A Parent's Guide to Child Care

Early Childhood Division
Department of Community and Human Services

Early Childhood Division

Mission

*Families are the most important influence in the development of children.
We will work with each child's family to ensure the best possible environment for the child.*

Goals

Develop relationships of mutual trust with the families we serve

Build upon families' strengths and competencies as we support them in nurturing children

Foster respect for the dignity of each family, its culture, language, customs and beliefs

Foster respect for families' child rearing values and their rights to make decisions on behalf of their own children

Encourage families' understanding and appreciation of the value of developmentally appropriate early childhood practices

Improve families' understanding of their children and enhance parenting skills and communication

Participate in creating and maintaining support networks for families through shared community resources and services

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Introduction to Child Care in the City of Alexandria

The City of Alexandria is committed to making quality child care available to families who live and work in the City. The Department of Community and Human Services Early Childhood Division (ECD) helps families find and use child care.

Early Childhood Division Services

- ✆ Free information about child care, including what to look for in a quality program and lists of providers
- ✆ Financial assistance for low-income families to help pay for child care costs
- ✆ Investigation of complaints against family child care homes
- ✆ Training, professional development and many other kinds of support for child care providers and families with children

How to get information on child care:

- call ECD at **703.746.5437**
- search for locally regulated family child care providers and other information at: **alexandriava.gov/childcare**
- search for state licensed programs, including child care centers and family child care providers in Virginia at: **www.dss.virginia.gov/facility/search/cc.cgi**

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Selecting child care is an important family decision.

Families can choose among child care centers, nursery schools, family child care homes, in-home providers and before- and after-school child care programs to provide care for their children.

Child Care Centers

❋ provide child care and early childhood education for groups of children, ranging in age from six weeks to five years

❋ often operate full days and all year

❋ must have a Special Use Permit from the City and be licensed by the Virginia Department of Social Services

❋ meet certain quality, program and safety standards

Family Child Care Homes

❋ provide small group care and early education for children by an adult in a private house or apartment

❋ offer a home-like and informal atmosphere for infants and children

❋ must be registered with the City's Early Childhood Division

❋ must have a Special Use Permit from the City and be licensed by the state if caring for more than five children

❋ may offer greater flexibility for families with changing work schedules

Nursery Schools

❋ provide child care and early childhood education for groups of preschool-age children

❋ offer half-day or part-time programs from September to June

❋ emphasize socializing and early learning among children the same age

Before- and After-school Child Care Programs

✳   offer supervised programs with recreational and educational activities for school age children

✳   often operate when school is not in session, in addition to before- and after-school care

✳   sometimes provide care during holidays and snow days

✳   may offer full-day summer programs

Standards for City of Alexandria
Family Child Care Homes

There are staffing, program, physical and environmental standards for child care homes in the City. All family child care homes that care for five or fewer children must register with the City's Early Childhood Division and must pass health and safety inspections. Adults in the home must pass background checks for barrier crimes. All individuals age 14 and older must also have child protective services clearances as well as undergo reference checks.

Child care homes providing care to more than five unrelated children or more than four children under age two must be licensed through the state of Virginia (see **www.dss.virginia.gov/facility/ search/licensed.cgi**). The City requires licensed homes to obtain a Special Use Permit. All registrations, licenses and permits must be prominantly displayed.

For a more detailed explanation of these standards and requirements, please see the publication, *A Parent's Guide on Selecting and Monitoring Child Care*, produced by the Virginia Department of Social Services, available online at **www.dss.virginia.gov/family/ cc/publications.cgi**. Information on the City's registration requirements can be found online at **alexandriava.gov/childcare.**

Choosing the best provider to care for your child takes time.

When looking for child care, plan to visit several centers or homes. It is important to talk with providers and center staff. Visiting a provider's home or a child care center lets you see for yourself where your child will be for several hours every day. Visit at a time of day when children should be active. Take your child with you; watch his or her responses. Use the Child Care Checklists on the following pages to help you identify the program you feel is best for your child.

Once you have chosen a provider or center, you still need to visit and observe the program and your child regularly. If you have questions or worries, discuss them first with the provider or center staff. Many problems can easily be taken care of when parents and providers communicate and work together.

Child Care Evaluation Checklists

These checklists serve as general guides. Don't expect to find everything in every program. Choose the program that feels right to you and is a good fit for your child and family. You may wish to use the general checklist in combination with age-specific checklists that follow.

General Program Quality Checklist

General Policies

❏ Are written policies and information about fees, holidays and illnesses available?

❏ Are licenses and/or registrations from the City/State posted, and are the documents current?

❏ Are you welcome to ask caregivers questions about your child's day?

❏ Are parents involved and encouraged to participate in activities?

❏ Are parents permitted to ask for references for staff or family child care providers or to contact other families who use the program for references?

❏ Can you visit your child in care at any time without calling first?

Center Staff & Child Care Providers

❏ Are there enough caregivers for the number of children in care?

❏ Is the group size small enough that children get timely individual attention?

❏ Do they treat children with respect, kindness and patience?

❏ Are they active with young children on the floor, at their own level?

❏ Do they take time to discuss your child with you?

❏ Do they have education or training or special experience in early childhood development?

❏ Do they practice good personal hygiene?

❏ Are they trained in pediatric first aid/CPR?

❏ Will your child have the same caregiver daily?

❏ Is there a low staff turnover?

❏ Do caregivers regularly take continuing education courses to help them stay current with the best early childhood practices?

Facilities

❏ Is it clean and safe, indoors and outdoors?

❏ Is it bright, cheery and colorful?

❏ Is it well ventilated and the right temperature for the season (cool enough in summer; warm enough in winter)?

❏ Are the kitchen and bathroom areas clean?

❏ Are furnishings and equipment safe and accessible to children?

❏ Is there enough space for different levels of activity–quiet time and active play?

Health & Safety Basics

❏ Do you see evidence of child-proofing? (e.g., covered electrical outlets, baby gates at stairways, locked cabinets)

❏ Have building safety and security precautions been taken (fire extinguishers, smoke detectors installed)?

❏ Are dangerous supplies or medicines out of reach or locked away from children?

❏ Do you see toys and play equipment in good and clean condition?

❏ Do you see frequent hand washing (after toileting and before meals or snacks) and other sanitizing (e.g., at diaper changing table)?

❏ Is there a first aid kit readily available?

❏ Are there cribs for each infant, cots or mats for older children?

Environment & Program

❏ Are toys and activities available that are age-appropriate for your child? All children?

❏ Do activities encourage your child to learn and develop new skills?

❏ Are there plenty of creative arts materials (musical instruments, arts and crafts supplies), books and music?

❏ Is there an organized, but flexible, schedule of activities posted that shows variety and balance between active and restful (e.g. outdoor play vs. storytime), structured and unstructured (e.g. group games vs. free individual play), time?

❏ Are outdoor play and rest times adequate and supervised?

Values & Practices

❏ Do you agree with program or provider goals for your child's care?

❏ Does the program reflect values consistent with your family's beliefs?

❏ Is there careful supervision, with caregivers teaching children how to resolve conflicts, helping children learn to safely express strong emotions and offering comfort to a child who is upset?

❏ Do caregivers have realistic expectations for the behavior of children of differing ages and interests?

❏ Do you and the caregiver(s) agree on what is appropriate discipline for the age of your child?

❏ Do you see positive behavior reinforcement (praise, appreciation and attention for good behavior) being used by staff?

❏ Is discipline firm and consistently applied, and behavior limits clearly set, with no physical punishment, shaming or yelling?

Infant & Toddler Child Care—questions specifically related to the care of young children from birth though two years old.

Environment

❏ Is there child-proof space for crawling and playing (no sharp corners or furniture that can be overturned, safe and clean floors, stairways off limits with safety gates, no breakables within reach of toddlers)?

❏ Is there proper child care equipment for diaper changing and feeding that can be easily cleaned and sanitized after every use?

❏ Are there separate cribs for each infant in care?

❏ Is bedding clean and safe (plastic covered mattresses, separate bedding for each infant)?

Caregiver(s)

❏ Does the caregiver enjoy giving physical attention to infants (cuddling, holding, playing)?

❏ Does the caregiver offer your child stimulation such as talking and singing, offering interesting things to touch and look at?

❏ Is care consistent, meeting your baby's physical and emotional needs in a timely manner so your child can develop trust and attachment?

- ❏ Is your baby fed and changed properly, with the caregiver washing hands frequently?

- ❏ Will the caregiver provide cooperative help in toilet training your toddler?

- ❏ Does the caregiver empower children to learn to do things for themselves (put away toys, button clothing, wash hands, make choices--such as choosing a snack or picking out a book)?

- ❏ Does the caregiver support language development through reading aloud, singing, naming things, playing games that involve words and letters, and conversation (responding to your child's verbal communication)?

Program & Activities

- ❏ Do infants have access to things that develop the senses, such as mobiles, soft toys, things that make noises, rattles, balls, mirrors, etc.?

- ❏ Do toddlers have age-appropriate toys to develop motor skills, such as blocks, puzzles, clay, things with wheels, musical instruments, etc.?

- ❏ Is there indoor and outdoor space to encourage safe exploration, learning to crawl and learning to walk?

Preschool-Age Child Care—questions specifically related to the care of young children two to five years of age.

Environment

- ❏ Are there aids such as step-stools to reach the sink in the bathroom and child toilet seats?

Caregiver(s)

- ❏ Does the caregiver encourage creative play with imaginative games and crafts?

- ❏ Does the caregiver set appropriate and consistent limits for your child's behavior and allow your child to make choices and experience the consequences of mistakes?

- ❏ Does the caregiver play with your child and join in activities and games?

- ❏ Does your child get positive and patient individual attention from the caregiver?

- ❏ Does the caregiver help your child learn self-sufficiency by letting him do things for himself, including letting him make mistakes he can learn from?

- ❏ Is the caregiver physically affectionate with your child?

Program & Activities

❏ Are there toys that stimulate imagination and creativity (dress-up clothes, arts and crafts materials, musical instruments, building blocks, etc.)

❏ Does the schedule allow children to have some unstructured time to themselves?

❏ Does the caregiver arrange visits to local parks, the library or other places of interest nearby?

School-Age Child Care—questions specifically related to the care of young children six to thirteen years of age.

Environment

❏ Are there age-appropriate furnishings and activities?

❏ Is there a quiet place to read or concentrate on homework?

Caregiver(s)

❏ Does the caregiver provide structure and security, and supervision appropriate to your child's level of maturity?

❏ Are there consistent limits set, and are there reasonable expectations for your child's behavior?

❏ Is the caregiver willing to cooperate with you in adjusting these limits?

❏ Does the caregiver provide guidance and understanding to children experiencing confusion and conflicted feelings about growing up?

❏ Does the caregiver show respect for your child's opinions and ideas?

❏ Does the caregiver allow your child to take responsibility for choices made and provide constructive feedback on problems, projects and homework?

❏ Does the caregiver understand an older child's struggle to understand feelings about peer pressure, sex and identity?

❏ Does the caregiver make time to listen to your child and empathize?

Program & Activities

❏ Does the schedule or program allow time for homework?

❏ Is there an opportunity to participate in strenuous play, such as team sports or other physical activity?

❏ Does the program support your child's special interests (e.g., art, music, computers, models, gardening, photography, collecting, etc.)?

❏ Does the schedule or program permit social time with your child's own friends after school?

❏ Are there special facilities available for the program's use (e.g., community center, pool, gym)?

Your Family's Questions

This space is for you to note additional questions that are specific to your family's child care needs. Discussing and writing down the questions you want to remember to ask before your visit (and perhaps afterwards) can help you make the best choice for your children's care.

_____

_____

_____

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_____

How to recognize the warning signs of poor child care…

In this world, as the saying goes, there is nothing constant except change. Child care programs are no exception to this and can change over time, for better or for worse. Here are some things to watch for that may indicate problems with the child care center or provider.

No unannounced visits are permitted; parents must call to arrange a visit or to pick up a child earlier than the usual time.

Parents not allowed in the child care area; you are asked to leave the child at the center's office or reception area or at the family child care provider's front door.

Your child does not adjust and after several months is still unhappy about going to the child care home or center. Or, a well-adjusted child suddenly becomes unhappy. This may or may not be a danger sign; children experience separation problems at different ages, but it should be investigated.

Your child seems afraid or dislikes a particular caregiver, or seems fearful, too quiet or withdrawn in his/her presence.

You notice unfamiliar people caring for children; there are different staff or frequent changes in staff.

Care seems indifferent or lax; children are left outdoors to play unattended or made to wait for attention for long periods of time.

Your child has injuries that the caregiver cannot adequately explain.

The caregiver's manner or voice seems harsh, rude or indifferent toward any child in care.

Few activities or toys seem to be available for the children; toys may be for display and not used by children.

Caregiver becomes upset, defensive or unhelpful and/or cannot discuss the matter rationally with you when you ask questions or speak about your concerns .

You feel uneasy about the care, do not have confidence in the caregiver(s) or worry about how your child is doing. In this case, a visit to spend time with your child to observe his/her life in care may reassure you.

What to do when problems arise with your child care provider.

If all is not well in your child's child care program and you recognize problems, take action immediately. Here are some things you can do.

If there's a problem…

…related to the operation of the center or home, its procedures, fees or policies, make an appointment to talk to the director or provider in charge.

…with the caregiver, the classroom, type of instruction, or a conflict between your child and another child, schedule an appointment with the caregiver to address the problem when both of you can talk together undisturbed. Do NOT attempt to handle it when you are picking up or dropping off your child.

…with a matter you discussed with a caregiver that has not been resolved to your satisfaction, make an appointment with the director and include the caregiver in this meeting, if possible.

…that may put children in danger because of violations of regulations, such as too many children in care or safety or health problems the provider has refused to address, contact ECD at 703.746.5437. If the program is center-based, contact state licensing at 703.934.1505.

S.O.L.V.E. it!

To have an effective meeting to address problems, try the **S.O.L.V.E.** model.

State the problem without placing blame: *"I am concerned because ___ occurred"* or *"I saw ___ and wondered if we could discuss it?"* are good ways to begin.

Offer and ask for ideas to solve the problem. Then decide together what you and the provider will try.

Listen and stay calm.

Value the provider. Tell them you appreciate them and are willing to work with them to find a solution.

Evaluate after a few days or weeks by talking with the provider, sharing your feelings and asking for theirs.

Financial help to pay for child care is available to some City of Alexandria families.

To apply for financial assistance with child care, all parents in the household must be:

✔ **employed**,

✔ **enrolled** in an educational program to gain employment; or

✔ **participating** in a combination of working and attending school.

Many factors affect a family's eligibility for financial aid, including: gross family income (total wages earned by parent(s) before taxes plus any other source of income such as child support); and how many family members are living in the home.

If you believe your family may be eligible, call ECD at 703.746.5437, visit the office for an application, or apply at commonhelp.virginia.gov.

ECD will either mail an application to you, or add your name to the waiting list for applications if there is no funding available.

Complete the application and call if you need help or have questions.

Return your completed application to ECD along with all required verifications.

After reviewing your application, **a child care worker will contact you** to schedule an appointment to discuss your eligibility and child care needs.

Other Resources for Parents

Parent Infant Education Program (PIE)

The City of Alexandria PIE program works with the families of infants and toddlers up to 3 years whose physical or mental development is slower than expected, who are diagnosed with a condition likely to result in a delay or who have a 25% delay in one or more developmental areas. PIE is part of the Infant Toddler Connection of Virginia. Services include:

- Evaluations of infants and toddlers to assess the following areas: cognitive, physical, communication, social, emotional and adaptive functioning

- Assessment of individual and family needs, and development of a plan to meet those needs

- Developmental education provided to parents so families can help their child develop and learn

- Service coordination to assist in locating and using supports and services

- Services in the child's natural environment such as a home or preschool

- Financial assistance to families for special services and equipment (as available)

For more information the Parent Infant Education Program, call 703.746.3350.

The Preschool Prevention Program

The Preschool Prevention Team works in collaboration with the City of Alexandria's early childhood community to promote the healthy social emotional development of young children age 0-5 by strengthening caregiver-child relationships. The Preschool Prevention Team consists of mental health professionals who provide:

- Interactive on-site trainings for pre-school teachers and families

- Supportive counseling for children & families

- Parent consultations

- Child social skills development and behavior management

For information about open play groups offered by the Center for Alexandria's Children, visit www.centerforalexandriaschildren.org.

For more information about Preschool Prevention Team services, call 703.746.6009.

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Notes