Focusing on What Works: Making the Most of a Family's Available Childcare (2022)

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INTRODUCTION

With the cost of childcare unsustainably high, and availability too low to meet demand, many parents find themselves letting go of dreams of their ideal childcare situation and making do with what is available and within their financial reach. While parents may have envisioned a full-time, college-educated nanny to nurture their child's gifts, or the blissful warmth and individual attention of a high-quality Montessori preschool, many find themselves using nonprofessional family caregivers or daycares that are just good enough. The reassuring news is that children can and do thrive in a variety of childcare situations, and that there are benefits across the spectrum of childcare options: from private nannies to family caregivers to run of the mill daycare centers. A knowledge of the evidence surrounding what *actually*matters for a child's development can help ease the guilt parents may feel in not providing their first-choice childcare daydream for their children and maximize the benefit their children receive from the loving caregivers they actually have.

THE GOALS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE

While in a practical sense, childcare from birth until a child starts kindergarten is largely employed to allow parents to work before public education is available; it would be difficult to find a parent who does not also crave a meaningful developmental experience for their child during those hours in which they must receive nonparental care. The first five years of a child's life include milestones of physical, intellectual, moral, and social development and set the foundation for lifelong health and success (Gove & Black, 2016). Since a child with two working parents is likely to spend the majority of their waking time during the week in the care of non-parents, the goals of the childcare setting should be consistent with the overall goals for the child's development during these years. The goals of quality early childhood care include:

- Establishing healthy habits around food and physical activity
- Growing social skills and friendships
- Modeling appropriate behavior and values
- Nurturing pre-literacy and early math skills
- Encouraging a multicultural understanding
- Screening for developmental problems

These goals are consistent across childcare options, though different forms of childcare will have different strengths. With an eye toward maximizing the way in which each available option can meet these goals, we can examine a variety of childcare situations.

IN-HOME NANNY

A qualified, reliable, and caring nanny can quickly become like a member of the family for whom they work. The exception to the rule that "your job won't love you back," nannies provide consistent, quality care from one beloved adult in the family home. It is not unusual for nannies to work 50 hours per week, giving parents time to meaningfully meet their work responsibilities without rushing to a daycare pickup. Nannies provide a developmentally meaningful relationship that, when positive, functions as a consistent and loving presence fostering healthy attachment in young children (Kimball, 2016). To maximize the developmental encouragement the nanny can provide children, parents must be prepared to coordinate discipline and values-based modeling so that these are consistent between the parents and the nanny (Kimball, 2016).

One study did find that both caregivers in early childhood education centers (daycares) *and* nannies are reluctant to perform direct interventions that increase a child's play (Lemay et al., 2016). This may be because nannies are often expected to complete household tasks in addition to childcare responsibilities, so they are not fully focused on engaging the children in play. While daycare workers are similarly unlikely to deliberately increase play activities in children, these deficits may be mediated in a daycare setting by the presence of other children (Lemay et al., 2016). To mitigate this issue in a nanny care setting, the parents should emphasize that the nanny is not expected to also do the work of a housekeeper. Additionally, parents can encourage interaction with other children, by connecting the nanny with other nannies in the neighborhood or developing a nanny share.

Speaking on nanny shares, a new parent may be curious about what one is. A nanny share is a formalized agreement between two (seldom more) families who share one in-home caregiver. A nanny share is a way for families to pay a quality nanny what they deserve while lessening the financial burden for each individual family. Challenges may arise between families when covering a nanny's sick days, coordinating vacation times, and transitioning to preschools. Unlike a private nanny, a nanny share is unlikely to last longer than the first few years of a child's life, since families tend to diverge around age 3 towards different schedules surrounding preschool, and may have additional babies.

AU PAIR

Less often used than a nanny is an au pair, and there is confusion about the difference. "Au Pair" refers to a person participating in one of many structured programs which provides in

home childcare providers in exchange for room, board, and a stipend as well as the opportunity to study. Au pairs are less expensive than nannies, but they are not a cheaper version of the same thing. Au pairs are generally very young and are unlikely to see childcare as their long-term profession. Their hours are strictly capped and unlike nannies who can negotiate duties as they please, they are not allowed to do any work that is not directly related to childcare (*Au Pair vs. Nanny: What Is the Difference between Them?*, 2022.). When considering hiring an au pair, it is important to be honest with yourself about your family's bandwidth for hosting a very young person who may not be familiar with your country and taking responsibility for their safety and comfort. An au pair can be a good choice for a family with school-aged children who need care and transportation for after school, since their schedules are flexible and they are unlikely to have the levels of experience that make parents comfortable putting them in charge of infants. Since au pairs are placed through an agency, parents may find comfort in the fact that they are pre-screened with background checks and have usually received a small amount of childcare training (*Compare Your Child Care Options*, 2022).

DAYCARE

Daycares are by far the most affordable and frequently used childcare solution. While many parents are nervous about dropping their children off at a childcare center, licensed daycare facilities are regulated, safe, and overwhelmingly staffed by loving professionals who care deeply about nurturing the children in their care. A child in daycare learns alongside other children, and is learns that in daycare, like in the "real world", every child's needs are equally important(Kimball, 2016). Daycares with adequate early childhood education curricula are shown to increase a child's academic readiness for kindergarten in early literacy and math skills (Loeb et al., 2007). However, time in daycare is linked to minor early childhood behavioral issues, so a savvy parent will pay special attention to the policies and theoretical or pedagogical foundations of a childcare center's conflict resolution protocol (Loeb et al., 2007). By finding a school that uses an established disciplinary philosophy, such as Montessori or Conscious Discipline ®, parents can maximize the benefits of social interaction inherent in a daycare setting while minimizing the risk for behavioral issues (D'Apolito, 2016).

With the presence of other children, potentially large outdoor play spaces, and time during the day scheduled for unstructured outdoor play, daycare environments are ideal for nurturing healthy relationships with physical activity that can continue throughout a child's life (Finch et al., 2016). In order to take full advantage of this potentially valuable developmental perk of daycare environments, administration should adopt structured play and free-play periods during the daily schedule, and encourage childcare providers to participate and model active outdoor play (Gagné & Harnois, 2014).

CONCLUSION

The best childcare option for any family is the one that allows parents to fulfill their work and other obligations with minimal stress, is not a financial burden to the family, and is a pleasant and developmentally nurturing experience for the child. In the United States today, even this bare minimum set of expectations can seem out of reach for many families. For this reason, and because a child can thrive in a wide variety of childcare situations, it is important for parents to not fear that the childcare they are able to access will leave their child developmentally lacking. By recognizing the strengths and weaknesses inherent to a variety of childcare solutions, parents can use the knowledge that research has provided and skilled child care workers put into practice to maximize the strengths and minimize the weaknesses, leaving room for the magic of childhood to crowd out any anxieties of not getting things exactly perfect. By looking for and encouraging meaningful, evidence-based philosophy in either the individual or childcare center, parents can nurture the developmental needs and foster lifelong skills in their children.

RESOURCES

Conscious Discipline **http://consciousdiscipline.com** **–** Conscious Discipline is a trademarked, evidence-based childcare philogophy that uses knowledge of neuroscience and social learning to turn challenges into learning opportunities.

American Montessori Society **http://amshq.org/** **–** Montessori is an established, research-backed childcare philosophy which emphasizes independence and self-motivation.

Au Pair In America **http://www.aupairinamerica.com** **–** Au pairs must be found through an agency, and require an in-home visit by a coordinator.

Nanny Counsel **http://www.nannycounsel.com** **–** The Nanny Counsel can help a family begin a nanny search and set realistic expectations.

Administration for Children and Families
http://childcare.gov/consumer-education/child-care-quality-ratings – This website can help you evaluate daycare options in your area

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