

WORKING OUTSIDE THE HOME

The Decision to Work

- 1. Reasons for working.** More than 50 percent of mothers with infants or preschoolers work outside the home. Some mothers are working financial need. Some mothers return to work because they enjoy it or need to stay up-to-date in a fast-changing career.

The question of returning to work versus staying at home has no easy or correct answer. The decision is one that each mother must make based on her particular circumstances. Children can do well either way. The family's needs and financial security are the real considerations.

- 2. Pros and cons for your child.** If you provide your child with a consistent nurturing caretaker, there is no reason that your return to work will cause your child any harm. Children whose mothers work outside the home develop as well emotionally as do other children. The mother-child bond is not weakened. Benefits for a child whose mother works outside the home include increased independence, responsibility, and maturity. Young children of working mothers often have more opportunities to learn to trust other adults and to negotiate better with peers.

- 3. Timing the return to work.** A mother needs 6 to 8 weeks at home after the birth of her baby to recover physically from childbirth and establish breast-feeding. A preferred maternity leave would extend to 4 months after the birth, at which time the mother will have developed greater confidence in her mothering skills. In addition, by 4 months, the baby should have formed a secure attachment to his mother and be sleeping through the night. Some authorities suggest that mothers should try to spend the first 2 or 3 years of their baby's life fully involved with child rearing, but the advantages of this commitment remain unproven. Unfortunately, many mothers do not have the luxury of deciding when they will return to work. Mothers should not feel guilty about returning to work.

Choosing the Right Caregiver

Types of child care

Caregivers can be family members, close friends, or trusted employees. You can choose from three types of care:

- **In-home care** services bring the caregiver into your home.
- **Family childcare** is offered in the home of the caregiver.
- **Center-based care** usually takes place outside the home in a facility designed for young children. You should consider the pros and cons of each type of care.

In-home care can be very convenient. Many home care providers can arrange their schedules to match your needs. Since the caregiver comes to your home, your child does not have to adjust to a new setting. This gives you greater control over your child's environment. Also, your child can receive more individual attention, especially if the caregiver is not expected to do housekeeping. Home care may lessen your child's exposure to seasonal illnesses, because of exposure to fewer children.

Skilled in-home providers are difficult to find. You will need a backup plan for the times when the caregiver is sick or goes on vacation. You alone are the judge of the caregiver's character, health, and skill. It is hard to know for sure what the caregiver does when you are not there. In some urban areas, agencies may provide training, placement, and supervision for in-home providers.

The training of home care providers should include emergency response to choking and first aid. The caregiver should provide you with a daily schedule and a daily report. Plan frequent opportunities for someone to observe the caregiver's interactions with your child.

Family childcare takes place in the caregiver's home. Many family child care providers who offer child care have young children of their own. Caregivers may care for children who are the same age or for children of all ages.

Check to see that the home is clean and safe. Also, make sure that the caregiver and the caregiver's children are healthy. Television watching should be limited to 1 or 2 hours per day. Carefully review how the caregiver handles meals and discipline.

Including the caregiver's own children, a childcare home should not have more than six children per adult caregiver. (In some states, group homes allow more children when at least two adults are available at all times.) The total number of children should be less when infants and toddlers are included. Unlike child care center recommendations, a single caregiver within the family care setting should care for no more than two children younger than 2 years of age. Since there is only one adult, backup care in an emergency situation must be close by. In some areas, caregivers belong to a network of family childcare providers who may provide backup help.

Family childcare providers usually work alone. This makes it hard to judge their work. Look for caregivers who are licensed or registered with the state and have their home visited by an inspector. Family caregivers can be accredited through the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC).

Center-based care has many names—childcare center, preschool, nursery school, or learning center. Center-based care also may have different sponsors, including churches, schools, colleges, universities, social service agencies, Head Start, independent owners and chains, and employers. Regardless of what type of child care center you choose, there are some basic things to consider:

- All centers should be licensed and inspected regularly for health, safety, cleanliness, staffing, and program content. Just because a center is licensed, do not assume it is regularly inspected. Check to see how often the center you are considering had announced and unannounced inspections in the past year and what was checked. To find out about the regulations in your area, contact your city, county, or state department of social services.

- Caregivers and center directors should have basic training and experience in early childhood development. Check to see if state or national organizations accredit the center. Several independent groups of early childhood care and education professionals offer accreditation. For centers, these are the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) or the National Child Care Association (NCCA), (Although it is reassuring to know that a caregiver is accredited, some very good care-givers may not be accredited by either of these organizations. You might suggest that they apply for accreditation.)
- Look for age-appropriate toys, a daily schedule that is used, and joyful interactions between children and staff. Parents should be able to make unannounced visits to the center to see their child, and receive quick notification if their child gets sick or is injured.
- Be sure to check the center's special programs and published policies, including its policies on sick children. Centers have the advantage of covering a caregiver's illness or vacation.
- Look for centers that have two caregivers per room, a window or glass door for supervisors to view activities, and ongoing staff training.

Paying for childcare can be quite an investment, so families must budget ahead. Although the cost seems high, consider how much the caregiver should earn for professionally meeting your family's childcare needs and helping your child develop normally. Ask your company for assistance from:

- direct payment through cafeteria plans
- dependent-care spending accounts (tax savings)
- voucher programs
- company discounts

Whatever type of childcare you choose—in-home, family, or center-based be sure to consider these factors:

- **Quality of adult/child relationships**--Are staff members specially trained in child development and early education? Are children cared for in small groups and given activities according to their level of development? Are there enough trained adults available to children on a regular basis?
- **Location**--How far will the care be from home? From work? Is this convenient for both parents? Can both parents easily get there in an emergency?
- **Hours**--What hours of care are needed? What happens if you are late in picking up your child?
- **Alternative arrangements**--What happens if your child is sick? When the caregiver cannot come? What if the childcare program is closed? What pediatric medical care is available to the program?
- **Consistency**--Are the program's policies on meals, discipline, and toilet training the same as your views at home? Will your child be able to have a stable relationship with one caring adult?
- **Parent responsibility**--It is ultimately your responsibility to ensure that your child receives the best care. Talk with the caregiver on a regular basis. Plan to spend time with your child and the caregiver every day, both before you leave and when you return. When problems occur, your home caregiver or staff at the child care center should be able and willing to help you work through the situation. If problems persist and you suspect your child's health or safety is in question, find another child care arrangement for your child right away.

Questions to Ask

Finding quality childcare is important. Standards for childcare settings may vary depending on the type of childcare. Use the following list of questions when visiting childcare settings to help you decide the childcare option that is best for you and your child.

What to look for

1. Do the child:staff ratios and the size of groups meet or exceed recommended levels? (See chart.)
2. Does the staff appear to enjoy caring for the children?
3. Is the center or home bright, cheerful, and well ventilated? Is all equipment clean, safe, and well maintained?
4. Do the children in the program appear to be happy?
5. Is the noise level in the child care areas comfortable?
6. Do the adults and the children often talk with each other? Are children encouraged to talk with each other?
7. Is the indoor space large enough? Look for 50 square feet, measured wall-to-wall, per child.
8. Is there a sleeping or quiet area large enough for all the children to rest during naptime? (There should be at least 3 feet of space between children sleeping in a head-to-toe manner.)
9. Does each child have a place for his or her own belongings?
10. Are infants always fed in an upright position and, until they can sit by themselves for feeding, held by an adult? (No bottles are allowed in bed or propped.)
11. Is all the food nutritious, well prepared, well served, and age-appropriate? Are you able to check the menus and meal plans in advance?
12. Are there many toys present that are accessible, safe, and appropriate for your child's age group?
13. Is there protective surfacing under indoor climbing equipment? Indoor climbers require the same types of impact-absorbing materials and fall zones as those installed outdoors.
14. Is there an outside playing area that is free of sharp edges, pinch points, sharp rocks, and ditches?
15. Is the outside area free of hazards such as hard surfaces, sharp rocks, high climbers, tall slides, unprotected seesaws and merry-go-rounds, and unsafe swings?
16. Is equipment age-appropriate, properly installed, and well maintained?
17. Is there impact-absorbing material such as soft sand, wood chips, smooth gravel, or specially manufactured rubber mats under and at least 6 feet out from equipment?
18. Are there individual cribs, beds, cots, or mats to sleep on? Do sleeping children stay within view of caregivers?
19. Is there a clean diaper-changing area for infants and toddlers? Is a sink within the caregiver's reach near the diaper-changing surface?
20. Are the toilets and sinks clean and easy to reach? Can children reach clean towels, liquid soap, and toilet paper?
21. Do caregivers wash hands after changing diapers, wiping a runny nose, or helping a child with toileting?
22. Do caregivers make sure that children wash their hands after toileting, playing outside, and before meals?
23. Does each child have his or her own separate wash cloth and towel?

24. Are there sinks in each room, with a separate sink for food preparation and hand washing?
 25. Does the center or home appear to be clean and safe for your child?

Age	Child:Staff ratio	Maximum group size
Birth—24 months	3:1	6
25—30 months	4:1	8
31-35 months	5:1	10
3 year olds	7:1	14
4 year olds	8:1	16
5 year olds	8:1	16
6—8 year olds	10:1	20
9—12 year olds	12:1	24

What to ask

1. Is the childcare center or home licensed or registered with local government? Has the program achieved accreditation by a nationally recognized independent group of early childhood professionals? (Ask to see a current document and find out what type of inspection or review was done.)
2. Are you welcome to visit the facility during normal operating hours before and after registering your child in the program?
3. Can you see all areas your child will use?
4. Is there a written plan for play and learning activities that includes active play, quiet play, nap or rest time, and snacks and meals? (Ask to see it.)
5. Are there daily opportunities for inside and outside play, and are children supervised at all times?
6. Is television viewing limited to short times and age-appropriate programs?
7. Does the center offer parenting education classes or other family support?
8. Is each child assigned to one caregiver that is primarily responsible for his or her care and whereabouts, even if other caregivers are sometimes involved?
9. Does the caregiver regularly meet with parents? (Ask how often.)
10. Is there a written policy about discipline? (Ask to read it.)
11. Is smoking banned from the childcare center or home?
12. Are there written policies and plans for the care of ill children that include the responsibilities of parents? (Ask to see the policies.)
13. Is there a quiet, well-supervised arrangement for the care of ill children until parents pick them up?
14. Will the caregivers give prescribed medications to your child? (If yes, under what conditions?)

15. Is there a health specialist, such as a pediatrician, who serves as a consultant for the child care program?
16. Are staff members and volunteers trained in child development?
17. Are you comfortable with the experience and qualifications of the staff?
18. Are the staff members and volunteers trained in first aid, injury prevention, emergency response to choking, and prevention of infections?
19. Does the caregiver perform monthly evacuation and emergency drills and monthly playground checks?
20. What are the arrangements if a caregiver gets sick or has to be away?
21. Can you get recommendations and advice from parents whose children are currently in the program?
22. Did the center explain to you all the costs and fees involved with your child's care?

Different children, different care

The key to good childcare is whether the caregiver can adapt to the needs of children and families. Not all children of the same age are at the same level of development; each child has unique character traits. A good caregiver understands these personal and developmental differences and creates a program to meet each child's needs.

When your child is an infant, the number of caregivers should be limited. Your child can only form a trusting relationship with a few people. Most young infants thrive when they have steady, positive relationships with their caregivers. Close contact aids your child's social and emotional growth. Your infant becomes used to a certain tone of voice, way of being held, etc. The caregiver also learns to recognize your infant's cues for distress, hunger, and playfulness. Even if more than one adult works with the group, one adult should have primary responsibility for your child.

Helping your child adjust to day care.

When you take your child to day care for the first day, plan on spending enough time at the daycare to make sure your baby is comfortable in his new environment. On the second day, stay 5 or 10 minutes while your child makes the transition to interacting with the day care provider. If possible, leave a familiar toy or security object with your child. If the day care center is near your workplace, visit your child during the day. When you leave your child, do so with a cheerful attitude and let your child know you are leaving--don't sneak away. Let your child gradually reach out and become involved with the other children and the caregiver(s)

Preparing your child

Most young infants, up to 7 months, adapt to caring adults and seldom have problems adjusting to good childcare. Older infants may be upset when left with strangers. They will need extra time and your support to "get to know" the caregiver.

You can reduce your child's fears about starting childcare. Visit the program or family childcare home with your child before beginning care. Show your child that you like and trust the caregiver. Arrange a visit with in-home providers while you are at home or when you need childcare for a short time. Some children like to carry a reminder of home when they go to childcare. A family photograph or small toy can be helpful. Talking to your child about childcare and the caregiver is helpful. Preparation and familiarity make any new experience easier for children. There also are storybooks about childcare that you and your child can read together. (Check with your local library.)

After a child has been in childcare, a sudden change in caregivers may be upsetting. This can happen even if the new caregiver is kind and competent. If you are concerned about your child's feelings, you may want to arrange a meeting with the caregiver or ask your pediatrician for advice. Parents need to help the caregivers and the child deal with any changes in the child's routine at home or childcare.

Good childcare helps children grow in every way and promotes their physical, social, and mental development. It offers support to working parents. Your pediatrician wants your child to grow and develop with enjoyment in a setting that supports you as a parent.

For further information on childcare and early education, contact:

- National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1509 16th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036-1426.
- National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, 1319 F Street, NW, Suite 810, Washington, DC 20004
- Child Care Aware: 800/424-2246

Caring for a sick child.

The onset of illness can be a major disruption for the mother working outside the home. Many day care homes and centers will not care for sick children. Your options usually are staying home with your child, having your spouse take time off from work and stay home with your child, or having your child stay with a friend or relative who has agreed in advance to be a backup for illness care.

If your child becomes sick during the working day and you think he needs to see a physician, try to arrange for a late-afternoon appointment by calling before 3:00 PM.

Children with a sore throat, moderate cough, runny nose, or cold symptoms (but without a fever or breathing difficulties) can usually stay in or return to day care. The decision should be based mainly on how well your child feels. Children with fevers (over 100 degrees F, or 37.8 degrees C), chickenpox, vomiting, or diarrhea cannot stay in a regular day care setting. Children with a strep throat or an eye infection can usually return after 24 hours on an antibiotic. Many childcare centers have their own rules about when a sick child must stay at home. You should become familiar with these rules.

If your child gets sick. Make sure that your childcare provider can always reach you. Many times children are allowed to stay with their child care provider as long as they can participate in most of the activities. If the child needs extra rest, there must be a place to lie down and still be observed.

Sometimes children need medications while they are at childcare. Both prescription and over-the-counter medications should have a pharmacy label with the child's name, dosage, and expiration date. The childcare provider should know when and how to safely give the medication and properly record each dose.

Challenges for Mothers working Outside the Home

- 1. Look for a supportive employer and workplace.** Being a mother who is working outside the home can be harder and more stressful than being a mother who stays home because your other responsibilities are never completely filled by other people. To lessen the burden, consider working only part-time if it's financially acceptable. Perhaps you can share a job with another person, so that each of you works 20 hours a week. Or perhaps your employer will allow you to have a flexible schedule or to work at least some of the time in your home.
- 2. Avoid fatigue.** If you don't get enough sleep, nothing will seem to turn out right. Pick a reasonable bedtime and stay with it. Cut corners in other areas but protect your sleep time.
- 3. Provide contact time with your child.** Research has shown that both the quality and quantity of time you spend with your child are important. Try to make breakfast a pleasant, unhurried occasion. Try to talk with your child during the commute to and from the child care provider. Use the 30 minutes before bedtime to discuss the day's events with your child at your child's pace. Set aside special half-days on weekends to do things with your child. Also remember that including your child in adult activities such as shopping, cooking, washing, and home repair is also quality time. You are providing enough input if your child is usually happy.
- 4. Reduce your housework time.** If you can afford it, hire a housekeeper. In any case, try to simplify your home life. A spotless house must become a low priority. Do less cooking; make triple recipes and freeze leftovers. In addition, make a date for a night out with your spouse or a friend at least once a week; relaxation time is essential, not frivolous or wasteful.
- 5. Ask other family members for help.** It is imperative that spouses participate in the housework and childcare. Responsibility for these tasks must be redistributed to prevent the mother from becoming overworked. For example, the father can help buy a son's clothing, take the children places, cook, and clean the house. School-age children can also be assigned some chores.
- 6. Watch out for feelings of guilt.** Try to understand that "Supermom" is a myth. You can't do everything single-handedly or perfectly. You need help and deserve help. If you have found a good child care provider, you should feel comfortable during the day about your child's well being. Despite your best efforts, your child will sometimes cry when dropped off at day care and will sometimes become sick. Try not to rethink your career decision every time this happens.

7. Find extra help if you are a single parent. Try to find a friend with a child close in age to yours. Share shopping, overnight and weekend visits, baby-sitting, and other responsibilities with your friend. Trading services in this way will save you money. Living with another single mother may be mutually beneficial. Consider joining an organization for single parents.

Recommended Reading

T. Berry Brazelton, *Working and Caring* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1992).
Earl A. Grollman, et al., *The Working Parent Dilemma* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).