



## **Choosing Family Child Care**

**A Guide to Finding and Working with a  
Family Child Care Provider**

## **Introduction**

The term family child care refers to any ongoing arrangement that takes place in the home of a regulated provider. The provider may be someone you have located specifically to care for your child, or someone referred to you by an agency or network.

Family child care homes may provide care for infants, toddlers, pre-school children, or school-age children.

In New York, a single family child care provider is usually allowed to care for up to six children. A group family child care provider can care for up to 12 children with an assistant. Please refer to local licensing regulations, which are inserted in your booklet.

The quality of care your child receives in family child care will be as good as the provider you choose. It is essential for you to select a provider you trust and respect.

This booklet offers some guidelines to help you in this process.

# Finding a Good Family Child Care Home

## Determine Your Basic Needs

By writing down your expectations and your child's needs, you can organize them according to what is most important to you. Before you begin to look for a family child care home, you need to consider these basic questions:

- What hours of care do you need for your child?
- Are the hours fixed or flexible?
- How much are able to pay for child care?
- Must the family child care home be within walking distance?
- Do you want you child to be with other children, or the only child being cared for?

**Also think carefully about particular qualities that matter to you in your choice of a provider. For example:**

- Do you expect her\*\* to have had prior child care training and experience?
- Are there particular child-rearing methods that you believe in?
- Do you want the provider to be affiliated with a community agency or network?
- Do you have preferences about whether a provider smokes, watches TV, or does housework during the hours she cares for your child?
- Do you want the provider to be fluent in your language?

## **Begin the Search**

Once you have your priorities in place, you can begin to look for a family child care home. Child care resource and referral agencies can provide the names of individuals and/or agencies who provide family child care in your area. (See enclosures).

Finding the right provider may take some time, energy, and organization. Even if you speak with a good candidate on your first try, it is wise to speak with a few child care providers so you are clear about all your options. While you are following up on the leads you have been given, you may also want to:

- Ask neighbors, friends, and other parents in the area if they know of anyone who offers family child care.
- Check with building superintendents, school crossing guards, your pediatrician and obstetrician.
- Look for caregivers' notices in local newspapers and on community bulletin boards.
- Post your own notices in school, churches, synagogues, day care centers, libraries, Laundromats, and health clinics.

When you contact a provider, you can save time and energy by doing your initial screening over the telephone. After you have established whether she has a place for your child at the hours you need and the rate you can afford, some follow-up questions might be:

- How many children are currently in her care?
- Do these include the provider's own children? If so, how many?
- What is the maximum number of children she would care for at any one time?
- What are the ages of the children in care?
- How long has she been caring for children?

## Check References

You may want to check references before arranging to visit a child care home, or you may prefer to wait until you have met the provider in person. The important thing is to make sure you check references at some point.

When you call other parents to inquire about the provider, listen to their tone of voice as well as to what is actually said. Is the tone of their response flat or enthusiastic? Do they sound hesitant about answering your questions? Most people feel uncomfortable about giving anyone a negative reference. It may help you get a frank response if you ask:

- What did they particularly like about this provider?
- Was there anything they would have changed about the child care home, or the care their child received?
- Would they want this provider to take care of their child again if they needed future child care?

## Visiting a Family Child Care Home

To provide you with the information you will need in making your decision, the visit should give you an opportunity to:

- ✓ **Observe** the provider interacting with children.
- ✓ **Explore** the child care home.
- ✓ **Talk** with the provider in depth.

It is best to schedule your visit so that you will have time to talk with the provider before children arrive or after they have been picked up. This would also give you an opportunity to see how the provider interacts with other parents.

If this is not convenient, you may want to schedule two visits: an initial visit to observe activities in the home, and a second visit to talk with the provider in depth.

### Observe the Provider

There are several things to look for when you observe the provider interacting with the children in her care:

- ✓ Do the children seem comfortable in the home?
- ✓ Are they happily occupied?
- ✓ Does the provider help them to find and use appropriate play things?
- ✓ Does she handle upsets and disputes in a calm and patient manner?
- ✓ Is she responsive to their questions and requests?
- ✓ Is there enough space provided for their play?
- ✓ What kinds of food are served? How is food offered to the children? Are eating times cheerful and relaxed?
- ✓ How is diapering and/or toileting handled?
- ✓ Does the provider seem to enjoy being with children?

## **Explore the Family Child Care Home**

It is important for you to check on the cleanliness and safety of the family child care home:

Is the home clean and in good repair?

Are the toys safe and appropriate for the age group that is using them?

Is the home well lighted and ventilated?

Are there smoke detectors? Fire extinguishers?

Are there guards on the windows?

Are medicines and household products stored out of reach?

Does the provider wash her hands after diapering each child?

### **Talk with the Provider in Depth**

Before you talk with the provider, think of the questions you want to ask. It may be helpful if you take notes during your visit, so you will be able to discuss the provider's routines and responses to the children.

If you want to find out the provider's attitudes about child rearing, ask questions that do not reflect your own philosophies and expectations. Depending upon the age and needs of your child, some aspects of care may be particular importance to you.

#### **If you have an infant, you might ask the provider:**

- ✓ If she believes in feeding on demand or on schedule?
- ✓ If she thinks the baby should be held when fed?
- ✓ Would she put the baby in a crib with a bottle?
- ✓ What kinds of toys would she give to a baby?
- ✓ How would she soothe the baby for nap time?

**If you have a toddler, you might ask:**

- ✓ How and at what age does she think toilet training should be introduced?
- ✓ How does she think temper tantrums should be handled?
- ✓ What activities does she enjoy doing with toddlers?
- ✓ What kinds of outdoor play does she think young children need?
- ✓ Where does she take the children for outdoor play?

**If you have a pre-school child, you might ask:**

- ✓ What TV shows (if any) does she think are appropriate?
- ✓ What indoor and outdoor activities would she initiate?
- ✓ What outdoor play areas does she use?
- ✓ What are some of her favorite children's books?
- ✓ What would she do if a child misbehaves or does not follow her instructions?

**If you have a school-age child, you might ask:**

- ✓ What does she consider a good after-school snack?
- ✓ Would she be willing and able to help your child with homework?
- ✓ What rules does she set for behavior in her home regarding fighting, cursing, teasing, etc.?
- ✓ Could your child invite a friend to the provider's home for after-school play?
- ✓ Can she give you the names of parents whose children have been in her care so that you can get references?
- ✓ If your feelings are positive at this point, ask the provider when you can visit the child care home.

## **Trust Your Instructions!**

If you have any uneasy feelings about the child care home, look elsewhere. You do not have to be objective in your assessment. You are the best judge of your child care needs.

You may need to talk with several people before you find the best situation for your child. Don't get discouraged. Take your time. It will pay off later in the peace of mind you will have when you leave your child with someone you trust.

## **Making Your Decision**

There are several factors in making your decision:

- ✓ Are the provider's attitudes towards children similar to your own?
- ✓ Do you think that the provider's style is appropriate for your child's temperament?
- ✓ If there is a disagreement, do you feel that you could discuss it with the provider?

If the provider is caring for more than one or two other children, it is important for you to consider and discuss with her how an individual child's needs can be met within the group:

- ✓ Would your baby get the cuddling he or she needs?
- ✓ Would your toddler be expected to conform to rules set for older children?
- ✓ Would the provider be able to manage walks to the playground and other outings?
- ✓ In an emergency – such as fire, illness, or injury – could the provider get everyone out quickly and safely in one trip?

Think over all the information you have gathered, and go with your feelings.

## Written Agreements

When you have found a provider you like and trust, make a clear agreement with her about the conditions of care. Good family child care requires open communication between parent and provider. The more explicit you are with one another, the less likely you will be to have misunderstandings that might disrupt your child's care.

Ask the provider to furnish you with the following information in writing:

- ◆ Hours, fees, and payment policies.
- ◆ Overtime policy and charges.
- ◆ Vacation and holiday schedule.
- ◆ Names and phone numbers of substitute providers (if any).
- ◆ Policies on food, clothing, and equipment – who provides what and when.
- ◆ Emergency back-up plan. Is there another adult on call? Does the provider have contact with a local doctor?
- ◆ Sick child care policy. Under what circumstances would you be expected to pick up your child early, or not bring the child to the home? Are there circumstances under which the provider would care for your child during an illness?

Make sure the provider has the following written information about you and your child before you leave the child in her care:

- Your full name, address, and phone number.
- Your work address, phone number, title, and schedule (and the same information on your spouse, if applicable).
- The name, address, and phone number of your pediatrician or health center, and their hospital affiliation.
- At least two emergency contacts: relatives, friends and neighbors who can be called if you cannot be reached.

## Making the Transition

Children need to know exactly what is being planned for them. If your child is old enough to understand, talk about the new arrangements and what the days will be like. Plan to spend time with you child in the child care home prior to the day when you will actually begin the child care arrangement.

When you begin the regular schedule, you can help ease you child's adjustment by:

- Talking with the provider about how you child generally reacts to separation.
- Making sure the provider knows if your child uses a blanket, bottle, pacifier, etc. for comfort, and making sure it is available.
- Giving your child a photograph of yourself to keep at the family child care home.
- Telling your child – in terms he or she can understand – exactly when you will come back. For instance: “when the sky is getting dark”...”after your nap”...”when the provider tells you it’s 6 o’clock.”
- Saying goodbye directly to your child and the provider. Never sneak away while your child is involved in play.
- Calling at a particular time of day and saying hello to your child if he or she is old enough for telephone conversation. Ask your provider to suggest the best time for this.

## **Assessing the Arrangement**

As your child and the provider become better acquainted, you can assess the relationship more realistically. Even if you have been very careful in your selection of a family child care home, it is natural to wonder whether it is the best situation for your child.

As you observe the developing relationship between your child, the provider and the other children, it may be helpful to consider these questions:

### **Does your child....**

- Respond to the provider warmly?
- Settle into play easily when arriving at the home?
- Show you or tell you about the day's activities?

### **Do you as a parent...**

- Feel comfortable spending time in the home?
- Find the provider responsive to your comments and suggestions?
- Feel that your instructions are being followed?

## **Nurturing the Family Child Care Relationship**

Family child care works best when parents and provider work as partners in considering the child's needs. There are many ways in which you as a parent can contribute to making this relationship flourish. For instance:

- Keep to the arrangements you have made. Do not take for granted the provider's time and good nature.
- Set up a system for ongoing communication. Plan on a few minutes of chatting in the morning, and again at pick-up time.
- Set aside time once a month for an in-depth talk about how your child is doing.
- If you are connected about something, bring it to the provider's attention. Be specific about your complaint.

***Remember,*** Family Child Care works best when parents and providers work as partners to ensure the best care and development of your child.