

The Search for Child Care

By Kathy Sauter

Making the decision to place your child in child care is not easy for most parents, and many will confess that finding a child care program that meets the needs of their child, as well as the complicated needs of working parents, is often a challenge. When you add considerations that involve the care of a child with special needs, identifying the right match can be most intimidating. No matter what your child's disability, spending hour upon hour in a setting that does not support his/her safe and healthy development -- or with individuals whose interactions may be influenced by misconceptions -- can be stressful to you and costly to your child.

There is a wealth of information available from pediatricians, libraries, schools and websites designed to help parents identify quality child care; however, issues can arise that are unique to families with a child who has a disability. Fortunately, federal laws ensure that the rights of families and children are protected. These laws prevent child care programs from discriminating against you and your child on the basis of a disability, and they require programs to make accommodations for your child's special needs.

The ADA and Child Care Programs

Generally, privately run child care programs must comply with Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and government-run child care services must comply with Title II of the ADA, both of which guide child care programs' interactions with children, parents, guardians and other potential customers. In summary, the ADA requires that child care providers not discriminate against persons on the basis of their disability and ensures they provide children with disabilities -- and their parents -- with an equal opportunity to participate fully in the child care provider's program and services.

Sometimes programs do not comply with the law. My experience has been that those challenges are usually due to ignorance of the law, difficulties with financial implications or poor communication between staff and management. Knowing the law is an important factor in ensuring that your child's needs are met, so take some time to understand the law. In addition, take time to learn what resources are available to programs to help them accommodate children whose needs may be different. Parents should become experts at identifying resources in their communities and advocating for the needs of their child.

What to Look for in a Provider

Learning to recognize quality child care should be your

next step. In any child care search, it's important to find someone who will closely approximate your parenting style, respect your role as parent, and be willing to work with you as a partner.

Communication and cooperation will be key elements in building a successful relationship with a caregiver, but a caregiver should also possess an excellent foundation knowledge in child development as well as a willingness to learn. Parents often find themselves weighing which corners to cut, but when it comes to your child, health and safety are top priorities. Qualified, trained providers are a rare commodity, but training a good provider to meet your child's individual needs will come easily when you work with a professional who respects you and your child, and values the relationships that grow in an excellent child care setting. Quality caregivers will possess an above-average desire to serve. They will embrace challenges creatively and thrive on the excitement of providing activities, materials and supports that will facilitate your child's growth and development. They will be open communicators, looking to you for updates, information, advice and feedback on a regular basis, and they will be sensitive enough to assess what is and is not working well in the child care environment. In addition, they will value your input in resolving the challenges that do arise. Any parent will rejoice when they find this type of caregiver, but for a family with a child who requires extra care, this type of caregiver is not a luxury, but a necessity.

Where to Start

Your local child care resource and referral (CCR&R) is an excellent place to begin your search. You can find them through the Virginia Child Care Resource and Referral Network (www.vaccrrm.org). You can also reach them through the statewide line 1-866-KIDS TLC, which helps you search by zip code.

Your local CCR&R will conduct an intake to personally identify your needs and construct a personalized referral list. They will be able to identify caregivers in your area and provide you with enough information to begin the interview process. Your local CCR&R can offer you valuable information about professionals with special needs experience and/or training. Although this is helpful, you will want to rely upon your interviews to gather the important details you will need to narrow your choices. Visiting



child care programs will add another perspective to your assessment as you use your checklists and questions to identify the important factors of your particular situation. As your list of prospective care providers gets smaller, you should gather further reference information on all providers that you consider as placement possibilities.

Child Care Aware (www.childcareaware.org/en/) is a non-profit initiative committed to helping parents find the best information on locating quality child care and child care resources in their community. It offers plenty of information for parents and includes a publication designed for children with special needs.

Another source of information is parents of other children with special needs. Perhaps through your child's Early Intervention (EI) program, school, or local support group, you can gain valuable expertise and information from fellow parents. Keeping in mind that selecting a provider is a very personal matching process, try to gather clear, objective information from parents, and use this as one source in addition to many others in making your selection process go smoothly.

Whether or not this is your child's first child care placement, always consider ways to ensure a successful transition for you, your child, and your provider. Establish in advance what specific skills your provider will need to learn before caring for your child without you there. Make visits to the program with your child, and spend enough time that you are both comfortable with the routines of the program.

Parent/Provider/Child Relations

Believe it or not, there are no perfect child care providers. Every relationship has a starting point and room to grow. Building a relationship with a child care provider is much like any other relationship, you both bring a certain amount of baggage, but with good communication, respect, and patience, you can develop a relationship that is mutually beneficial. Your child care provider will spend

an enormous amount of time with your child, and can serve as a tremendous asset in your child's growth and development. Excellent caregivers also recognize the importance of supporting parents in dealing with the challenges of balancing work, home and family. For children with special needs, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the difference between normal development and special challenges. Child care professionals can be helpful to parents when they respectfully provide information that helps make these distinctions.

Effective communication is a primary tool for building great parent/provider relations. Spending a few minutes at drop-off and pick-up times to talk to your child's caregiver is a great way for parents and providers to exchange valuable information. Some children may need additional tools such as report cards or notebooks where parents and providers can record important information that needs to be shared daily, weekly, or as needed. Sometimes additional phone conferences may be needed to address specific issues or to brainstorm solutions. Both parents and providers need to know when things are going well and when they are not, so keeping the channels of communication open is important.

Resolving Problems

Caring for a child with different needs can be stressful to both parents and providers, and seeking outside consultation and support should always be looked upon as a resource. Training opportunities, support groups, and resource programs can become a valuable asset for parents as well as providers. Frequently EI staff are already seeing a child in the childcare setting and are usually available to child care staff as a resource. Parents of infants/toddlers can choose to have their child's caregiver attend Individualized Family Support Plan (IFSP) meetings and receive information from the EI program on a regular basis. For older children, caregivers can be invited by parents to participate in Individualized Education Plan (IEP)



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