

Early Childhood Service

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

On Mondays, Donna's mother watched three-year-old Sara. On Tuesdays, Sara was with her husband's mother. On Wednesdays and Thursdays, she was with the woman next door. Fridays were divided among the grandmothers, except in the summer, when a high school girl down the street came to sit.

Donna accepted this maddening schedule as the price of working full time – until her daughter asked one morning, “Where am I today?”

The next day, Donna began shopping for an early childhood service to simplify things, and give Sara consistency, structure, and a chance to mingle with other kids.

The process was intimidating. It was a lot easier to have grandmothers and neighbors care for Sara. Now she had to choose among strangers.

Donna took the right approach. Rather than consider cost and convenience first, she emphasized the quality of the teachers and the program. In short, she looked for a daycare arrangement that both she and Sara liked.

Parents need to feel confident their children are safe, at ease, and learning. Children need to feel comfortable and have experiences that teach them about themselves and how to get along with other children, develop their curiosities, and instill a love of learning.

Finding such an arrangement can be hard work.

Start by identifying the choices. Solicit referrals from friends. Scout for services run by neighborhood organizations and other providers. Look for a child care referral agency in the phone book.

Never enroll your child in a service you have not checked out. Try to visit two or more services before deciding. Good services will welcome a visit, even several visits.

Check to see if the service is registered, licensed, or otherwise regulated by a public agency. Licensing, while not a guarantee of quality, indicates that a certain standard of care is likely.

Check out the staff. Do teachers have a substantial amount of general education and child-specific education? What is the staff/child ratio? For example, look for a ratio of one staff person for every four children ages birth to 18 months.

Tour the building and classroom. Do the children appear happy? Do you see any safety problems? Do teachers interact with the children and appear to enjoy their work? Do you feel comfortable? If not, check out another service.

Good detectives observe, question, and invest a little shoe leather in digging out the facts. And they use their intuition. So should you.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Co-Director of the Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.