

# Preparing for child care

by Nicky Lawson and Angela Owens

Placing your child in child care is an exciting, though sometimes overwhelming, experience for many families. Before you begin using child care, you will need to consider issues such as when you want to start using care, what child care options are available, how to access child care, and what you might expect when your child starts care. This *Factsheet* provides you with information to guide you through these issues, and to assist you to make informed decisions about the type of child care your family wants to use.

## When should my child start care?

There is no 'best time' to start child care - it depends on what suits your family and child. Current research in child development indicates that the *quality* of the child care they receive is more important to good outcomes for children than the age at which they start care, or the amount of time they spend in care.

Many families are seeking quality child care, so it is important to consider your child care options as early as possible and to begin the process of finding suitable services well before you need to start using care.

Most services have a waiting list, and it is a good idea to place your child's name on the lists of several services to increase the chances of a place being available when you require it. It is also important that you remove your name from any waiting lists that you are on once you find a child care place so that services can keep their waiting lists up to date for other families.



Even though you may not know the exact details of the days and hours that you will want for child care, it is helpful to think in advance about what may be most likely to suit your family situation. However, child care services understand that a family's anticipated needs may change by the time a child care place is offered.

## What child care options are available?

There is a variety of child care options available, including family day care, long day care and outside school hours care. You will need to consider the characteristics of each type of care, as well as the individual service to decide whether the care being offered will suit your child and family. Many families find that their child care needs change over time, and they may use two or more different service types either at the same time, or one after another. For example, a family may choose to place their baby in a family day care service, but move them to a long day care service in the year before they start school so that they can engage with a larger group of children.

The child care services types that currently participate in the Child Care Quality Assurance (CCQA) systems administered by NCAC are:

- Family Day Care provides care for small groups of children from birth to 12 years of age in the family home of a registered carer.
- Long Day Care provides care for children from birth to 5 years of age in a centre based environment.
- Outside School Hours Care provides care for school age children before and/or after school and/or during school holidays (vacation care).

Other child care types include occasional child care, preschool services or care provided by family or friends, babysitters and nannies.

When considering your child care options, you may wish to visit different child care services to

assist you to decide whether to place your child's name on the waiting list. It is important to note that many child care services charge a non-refundable waiting list administration fee.

## How can I find a child care service?

NCAC provides the names, contact details and Accreditation history of registered child care services on the NCAC website ([www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au)) through a search facility that enables you to search for services by postcode or suburb. If you are unable to access NCAC's website you can telephone NCAC on 1300 136 554 and speak with a Child Care Adviser.

Friends and family members can often provide you with a good source of information about the child care that they use, and it can be useful to find out what others think about the child care that they use.

You may also be able to find out about child care services through:

- your local business or telephone directory
- local council listings
- classified advertisements
- public noticeboards in schools and shopping centres
- work/study colleagues
- your employer or educational institution
- the Child Care Access Hotline: 1800 670 305.

## How will I know if the child care is good quality?

There are some useful questions that you can ask when visiting child care services to decide whether the care they offer will meet your needs. NCAC produces a free *Family Information Kit* that outlines what to look for in quality child care.



Preparing for child care - a NCAC Factsheet for Families

To receive this *Kit*, please visit the 'Families and Children' page on NCAC's website. NCAC has also developed a range of other resources for families that will assist you to determine whether a service is offering quality care. These include:

- A *Choosing Quality Child Care* brochure that includes information about NCAC, how to find quality child care, questions to assist families to choose quality care and the Child Care Quality Assurance (CCQA) system standards.
- *Quality Assurance* brochures, including CCQA information for each specific service type.
- NCAC *Factsheets for Families* about aspects of quality care in child care services.

NCAC requires child care services to provide families with information about the service's participation in the CCQA systems. If a service is Accredited, they need to display a current *Certificate of Accreditation* and a *Quality Profile Certificate* that shows the ratings they received for each area of practice when they were Accredited.

Not Accredited services are also required to display the most recent *Quality Profile Certificate*. It is important to note that Not Accredited services should be working to improve the quality of care they provide, and you may find that a Not Accredited Service has improved their practices to a satisfactory or higher level since they were Not Accredited.

Services that are newly registered with NCAC, and have not yet had an Accreditation Decision, should display a *NCAC Certificate of Registration*.

## What happens when my child begins care?

### Enrolment

Once a child care place has been offered, the service should guide you through an enrolment process. Effective enrolment processes are very important as this time is used for families and child care professionals to share important information about your child, family and the child care service.

An enrolment form may request information including:

- Family contact details and information.
- Authorised contact details and access information for your child. This helps services to know who is authorised to collect them from care, as well as authorised contacts that may be used in an emergency, when you cannot be contacted.

- Specific information about your child, including their eating and sleeping routines, interests and likes/dislikes, illnesses, allergies, medical conditions, health insurance information and health care professional contact details.
- Your child's immunisation history. This may be provided by taking a photocopy of the child's child health record, or by obtaining an immunisation history statement from the Australian Childhood Immunisation Register on the Medicare Australia website ([www.medicareaustralia.gov.au](http://www.medicareaustralia.gov.au)).
- Your child's birth certificate.

### Orientation

Starting child care can often be an emotional experience for both you and your child. An orientation visit usually takes place before your child starts care, and is an important step as it provides time for you, your child and the child care professionals to get to know each other.

By spending time in the service you can begin to understand what you can expect from the service. An orientation visit also provides valuable time for you to discuss the enrolment form, your child's needs, interests, routines and rituals with the child care professionals who will work with your child. It is also a good opportunity to ask questions and to become more familiar with the service.

During an orientation visit, you should be able to spend time with your child in the service. This enables them to explore their new environment, establish the beginnings of a relationship with child care professionals, and to meet potential 'new friends', with the security of having you close by. It can also make you feel reassured when you see how your child responds to the child care environment.

Services often provide a handbook to families at orientation time which outlines information about the service, the staff, opening hours, and policies on issues such as holidays, managing illness, fees and other issues which may affect care arrangements.

### What will help my child to settle into care?

Children can often experience some difficulty settling into a child care environment, particularly if they find it hard to separate from family or familiar caregivers. Each child's response to care and the length of time they take to settle depends on the individual child and their past experiences. However, there are strategies that families and services can use to support children to settle successfully.



Families may find the following suggestions helpful when they are supporting their child to settle into care:

- If possible, start child care before work or study commitments commence and try to allow your child to have shorter days initially, then gradually increase the time spent in care.
- Seek out a preferred child care professional or peer that your child can stay with when you leave the service.
- Spend some time settling your child at a favoured activity before you leave.
- Inform the service about what comforts your child, and discuss how you manage activities or times of the day they find unsettling. For example, does your child have a comfort item such as a toy or blanket that can help them to settle when they become upset?
- Show your child that you feel secure about leaving them at the service and that you trust the child care professionals. Say 'goodbye' confidently, and reassure them that you will be back later. While it may be tempting to leave while they are engaged happily in play, it can be very distressing for your child to realise you have left without saying goodbye.
- You should feel that you can contact the service at any time to check how your child is settling, and the child care professionals should provide you with sensitive, honest feedback about this.

### Some practical things to consider when choosing child care

- What hours of care does the service offer? Will you be able to drop off and collect your child within these hours?
- Will it be more practical to seek child care closer to home or closer to your place of work or study?
- Does the service have closure periods during the year, how long are these, and when do they occur?
- Does the service have an 'open door' policy that allows you to visit or telephone the service at any time?
- Does the service charge fees for public holidays, or when your child is absent?
- Does the service provide things such as nappies and meals, or will these need to be provided from home?
- What ages does the service cater for? For example, a service may provide care for children aged 0-3, so your family may also need to consider future child care options.

Child care often plays a major role in your family's life. It is important to build a good relationship with your child care service, to exchange important information about your child and to share your values and expectations for your child with child care professionals. Using quality child care offers many positive outcomes for children, including opportunities to develop meaningful relationships and to engage in experiences that will benefit them both now and in their future life course ■

### Useful contact information:

#### • **National Childcare Accreditation Council**

For information on quality child care, or to access NCAC's free *Family Information Kit*  
Call 1300 136 554 or visit [www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au)

#### • **Child Care Access Hotline**

For information on types of care, location of child care services and possible vacancies.  
Call 1800 670 305 (Open Monday to Friday 8am to 9pm EST)

#### • **Australian Childhood Immunisation Register**

To obtain a copy of a child's Immunisation History Statement.  
Call 1800 653 809, visit [www.medicareaustralia.gov.au](http://www.medicareaustralia.gov.au) or visit your local Medicare office.

#### • **Family Assistance Office (FAO)**

For information on Family assistance payments, Child Care Benefit (CCB), the Child Care Tax Rebate and Family Tax Benefit.  
Call 13 61 50 (Open Monday to Friday 8am to 8pm), visit [www.familyassist.gov.au](http://www.familyassist.gov.au) or visit your local Medicare office or Centrelink Customer Service Centre.



**For more information on Child Care Quality Assurance please contact a NCAC Child Care Adviser.**

Telephone: 1300 136 554 or (02) 8260 1900  
E-mail: [qualitycare@ncac.gov.au](mailto:qualitycare@ncac.gov.au)  
Level 3, 418a Elizabeth St  
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