

A close-up photograph of a Black woman with a warm smile, wearing a yellow earring and a green and yellow striped shirt. She is holding a young child in a light blue shirt. The background is softly blurred.

Selecting
**QUALITY
CHILD CARE**
A Parent's Guide



Child Care
Services

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STEPS TO FINDING CARE

You want your child to succeed – in school and in life.

Good child care is a first step to school success. Studies show that children who get quality child care enter school with better math, language and social skills. These skills will help your child do well in school. When your child has safe, loving and stimulating child care that you can count on, you don't have to worry while you are at work. You know that your child is getting the kind of care needed to be healthy, happy and ready for school.

Watch our “Choosing Quality Child Care” video online at www.okdhs.org/childcare

Step 1. Call for referrals

Begin your search by contacting your local experts – your child care resource and referral agency. The referral service is free. Get the facts about child care and a personalized list of options in your area that may meet your needs.

To find the child care resource and referral agency in your local area of Oklahoma, call toll free 1-800-438-0008 or in Spanish 405-525-8783.

To search online, you can access the Child Care Resource and Referral database at www.oklahomachildcare.org or the DHS Oklahoma Child Care Services Child Care Locator database at www.okdhs.org/childcare.

Step 2. Screen by phone

Call everyone on your list of possibilities to see if they have an opening for your child. Interview them by phone, and narrow your list to three to five possibilities.

Step 3. Visit and ask questions

Visit child care programs in person before you make a choice. Meet the caregivers and tour the facility. Use the checklist on pages 22 and 23. You know your child best. To help you decide where your child will be safe and happy, ask lots of questions.

Step 4. Check the record

Does the program follow DHS child care licensing rules? A summary of a licensed program's history of inspections and complaints is available on the Internet. Go to www.okdhs.org/childcare, and then click on the program name. Visit the program and ask to see their compliance file and required postings. To see a detailed record, call to make an appointment with the licensing office for your county and view the file in person.

Step 5. Make a choice

Think about what you saw at each visit and make the best choice for your child and family. Use the checklist on pages 22 and 23 to help you.

Step 6. Stay involved

You and your child's caregiver are partners now. Visiting and participating in events at the child care program will send a strong message. It will tell your child and your child's caregiver that you care about what your child is doing and learning. Continue to check the record once in a while.

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QUALITY MATTERS

Choosing child care that is right for your child is very important and can have long lasting results. Many studies show that birth to age 5 is the most critical stage in a child's growth and learning. As much as 90 percent of the human brain develops in these early years.

Ask these questions of any child care program you consider.

Adult-to-Child Ratio

How many children are there for each adult? You want your child to get plenty of attention. The fewer the children for each caregiver, the better the situation for your child. And the younger your child, the more important this is. The State of Oklahoma regulates the ratio of children to adults in licensed child care. (See pages 13 and 14 for details.)

Group Size

How many children are in the group? A small group is usually safer and calmer. The State of Oklahoma regulates the size of groups in licensed child care.

Caregiver Qualifications

Ask about the caregivers' training and education. Caregivers with degrees or special training in working with children will be better able to help your child learn. Are the caregivers involved in activities to improve their skills? Do they attend classes and workshops? The State of Oklahoma requires caregivers to attend a certain amount of training each year in order to be licensed.

Turnover

How long have the current caregivers been there? It's best if children can stay with the same caregiver for at least a year. Caregivers who come and go make it hard on your child. Getting used to new caregivers takes time and energy that could be spent on learning new things.

Health and Safety

Does the program look clean and safe? Are hands washed often? What is the plan in case of emergency or disaster? Is the program licensed? A licensed program is inspected at least three times a year by DHS for basic health and safety requirements. Most types of child care in Oklahoma must be licensed.

Star Ratings and Accreditation

Licensed centers and homes are rated from one to three stars. Two- and three-star programs have met voluntary standards for child care that are higher than basic licensing requirements. Three-star programs are also nationally accredited. Three-star programs can also qualify by meeting Head Start Performance Standards.

Positive Interactions

Does the caregiver attend to children's needs and give them lots of attention and encouragement? Look for signs of warm responsive relationships between adults and children. Caregivers should talk to children at their eye level and listen closely to each child.

Opportunities to Learn

Is there a daily schedule with planned activities for children as well as lots of time for free play? Do caregivers read to children? Good child care programs offer active play and learning activities to help children enter school with the skills they need to succeed.

Family Involvement

Ask about ways parents can be involved with the program. How will caregivers let you know about what went on during your child's day? Good child care programs welcome drop-in visits and parent ideas.



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TYPES OF CHILD CARE

There are several types of child care that may be available to you. Each type has advantages, depending on what you want for your child. The two main types of licensed care are child care centers and family child care homes. As you learn about the different types, you may get a feel for what would be most comfortable for your child and for the rest of the family.

Child Care Centers

Child care centers care for children in groups. The State of Oklahoma requires centers to be licensed. Although a license does not ensure quality, it does set minimum requirements for health, safety and caregiver training. Oklahoma typically inspects licensed centers three times a year. Centers are located in a variety of settings including churches, houses, community centers and buildings designed specifically for child care. Caregivers are required to have a national criminal history check based on fingerprints.

There are four types of centers in Oklahoma:

Child care centers operate more than 30 hours per week and typically care for more than twelve children of any age.

Out-of-school time programs care for eight or more children who are enrolled in school. Examples are before-school and after-school programs, day camps, summer camps and summer park programs.

Part-day programs care for children for more than 15 hours per week, up to 30 hours per week. These are generally preschool or mother's day out programs. Programs that operate for more than 15 hours per week must be licensed.

Drop-in centers care for children once in a while, with no child attending more than six hours per day, for a maximum of 24 hours a week. Drop-in centers must be licensed if parents are not on the premises.

Why do Parents Choose Child Care Centers?

Parents choose centers because they believe larger groups, multiple caregivers and state inspections make programs safer for their children and make the arrangement more dependable. They respect the reputation of the child care program or the institution sponsoring the program. Many parents believe that more staff, space, equipment, toys and organized activities can provide a better learning environment for their children.

Things to Consider

Sometimes high turnover of staff may be common. Some children may not adapt well to large group settings. Centers are usually not flexible about their hours of operation.

Family Child Care Homes

Family child care homes offer care for children in a home-like setting. The State of Oklahoma requires family child care homes to be licensed. Although a license does not ensure quality, it does set minimum requirements for health, safety and caregiver training. Oklahoma typically inspects family child care homes three times a year. Caregivers are required to have a national criminal history check based on fingerprints. This is required for everyone in the home over the age of 18.

There are two types of family child care in Oklahoma:

Family child care homes may care for up to seven children.
Large family child care homes may care for up to 12 children.

Depending on the ages of the children, more than one caregiver may be required to be present in the home.

Why do Parents Choose Family Child Care?

Parents choose family child care because they want to keep their children in a home-like environment. They prefer to relate to only one or two caregivers and believe that children are healthier, happier and more secure in smaller groups.

Some parents like having all their children in the same group, or trust what they learned about the provider from friends. Sometimes they choose family child care because they find it closer to home, less expensive or more flexible about hours of operation.

Things to Consider

One caregiver is usually alone with a group of children. When the family child care home provider is sick or on vacation, families may need to have a plan for back-up care.

In-Home Caregivers

In-home caregivers provide care for children in the child's home. They may be live-in or live-out nannies or housekeepers. Oklahoma does not regulate in-home caregivers or nanny-placement agencies. The family employs the caregiver, and the family has the responsibility to supervise the caregiver, meet wage and hour requirements and pay payroll taxes.

Why do Parents Choose In-home Caregivers?

Parents choose in-home care because they believe their children will be safer and more secure in their own home. They believe that if they employ the caregiver to work in their home, they have more control over the kind of care their children will receive.

Some parents find in-home care to be a more convenient arrangement for the family and believe it provides more flexibility. If there are several children involved, they may find that in-home care is not significantly more expensive than other forms of care.

Things to Consider

In-home care is usually more expensive than other types of care. Children may have fewer chances to play with other children. The family is solely responsible for supervision, criminal history checks, salary and payroll taxes.

Care Provided by Relatives

Care provided by relatives of the child may take place in the caregiver's home or in the child's home. You may have heard this called kith and kin care. Sometimes parents arrange to work different shifts, so one parent is always available to care for the children. Oklahoma does not regulate care provided by a relative of the child. The family has the responsibility to supervise the caregiver.

Why do Parents Choose Care by Relatives?

Parents who use this kind of care consider themselves lucky to have a relative they trust to care for their children. They believe that these caregivers will provide warmer, more loving care for the child, and that the child will be more secure.

Many parents believe relatives will be more likely to share their values, and they feel more comfortable entrusting their children to them. Sometimes parents use this type of care because their schedules, budgets or transportation problems limit child care options.

Things to Consider

The relative's age, health or time may limit interaction with the child. Families will need to agree on important care giving practices such as health and safety. Some relatives feel a duty to the family instead of a real desire to care for young children.

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LICENSING INFORMATION

How the State of Oklahoma licenses and regulates child care

Oklahoma has regulations that require most types of child care to have a license. Anyone caring for one or more unrelated children on a regular basis must have approval from the state to operate and must meet specific requirements. A license does not ensure quality, but it does set minimum health, safety and caregiver training requirements. The goal of regulation is to work in partnership with parents to protect the safety and well-being of children while in out-of-home care. The Oklahoma Department of Human Services is responsible for regulating child care.

To contact DHS
Child Care Services, call
1-800-347-2276
or find us on the Web at
www.okdhs.org/childcare.

You may review the Oklahoma requirements for different types of licensed child care at

[nrckids.org/index.cfm/
resources/state-licensing-and-
regulation-information/
oklahoma-regulations/](http://nrckids.org/index.cfm/resources/state-licensing-and-regulation-information/oklahoma-regulations/)

Inspections

Licensed child care programs in Oklahoma are typically inspected three times per year. Inspections are unannounced. Additional inspections may be made when there is a complaint or to follow-up on a violation.

Check the Record

The licensing inspection files of Oklahoma child care programs are public record. Be sure to check the record for the program you have selected before you place your child in care. Thereafter, check the record every once in a while so you know your chosen child care program continues to follow the licensing requirements. Inspection reports and a history of any complaints can be viewed in several ways:

Internet: A summary of facility monitoring can be viewed at www.okdhs.org/childcare. Search for the center or home. Then click on the name of an individual child care program.

On-site: Some records must be posted at the entrance to a child care facility. Others are available on request. Ask to see the program's compliance file and required postings.

In person: You may discuss the record with licensing staff. Call the DHS office in your county for an appointment to view the detailed file.

Criminal History Checks

Oklahoma licensing regulations require criminal history checks before caregivers are allowed to take care of children. In centers, this includes owners and directors of programs, all caregivers, substitutes and support staff. In family child care homes, this includes everyone 18 and older who lives in the home and any assistant caregivers or substitutes. Background checks use finger prints to check state and FBI records, and also check child abuse sex offender registries.

Ratio and Group Size

Oklahoma licensing requirements limit the number of children per caregiver. The ratio of children per adult is important because it has a direct effect on how much supervision your child receives. Count the number of children and the number of caregivers when you visit a child care program. A small number of children per caregiver is most important for babies and younger children.

Licensing requirements also limit the number of children who can be grouped together for care. Generally, children do better in small groups because small groups are usually safer and calmer. No matter how many caregivers are on hand, the total number of children who are grouped together for care is also important.



Ratio and Group Size Chart by Type of Care

REGULAR			
Family Child Care Home			
<i>Licensed for no more than 7 children</i>			
Total Children Allowed in Care	Ages of Children		Caregivers Required
	# Children Under 2 Years Old	# Children 2 Years Old & Older	
7	0	7	1
7	1	6	1
7	2	5	1
6	3	3	1
5	4	1	1
5	5	0	1
7	3	4	2
7	4	3	2
7	5	2	2
7	6	1	2
7	7	0	2
LARGE			
Family Child Care Home			
<i>Licensed for no more than 12 children</i>			
Total Children Allowed in Care	Ages of Children		Caregivers Required
5	Any ages		1
6	No more than 3 under 2 years old		1
7	No more than 2 under 2 years old		1
8	All 3 years old and older		1
10	All 4 years old and older		1
12	All 5 years old and older		1
8	Any ages		2
12	No more than 6 under 2 years old		2
12	No more than 8 under 2 years old		3

Ratio and Group Size Chart by Type of Care Single Age Groups

Child Care Centers	Staff-Child Ratio	Maximum Group Size
Birth through 11 months	1:4	8
12 months through 23 months	1:6	12
2-year-olds	1:8	16
3-year-olds	1:12	24
4- and 5- year-olds	1:15	30
6-year-old and older	1:20	40

*For more information on mixed-age groups,
contact your local licensing office.*

Caregiver Training

Oklahoma licensing standards set requirements for how much training caregivers must receive every year. The training and education of caregivers can tell you a lot about the quality of a child care program. Studies have shown that the more caregivers know about how young children grow and learn, the more likely they are to offer a high quality of care. Ask about college degrees and certificate programs like the Child Development Associate Credential. Caregivers in centers and family homes must have a minimum of 12 clock hours of training per year. Programs that have earned higher star ratings are required to have more hours of on-

going professional development. At least one person in the child care setting must have first aid and CPR training.

Star Ratings

Oklahoma was one of the first states in the nation to develop a quality rating system for child care facilities. Participation is voluntary. Star ratings are based on compliance with licensing regulations, increased education of caregivers, parent involvement, the learning environment for children and participation in national accreditation systems. A child care program must meet all of the criteria at one level before applying to move up to the next level.

One Star programs meet minimum licensing requirements.

One Star Plus programs meet additional quality criteria, which includes additional training, reading to children daily, parent involvement and program assessment.

Two Star programs meet One Star Plus and additional quality criteria **or** are nationally accredited **or** meet Head Start Performance Standards. Additional training for caregivers is also required.

Three Star programs meet additional quality criteria **and** are nationally accredited.

Health and Safety

Oklahoma licensing requirements have many detailed regulations intended to protect children from illness and harm. Here are a few of the topics covered in the requirements.

★ The space is clean, free of hazards, kept at a comfortable temperature, well lighted and smoke-free.

- ★ Toys and furniture are clean, safe and in good repair.
- ★ All children are up-to-date on their immunizations.
- ★ Children who are sick are separated from the group to prevent the spread of illness. Rules for giving and storing medications are followed.
- ★ The program has emergency procedures and a disaster plan including smoke detectors, fire extinguishers, evacuation plans, regular fire drills and tornado drills.
- ★ Caregivers and children wash hands often, especially before meals, and after toileting or diapering.
- ★ Nutritious meals are served to children. Food is stored properly and prepared in a clean environment.
- ★ Parent's permission is required to transport children. Seat belts and safety seats are used, and vehicles are safely operated.
- ★ Each child has their own sleeping space with clean bedding. Babies are placed on their backs to sleep in order to reduce the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

- ★ There is enough space for children; recommended 50 square feet per child indoors and 75 square feet per child outdoors.
- ★ Outdoors, there should be shade, and a soft place to land under swings and other large playground equipment. Most programs must have a fenced play area.

How to Make a Complaint about a Child Care Program

Chances are you will find care that will provide a good experience for your child. But there is also the possibility that you may find

something wrong. If you think there is a problem, make a surprise visit to see for yourself how things are going. Talk honestly with your child's caregiver and try to work together on a solution.

As a citizen concerned about other children as well as your own, you will want to report serious violations that may put children in danger. If your concern involves a violation of licensing requirements, you may file a complaint by contacting the regional licensing office for your county.

To locate the local office, call 1-800-347-2276.

You may request a follow-up contact after the investigation has been completed.



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Matching Your Child's Needs to the Right Program

Infants

Toddlers

Preschoolers

School-Agers

Children With Special Needs

Infants

Infants need to:

- ★ Bond with parents and caregivers.
- ★ Get their physical needs met.
- ★ Begin to explore their new world.

In child care, look for:

- ★ A primary caregiver who will be there for your baby day in and day out.
- ★ Warm and affectionate caregivers who respond quickly to comfort, feed and change babies.
- ★ Small group with enough caregivers to give your baby lots of attention.
- ★ A flexible schedule based on the needs of your baby.
- ★ Babies are placed on their backs to sleep.
- ★ Play space that is warm, soft, comfortable and safe to explore.
- ★ Babies who are held, cuddled and talked to just because.
- ★ Opportunities for your baby to practice new skills like grasping, reaching, pushing and crawling.
- ★ Good communication so you will know what happens with your baby during the day.
- ★ Confining infants (in cribs, swings, car seats, bouncy seats. etc.) is kept to a minimum.

Toddlers

Toddlers need to:

- ★ Develop a sense of independence.
- ★ Discover walking and other large muscle skills.
- ★ Begin to talk.
- ★ Have a variety of interesting toys, books and play equipment accessible to help children learn.

In child care look for:

- ★ Chances for children to make simple decisions and learn to do things for themselves.
 - ★ A child-proof play space that is safe and clean, with time to crawl, climb and explore freely.
 - ★ Warm and affectionate caregivers who listen, talk and read to children.
 - ★ Clear and simple expectations for behavior to avoid problems before they start.
 - ★ Caregivers who calmly settle disputes and redirect toddlers by getting them interested in something new.
 - ★ Schedules that give each child a chance for independent play and some flexibility based on their own daily needs.
- 18** ★ Clean diaper-changing areas, and toilet training that takes into account each child's individual readiness.

Preschoolers

Preschoolers need to:

- ★ Learn social skills and values.
- ★ Test and try new skills.
- ★ Develop imagination and new ideas of their own.

In child care look for:

- ★ Chances for children to play together, make friends, share and take turns.
- ★ Caregivers who encourage children to be active, social and curious.
- ★ Caregivers who talk directly to children by getting down on their physical level and show respect to each child as an individual.
- ★ Play space that is clean and safe with interesting things to do.
- ★ Interest areas with blocks, pretend play, puzzles, art, books, writing materials, math, science and nature.
- ★ Time for active play outdoors.
- ★ Nurturing caregivers who know how children grow and learn.
- ★ Opportunities for children to develop skills and experience success.

School-Agers

School-agers need:

- ★ Opportunities to play by themselves, with one friend, and with a group of friends.
- ★ Supervision, but opportunities to make some choices.
- ★ Opportunities for active play – indoors and out.

In child care look for:

- ★ Safe, clean space that offers a variety of activities to encourage choices and independence.
- ★ Opportunities for playing with age-appropriate games, books, art, music, pretend play, blocks and other imaginative toys.
- ★ Limited time on computer games, video games and television.
- ★ Areas for completing homework, and time and space to work on individual projects.
- ★ Caregivers who understand changing relationships between friends and groups of children.
- ★ A program that allows school-agers to be a part of the program without being assistants for other classes.
- ★ Safe transportation to and from school.
- ★ Safe, well-supervised field trips when offered.

Children Who May Have Identified Special Needs

A child with special needs should have:

- ★ Care that is comforting, stimulating, safe and welcoming.
- ★ Accommodation for medical, developmental and behavioral needs.
- ★ Inclusion and freedom from discrimination.

In child care look for:

- ★ Caregivers who are genuinely interested in learning more about your child's care and abilities.
- ★ Caregivers who are willing to receive additional training and seek resources.
- ★ Opportunities for all children to actively participate.
- ★ Systems for communication between families, specialists and caregivers.
- ★ Reasonable accommodations for children who need assistive equipment.

[Look for additional resources in “Caring for Our Children” and in other documents on the DHS website.]



HELP PAYING FOR CHILD CARE

Your child is priceless . . .

but paying for good child care can be a struggle. In fact, child care is probably the second largest expense in your budget after rent or mortgage. Child care is costly, but you may be able to reduce your child care expenses or get some help paying your child care bills.

Find Out What Kind of Help May be Available

Each type of financial assistance for child care has different qualifications, like income level, employment status, or residency, so make sure you get all the facts.

State Child Care Assistance

Find out if you are eligible to receive child care assistance from the Oklahoma Department of Human Services. Assistance is available for lower-income families who are working or in school. If you are eligible, the state may pay all or part of the cost depending on your family income. To receive assistance, you must choose licensed child care with a DHS contract.

To apply for assistance, contact your local DHS office or call toll-free: 1-877-653-4798. For more information, go to www.okdhs.org/childcare.

Tribal Assistance

Some American Indian tribes in the state of Oklahoma offer child care assistance. Each tribal government is different and develops its own plan for child care services.

Tribal assistance with child care is based on family income. Eligibility guidelines vary from tribe to tribe. Tribal assistance and family co-payments may be higher or lower than state assistance, so find out about both.

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Call the tribal headquarters of your own tribe, and of other tribes near your home, to find out whether they offer child care assistance.

Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) Programs

Most of Oklahoma's public school districts voluntarily offer half-day or full-day Pre-K classes. Although pre-kindergarten is free, there may be a charge for before- and after-school care to complete the day for working families. To enroll your child in Pre-K, call your local elementary school.

Head Start and Early Head Start

Head Start and Early Head Start are federally funded full or part-day programs that provide free child care and other services to help meet the health and school readiness needs of eligible children. Most, but not all, families who access Head Start or Early Head Start must have incomes that meet federal poverty guidelines.

Employer or College Support

Your employer, or college if you are a student, may provide child care scholarships, discounts to certain programs, or on-site child care at reduced rates.

Flexible Spending Accounts

Your employer may offer a Flexible Spending Account, which allows you to have money taken out of your paycheck tax-free and put into a special account to be used for child care tuition reimbursement. The main purpose of this type of program is to help you lower the amount of taxes you have to pay during the year. Flexible Spending Accounts are offered to employees of all income levels.

Federal and State Tax Credits

Tax credits can save you thousands of dollars if you work and have children. In some cases, you may actually get cash back if you qualify. You can use the savings to help pay for child care expenses. You will need to file a tax return to receive the credits whether or not you owe taxes. Ask the IRS or your tax preparer if you qualify.



CHECK IT OUT!

Take this checklist with you as you visit caregivers. Ask these questions to help you choose good quality child care.

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Training and education

- Does the person who will be caring for your child have the required special training?

Caregivers with degrees or special training in working with children will be better able to help your child learn.

Positive interaction

- Does the caregiver attend to children's needs and give them lots of attention and encouragement? Do you see her talking to children at their eye level and listening closely to each child?

Children need to form a bond with their caregiver and feel safe and loved.

Teacher turnover

- How long has the caregiver been in the same program or providing child care in the home?

Caregivers who come and go make it hard on your child. It's best if children can stay with the same caregiver for at least a year.

Low child/adult ratio

- Are just a few children being cared for by one caregiver?

You want your child to get plenty of attention. The fewer the children for each caregiver, the better situation for your child. And the younger your child, the more important this is.

Group size

- If there is more than one caregiver in the setting, is the total number of children in the group still fairly small?

A small group is usually safer and calmer.

Health and safety

- Does the place look clean and safe? Is hand washing done often? What is the plan in case of emergency or disaster?

Clean environments reduce illness and the spread of germs. Safe programs reduce the risk of injury.

Regulation

- Is the child care center or family child care home licensed and inspected by the State of Oklahoma?

Oklahoma requires most child care programs to have a license. A license does not ensure quality, but it does set minimum standards.

Learning environment

- Is there a daily schedule with planned activities for children to do as well as lots of time for free play? Do caregivers read to children?

Good child care programs offer active play and learning activities to help children enter school with the skills they need to succeed.

Star ratings

- How many Oklahoma quality rating stars has the program earned? (Three is the highest)

Programs with more stars have met voluntary standards for child care that are higher than basic licensing requirements.

Accreditation

- Is the child care program accredited by a national organization?

Accredited child care programs are more likely to offer a higher quality of care.

Family involvement

- Does the caregiver welcome drop-in visits and parent ideas and involvement?

Good child care programs involve parents and work as a team with the family to meet the needs of children.

You know your child best

- Will your child be happy there?

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