CHILD CARE SOLUTIONS

Choosing Quality Care:
A Handbook for Every Family



CONTACT US

Call: (315) 446-1220
Toll Free: (888) 729-7290
ccs@childcaresolutionscny.org

Syracuse Office
1101 Erie Blvd East
Syracuse, NY 13210
Mon-Fri 8:30am - 4:30pm

Auburn Office
100 North St., Suite 3
Auburn, NY 13021
Tues-Fri 8:30am-4:00pm

Finding Quality Care for the Children in Your Family

Choosing child care is one of the most important decisions a family can make. Finding the right care is an investment in a child's future. A nurturing and stimulating environment during these early years has a lasting impact on a child's growth, development, and long-term success.

At Child Care Solutions, we believe that quality care is a community resource that supports families and nurtures children. Our staff is here to help you navigate this process by providing free, personalized referrals to licensed and registered child care programs.



How Child Care Solutions Supports You

Our Family Specialists are committed to being responsive, professional, and caring. We work with you to find options that prioritize safety, qualified staff, and engaging, age-appropriate activities.

- **Personalized Referrals:** We listen to your specific needs to help locate potential providers. Please note that the providers we provide are referrals only, not recommendations.
- **No Fees:** Our referral service is provided to all families at no cost.
- **Confidentiality:** All information shared with us is kept strictly confidential. It is used solely to help locate providers, identify helpful resources, and generate blind data reports for our funding sources.
- **Understanding Costs:** The average weekly cost of full-time care varies by setting type and your child's age. We are happy to help you guide you through these variables as you plan.

CHILD CARE SOLUTIONS

Get Started Today

We are here to assist you with your child care needs or answer any questions you may have.

Toll-Free: (888) 729-7290 | ccscny.org

The journey to finding the right child care begins with a clear understanding of your own values and your child's specific needs. Your primary objective is to find a caregiver you trust, someone who not only keeps the child safe, but also aligns with your family's philosophy. Finding that partner in a child's development will provide you with true peace of mind.

Defining Your Needs

To start, we recommend that you and your partner, co-guardians, or other involved family members sit down to outline your priorities. Think of this as your "Caregiver Game Plan." It is helpful to categorize your thoughts into three distinct areas:

- **Absolute Must-Haves:** These are the non-negotiables; factors like specific location requirements, hours of operation, or essential health and safety standards that are mandatory to your family.
- **Preferences:** These are the "would-be-nice" qualities, such as a specific educational philosophy (e.g., Montessori or play-based learning), outdoor space, or proximity to your workplace.
- **Areas of Compromise:** Identifying these early helps you remain realistic. Perhaps you prioritize a slightly longer commute for a program that offers specific enrichment activities, or you are flexible on the daily schedule if the provider's atmosphere is exactly what you envisioned.

By defining these parameters upfront, you will be much better equipped to identify the specific skills and traits you are looking for. This clarity will also serve as a foundation for the rest of your search, making it easier to craft meaningful interview questions, create organized checklists, and ultimately, feel confident in the final decision you make for your child.



Understanding Types of Child Care

Choosing the right setting is a deeply personal decision, as every child is unique and there is no "one-size-fits-all" answer. Regardless of whether you prefer a center-based environment, a home setting, or care from a relative, the first step is to understand the distinction between regulated and unregulated programs.

Regulated Programs (NYS OCFS Licensed/Registered)

Regulated programs are licensed/registered through the NYS Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS). and are required to meet minimum state standards for health, safety, nutrition, and staff training.

An Important Note: *Regulation ensures a baseline level of safety, it is not a guarantee of high quality. We encourage you to use our "Quality Indicators" checklist to evaluate the learning environment, and to check a program's history (see page 10) before making your final decision.*

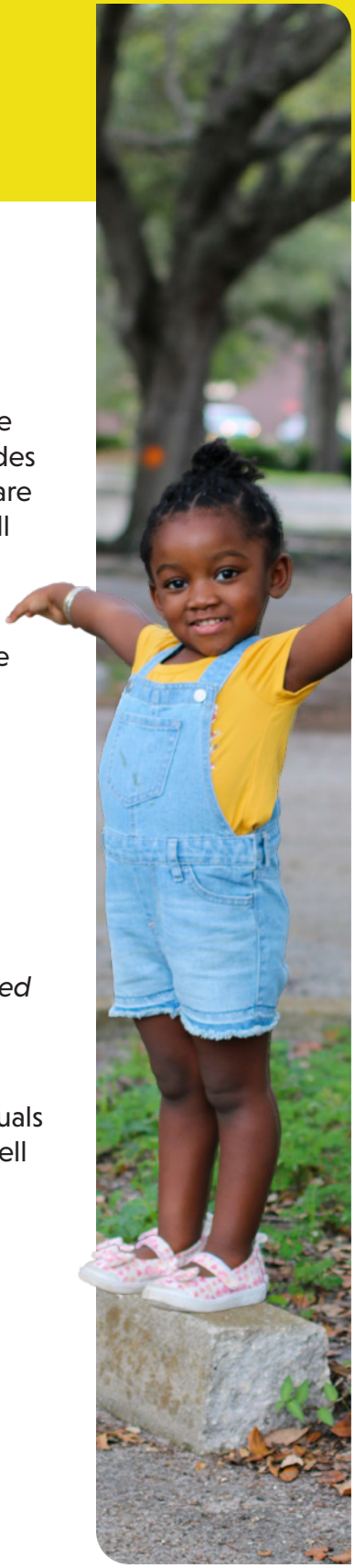
- **Family Care Homes:** Home-based care by one primary caregiver for up to 6 children (plus 2 additional school-age children with OCFS approval). Requires a 1:2 adult-to-child ratio for children under two.
- **Group Family Care:** Home-based child care by a primary caregiver and an assistant for up to 12 children (plus 4 additional school-age children). Maintains a 1:2 ratio for children under two, with provisions allowing one adult to care for up to 8 children under specific age conditions.
- **Child Care Centers:** Non-residential group care provided for more than 3 hours daily, meeting state regulations for facility, health, safety, staffing, and education. (See *Maxium Group Size & Child to Adult Ratio* chart on page 6)
- **School-Age Child Care:** Programs for children from kindergarten through age 12 during non-school hours, holidays, and vacations, offered through child care centers, family child care homes, public schools, youth recreation groups, religious organizations, and other community groups.

Federal /State Programs

In addition to state-regulated programs, you may encounter options that operate under the oversight of federal or state educational systems. While these programs have different administrative requirements and funding models, they are all designed to prioritize child development, school readiness, and family support.

- **Head Start & Early Head Start:** Federally funded, cost-free programs for eligible families. Early Head Start serves children from birth to age 3, while Head Start serves children ages 3 to 5. These programs are licensed by OCFS and often connect families to additional community resources.
- **Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K):** Typically located in public schools, but also found in private schools or centers. Depending on whether the program is in the public or private sector, public entities are supervised by the State Education Department (SED), and OCFS supervises private entities.
- **Nursery Schools:** Programs providing care for three hours or less per day. They are not regulated by OCFS but may voluntarily register with the State Education Department (SED).
- **Camp Programs:** Recreational day or overnight programs operating during summer months or school breaks. These are regulated by the NYS Department of Health or the NYS Office of Children and Family Services.





Legally Exempt & Informal Care

Some families may prefer care provided by someone they already know and trust, such as a relative, friend, or neighbor. New York State recognizes the value of these relationships, especially in areas where child care programs are limited, and provides specific pathways, such as 'Legally Exempt' enrollment, for those receiving child care assistance, allowing families to use these personalized care arrangements while still maintaining access to support systems**.**

- **Family, Friend & Neighbor Care (Legally Exempt)**: If you receive county child care assistance, you may choose to have a relative or friend provide care. These providers are not required to be licensed, but they must be enrolled in the Legally Exempt program to receive payments.

  Relative Definition: *Per NYS regulations, this includes grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts/uncles, siblings, and first cousins (including spouses of these relatives*).

  A Note on Legally Exempt Enrollment: *If you are seeking child care assistance, please get in touch with the Onondaga County Child Care Assistance Program or the Cayuga County Day Care Services to be assigned a caseworker. Once you have your packet, Child Care Solutions is here to assist you with the Legally Exempt enrollment process.*

- **Informal Care/Nanny:** In New York State, informal care options include individuals who provide care for up to two non-relative children in their own homes, as well as hired private nannies who care for children within a family's home.

  Note: *If you choose to hire a private caregiver, please be aware that you become the household employer. In this role, you are responsible for adhering to all labor laws, tax requirements, and minimum wage regulations. For guidance on your responsibilities as an employer, please contact the New York State Department of Labor (DOL) or visit their website at dol.ny.gov for resources on household employment. Please note that because these arrangements are private, hiring a nanny is outside the purview of Child Care Solutions, and we do not provide referrals for these services.*



Average Cost of Child Care
Average Weekly Market Rate

	Infant *(6 weeks - 17 months)*	Toddler *(18 - 35 months)*	Pre-School *(3-4 Years)*	School Age *(5-12 Years)*
Family Child Care				
Cayuga	$279	$265	$263	$236
Onondaga	$315	$300	$285	$270
Group Family Child Care (Full-time)				
Cayuga	$279	$265	$263	$236
Onondaga	$315	$300	$285	$270
Child Care Centers (Full-time)				
Cayuga	$320	$300	$277	$257
Onondaga	$385	$365	$340	$286
School Age Child Care				
Cayuga				$257
Onondaga				$286

Center-Based Care
Maxium Group Size & Child to (one) Adult Ratio

	6 wks-18 mo	18-36 mo	3 yrs	4 yrs	5 yrs	6-9 yrs	10-12 yrs
Group Size	8	12	18	21	24	20	30
Ratio	4:1	5:1	7:1	8:1	9:1	10:1	15:1

Financial Support for Child Care

Finding quality care is an investment, and we want to ensure every family knows about available financial supports.

Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP): Both Onondaga and Cayuga counties offer assistance programs to help cover the cost of child care for eligible families. To see if you might qualify, please visit http://hs.ocfs.ny.gov/CCAPeligibility/ or scan the QR code to take a short, confidential quiz.

NYS Child Care Assistance Eligibility Questionaire

Child Care Solutions Is Here to Help

If you have questions about either of these programs or need assistance with the application process, please reach out to our Parent Services team at Child Care Solutions. You can contact us at 315-446-1220 (ext. 303) or toll-free at 888-729-7290 (ext. 303).

Understanding Family Share (Parent Fee)

If you qualify for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), you may pay a small portion of the cost of care, known as the Family Share. This fee is designed to be manageable and is based on your family's size and annual income.

Example: To give you an idea of how this looks in practice, let's look at a family of four (such as two caregivers and two children, or one caregiver and three children) If that family has an annual income of $116,492, their family share would be $16.00 per week for all children in care.

Family Size	Family Income	Weekly Family Cost
2	$79,214	$11.00
3	$97,853	$13.50
4	$116,492	$16.00
5	$135,131	$18.50
6	$153,770	$21.00

**Family share amounts effective 6/1/2026 through 5/31/2027.*

For more information or to apply contact:

Cayuga County Residences
Cayuga County Day Care Services
(315) 253-4700
CayugaCounty.gov/281/Day-Care-Services

Onondaga County Residences
Onondaga County Child Care Assistance Program
(315) 435-5683
https://onondaga.gov/dss/childcare/apply/

Identifying the Right Care for your Family

Finding the right care is a journey. We recommend following these five steps to ensure you gather all the information you need to make a confident, informed decision for your family.

1. Start with a Child Care Solutions' Family Services Team Member Requesting Your Customized Referrals: Child Care Solutions' Parent Services Specialists can provide you with a customized list of programs tailored to your specific needs. In addition to location and hours of operation, we can help walk you through individualized requirements, such as pet allergies, medications, specialized dietary needs, or specific developmental goals that your child has, so we can find providers that match your family's unique needs.

2. **Call Potential Programs**
   - **Check Availability:** Ask if they have current openings for your child's age.
   - **Ask Preliminary Questions:** Use the "Must-Haves" and "Preferences" you defined in your Caregiver Game Plan (from page 3) to ask specific questions about their program. Focus on the factors that are most important to your family's needs and values. Additionally, review the suggested interview questions below and add any you feel are needed during your preliminary phone call.
   - **Schedule a Visit:** Always arrange to visit during the day while children are in care. This is the only way to get a true sense of the program's daily atmosphere.

3. **Prepare Your Interview Questions**
   When speaking with providers, consider asking:
   - *"Are you licensed or registered with the state?"*
   - *"What is your experience, and what ongoing training do you and your staff participate in?"*
   - *"How long have your current staff members been with the program?" (Low turnover is a sign of stability.)*
   - *"Can I see a copy of your parent contract?" (Review the details on payments for holidays, sick days, and vacation policies.)*
   - *"How do you keep families informed about a child's day?"*
   - *"Are there opportunities for families to be involved in the program, such as field trips or special projects?"*





4. **Visit, Observe, and Interview**
   Bring your Quality Indicators Checklist (found on page 11) with you to your visit.

   - **Observe Interactions:** Pay attention to how the providers speak to the children. Are the interactions warm, responsive, and engaging?
   - **Watch the Routine:** Observe how the day's flow is managed. Does the environment feel calm and purposeful?
   - **Assess the Environment:** Look for safety (e.g., outlet covers, childproofed cabinets) and resources (e.g., age-appropriate toys and learning materials).
   - **Get Documentation:** Ask for a copy of the contract and a list of references before you leave.

5. **After the Visit**
   - **Check References:** Follow up with the references provided. Ask both current families and at least one family who no longer uses the program about their experience.
   - **Review Policies:** Read through the contract carefully to ensure you understand all financial and operational expectations.
   - **Verify Compliance:** Contact the Office of Children & Family Services (OCFS) or check with us to review the program's regulatory history.
   - **The Test Run:** Once you have narrowed the list of programs that match your family's needs, consider bringing your child for a short visit. This allows you to observe how your child interacts with the caregiver and the other children in the group.

Choosing the right care for your child is a significant milestone, and you don't have to navigate it alone. At Child Care Solutions, we are dedicated to helping families find the support they need to thrive. Whether you are just beginning your search or have specific questions about a potential program, our team is here to walk beside you. We hope this handbook serves as a reliable partner in your journey toward finding quality care. Trust your instincts, and know that Child Care Solutions is always here to provide the resources and professional support you need to make your choice with confidence.

7 Indicators of High-Quality Child Care

While state licensing provides a foundation for safety, "high-quality" care goes further. It creates an environment where your child can thrive emotionally, socially, and intellectually. As you visit potential providers, look for these seven key indicators:

1. **Small Group Size & Low Staff-to-Child Ratios**
   Programs that maintain smaller groups and lower ratios allow providers to give each child the individual attention they need. This ensures your child is properly supervised and that their unique needs are recognized and met throughout the day.

2. **Strong Family-Provider Partnerships**
   Quality care is a partnership. You should feel welcome at the program at any time. Look for providers who prioritize open, two-way communication and value your input as the expert on the child in your care.

3. **Consistent, Stable Relationships**
   Children thrive on consistency. Frequent changes in caregivers can be stressful for a young child. High-quality programs prioritize staff retention, ensuring your child can build long-term, secure attachments to the people caring for them.

4. **Specialized Early Childhood Training**
   Your child's caregiver is their teacher and protector. Look for providers who actively pursue ongoing professional development in early childhood development. This training helps them understand how children learn and how to best support their growth.

5. **Licensed or Registered Status**
   Regulated programs are subject to background checks and mandated health and safety inspections. When you visit, don't hesitate to ask to see the program's license or registration certificate; a high-quality provider will be proud to share it with you.

6. **Excellent Health & Safety Practices**
   A clean, organized, and safe environment is the baseline for quality. Quality programs do not just meet minimum safety standards; they proactively maintain their space to prevent accidents and promote healthy habits.

7. **Accreditation**
   Accreditation is the gold standard in the field. It is a voluntary process in which a program undergoes an intensive review by a national commission (such as NAEYC: National Association for the Education of Young Children or NAFCC: National Association for Family Child Care) to demonstrate it meets exceptional quality benchmarks that go above and beyond state regulations.

Have a Comment or Complaint?

If you have questions about a program's history or need to share feedback, please contact the appropriate office based on the program's location:

Onondaga County: Contact Child Care Solutions at (315) 446-1220 (M-F, 8:30 am–4:30 pm).

Cayuga County: Contact the NYS Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) at 1-800-732-5207 or (315) 423-1202 (M-F, 9 am–5 pm) or visit www.ocfs.ny.gov.

Choosing Quality Child Care Checklist

Bring this checklist with you when you visit potential child care providers. When you are prepared with the right questions it is easier to interview and select the right provider for your family.

At Child Care Solutions, we believe that you are the best person to choose a child care setting that will best meet the needs of your child. Choosing care can be a difficult one. It is important to carefully evaluate the program or family child care provider. We strongly suggest that you visit as many programs as possible. This will allow you to explore and compare the many options available. The following is a guide you may use while visiting and evaluating the child care setting.

Child Care Solutions referral service does not give recommendations, endorse or inspect any programs or providers listed for referral purpose.

	Providers Name				
	1	2	3	4	5

Health And Safety

Does the site have working smoke detectors & fire extinguishers?					
Is there an emergency/evacuation plan and are practice drills done with the children?					
Is the site child proof: electrical outlets covered, stairways protected, poisons kept away from children, guns locked in cabinets?					
Is there a working phone on site and emergency numbers posted?					
Is the furniture and equipment safe and in good condition?					
Are there first aid supplies available on site?					
Is there a bathroom or wash area accessible to children on site?					
Is the environment clean? (eating, diapering and bathroom areas)					
Are good health habits such as washing hands before eating, after toileting or playing outside practiced?					
Are infants laid on their backs to sleep?					
Is at least one care giver on site certified in medication administration, CPR and First Aid?					

ENVIRONMENT

Does the site have a safe place for infants to crawl and explore?					
Is there space indoors for active play and outdoors for running, jumping and climbing?					
Does the site have separate spaces for quiet times like doing homework or naptime?					

Is the site clean, bright and child friendly?					
Are there equipment and supplies on site to accommodate the needs of various ages: blocks, books, games, toys, creative art materials?					
Are children allowed to choose activities based on their own interests and abilities?					
Is reading to the children part of the daily activities? Do children watch TV? How much and what?					

CAREGIVER

Are there enough adults for the group size and ages of children?					
Does the caregiver attend trainings related to health and safety & child development?					
Does the caregiver provide individual attention to each child?					
Does the caregiver get down to the level of the children and engage in activities?					
Does the caregiver appear to be warm, loving and nurturing?					

POLICIES, PROCEDURES & HANDBOOK

Are there written descriptions of various fees, hours of operation, and holiday & vacation schedule?					
How are behavior issues and discipline handled?					
How are feeding & sleeping schedules handled? Is toilet training discussed?					
Are nutritious meals provided? Does the provider participate in the CACFP food program?					
Are children transported for any reason? Who provides the car seats? Is there a written permission form?					
Are parents allowed to visit at any time?					
Are references provided?					
How does the program/provider share information regarding your child with you on a regular basis?					
What happens when your child is ill?					
What happens when the care giver is ill?					
How is toilet training handled?					

Notes