

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 20

December 2011

Making Day Care a Good Experience

Child and adolescent psychiatrists recognize that the ideal environment for raising a small child is in the home with parents and family. Some experts recommend a minimum of six or more months leave for parents after a child is born to promote bonding. Intimate daily parental caretaking of infants for the first several months of life is particularly important. Since the ideal environment often is not possible if parents have to return to work, the role of day care has to be considered. Experts agree that when day care is used in the first years of a child's life, the quantity and quality of the day care have significant impact on the child's emotional and physical development.

Before choosing a day care environment, parents should be familiar with the state licensure regulations for child care. They should also check references from other parents and observe the potential caregivers with the child.

Parents sometimes take their young child to the home of a person who is caring for one or more other children. Infants and children under the age of two-and-one-half need:

- More adults per child than older children require
- A lot of individual attention
- The same caregiver(s) over a long period of time
- A caregiver who will play and talk with them, smile with them, praise them for their achievements, and enjoy them

Parents should seek a caregiver who is warm, caring, self-confident, attentive, and responsive to the children. The caregiver should be able to encourage social skills and positive behavior, and set limits on negative ones. Parents should consider the caregiver's ability to relate to children of different ages. Some individuals can work well only with children at a specific stage of development.

It is wise for parents to find out how long the individual plans to work in this day care job. High turnover of individuals, several turnovers, or any turnover at critical points of development, can distress the child. If parents think or feel the day care they have chosen is unsatisfactory, they should change caregivers. All parents have the right to drop in during the day and make an unannounced visit.

Many children, particularly after the age of three, benefit from good, group day care, where they can have fun and learn how to interact with others. Child and adolescent psychiatrists suggest that parents seek day care services that have:

- trained, experienced teachers who enjoy, understand and can lead children

- appropriate number of teachers and assistants, ideally, at least one for every five children, small rather than large groups if possible. (Studies have shown that five children with one caregiver is better than 20 children with four caregivers)
- staff that has been there for a long period of time
- opportunities for creative work, imaginative play, and physical activity
- space to move indoors and out
- lots of drawing and coloring materials and toys, as well as equipment for physical activity such as swings, wagons, jungle gyms, etc.

If the child seems afraid to go to day care, parents should introduce the new environment gradually: at first, the mother or father can go along, staying nearby while the child plays. The parent and child can stay for a longer period each day until the child wants to become part of the group. If the child shows unusual or persistent terror about leaving home, parents should consider consulting a child and adolescent psychiatrist to discuss their concerns and develop strategies to help the child to talk about his or her fears. Parents can help make day care more positive and less stressful for their child by being actively involved with the day care staff and proactively talking to their child about daily activities in daycare.

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