

Know your Options

Categories of Childcare for children in the 0-6 year old bracket:

- 1. Sessional Services** – Services which offer a planned programme to pre-school children for a total of not more than 3.5 hours per session. Services covered by the definition may include pre-schools, playgroups, crèches, Montessori pre-schools, naíonraí, notifiable childminders or similar services which generally cater for pre-school children in the 0-6 year age bracket.
- 2. Part-time day care** – Services offering a structured day care service for pre-school children of more than 3.5 hours and less than 5 hours per day and may include a sessional pre-school service for pre-school children not attending the part-time day care service. The service must provide the same physical environment, including rest, play and sanitary facilities, as for full day care. Services covered by the above definition may include pre-schools, playgroups, crèches, Montessori pre-schools, naíonraí, notifiable childminders or similar services which generally cater for pre-school children in the 0-6 year age bracket.



- 3. Full Day Care Services** – Services offering a structured day care service for children for children in the 0-6 year age bracket which may include a sessional pre-school service for pre-school children not attending the full day care service. Services such as those currently described as day nurseries and crèches are included in this definition.
- 4. Drop-In Centres** – Services offering day care which is used on an intermittent basis for a period of not more than two hours while a parent/guardian is availing of a service or attending an event. Such services are mainly located in shopping centres, leisure centres or other establishments as part of customer/client service.
- 5. Childminding** – A service offered by a person who single-handedly takes care of pre-school children in the childminder's home for a total of more than 2 hours per

day. There are exemptions to this – further information in relation to choosing a childminder is available from Carlow CCC – ‘**A Parent’s Guide to Choosing a Childminder**’.

- 6. Overnight Pre-school Service** – Services that care for children overnight in a crèche type of childminding service to facilitate parents’/guardians’ working arrangements for a total of more than 2 hours between the hours of 7pm and 6am. (Some exemptions apply)



Five Steps to Choosing Good Childcare

- Step 1 - Get Organised**
- Step 2 - Conduct a Telephone Interview**
- Step 3 - Make a Visit**
- Step 4 - Check References**
- Step 5 - Make a Decision**



Step 1 – Get Organised

Finding quality child care is going to take a little homework. If possible, begin gathering basic information several months before you think you will need child care.

- Ask your friends and co-workers for recommendations.
- Contact your County Childcare Committee (Carlow County Childcare Committee’s website: www.carlowccc.com contains an up to date list of childcare providers) or the HSE for names and contact details of childcare facilities in your area, a list of childminders is also available through the Carlow CCC Office, and other helpful information.

Step 2 – Conduct a Telephone Interview

Save time and energy by using the phone to narrow your search. It is a good idea to contact at least three different childcare facilities and childminders. To get the best response, avoid calling at busy times such as arrival, departure, or lunch time.



	Provider 1	Provider 2	Provider 3
Availability			
What ages are accepted?			
Is there availability?			
Is there a waiting list?			
Hours & Location			
What are the hours for full- or part-time care?			
Is the service close to home?			
Is the service close to work?			
Cost			
When are fees due? How much?			
Are there different fees for part-time or full-time care?			
Are there different fees for children of different ages? (baby care may sometimes cost more)			
Do fees include the provision of meals?			
Do fees include formula or nappies?			
Is there still a charge when a child is sick or on holidays? (there usually is)			
Are there discounts for siblings?			
Are there extra fees — supply fees, late collection fees?			
Quality Issues			
How many children are cared for and what are their ages?			
How many adults are there per child?			
What type of education or experience do the childcare workers have?			
Is it OK to visit the service and when?			
Is the service notified to the HSE?			



Step 3 – Make a Visit

It is important to visit the services while children are there. You will need to consider accessibility, affordability and quality. Good quality childcare has many long term benefits for children and their families and a quality, play-based curriculum will promote children’s development in all areas.

Visit at least three services. Be prepared to spend some time – at least an hour or longer. **You should expect:**

- a warm greeting
- short introductions to both adults and children
- a brief tour
- an explanation of fees and policies
- an invitation to stay a while to see the daily routine and children playing

Most services will have information to hand, possibly in the form of a Parent’s Handbook. This should contain comprehensive and accurate information detailing opening hours, fees, facilities offered, policies and procedures etc. This should leave you with fewer questions to ask however, answers to the following questions are very important in order for you to make an informed decision.

Suggested questions to ask

- Please describe a typical day.
- Do you have a TV/DVD Policy?
- Tell me about your behaviour management policy?
- How do you handle nap times?
- How do you handle toilet training?
- What types of play or learning activities do you have?
- Do you have CPR and First Aid Training?
- What child proofing have you done to prevent accidents?
- What types of foods do you serve for meals and snacks?
- Are children ever transported in a vehicle?
Do you use car seats?
- How do you handle emergencies?



Checklist for Sessional and Full-Day Care Services

	Provider 1	Provider 2	Provider 3
Health and safety			
Has the service been notified to the Health Service Executive and does it comply with regulations?			
Is a copy of the Childcare (Pre-School Services) Regulations available?			
Clean and comfortable, Enough space			
Suitable, hygienic nappy changing facilities			
Enough Toilet Facilities - Handwashing encouraged?			
Toys and furniture in good condition			
Medicines and cleansers locked up			
Is there a security system? Safety gates etc.			
Safety caps on electrical outlets			
Safe, fenced, and litter free outdoor play areas			
Nutritious meals and snacks			
Are the premises clean and hygienic with suitable food preparation and storage facilities? (If hot food is served, is HACCP in place?)			
Smoke detectors			
Covered or thermostatically controlled radiators or heaters			
Alternative exit for fire			
Are there policies covering child protection and equality and diversity in place?			
Is there suitable First Aid and Fire Safety equipment in place?			
Is there adequate insurance?			
Are the premises bright, warm and comfortable?			
Are the premises accessible to adults and children with disabilities?			
Is it OK to visit the service and when?			

Checklist for Sessional and Full-Day Care Services

	Provider 1	Provider 2	Provider 3
Daily routines and room lay out			
Greeted warmly upon arrival			
Lunch and snack times relaxed and pleasant			
Nap times relaxed and NOT stressful			
Consistent, predictable schedule			
Does the daily routine allow enough time for children to engage in and extend activities?			
If your child wishes to change from the routine can they do this?			
Times and places to play quietly or actively			
Times and places to play alone or with others			
Small group sizes			
Are the resting/sleeping arrangements adequate?			
Does the room look interesting and welcoming to you and your child?			
Are the resources accessible to the children and at child level?			
Is the room divided into different play areas? - Arts and Crafts Area. - Constructive and Manipulative Play Area. - Water and Sand Play Area. - Books/Quiet Area. - Imaginative Play Area (Home Corner).			
Partnership with Parents			
Are parents able to drop in at any time or is it appointments only?			
How is information relayed to parents about their children? Verbally, written, daily, weekly, monthly or at the end of each term?			
Are the staff welcoming, approachable and willing to answer your questions?			
Does the service work in collaboration with parents?			
Does the service keep confidential records on each child and discuss each child's development with their parents?			
Are written programmes of forthcoming activities prominently displayed and available to parents?			
Do they observe and assess children's attainments and interests and use this as a basis for planning future activities.			
Do the staff members have the relevant knowledge and understanding to support parents and children with disabilities or specific requirements?			



Checklist for Sessional and Full-Day Care Services

Suggested questions to ask

- Are all the activities offered all day or part of the day?
- Are the children free to choose their activities?
- Are there lots of examples of children’s work displayed?
- Are the children properly supervised but still allowed to experience activities that are challenging and exciting?
- Are the children happy and engaged in the activities?
- For all children, is there a balance between activities that are directed by staff and those which the child chooses for him/herself?
- Finally, do the children seem happy, purposeful and safe?

Where outdoor facilities are available:

- Is the play area suitable, safe and secure at the boundaries?
- Are there a variety of surfaces?
- Is the equipment safe and suitable for the age of the children?
- Are children given access to outdoor activities every day?

Is play valued as the natural vehicle for children’s overall development?

	Provider 1	Provider 2	Provider 3
Are the toys and equipment safe, clean, suitable and accessible?			
Is there plenty of equipment and resources available for the children?			
For babies under 1 year these should include:			
Mobiles, musical toys and rattles, washable soft toys of different textures, activity centres, baby gyms, bricks, stacking toys, pull-along toys and a range of books - board, soft plastic, foam and cloth.			
Are babies talked to, sang to and given individual attention and physical contact?			
Are their positions changed regularly for comfort and to vary the environment?			
Is there space for safe movement – rolling, crawling, first steps?			
Is the environment colourful and stimulating?			
For children 1-3 years these should include:			
Opportunities for messy play – sand, water, paint, modelling materials – clay, play dough			
Opportunities for role play – home corner, dolls, play food, dressing-up clothes, vehicles, farm sets etc. that reflect the diversity of our society			
Opportunities for construction – blocks and bricks of different sizes and materials, interlocking bricks such as Duplo, junk-modelling materials			
Opportunities for physical play – climbing, running, jumping, ring games, ball games, dance			
Opportunities to develop fine motor skills – threading, lacing, jigsaws, drawing, cutting and sticking			
Activities involving story, music and drama			
Activities designed to promote the use of the 5 senses and to develop an appreciation of the natural environment			
Games with simple rules to encourage social skills of co-operation and interaction			
For children over 3 years:			
Activities and experiences should include all of the above as well as providing some more structured activities designed to nurture the following:			
Language skills – talking - about ideas and feelings; listening - to adults and other children; early reading and writing e.g. listening to and creating stories and rhymes			
Mathematical knowledge – space, shape, volume, capacity, measures, sequencing, counting, patterns			
Knowledge of science, technology and the environment – observing, questioning, investigating, classifying in relation to forces, materials, animals and plants			

Checklist for Sessional and Full-Day Care Services

Further questions to ask?

- Will you be consulted about how to deal with your child should he/she become ill, distressed or angry?
- What happens if staff are ill or on holidays - who replaces them?
- What is the settling in policy?

Specific ratios of staff to children are set out below:

FULL DAY CARE

Age Group	Adult : Child Ratio
0 - 1 year	1:3
1 - 2 years	1:5
2 - 3 years	1:6
3 - 6 years	1:8

DROP-IN

0 - 6 years	1:4 (No more than 2 under 15 months)
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Specific ratios of staff to children are set out below:

PART-TIME DAY CARE

Age Group	Adult : Child Ratio
0 - 1 year	1:3
1 - 2 years	1:5
2 - 3 years	1:6
3 - 6 years	1:8

SESSIONAL

Age Group	Adult : Child Ratio
0 - 1 year	1:3
1 - 2½ years	1:5
2½ - 6 years	1:10

CHILDMINDER

0 - 6 years	1:5 (No more than 2 under 15 months)
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	Provider 1	Provider 2	Provider 3
Relationships Between Children and Childcare Staff			
Staff are respectful of children and parents			
Are there enough adults to provide individual attention to your child if they need it?			
Do the staff have a good understanding about child development and working with children?			
Do the staff interact well with the children?			
Do the staff play with the children?			
Are the staff aware of each child's needs, likes and dislikes?			
Do the staff listen to the children and help the children understand and express their feelings?			
Are the children treated with respect and empathy?			
Do the staff talk to children about their behaviour and explain what is right or wrong?			
Do the staff know when to engage with the children and when to observe?			
Do the children interact well with other children?			
Do the staff members interact with children in a supportive way?			
Do they listen to children and give consideration to their ideas and wishes?			
Do the staff members have suitable qualifications and training (on display) and opportunities for further training?			
Do they support bi-lingual parents and children?			
Do they promote each child's individual, personal and cultural identity?			
Is there a positive approach to Irish language and culture?			
Is there evidence of a celebration of diversity in displays, posters, books and the range of equipment?			
Is inappropriate behaviour dealt with in a positive, caring and consistent way?			
Are mistakes used as opportunities to learn?			

Checklist for Drop-In Centres

All the above checklists will be of use to you if you are choosing to use a Drop-in Childcare Facility however it is important to note the difference between all the other types of services and drop-in facilities.

Children usually only spend short periods of time in drop-in centres so procedures for exchanging information are vitally important. Childcare Staff members have responsibility for

caring for constantly changing groups of children and will not have a chance to develop relationships with them. You will need to ensure that you provide staff with relevant details of your child's needs e.g. medical, dietary. The staff should provide you with clear instructions regarding procedures for collecting children, contacting parents and emergencies.

Checklist for School Age Services

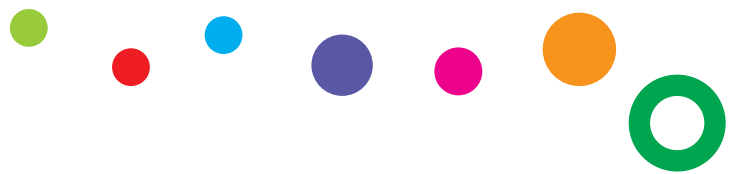
Other points to consider:

Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly states that children have the right to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child.

A school age service should plan and provide a range of play opportunities and activities to foster the development of children's social, physical, intellectual, creative and emotional capabilities.

A strong focus on play should be a core principle of school age childcare.

Active play encourages children's gross motor development while imaginative play allows children to engage in scenarios to assume roles and attempt tasks that are beyond their ability in reality.



	Provider 1	Provider 2	Provider 3
What arrangements are made for the provision of snacks, meals and drinks?			
Are the procedures for collection to and from schools to the service, clearly set out?			
Are children encouraged to participate in community events? Is there adequate insurance cover?			
Are the premises suitable for the age range of the children and the activities on offer?			
Are parents and children consulted for input into the programme of activities offered?			
Are written programmes of activities prominently displayed and available to parents?			
Do the programmes promote healthy life choices, offer opportunities for challenge and risk, be of recreational and educational benefit to the children?			
Are children given choice daily?			
Do staff provide positive role models and treat all children with fairness?			
Are children encouraged to engage in a wide range of social and creative activities appropriate to their age and stage of development?			
Are staff trained in child development from the early years to adolescence?			
Do staff have a play or youth work qualification?			
Has the school age service health and safety policies and procedures in place dealing with:			
• Child welfare and protection			
• Illness			
• First Aid Practices			
• Supervision			
• Behaviour Management			
• Regular safety checks on equipment, risk and hazard assessment			
• Hygiene practices			
Is there a member of staff with a First Aid qualification, present at all times?			

Checklist for School Age Services

	Provider 1	Provider 2	Provider 3
Where a homework facility is provided, do staff:			
Collaborate with local schools?			
Provide assistance and support materials?			
Provide a quiet place to work?			
Provide an opportunity for recreational activities?			
School Age Service Environment:			
Are there separate areas/rooms for eating, homework and quieter activities in addition to more active games and activities?			
Does it have a comfortable and relaxed environment for children of school age?			
Is it aesthetically appealing, soft seating and relaxing?			
Have the children access to supervised outdoor and/or indoor hall play space of adequate size?			
Is there appropriate and suitable kitchen and toilet facilities?			
All areas should be designed for easy and unobtrusive supervision			

Step 4 - Check References

Don't be shy about checking references. Selecting a childcare provider to share the care of your child with is one of the most important things you will ever do.

Ask each childcare service for at least two parent references and their phone numbers. Most parents are happy to share information with other parents and can be a wonderful

resource. Parents who check references say they often get information they couldn't have gathered any other way.

Parent 1 _____
 Parent 2 _____
 Parent 3 _____
 Parent 4 _____

Step 5 - Make a decision

Remember that it is OK to be choosy. Review the information you have gathered and call back if you have questions that were not answered. Trust your gut instinct. If you are not comfortable with what you have found thus far, keep looking. If a child care arrangement you like is full, put your name on a waiting list. Even if you must use another program

temporarily, you will have this as an option if things don't work out. Prepare your children by talking positively about the new childcare situation and by letting them visit the place beforehand. Ask your new childcare facility if it would be OK for your child to bring a favourite toy, teddy bear, or blanket to help ease the transition.

A school age service should aim to be a home away from home for the children attending

Other useful resources are available from Carlow CCC

