Any working parent will tell you that child care is a top priority. But, do you know what to look for? Often decisions are made based on availability, cost, location, hours of operation, and reputation. While these are all important, there are some additional issues you may want to ask about before choosing a provider. Here are some questions to get you started.

How many children can the provider care for?

The NH Bureau of Child Care Licensing mandates caregiver to child ratios that must be met in order to maintain a license to operate.

For center-based care the ratios are as follows:

- Infants (up to 1 yr) – 1 caregiver: 4 children
- 1 Year Olds – 1 caregiver: 5 children
- 2 Year Olds – 1 caregiver: 6 children
- 3 Year Olds – 1 caregiver: 8 children
- 4 Year Olds – 1 caregiver: 12 children
- 5 Year Olds and up – 1 caregiver: 15 children

Within these guidelines you may find a provider that is Licensed-Exempt (cares for no more than three children that are not their own), Licensed Family Child Care providers, or center-based providers that practice mixed age grouping. There are different requirements for these groups, so check with the provider about ratios they follow.

What qualifications do the caregivers have?

The education and experience of those working in the early childhood profession can differ a great deal, even in one location. It is not uncommon to find caregivers with years of experience working alongside those with only a few months; caregivers with on-the-job training and those with college degrees; and caregivers just starting out to those nearing retirement.

The Bureau of Child Care Licensing mandates minimum requirements for all child care personnel working in a licensed program (including age, education, and experience), but it is not always obvious what qualifications your provider may have. Go ahead and ask! What kind of education and/or experience do they have? Do they participate in continuing education opportunities? What is it they enjoy about working with young children?

How will I know my child is safe?

The fear of putting your child with strangers is a daunting one. Ask providers what kind of security policies and procedures are in place (locked doors, visitor check-in and ID).

Observe how adults supervise children and evaluate the environment for potential areas of concern. Also, touch base about how you would be notified if anything happened (security issue or everyday accident).

What will your child experience while they are in care?

This is another area that can differ a great deal from one provider to the next; from hands-on learning to direct instruction, from free play to facilitated experiences. Ask the provider to share with you their philosophy about what is important for young children in care, and then visit the environment and watch the adults and children in action. Is this a place you picture for your child?

As you can see, there are a lot of factors to consider in choosing a child care provider. Visit each program you are considering, talk with each provider, and evaluate which program is the best fit for you and your child.

Additional Resources:
- Easter Seals Resource and Referral
  621-3501 or www.nhccrr.org
- NH Bureau of Child Care Licensing
  1-800-852-3345, ext. 4624
  www.dhhs.state.nh.us/DHHS/BCCL
- VNA CHILD CARE & FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER
  Providing high quality, affordable care to working families that could otherwise not afford it; to families receiving state scholarships for child care; and to families in foster care. For more information, call 666-5982, ext. 11.