

Finding the Right Child Care Program



For more information,
call your local
PUZZLES Center:

Bladen County
910-642-8189

Brunswick County
910-755-3362

Columbus County
910-642-8189

Duplin County
910-296-2000

New Hanover County
910-815-3731

Pender County
910-259-9978

Sampson County
910-592-9399

Five Steps to Choosing High-Quality Child Care

Start Early

Start looking far in advance. No matter what type of care you are considering, finding the right child care option can take some time.

Call Your Local Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) Agency

Finding a child care program can seem overwhelming. Your local CCR&R can help by providing you with a list of referrals based on your needs such as location, type of care, star rating, cost, etc. Call Smart Start for more information on the CCR&R in your area.

Visit and Ask Questions

Make sure you visit the child care programs you are considering. Look for the Key Indicators of Quality (found on the next page)

Make a Choice

Think about what you saw at each visit, and make the best choice for your child and family. Use the enclosed checklist to help you.

Stay Involved

The work isn't over when you find good care for your child. You and your child's caregiver are partners now. Ask your child care provider how you can be involved and make an effort to talk to your child care provider every day.

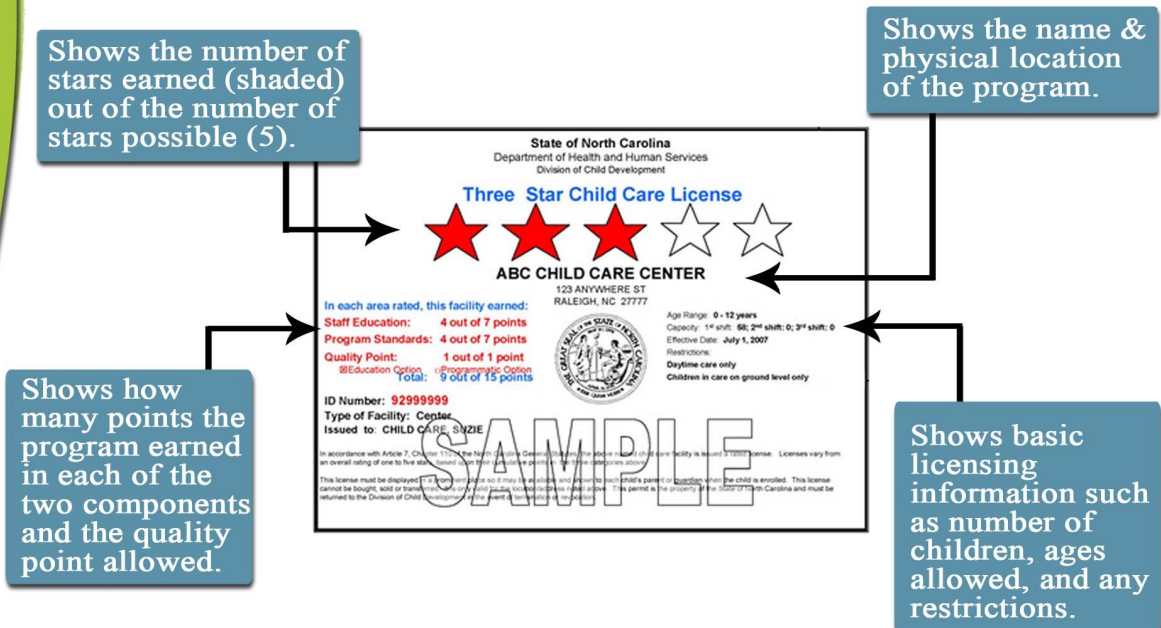
YOU ARE YOUR CHILD'S FIRST AND MOST IMPORTANT TEACHER!

You want your child to succeed in school and life. If you have to put your child in child care, you want the best option that fits your and your child's unique needs. Choosing a high-quality child care program is important to ensuring that your child is healthy, happy, and on the path to be ready for school and life.

LOOK FOR THE STARS! – THE NUMBER OF STARS TELLS YOU A LOT.

In North Carolina, any child care program serving three or more preschool children more than four hours a day must be regulated. A one-star license ensures that a family child care home or center meets minimal health and safety standards and that providers have CPR and First Aid training, and criminal background checks. Requirements include monitoring by local fire, building and sanitation inspectors, as well as by a consultant from the NC Division of Child Development (NCDCCD). A license should be displayed in a prominent location. Religiously-affiliated programs may choose to obtain a letter of compliance instead. This means that they agree to meet the basic health and safety standards of the one-star license, but do not have to meet the requirements for staff qualifications and curriculum and may use corporal punishment.

In addition to meeting the minimal requirements of a one-star rating, child care homes or centers may apply to achieve a rating of two to five stars by meeting higher standards for better quality care. Two components determine the final star rating: staff education and program standards. Each component is assigned one to seven points, yielding a total of up to fourteen points. Also, facilities can meet additional standards to earn an extra point. The star rating is then based on the total number of points. More points equal more stars.



WHAT IS NATIONAL ACCREDITATION?

Another way for families to identify a high-quality child care program is to ask if the facility has received national accreditation. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and The National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) are two of the largest organizations that accredit child care programs. If you don't see the NAEYC or NAFCC certificate in a visible location, ask if the facility is accredited or working towards accreditation.

KEY QUALITY INDICATORS

In addition to the star rating, look for the following quality indicators to help guide your search. When your child is in a high quality program, you can feel confident that he/she is getting the best possible care. Use the enclosed checklist when visiting a child care program.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Healthy and safe experiences in the child care setting are critical to healthy development. Some of the most basic things you should look for include:

- Good handwashing and diapering procedures - procedures are posted.
- Space is clean & free of potential harm.
- First aid equipment is available and staff are trained on proper use of equipment and CPR.
- Infants are put to sleep on their backs.
- Fire drills and evacuation procedures are practiced and parents are made aware of the facility's policies.

GROUP SIZE & STAFF/CHILD RATIO

Low staff/child ratios (the number of children per adult) allow teachers to give attention to each individual child and respond to their unique needs. Smaller group sizes (the number of children allowed in a single classroom) create safer and calmer environments and in turn results in an optimal place for children to learn and grow. North Carolina defines maximum standards for group size and staff/child ratios (see the chart below). In general, lower staff/child ratios equal better quality.

CAREGIVER EDUCATION & TURNOVER

Research shows that having a consistent child care provider/teacher is best because it allows the child to develop a bond with another caring adult. In addition, the teacher's level of education is important because they will be better prepared to help your child learn.

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

You and your child care provider are partners in ensuring that your child is well cared for and getting appropriate early learning experiences. A child care provider and facility should offer you ways to stay involved, such as visiting the facility regularly, holding parent-caregiver meetings, volunteering for birthday and holiday parties, and chaperoning field trips.

POSITIVE TEACHER-CHILD INTERACTIONS

When teachers listen, make eye contact, and engage in caring face-to-face interactions with young children, they promote secure teacher-child relationships. It in turn helps children learn how to develop secure and positive relationships with others.

DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE ACTIVITIES/CURRICULUMS

Developmentally Appropriate Practice is grounded in both the research on how young children develop and learn and in what is known about education effectiveness. Teachers should provide age appropriate materials and activities. Children should be allowed to make choices, and TV should be limited or excluded. Developmentally appropriate curriculums follow the "learning through play" approach.

Staff/Child Ratio				
Number of children per adult for licensed child care center and homes				
Child Care Center	Age of Child	Minimum Standard	Higher Voluntary Standard	NAEYC Standard
	0-12 months	5:1 (Max Group Size: 10)	5:1 (Max Group Size: 10)	4:1
	12-24 months	6:1 (Max Group Size: 12)	6:1 (Max Group Size: 12)	5:1
	2-3 years	10:1 (Max Group Size: 20)	9:1 (Max Group Size: 18)	7:1
	3-4 years	15:1 (Max Group Size: 25)	10:1 (Max Group Size: 20)	10:1
	4-5 years	20:1 (Max Group Size: 25)	13:1 (Max Group Size: 25)	10:1
	School Age	25:1 (Max Group Size: 25)	15:1 (Max Group Size: 25)	12:1
Family Child Care Home	Age of Child	Maximum Enrollment		
	0-5	5		
	School Age	3		

Help Paying for Child Care

Child Care Subsidy

Administered by the county Department of Social Services, this program helps families (with children ages 0-12) in paying for child care. Families must meet certain eligibility requirements to qualify. Call your local Department of Social Services for more information.

Child Care Program Assistance

Ask if your child care provider offers scholarships, discounts, or a sliding fee scale.

Federal and State Tax Credits

You may be eligible for certain tax credits from both the federal and state government. These tax credits include the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Child Tax Credit (CTC), and the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit. Each tax credit has eligibility requirements including income level and family size. For more information, visit www.irs.gov.

Dependent Care Assistant Program (DCAP)

Your employer may offer a DCAP, 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.

Federal or State Funded Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) and Head Start Programs

Most counties in NC offer NC Pre-K and/or Head Start Programs. In New Hanover County, these programs only serve four year old children (Head Start serves three-year-olds as well). Families must meet eligibility requirements.

Types of Licensed or Regulated Child Care

Center-Based Programs are independently operated or operate in schools, workplaces, individual homes (considered small centers) churches or synagogues. Most are open on a fixed schedule, eight or more hours per day, Monday through Friday. Children in centers are usually grouped by age. As they grow, children often move into the next age group with a different caregiver. All centers must meet state regulations.

GS 110-106 (Religious-sponsored child care facilities) are child care facilities or summer day camps operated by a church, synagogue, or school of religious charter. While exempt from licensure, they must file a notice of intent to operate a child care facility with the state. A religious-sponsored child care facility may choose to seek licensure, but if it does not, it must still meet state licensing requirements with the following exceptions: staff qualifications, staff training, written activity plans and developmentally appropriate activity centers.

Head Start is a federally funded community-based program for low income three and four-year-old children and their families that promotes school readiness by enhancing the social and cognitive development of children through the provision of educational, health, nutritional, social and other services.

Early Head Start serves families with children ages birth through three and low-income pregnant women. Created by the 1994 Head Start Reauthorization Act, it is also a federally funded, comprehensive preschool program designed to meet emotional, social, health, nutritional and psychological needs.

NC Pre-Kindergarten Program (NC Pre-K) is a state-wide, voluntary program that prepares eligible four-year-old children for school success by providing them with high quality pre-kindergarten experiences. The curriculum used is child-centered, has a literacy and language focus and includes parent participation. NC Pre-K classrooms operate in centers and school settings for six hours per day, follow the public school calendar and have no more than a one-to-nine staff-to-child ratio.

Family Child Care Homes (FCCH) are operated by individuals who provide care in their homes for more than two children who are not related to them. These programs offer a home-like setting that provides the opportunity for siblings to stay together. A licensed FCCH may care for up to eight children, with no more than five preschool children in care at any given time. FCCHs must provide age-appropriate toys and activities, nutritious meals and snacks and meet basic health and safety standards. All FCCHs must meet state regulations.

Centers in a Residence are located in a home and are licensed to care for up to 12 children. Programs caring for school-age children only may care for up to 15 children. They are required to be licensed by NCDCEE.

School-Age Child Care refers to programs for children before and/or after school hours and during school holidays and vacations. Family child care homes, child care centers and schools typically offer this type of care. Programs that operate for four hours or less per day are license-exempt, but may voluntarily seek state licensure.

Types of Non-Licensed or Non-Regulated Child Care

Part-Day Preschools operate for four hours or less per day serving children between the ages of 0-5 years. While license-exempt, part-day preschools may voluntarily seek licensure and may pursue national accreditation. Typically, part-day programs operate on the same calendar year as the public school system, serving families where one parent is not employed full-time. Faith organizations and community-based non-profit organizations are the primary sponsors of part-day programs.

Drop-In Child Care is similar to traditional child care centers, with a few exceptions. Drop-in child care centers are typically open extended hours, often until 10:00 pm during the week and they often offer weekend care. Children can stay for a maximum of four hours at a time. Parents should be able to return to the facility within 15 minutes should an emergency arise so it is not advisable to use drop-in child care for work related purposes. Registration is required, but once registered, a parent can drop-off their child anytime during operating hours without an appointment.

In-Home Caregivers provide care for children in the child's home. They may be live-in or live-out nannies, baby-sitters or housekeepers. North Carolina does not regulate in-home caregivers.

Informal Child Care is unregulated child care provided by family members or other license-exempt individuals (you may have heard this called "family, friend and neighbor care").

Summer Day Camps are generally designed for school-age children and operate during the day for less than four months. They may be offered by child care centers, colleges, recreation sites, faith-based groups, or other sponsoring organizations. This type of program is exempt from state licensure.

For more details about the Star Rated License or to check the compliance history of a licensed child care program:

North Carolina
Division of Child Development
and Early Education (NCDCEE)
www.ncchildcare.net

For more information about child care including customized child care referrals, or to be connected to resources in your community, call or visit your local **PUZZLES Center**:

Smart Start of
New Hanover County
3534 S. College Rd, Suite F
Wilmington, NC 28412
(910) 815-3731