

CHILD CARE

is a

FAMILY ISSUE

Written by Jan Barrett for the
Community Child Care Association of
Victoria on behalf of the

**Victorian
Women Lawyers
Association**

A guide to assessing, selecting, using and
evaluating child care options for families.

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These Checklists are for you to remove and/or photocopy. You can also download these from the VWL website: www.vwl.asn.au

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INTRODUCTION

A major trend in the 1980s and 1990s has been the increased workforce participation of women.

Currently, 59% of women in Australia with dependent children below the age of 14 are in the labour force.

The majority of these women work part time – a trend that has increased over the past two years.

In response to this, the Australian community and different levels of Government have worked together to develop a comprehensive and diverse system of child care provision to meet the needs of Australian families.

The current environment of rising child care costs, changing work patterns and an increasing range of child care options can create a myriad of dilemmas as parents endeavour to balance work and family responsibilities.

One of these is making the right choice of child care for our child.

The success of this choice largely depends on the work put in to making the decision.

It is estimated that a child can spend up to 20,000 hours in child care up to the age of twelve – excluding hours attending school! It stands to reason therefore that adequate time be put in to making this decision.

We now have an increased understanding of the importance of development in early childhood and the need for school aged children to be provided with quality recreational and educational programs to meet their social, emotional, physical and intellectual needs outside school hours.

Equally important for parents is to choose care that meets their needs as individuals, as a family and as participants in the workforce.

The legal profession, also, has had a significant and steady increase of women taking up full and part time positions of employment – as solicitors, barristers, judges and non professional staff working in law firms.

In recognition of this, the Victorian Women Lawyers Association has produced this Child Care Information Kit. It aims to provide practical assistance and a step by step guide for parents working in the legal profession when selecting, accessing, using and assessing a suitable child care service to meet their work and family needs.

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The kit has been designed to enable you to work through these processes:

- Assess your child, family and employment needs
- Identify the range of child care options available and choosing the best option(s) to meet those needs
- Select the right service available
- Make it work for your family
- Follow up resources for you to use

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CHAPTER ONE

ASSESS YOUR CHILD, FAMILY AND EMPLOYMENT NEEDS

Before even beginning to investigate the child care options available, it is useful to take time to carefully consider your family and employment situation. You may be a single or two-parent family with or without an extended family network. You may be an employee or a partner in a firm, an in-house counsel, an associate to a judge, a registrar in a court or a sole practitioner.

Having a clear understanding of the particular needs of your child, family and workplace will assist you in making a successful and informed child care choice.

1. Child care is a family issue

Women have been increasing their participation in the workforce steadily over the past thirty years. However, studies show that a significant proportion of household and family management responsibilities are still being taken on by women rather than being shared equitably within the family.* In the legal profession, the struggle is often more difficult because of the hours worked.

This is particularly true in the case of child care. A recent Study by the ACTU identified that mothers more often select the care, transport their children to and from care, pay the costs and make all the child care arrangements including taking time off work when the children are sick.

There is a risk that this inequitable balance could create unwanted and unproductive family and workplace tensions*. There is an increasing recognition amongst fathers that they want a greater role in sharing the parental responsibilities. A positive work and family environment can be created if shared family decision making occurs on such issues as:

- equitable workplace participation of parents
- joint decision making in the choice of child care
- shared responsibility in the costs of care
- equitable distribution of responsibilities such as transport, care for sick children, communication with carers and participation in any activities associated with care arrangements (such as working bees, fund raising events etc).

Ensuring that such discussions take place before any concrete decisions are made will help integrate child care into your work and family life.

* Office of the Status of Women "Working Families: Sharing the Load Program", Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Commonwealth of Australia, 1994.

2. Consider future plans for your family

Taking into account the short and long term goals of your family will also impact on your choice of care.

Creating opportunities for family discussions around the following issues will assist you in selecting appropriate care arrangements:

- career plans /goals of each parent
- consideration of type and location of future or current schools
- possible workplace changes/moving of residence/travel/promotion
- what size family you plan to have.

3. Take into account your family lifestyle and commitments

It is important to ensure that any child care arrangements will blend with your family lifestyle:

- Will the type of care reflect the values that are important to your family? (eg community involvement, homelike atmosphere, educational achievement, religious beliefs, etc).
- Are there regular social or family commitments that must be worked around? (eg visits to elderly parents, sporting/leisure activities, ballet classes etc).
- Will there be time for each parent to pursue individual interests?
- Will the care enhance and strengthen your overall functioning as a family?

4. Assess your work commitments

Having a clear and realistic understanding within the family of the expectations of your work/study commitments is an essential ingredient when making your choice of child care:

- What hours weekly are you involved in work?
- What are your travelling arrangements? How will they fit in with transport to and from child care?
- Will you be required to work weekends/week nights? How often will this occur?
e.g. only on a big trial or contract
- How "family friendly" is your workplace? What are the policies on flexitime, care for sick children, family emergencies, family leave arrangements etc?
- How stable is your employment? Are there possible changes that could affect the location of or type of care you may choose?
- How will your work commitments enable you to participate equitably in the child care responsibilities?

5. Clarify the Finances

Child care costs are rapidly increasing. The cost of care can sometimes even exceed the cost of private schooling. It is important to find out the fees and your entitlements to government assistance of any type of care you may be considering. (How to do this is discussed in Section 5 and Appendix 1.) There is often a tendency to see child care costs as needing to be justified by the woman's salary. However, child care is a family issue and its costs should be justified on a family basis.

6. Understand your child as an individual

The ages between 0 – 12 represent the fastest development period within the human lifespan. The early childhood years are seen to be of particular significance in a person's overall development.

Whilst each child is unique in his/her development, it is useful to recognise some of the key developmental milestones that children reach in their early years and how this may impact on the needs of children in a care setting. There are many publications that provide an overview of children's development that you can access in libraries and book shops. One publication that is written specifically for parents is Woolfson, Richard "A Parents Guide to Child Psychology" Faber & Faber, London, 1989.

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CHAPTER TWO

WHAT OPTIONS ARE AVAILABLE

This chapter is designed to assist you to select the type of child care setting that would best meet all your family's needs that you have been assessing in Chapter One. There are many options available – so it may be useful to eliminate those not suitable as you read through each one.

In general there are two main types of care arrangements:

INFORMAL CARE

Informal care is still by far the largest type of child care used by Australian families. It is defined by the childrens services sector as care that includes informal arrangements made by families such as private home based care with relatives, nannies/babysitters, neighbours and friends.

The main features of informal care are:

- It is home based
- The family often knows the carer
- There is not always a charge or fee
- Care Providers are non qualified and unlicensed.

Informal care can range from parents making casual arrangements with friends or relatives to arrangements such as using nannies who can be found either through Nanny Agencies or advertising. Informal care also includes shared care – where two or more families employ a person to provide care for children in one of the homes and share the cost. In some states the person providing the care must be licensed.

Playgroups are sometimes formed by parents to provide companionship and fun for their children and social contact for themselves. They meet on a rotating basis in homes or regularly in halls and share the responsibility of providing care and for the program.

Advantages of informal care:

- Care can be provided in the child's own home
- Caring for sick children is not a major issue
- Carers are known and trusted by families – often an extension of the family network
- Cost can be negotiated
- Families are eligible for the cash rebate if carer is registered. (See Appendix 1).

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Disadvantages of Informal care

- Care may not be as reliable, particularly if it is unpaid
- It may be less likely to be child care/ education and more likely to be child minding.
- It may not provide for social interaction with peers
- There are no quality control checks required for registration as a carer.

Nannies and other carers must be registered with the state government in order for families to receive the cash rebate.

A Word on Nannies

Employment of nannies is an option which is often considered by professionals such as lawyers.

There are now a range of Nanny Agencies specialising in providing nannies for professional families. As with all forms of informal child care it is possible to obtain high quality care providers within the nanny profession. However, the position of nanny care is still regarded as informal care by all levels of Government and the early childhood profession.

The following points may assist in further understanding the nature of nanny care and the issues that need to be taken into account when considering nanny care as an option.

- There is a short TAFE Nanny qualification that is a pre-service training course for prospective employees in this industry. This qualification does not meet the State Government Regulations standard required for “qualified staff” in any formal children’s service. (“Qualified Staff” as per the 1998 Children’s Services Regulations require a qualification equal to a two (2) year full time, or part time equivalent, post secondary early childhood qualification.) Many nannies do have qualifications that would meet the “qualified staff” standard, however, this is in no way required or checked on by Local, State or Commonwealth Government bodies.
- There are no regulations or quality assessment standards in place for any informal care – including nanny care. This means that even a service offered by high quality agencies using qualified staff is not subject to the normal standards and regulations provided in formal care. Examples of these requirements include police checks, health, hygiene and safety, the children’s program, staff qualifications, child/staff ratio, and defined benchmarks for quality interactions with children and parents.
- Whether parents choose to use Nanny Agencies, the Nanny Referral Service operated by the Law Institute of Victoria (phone 03 9607 9311) or their own private arrangements, there will be additional costs incurred that vary according to the particular employment agreement reached.

These may include such things as Agency fees, meal/travel allowances, insurance and employment on-costs, such as superannuation, long service leave and WorkCover. Employment on-costs alone add approximately 30% to the overall wage costs.

- It is important to clarify who the employer is. If the family is the employer (rather than an Agency) it should be thoroughly aware of its responsibilities as an employer under the Industrial Relations, Equal Opportunity, Occupational Health and Safety, and other relevant Acts.

FORMAL CARE

The term Formal Care is used to describe a range of developmentally appropriate programs for children 0 – 12 years. These services include centre-based care, occasional care, and school-aged care, preschool (often referred to as kindergarten) and home based care, also known as Family Day Care.

The following information will give you an overview of the different types of formal care available and how they operate.

For more detailed information on fees, structures, hours of operation and government assistance you can ring the Child Care Access Hotline phone 1800 670 305 and refer also to Appendix 1.

1. Centre based care

Centre based care is run from purpose built or renovated premises designed for children's needs. It provides care on a full or part time basis for children from birth to school age. It takes many different forms and is often referred to under different names.

Different Types of Centre Based Care

1A Long Day Care Centres

These are also known as creches, day nurseries, and neighbourhood houses or parents co-operatives. These centres usually operate between eight and twelve hours a day, five days per week and for at least 48 weeks per year. Some centres will operate seven days per week.

Centres usually provide child care on a regular, full time or part time basis. They must be licensed with the State Government and meet all legislative requirements including licence applications, record keeping, provision of information to parents, staffing, children's program planning, health and welfare of children, and building and facilities.

The Victorian Regulations changed in 1998 and are now covered under the Children's Services Regulations and Children's Services Act, 1998. A copy of these are available from Information Victoria at 356 Collins Street, Melbourne.

In Victoria, Child care centres must employ a ratio of 1 staff for every 5 children under three and one staff for every 15 children over three. There must be a minimum number of two staff on duty at all times, one of whom must be trained in First Aid. There are no specific regulations for the care of babies. Within this a proportion of staff must hold a suitable child care qualification. (see previous section).

- Some centres may offer occasional care, emergency care and out of school hours care on the same site.
- All long day care child care centres in receipt of child care assistance must be accredited under the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System. (See appendix 2).

(This is a system of ensuring centres meet a certain standard of quality in their staff/child/parent interactions; the children's program; nutrition, health and safety; and management and administration).

- Centres may operate as stand alone services or may provide care in a multi – service environment such as a preschool or a maternal and child health service.
- Child care centres primarily operate for children of parents working, training, studying or seeking work.
- A long day care centre can be community owned and managed, managed by private proprietors or be a work-based centre.
- Families using registered long day care centres are eligible for Child care Assistance and the Child Care Cash Rebate.

Possible Advantages of Centre Based Long Day Care

- Care is subject to outside quality controls such as State Licensing and Accreditation.
- Children may benefit from attending a service that is purpose built
- There is a developmental program provided by qualified staff
- Parents transport their own children – they are not placed in other private cars
- Parents always know exactly where their child is
- There are always opportunities for children to relate socially with peers
- A centre can provide a resource and support base for parents

Possible Disadvantages of Centre Based Long Day Care

- Large numbers of children – can be impersonal
- May not be homelike
- Children may have to relate to a number of carers
- Increased likelihood of cross infection with childhood illnesses

Private Vs community owned long day care centres

You may have the opportunity to choose between privately operated and community owned services.

The key difference between them is that community owned services are non profit. Any profits are returned directly to improve the centre or reduce fees.

Privately owned services are businesses – any profits are returned to the owner.

The Accreditation System and State Regulations provide clear guidelines for both types of services. There may often appear to be little difference in the quality of care each service provides. However you may wish to take the following issues into account when making your decision:

- Community owned services may be less likely to introduce profit making measures such as employing junior staff, cutting food costs , or limiting other resources.
- Community owned services are part of the local community's infrastructure.
- You have varying degrees of input into the management of child care centres. In private centres you may have the opportunity to be part of a parent advisory group or accreditation sub-committee. In community owned centres however, you are also making the decisions about critical issues such as fee levels, the type of staff employed and centre policies and procedures.

1B Work based/employer sponsored child care

Where a company or group of companies, institution, hospital, university, or work centre develops child care facilities for their employees and/or students, it is called a work based centre.

Some centres, established by hospitals and manufacturing industries, have set up extended hours services to suit shift workers.

These centres are usually located close to the workplace and enable you to be close to your children. This eases the juggle of working hours, breast feeding and arranging lunch

time visits. It is also convenient in an emergency situation. Families faced with an option of selecting work placed child care may need to also consider the following:

- Travelling time for the children
- The care responsibility will largely rest with the parent whose workplace sponsors the care
- It may be more suitable for younger children but older children may benefit more by being part of a service located in their own neighbourhood, which then feeds into their local primary school.

Some centres also provide holiday programs and outside school hours services.

Alternatively, companies can reserve blocks of places in a centre close to work and advise employees of their availability.

Families using registered work based long day care centres are eligible for Child care Assistance and the Child Care Cash Rebate.

1C Occasional Care Centres

Occasional care is child care provided to families who require care on an 'irregular' basis or for short periods during the day. It is located in purpose built centres, neighbourhood centres or parent cooperatives. There is generally a limit on the number of hours per week. Fees are charged on an hourly basis.

These centres must also be licensed with the state government. Child care assistance is available to some occasional care services for up to twenty hours per week of non-work related care and families are eligible for the Cash Rebate. You will need to ask your service if it is eligible for child care assistance. Some long day care centres also provide occasional care.

1D Preschool services

Preschool services provide a care and educational program for children aged between three to five years. A child is eligible to attend a funded preschool program when the child turns four on or before April 30 in the year prior to them attending school. Preschool programs can be provided through a variety of services. They are mainly provided through preschools or kindergartens on a sessional basis and in long day care centres.

Many private schools now provide kindergarten and pre – prep programs with extended hours to suit the needs of working families.

Traditionally preschools were seen as providing the 'educational' program and child care centres as providing 'care' only. It has now been recognised that care and education are closely interlinked. In addition, preschools and child care centres are gradually moving closer together in structure. More preschools are now offering sessions on an extended hours basis to meet the needs of working families and many long day care centres are providing a special preschool program.

Preschools/kindergartens must also be licensed with the State Government.

Child care Assistance is available if preschools provide a service for a minimum of 8 hours per day and 48 weeks per year.

1E Out of School Hours Care (Before, After and School Vacation)

An out of school hours service is a centre based program that has been set up to cater for the needs of primary school aged children and their families before school, after school and during non teaching days and school holidays. The services are able to meet the recreational, social and developmental needs of the children as well as the family's requirements for care.

- Out of school hours care is usually community owned and managed. Services generally operate with regular hours before and after school and during vacation periods.
- They are usually located in or close to primary schools, community centres, neighbourhood houses halls and recreational centres. They are seldom located in purpose built facilities, although this is gradually changing.
- Before school care generally operates from early morning (depending on parent need), until the staff deliver the children to commence the school day.
- After school operates when school is finished for the day. Staff usually collect the children from a set location after school and escort them to the program.
- Vacation care is provided during the school holidays, ensuring the continuity of the program throughout the year for working parents.

Unlike centre based long day care, out of school hours services are not subject to either regulations or accreditation. There are National Standards developed in conjunction with all State and Territory Governments which guide services on matters concerning facilities, staffing, administration, programming and health and safety. An Accreditation System is currently being investigated for out of school hours care by the National Out of School Hours Association.

Families using registered out of school hours services are eligible for Childcare Assistance and the Child Care Cash Rebate.

Possible Advantages of Centre based Out of School Hours Care

- Provides a dedicated school aged recreational program.
- Located adjacent to/within the school environment.
- Parents always know where their children are.
- There are always opportunities for children to have social interaction with peers.
- The centre can provide a resource and support base for parents.
- Strong links with the school can be developed.

Possible disadvantages of Centre based Out of School Hours Care

- Shared facilities – no dedicated space for program
- Large numbers of children – less personal
- Varying standard – limited formal external quality controls (National Standards are yet to be fully implemented)
- Large age range of children (5 – 12.)

2. Home Based Care – Family Day Care

Family Day Care provides care and developmental activities in the homes of registered home based child care workers who are recruited and approved by a coordination unit.

The objective of Family Day Care is to provide care for up to four children in a stimulating home like atmosphere, with direct input from parents about the needs and the care of their children.

Home based child care workers can care for up to four preschool children including their own children

- Family Day Care schemes are administered and supported by a central coordination unit operated by local municipal councils.
- Family day care provides flexible child care according to family needs, for children between the ages of 0 – 12 years.
- Family Day Care is ideally structured to suit the needs of many workers and also offers respite, emergency care, sick care and care for special needs groups.
- Family day care schemes may provide care 24 hours per day, 52 weeks of the year .

As with out of school hours services, Family Day Care is not at this stage subject to either Regulations or Accreditation. There are quality protocols and National Standards in place developed by the National Family Day Care in conjunction with the State and Territory governments. An Accreditation System is currently being investigated for Family Day Care. Childcare assistance and the cash rebate are available to users of Family Day Care.

Families often choose home based care as an alternative to centre based care for their children for the following reasons:

- They prefer a home setting rather than a purpose built centre for their children;
- There are only a few children being cared for at any one time;
- There is usually only one consistent carer for the children become familiar with;
- Hours are often more flexible;
- Fees are usually less than in centre based care;
- Siblings can be together – from babies to school aged;

Some considerations to take into account when making a decision include:

- Will there be enough opportunities for social interaction for older children with their peer group;
- Are there consistent routines in place – particularly for younger children;
- What are the transport arrangements for your children whilst in home based care;
- Are there school aged children being cared for as well? (National Standards recommend a total of seven children per Care Provider including school aged children).

SELECTING THE TYPE OF CARE FOR YOUR CHILD

These first two chapters provided you with the opportunity to assess your particular needs and then match them to the type of care you think suitable to meet these needs. It is important that this process is opened up for family discussion. You need to consider the pros and cons of each service type as it relates to your individual child's needs, family plans and lifestyle, your work commitments etc.

It may be that a service type is easily identified. On the other hand, you may need more time to consider your options. The following Chapter should assist in this process.

CHAPTER THREE

SELECTING THE BEST CHILD CARE FOR YOUR CHILD

This Chapter aims to assisting you in:

- Locating services in your area.
- Making telephone contact with them.
- Shortlisting and visiting a range of formal services armed with key questions and checklists to narrow your selection down to only a few.
- Making a summary and finally a decision.

Whether you have decided on an informal or formal care option –the processes discussed in this Chapter will be applicable. As this is another critical step in choosing care for your child – it is important to go through this process as a family. One person may pick up something that another doesn't – and comparing notes after the visit is invaluable.

1. Locate services in your area

Before you go any further in arranging care you'll want to explore the options available in your community (and workplace). Set aside a few hours to make some preliminary phone calls. You can ask a number of questions over the phone and not have to make a commitment to visit.

Get ready by gathering phone numbers:

- Child Care Access Hotline – Attachment A should provide you with information on all formal services in your area.
- Your Local Council's Human Services Department can provide you with a list of local formal services.
- Neighbourhood houses, Schools, Citizens Advice Bureaus, Maternal and Child Health Services, Community Health Centres can provide a wealth of local knowledge about services.
- Local papers often advertise nannies and carers.
- Friends and neighbours can often provide personal experience of services.

It is important that you work through the next steps with any carers/services even if they have been recommended by people you know and trust. This will give you an objective view which is an invaluable tool when making such an important decision.

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2. Make telephone contact with potential services/carers

When making phone calls – provide basic information such as the ages of your children and your work commitments.

Make notes for each service you speak to. It could be useful to write the questions out beforehand so you make the same inquiry each time. You can then record the answers against them.

Initial questions could cover:

- Are there any vacancies?
- What are the opening hours?
- Could any printed information and application forms be sent?
- Do you have time now to talk about the program or when is it convenient to call back?

Follow up questions could include:

- Is the centre licensed. If so with whom?
- What is the centre's accreditation status – 1, 2 or 3 years? Three years is considered best – see *Appendix 2 for more details on Accreditation.*
- How many children are being cared for at any one time?
- How are different age groups catered for?
- What staff are employed. What are their qualifications?
- What are the fees?
- How would you describe the program/activities?
- What is a typical schedule of a child's day?
- What meals are provided and who prepares them?
- Who would be with my child?
- Is it possible to arrange a visit when you can meet the people who would be having the most contact with your child?
- When is the best time for a visit?
- How long can I stay and observe by myself?
- Are parents able to visit unannounced through the day?

- Am I eligible for Childcare Assistance and the Child Care Rebate?
- What opportunities are there for parents to participate?
- Do you keep individual records of children's development?

Arrange for a family visit (approximately two hours), if your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. If not, thank the person for their time and move on through your list.

Sometimes there may not be a vacancy at a service/with a carer that you would like to visit. A busy centre or family day carer may discourage you from visiting until there is space. But if the care sounds excellent and it is convenient and possible to visit at this point, do so. Sometimes a space will open up when you are ready for a change anyway – or you may choose to arrange temporary care until there is a vacancy.

3. Visit the Service

The next step is to visit the service as arranged. This is a major part of the selection process and will need to be well planned.

The checklists at the end of the document have been provided to give you a clear-cut guide as to what to look for when you visit a service/carers. These checklists can also be downloaded from the VWL website (www.vwl.asn.au).

There are seven checklists you may find useful

- General checklist – Family Day Care
- General checklist – Centre based care
- Health and safety checklist (all services/carers)
- Children's program checklist (all services/carers)
- Behaviour guidance checklist (all services/carers)
- Communications checklist (all services/carers)
- Final Checklist (all services/carers).

The checklists have been designed for you to photocopy and use directly either when you are at the service or immediately afterwards. You can add/change any of the questions to suit your needs.

Each child care setting you look at will have its own special qualities and features. The questions in the checklist will give you specific items to consider, leaving you time to also take in the atmosphere of the program provided.

Take a look at the whole centre – both inside and out. Observe how staff interact with the children and each other. How easy is it for children to move around? Is the centre inviting and pleasant. Can children be comfortable and safe at the same time/?

If you feel apprehensive about taking checklists in and making notes while you visit you may want to explain what you are doing and why – perhaps when you arrange the visit. Explain that you are concerned to make the right decision, or that you need written notes to refer to later or share with your partner. You may want to make light of it and say you have a terrible memory! You may decide to learn the checklists thoroughly and fill them out when you leave. You can do what is best in each situation. A good centre/carer should welcome your concerns and interest. An informed parent is an asset to any child care situation.

Plan for sufficient time to speak with the centre director and the staff/carer and observe the children as they move through a number of routines and activities.

4. Summarising it

Having visited a number of services and carers it is now time to make the final decision.

Take some time as a family to sit down and think through what you have seen and heard.

Separate the real possibilities from all the options. You should be fairly certain about the type of care that best suits your child's needs – informal, centre based or home based.

Go through the checklists and look at all the information you have gathered as well as discussing which service felt best to you. Assess how each service rated. Did one particular service stand out and have mostly yes answers, and seem like it would meet your specific needs? If so, you may have found the right care for your child.

If there are two or more services that seem equal it may be useful to go through your notes again and perhaps make another visit to check up on critical issues.

Now match up the combination of your child's needs, your own as individuals and as a family and those of your workplace(s) and make a final decision. If you are uncertain or have additional questions continue looking.

CHAPTER FOUR

MAKING IT ALL WORK

PREPARING FOR CARE

1. Develop Family Support Network

Balancing work and family responsibilities is hard work at the best time. As has already been discussed, it is important that the child care responsibilities are equitably shared within the family.

However it is also critical that the family is supported as well. It is sensible to develop a support network of extended family, trusted friends and community contacts who can provide assistance in a range of situations. Having such a network in place not only supports the family in time of need, but gives the child care service assistance in ensuring the needs of your child are met at all times.

Families find it a great relief to know that in times of stress there are others who can take on the responsibilities of the care of your children – even if it is only for a short time or in fact never used.

Make a list of people who could give you back up support on occasions in:

- transporting your child to and from the child care service
- attending family occasions at the centre
- collecting and caring for your child if they are sick
- emergency situations
- providing medical information if required (your Family Doctor, Maternal and Child Health Nurse).

Let them know the child care arrangements you have made and ask if they are willing to be available for support or information if required in an emergency. Once you have a list of support people – make sure the centre is aware of who they are and in what capacity they may be called on.

Circulate the list to all involved.

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2. Budget for the Cost of Care

A number of references have been made to ensuring the cost of care is affordable for you and that child care expenditure forms part of your family budget.

As the time approaches it will be necessary to review this and decide:

- how fees will be paid and who will pay them
- how the cash rebate will be collected
- if you need to change your family budget further to allow for the cost of care.

3. Prepare Your Child and Family

A smooth transition from home to care is ideal for all concerned. If parents have a well thought out transition plan, they are far more likely to be relaxed and consequently so will the child.

Set aside time to make sure that the family can incorporate the new arrangements into their routine. Discuss and allocate responsibilities such as transporting, paying fees, liaising with care staff, packing and unpacking bags, reading communication notices etc.

Allow plenty of time for your child to adjust to the idea of attending care. Ensure that the child is aware of what is happening through casual conversations as well as visiting the service/carer prior to starting.

It is best if a number of casual visits can be made and that all family members can visit with the child at least once. This is also an ideal time to introduce your family support network to the centre.

USING THE SERVICE

1. Settling In

- As the time approaches discuss the first day of care with your child. Be clear exactly when the care will start, how long they will be staying and who will be collecting them from care.
- Provide staff with information on your child's interests, abilities and needs.
- Allow your child to develop a trusting relationship with the caregiver. Once this has been established, leave the child for short periods, and gradually extend the time until the child has virtually spent the whole day/session without you. Allow time for this process – even with primary school aged children. This will greatly assist their long-term adjustment to child care.

- If your child has a medical condition or special needs, develop an action plan with staff.
- Talk to your child about the child care service, and why your family needs it.
- Make a photo album of family members, pets or other special things that the child can take to the service.
- Allow the child to take their special toy, teddy or blanket.
- Develop a smooth routine that includes a consistent way to say goodbye in the morning and to greet your child at the end of the day.
- Make good-byes short but reassuring. Avoid sneaking out. This only creates confusion and mistrust.
- Accept your child's feelings of upset or anguish. This is part of a normal transition process and needs to be treated with acceptance, respect and confidence that the transition is going smoothly.
- Accept that you and other family members may be feeling anxious and upset. This is a big change in your family's routine and such feelings are normal and a healthy part of the transition process.
- Remember there is a lot to be gained for your child, the family and yourselves from using a quality child care service.

2. Bridging Care and Home

For your child, there will be a gap between home and care. You can assist your child to move smoothly between home and the care service through communication:

- Set aside a special time each day so that you can all share your day's experiences.
- Encourage your child to explore and enjoy their new environment and friends.
- Readjust work, home and family schedules in the first few weeks to spend more time with your child both at home and at the service.
- Make sure all family members visit the service regularly.
- Let staff know of any special home events or problems etc.
- Take time each day to talk to the staff about your child's day. Find out
 - what they ate, the main activities they pursued, if they slept
 - what they enjoyed most doing
 - if there is any activity that could be followed up at home or new friends to invite back home to play.

3. Maintaining Positive Family Involvement

As your child is being settled securely into care it is important to look at ways to ensure that the child care experience can blend smoothly with your work and family life.

You have introduced a major change in to the family routine and there will no doubt be issues to discuss as a family:

- Are the practical arrangements working out or could they be done differently?
- Are there family responsibilities that need shifting around?
- Are the arrangements satisfactorily enabling you to meet your family, work and personal needs?

Creating opportunities to have open discussions about such issues assists in creating positive family involvement in your child's care.

The best experience for the child occurs when families form active partnerships with the child care service/carers:

- Speaking daily to the carers about yourself and your child.
- Keep the caregiver informed about your child – their eating and sleeping patterns, interest and weekend activities.
- Provide positive feedback on his or her role in the care of your child.
- Familiarise yourselves with the service's policies and parent handbook ie. pay fees promptly, sign your children in and out, keep records up to date.
- Show interest in and offer to contribute to the children's program.
- Ensure siblings and your family network members visit the centre regularly.
- Take part in the service activities. They are usually planned to fit into parents busy schedules and provide opportunities for social interaction with other families using care. Community owned services provide opportunities for parents to take part in the management of the child care service. This gives you the chance to be part of major decisions affecting how the centre operates, develop friendships, contribute as well as expand your knowledge and skill base.
- Don't be afraid to make your own suggestions to increase parent involvement. Ideas such as setting up parent fundraising events, parent toy library, a babysitting club, family barbecues all contribute to a family integrated service and your child's overall well being.

4. Making Sure Your Child is Happy

Families are the best judges of whether their children are happy in care. As time passes you will be able to know whether you've made a good choice. Indications that your child is happy may include:

- Your child being eager to go to care.
- A busy child involved in activities when you arrive to collect them.
- Your child talking positively about something that happened or a new friend.
- Your child relating well to the caregiver.
- Your child bringing things home they have drawn or painted.
- Your child does not want to leave when it is time to go home.

There will be times when your child seems upset or reluctant to attend care. It is important that any problems are approached calmly and are dealt with positively. Your child's feelings need to be respected, their concerns heard and a clear positive solution worked out by the parent and communicated to the child. For example:

I understand you want to stay home with me today but I am going to work and you are going to child care. What I have decided to do is to give you some special time tonight when we get home. We could cook dinner together, have a bath together or play a special game. You choose – which would you like to do?

Such a response acknowledges and respects your child's feelings, comes up with a solution that is workable for the parent and gives your child real choices. It is important to come up with a solution that

- addresses your child's feelings
- does not disrupt your child's care routine, your work or family's commitments
- indicates that as a parent, you can take responsibility and deal with a problem without fuss

5. Dealing with Concerns

If you have any concerns it is important to speak with the Service Director or caregiver promptly. He or she should respond in a supportive and constructive manner. You need to be clear as to what you want done to remedy the situation. You should also be willing to consider the service's view of any problems or issues that may arise. The best way to deal with concerns is open, honest non-accusative communication and a willingness to work through to a practical solution for all concerned.

Most situations can be resolved positively and with minimum disruption.

It is also important to be alert and concerned if:

- your child is constantly unhappy to go to care
- your child continually shows emotional or physical signs of stress (fatigue, irritability, withdrawn, anxiety or ill health)
- there are sudden changes in their behaviour (clingy, bedwetting, nightmares, tantrums)
- your child strongly reacts to being left at the service
- your child talks about adult roles in ways that are beyond their capacity to understand – eg. talking about, violent, sexual or secretive behaviour.
- You are discouraged from dropping in at any time.

Take particular note of your child's behaviour and responses and if they are old enough – ask them what the problem is and what they would like changed.

Make a family appointment to see whoever is in charge without your child being present. Be clear and straight forward about your concerns. You should leave the appointment with practical strategies in place to deal with any problems.

If you have serious concerns about the well being of your child at the centre. Contact the Children's Services Officer at your Regional State Government Community Services Office. They will listen and investigate the situation if necessary.

If you still have serious concerns – remove your child from care.

Official Complaints

Many quality child care services will have policy and procedures set out for dealing with parent complaints. These should outline a clear process that can be followed in the event of a parent wishing to lodge an official complaint. If this is the case – then it would be best to follow these procedures if you wish to make an official complaint. If there are no policies or procedures in place the following procedures could be useful to follow. (It is strongly advised however, that you seek guidance from a Resource Organisation, such as Community Child Care Association, to assist you in identifying and following an appropriate procedure to effectively deal with the complaint.)

- As already discussed – speak with the direct caregiver first.
- If you are still dissatisfied – speak with the Director of the centre and request that some mutually acceptable procedures are put in place to deal with the complaint. These should be documented, agreed to and a time to evaluate the progress arranged.

- If this is still not satisfactory – you should write a letter to the Proprietor (Management Committee) of the Centre. This letter should clearly outline the complaint and request a process be established to resolve the issue.

Some complaints may be the result of the Centre contravening requirements under Local, State or Commonwealth requirements. The Child care Access Hotline (freecall 1800 670 305) and/or Community Child Care Association (phone 03 9486 3455) should be able to assist you in identifying if this is the case.

Local Government Contraventions

- These will relate to Local By-Laws such as Health and Building Regulations. Any complaint regarding contravention of Local By-Laws should be taken up directly with the Local Council.

State Government Contraventions

- Section 51 of the Children's Services Regulations (1998), deals with complaints. The service proprietor is expected to effectively deal with, and respond to, complaints relating to the children's service. If the complaint alleges that the health, safety or well being of any child has been compromised or there may have been a contravention of the Act or Regulations the proprietor must notify the Secretary, Department of Human Services within **48 hours**.

Commonwealth Government Contraventions

- A complaint may relate to the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (see Appendix 2). If so, parents can take the matter up directly with the National Accreditation Council (freecall 1800 655 545).
- A complaint may be about the parents entitlement to Childcare Assistance and/or the Child Care Rebate. This should be referred to Centrelink (phone 13 1524).
- All formal child care services funded by the Commonwealth Government sign Service Agreements that require them to operate in a certain manner. These Agreements relate to how the service is to legally operate and how it is accountable to the Government in order to be registered for Childcare Assistance and other funding purposes.

Further information regarding complaints of this nature should be directed to your local office of the Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services (phone 03 9285 888, freecall 1800 62 2220).

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6. Ensuring Quality Control

There are a number of external measures that assist in ensuring that your child receives quality care in formal child care services;

- Long Day Care Centres and Occasional Care Services are subject to State Regulations and the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS).
- Out of School Hours Services have National Standards
- Family Day Care services have Protocols that have been developed by the National Family Day Care Council
- Research projects are being undertaken in 1998 to develop a QIAS system for Family Day Care and Out of School Hours Services

As a parent you can ensure that your centre meets these required standards by

- Familiarising yourself with the QIAS system – see Appendix 2 Choosing Quality Care – Putting Children first. This will give you key indicators on quality care – no matter what type of care your child is placed in. If you wish to understand the QIAS system in more detail there are publications that give detail of the 52 Principles of the System and how they should be put into practice. Contact the National Accreditation Council (freecall 1800 655 545).
- Reviewing the Regulations or National Standards that relate to your centre. You can obtain copies from your Regional Department of Human Services or Information Victoria. This will give you guidelines on basic standards that should be followed.
- Join your service's management committee, QIAS committee or policy subcommittee. This way you can play a proactive role in assisting your service to improve the quality of care it provides.

SPECIAL CHILD CARE ARRANGEMENTS

From time to time, special situations may require you to need additional care services – such as extended hours, emergency care or care for your children if they are ill. If you followed the processes outlined in Chapter 3, you will have investigated what additional child care services your centre offers and you will also have a family support network to assist you in these special circumstances.

Your centre and local council may also be able to provide you with additional resources. For example, some Family Day Care Schemes provide care for sick children in the local community.

If a service is being responsive to the needs of their families, they may be able to provide additional care arrangements particularly if there are a number of families requesting similar assistance. It may be possible for you and other parents to approach the committee, operator or proprietor of your service with suggestions for additional services.

CONCLUSION

This booklet has provided you with assistance to identify your child care needs, select the best option and use the service to the best advantage.

There are also many organisations, resources and information that you can use to support you further in the provision of high quality child care.

We hope that the resources listed in the following chapter will be of assistance.

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CHAPTER FIVE

FAMILY SUPPORT ORGANISATIONS AND RESOURCES

Support, Resourcing, Training for Child Care Services

COMMUNITY CHILD CARE ASSOCIATION, VICTORIA

1/48 High Street, Northcote, 3070

Ph. 03 9486 3455

Fax 03 9486 3271

LADY GOWRIE CHILD CENTRE

36 Newry Street, North Carlton 3054

Ph. 03 9347 6388

Fax 03 9347 7567

MULTICULTURAL RESOURCE CENTRE

9 – 11 Stewart Street, Richmond 3121

Ph. 03 9428 4471

Fax 03 9420 0252

VICSEG (Victorian Cooperative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups)

569 Nicholson Street, North Carlton 3053

Ph. 03 9387 0177

Fax 03 9387 8653

PLAYWORKS

4 Duke Street, Prahran 3181

Ph. 03 9521 3300

Fax 03 95211303

TTY 03 95107413

KINDERGARTEN PARENTS VICTORIA

1/48 High Street, Northcote, 3070

Ph. 03 9489 3500

Fax 03 9486 4226

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Government Assistance

Advice on local Child Care Services, Fees, Government Assistance

Child Care Access Hotline Ph. 1800 670 305

TTY 1800 639 327

Information on State Licensing, Regulations, Child Care Provision, preschool services

Children's Services Officers at your Regional Office, Department of Human Services

Ph. 03 9616 8527 for details.

Information on planning of child care places, Commonwealth provision of child care

Contact Department of Health and Family Services, Children's Services Program

Ph. 03 9285 8888

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CHAPTER SIX - CHECKLISTS

Family Day Care General Checklist

Name of Provider

Address

Phone

Experience of provide

How long has this home been used for care?

Hours of operation

Weeks of operation

Fees

Days service is closed

How many children are being cared for

- | | | |
|--|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Is carer part of a local coordination unit, or | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Is it a privately operated (for profit) scheme? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Is the carer registered for Cash Rebate and Childcare Assistance purposes? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Can the carer provide care when children are ill? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Is there a first aid kit? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Has the carer first aid qualifications? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Is there emergency care/extended hours care available? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Is there a system for relief carers? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Are the accident/medical/emergency procedures adequate? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Are smoke detectors installed and working? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Is there a complaints procedure? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Are records kept on each child? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| What is the carers role within the home? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do any of the children cared for belong to the carer? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Are there additional school aged children cared for? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Is there outside support/training available? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Are they covered for public liability insurance? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Will children be transported from the home at all? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |

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Are these arrangements satisfactory? Yes No

Can the carer cater for any special needs the children may have? Yes No

Centre Based Care General Checklist (long day care, preschool, out of school hours care, occasional care)

Name of Service _____

Address _____

Phone _____

Length of operation _____

Hours of operation _____ *Weeks of operation* _____

Sessional care fees _____ *Days service is closed* _____

Number of places _____ *Child/staff ratio* _____

How many qualified staff? _____

What system is used for staff relief? _____

Is the centre community owned non profit? Yes No

Are parents represented on the management committee? Yes No

Is the centre a privately owned business? Yes No

Are there any opportunities for parents to become involved? Yes No

Is the centre registered for Cash Rebate and Childcare Assistance purposes? Yes No

Are there any support systems for the care of ill children? Yes No

Is there emergency care/extended hours care available? Yes No

Are the accident/medical/emergency procedures adequate? Yes No

Does the centre meet State Licensing requirements (0 – 5)? Yes No

Is the licence on display? Yes No

Does the centre meet National Standards (5 – 12)? Yes No

Is the centre's Accreditation Certificate on display (long day care)? Yes No

Is there a complaints procedure? Yes No

Are records kept on each child? Yes No

Is there outside support/training available? Yes No

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Are they covered for public liability insurance?

Yes

No

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Health and Safety Checklist

Does the service appear clean & hygienic Yes No

What food/drink is provided

hot lunch? Yes No

morning/afternoon tea? Yes No

special dietary needs catered for? Yes No

Are there regular eating routines? Yes No

Are nappies supplied? Yes No

Are milk formulas provided? Yes No

Are sunscreens provided? Yes No

Are sleep/ rest routines in place? Yes No

Is there flexibility within these? Yes No

Is there a separate sleep room for babies? Yes No

Is there a separate kindergarten program? Yes No

Are there illness and exclusion policies? Yes No

Is there space to isolate children who are unwell? Yes No

Are toys and equipment safe and well maintained? Yes No

Are fences and gates child proof? Yes No

Are there satisfactory staff hygiene practices ? Yes No

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The Children's Program Checklist

Are there good quality toys and equipment provided e.g. paint, fingerpaint, home corner, construction toys, blocks etc.?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Are songs, stories, fingerplays, music, books part of the daily program?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Can the children easily move around and find materials?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Are they busy and relaxed	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Would my child have a good time here?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Are the activities age appropriate?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Are children free to pursue their own interests?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Are the children learning balanced social roles?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Are problems handled with little upset?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Is there a war free policy – no guns etc?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Is there a daily and weekly developmental program on display?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Is there planned outdoor play every day?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Do the children go on excursions or have incursions?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Is the environment challenging?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Do the children receive enough of the individual interest and attention they need?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Are children able to relax and play quietly on their own in special quiet areas?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Can the centre cater for any special needs that children may have?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Are childrens questions answered easily?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>

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Behaviour Guidance Checklist

Do children respond easily and happily to each other?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Is there a Behaviour Guidance Policy in place ?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Are limits fair and clearly understood?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Are aggressive behaviours dealt with appropriately?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Are teasing, shouting, shaming avoided?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Is positive behaviour reinforcement used?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Is physical force used to guide children avoided at all times?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Are the language and culture of each child respected?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>

Communication Checklist

Do caregivers smile, look at and talk with individual children?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Are they often physically down at the children's level?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Do they call all children by name?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Are they affectionate, relaxed and do they laugh with the children?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Do they seem happy?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Is there communication in other language?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Do caregivers encourage creativity and independence?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Would my child fit in with the present group?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Do they treat children and each other with respect?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Are children appropriately cuddled and comforted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Are babies attended to when they cry?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Are parents welcome to drop in at any time?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Can they participate in the program?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Are there opportunities for regular feedback and discussions with staff?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Is there a written service policy provided to parent?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Who is able to collect my child?		

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Final Checklist

Is the centre/carer in an easy location? Yes No

Is it safe, comfortable and attractive? Yes No

Will it fit in with our family's needs and values? Yes No

Are there plenty of good, varied and challenging activities and equipment for fun and learning? Yes No

Do children and staff interact happily and communicate easily? Yes No

Is each child respected as an individual? Yes No

Does the place offer nutritious, tasty meals and snacks? Yes No

Is there sufficient indoor and outdoor space for a wide range of activities, either playing with other children or quietly alone? Yes No

Are our needs for a dependable caregiver and to value us as parents considered? Yes No

Can we afford the fees? Yes No

Will the care provided fit in with our work patterns? Yes No

Will it complement our family lifestyle and values? Yes No

Words I would use to describe the centre?

How would my child feel about this place?

How do I feel about it overall?

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