

Care Options for Kids: What's a Responsible Parent to Do?

"Remember that children, marriages, and flower gardens reflect the kind of care they get."
—H. Jackson Brown, Jr.

Finding high-quality care for our children is an issue all parents face when we work outside the home, fulfill other commitments, or take time for ourselves. It generally requires some deliberate searching to find a good fit between your child and care provider, and can lead to guilt and frustration on your part if you worry that you should always be the caregiver. But an in-home sitter or an out-of-home care situation can be good for young people when the match is well-made. Here are some tips to accomplish that goal:

Try it...

For parents with children of all ages

- Hold a quarterly conversation with your child's caregiver. Praise your regular caregiver (and casual babysitters) for what they do well. Rarely do caregivers receive this kind of formal feedback. Next, talk about any concerns you have or changes you'd like to see. You might frame your comments in terms of how you think your child would respond to a change ("Eric usually responds well at home when we try this.").

For parents with children ages birth to 5

- When you look for a new childcare provider or assess a current arrangement, watch for signs of a caring environment—caregivers and children who enjoy learning and being together. Compliment caregivers when you see these signs. Ask questions when you don't.
- Get to know caregivers personally. Find out about their hobbies and interests. Caring about your caregiver helps you establish good communication, which translates into positive relationships between caregiver, child, and you.
- Keep an eye on décor: Is it safe and appropriate for children? Is the environment stimulating, organized, and thoughtfully arranged?

For parents with children ages 6 - 9

- Check out your school's before- and after-school care program. Are the rooms welcoming to children? Are there lots of age-appropriate activities and spaces for kids?
- Try to cultivate relationships with one or two reliable sitters. Explain what you expect in terms of how they interact with your kids and whether they are responsible for other household tasks, such as preparing meals or serving snacks.
- In addition to establishing clear expectations for sitters, be sure to pay them as well as you can so that they know you value their work. Consider tipping good sitters if their work exceeds your expectations.

For parents with children ages 10 - 15

- Together with your children, find out about out-of-school opportunities in your community. Check

with schools, congregations, community centers, local merchants, and sports or arts organizations. Once you compile a list of opportunities, pick some together that your children think would be fun or interesting. Consider sharing activities and carpools with your children's friends.

- When leaving children and teens home alone, always be sure to provide information about how they can contact you or another trusted adult. Talk about what kinds of issues warrant a phone call from them to you, what constitutes an emergency, and whom they can turn to in a crisis.

For parents with children ages 16 - 18

- Encourage your teens to be involved in some out-of-school programs or activities. If they aren't interested in options at school, help them identify and research opportunities in your community. Carefully chosen part-time jobs or volunteer situations can also be worthwhile endeavors for teens.
- If you leave your teen home alone overnight, be very clear about house rules and expectations. Plan scheduled check-in calls and ask a close neighbor, friend, or adult family member to call and/or stop by while you're gone to make sure everything is going okay. Be sure they know how to get in touch with you.

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