

# The childcare hunt can be as simple as

*Do your research, visit the centers and trust your gut.*

BY KRISTEN DE DEYN KIRK

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Jessica Barton of Ft. Myers, Florida thought she was ahead of the game when she was five months pregnant.

"I made a list of all of the daycare centers in the area and called them to find out at what age they took infants; what was their weekly fee; what items did I need to provide (diapers, bottles); what were their security measures; could they provide references; and did they have registration fees and a waiting list," she remembers.

"I was surprised to find that most of them had a 12-month waiting list, which was confusing, because last time I checked, you only know you're pregnant for nine months!"

Barton was on the right track - even though she was frustrated. She was organized with a list of centers and questions. Roadblocks such as wait lists and age restrictions make Moms and Dads pull out their hair, but the smart ones know they can push through such setbacks. The keys are persistence and focus on your child's well-being: What's most important is that you find a place where your child will be loved, protected and nurtured — and not cost you more than a year

of college tuition.

Mary Zurn, who has a doctorate's in early childhood education and is vice president of education and professional development for Primrose Schools, recommends that parents look for a place where their child will be cared for by familiar adults.

"Children benefit from having the same teachers care for them every day in a safe and secure environment," she notes.

So...one of your first questions should be about the school's turnover rate.

In addition, Zurn wants parents to make sure teachers focus on children's care *and* education:

"With a careful combination of academics and play, children are prepared for both the social and educational aspects of elementary school."

Asking for some facts and figures can help parents determine if a daycare will address both.

Zurn recommends these questions:

**What is the student-to-teacher ratio?**

How does it compare to state standards? Can the teachers take care of the number of children they have? Are teachers also able to spend some one-on-one time with children? "Even in group care, it is important that children get a healthy dose of one-on-one time," she notes.



**What are the teachers' qualifications?**

What are the training requirements for teachers? Is there ongoing professional development for teachers? Are teachers certified in First Aid and CPR? "Caregivers with degrees and/or special training will be better able to help your children learn," she says.

**Is the school accredited?**

Does the accreditation process include both internal and external evaluations on an ongoing basis? Accreditation means that the childcare center meets voluntary standards for childcare that are higher than most state licensing requirements.

**What are the center's policies?**

What are the center's policies on safety and parent communications? How does the center handle sick children? What are the payment options?



**What do the other parents think?** What preschools and childcare centers do your friends recommend? What qualities of childcare centers are most important to them? Talk to people you know and trust about their choices for their children's care and education.

So many questions, huh? And guess what? You're just getting started.

You're also going to talk with the daycare directors and teachers in person. Be sure to look for a place that is literally welcoming. Can you stop by anytime to take a tour? If not, the center might have two faces - one that's not so clean and happy and another that's pristine and cheerful only for announced guests.

For your initial visit, try a mid-morning time. Children should be engaged in many activities, and the staff should be warm and friendly and regularly interacting with the children. You can usually gauge the feeling once you walk in.

Parents should also ask about the following while at the center:

- What's on the playground and how much time do children spend outside?
- Are background checks on file?
- Do they practice fire drills?
- Are the infant teachers trained about SIDS?
- Have there been any violations with state agencies in the past two years?

If a center has applied for state licensing, a parent can review past audits and read what is on the report. Search for the facilities you're interested in at <http://www.dss.virginia.gov/facility/search/cc.cgi>. If you do this, be sure to ask the center about any violations and how they've been addressed. Virginia requires all non-religious-based centers to be licensed and religious-based ones to submit

much of the same paperwork as required of licensed centers.

To find out what is required of daycare centers locally, check the National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Elementary online at <http://nrc.uch-sc.edu/STATES/VA/virginia.htm>. While you'll find five different documents regulating health and safety of childcare centers, the Virginia Department of Social Services' 100-page document is the most comprehensive.

In 2008, Virginia introduced a Star Quality Initiative. Centers can volunteer to participate. Licensing is still the bare minimum required of each non-religious center, and the state can award stars for quality above and beyond the minimum if the center decides to participate. Learn more at [www.vecf.org/va-star-quality-initiative](http://www.vecf.org/va-star-quality-initiative).

All of this research is necessary to put your mind at ease. Yet, in the end, it'll probably be your gut that tells you what decision to make.



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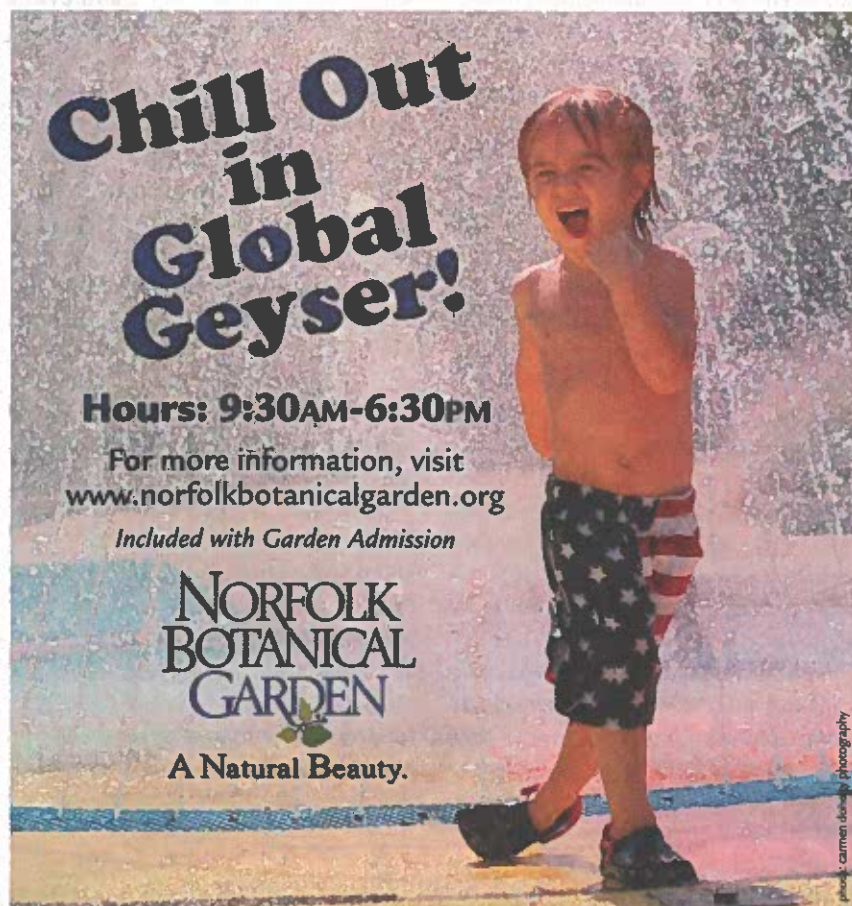
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