

# GuidanceResources® Online

## ***Finding Day Care for Children with Disabilities and Special Needs***

Finding a day care provider for a child with a physical disability, learning difficulty or other special need can be a difficult and time-consuming process. There are a number of things parents and guardians can do to ensure their search for day care is thorough, comprehensive and results in a good situation for the child.

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### **Background Information Concerning Children with Disabilities and Child Care**

The Americans with Disabilities Act is a federal law that states many public institutions and private companies, including most child care programs, cannot discriminate against individuals because of a disability. The law applies to all public nurseries, child care centers, preschools and family child care homes, including programs renting space in religious facilities.

The Americans with Disabilities Act contains the following provisions:

- Child care programs cannot refuse service to a child because their staff lacks training if training is readily available at a reasonable cost.
- Child care programs cannot refuse service to a child because their staff lacks training if training is readily available at a reasonable cost.
- Child care programs must make reasonable modifications to their programs to accommodate the unique needs of disabled and special needs children.
- Child care programs can deny service if the needs of the child are fundamentally different than those offered by the day care program.
- Child care programs cannot charge more serve children with disabilities or special needs.
- Child care programs can charge for "extra services" that are not within the range of services normally covered by the child care program. These services could include things like specialized medical care, physical therapy and speech instruction.
- Child care programs cannot deny service to a child with special needs if admitting the child would cause the day care provider's insurance rates to increase.
- Child care programs can deny service if the changes to accommodate the child are cost-prohibitive to the individual day care program.
- Child care programs can deny service if there is a direct threat to the health and safety of other children at the day care center.

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### **Starting the Child Care Provider Search Process**

Children with special needs will often require special circumstances, facilities and supervision for their day care. Many states and local communities have resources for helping families locate facilities that offer appropriate care for children with disabilities and special needs. Take advantage of these resources to help you create an initial list of facilities and providers to research.

Parents and guardians should make a list of needs the child and family want to have met by a day care provider. These needs could include:

- A specific number of hours and days each week care is needed.
- Mobility assistance.
- Assistance in the bathroom.
- Assistance eating.
- Help with transportation.
- The timely administering of medications or physical therapy.

Parents and guardians should make a list of skills, capabilities and services they would expect to see on display in a quality child care

environment before they start visiting day care centers and interviewing providers. These include:

- The building the day care is provided in is physically accessible and user-friendly for children with disabilities.
- The center has a small child-to-staff ratio, meaning supervisors will spend more time caring for each individual child.
- The center appears to be a safe, caring and educational environment for all children.
- The staff promotes the physical, social and educational growth of all children.
- The center or provider has the skills and training needed to care for the child.
- The center or provider has cared for children with the condition or need before.
- Seeing children interacting with each other.
- Observing appropriate discipline and guidance being administered to children.
- The staff responds quickly to situations and questions.

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## Interviewing

While interviewing a potential day care provider make sure to clearly state the needs your child and family have. Provide details of their condition and describe the current structure of your child's daily life.

In addition to the typical questions any parent would ask a child care provider, there are specific questions that parents of disabled or special needs children should ask during the interview process. These include:

- What is a typical day like for a child under your care?
- How has the staff been trained to care for and educate children with disabilities and special needs?
- Do you have special equipment/toys/programs for children with disabilities or special needs?
- Is the facility clean and free of clutter?
- How is the home/facility child-proofed?
- What will you help my child to learn?
- Are parents allowed to observe the day care environment?
- What are your disciplinary policies?
- How do you resolve disputes between children?
- How would you deal with communication problems with a parent?
- Do you have emergency preparedness, first aid or CPR training?
- What special costs might be associated with providing care for my child?
- Are there families of other disabled or special needs children you have cared for who can be contacted as references?

Try to observe the interaction of children in the care of the provider. Watch the supervisor's interaction with other special needs children, and then see how they interact with your own child. Observe the day care provider to get answers to the following questions:

- Is the child care provider attentive?
- Do the children seem happy?
- Do the children seem stimulated?
- Is your child having a good experience?
- Are any children misbehaving and, if so, how are they being dealt with?
- Does the staff ask you questions about your child?
- Can you picture you child spending more time in the program and with the staff?
- What does your "gut instinct" tell you about the facility?

Schedule a second visit to the program if you are impressed, but always check out more than one facility, even if you think the first one you visit is exemplary. In order to pick the right program for your child you will have to base your decision on a comparison of several day care centers and providers. Take plenty of time to think about the pros and cons of each program before you make your decision.

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## After You Have Decided on a Provider

Once you have chosen a day care provider for you child there are several things you should do to make the transition easier for your child and the day care provider. If your child has never been to day care before you should talk with them about the experience. This will help make their

first day, and all subsequent days, easier. Also, continue to educate the child care provider or the facility's staff about your child's physical, emotional, medicinal and educational needs.

Once your child has started day care you should keep in contact with the care provider and staff. Initially this communication could take the form of a daily debriefing when you come to pick up your child. As your child becomes more integrated into the day care system and the personnel become more used to addressing your child's special needs the need for daily briefings will pass. But the lines of communication must always be open so the day care provider can work with the parents to identify and address any changes and unexpected events (both good and bad) that the child experiences in and out of school.

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