADA and California disability laws. The U.S. Department of Justice operates a toll-free ADA Information Line to provide information and the materials to the public about the requirements of the ADA. To get answers to technical questions, obtain general ADA information, or order free ADA materials, you may call 1-800-514-0301 (voice)/ 1-800-514-0383 (TTY). U.S. Department of Justice publications include a "[Commonly Asked Questions about Child Care Centers and the Americans with Disabilities Act](#)".

Facility Visit Checklist

Rank each applicable version on a 1-5 scale, with 5 being best.

Then add scores and compare facilities

Areas Reviewed	Facility 1	Facility 2	Facility 3	Facility 4
Facility				
Is the facility licensed?				
Is the facility clean, well-maintained and odor free?				
Are classrooms or common areas age-appropriate for children?				
Is the temperature acceptable for the season?				
Is the facility well lit with clearly marked Emergency exits?				
Is the furniture and equipment in good condition and free of defects?				
Are bathrooms/changing tables size-appropriate, clean and in working order?				
Is there an emergency/evacuation plan with current relocation sites and emergency contacts clearly posted?				
Does the facility have working smoke detectors and fire extinguishers?				
Did you notice any unsafe items accessible to children: fire arms, knives, poisons, cleaners?				
Does the facility have a working telephone and keep lists of emergency numbers?				
Play Areas and Outdoor Recreation:				
Are outdoor areas free of hazards?				
Is there plenty of room for children to play and interact without feeling confined?				
Is there enough staff to safely monitor and supervise the children at play?				
Is physical activity encouraged?				
Programs and Activities				
What is a typical day like for a child?				
Does the schedule of activities allow time for free play?				
Are children learning in preparation for preschool or kindergarten?				
Are activities engaging the children in a social, artistic, educational and fun manner?				
Are children being talked, read or sung to by staff and are they encouraged to participate?				
Are there any off-site functions or field trips?				

Food Service				
Are the kitchen and dining areas clean and sanitary?				
If food is provided, is there a menu available?				
Are the food choices healthy and well-balanced?				
Can the facility accommodate special diets?				
Is drinking water readily available indoors and outside?				
Education Philosophy and Services:				
Is the philosophy right for my child's needs?				
Are the children intermingled or placed in groups of similar age?				
Are napping or sleeping areas adequate?				
Are safe sleep guidelines practiced, including infants placed on their back to sleep?				
Can the facility provide transportation for school?				
What is the facility's discipline policy?				
How are conflicts between children handled?				
How are sick children cared for?				
Can parents/guardians visit freely and are they encouraged to do so?				
What items, if any, must be brought from home? (food, diapers, clothes, toothbrushes?)				
Does the facility require a family contract?				
Staff and Administration:				
Is the staff CPR/First Aid certified?				
What is the staff-to-child ratio?				
Does staff work together to engage and supervise the children?				
Does staff have degrees or training in early childhood development or related fields?				
What is the staff turnover rate?				
Does the staff receive ongoing training?				
Does the administrator meet all necessary qualifications?				
Is the facility accredited by a credible third-party organization?				
How does the staff provide regular updates to parents about their child's time in care?				
Affordability:				
Is the facility in my price range?				
Does the facility accept subsidies, funding vouchers or provide a sliding scale to help defer cost?				
FINAL SCORE:				