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Introduction

There are a number of options to choose from when deciding on the right child care. Options range from informal care by relatives or babysitters to the more formal arrangements such as day homes or day care centres. Private babysitters can care for up to six children, including their own, without being licenced or approved. Subsidies for low income families are not available through private babysitters.

The key is to choose the arrangement that best meets the needs of your child and family.

This booklet discusses the option of placing your child in a day care centre. Finding the best possible day care situation is essential if your child is to thrive while you're away. This booklet will provide some guidelines for you to consider as you visit day care centres. It is made up of four sections:

- Day Care Centres
- Steps in Choosing a Day Care Centre
- Checklist for Parents
- Making Day Care Work for You

Day Care Centres

What is a Day Care Centre?

A day care centre provides care for groups of children and offers year-round, full-time day care. Each centre sets its own policies on matters like fees, the notice required to withdraw a child, holiday closure, hours of operation and whether children can attend on a part-time or drop-in basis. In addition, each centre has its own philosophy and approach to child care as well as its own program of daily activities.

What Does Licensed Mean?

Every day care centre in Alberta must be licensed by Alberta Children's Services. By law, this license must be posted in the centre. The license means the centre meets standards set by the provincial government. The license should be one of the first things you look for when visiting a day care centre.

Licensing officers monitor and inspect each centre on a regular basis to make sure it continues to meet government standards. The officers will visit more often if there are concerns about standards at a particular centre. All complaints are investigated. Day care operators are required to make recent inspection reports available to parents of the children in the centre upon request.

In addition, operators are also required to provide a Parent Checklist form for you to fill out.

What About Children With Special Needs?

Day care staff must, of course, be aware of the needs of all children. However, if your child has special needs, you will want to choose a day care centre with a program and staff that can meet those needs.

The Inclusive Day Care Program provides assistance for preschool children with special needs so they can participate in the regular activities of a day care centre (as well as a family day home or nursery school). Funding varies depending on the special needs of the children and the type of service they require. Contact your local Child and Family Services Authority office listed at the back of this booklet for more information.

Child Care Subsidies

The Child and Family Services Authorities subsidize day care fees for families whose income falls below a certain level. You may qualify depending on your income, your reason for needing day care and the size of your family.

For more information contact your local Child and Family Services Authority office listed at the back of this booklet and ask for “The Child Care Subsidy Program - Information for Parents” (also available at day care centres).

Steps in Choosing a Day Care Centre

Here are three basic steps to choosing a day care centre:

1. List your day care needs or preferences. This includes your child's needs (age, personality and interests) and your needs (hours of care, location of centre, transportation arrangements).
2. Phone several day care centres to determine those that may suit your needs. You can find out about day care centres in your community by checking the telephone book under "Day Care Centres and Nurseries," contacting your local Child and Family Services Authority office listed in the back of this booklet for a listing of day care centres, or by talking to friends and neighbours about their experiences with day care.
3. Visit the centres you think are the most promising. Plan to visit each centre for at least one hour. Use the checklist included in this brochure as a guide when you tour and observe the program. Note any questions and arrange a time to talk with the caregivers and/or the Program Director. If possible, visit on more than one occasion to see what is happening at different times of the day.

Checklist for Parents

Along with the Parent Checklist form, here are extra points to look for:

1. Day Care Centre Staff

Look for day care staff who:

- Are warm, affectionate and enjoy being with children.
- Understand how children grow and develop. For example, the different capabilities of a two-year old compared to a five-year old.
- Encourage children to do certain things by themselves, offering assistance only if necessary. For example getting a drink of water, washing their hands, serving their own food at meals and snacks and dressing themselves.
- Use praise and attention to encourage positive behaviour and guide children's behaviour in a gentle and positive manner.
- Avoid conflicts between children by listening and watching carefully so they can step in and manage the situation before it escalates.
- Are patient when unexpected incidents occur (such as spills and toileting accidents).
- Use a pleasant tone of voice, talk often with the children (including infants and toddlers), and speak to children at their level by kneeling or bending over.

- Are aware of everything that is happening in a play room.
- Are easy to talk to and work with.

Look to see that there are enough staff working directly with the children (primary staff). The Alberta Day Care Regulation sets the following standards:

- Children under 13 months of age require one primary staff member for every three children.
- Children 13-18 months old require one primary staff member for every four children.
- Children 19-35 months require one primary staff for every six children.
- Children 3 years or over and under 4½ years require one primary staff member for every eight children.
- Children over 4½ years require one primary staff member for every 10 children.

Ask what training the staff have. Look to see if:

- The person responsible for the day-to-day operation of the day care centre (the program director) is certified at Level 3. This means they have completed a two year Early Childhood Diploma.
- At least one out of four primary staff have a Level 2 certificate. This means they have completed a one year certificate in early childhood education.

- All other primary staff are certified at Level 1. This means they have completed 50 hours of early childhood education (or equivalent).
- If any staff do not have the required training, look for Level 1, 2 and 3 exemption approval letters which means they are taking the courses needed for their position.
- An alternate program director certified at Level 2 is available whenever the program director is absent from the day care centre.

2. Program of Daily Activities

Look for:

- Daily routines that are flexible enough to handle children's individual needs. For example, children who need less sleep should be provided with activities while other children rest.
- A balance between activities chosen by children and those planned by staff members.
- Children being involved in a variety of activities, such as housekeeping, dress up, water and sand play, block construction, books and puzzles.
- Children playing in small groups or on their own. Children who are busy and involved in what they are doing.
- Children involved in setting up activities or cleaning up afterwards. For example, helping set up for snacks or setting up and putting away play things.

- Activity areas that are organized so toys and materials are easy to find and easy to put away. Children should have easy access to toys and equipment.
- Art materials which are easy to use and stimulate creativity, such as crayons, paints and play dough.
- Children's work, drawings and craft projects displayed at children's eye level.
- Limited and selective use of television.

3. Care of Infants

Look for primary staff who:

- Allow infants to eat and sleep according to their own schedules.
- Consistently care for the same infants.
- Talk to infants while feeding, diapering or dressing.
- Comfort and soothe crying infants.
- Never leave infants in cribs once they are awake.
- Guide infants in activities such as playing with stacking toys.

Look at facilities that include:

- A clean, safe place for infants to crawl on the floor.
- A fresh smell and no odour of diapers.

- Easy access to safe toys on open shelves or in organized bins.
- A carpeted or soft pillowed area on which infants can rest.
- Safety devices such as safety straps on high chairs and change tables.

4. Day Care Facility

Indoors look for:

- A spacious, warm and inviting play area.
- A variety of sturdy, safe and easy-to-use equipment.
- Bathrooms that are conveniently located, clean, and simple for a child to use with easy-to-reach taps, toilets and paper towels.
- Comfortable cots, mats, or cribs with sheets and warm blankets.
- Space set up in a way that allows staff members to observe children at all times.
- A variety of activity areas: play or housekeeping centre, building and construction play centre, block and floor play area, water play area, sand play area, art area, active play area and quiet centre.

Outdoors look for:

- A fenced play area close to the centre.
- A protective surface (eg. sand, pea gravel) under and around all large equipment.
- A shaded area.
- Play area that is protected from animal contamination (eg. a covered sand area).
- Safe play equipment and materials for each age group.

5. Health and Safety

Look for:

- Safety devices to prevent accidents such as electrical outlet covers, gates near stairs, fire extinguishers and locks on cupboards containing medications, cleaning materials and other hazardous products.
- A posted plan for emergency evacuation and relocation. A record of fire drills.
- Medication administered only with written permission from parents.
- Nutritious meals and snacks served daily on a suitable schedule with the menus posted weekly.

- To prevent the spread of germs, do staff members wash their hands each time they change a diaper or help a child use the toilet? Are children being taught to wash hands after toileting?
- Are change tables disinfected after each diaper change?

6. Administration

Ask about fees and administrative policies:

- What is the monthly fee? Is advance payment of fees required?
- How much notice is given for fee increases?
- Are there other fees (e.g. registration, deposit, lessons)?
- What is the policy for payment of fees when children are sick, absent or on vacation?
- Are there fines if you are late picking up your child?
- How much notice is required to withdraw a child?
- What are the opening and closing times?
- Is the centre closed on certain holidays?

Ask about arrivals and departures:

- Are there sign-in procedures so that staff know which children are present at all times?

- What happens if someone new comes to pick up the child?

Ask about parent involvement:

- Are parents welcome to visit at any time?
- Are recent licensing reports available for parents to read?
- How are children introduced into care? Are parents able to stay with their child if they choose or have child attend gradually at first?
- Are parents required to provide lunches or snacks?
- Are there other opportunities for parent involvement (eg. parent advisory boards, parent volunteers etc.)?

Ask about health and safety:

- Do staff members have training in child care first aid?
Is at least one staff member with a valid first aid certificate on the premises at all times?
- Are parents notified immediately if their child is ill or injured?
- Is there a smoking ban on all areas of the day care centre including the playground?
- What are the supervision arrangements when children are being transported to and from school or on field trips?

Ask about policies on child guidance:

- What is the centre's policy on child guidance?
- Is corporal punishment prohibited?
- How are difficult behaviours handled?
- Ask if these policies are available in writing, and if copies can be provided.

Making Day Care Work For You

Keeping Track

Once you have chosen a day care centre and enrolled your child, it is important to monitor the arrangement to be sure it meets your expectations. Licensing staff are limited in the number of times they can visit centres. As parents, you have the primary responsibility for your child's care and because you visit the centre daily, you are in the best position to observe the care provided for your child.

The most important part of keeping track is communication, both with your child and with the staff at the centre. There are a number of things you can do to help keep things running smoothly:

- It's not easy to leave children in a new care situation. Children need time to feel comfortable in a new or different environment. Discuss the day care routine with your child — understanding the routine will help him or her feel more confident.
- When you drop off or pick up your child, take a few minutes to talk with the staff and see what is happening in the centre. It is a good sign if your child is busy playing when you arrive.
- Give staff all the information they need about your child, including all necessary registration and health information as well as daily information that may affect your child's day at the centre.
- Work with day care operators by becoming familiar with and respecting day care policies, by not taking sick children to the centre, and by taking advantage of opportunities for parental involvement.

If There is a Problem

You can usually avoid problems by carefully choosing a day care centre and talking with staff on a regular basis. However, if problems do arise, your first step should be an open discussion with the program director and the primary staff looking after your child. If the situation cannot be resolved through discussion, the best solution might be to change the group, the day care centre or the type of care.

If you believe that standards are not being met or that children are not being properly cared for, take action. List your concerns and call your local Child and Family Services Authority office listed in the back of this booklet. Every complaint is looked into by licensing staff. When submitted in writing, your complaint will receive a written response from the Licensing office. The response will indicate whether the complaint was verified and that appropriate action was taken.

If you suspect a child is being abused or neglected by the parent or guardian, the law says you must report this to the Child Abuse Hotline. Call 1-800-387-KIDS (5437). You can call any time, day or night. If you suspect a child is being abused by someone other than the parent or guardian, contact the police in your area.

To Sum Up...

This booklet was designed to help you select the day care centre that best meets the needs of your child and family. When day care works well, you can pursue your work, education or other interests confident that your child is being cared for in a safe and nurturing environment.

If you have any further questions about choosing a day care centre, or other child care, please contact your local Child and Family Services Authority office.

Alberta Children's Services Child and Family Services Authorities (CFSA)

Sun Country CFSA (Region 1)
333, 200-5 Ave. S.
Lethbridge, AB T1J 4L7
Ph: (403) 381-5543 Fax: (403) 381-5608

Southeast Alberta CFSA (Region 2)
303 Provincial Bldg. 346-3 St. S.E.
Medicine Hat, AB T1A 0G7
Ph: (403) 529-3753 Fax: (403) 528-5244

Windsong CFSA (Region 3)
P.O. Box 5147, 2nd Floor, 129-4 Ave. W.
High River, AB T1V 1M3
Ph: (403) 652-8360 Fax: (403) 652-8365

Calgary Rocky View CFSA (Region 4)
1011-6 Ave. S.W.
Calgary, AB T2P 0W1
Ph: (403) 297-8080 Fax: (403) 297-7214

Hearthstone CFSA (Region 5)
Box 484, 160-2nd Ave. S.
Three Hills, AB T0M 2A0
Ph: (403) 443-8535 Fax: (403) 443-8537

Diamond Willow CFSA (Region 6)
1st Red Deer Place, 504, 4911-51 St.
Red Deer, AB T4N 6V4
Ph: (403) 341-8642 Fax: (403) 341-8654

Ribstone CFSA (Region 7)
P.O. Box 450, 4903-50 Ave.
Killam, AB T0B 2L0
Ph: 1-877-385-7160 Fax: 1-877-385-7163

West Yellowhead CFSA (Region 8)
Box 247C Prov. Bldg., 4709-44 Ave.
Stony Plain, AB T7Z 1N4
Ph: (780) 968-6530 Fax: (780) 968-6539

Keystone CFSA (Region 9)
Box 7595, 5201-52 St.
Drayton Valley, AB T7A 1S7
Ph: (780) 621-4020 Fax: (780) 621-4023

Ma'Mowe Capital Region CFSA (Region 10)
1001, 10025-106 St.
Edmonton, AB T5J 1G4
Ph: (780) 422-3355 Fax: (780) 422-6864

Sakaw-Askiy (Woodlands) CFSA (Region 11)
201, 10004-107 S.
Westlock, AB T7P 2K8
Ph: (780) 349-5478 Fax: (780) 349-5603

Sakaigun Asky CFSA (Region 12)
5201-44 Street, P.O. Box 6590
Bonnyville, AB T9N 2H1
Ph: (780) 826-8058 Fax: (780) 826-7872

Child & Family Services Authority (Region 13)
3001 Prov. Bldg., 10320-99 St.
Grande Prairie, AB T8V 6J4
Ph: (780) 538-5148 Fax: (780) 538-5137

Child & Family Services Authority (Region 14)
Prov. Bldg, Bag 900-32, 3rd Floor, 9621-96 Ave.
Peace River, AB T8S 1T4
Ph: (780) 624-6363 Fax: (780) 624-6359

Neegan Awas'sak CFSA (Region 15)
101 Main St. South, 3rd Floor, Lakeland Centre
Slave Lake, AB T0G 2A0
Ph: (780) 849-7146 Fax: (780) 849-7148

Awasak CFSA (Region 16)
Provincial Bldg., 5th Floor, 9915 Franklin Ave.
Fort McMurray, AB T9H 2K4
Ph: (780) 743-7461 Fax: (780) 743-7474

Silver Birch CFSA (Region 17)
P.O. Box 749
High Level, AB T0H 1Z0
Ph: (780) 926-4370 Fax: (780) 926-5263

Metis Settlements CFSA (Region 18)
3rd. Floor, 10525-170 St.
Edmonton, AB T5P 4W2
Ph: (780) 415-0181 Fax: (780) 415-0177

To be connected toll-free, dial 310-0000