

Choices in Childcare



Northern
Health and
Social Services
Board



NORTHERN
CHILD CARE
PARTNERSHIP

FOREWORD

The Northern Childcare Partnership is a group of statutory and voluntary agencies required by the government to enhance the childcare and play experiences of children up to the age of 14 in every neighbourhood within its area. We are particularly keen to improve choice for parents and promote good quality among all childcare providers.

Childcare includes private day care in nurseries, childminders, pre-school playgroups, after school clubs and crèches.

This booklet is aimed at helping parents make those choices by providing information about all aspects of childcare. It includes lists of questions to ask and quality and safety checks to make before committing your child to the care of others. The booklet has been written by Karen Young and Bernie Brown, both Senior Social Workers based in the Early Years Teams of Causeway and Homefirst Trusts. The Trusts have a statutory responsibility for the registration and inspection of all childcare provision where a child is placed for more than 2 hours in any day.

The Partnership hopes you as parents will find it a useful guide to finding the right childcare arrangement for your child based on good quality information and advice. We are interested in your views both on the booklet itself

INTRODUCTION

There are a number of different choices available for parents seeking day care for their children. For working parents the three main choices are childminders, day nurseries and out of school care, as these tend to offer full-time, all day care.

Other options include playgroups, crèches and nursery schools; these are usually run on a sessional or part-time basis.

All day care facilities, with the exception of nursery schools, must be registered with Social Services.

Some families prefer to employ a nanny who comes into their home. Currently nannies do not have to be registered with Social Services.

If you are a working parent when should you start thinking about choosing childcare? The simple answer is as soon as possible. Before your baby arrives you'll have some time to look at the different options available in your area, think about what's best for you and your child, and make some visits to find out more. Remember, there may be a waiting list, so you will need to plan ahead and book your preference as soon as possible.

You should start by making a list of what is important to you – for example, one-to-one care, or group care, and how this might fit in around your working hours. Finances

also need to be considered – costs can vary, though some help can be available to working parents.

You will also need to consider location – the best childcare in the world can seem less worthwhile if you have to make a long and stressful journey to deliver and collect your child.

If you are planning another baby in the future you may want to take this into consideration as you will need to arrange day care that meets the needs of children of different ages.

Remember, too, that children have differing needs at different stages. For example, babies and under twos need to develop a close relationship with an adult through one-to-one care, while pre-schoolers and older children thrive when mixing with children of a similar age. All children need to be where they are safe and able to relax, yet stimulated and encouraged to develop their skills. As long as your child is confident and happy with day care, you will be too.

DO's and DON'Ts

DO...look for childcare solutions early. The sooner you start the more choice you will have – and don't forget there are often waiting lists for some areas.

DO...talk to other parents about what worked for them. They may be able to give you invaluable advice. Your local Early Years team can also give you good advice about childcare options in your area.

DO...be prepared to use your energy exploring all the options so you can make an informed choice.

DO...consider your future needs and try to plan for stability and continuity.

DO...trust your instincts. Your child must be safe and well cared for, but how you feel about the carer is just as important.

DON'T...panic and go for the first option you visit. You can always put your child's name on the waiting list while you continue to look at other options.

DON'T...agree to any arrangement you won't be able to keep. You need to be honest about what hours you need so everyone knows what to expect.

DON'T...stop looking until you are really confident and happy with your choice. But remember you may need to be flexible as you may not find the perfect solution!

THE QUICK GUIDE TO ARRANGING CHILDCARE

1. Draw up a list. Your local Early Years Team can provide you with a list of all the available registered day care provision in your area. It's a good idea to phone a few places and get some information in advance of visiting. Ask if places are available now or if there is a waiting list, if there are any age restrictions, what hours the facility offers and will this fit in with your needs, what fees are charged and what happens during holiday periods.
2. Arrange to visit. Make appointments to see as many different kinds of daycare as you can, and always arrange to call when other children are being cared for. This means you can judge how the carer responds to children, and vice versa. You might find it useful to bring with you a list of questions to ask, as it is easy to get side-tracked or distracted.
3. Take time to choose. Once you have gathered together your information, check your requirements against each option. Include criteria such as suitability, location, cost, availability and even the "feel good" factor. It can be useful to make a second visit to ensure you have the information you need. At this stage it can also be useful to speak to other parents who use the same facility.
4. Confirm your decision . This is the point where you double-check the details, e.g. the cost, the hours,

retainer fee, etc. It is essential to use a written contract to confirm the terms and conditions of the agreement. Group daycare providers as well as childminders should all offer you a contract.

5. Contract details. The contract should include the following:
 - Retainer fee until your child attends
 - Arrangements for periods of illness – yours or the carer's
 - Holiday pay
 - Hours and days your child will attend
 - Costs, and what this covers, e.g. food, nappies etc.
 - How much notice should be given by each party
6. Information for you. You should receive some written information on policies and procedures so you will be clear about what the provider is offering. This is more usual in group settings though more and more childminders are developing written policies.
7. Help with Childcare Costs. In some areas you may qualify for help with meeting the cost of childcare. You can find out more about this by contacting your Local Social Security Office and asking about the Childcare subsidy of Child Tax Credit.

SO – IS THIS THE RIGHT CARER FOR YOU?

- Trust your instincts . A carer may have all the right equipment, may seem to get on well with children in her care, but if you and she do not see eye-to-eye about how your child should be looked after you will have less confidence about the arrangement.
- Ask about their childcare experience, including qualifications, if any.
- Watch how the carer interacts with the children.
- Ask to see the registration certificate. Registration with Social Services is a legal requirement and also indicates the carer meets minimum standards.
- Ask for details of any insurance cover the carer may have.
- Talk about important issues such as nutrition, potty training, behaviour management, what activities children can expect and so on.

- Ask about how many other children will be cared for with your child. Registration requirements limit these numbers. Information on other cared for children is confidential so you do not have the right of access to such information. Remember, if a day care provider talks to you about other children she may well talk to other people about your child.
- Ask your local Early Years Team for a copy of the most recent inspection report.
- Again, trust your instincts. If everything feels right, it probably is!

WHICH KIND OF CHILDCARE IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

CHILDMINDERS

Childminders are self-employed carers based in their own homes. Any person who looks after a child or children for more than two hours in any day, for reward, must be registered with Social Services. The childminder and family, the premises and any available equipment are all registered. This ensures that they will meet minimum standards. Childminders undergo a formal annual inspection in order to ensure that standards are maintained.

During the registration process various checks are made. These include police and childcare checks on everyone in the household, a health check, references and an assessment of suitability.

Childminders may be registered to care for up to six children under the age of twelve years. Of these, no more than three children may be aged under five years. The minder's own children are included in these numbers. You should always have a written contract with your childminder as this will clarify issues such as holiday pay, hours to work, retainer fees and so on.

This may be ideal if.....

- You want your child to have one-to-one care in a homely setting.
- You prefer a "family" type care base You need flexibility in hours due to perhaps your irregular shift patterns

- You want your child to enjoy the company of children of different ages
- You want continuity of care from babyhood until and including your child attending school

This may not suit so well if...

- You want your child to have the stimulation of children of a similar age
- You anticipate problems addressing issues you are not happy with

Remember to check....

- That the childminder has a current registration with the local Social Services
- That they have adequate insurance cover
- That they have appropriate safety equipment, including for travel by car

That the contract covers everything relevant to you and your needs

WHICH KIND OF CHILDCARE IS RIGHT FOR YOU? continued...

Some questions you may want to ask.....

- How long has she been childminding and what does she particularly enjoy about it?
- Can she give you names and numbers of other parents she works for? It can be useful to follow this up.
- What other children will be looked after while your child is there?
- What age-appropriate activities will be offered to your child?
- What sort of routine is in place?
- How flexible is the childminder when negotiating hours?
- What food is on offer?
- How much television will children be exposed to?
- What is the childminder's attitude towards managing difficult behaviour, potty training, sleep?

- How will the childminder fit in her own household “chores” around childminding and how is this likely to affect your child?
- What other adults or older children are likely to have close contact with your child?
- What about emergency back-up?

Obviously this list is by no means exhaustive, but it should start you thinking about what you may want to discuss with a childminder.

NANNIES

A nanny is someone who looks after your children in your own home. There is no legal requirement for nannies to be registered therefore Social Services has no statutory responsibility (unless they are looking after more than two families). There is no way of checking how suitable they are, other than by following up references and checking any qualifications.

A nanny may either live-in or come to your home every day. Costs vary from area to area but sharing a nanny with another family is one way of making this option more affordable. Finding a nanny can be difficult as there are no agencies in the NHSSB area. You could advertise in the local press or contact your Early Years Team for a list of childminders as you may find someone willing to come to your home.

This may be ideal if.....

- You want the convenience of someone coming to your home and fitting in with your lifestyle
- You want to have more say in your child's routine
- You have a mixed age range of children requiring care

This may not suit so well if.....

- You don't want the responsibility of employing someone and having to contribute to their tax and National Insurance
- You think your child might be happier and more stimulated by mixing with other children

You are working to a tight budget – nannies tend to be more expensive

Remember to check....

- References. This is vital as it may be your only way of finding out what previous employers thought of the nanny
- Qualifications. There is no requirement for a nanny to have any qualifications but if she has it indicates she has fulfilled minimum standards of competence and should have a good working knowledge of children's needs
- Expectations. The nanny must be very clear about what you expect from her in terms of hours, duties etc.

Some questions you may want to ask...

- What qualifications does she have?
- What experience does she have?
- Why does she like working with children?
- How organised is she?
- What is her understanding of the importance of play, nutrition, potty training and behaviour management?
- Can you both agree on the approach to take with your children?
- Does she understand the importance of working with parents?

DAY NURSERIES

Day nurseries provide care for children from the age of 6 weeks to 5 years – pre-school children. Some nurseries also offer Out of School care in separate units. Nurseries may be privately owned, community-run, or provided by employers. All day nurseries must be registered with Social Services and are inspected annually. There are minimum standards which facilities must maintain, including staff/child ratios, space ratios, health and safety features and staff qualifications.

Most nurseries are open from 8am to 6pm, and are open all year round with the exception of major holiday periods such as Christmas.

This may be ideal if...

- You prefer to have your child cared for by a team of qualified staff
- You need reliable childcare, eg., if one member of staff is off ill your child can still attend the nursery
- You want to be sure of continuity of care – your child can stay at the nursery until he starts school, and even beyond if the nursery has an Out of School facility

This may not suit so well if...

- Your working hours need to be more flexible than the usual 9am to 5pm
- The nursery is not conveniently located
- You have other children to collect from school and deliver to day care
- You prefer a homely, family-based environment
- Your employer is not “family-friendly”...if your child is ill he will not be able to attend the day nursery

Remember to check...

- That the nursery has a vacancy in your child's age group
- That the nursery has a key worker system, meaning your child will have an identified member of staff to ensure continuity of care
- That you are happy with the premises, indoors and outdoors, and the kinds of equipment and play materials offered to children
- That the children currently attending seem happy and relaxed as well as being well supervised by staff in attendance.

Some questions you may want to ask...

- What is their ratio of staff to children?
- What are the levels of staff turnover and staff sickness?
- What sort of routine can your child expect? What kind of activities are on offer?
- What is the policy on managing behaviour?
- What is the policy on settling-in children?
- What other policies does the nursery have?
- What happens if you are concerned or unhappy about something?

Can you see a copy of their most recent inspection by Social Services

PLAYGROUPS

Pre-school playgroups offer sessional play for children aged 3 – 5 years. Most playgroups are either privately-owned or community-run. Playgroups are all registered with Social Services and are inspected annually. They must meet and maintain certain standards.

Playgroup sessions last up to 4 hours and can be mornings, afternoons, or both..

This may be ideal if...

- You do not need full day care
- You want your pre-school child to mix with other children in a similar age group
- You want your child to have access to a wide range of toys, equipment and activities you would not normally be able to offer at home
- You are able to combine playgroup with a childminding arrangement
- You want to be involved in helping with the playgroup and have the time and the interest in this
- You want to get to know other parents in your area.

This may not suit so well if...

- You have work commitments which do not match with playgroup hours
- The location of the playgroup makes it difficult for you to access this service
- You want your child to be involved with a mixed age range of children.

Remember to check...

- That the playgroup has a registration certificate from Social Services
- That the playgroup has adequate insurance cover
- That there are adequate numbers of staff with the appropriate qualifications
- That the children seem happy, well-supervised and engaging in a range of appropriate activities
- What structure is built in to sessions, e.g. quiet time, physical activity, creative play etc.

Some questions you may want to ask...

- How many staff are on duty at any one time?
- What qualifications/experience do staff have?
- What policies and procedures does the group have?
- Can you stay with your child until he/she seems settled?

OUT OF SCHOOL CARE

Out of School clubs offer care for children aged between 4 and 12 years. They are available from the end of the school day, i.e. approximately 2pm, until perhaps 6pm, to accommodate working parents. They usually offer full day care during school holidays.

Clubs run a school pick-up service and provide play activities for children until being collected by their parents.

All Out of School facilities are registered with Social Services and are inspected annually.

This may be ideal if...

- You need someone to collect your child from school
- You want your child to enjoy a wide range of activities
- Your child wants to play with friends after school.

This may not suit so well if...

- You need more flexible hours than the club can offer
- You have a young child who does not want to take part in busy activities after school
- Your child finds it difficult getting involved in mixed age groups.

Remember to check...

- Staffing levels, qualifications and experience
- Levels of supervision - these may differ according to the activities on offer
- What the signing-in and out process involves – some older children may feel they should be able to come and go as they please
- How far in advance you have to book – clubs in your area may be limited and may have waiting lists.

Some questions you may want to ask...

- What activities are offered to children?
- Are children separated by age groups?
- How many staff are qualified in first aid?
- What policies and procedures does the group have?

SUMMER SCHEMES

Summer schemes are, by nature, seasonal, and thus tend to be time-limited. They may be run by various organisations such as voluntary groups, church groups or local councils.

Quite often there is no legal requirement for such schemes to be registered with Social Services. However, organisers should have in place policies and procedures similar to other day care groups, to ensure the health, protection and well-being of the children who attend.

Your local churches and council offices should be able to advise you on any schemes available in your area.

Remember to check.....

- Any qualifications staff may have, including first aid
- How many staff will be on duty at any one time
- How many children are catered for
- What are the signing in and out procedures?
- What happens if your child becomes ill or has an accident?
- How will the day be structured?

CRÈCHES

There are a number of different kinds of crèche available, which can make it difficult to give a precise definition! In general, crèches are sessional. They may be run by colleges to support parents in further education, or perhaps run by a supermarket so parents can shop at leisure. Sometimes a crèche may be provided to facilitate daycare for parents attending a conference.

Any crèche which is available for more than 2 hours in any day, or for more than 6 days in any year, must be registered with and inspected by Social Services.

For more information on crèches please contact your local Early Years Team.

NURSERY SCHOOLS

Nursery schools are managed by Education and Library Boards and are not registered by Social Services.

They are usually open from approximately 9am to 2pm, during school term times, and accommodate children in their pre-school year.

For further information about nursery schools please contact your local Education and Library Board.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM DAY CARE PROVISION

Health and Social Services Trusts are responsible for the registration, monitoring and inspection of all day care facilities for children aged under 12.

Every childcare provider must meet certain minimum standards in order to be approved, and must maintain those standards in order to maintain their registration status.

The standards cover areas such as qualifications and experience of staff, quality of care, premises, equipment, health and safety, policies and procedures.

All day care facilities have their own link social worker within Early Years Teams and each facility is inspected annually as well as having support and monitoring visits throughout the year.

If an inspecting social worker finds that standards are not being maintained, the facility will be given advice and support as to how to improve. Usually a time-limit will be set, during which the facility should be able to show they have met the required standards.

Generally facilities welcome the inspection process as it enables them to carry out a degree of self-evaluation and preparation for their annual inspection.

All of this is good news for parents! You will know that childcare providers registered with local Trusts meet set standards and that the Trusts check they keep these standards high.

You can ask to see the most recent inspection report to find out what to expect from a provider.

However, you must remember that as a parent you also have a responsibility to check the quality of the childcare you use, both at the time of booking and on an on-going basis.

Safety checks you must make....

- Keep a check on facilities inside and out, and talk to the carer about potential danger areas such as gates, paddling pools, stairs, kitchens, and ask what precautions have been taken to safeguard children of different age-groups.
- Make sure you keep your carer up-to-date with your child's development with regard to safety, for example when your baby starts to crawl or climb.
- If you use a childminder you'll know whether or not she smokes, or has pets. But what about her friends? Might your child be exposed to cigarette smoke? Or dogs?
- Keep an eye on what toys are available for your child to play with. Are they in good condition? Are they safe? Are they appropriate for your child's age?
- If your child is going on an outing make sure you know all the details. How many staff will be in attendance? What qualifications/experience do they have?

AND FINALLY.....

Remember to trust your instincts. If you are unhappy with your day care provider talk to them and try to resolve any issues you may have. If you feel unable to do this, or you have concerns about the level of care your, or any other child is receiving, please do not hesitate to contact your local Early Years Team. While Social Services has a responsibility to ensure standards are being met and maintained, parents also have a responsibility in this area. After all, as parents, you have contact with your day care provider on a daily basis, while Social Workers do not!

If you and your child are happy with the care, then relax and enjoy it!

List of Contacts

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Details of Health Visitors can be obtained from your local GP Surgery. They may be able to advise on the location and availability of local childcare provision.