

Looking for childcare?

A Sure Start guide to help you make the right choice

Introduction

Know your childcare options and make an informed decision. This booklet contains information about childcare and early education choices, benefits and advice.

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Are you looking for childcare?

Childcare decisions can seem daunting and expensive. Sure Start has produced this booklet to help you make choices. Even if you're not yet ready to leave your child in childcare, it makes sense to start thinking about it now. There are plenty of options out there, but which one is right for you? How do you go about choosing and moving forward?

How childcare and early education can help you and your child

Nowadays there are so many different kinds of family set ups, all with a variety of needs and demands on their time and income. You'll need to work out which is the best arrangement for you – from a personal point of view as well as a financial one.

Benefits for you

- There are lots of different good quality childcare arrangements on offer which you can mix and match to suit your daily schedule, working hours, study or training. To help you make the right choice for you and your child, turn to page 8.
- Flexible ways of working give you the chance to fit in childcare and studying too (details, see page 21).
- There is also financial help from the Government to make childcare more affordable, regardless of whether you are working or not. See the 'Help with costs' section starting on page 58 for what's available and how to claim it.

Benefits for your child

- Good quality childcare and early education give your child a head start in primary school, because it supports better educational, emotional and social development.
- Good quality can be found in all kinds of settings – for example, those where: – some of the staff have a

recognised early years qualification; – the manager is a trained teacher; – trained teachers are among the staff; – adults having active and warm relationships with children; and – there are clear educational goals.

- Children with experience of good quality childcare and early education do better in KS1 national assessments in English and Mathematics at age 7.
- Children who attend a good quality setting are more likely to be more independent, better able to concentrate and more sociable at the start of primary school.
- Part-time attendance is just as good as full-time attendance.
- Regardless of the type of childcare you choose, what you do at home can make a real difference to your child's development. Along with good-quality childcare and early education, you can support your child's development by:
 - reading to them;
 - teaching songs and nursery rhymes;
 - playing with letters and numbers;
 - painting and drawing;
 - taking them to the library; and
 - creating opportunities for them to play with friends at home.

Visit www.surestart.gov.uk for more information about the benefits of high quality childcare

Affordable Childcare

Before you start looking, it's easy to think "Forget childcare, I can't afford it". Many people think that good quality childcare and early education comes with a hefty price tag and is only for the well-off. However, it's worth remembering that whatever your financial position, there are plenty of options. Most families are helped with the cost from the very start, and a growing number of employers provide childcare help (see page 16). There are benefits that, surprisingly, many working families in the UK don't claim because they just don't know about them or think they aren't eligible. Missing out on them can make a massive difference to your choices. For an essential list of what's on offer, whether you are entitled and how to claim, see page 20.

GET THE TAX CREDIT YOU'RE ENTITLED TO

Tax Credits Nine out of ten families are eligible for Tax Credits. The amount you receive depends on your circumstances. To find out how much you could get and claim online visit

www.inlandrevenue.gov.uk/taxcredits

Child Tax Credit (CTC) Worth over £32 weekly for one child and it goes up for more children. Families with income up to £58,000 (or £66,000 if there is at least one child under one year old) could be eligible for help depending on their circumstances. If you have a child with a disability you may receive extra help.

Working Tax Credit (WTC). This is a top-up to wages for people on low incomes and is available for working parents and disabled people in work. For full details of WTC see page 16.

Childcare Element of the Working Tax Credit. This is aimed at helping working parents cover childcare costs. You can claim up to 70p for every £1 you pay for registered or approved childcare, up to certain limits. See page 16 for full details of the Childcare Element of the Working Tax Credit (WTC).

Free part-time early education for all three and four-year-olds

All three and four-year-olds are entitled to free part-time early education which can mean a big saving for you. A free part-time place means your child is provided with two-and-a-half hours of early education a day, five days a week, 33 weeks a year. Available from the first nationally-prescribed term following your child's third birthday

These part-time places can be: in school nursery classes in a state or private nursery school - in day nurseries - in playgroups or pre-school - with childminders who are part of an approved Childminder Network. Contact your local Children's Information Service (CIS) via ChildcareLink on **0800 096 02 96** to find out how to claim your child's free early education.

For more info...Call the Inland Revenue and Tax Credit Helpline on 0845 300 3900. If you use a textphone the number is **0845 300 3909**. You can also apply online at www.inlandrevenue.gov.uk/taxcredits

Your choices

Each type of childcare has its pros and cons, and you'll need to work out what suits you and your family needs best, based on work hours, budgets, etc. But the first step is to find out what's available near you.

More and more services are providing more than just childcare – they support the whole community. Your local Children's Information Service (CIS) can tell you what's available – you'll find one in your area. They will hold up-to-date lists of all the various local childcare and early education services. Registered childcarers or places on the

lists will be regularly checked by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) so you can be sure of safety and standards (see page 14). As well as contact details, the CIS will provide you with useful information such as opening hours, age restrictions, parking facilities and costs.

For more info... Call ChildcareLink on **0800 096 02 96** for the telephone number of your local Children's Information Service or visit www.childcarelink.gov.uk

Childminders

The facts

- Registered childminders look after your child along with other children, usually in their own home.
- They are allowed to care for up to six children under the age of eight, including their own – but only three of them can be aged under five.
- Self-employed, they decide on working hours. Most are willing to work early mornings, evenings and weekends as well as part-time – perfect, say, for school drop off/collection, and holidays.
- All childminders are required to have completed a basic training course, including first aid, and most go on to do further training and professional development.

How can I be sure of good quality care?

Childminders must be registered and inspected by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, see page 50), who carry out regular checks on the home and childminder. What's more, all adults (16+) living and working in the childminder's home will be police and health checked. Not all have childcare qualifications. Once you've met and interviewed a childminder, you will get a feel for whether they are suitable for your children (see page 42 for what to look out for).

What will it cost me?

You will need to negotiate hours, terms and conditions with your childminder (see page 3). Rates vary from area to area and can cost you on average £2.50 an hour (£3 in London) per child. See page 60 for comparative costs.

Is it for me?

- I need flexible care because I work irregular hours which don't correspond to a normal 8am-6pm nursery day
- I want my child to be cared for in a family home
- I want my child to have one carer
- I have children of different ages and it's important they're cared for together
- I'm good at saying what I want
- Mixing with large groups of children isn't a priority right now

Questions to ask your childminder

How long have you been childminding?

What extra training have you done?

Why do you like this job?

How long do you intend to do it for?

What other children will be with my child, and how old are they?

Can I have the phone numbers of other parents you work for so I can follow up references?

Have you undertaken any quality assurance schemes?

Do you belong to a childminder network?

Do you charge for sick days?

Ask to see if all the rooms in the house are clean and tidy.

Where will your child sleep? Make sure it is quiet.

How do you spend the day and how do the other children's schedules fit in with my child? Find out simple things, such as when she or he does shopping/banking/chores.

Do you go out on day trips? Where to?

Do you have properly-fitted car seats?

What kind of meals and drinks do you give the children?

Do you keep a file about a child's progress?

Will you agree to a trial run (say a couple of mornings) to see how it's going to work out? Most childminders will agree to this.

Also remember...

Ask for the childcarer's up-to-date registration, public liability and first aid certificates.
Check all rooms and garden are insured, otherwise your child will be excluded from those areas.
Who is coming and going?
Ask how many other adults will be in the house.
Agree on feeding, learning, TV watching and discipline policies.
Any contract should cover hours, pay, sickness and holiday pay (see page 11).

Your childminder can provide free part-time early education if they are part of a childminder network.

For more info...Call Childcarelink on **0800 096 02 96** or www.childcarelink.gov.uk for your local Children's Information Service (CIS) who will have a list of childminders in your area
Or call the National Childminding Association on **0800 169 4486**
Or www.ncma.org.uk – for more information on childminder networks

NANNIES AND OTHER HOME-BASED CARERS

The facts

- Nannies and other home-based childcarers are employed by you to provide care for children, usually in your home.
- They will fit in with unusual working hours, and work part-time or even live in. Some may agree to do additional jobs around the house (cooking, tidying etc.).
- Shared nannies work for you and another family.
- Most nannies and some other home-based childcarers have a recognised childcare qualification or nursery nurse training, but this isn't compulsory.
- Thousands of parents are now entitled to financial support to help pay for childcarers if they are approved through the Childcare Approval Scheme – see page 14.

How can I be sure of good quality care?

Some nannies and home-based childcarers are not inspected by Ofsted. However, the reassuring news is that nannies and other home-based childcarers can apply to the new Childcare Approval Scheme (see page 14 for details) and will have to meet basic criteria before being approved.

WHAT WILL IT COST ME?

Wages range from £127 to £400 per week, depending on hours, their experience, where you live and whether they live in. You will also have to pay their tax and National Insurance contributions. Other costs include holiday and sick pay, mobile phone for emergencies and putting them on your car insurance if you want them to drive the family car.

Is it for me?

- I need someone to fit around my routine and lifestyle
- I want a big say in how my child is cared for – what they do, when they sleep etc.
- I've got children of different ages to find care for – this way they can be together and it's less expensive
- My child will be happier in his own home (and own bed, if I'm late home etc.)
- I need someone full time, as my child isn't at school
- I'm happy to take on the legal and financial responsibility
- I'm happy with the idea of someone else living with us (and have the space)

Questions to ask your nanny or home-based childcarer

- What qualifications or training do you have?
- Have you been approved through the Childcare Approval Scheme?
- What kind of experience do you have?
- Why do you enjoy the job?
- Why do you want this particular job?
- How would you organise my child's day? And help them achieve developmental goals?
- Will you keep a food and day diary?
- Where would you take my child out?
- How do you feel about early starts/late finishes?
- Can you babysit in the evenings?
- What's your policy on potty training, feeding, teaching right from wrong?

If living in:

How will you spend your days off? You need to be clear about boyfriends staying over, issues like smoking and use of telephone.

Au pairs

Au pairs are usually single young women (occasionally men) from a number of European countries. They come to the UK to study English, live with a family and help out in the home for a maximum of five hours a day. In exchange, they must have two days off, and be provided with a weekly allowance (around £50), meals and their own room. Au pairs are not registered or usually trained to work with children so are generally considered inappropriate to care for a young baby, but can be a good option when it comes to providing affordable after-school care.

Also remember...

Ask to see their first aid certificate (is it current?) and Childcare Approval Scheme letter.

Put everything in writing (hours, job description, length of employment, sick/holiday pay etc. See page 11).

You must take out employer's indemnity insurance in case of an accident.

If choosing a nanny, always use a reputable nanny agency and check references. Talk to at least two previous employers.

If your nanny lives in, you'll be expected to provide them with a room and food on top of their salary.

Find out more...

For details of the Childcare Approval Scheme see page 14 or visit www.childcareapprovalscheme.co.uk

Call the Working Families helpline on **0800 013 0313** or visit www.workingfamilies.org.uk

Call the National Childbirth Trust on **0870 444 8707** for local branches with a nanny share register

Call the Professional Association of Nursery Nurses (PANN) on **01322 372 337** for a Nanny Pack

Read the 'Need A Nanny' guide: www.surestart.gov.uk/ensuringquality/needananny

Day Nurseries**The facts**

- A day nursery provides care and education for children between the ages of six weeks and five years. (Many also offer out-of-school care for five-to-eleven year olds.)
- Day nurseries can be run by the council, the community, based in the work place or privately run.
- Opening times tend to coincide with a standard working day – 8am to 7pm on weekdays, 50 weeks of the year. You can send your child full or part-time.
- Your child should experience learning and development activities suitable for their age which are based on the Birth to Three Matters Framework and Foundation Stage (see 'Learning as they grow' page 12)

How can I be sure of good quality care?

Always use a registered day nursery to ensure they are regularly inspected by Ofsted (see page 14), but also to check that the free part-time early education is satisfactory. Children will be grouped together by age and looked after by carers according to specified staff/children ratios to ensure your child gets the attention they need (see page 6). The day nursery will have qualified staff and will usually take between 25 and 40 children.

WHAT WILL IT COST ME?

On average £197 (in London) and £148 (elsewhere) for a full-time week for children under two, but rates will vary across the country. Your local Children's Information Service will be able to give you up-to-date local costs.

Is it for me?

- I feel happy leaving my child in a place where there are qualified staff
- I need somewhere open virtually all year
- My hours fit in with their opening times
- I need to know that there will always be someone to look after my child – if one carer is sick, another can cover
- I have emergency backup – ill children can't attend day nursery
- I want my child to be around plenty of other children and involved in lots of activities
- I want my child to have access to different toys, equipment and stimulation

- I think my child is ready for new experiences

Questions to ask your day nursery

What is the ratio of carers to children? Remember the rules: for under twos, it's three children per carer; for two year olds, four children per carer and older children, eight children per carer.

What is the daily routine?

Where will my child eat/play/nap?

Ask a member of staff to walk you round, room by room.

Is it clean, light and big enough?

Are the children well supervised?

Do they look happy and purposeful?

Is there a lot going on?

Look for projects and drawings up on the walls. What about stimulating toys and books on show?

Will your child be taken off the premises? Ask for examples of where.

Are nutritious meals provided?

Will you keep a daily record of what they've done?

Do you offer school pick-ups and out-of-school care? Some nurseries will do this.

Are there penalties if you're late to pick up your child?

Also remember...

Be certain the day nursery has places for your child's age group. For example, some don't take children under two. Let them know the week days you want day care.

Find out whether the nursery operates a key carer system – whereby each child is assigned to a particular member of staff.

Go back for a second 'viewing'.

Take your child with you to see how they get on with other children, staff and in the surroundings.

For more info...Contact your local Children's Information Service (via ChildcareLink **0800 096 02 96**) for a list of local day nurseries

National Day Nurseries Association: call **0870 774 4244** or visit www.ndna.org.uk

Free part-time early education offer – see page 2

Tax Credits information – see page 16

Nursery schools and classes

The facts

- Nursery schools and nursery classes provide early education and childcare for children between three and five years old (some will take children from two-and-a-half).
- Some schools and classes are part of the state education system, others are run by private or voluntary sector organisations. They charge fees which vary across the country.
- Nursery schools are open during school hours, normally only in term time, usually 9am to 3:30pm for full or half-day sessions.
- Your child should experience learning and development activities suitable for their age which are based on the Birth to Three Framework and the Foundation Stage (see 'Learning as they grow' on page 12).
- Some may also offer out-of-school care before or after school during term time and in the school holidays.

How can I be sure of good quality care?

All nursery schools or classes are regularly inspected by Ofsted (see page 14), to check that the free part-time early education is satisfactory. The size of a school or class will vary, but one carer should be allocated to every 13 children, and the team will include qualified teachers and nursery assistants.

WHAT WILL IT COST ME?

It's free if part of the state education system (apart for meals and trips). Other nurseries are run by private and voluntary organisations and charge fees. Most offer free part-time early education places for eligible three and four-year-olds. See page 18 for an idea of costs.

Is it for me?

- It's important to me that my child mixes with similar-aged kids

- I'm close to a state nursery school (so it's free)
- My hours fit around opening and term times
- I like the fact that my child will be taught by qualified teachers
- I'm looking for continuity of care
- I need to know there will always be someone to look after my child – if one carer is sick, another can cover
- I want my child to have access to different toys, equipment and stimulation
- I think my child is ready for new experiences

Questions to ask the nursery school

Ask a member of staff to walk you around.

Are the rooms clean, light and big enough?

Do the children look happy and purposeful?

Are toys/books/furniture well kept?

Ask a member of staff to talk you through a day/session.

What kind of activities do you plan?

Are there suitable sleeping arrangements?

Are there opportunities for children to play outside?

How many children will be the same age as my child?

Are there any additional costs?

How can I get involved?

Where do they go (parks, swimming, for instance)?

How can I make sure my child is settling in well?

Will you keep a daily record of what they've done?

Are the children well supervised?

Also remember...

See the nursery school when a session is in full swing. That way you'll get to see the setting and atmosphere first hand.

Go back for a second viewing.

Take your child with you to see how they get on with other children, staff and in the surroundings.

Find out what sort of helpers the school employs and how much continuity of care there is. A rapid turnover of staff can be quite bewildering for small children.

Find out more...

Contact your Children's Information Service (CIS) via ChildcareLink freephone **0800 096 02 96** for a list of local nursery schools

National Day Nurseries Associations: **0870 774 4244** or visit www.ndna.org.uk

Forum for maintained nursery schools and Children's Centres:

www.early-education.org.uk/nsfnewhome.htm

PRE-SCHOOLS OR PLAYGROUPS

The facts

- Pre-schools or playgroups provide care and most also provide early education for children between three and five years old.
- A pre-school or playgroup is a group organised by the community or voluntary groups on a not-for-profit basis, often with help from parents.
- They offer sessions from two-and-a-half hours to four hours, during term time, either every day or on several days a week.
- Your child should experience learning and development activities suitable for their age which are based on the Birth to Three Framework and Foundation Stage (see 'Learning as they grow' on page 12).
- Pre-schools are a good way of extending your childcare and some are developing their services to offer longer sessions or full-time daycare.

How can I be sure of good quality care?

A registered pre-school or playgroup is regularly inspected by Ofsted (see page 14), to check on the quality of the care and free part-time early education (if provided) is satisfactory.

Most pre-schools or playgroups will provide places for between twenty four and twenty eight children. There should

be one member of staff for every eight children aged three to five.
Most staff are trained to work with children or are mid-training.

WHAT WILL IT COST ME?

£3 to £5 per session, but kept to a minimum. Some may ask you to pay for a block booking of half a term in advance. Costs will vary across the country. Your local Children's Information Service will be able to give you up-to-date local costs.

Is it for me?

- My childminder can take my child to pre-school (they can supplement existing childcare arrangements)
- I think it's great that they'll mix and make friends with other children
- I don't want to leave my child for longer than I need to
- I've got the spare time, and want to get involved with the playgroup and help out
- I want my child to have access to different toys, equipment and stimulation
- My hours fit around opening and closing times
- I feel happy leaving my child in a place where there are trained professionals
- I need to know that there will always be someone to look after my child; if one carer is sick, another can cover

Questions to ask the pre-school/playgroup

What qualifications do staff hold?

Can you talk me through the learning and developmental activities my child will take part in?

How will I find out how well my child is settling in?

Can I stay and join in at least two sessions to be sure this type of care is right for my child?

How many children do you care for?

Is the building/room safe and well kept (especially if it is used for other purposes e.g. a church hall)?

Are there lots of toys and equipment?

How much emphasis is on parental involvement and how can I get involved?

How will outings be supervised?

Will you keep a daily record of what they've done?

Are the children well supervised?

Also remember...

Put your child's name down on a pre-school list ASAP to avoid delays – and disappointment. They are extremely popular.

Make sure that the leader is suitably qualified. The National Standards state they should have a level three qualification in early years care and education, plus trained assistant staff.

Check facilities are of a high standard.

There should be a quiet time area for sitting-down activities (such as playing with construction toys, puzzles, drawing and story times), an area for free play, and an area for more physical play like pram pushing.

Find out more...

Contact your Children's Information Service (CIS) via ChildcareLink (freephone **0800 096 02 96**) for a list of local pre-schools or playgroups

Call Pre-School Learning Alliance: **020 7833 0991** or visit www.pre-school.org.uk

SURE START CHILDREN'S CENTRES

The facts

- Sure Start children's centres are new – they provide full daycare along with early education and health services for children under five years old.
- They may also offer family support and outreach to parents, a base for childminders, and links with Jobcentre Plus, Children's Information Services (CIS) and further education institutions too.
- They are open a minimum of 48 weeks a year, five days a week, ten hours a day.
- 250 centres are open in England already. By 2008, 2,500 will be open, and by 2010 there will be one for every community.
- Many centres will be developed from Sure Start local programmes, Neighbourhood Nurseries and Early Excellence Centres and involve private/voluntary provision.

How can I be sure of good quality care?

All centres will be checked and inspected by Ofsted. Note: A centre might not have been inspected if it only opened recently. You will need to check.

WHAT WILL IT COST ME?

All centres will be run differently so talk to staff. You will probably have to pay for childcare, but this will depend on your circumstances, for instance whether you are working or are claiming state benefits.

Is it for me?

- I work full time and need qualified staff I can trust
- I want my child to learn while being cared for (it'll give them a good start for school)
- I'm not working and want to meet other parents, carers and children
- I want to get health advice from people trained to help
- I want to find out more about training and job opportunities for the future
- I want just one place to go for all my childcare needs, advice and support

Questions to ask the sure start children's centre

How long has this centre been operating?

What else does it offer beyond childcare?

How many children is it registered to care for?

What provisions are made for non-toilet trained children?

Are safe, sanitary, hygienic conditions maintained?

Do I need to pay for any of the services?

How can I get involved at the centre?

Are the children well supervised?

For more childcare questions, see the day nurseries section on page 5.

Who can use Sure Start children's centres?

You are eligible to use a centre: if you are pregnant, a parent or carer of a child or children under five years old. The centre may provide adult education and employment advice. Contact your local Children's Information Service for details of a centre in your area and what it offers.

Also remember...

To ask about the child protection and health and safety policies and how everyone is made aware of procedures. Check how staff are prepared for special needs. What happens if your child is ill (emergency procedure?) and do they hold up-to-date first aid certificates?

Have a good look round the premises to check it is a safe and stimulating place to be.

Find out more...

Call your local Children's Information Service via ChildcareLink on freephone **0800 096 02 96** to see if there's a centre open in your area yet, or a suitable alternative.

For more details on Sure Start children's centres visit

www.surestart.gov.uk/surestartservices/childrenscentres/

SCHOOL-BASED CHILDCARE

The facts

- Many schools offer a variety of activities on top of the normal school day. These range from formal childcare to activities such as music, art, sport or additional study support. As a result the school is often open from 8.00am to 6.00pm, even during the holidays.
- Depending on the hours you work, you can opt for a combination of breakfast clubs (normally open from 8.00am), after-school clubs (typically from 3.30pm to 6pm) and holiday play schemes (8.00am to 6pm) which run out of term time.
- This doesn't mean children have to learn longer or teachers have to work extra hours. Some schools organise the childcare themselves. But others will work with local voluntary groups, private providers and childminders, who will provide staff and even facilities.
- Out-of-school clubs and centres also provide activities for children beyond the school day. Often these are based on school sites but they may also be in youth clubs, community centres and nurseries.

- The Government wants all schools to provide extra activities by 2010 so that all children and parents across the country can benefit. Childcare, alongside other activities, will be available from at least 8am to 6pm before and after the school day and in the holidays (for 48 weeks a year).

Is it for me?

- I'm looking to bridge the awkward gap between school and work hours
- It's an affordable option for me
- My child will love the chance to play with new friends
- I want one 'drop off' and my child to be in a place he or she is used to
- I'm not covered during the holidays
- I'm happy that older children will be there
- I have to be in work early

How can I be sure of good quality care?

All schools offering school-based childcare are registered and inspected by Ofsted, as are out-of-school clubs, if the children are under eight years old and if the club is open for more than two hours a day for six or more days in any year.

What will it cost me?

The form of childcare being offered and funding in your local area will determine what it costs. On average, expect to pay from around £5-10 a day for an after-school club place, about £1 for a breakfast club, and around £15 a day, or £75 a week, for a holiday place. Privately-run holiday play schemes cost more – around £150 a week.

TIP Clubs catering for eight years and over are not registered but many will be 'quality assured' by a scheme recognised by the Government. If registered, playworkers will be approved, and at least half of the staff will be trained/qualified.

Questions to ask about out-of-school childcare

What do the children do?

Are there activities such as art, sports or music?

How are they supervised?

How much individual attention do they get?

Do they offer homework facilities?

Who is the leader, and what kind of qualifications and experience do they (and other staff) have? Arrange to meet and talk to them.

Are the staff trained in first aid?

Is there a separate section for younger children? Some can't cope being in a large group of older ones.

What about a quiet area where all children can chill out?

Can I see how the security and signing-in book works?

If private, what are the arrangements for payment?

Find out more...Contact your local Children's Information Service via ChildcareLink on **0800 096 02 96** or 4Children on **020 7512 2112** for information on school-based care, out-of-school and holiday clubs in your area

Choosing and arranging

Finding the right type of childcare to suit you and your child is crucial, especially when there is so much to consider – what the place is like, will your child really like it there? There will be different options available in every area – what's important is to give yourself plenty of time to research them.

Draw up a list of all registered childcare from your Children's Information Service (CIS) (see below) and have a list of questions ready to ask when you visit prospective childcarers – everything from opening hours to taking up references. Here are our tips to get you started, along with essential safety checks and how to make sure the transition for you and your little one goes smoothly.

For more info...Call ChildcareLink on **0800 096 02 96** for contact details of your local Children's Information Service (CIS) who can provide a list of local and registered childcare services. Visit

www.surestart.gov.uk/lookingforchildcare for copies of childcare and early education checklists

Some do's and don't's of choosing and arranging childcare

DON'T leave it until the last minute. Even if you're not yet ready for childcare, give yourself plenty of time to make your choice. If it's popular, expect long waiting lists; interviewing and hiring a nanny or home carer can take months.

DO research the options. Call your local Children's Information Service (CIS) for a list of registered childcare in your community – see opposite for contact details. Jot down basic requirements e.g. opening hours, costs, location, and make those your first questions when you phone around. You will immediately discount some of them.

DO think about your child's age and personality (see page 12). This is particularly advisable when it comes to small babies and children under two, who need a close one-on-one relationship. You know your child best, so keep in mind your gut instinct, too.

DO shop around. Aim to visit at least two or three places to meet the carer and compare what's on offer. Make a formal appointment when you can see how the children behave, and take a list of prepared questions – see page below for some examples. Where possible (for instance, at nurseries) drop in randomly to see exactly what you walk into.

DON'T rule out combining care. If playgroups, nurseries, etc., can't offer you five-day-a-week care, think about merging your care e.g. nursery (two days) and childminder/shared nanny (three days).

DO check references. This is vital. Most carers (including nurseries, pre-schools, etc.) will be happy to give you names of other parents to speak to about their work, so take up references for peace of mind.

DON'T feel guilty about double checks. Go back for a second or third look once you've narrowed down your choices. This gives you the time to confirm that they meet all your requirements. Some carers will agree to trial runs before a formal agreement, to see how it's going to work out.

DO get it all in writing once a decision has been made. Nurseries will ask you to sign a contract/letter, outlining details such as costs, rules, hours, etc. Read it carefully before signing. You should provide contracts for childminders and nannies. See page below for more on this.

Finding childcare in your area... Call ChildcareLink on freephone **0800 096 02 96** for the address and phone number of your local Children's Information Service (CIS) who have an up-to-date list of local and registered childcare and early years services. Or visit www.childcarelink.gov.uk

What to look out for

Your checklist...

Qualifications. What training and experience does the carer/team have?

Environment. Is it secure, does it feel nurturing, are there pets, is it non-smoking? Enough space?

Diet. What's on the menu? Fresh fruit and veg? Access to water when they want it? Cater for special requirements?

Supervision. Who supervises and how? Staff-to-child ratio?

Emotional care. What are the routines? Difficult behaviour dealt with? There should be a written policy. Are staff warm, joining in, showing affection?

Equipment. Is it creative, varied, plentiful, of a high standard? Do displays show different cultures in a positive way? What about physical activities? Is there outside space, secure? If not, where will they play in fresh air?

Health habits. Are the toilets and basins clean, child-sized? And facilities for potty training/baby changing?

Expectations. Lay all yours out, such as your working hours, time-keeping, meal preparation, washing, babysitting. Policy on late picks up?

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

Contracts and interviewing

What should be included in your contract

If you're signing

- The retainer fee or deposit to secure your child's place
- The amount you pay and what it covers (e.g., nappies, food, days out)

- The hours/days your child will attend
- What you pay if your child or the carer is sick

If you're hiring

- A job description and hours of work
- Salary and agreed method of payment
- Length of employment (e.g. rolling 6 month contract) and notice period
- Details of sick/holiday pay, expenses
- Add personal additions such as limiting TV watching (e.g. not every day), no sugary treats or juices

For more contract info... Call The National Childminding Association on **0800 169 4486** or visit www.ncma.org.uk Or call the Working Families helpline on **0800 013 0313** or visit www.workingfamilies.org.uk for more contract info or legal advice

When interviewing and visiting...

Interviewing potential carers and visiting childcare centres is critical – it gives you the best idea of their parenting style, how they'd get on with your child and in what setting. We've outlined questions you should ask specific types of carers in the 'Your Choices' section, starting on page 8. See 'Your Checklist' opposite for some general areas to check and ask about.

Settling them in

Once you've gone for the childcare you want, you'll want to know how to get the best out of it. Your child will want to be eased into his or her new routine – and you'll want to get off on the right foot with your carer. Leaving your child with a carer is a big step for both you and your child. It will take time to adjust, but here's how you can help them through the jitters and feel more relaxed.

- Visit the new childcare facilities or home carer at least twice with your child. Before you go back to work, leave your child for 30 minutes while you stay in the background; later try 30 minutes while you walk round the block. Build up to an hour. Another option: start your care on a Wednesday so they don't have to start with a full week.
- Try to let the carer take charge and help your child so they get used to the face, the voice and the security.
- Prepare toddlers and older children for what to expect. For instance, some nurseries ask that children at appropriate ages can tie their own shoelaces and go to the toilet on their own etc.
- Until your child feels comfortable, get there with five minutes to spare. This gives you enough time to settle them into an activity.
- If you're dropping babies or small children off in another location, pack something they're attached to or recognise from home (a favourite toy or blanket).
- Don't be sad or look torn when you leave your child – they'll pick up on your mood. Keep it upbeat when the carer arrives, ("Look whose here!"), always say goodbye rather than slip away (but don't linger). Be sure to remind toddlers you'll be back at a particular time.
- Make sure you provide your nanny with the facilities for learning and play e.g. paint, shape sorters, pens, books, etc., to keep them busy and having fun.

For more info... www.surestart.gov.uk/lookingforchildcare for copies of childcare and early education checklists

Learning as they grow

Every parent knows that each child is unique and that he or she will develop at their own pace. It helps to consider carefully your child's age and stage of development when choosing the right care and learning setting for them. Research shows that the years between birth and three are particularly important for your child because the experiences they have during this time will have an impact on their future.

The step-by-step guide to how learning develops

0-8 months During this time, young babies react to people and situations with their whole bodies. They're also observing and responding to their environment and communicating with those around them.

8-18 months Babies' exploration of what's around them now becomes more purposeful. This is when 'they get everywhere'. They'll be sitting, standing, exploring and picking up different words.

18-24 months At this stage, babies will be showing increased independence and clear pleasure in moving,

communicating and learning through play.

24-36 months Their competence at moving, talking and pretending is more and more evident, and they show increasing confidence in themselves and in making relationships.

Birth to three matters

The years between birth and three are particularly important. Because many children now spend some time before the age of three with a carer, Sure Start has produced Birth to Three Matters as a guide to the way your child is cared for. It's not a curriculum, but just as important in helping your carer think about:

- your child
- your child's needs
- the things your child enjoys doing
- how they can ensure that your child's time in the childcare setting is happy and productive

If you're interested in reading more about your child's development between birth to three, see Birth to Three Matters on the Sure Start website: www.surestart.gov.uk/ensuringquality/birthtothreematters/

Age three to five

The Foundation Stage

The Foundation Stage is the first part of the National Curriculum, focusing on the distinct needs of children aged three to the end of the reception year in primary school.

The Foundation Stage curriculum builds on a child's enjoyment of play – it's about learning through lots of stimulating activities. The Foundation Stage has six areas of learning. Each area of learning contains a number of Early Learning Goals setting out what most children are expected to achieve by the end. The Foundation Stage also sets out stepping stones which help to show a child's progress towards the goals. For more information about the Foundation Stage, visit the Sure Start website: www.surestart.gov.uk/ensuringquality/foundationstage/

The six areas of learning at the Foundation Stage are...

- 1 Personal, social and emotional development
- 2 Communication, language and literacy
- 3 Mathematical development
- 4 Knowledge and understanding of the world
- 5 Physical development
- 6 Creative development

Remember!

All three and four-year-olds are entitled to free part-time early education (see page 2)

How parents can help with learning

- Where parents and their early learning settings work closely together, children do better.
- You know your child better than anyone else so talking to your carer about what your child enjoys doing and their needs and strengths will boost all-round development.
- Talking to your carer about what they plan to do on a daily basis will help you track progress and play an active early learning role in the home in ways that are fun.
- Early learning settings welcome your input and encourage parents to spend time in the setting, either on a regular basis or whenever they can.

Babies love books!

From the earliest age, babies love looking at and sharing books. Reading to your baby and singing songs and rhymes is a way to really bond with your child, stimulate imagination and start their first steps to language. Later on, these practices help conversation and reading and writing skills.

FREE BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

Sponsored by Sure Start, Bookstart is a scheme that gives books to every baby born in the UK as a gift. So what's on offer?

- Bookstart for babies – a bag of baby books and nursery rhymes place mat, usually given out by the health visitor PLUS coming soon...
- Bookstart Plus – two books, plus scribble pad and crayons, for your 18-month old toddler – from autumn/winter 2005

- My Bookstart Treasure Chest – a new pack for three-year-olds, with hidden compartments for small toys and books, scribble pad, activity pad and much more – from autumn/winter 2005
- Parents and carers can contact their health visitor or local library to ask about Bookstart.

Reading tips: how to help your child enjoy books

- Follow the words with your finger or let your child do it. This shows the child that the squiggly lines are important.
- Listen to your child, allow them to lead.
- Turn the book into a play by acting out the story using toys and props. Do they want to join in? Speak or sing in different voices to represent characters.
- Ask them about the story later and see what words they remember. If you talk and listen to them, they learn a lot more.
- Have a regular story time (say before bed) but add extra ones, maybe if friends come over.
- You can borrow lots of books from your local library. Libraries also hold story and rhyme sessions. Ask them for details.

For more info...For *Birth to Three Matters*, the pack for parents and support in early learning years, visit www.surestart.gov.uk/ensuringquality/birthtothreematters/ For an online guide to the curriculum for parents, a search of educational resources to help you and your child work together, and detailed info about many other areas of education, see www.parentscentre.gov.uk

QUALITY CHILDCARE Your child's safety

QUALITY OF CHILDCARE

Top priority for any parent is to know that their children are in safe hands. It's the job of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) to register and inspect childminders, nurseries, playgroups, out-of-school and holiday clubs, as well as some nannies and some crèches for children aged under eight.

- Fourteen national standards must be met relating to health and safety, equipment, and the care, learning and play that services deliver. Childcare services are checked once by Ofsted before they are registered, and inspected regularly to ensure they maintain standards. Individual complaints may be made to Ofsted – and followed up.
- Nannies who work for more than two families at the same time are subject to these checks, but not nannies who are employed by one or two families to work in the family home. Read the service's most recent Ofsted report for a better idea of checks made, but remember to make your own personal assessment of the quality (see page 14).

5 things you can do to monitor your child's care

1. Talk to your child carer every day. She or he needs to know about what's happening at home that might affect your child's needs during the day. You also need to know how your child's day went – what they ate, how well they slept etc. Ask your carer to keep an activities diary (sometimes known as a 'My Day' sheet) outlining the day.
2. Keep saying what you expect. Although certain requirements will have been agreed from the outset, new concerns will inevitably come up.
3. Look out for changes in your child's behaviour or mood. If they can talk, ask questions (what have they eaten, slept, done?). Early on, it's good to know the names of children and parents to know who they're talking about/playing with.
4. Make occasional, unexpected visits to the childcare centre or childminder's home, or arrive early to see what's happening. Talk to other parents and neighbours.
5. Book time two months or so into a new arrangement to discuss your child's progress/improvements/issues together.

What if...

You're unhappy about a certain aspect of childcare?

- Make sure you raise this with the carer. A good child carer is a professional, and generally they should really want to get it right.
- Think carefully about what's bothering you. Calmly explain why you are concerned, and allow your carer the time to respond.
- Suggest ways round the problem. Ask your carer for their advice on how to tackle it. Then agree on a plan of action.
- If the situation doesn't improve, or the carer hasn't made the changes that were agreed, ask to speak to the person in charge (if you haven't done so already), check your notice period and start looking for alternative

childcare.

- If you are concerned that a childcarer is not meeting the required standards, you can complain directly to Ofsted, and an inspector will investigate. Ofsted's complaints number is 0845 601 4771.

QUALITY CHILDCARE

CHILDCARE APPROVAL SCHEME

More and more parents are looking for childcarers in their own home – particularly if awkward hours/shifts need to be covered, transport is a problem, or they have a child with disabilities or other special needs.

The new voluntary Childcare Approval Scheme will apply to all care provided in the family home, and to childminders caring solely for children over the age of seven on other domestic premises.

WHAT DOES THE SCHEME DO?

- It verifies that the childcarer has a childcare qualification (or has attended a relevant childcare induction course). See an up-to-date list of all acceptable childcare qualifications at www.dfes.gov.uk/childrenswfqualifications
- It guarantees that the childcarer is 18 or over, and has an appropriate first aid certificate which is no more than three years old at the time of application.
- It carries out an enhanced CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) check including a POCA (Protection of Children's Act) list check to ascertain that there is nothing in their background that makes them unsuitable to care for children.
- The scheme only applies to childcare provided in England.

HOW DOES THE SCHEME BENEFIT ME?

- It will help put your mind at rest. By using an approved carer, you'll know that they've been checked and have met the basic criteria.
- This means they're not unsuitable to work with children, have some understanding of their needs, and will know what to do in an emergency.
- Some working parents and disabled people who use an approved carer may be able to get financial support via the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit, or employer-supported care, such as childcare vouchers or childcare places contracted by the employer (see page 16).
- It provides more high quality, accessible and affordable childcare that is available to parents when and where they need it.

THE CHECKS YOU WILL STILL NEED TO MAKE

If he or she is allowed to work in the UK, ask them for evidence.

What age group the carer is best suited to. Take up references to see what previous experience they have.

Whether or not a childcarer will meet your own personal requirements. This is your responsibility. See the section on Nannies and other home-based childcarers starting on page 4 for an idea of the right questions to ask and checks to make to help work this out.

A guide for parents employing an approved childcarer will be available from www.childcareapprovalscheme.co.uk from April 2005

For information on the Childcare Approval Scheme call **0845 7678 111** (calls are charged at the local rate or higher from a mobile or public phone) or visit www.childcareapprovalscheme.co.uk

IF YOUR CHILD HAS A DISABILITY OR SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

All childcare providers must meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and make 'reasonable adjustments' to include disabled children. They must not treat a disabled child 'less favourably' than someone else for a reason related to their disability.

- Most early years settings/providers have a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO), who will be able to discuss what's right for you and your child in that particular setting.
- Contact a Family, a voluntary organisation that supports families with disabled children. You could discuss your needs with other parents in your area, their HelpLine could put you in touch (call **0808 808 3555**).
- The Early Support Programme is a Government initiative to improve services for disabled children and their families, especially those under the age of three. For an Early Support Family Pack, call DfES publications on **0845 60 222 60** quote reference **ESPP1**. For more info, visit www.espp.org.uk

Funding

In addition to the financial help listed on page 16, don't forget a parent of a disabled child can also help pay for childcare costs via:

- Direct payments – from your local authority, are cash payments for parents of disabled children to buy their own support or care. Call **08701 555 455** for a copy of 'A Parent's Guide to Direct Payments' (**quote ref. 31762**).
- Child Tax Credit can include additional amounts for disabled children. Working Tax Credit can include help with childcare costs. For advice or a claim form call **0845 300 3900**.
- Through the new Childcare Approval Scheme – working parents may now be eligible for financial support to help pay for approved home-based childcare (page 11).
- Your Children's Information Service (CIS) – they may know of local arrangements to help cover childcare costs for disabled children (call **0800 096 02 96**).

YOUR CHILD'S NEEDS: QUESTIONS TO ASK

What qualifications and/or training do staff have, and are they relevant to your child?

Does your child need extra help – and are the staff willing for you (and/or a health professional if appropriate) to show them how to look after his or her needs?

Are they ready and able to provide practical support (e.g. with personal care)? Is the building accessible?

Are physical adaptations needed to the building?

What equipment is essential?

Are carers willing to be shown how to administer medicine? Do they have the relevant insurance?

For more info...

- ChildcareLink on **0800 096 02 96** for options, including childminders, nurseries, etc., who can provide good care for children with disabilities or special educational needs
- Your local Social Services Departments for info on short breaks, Direct Payments, childcare for disabled children and play and leisure services for older disabled children
- Childcare providers can contact their local authority to find out about Sure Start funding to help with equipment costs, staff training, and adapting facilities and premises (e.g. enabling wheelchair access)
- Call Crossroads on **0845 450 0350** for information about trained support workers who may be able to come to your home and give you a break
- Visit www.surestart.gov.uk for information on how to find the right childcare, pay for additional support and who to turn to for help.
- Call the Disability Rights Commission on **08457 622633** for guidance on legal requirements relating to childcare providers

HOW MUCH WILL IT COST?

Paying for childcare for the first time can be quite daunting – you know you have options, but they all come at a price, right? That is where this next section can help. We compare the cost of all the different types of childcare, but as you read on you will also find information about the sources of financial help you can get towards the cost of it, including all-important tax credits which can make a real difference to your bank balance. If childcare is going to work out for your family, you need to have enough money to get through, so it's essential to know how and when to apply for it.

For more info... Call the Inland Revenue Tax Credit Helpline on **0845 300 3900**, or visit www.taxcredits.inlandrevenue.gov.uk for info on your entitlements and advice on how you could get help with the costs of childcare.

HELP WITH COSTS

Paying for childcare can take a big chunk out of your household income. However, don't rule out any options until you've worked out what financial help is available. Also take into account benefits you can claim see page 20.

For three and four year olds

If your child is three or four years old they are entitled to free part-time early education from the beginning of the first nationally-prescribed term after their third birthday.

For single parents

If you need help finding work, job training or childcare, the New Deal for Lone Parents could help. Call **0800 868 868**.

For special circumstances

Covering the day-to-day costs of disability: make sure you are claiming all the benefits to help you with the cost of every day living. For more info on the Disability Living Allowance and other benefits call the Disability Benefits Helpline on **0800 88 22 00**.

TAX CREDITS

Nine out of ten families are eligible for financial help, depending on their circumstances. So what do they offer parents?

Child Tax Credit

Whether you work or not, families with incomes of up to £58,000 (or £66,000 if there is at least one child under a year old) could be eligible for this depending on their circumstances. It's worth over £32 a week for one child, and goes up with more children. If you have a child with a disability you can receive extra help. It will be paid directly into your bank account.

Working Tax Credit

This is an allowance for people on low incomes and can include help with childcare costs. It's paid through your pay packet, taking into account your annual salary (and partners, where appropriate), and generally applies to working parents and disabled people in work.

Childcare Element of Working Tax Credit

Extra help is available through a childcare element of the Working Tax Credit for working parents. It is specifically aimed at helping working parents cover childcare costs. You can claim up to a maximum of 70p for every £1 you pay for registered or approved childcare up to certain limits. From April 2005, the limit is £175 a week for one child, and £300 for two or more. It's paid direct to the main carer.

To be eligible:

- lone parents must work 16 hours or more
- couples must both work 16 hours or more, or one partner works 16 hours or more per week and the other receives a disability benefit, or is in hospital or prison
- the child you are caring for is school-age or under

DISABLED CHILD'S PREMIUM

You may be eligible for the Disabled Child's Premium, proof of eligibility is usually having the Disability Living Allowance.

A growing number of employers provide their employees with some kind of childcare help.

EMPLOYER CHILDCARE VOUCHERS

Employer provided childcare vouchers are vouchers that your employer can give to you to use to pay your childcare provider. The first £50 per week of any voucher you receive is exempt from tax and National Insurance Contributions (NICs) if the voucher is used only to pay for registered or approved childcare and your employer's scheme is generally available to all his or her employees. For more information on Employer Childcare Vouchers and a copy of the 'Childcare Vouchers for Employees' factsheet visit www.daycaretrust.org.uk

For more info...Call the Inland Revenue Tax Credit Helpline on 0845 300 3900, or visit www.taxcredits.inlandrevenue.gov.uk/HomeIR.aspx to find out if you're eligible for help

HOW MUCH WILL IT COST?

These facts and figures give a general indication, but you will find costs vary across the country. We recommend you check these figures locally.

Type of childcare or early education	Where?	Age group	Cost	Free early education offer?	Working tax credit*	Opening times	Are they registered by Ofsted?	Other advice
Childminders	Mostly in the childminder's home	Any	On average £2.50 per hour per child, but anything between £1.85 and £6	Yes, if part of a childminder network	*	Flexible, but the vast majority work between 8am-6pm	Yes, if they care for children under eight	The typical cost of a full time place for a child under two is £127 a week. You'll need to negotiate hours, holiday pay and other terms and conditions set out in a contract.
Nannies and other home-based childcarers	In the family home	Any	The average rate varies between £2.50-£4.50 per hour per child	No	*	Flexible, can work part-time or even live in	No, but they may be approved through the Childcare Approval Scheme	A full-time place varies between £127- £400. You will have to pay tax and National Insurance as well. The Inland Revenue will calculate this for you (call 0845 6070143).
Day Nurseries	Centre-based	0-5 years	From £141 to £197 for a full-time week.	Yes	*	Usually 8.30am to 7pm weekdays, but can sometimes offer part-time, and early drops/late pick-ups	Yes	If your child is three or four years old, fees may be reduced because they are eligible for a free part-time early education offer (see page 5).

Nursery Schools	Centre-based	2-5 years	Free if part of a state education system (bar meals and trips). Go private, and costs are around £800-£1200 per term	Yes	*	Usually 9am to 3.30pm, term-time only. Option to go part-time (morning or afternoon) is common.	Yes	You may need to pay for school-based nursery schools, and nursery schools at fee-paying schools may charge a top-up for early education as well as care.
Pre-schools and Playgroups	Centre-based	2-5 years	Around £3-£5 per session	Yes, if registered for the time involved.	*	Sessions from two-and-a-half to four hours, during term time, every day or several days a week.	Yes	Block bookings (e.g. half a term) may need to be paid for in advance).
Sure Start children's centres	Centre-based	0-5 years	From £141-£197 for a full time week but will differ depending on circumstances.	Yes	*	Open five days a week 48 weeks a year but childcare times will need to be checked.	Yes	If centres have only just opened they may not have been inspected yet.
School-based care	Centre-based	5-11 years, up to 16 if special needs	Between £5 to £10 a day for after-school clubs; £1 for breakfast clubs; around £15 a day or £75 a week for holiday place.	Check with settings where 3-4 years olds attend.	*	3.30pm to 6pm for after-school clubs; from 8am for breakfast clubs; 8.30am to 6pm for holiday clubs.	Yes, if they care for children aged under eight.	Private out-of-school clubs may charge more. For instance, expect to pay around £150 a week for private holiday clubs.

* Childcare Element of the Working Tax Credit applicable in registered or approved childcare services – see page 16

Balancing Family and Work

Preparing to start a paid job or returning to work or study when you have a young family is a challenging time. Don't miss out on any of your entitlements (even if you're a working mum-to-be) or be afraid to ask your employer or college about childcare help they could offer. You have new rights as a working parent – over the next few pages we'll fill you in. For instance, did you know it's your right to ask for flexible work options like term-time work or jobshare? It means you should find it easier to combine a happy family and working life. Here's how to go about it.

For more info... Visit www.maternityalliance.org.uk for maternity and paternity rights, entitlements and booklets or see the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) website on www.dti.gov.uk for a range of leaflets for working parents. Call the Know Your Rights Line on **0870 600 4882** or log on to www.tuc.org.uk

WHO GETS WHAT?

Don't miss out on the benefits you're entitled to when you're pregnant and a new parent. Some employers have their own, more generous policies.

For mums-to-be

As a pregnant employee, you can take paid time off for all antenatal appointments. Think your job may harm you or your baby? Tell your employer immediately – they must make changes to your existing job or offer you suitable alternative work, otherwise they will have to suspend you on full pay.

For mums

From the day you start a job, you're entitled to 26 weeks of Ordinary Maternity Leave (OML), regardless of your position or hours. You have the right to return to the same job at the end too. You can also take Additional Maternity Leave, unpaid, for 26 weeks from the end of your OML.

You can claim Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP) if you have worked for the same employer since before you became pregnant and earn at least £82 a week (before tax). SMP provides 90% of your average earnings for six weeks, followed by £106 a week (or 90% of your earnings, whichever figure is less) for 20 weeks. Some employers do offer to top this up.

For LOWER-PAID/self-employed mums

You can claim Maternity Allowance – £106 a week for 26 weeks, or 90% of your average earnings, whichever is less. You must be self-employed, or earn at least £30 a week for 13 weeks (not necessarily consecutively), and have worked for at least 26 weeks in the 66 weeks before the baby is due.

For low income parents

Receiving a low-income benefit or tax credit? You may be able to claim the Sure Start Maternity Grant (SSMG) – a one-off payment of £500.

For adoptive parents

The same leave rights as For Mums are available for an individual who adopts or one partner of a couple jointly adopting. The other partner can take paternity leave.

For both parents

If you've been in the same job for a year or more, both parents can take Parental Leave – 13 weeks leave per child, to be taken before the child's fifth birthday, usually in blocks of four weeks per year. If your child has a disability you will be entitled to 18 weeks leave to be taken by their 18th birthday.

The Government gives Child Benefit to all parents – £17.00 per week for the first child, £11.40 for each child after that.

What about dads?

You can claim Statutory Paternity Pay (SPP) if you have worked for the same employer since before your partner became pregnant and will still be in that job at the time of birth.

For more info... Call the Maternity Alliance Information Line **020 7490 7638** or visit www.maternityalliance.org.uk for how to claim maternity and paternity rights. See the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) or www.dti.gov.uk/workingparents for working parents leaflets.

Contact your local Jobcentre Plus office for a Sure Start Maternity Grant application form.

Returning to work or study

Holding down a full-time job, running a house and being a loving mum or dad – there are practical and emotional issues to deal with if you are planning to go back to work. Here's some tips to help you find a happy balance.

How to prepare yourself for work

"I'm thinking about going back to work and I'm worried how I'm going to manage it."

It's advisable to sit down and chat through your situation with employers. You might need to negotiate new arrangements (see page 21 for your right to ask for flexible ways of working). Don't fall into the trap of making excuses, being embarrassed or feeling you're letting work down when you rush off to sort the odd childcare problem – everyone has commitments outside work from time to time.

"Will my employer help with childcare costs?"

About one in ten employers provide some kind of childcare help to employees, such as childcare allowances and vouchers, and running subsidised workplace crèches and nurseries. Just ask. Don't forget you may get help through the Childcare Element of the Working Tax Credit. Childcare vouchers can be used to pay for care provided by registered or approved childminders, nurseries and after-school groups. You exchange part of your salary in return for the vouchers, and save the National Insurance deducted from £50 per week so it actually works out that you're taking home more pay. From April, you will save the tax from £50 per week as well. Contact your local Children's Information Service (CIS) for more information.

"What if I need time off in an emergency?"

It's bound to happen – your child wakes up feeling sick or your childcarer fails to show up. However, everybody has the right to take emergency leave at very short notice in a family crisis – usually one or two days, unpaid. For full details, contact the Maternity Alliance helpline or website (see Contacts p26). If you can, it's a good idea to build up a list of possible childcarers to call on, or keep some holiday days at the ready to use in an emergency.

At home tips

As a working parent, your time at home is precious. It sounds obvious, but simple timesaving measures can take the pressure off a hectic schedule. Plan your day, make a note of important dates, have a set time to do chores, and establish routines, such as getting yours and your child's clothes ready the night before. If you have older children, ask them to help out around the house, and go easy on punishing yourself about standards of perfection – it will make life easier.

Flexible Working *"Not sure about going back full time?"*

Who can apply?

Parents (including adoptive parents, guardians and foster carers) of children under six or disabled children up to the age of 18 can now apply for flexible working hours, including home working. More than one million parents have asked to work flexibly since the law came into effect. Your boss has to listen and can only say "no" when there is a clear business reason, which he/she must provide in writing. The request has to be worded properly; forms are available from the DTI. You may also have further rights under the Sex Discrimination Act.

Check out the chart below to see if any of these flexi-options would work for you.

For more info... Visit www.tiger.gov.uk for Tailored Interactive Guidance for Employment Rights
Visit www.dti.gov.uk/workingparents or call Working Families free legal helpline on **0800 013 0313**

Ways of working	What this means
Part-time	Anything less than the regular number of hours worked in a week, but you must not be treated any differently just because you work fewer hours.
Flexi-working	You agree to work certain hours, known as core time (for instance, 10am-12pm and 2pm-4pm). But outside these hours, you can dip in and out as you please, clocking up a fixed amount of time and taking banked hours as flexi-leave.
Job sharing	A job is split between two people. Income, benefits and pensions rights are also divided.
Term-time working	In a permanent full or part time job, you take unpaid leave during school holidays, spreading salary payments over the year so you still receive a regular wage packet.
School hours	You work during school hours, in order to be able to drop the children working off and collect them.
Staggered hours	Instead of 9-5, what about 7-3, or 11-7? But if you work six hours or more you must take a break of at least 20 mins.
Compressed hours	You work more hours, fewer days of the week (e.g. four ten-hour days, four days a week, Fridays off).
Working from home	You swap the office desk to work at home, all or some days of the week, home going in for meetings/catch-ups.

THINKING ABOUT A JOB IN CHILDCARE?

Raising your children in a safe, healthy and happy environment is of utmost importance to you as a parent. But did you know there are also opportunities for you to work in childcare yourself?

Many childcare jobs are ideal for parents – the benefits can include:

- a job with hours that fit around family life
- varied, fun and challenging work
- a career you can be proud of
- opportunities to gain training and qualifications

So why not consider a career in childcare yourself?

High quality childcare and education are in high demand in this country. That's why people like you – with commitment, energy and a caring nature – are needed to play a key role.

There is a wide range of career opportunities in the childcare sector. Jobs can vary widely in terms of venue, hours and the age of the children you are caring for.

Employers are looking for unqualified as well as qualified staff, and there is a range of on-the-job training available at all levels.

Here are some examples of jobs in childcare:

- Nursery nurse – you'll work as part of a team, planning and organising lots of play activities, helping children develop, building a relationship with their families.
- Pre-school worker – looking after children aged between two and five, you'll work in a pre-school or playgroup helping to stimulate a child's development before they start full-time education.
- Childminder – caring for children, usually in your own home. Doing creative activities with the children in your care, feeding and changing them, taking them out – ensuring they're happy and having fun (see page 10 for facts about childminders).

Care to learn?

If you are a teenage mum or dad aged between 16 and 19 and want to start or carry on with studying, how can you make it work? Thanks to the Care To Learn Scheme, your childcare and extra travel costs could be paid for. Call the helpline on **0845 600 2809** or visit www.dfes.gov.uk/caretolearn/parents.cfm to see if

Care to Learn can help you. Here you'll find real life stories, types of learning courses, FAQs and useful links.

For more info... If you are interested in a rewarding and flexible career in childcare, why not call the National Childcare Recruitment order line on **0800 996600** and quote **LFC** for a free information pack. Alternatively, you can contact the Recruitment Team at your local authority. Their details can be found on www.childcarecareers.gov.uk. They can provide you with information about jobs and training opportunities in your area. An insider's view of what to expect and case studies of people who already work in this field are also on this website.

The future for Sure Start, childcare and early years

Over the past few years the government has greatly expanded childcare and early years' services. All three and four-year-olds are entitled to a free part-time early education place; there are now over 1.17 million registered childcare places available; there is a Children's Information Service in every local authority which provides up-to-date information on registered childcare services, and there are national standards in place to ensure that the person looking after your child has been properly trained and checked.

But there is still more to do. The Government's ten year strategy for childcare aims to make sure all children have the best start in life and to give parents more real choices in balancing work and family life. Plans include:

- **More time off** with your baby in the first year: paid maternity leave will increase to nine months by April 2007, and the Government aims to extend it to twelve months by 2010.
- **More Sure Start children's centres:** by 2008, every local authority will have at least one, and by 2010 every family with children under five will be able to have access to Sure Start services.
- **More help with the costs of childcare** for many parents: From April 2005, a parent could claim through the Working Tax Credit up to 70% of eligible childcare costs which is up to £175 a week for 1 child and £300 for 2 children or more. From April 2006 changes to the Working Tax Credit mean that a working couple on £34,000 a year, for example, with typical childcare costs for two children could save £700.
- **Schools offering childcare and supervised activities and homework clubs between 8am and 6pm.**
- **Free nursery places for all three and four-year-olds for 38 weeks of the year**, with longer hours available: 15 hours by 2007 and 20 hours in the longer term. In time, there will also be the option of using the hours flexibly, for example taking the 15 hours over three 5-hour days.

For more info...Visit www.surestart.gov.uk

WHERE TO FIND INFO

Start by contacting your local Children's Information Service (CIS). There is a CIS in every local authority and each one holds a list of all the various local childcare and early education services available in your area. Their lists are regularly updated and the registered childcarers and places on them will be subject to regular checks by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) so you can be sure of safety and standards (see page 50). As well as contact details, your local CIS will provide you with useful information such as opening hours, age restrictions, parking facilities and costs – enough to get you started before you call direct.

For more info... Call ChildcareLink on **0800 096 02 96** for the telephone number of your local Children's Information Service or visit www.childcarelink.gov.uk. Visit www.surestart.gov.uk for information on Government support for children, parents and communities. Visit www.parentscentre.gov.uk for information and advice about your child's learning and advice and support for parents. Visit www.direct.gov.uk for an A-Z of information about central Government departments.

Contacts

There are lots of organisations ready to offer you information and answer specific questions about childcare and early education issues – online or at the end of the phone. Try these as starting points:

A

4Children (formerly Kids' Clubs Network)
City Reach, 5 Greenwich View Place London E14
9NN
Tel: 020 7512 2112 Fax: 020 7537 6012 Email:
Info@4Children.org.uk
www.4children.org.uk

B

Basic Skills
www.basic-skills.co.uk

Bookstart
A national scheme offering free books to children.
www.bookstart.co.uk

C

CAPT Child Accident Prevention Trust
22-26 Farringdon Lane, London EC1R 3AJ
Tel: 020 7608 3828 Email: safe@capt.org.uk
www.capt.org.uk

Care to Learn
If you are a student (under 19) you might get help
paying for childcare. Helpline: 0845 600 2809 or
visit
www.dfes.gov.uk/caretolearn/parents.cfm

Child Benefit Enquiry Line
Tel: 0845 302 1444
www.inlandrevenue.gov.uk

Childcare Approval Scheme
Helpline: 0845 767 8111
www.childcareapprovalscheme.co.uk

Childcare Careers
Information, advice and case studies on careers in
childcare.
www.childcarecareers.gov.uk

ChildcareLink
Gives details on your local Children's Information
Service (CIS), who provide a list of registered
childcare in your area.
Tel: 0800 096 02 96
www.childcarelink.gov.uk

C

Children's Information Service (CIS)
Based in the community, your local CIS has
information on all local childcare, early education
and other care and support services for children
and parents. Call 0800 096 02 96 for your local
CIS number.
www.childcarelink.gov.uk for the number of
your local CIS.

Children in Scotland
Information on services for children and their
families in Scotland.
Tel: 0131 228 8484
Email: info@childreninScotland.org.uk
www.childreninScotland.org.uk

Children in Wales/Plant Yng Nghymru
Information on services for children and their
families in Wales.
Tel: 02920 342434 Email:
info@childreninWales.org.uk
www.childreninWales.org.uk

Child Support Agency
Tel: 0845 713 3133
www.csa.gov.uk

Citizens Advice Bureau
www.adviceguide.org.uk

Contact a Family
Supports families with disabled children.
Helpline: 0808 808 3555 – where you may be able
to discuss your needs with other parents in your
area.

Crossroads
Can provide advice and trained support workers if
your child has complex needs.
Tel: 0845 450 0350

D

Daycare Trust
National childcare charity.
21 St. George's Rd, London SE1 6ES
Tel: 020 7840 3350 Email:
info@daycaretrust.org.uk
www.daycaretrust.org.uk

D

Department for Trade and Industry (DTI)

www.dti.gov.uk

www.tiger.gov.uk

The DTI's Tailored Interactive Guidance on Employment Rights (TIGER); maternity & paternity leave, flexible working etc.

DirectGov

A-Z of central government.

Lists central government departments, executive agencies and non-departmental public bodies.

www.direct.gov.uk

Direct payments

Tel: 08701 555 455

for a copy of 'A Parent's Guide to Direct Payments' (quoting reference 31762).

Disability Benefits Helpline

Tel: 0800 88 22 00

Disability Rights Commission

For detailed guidance on legal requirements.

Tel: 08457 622633

E

Early Support Programme

A Government initiative to improve services for disabled children and their families, especially those under the age of three. For an 'Early Support Family Pack' call 0845 60 222 60 and quote reference ESPP1

www.espp.org.uk – for more information about the Early Support Programme.

Early Years Equality

Offers support for ethnic minority parents.

Tel: 0151 639 1778

info@earlyyearequality.org

www.earlyyearequality.org

Employment Agency Standards – Department of Trade and Industry (DTI)

Free confidential complaints service about agency conduct. Investigates any complaints made by families or nannies.

1 Victoria Street, London SW1H 0ET

Helpline: 0845 955 5105 (local call rates apply)

Email: eas@dti.gsi.gov.uk

www.dti.gov.uk/er/agency-kyr.html

Equal Opportunities Commission

Advice on parental rights in the workplace.

Tel: 0845 601 5901

www.eoc.org.uk

F

Fathers Direct

Useful information for dads.

www.fathersdirect.com

Forum for maintained nursery schools and Children's Centres

www.early-education.org.uk/nsfnewhome.htm

G

Gingerbread

Advice line freephone service.

Tel: 0800 018 4318.

www.gingerbread.org.uk

H

Healthy Eating

Advice on health issues relating to under fives.

www.publications.doh.gov.uk/birthtofive

HomeDad

Supports fathers who are staying at home to raise their children

www.HomeDad.org.uk

Home Start

Offers friendship, support and practical help to parents with young children.

www.home-start.org.uk

I

Inland Revenue Tax Credits

For info on your tax credit entitlements.

Tel: Tax Credits Helpline on 0845 300 3900

www.taxcredits.inlandrevenue.gov.uk

(tax credit queries only)

J

Jobcentre Plus

www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk

K

Kidsactive

Play and opportunity for disabled children.

6 Aztec Row, Berners Road, London N1 0PW

Tel: 020 7359 3635 Fax: 020 7359 8238 Email:

enquiries@kids-online.org.uk

www.kidsactive.org.uk

Know your Rights

For info on workplace issues call the Know Your Rights Line.

Tel: 0870 600 4882

www.tuc.org.uk

L

Learndirect

www.learndirect.co.uk

M

Maternity Grant

Sure Start Maternity Grant. Contact your local Jobcentre Plus for an application form.

Maternity Alliance

Maternity and paternity rights and entitlements via their website, telephone helpline.

Information Line: 020 7490 7638

www.maternityalliance.org.uk

N

National Association of Toy & Leisure Libraries

Tel: 020 7255 4600

admin@playmatters.co.uk

National Childbirth Trust

For info and support for pregnancy, birth and early years parenting.

Alexandra House, Oldham Terrace, London W3 6NH

Enquiry Line: 0870 444 8707 Email:

enquiries@national-childbirth-trust.co.uk

www.nctpregnancyandbabycare.com

National Childminding Association

Information on choosing a childminder and drawing up contracts.

8 Masons Hill, Bromley Kent, BR2 9EY

Tel: 0800 169 4486

www.ncma.org.uk

National Day Nurseries Association

For a list of day nurseries and tips on choosing childcare.

Oak House, Woodvale Road Brighouse, West Yorkshire, HD6 4AB

Tel: 0870 774 4244

www.ndna.org.uk

National Family & Parenting Institute

430 Highgate Studios 53-79 Highgate Road London NW5 1TL

Tel: 020 7424 3460

Fax 020 7485 3590

Email: info@nfpi.org

www.nfpi.org or www.e-parents.org

NCH Action for Children

Helpline: 0845 762 6579 (calls charged at local rate, open 9am-5pm, Monday to Friday).

www.nchafc.org.uk

N

NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children)

Helpline 0808 800 5000

www.nspcc.org.uk

O

Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted)

For serious complaints and/or concerns about any registered childcare provision call Alexandra House

33 Kingsway, London WC2B 6SE

Tel: 020 7421 6800 Helpline: 0845 601 4771

www.ofsted.gov.uk

One Parent Families

Information and advice for parents bringing up children on their own

Tel: 0800 018 5026

www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk/

For local support groups see Gingerbread

P

Parental Involvement

Information on all aspects of parental involvement can be found on this site.

www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/parentalinvolvement

Parents Centre

Parents Centre is for all parents and carers who want to help their child or children to learn. It is here to offer you support, information and advice about your child's learning and the English education system.

www.parentscentre.gov.uk

Parentline Plus

A UK registered charity which provides a free 24-hour helpline and offers support to anyone caring for a child.

Tel: 0808 800 2222

www.parentlineplus.org.uk

Parents Online

Learn about your child's early education, interactive links and information about online safety.

www.parentsonline.gov.uk

Pre-School Learning Alliance

For info on pre-school provision

Tel: 020 7833 0991

www.pre-school.org.uk

P

Professional Association of Nursery Nurses
(PANN)
For an information pack on employing a nanny.
2 St James Court, Friars Gate, Derby, DE1 1BT
Tel: 01332 372 337
Email: pann@pat.org.uk
www.pat.org.uk/

Q

Quality Checks See Ofsted

R

Read and Write Plus
www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus

Recruitment and Employment Confederation
(REC) For information on all forms of childcare
options and sample contract of employment for
nannies.
36-38 Mortimer Street, London W1W 7RG
Tel: 020 7462 3260
www.rec.uk.com/rec/home/index.aspx

S

Sure Start - Information on Government support
for children, parents and communities and details
of local Sure Start settings Tel: 0870 000 2288
www.surestart.gov.uk/

T

Tax Credit Helpline
You might be able to get help with paying for
childcare. Information on Child Tax Credit and
Working Tax Credit, as well as an online
application form and claim pack.
Tel: Tax Credit hotline on 0845 300 3900
www.taxcredits.inlandrevenue.gov.uk

T

TUC
Free range of leaflets on workplace issues,
including maternity rights. Know your rights
helpline: 0870 600 4882
www.tuc.org.uk

Working Families

Supports working parents and carers and offers
free fact sheets on flexible working, maternity
leave and childcare on their website.
1-3 Berry Street, London EC1V 0AA
Tel: 020 7253 7243 Email:
office@workingfamilies.org.uk Free legal helpline:
0800 013 0313 – for parents and carers
www.workingfamilies.org.uk

Work-Life Balance Trust

Independent charity
22 Heath Rise, Kersfield Road, London, SW15
3HF
Tel: 020 8789 0136 Fax: 020 8785 4733 Email:
info@w-lb.org.uk
www.w-lb.org.uk
www.worksmart.org.uk

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For more copies of this booklet, free of charge, contact: DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DL. Tel: 0845 60 222 60. Fax: 0845 60 333 60. Minicom: 0845 60 555 60. Email: dfes@prolog.uk.com. Please quote reference LEA-1252-2005 followed by the language you require. You can also view and download copies in English and 13 other languages by visiting www.surestart.gov.uk/lookingforchildcare

The work of the Sure Start Unit applies in England only. Responsibility for early education and childcare in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland rests with the devolved administrations. To find out more visit the following web pages:

- Sure Start Northern Ireland

www.surestart.gov.uk/surestartservices/surestartlocalprogrammes/ssni/

- Sure Start Scotland

www.surestart.gov.uk/surestartservices/surestartlocalprogrammes/ssscotland/

- Sure Start Wales

www.surestart.gov.uk/surestartservices/surestartlocalprogrammes/sswales/

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