

CHILD CARE CHOICES:

AN OVERVIEW OF EARLY LEARNING & CARE SETTINGS

Choices allow parents to meet individual needs.

Finding child care that is affordable, safe, and developmentally appropriate is critical for children and families alike. Children experience both short- and long-term benefits from quality early learning, which sets them up for success as they enter school and beyond. For a majority of families with young children, child care is an economic necessity while they work or attend school. As families navigate their unique circumstances, choice in, and access to, child care settings is imperative.

Early childhood education (ECE) is an umbrella term used to describe the care, education, and developmental support of children from birth through age five. People may use different phrases – including daycare, early learning, child care, preschool or pre-K – to describe the various settings, programs, and opportunities that support young children, but the commonly made distinction between ‘care’ and ‘education’ in early childhood is a false one. **Since children are born learning, anywhere they are receiving care is a place for learning, regardless of the physical location or what it is technically called.** Quality early childhood education can occur in any number of settings, including publicly or privately funded classrooms, in-home settings, care provided by trusted individual caregivers and others.

This resource is meant to provide a broad overview of the settings where children go while they are not in the care of their parent(s) or guardian(s) before they enter the traditional K-12 school system. The settings outlined here are not mutually exclusive as families often piece together multiple forms of child care to meet their individual needs. This diverse landscape of opportunities is referred to as a mixed-delivery system since there are numerous programs and funding sources that work together to care for children. Parents make decisions about where to send their children based on a combination of factors, including cost, location, hours of care needed, individual needs of the child, culture, values, and more.



CHILD CARE SETTINGS

CENTER-BASED CARE

- Child care centers
- On-site care (at or near a workplace)
- Faith-based programs
- Preschool
- Pre-K
- Nursery school

HOME-BASED CARE

FAMILY CHILD CARE

- Family child care homes

FAMILY, FRIEND & NEIGHBOR CARE

- Relative
- Non-relative
- Nanny/Nanny-share/Au pair
- Babysitter

Note: The federal Head Start program, which delivers comprehensive early learning services to families in poverty, can operate in a variety of center- and home-based settings

TYPES OF EARLY LEARNING & CARE EXPLAINED

This section offers FFYF's definitions of early learning and care settings and may not be exhaustive. Given the nature of the mixed-delivery system, some of these definitions may differ slightly from state or local understandings.

CENTER-BASED CARE

Center-based care generally offers classroom-like settings that group children by age to better meet their developmental needs and provide structures that support growth. Center-based care is often what people mean when they refer to "child care" or "daycare." While "daycare" is a commonly used term, it does not accurately reflect any specific type of care, and thus it is not included in the graphic on the previous page. Based on the state and locality in which these programs operate, there are various program structures, funding sources, and regulations that centers must meet.

• Child Care Centers

Centers generally operate in commercial buildings, care for more children than other settings, and operate during standard work hours. Child care centers often care for children in classrooms, with a structured routine, where children are grouped by age to meet children's developmental needs. Many centers serve children from infancy until kindergarten entry, and may refer to their classrooms serving 3- to 5-year-old children as preschool. Licensing requirements vary by state, but centers usually have health and safety standards they must follow. Child care centers are primarily funded through parent payments, although lower-income families may receive subsidies.

WHY FAMILIES MAY PREFER THIS TYPE OF CARE:

classroom-like structure, licensing requirements, and/or various resources including tailored facilities, supplies, and activities.

• On-site Child Care

Recognizing the importance of child care for employees, some employers offer child care at or near their worksite. Most often considered a child care center, these providers may care for children in classroom-type settings grouped by child age. In some cases, such as at a hospital, on-site child care can provide care for families that need non-standard hour care, including overnight or weekend hours.

WHY FAMILIES MAY PREFER THIS TYPE OF CARE:

work hours, employer subsidies, and/or convenience.



• Faith-based Programs

Some center-based care is run through faith-based organizations. Additionally, faith-based organizations may fill critical gaps in child care arrangements by offering child care during school breaks, before and after other providers' hours, or for short periods during the day. In some states, faith-based programs are exempt from licensure.

WHY FAMILIES MAY PREFER THIS TYPE OF CARE:

flexibility, lower cost, and/or shared beliefs with providers.

• Preschool and Pre-K

Preschool and pre-K programs generally support children ages three through five. These programs usually have a focus on school readiness. They may serve children full-time and year-round, or their hours may align with the local elementary school day and calendar. Preschool and pre-K programs can occur in various settings such as schools, places of worship, nonprofit organizations, and child care centers. Preschool and pre-K are publicly funded in certain states and localities and may be targeted or universal in eligibility. However, where that is not the case parents must pay out of pocket. Depending on state rules, these programs may or may not be licensed.

WHY FAMILIES MAY PREFER THIS TYPE OF CARE:

focus on school preparedness, public availability, and/or having another child in the same setting.

• Nursery Schools

The term nursery school is interchangeable with preschool. It is less commonly used, but often describes a center-based program for children ages three to five.



Children are growing and learning across all settings, regardless of what they are called.

HOME-BASED CARE

Many children across the country are cared for in a residential setting -- whether that is in a caregivers' home or the child's own home. There are two primary kinds of home-based care: family child care homes and family, friend, and neighbor care.

FAMILY CHILD CARE HOMES

Family child care homes, also known as licensed child care homes, licensed group family child care homes, legally exempt or license-exempt homes, certified child care homes, or registered child care homes, generally care for small groups of children in a residential setting and usually operate as a business. Family child care providers are primarily funded through parent payments, although low-income families may receive subsidies to cover some or all of the cost. While licensing standards and regulations vary by state, many family child care providers are required to meet basic health and safety standards, and educators often have specific training requirements. Family child care providers may operate independently or as part of shared resource networks that provide additional administrative and quality supports for individual providers.

WHY FAMILIES MAY PREFER THIS TYPE OF CARE:

smaller group size, shared cultural values, lower cost, and/or flexible hours (especially "non-traditional" night and weekend care).

ABOUT FIRST FIVE YEARS FUND

The first five years last forever. At First Five Years Fund, we work to protect, prioritize, and build bipartisan support for quality child care and early learning programs at the federal level. Reliable, affordable, and high-quality early learning and child care can be transformative, not only enhancing a child's prospects for a brighter future but also bolstering working parents and fostering economic stability nationwide. Join us at www.ffyf.org.

FAMILY, FRIEND, & NEIGHBOR CARE

Family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care is a broad term for care that is provided in the child or caregiver's home by someone who is a relative, friend, neighbor, babysitter, or nanny. These providers are generally exempt from licensing and other regulations because they care for a small number of children and, if they are paid, families usually pay them directly.

WHY FAMILIES MAY PREFER THIS TYPE OF CARE:

trust in the caregiver, personalized care, shared cultural values, cost, and/or flexible hours (especially "non-traditional" night and weekend care).

• Relative Caregivers

Many children are cared for by a relative, including grandparents. While some relatives may not view themselves as providers, they are important caregivers for young children. Often, relatives are not licensed or regulated, though requirements vary by state. They may or may not receive formal compensation.

• Non-Relative Caregivers

Neighbors and friends who offer care for young children in their community are generally considered non-relative caregivers. Like relative caregivers, many are not licensed or regulated, though requirements vary by state. They may or may not be compensated.

• Nanny / Nanny-share / Au Pair

While nannies often care for a child daily, this is considered another type of FFN care because they are not typically regulated by the state. Nannies provide individual care for families in their homes. In a nanny share, multiple families may hire a single nanny to care for multiple children. This is often done in one of the families' homes and provides children with social interaction as well as lower costs than a dedicated nanny. Au pairs come to the United States through a State Department program in partnership with a foreign country to provide live-in child care. In return, parents provide au pairs with room, board, and a stipend.

• Babysitter

Babysitters are another type of FFN care. While babysitters may care for children regularly, they often provide care on an hourly or as-needed basis and can fill in gaps in care while parents work or go out.