Choosing Quality Child Care Core Knowledge. This project began when people around the State of Iowa realized that if we want parents to choose quality child care for their children, parents first need to know what quality child care looks like.
Parents looking for QUALITY child care may feel stressed, frustrated, confused, discouraged and even frightened. This emotional roller coaster ride shouldn’t have to take place.
Instead, we want you to feel comfortable and confident when searching for quality child care.
After going through the Choosing Quality Child Care Core Knowledge, choosing quality child care will hopefully seem like a breeze!
In Iowa, we want child care to be a place where children feel happy, safe and are learning. We will tell you what to look for in a child care and a child care provider that can show you whether or not it may be a quality arrangement for your child.
First we will discuss how to search for child care, the types of child care, what to consider in a child care program, how the provider/family relationship should work, how the program should help children learn and be happy, and finally some health and safety factors to consider. Let’s start by talking about your search.
The first way to find child care is to contact Iowa Child Care Resource & Referral. When you call the number on the screen, you will talk to a parent specialist who will gladly refer you to child care options that meet the needs of you and your children. When visiting the Iowa Child Care Resource & Referral website, you have access to child care referrals 24/7.
The second way to find child care in Iowa, is to visit the Department of Human Services website. When on the DHS website, you can use an interactive tool to locate child care all across Iowa.
Types of Child Care
There are five types of child care available in Iowa:

1. Centers (Licensed)
2. Child Development Homes (Registered)
3. Non-Registered Homes
4. Preschools
5. Family, Friends & Neighbors
Centers can either be licensed with the Department of Human Services (DHS) or follow the Department of Education Early Childhood Standards. Centers are usually more structured, and the children are grouped by ages. These group sizes may be bigger than in home child cares. Children may have more than one provider during the day and if one of those providers is sick, there will be a substitute to fill in.
Anyone working in a center needs to have the following completed:

- Fingerprinting
- Child Abuse History Check
- Criminal Background Check

Anyone working in a center needs to have a child abuse history check, criminal background check and fingerprinting done.
Background and fingerprint checks help reduce the risk of abuse or neglect and comforts parents knowing children are safe in their physical and mental health.

Iowa conducts the following criminal records check: National record check conducted by submitting fingerprints to the FBI for the check to be completed and a State of Iowa record check.

A Child Abuse record check is completed within the State of Iowa.

The Department of Human Services may also check dependent adult abuse and the sex offender registry, or other public or civil offense record check in Iowa or in other states.

Please note, this doesn’t provide assurance of no criminal conviction and it doesn’t confirm that there isn’t founded child/dependent adult abuse. What the background check DOES do is that it allows the Department to become aware of criminal or abuse records that need evaluation prior to said person being approved to be involved in child care.
There are trainings staff must take when working in centers. Anyone working in the center, and the substitutes, need to have a valid certificate in CPR, First Aid, Universal Precautions and Mandatory Child Abuse Reporter training. Center staff working less than 20 hrs. are not required to have CPR or First Aid.
Child Development Homes are registered with the Department of Human Services. You may also hear them being referred to as registered homes. They are visited by DHS once a year and more often if there is a complaint. Child Development Homes may cost less and have smaller group sizes with children of many ages and siblings together. This kind of care looks a lot like a family setting with one or two of the same providers everyday. A Child Development Home provider’s hours may be more flexible with possible evening or weekend care. If a provider needs a day off, the parent may be in charge of finding back-up care for their child that day.
Like centers, Child Development Homes must have background checks and fingerprinting completed. A Child Development Home provider and people living in the home 14+ years old need to complete a child abuse history check and a criminal background check. The provider and people living in the home 18+ years of age will also need to complete fingerprinting.
Child Development Home providers also have trainings they must take. The providers and their substitutes need to have an up-to-date certificate in CPR, First Aid and Mandatory Child Abuse Reporter training.
Some parents may choose neither center or Child Development Home care. They may choose non-registered home care. Non-registered homes are allowed only 5 children, including the provider’s own children. DHS does not visit or check these homes, although they may be visited if there is a protective concern or over numbers complaint.
Non-registered home providers do not have to complete background checks. It is important to know that these people may have a criminal record and may be considered unsafe for children to be around unattended. If a non-registered provider is receiving Child Care Assistance, they have had background checks completed by DHS.
Non-registered homes receiving Child Care Assistance should also take the required CPR and First Aid training.
Family, friends and neighbors do not need to be registered, although they may apply and get Child Care Assistance money if approved by DHS. Families may feel more relaxed with family, friends or neighbors caring for their children.
Family, friends and neighbors who apply through DHS to receive Child Care Assistance will be required to have a child abuse history check, criminal background check and fingerprinting completed.
Family, friends and neighbors receiving Child Care Assistance should also take the required CPR and First Aid training.
Preschools have part-time and full-time programs that offer varying hours. They are typically open during the school year and are designed for children ages 3-5 years old. Preschools can choose to be licensed with the Department of Human Services.
All programs follow ratios. If someone is caring for over five children, they must be regulated by the State of Iowa and become licensed or registered. Ratios help make sure children can be supervised at all times. Consider staff turnover when looking at ratios. If it seems like there are staff changes often, parents should think about the effect of this change on their child’s care, education and safety. When there is a predictable, constant routine and caregiver children will feel secure. Have your provider show you in their manual how many children they can care for and how they plan to meet their ratio. If you would like to learn more about ratios, visit the DHS website: dhs.iowa.gov
When choosing between child care options, make an effort to go visit your choices and interview the provider or director. Ask for a tour of the environment your child will be in.
When you go to interview a child care, we want you to ask them about their Registration or License. They should have it posted in a visible location.
Ask about a provider’s education and experience in the field. This will give you an idea about their background and skills with young children. You will also get an understanding of their child development practices and child care practices.
Licensed center and Child Development Home providers are required to take training throughout the year. They are always learning about different areas such as child-development, age appropriate activities plus many others. Visit with providers about their training to get a better idea of what information is supporting the quality of programming provided. Also, some providers will take part in training that can educate them on working with children with special health care and/or educational needs, so if that is something needed for your child, talk to your provider about this. There are some required trainings that Centers, Child Development Homes and family, friends and neighbors receiving CCA
The Quality Rating System (QRS) is a statewide voluntary program in which providers can earn points based on their actions to improve the quality of the care and education they provide to children and families. Families should ask about QRS and what, if any, participation is being completed by their child care provider. Families can be assured providers who work with the QRS system are working to ensure high quality in their programs. If you’d like to learn more about Iowa’s Quality Rating System, visit the website you see on the bottom of your screen. http://dhs.iowa.gov/iqrs
Many providers want to make sure all children can have quality care. This can happen through Child Care Assistance. Child Care Assistance is in place to help low-income families get quality child care for their children. Providers are aware of and work with families to ensure that confidentiality is kept. If you’d like to learn more about Child Care Assistance, visit the website you see on the bottom of your screen. http://dhs.iowa.gov/child-care
You should not be afraid to ask during an interview for a list of references. References can help you understand the type of child care program they are considering. When thinking about sending your child to child care, it helps to talk to other parents whose children have been or are in that program. Most high quality programs will have current or previous families who are willing to share comments about the program.
Provider & Family Relationship
Child care is a partnership between the provider and families. It shouldn’t be that either the you or providers do all of the work. Some providers you visit may have a parent handbook and written agreement between them and you. This written agreement sets the stage for open communication between family and the provider.
The written agreement may include things like:

- Hours of care, fee schedule
- Days provider is closed for holidays/vacations
- Policy for termination
- Notification of fee changes
- Charges if child is absent
- Early or late pick-up charges
- Any additional activities available plus their cost

All of these things should explain what can be expected of the provider as well as the family’s responsibilities.
To keep this partnership professional and strong, confidentiality should be kept in all areas. Any expectations regarding child care should be talked about between the parents and provider. Quality child care is not the sole responsibility of the providers or you as the parents. We want you to express the needs and interests of your child to providers since the children are most times unable to.
On days that are “different than normal,” the parent and provider should discuss and decide together if group care is the best place for your child that day. Some examples of a different than normal day would be if there was a death in the family, new baby, parent separation, parent out of town, child is sleepy or has been sick.
Happy & Learning
When you step in a child care provider’s door, you should be able to use your five senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell) to see if children want to be here.
When you see children laughing, happy, joyful and respecting one another, that is a sign kids are comfortable. If children want to be at child care and are excited to go most days, that is a good sign. This means they feel secure and enjoy the environment.
The provider should always greet the child and family. They set the tone for the day’s activities, learning and your children's well-being. The greeting is a key time for communication between parents and providers. Look for someone who is groomed, clean, emotionally in-tune with each child and happily ready for their day.
Children should have a place to store their personal belongings. This gives you the guarantee your child’s things are being taken care of and won't become part of the days' clutter.
You should be able to view a posted routine before they leave that is flexible enough to meet the needs of all children. A predictable routine is vital to your child's day. It helps develop their sense of time and order.
Children develop best when the environment meets their stage of development and sets a foundation for all future school and relationship skills. The furnishings at the child care should be child-sized. This ensures that each child can take more control of his/her bodily movements, thus helping with physical development. Materials for children should be age appropriate and suited to meet their developmental needs. Games and other playthings that are too easy or challenging can cause frustration and behavior issues. A variety and sufficient amount of toys should be available to children during free play.
Providers should have planned activities throughout the day for children. Planning is a key element for all child care providers. Daily routines and schedules will look different in each setting, but should include chances for children to make choices in free play with a variety of activities and materials. Planning involves looking at all development, content areas and teaching staff to organize the room to allow for individual or group experiences. Adults support children’s learning by providing comments or questions to challenge their learning. This can be done by having activities led by the provider that:

• Encourage use and development of language
• Develop large and small muscle skills
• Promote self-esteem
• Promote exploration
• Include active play and quiet play
• Encourage creativity and imaginative play
• Encourage cultural awareness
• Be indoors and outdoors

Providers in high quality care are intentional about the ways they plan and provide experiences that allow children to grow and learn. Providers should be sensitive to self-esteem and self-confidence of young children yet challenge to persist even when not successful (such as a tower that falls down and child rebuilds). High quality environments have activities that address all areas of development as well as important considerations for how preparation is approached, such as how is diversity considered as part of process. Age appropriateness must be considered in planning these activities.
Some activities should be child-led. This may be known as free play. Free play encourages children to explore and handle materials in a manner that allows them to become fully engaged and make decisions about how the play will evolve. This helps them learn through actually DOING! This option to make decisions about their learning is good for the child to process information, learn about others and gain perspective on new information (learning). It is known when children engage in extended free choice learning, they become more able to make choices and decisions in other areas. The extra time with materials allows children to fully engage in understanding a concept and is more appropriate than short segments of activity with learning.
Healthy & Safety
Providers are required to have first aid kits available in all areas where children are cared for so staff members are ready to handle emergencies. These places include: in the center or home, outdoor play area, vehicle used for driving children and on field trips. Also when going on field trips or being transported, you should know and be comforted that the correct seat restraints are being used.
Medications should be stored out of reach of children. This reduces the risk of unintentional poisoning.
If a child needs medication during the day, the parent must give the provider written approval. The medication must be in the original container with the label in place. The original container includes information essential to ensure safe medication administration. All medications require clear instruction and medical confirmation of the need for medication to be given while the child is at the child care program. Medications are encouraged to be given at home when possible to avoid potential errors in medication administration at the child care program.
If a child has food allergies, make sure the provider is able to meet the needs of this child. The provider should always have emergency medications on hand for that child. For example: EpiPen, Inhalers, Nebulizers, seizure medication and allergy medications always available. Emergency medications should be accessible to providers at all times and staff should be properly trained on its use. A delay in emergency medication administration is a major factor in deaths caused by anaphylaxis.
All infants up to 12 months of age should be placed wholly on their back for sleep with no blankets or soft material in the crib to reduce the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). If a child’s medical condition requires a different sleep position, there must be a signed waiver from a health care provider. Deaths in child care due to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) occur at a significant rate with many of these deaths occurring as a result of stomach positioning.
Infants should spend no more than 15 minutes twice a day in restrictive infant equipment such as: Swings, car seats, bouncers and Exersaucers. Too much time spent in these containers can slow development of gross motor skills. Infants also need to have supervised tummy time while awake to help with muscle development.
Recognize that emergencies do happen and make sure the provider has a plan. The provider should have an evacuation map and written instructions ready for all different types of emergencies: fire, flood and tornado among others. Tornado and fire drills should be practiced and documented monthly. This helps children and staff know what to do if an emergency happens. Some emergencies may require moving to a safe, clean location away from danger. If children have to be moved away from the child care facility, you should know the primary and secondary location where children may be taken. They should also know how to reach the provider during emergencies.
There should be a fire extinguisher on each child-occupied floor. These need to be accessible in the event of a fire in the home or center.
Meals and snacks should be well-balanced, healthy and served in the right amounts. This is important for nutrition reasons, but also gives children physical and emotional comfort in knowing that their hunger needs will be met.
A menu should be posted in a visible location. This allows families to address concerns, incorporate standards at home and actively engage children in nutrition.
A provider may be participating in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) or follow the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) guidelines on nutrition. Ideally, all providers are expected to follow CACFP meal patterns even if they do not participate in the actual program. These are two ways parents can be reassured their children are receiving healthy meals and snacks.
The provider should promote healthy habits such as handwashing. It is the most important way to stop the spread of infection. Handwashing should be done when the child arrives at the child care program and before going home. It should also take place before and after using the bathroom, changing diapers, eating and playing with pets. Lack of proper handwashing has contributed to many outbreaks of illness in the child care setting.
Diapering should take place on a clean, designated space. A designated diaper changing station and following the proper diapering procedure reduces the spread of infectious disease organisms. The provider should wear disposable gloves; disposable gloves provide a barrier that may reduce the presence of pathogens under fingernails and on hand surfaces. Finally, the changing surface should be cleaned/sanitized between children. There should also be no food present.
The facilities, grounds and vehicles used for transportation should all be tobacco and smoke-free. Secondhand smoke is damaging to the body, especially for the young child whose body is developing. Infants who are exposed to secondhand smoke have a higher risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), the leading cause of death in infants.
In Conclusion
As you can see, when it comes to choosing quality child care, there are many components. Remember to easily start your search by contacting Iowa Child Care Resource & Referral or the Department of Human Services. There are five types of child care you can choose from, and when looking at these five, think about background checks, fingerprinting and required trainings. Consider interviewing potential providers, and ask them about their education and experience and to see their license or registration. Talk about training, QRS, Child Care Assistance and ask for references. The provider/family partnership may start with a parent handbook and written agreement which will lead to open communication between both parties. It is important that this remains a professional partnership with confidentiality maintained. Expectations should be discussed between parent and provider and needs of the child expressed so proper care can be given. Be intentional about seeing the child care program and how children act in the environment and whether they look like they want to be there. The environment should be set up for all developmental ages with both provider-led and child-led activities. Children should be given plenty of FREE PLAY throughout the day. It is so important to consider the health and safety of your child. Make sure to ask questions and identify whether or not the child care program is a place you’d feel comfortable sending your child.
We hope you feel less of all of these negative emotions and more comfortable and confident in finding quality child care. Please know that there are FREE resources available to assist you in finding quality child care. Don’t be afraid to take advantage of those because you can change your child’s life when finding a quality child care.
We want all Iowa children to be happy, safe and learning. Thank you.