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These tools can help new and expecting Pa. parents find child care that meets their needs

by Sarah Boden for Spotlight PA | Sept. 10, 2024



COMMONWEALTH MEDIA SERVICES

In early 2016, Jessica Stamper started searching for child care around the end of her first trimester. The Pittsburgh resident had heard from friends that finding safe, quality care for her first baby would not be easy.

Some programs Stamper considered had high fees to just reserve a spot on their waitlists. And overall, she said, she struggled to find an affordable place that she

liked and was near her home.

“There were certainly ones that we probably could have gotten into right away, but I wasn't comfortable, or I felt their programming wasn't what I was looking for,” said Stamper of her options.

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Child care comes in many forms, and families can struggle to find the right fit for their needs and means. Location, cost, curriculum, operating hours, and quality are just a few of the factors parents must weigh, often while juggling jobs or caretaking.

When Stamper was on the hunt, she made use of Pennsylvania's Keystone STARS program, which rates the quality of providers based on factors like professional development for staff, and the educational curricula for and general learning environment for kids. As providers meet certain standards, they can earn as many as four stars. Any program with three or four stars is considered high quality.

In the early 2000s, high-quality child care in the state wasn't as common, according to a 2002 report from a task force created under then-Gov. Mark Schweiker to study the issue.

Keystone STARS helped change that, said Diane Barber, executive director of the Pennsylvania Child Care Association, a nonprofit that represents providers. She credited the rating system with giving programs clear guidelines for improvement.

Both center-based and home-based programs that care for four or more unrelated children must be certified by the state to operate in Pennsylvania. Having a license

automatically results in the minimum [one-star rating](#), which indicates the provider meets basic health and safety requirements. There are 3,104 providers with one star in Pennsylvania, 1,047 with two stars, 285 with three stars, and 1,733 with four stars, according to the Department of Human Services.

Pennsylvania's online [database](#) of child care providers is searchable by location and type of care, and lists star ratings. But the star system is not foolproof. Barber explained that some top-notch providers in Pennsylvania find it's not worth their time and energy to file the paperwork for a higher rating.

Other designations also can indicate high-caliber care. For instance, [Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts](#) and [Head Start](#) classrooms, which serve low-income families, are good choices, says Emily Neff, director of public policy at Trying Together. The Pittsburgh-based nonprofit advocates for young children and caregivers, and offers a [tipsheet](#) on how to find, choose, and pay for high-quality child care.

Neff and Barber both said another signal of quality is accreditation through organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

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But before deciding on a specific program, the experts strongly advised parents to visit first and see for themselves whether a facility appears organized and smells clean, and to observe how workers engage with the children.

“Do I hear laughter? Do I hear kind voices?” Barber said she would note during a tour.

If kids seem overly curious about the presence of visitors during a facility tour, that's a possible red flag, said Rick Fiene, a research psychologist at Penn State University who specializes in child care quality.

"They should really, really be engaged in what they're doing and everything. And you know, the fact that you're present and observing everything should not be a big deal," said Fiene. A first-rate environment, he explained, will have so much enrichment that kids may not even realize that a stranger is in their classroom.

Since kids learn through play, Fiene said, centers should have a variety of activities, such as blocks to help children develop gross motor skills, crafts for fine motor skills, and comfy, soft areas for dramatic play or reading. And workers should be actively observing the children and available to help when needed.

"The thing you don't want to see them doing is [standing] in a corner, chatting with each other," said Fiene of staff.

Providers' licensing and inspection reports are also a good resource. Keystone STARS attaches these reports to each program's profile.

When reviewing these reports, parents should pay extra attention to any issues with supervision, such as a staff member monitoring more children than what's been permitted by the state-mandated ratios, said Jen DeBell, the executive director of the Pennsylvania Association for the Education of Young Children.

For an infant room, there can be no more than eight babies and there must be a minimum of two caregivers. For toddlers ages one to two, groups can have as many as 10 kids, but must have at least two staff members.

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Unlicensed providers do not receive health and safety inspections from the state, including criminal background checks. That's why Barber cautions parents to be wary of caregivers they find on sites like Facebook or Nextdoor when searching for child care.

While parents tend to want what's best for their kids, some families don't have the option to be overly selective due to the worsening shortage of child care workers. As How We Care has [previously reported](#), this crisis is driven by low salaries that cause caregivers to leave the industry. Barber recommends that families start looking very early for a provider for this reason.

"The line just came up on the [home pregnancy] test? You need to start calling around," said Barber, who adds that care for infants and younger toddlers is especially hard to find right now.

Parents who place their children on several waitlists have a better chance of finding care, said Leah Spangler, the president and CEO of the Learning Lamp, a nonprofit that operates child care centers in southwestern Pennsylvania. Spangler told How We Care via email that demand is very high.

"At The Learning Lamp, we have 350 children on our waitlist. Some of those children may not get care," said Spangler.

Families who follow all of this advice may still struggle to find care, as was Jessica Stamper's experience with her younger daughter, born in 2022. Stamper took the same proactive approach of signing up for waitlists soon after she learned she was pregnant the second time, but ended up doing a nanny-share for three months before a spot at a facility near her home finally opened up. She's glad her daughter is now benefiting from the accredited, four-star child care center.

"I'm really grateful," said Stamper.

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