

Finding the right type of childcare to suit you and your child is crucial, especially when there is so much to consider. There will be different options available in every area, so give yourself plenty of time to research them.

Use **DISC Devon's family information service** to draw up a list of all registered childcare in your area. You can print off a list from www.devon.gov.uk/disc or call **0845 155 1013** and an adviser will send you a list through the post.

Types of registered childcare

Childminders look after your child and other children, usually in the childminder's home.

Nannies and **home childcarers** are employed by you to provide care for children, usually in the child's home. These types of carers can register on the Ofsted voluntary register.

Day nurseries provide care and education for children between six weeks and five years old. Many also offer out of school care for five to eleven year olds.

Nursery schools and **classes** provide early education and childcare for three to five year olds, some will take children from two and a half.

Pre-schools and **playgroups** provide care and most offer early education for children between two and five years old.

Out of school activities are services which may be based on school sites, youth clubs, community centres or nurseries.

Some schools organise childcare, others work with local voluntary groups, private providers and childminders. You can choose a combination of breakfast clubs, after-school clubs and holiday play schemes which run outside of term time.

Tips for choosing and arranging childcare

1. Don't leave it until the last minute. Even if you're not yet ready for childcare, give yourself plenty of time. If a place is popular, expect long waiting lists, up to six months or more. Interviewing and hiring a nanny or home childcarer can take months.
2. Make a note of your basic requirements, such as: opening hours, costs and location, and make those the first questions you ask when you phone around.
3. Think about your child's age and personality, particularly for small babies and children under two who need a close one-on-one relationship. You know your child best, so use your gut instinct too.
4. Aim to visit at least two or three places to meet the carer and compare what's on offer. Make a formal appointment and where possible (for instance, at nurseries) drop in randomly.
5. Take a list of prepared questions.
6. If playgroups or nurseries can't offer you care five days a week, think about combining care, for example nursery for two days and childminder for three days.
7. Check references. Most carers, including nurseries and pre-schools will be happy to give you names of other parents to speak to about their work.
8. Go back for a second or third look once you've narrowed down your choices. Some carers will agree to a trial run before a formal agreement.

9. Get everything in writing once a decision has been made. Nurseries and childminders will ask you to sign a contract or letter outlining details such as costs, rules and hours. Read it carefully before signing. You will need to provide contracts for home childcarers and nannies.

What to look for and questions to ask

Staff What training and experience does the carer or team have? What is staff turnover like? Are all staff CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) checked? What checks are carried out when appointing staff?

Environment Is it secure? Does it feel nurturing? Are there pets? Is it non-smoking? Is there enough space? Is there secure outside space? If not, where will children play in fresh air?

Diet What's on the menu? Is there fresh fruit and veg? Is there access to water when children want it? Do they cater for special diets?

Supervision Who supervises and how? What is the staff to child ratio?

Emotional care What are the routines? How is difficult behaviour dealt with? Are staff warm, do they join in and show affection? There should be a written policy which you can see.

Equipment Is it creative, varied, plentiful and of a high standard? Do displays show different cultures positively? What physical activities do they do?

Health Are the toilets and basins clean and child-sized? Are there facilities for potty training and baby changing? Where and how are meals prepared?

Safety What happens in the case of an emergency or accident? What safety procedures do they have in place?

Parent feedback How are parents consulted? How are parents involved? How are complaints dealt with? Are there references from other parents available?

Inspections Is there a copy of the latest Ofsted inspection report? When is the next inspection due? You can see Ofsted reports at www.ofsted.gov.uk Childcare run by a school will be included on that school's Ofsted report.

Ask about all your needs and expectations. And remember to ask about things like: your specific working hours, time-keeping, baby-sitting and the policy on late pick-ups.

Contracts

If you're signing your contract should include:

- the retainer fee or deposit to secure your child's place
- the amount you pay and what it covers
- the hours and days your child will attend
- what you pay if your child or the carer is sick.

If you're hiring a childcarer your contract should include:

- a job description and hours of work
- salary and agreed method of payment
- length of employment and notice period
- details of sick and holiday pay, and expenses
- any personal additions such as limiting TV watching or no sugary treats.

For more contract information call the **National Childminding Association** (NCMA) on **0800 169 4486** or visit www.ncma.org.uk

If you're worried about any aspect of child safety or child protection you should raise your concerns with the childcare provider. If you're still concerned you should then contact Ofsted, who will investigate, on **08456 404040** or visit www.ofsted.gov.uk