

CHOOSING INFANT CARE: HOW TO MAKE A TOUGH DECISION EASIER

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You've put it off for as long as you could. After two months of parental leave it's almost time to return to work, and you still haven't figured out what to do about child care!

It's perfectly understandable. Nothing can compare to the rapture of becoming a new parent or convey how deeply and immediately it changes your whole concept of what's important. And, the idea of choosing someone else to care for your child becomes positively terrifying.

These feelings are reasonable and normal. Hormonal overflow, lack of sleep, and general anxiety about your adequacy as a mother can further paralyze your rational thought processes.

But, you have to get going. Making the difficult decisions is what parenting is all about. So, take the first step in

choosing child care by giving yourself permission to think about it; to move beyond your panic and take action.

Your infant care decision is one of the first ways you, as a parent, begin representing your child's best interests through your actions. Once you make up your mind, you increase your confidence about how you and your child are going to relate to the world beyond the bubble of motherhood.

Thinking about child care starts with looking inside yourself. What will bring you the most comfort when you return to employment? No matter where your infant care is located, the most important thing is that you trust the person who will be responsible for your child. To get a handle on your own feelings, it helps to take a close look at the approaches others have used to choose a provider. Click on the resources links at the end of this article to get information on what to look for and what questions to ask. The more information you collect, the more confident you'll feel about the decision you make.



With infant care, the choices are, in order of their likely availability: your home, another person's home, or a center-based infant/ toddler program. No matter where your care is located, a few basics to look for include:

- **Stability:** Your baby should not have a succession of caregivers.
- **Enthusiasm:** The caregiver should be warm, loving and happy to be caring for your infant.
- **Safety:** CPR certification and knowledge of first aid are a must, at the very least.
- **Good communication:** The provider should be able to talk openly with you about all matters relating to the baby's care and report daily on feeding, sleep and regularity.

Keep in mind, that even if all of the above seem in place, you should never enter any child care arrangement without reference checks.

There are distinct advantages and disadvantages to each type of care; but access, availability and cost will most likely dictate your choices. Here's a brief rundown:

Infant care center.

Under 10% of all licensed infant care is provided in centers, and most parents are worried about a possible institutional atmosphere. But one advantage of group programs is that your baby will be in a place where there are other parents and other caregivers to observe and monitor what's going on every day.

An open-door policy is a must with any center program. The caregiver should not be responsible for more than two or three other infants, even if the state's licensing standard permits more. The infant rooms must be very clean, and the staff should have excellent sanitation practices. Low staff turn-over and a warm and friendly atmosphere are a must.

In-home care.

Care in your own home is the preferred alternative for most parents. The baby doesn't have to be bundled up and shuttled around, and neither of you has to adjust to new surroundings and a lot of new people.

The major down-side to in-home care is that there is no one with the provider and the baby, and there is no way for you to know what they really did all day. You'll need to spend some up-



front time demonstrating your basic routine to the nanny, so she can know what you expect. See how well she follows that routine while you are both together in the home. If you work well together, it's likely she'll do just fine on her own.

Care in someone else's home.

The most common location for infant/toddler care is in another person's home. As with the other options, your level of comfort with the provider is key. Group size should be very small - no more than three or four babies total. And as with centers, you will want to know the other parents and compare notes on the quality of care. Like centers, home-based providers should keep records on your baby's day and report to you regularly.

No matter what form of child care you choose, don't expect it to be cheap. The wage of the child care provider is spread among the number of children in her care. If the wage is \$10 an hour, the annual cost (without benefits) will be at least \$20,000 for in-home care down to about \$7200 for center or family child care. As a result, for many parents, the only economically feasible form of child care is from a relative who naturally adores your baby and isn't looking for a paycheck. Even family members, however, should be CPR-certified.



Of course, your child's well-being and your own peace-of-mind are worth a few tradeoffs, like giving up new clothes, nice haircuts, and that big trip to Disney World. You can also try to stretch your family leave, your spouse's leave, and the grandparents' goodwill to provide infant care at home for as long as you can. Then spread your wings as a decisive and action-oriented parent and find the solution where you can confidently say, "This is working for me and my child."

