

## Choosing Childcare Wisely

On a Wednesday morning in October, I walked into my two older children's preschool classroom to find six college-aged young men milling around the room, looking awkward and painfully disinterested in being there. As I looked for Ellie and Landon's teachers, I found them both to be absent. The class of 12 two to five-year-olds was being conducted by the young woman, in her mid twenties at best, who functioned as a teacher's aid, and a volunteer mother of one of the other children in the class.

My husband Andrew and I had become accustomed to seeing college student "helpers" at the preschool, having been told they were Early Childhood Development students at MSU who were fulfilling a requirement for their undergraduate work. But they had always come in small numbers, and had been actively *engaged* with the children. The guys I observed in the classroom on that morning in October were doing little more than hanging around with each other, biding their time, and making use of the toddler-sized computer station to play solitaire.

In a series of conversations with the volunteer mom, the preschool teachers and other administrators, I discovered the young men were at my children's preschool satisfying a community service requirement following their arrest for under-aged consumption of alcohol. Furthermore, I discovered there had been a string of similar visitors to Ellie and Landon's classroom over the past year, unbeknownst to most of the parents, for other infractions including drug use, drug paraphernalia possession and DUI's. Andrew and I were astounded and deeply disturbed. We couldn't get past the questions of, "At what point did our children become part of a community service project without our consent? How was this *ever* considered a good idea?" As we delved into the issue further, it became clear to us that not only were these guys lacking early childhood

development training, but we suspected they were devoid of the other state-mandated requirements childcare workers must possess such as proof of tuberculosis testing and an up-to-date immunization record, as well as complete criminal background checks.

A year before, while preparing to enroll Ellie in preschool at the age of two-and-a-half, I had researched and visited several classrooms; scrutinizing the cleanliness, general sense of order and learning activities provided by each facility. I had asked questions about healthy snacks, philosophies on discipline, and play time versus inclusion of academic activities. I thought I had made a great choice for her, and her younger brother who would eventually join her at school. The unpleasant surprise Andrew and I uncovered left me uneasy at the thought of re-enrolling our children elsewhere; plagued by the haunting question of, “Is there *any* place that is 100% safe for our children, other than at home?”

“We do have several quality programs out there,” says Joanie Slaybaugh, Provider Services Coordinator at Childcare Connections, a non-profit childcare resource and referral agency serving Gallatin, Park and Meagher counties. “But there are also those that could use some additional support and training.” A large part of Slaybaugh’s job at Childcare Connections is to work with new and existing licensed preschools and daycares to promote an ever increasing level of quality in the services provided by these organizations.

“Attending childcare can be a wonderful way for children to improve their social and cognitive skills—especially for a child who doesn’t have siblings to learn and grow from,” surmises Slaybaugh when asked about the benefits of enrolling young children in childcare. While not a parent herself, she suspects the greatest draw back to attending daycare is the long hours some children spend away from their parents while mom and/or dad are gone to work.

The fact of the matter is, there are some *wonderful* childcare and preschool facilities out there. There are teachers, and childcare workers who have chosen their line of work simply because they adore interacting with young children. But as parents, it is our job to ensure we are placing our little charges in the care of reliable, compassionate, trust-worthy adults when they are away from us. So how do we *know* our children are safe and sound when they are out of our care? Here are some questions to ask when preparing to enroll our children in preschool or day care:

Who will be caring for my child? What degree of training do they have in working with young children?

Do all employees undergo a criminal background check?

Are all employees up to date on their First Aid/CPR training?

What is the student/teacher ratio? (see side bar for state mandated student-teacher ratios)

Do the hours of childcare satisfy my needs?

What is the facility's sick child policy?

Are children required to be current on all recommended vaccinations?

How are infants cared for to ensure their particular needs are met?

Are meals well-balanced and nutritious?

What types of values, education and other lessons do the teachers/care providers plan to impart on my child?

What policies are in place for informing parents of changes in the facility's routines, procedures, and schedule?

How will you communicate with me regarding any concerns you may have about my child?

Many parents may not be aware of the fact that Montana State mandate requires licensed childcare facilities to post written policies on issues including meal/snack menus, sick child policies, activity schedules and fire/safety drill schedules.

While double-checking to make sure your child's daycare is following the rules and regulations spelled out in their licensure agreement, other parents may be sweating it out as to whether or not they'll even be able *to find* placement for their child(ren).

Lisa Curry, Resource and Referral Specialist at Childcare Connections, cautions parents with infants and young children that the number of childcare facilities compared to the quickly escalating population in our area is insufficient.

"It's definitely an issue," she confides. "There just aren't enough facilities right now."

Rumors of families placing children on wait lists for daycare or preschool—children who *aren't even born yet*—are becoming true at an alarming rate. But, beyond questioning a childcare or preschool facility about wait lists and estimated time frames of when your child might be invited for enrollment, other issues parents ought to consider when investigating childcare include:

Maximum number of children in the program

Cost

Staff turn-over rate

Emergency action plans for children w/ allergies or other health concerns

Daily activities planned for the children

How your child's temperament, interests and behavior fit with the program's environment

The program's schedule compared to that which your child is accustomed to

Safety, cleanliness and overall comfort of the facility

Any parent of a young child who has been through the heart wrenching process of selecting a preschool or daycare program knows how difficult this decision can be. The great news is that there are many wonderful resources to assist in the decision-making process. One the web, you can visit sites such as: [www.childcareconnections.info](http://www.childcareconnections.info) and [www.childcareaware.org](http://www.childcareaware.org).

“One piece of advice I always give parents looking into childcare is to call the local childcare licensor,” says Joanie Slaybaugh. “They can find out if there is any public record of deficiencies or other problems with a day care they are considering.”

Having learned that preschools are not required to register with the state under a licensing agreement similar to that of daycare facilities (although many choose to do so) I realized that the buck ultimately stopped with my husband and me to ensure the quality of the preschool program we would send our children to. As I regained enough courage to consider seeking out a new preschool for Ellie and Landon, I visited some magnificent facilities that boasted outdoor gardens, friendly pets, immaculately clean classrooms with fabulous learning toys and tools, and warm and welcoming staff members. But aside from admiring the ambiance some of these facilities presented, my search included many more probing questions than I had been willing to ask before.

While nothing detrimental happened to Ellie and Landon as they attended preschool where ill-qualified individuals were fulfilling their ten hours of disciplinary service by sweeping floors and cleaning dishes, I shudder at the thought of what *could have* happened in the blink of an eye. My children depend on their parents to make the best and *safest* choices for them as possible. And while I would never have imagined

needing to ask whether or not there would be recently arrested young men helping out in my kids' classroom, you better believe I'm willing to ask now.

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For side bar:

Montana State mandated childcare staff-child ratios:

Infants (0-2)	1:4
Toddlers (2-3)	1:8
Preschoolers (4-6)	1:10
School aged (6+)	1:14

Montana State mandates for childcare worker qualifications:

\*Age  $\geq$  18 y.o

\*2 yrs. Experience working in a licensed and registered childcare facility **OR** BA degree in education or related field

\*Significant language skills

\*Dept. of Health and Human Services personal statement of good health (required for all childcare workers, aides, or volunteers coming into contact with children attending a preschool or day care facility)

\*Criminal background and Adult Protective Services check

**Info. courtesy of:** [www.daycare.com/montana](http://www.daycare.com/montana) and [http://nrsc.edu/states/montana/mt\\_center.htm](http://nrsc.edu/states/montana/mt_center.htm)

Bozeman Childcare facility licenser:

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