Choosing a child care program:

Exploring child care options can be overwhelming. As you search for a child care setting, first consider your child’s particular temperament style. Children who are flexible and transition easily will often do well in group settings that offer lots of social interactions and new experiences. Thoughtful, cautious children who have a hard time with transitions might need a smaller setting that is less overwhelming. Feisty or strong-willed children who experience their feelings intensely will do best in a setting where they are matched with a primary caregiver who can get to know them well and meet their specific needs (though ALL children would certainly benefit from this!).

No matter your child’s personality, here are some questions to consider asking possible child care providers. Don’t be afraid to ask for more than one visit or to pose any additional questions you may have.

Health and safety issues to consider:

- Are diapering, sleeping, food preparation, and play areas separate?
- Are there clearly written sanitation procedures specific to each area? Are there instructions posted on proper diapering and on procedures for food storage and preparation?
- Are fire drills and other safety measures performed on a regular basis? How often? Is there a written policy in place for evacuation procedures?
- Do adults regularly conduct safety checks of all areas inside and out for potential safety hazards?
- Do staff maintain children’s personal grooming standards (for example, hand-washing)?
- Do staff take the children off grounds? In vehicles? On foot? Other means?
- What is your sick policy? What will you do if my child becomes ill or is injured?
- Are infants’ and toddlers’ toys washed and disinfected regularly?
- Are all infants put to sleep on their backs?
- Is the staff equipped with appropriate first aid materials? Do staff members know basic first aid techniques and CPR?
- How are drop-offs and pickups monitored?

Questions about staff and training:

- What type of education does staff have? How are child care providers trained and how often?
- How do parents and caregivers share daily information about feeding, diapering, and sleeping?
- How many children are enrolled, and how many will be in my child’s group?
Responsive care and issues to consider:

Ideally, the caregiving staff will adapt their approach to meet children’s needs. This is called responsive care. To do so, caregivers need to be excellent observers of the children in their care, and search for meaning in children’s gestures, gurgles, cries, and glances. Responsive caregivers wonder why a certain behavior is occurring, come up with an educated guess, and interact with the child to see if they’re correct. Is a crying baby tired? Hungry? Wet? Lonely? Frustrated?

Responsive caregivers adapt their responses based on the reason behind the behavior as well as the style of the individual child. This adaptation ensures that all children are treated as unique, with their own thoughts, feelings, preferences, and needs. Some questions to ask:

- Are children allowed to function on individual schedules? What is the overarching routine for the day?
- Do parents receive daily written reports about their children’s day (and formal progress reports twice per year)?
- Are parents free to visit, unannounced, any time of day?
- Does the caregiver adhere to state-regulated caregiver–child ratios?
- Is the caregiver’s turnover rate for families under 20%? Why do families leave?
- When caregivers leave, how do staff help children understand the transition?
- Do staff receive medical benefits, vacation leave, and continuing education support?
- How do caregivers respond to child-initiated interests?
- How do you handle it when a baby or child cries inconsolably for long periods of time?
- Will my child be assigned to one particular child care provider (primary caregiver)?
- How can parents get involved in the program?
- How do you help new children adapt to the program? Can I observe my child in her classroom?
- If my child is still nursing, is the staff responsive and accommodating?
- What is your discipline policy? How do you handle aggressive behavior (and biting) from children?

Questions about activities and curriculum:

- Do you use a curriculum for my child’s age group? What is it?
- How do you include the children’s interests in the curriculum?
- Can you give me some examples of activities you might use for my child’s age group?
- Are children allowed to have time for free play? How much time?
- Is there an outside play area here or nearby? How much time do children get to play outside?
- What is your program’s general philosophy about children, growth, and learning? About caring for infants and toddlers?
- Does staff ensure that books and other aspects of various cultures are included in the program?
- Is television/video/screen time part of the children’s day? What and when?
- Are staff’s values and practices consistent with your families?

General program questions:

- Is the program certified/licensed/accredited/registered?
- What are the fees? What do they cover?
- What should I send with my child each day? __ Milk/formula __ Snacks __ Lunch __ Change of clothes __ Favorite toy __ Diapers/wipes
- If my child has special or unique needs, can they be met here?
- Do you have families I can call as references to ask about their experiences?