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Editors Preface

Membership of the European Community has brought about changes in perspective for all member states. These changes have been favourable for the most part, representing an advance in the standard of living and with the expectation of future improvements. Each advance in society however may bring about a new set of problems. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the new opportunities for women in the labour force. The advent of the smaller family, the increase in the number of women participating in the labour force, and the increase in the number of children of single parents, have all brought into sharp focus the problems and issues of childcare. This in turn has uncovered a need for more equal sharing of family responsibility between mother and father as well as between the family and the community.

Ireland's fertility rate has been declining steadily in the past two decades, being now 2.4. However it is still the highest in the European Community, where Ireland remains the only country in which the population replaces itself (above 2.1). This European 'demographic time bomb', as it has been called, will result in a shortage of school leavers for most European countries facing into the nineties, with resultant labour market shortages. Our own demographic time bomb should not result in decreasing numbers of school leavers before the end of the nineties. However, we can expect a brain-drain and skills-drain to the rest of Europe after the completion of the Internal Market in 1992. One can therefore reasonably predict that Irish employers will soon follow their European (including UK) counterparts in actively trying to attract and retain women in employment.
Social acceptance of women in employment and the legislative enactment of equality of opportunity have come to be seen as incomplete without the possibility of offering parents some assistance in the job of child rearing by means of nursery or child minding facilities in the community. Thus childcare has moved from being a purely personal or family matter to being a shared family and social matter, requiring some measure of social infrastructure of childcare services.

The emergence of childcare issues into the social domain has been slower in Ireland than in the other EC countries. Examination and analysis of the issue have not however been wanting and we have had a number of government reports highlighting the issue and making specific proposals for increasing the number of childcare places in the community. Systematic policies to implement such proposals are less visible. There have nevertheless been some developments over the past decade, such as the increase in health board nursery provision for children in social need, and the provision of a nationally recognised training course for preschool care workers in the Dublin Institute of Technology, at Cathal Brugha Street.

Ireland's membership of the European Community has also brought the childcare issue into sharper focus as the next logical step on the road to equality of opportunity for women. Participation in the Community-wide Childcare Network and the publication of the findings of that Network Childcare and Equality of Opportunity, 1988 (Moss, P.), plus that of the Irish Childcare and Equal Opportunities; policies and services for childcare in Ireland, 1988 (Mc-Kenna, A.), served to place childcare in Ireland in a European context. These publications laid down a data-base against which future progress may be judged. Peter Moss' study described the mosaic of childcare systems in each European country, making recommendations for national policy and for future action throughout the Community.

The present publication is the first in a series on Childcare Issues in Ireland. It is being published by a grant-in-aid from
the European Commission Expert Network on Childcare. It has been commissioned by the Irish Childcare Advisory Group whose members are drawn from the Employment Equality Agency, the Joint Oireachtais Committee on Women's Rights, members of the Departments of Labour, Health and Education, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the Council for the Status of Women, the Federated Union of Employers, Cathal Brugha Street College and managers of Aer Rianta, RTE and Baggot Street nurseries as well as representatives of voluntary organisations engaged in nursery provision.

We have chosen to commission the present publication, Childcare in Ireland: A Parent's Guide, as the first of the series. It is parents who have the primary responsibility for rearing their children and for making choices about alternatives in childcare. It is in all our interests that the choices they make will be well informed and will contribute to the happiness and wholeness of the family.

Childcare is primarily about good quality experiences for young children and about what is best for their full development. There is convincing evidence that the experience of the first five or so years of life will markedly affect the developmental possibilities for the rest of life. The child's intellectual and social development will be formed according to the quality of the environmental stimulation and of the care experienced during these formative years. Many countries have come to see this aspect of childcare as a central issue and they consider that governments have some responsibility in this area. The bearing and rearing of children is not a mere consumer choice. It has the most significant of social values for all cultures at all times. In addition, to put the situation in a competitive perspective, if we do not plan high quality early experiences for our infants and preschoolers, they will be at a disadvantage in later years relative to their counterparts in other countries where such provisions do exist.

The aim of the present series is to set out information, knowledge and professional insights about childcare for
the benefit of parents, nursery personnel, employers and others concerned with the provision of high quality care for the children of Ireland.

Anne McKenna
Irish Representative
European Commission Childcare Network
Introduction

With the rise in the number of parents working outside the home, there is an increasing demand for services that will care for their children while they work. In this book we use the word *daycare* to refer to those services which offer childcare during the day. Daycare is mainly provided by childminders (or family daycare) and nurseries (or centre based care). The primary aim of this book is to provide information that will be of value to parents who are concerned about providing the best care for their child and anxious to have access to details about availability and provision of 'good quality' daycare in Ireland. As there is no legislation covering these services, a book such as this is particularly necessary. It is not a book that recommends one type of care over another, as this loses sight of the individual needs of families and their children. Rather it is intended as a resource which will raise points of interest and importance in the area of childcare for the young child and which will answer some of the more common questions raised by parents.

The book contains six chapters which cover the areas of parenting, child development, and good quality care options including such issues as choosing, making it work and practical advice.

Chapter 1 deals with the question of parenting. It looks at the needs of the child and how 'good parents' can meet these needs. This will help you to judge whether the care you choose is meeting the needs of your child.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of early child development. This is a guide to development which will assist you
in judging how your child's needs are met at different stages in the daycare service that is caring for your child. As a brief guide to normal development, it is hoped that it will also be of value to you as you watch your child progress from infancy through to school age.

Chapter 3 highlights certain issues relating to daycare, to parents working outside the home and to children. It aims to introduce the most commonly expressed concerns and difficulties that may arise for parents and children. The results of research are presented where appropriate and the various options in sharing the care of children in Ireland are introduced.

Chapter 4 discusses what we mean by 'good quality' care. We look at the role of the people who are providing the care, the place, toys, equipment and activities.

Chapter 5 is called Choosing the Care and, as the name suggests, deals with points to bear in mind when making your final selection. We provide some suggestions as to how you, the parent, might judge the quality of the services you come across and we include a list of questions which should guide you when making a final decision.

Chapter 6 is the final chapter. Once you have made your decision there are certain factors that will go towards making the arrangement work. In this chapter we suggest ways that you and your child can prepare for daycare and we discuss the important subject of communication between all those involved in the life of your young child.

We hope you find this book valuable in your search for 'good quality' childcare in Ireland.
Parent Child Relationships

Becoming a parent is something for which many people feel they are never fully equipped. Despite preparation and the experiences we have had in our own life as children, for most of us the reality of being a parent is quite different to all the expectations. Recently in Ireland, as elsewhere, there has been a growing interest in ‘parenting’ with the development of courses in parenting and books to help us over the hurdle of the first few years. While these courses and books are of value in highlighting important issues and giving us the opportunity to discuss points of parenting with others, they may also leave us with a sense that we...
have so much to learn that we may never succeed in the important job of being a good parent. Most parents are good parents.

There are many ways to be a good parent and different styles succeed in different settings. Our skills in parenting develop alongside the development of our children. In looking into what makes good parents, psychologists and others have first to rid people of the notion that they could ever become the ideal or perfect parent. Relationships are dynamic and changing and, in any relationship, circumstances influence the individuals. Winnicott, in his writings about children and family relationships, suggested that, rather than seeking characteristics of the perfect parent, we should look to the ‘good enough’ parent, that is the parent who provides safety, security and affection for the child during all the ups and downs of living. It is the characteristics of the ‘good enough’ parent that we should try to acquire. Most of us have been brought up by ‘good enough’ parents and, while there are aspects of our personality that we might like to change, we have not suffered irreparable damage.

‘Good enough’ parents are facilitating, and provide an environment that encourages and promotes the development of their children. To do this parents need to be aware of their children’s needs. To many of us this comes almost naturally but a useful guide to the basic needs of children has been outlined by Mia Kellmer Pringle. Basic needs for all children, which are met by good parents and carers, include the following:

- The need for Basic Physical Care; such as the need for protection, food, rest, hygiene and shelter.

- The need for Affection; including physical contact with holding, kissing, admiring, tenderness, approval, patience, making allowances and general concern and understanding.

- The need for Security; manifest by continuity of care, stability in family structure, a predictable environment with consistent patterns of routine and simple rules.
consistently applied. An harmonious family group facilitates the provision of security for the child.

- The need for Stimulation of Potential; by praise, attention, and encouragement of exploration and curiosity. Also important here is one's responsiveness to questions and the guiding of skills development, through providing opportunity for play and education.

- The need for Guidance and Control; where the child is helped acquire appropriate social behaviours. This involves management and discipline, taking account of the child's level of understanding. This requires patience and respect for the child on the part of the adult.

- The need for Responsibility; in line with the developmental ability of the child. To begin with one should give responsibility in small areas such as self care, tidying up playthings or clothes and later in allowing the child be responsible for certain decisions which help him or her learn from mistakes as well as successes.

- The need for Independence; a need which begins to manifest itself as early as the first year. Independence with protection and not overprotection is important. Overprotection is as bad as giving too much responsibility too soon; both put pressure on a child and can lead to difficulties.

Most 'good enough' parents meet the above needs most of the time. They do so intuitively, directed by their affection for their child. When faced with the task of being good parents, the 'good enough' parents adapt their behaviour, as far as possible, for the child's well being within the family structure. No one member should dictate the pattern to the exclusion of others. While meeting the needs of the very young and very dependent child, it is important that you have time to meet your own needs also.

Traditionally the family has been organised so that one parent, usually the mother, takes responsibility for the children. In this situation she acts as chief carer during the day, meeting the needs of the children and providing a stimulating environment for their development. To differing
degrees the father takes a share of the responsibility in the direct upbringing of the children and acts as a support to the mother. Families are now less traditional and a variety of different types exist, but we still have the traditional family where the mother remains as the chief carer.

However, given the various social changes, many mothers have to work at providing social contact for their children. This has led to the growth in part-time childcare services such as the 'mother/toddler' groups and, for older children, the playgroups. Generally, in the 'mother/toddler' group, the mother stays with her young child in the group and relaxes while her child begins to play in the company of other young children. With the playgroup, mothers tend to leave their child with a playgroup leader for 2–3 hours per day. In the playgroup, the emphasis is on social development through play. We also have lone parent families where the parent needs to or wishes to work and the child's care is shared with a childminder or with staff in a nursery. Increasingly we have the family where both parents continue to work in paid employment after the birth of children. This family also shares the care of the child.

When sharing the care of your child, for whatever reason, you will be anxious that carers will do as good a job as you yourself would do. Being conscious of the importance of parenting, particularly in the early years where the foundations for so much future developments are laid, most parents seeking childcare for their child are looking for the kind of environment that is conducive to positive development and which will meet the basic needs of the child. In this book we outline for you how you can assess the quality of care, what questions you should ask, what you should look for in the person, place, equipment and toys. In addition we raise issues which you should consider so that you can be sure your child is receiving that type of quality care which will assist his or her development. When you are happy that this is the case, you are more likely to be relaxed in yourself and able to provide your child with good quality parenting.
Knowing What To Expect Helps!

All parents are interested in the progress of their own children and anxious that they should achieve their developmental milestones: smiling, walking, talking and so on, at the appropriate time. But parents are not always clear about what to expect or when to expect it. With this in mind, the following is an overview of child development and describes what to expect at different ages.

We are born with inherited characteristics, such as hair and eye colour, but our environment, the family, home, school and community, all influence our development from a very early age. There is much research evidence to support the notion that early experiences have a significant influence on later characteristics, attitudes and abilities. It is this information that has directed the growth of interest in the preschool experiences of the young child, whether family or centre based. Indeed much of the recent interest focuses on the qualitative differences between the experiences of children cared for in their own homes, by the mother, when compared to those cared for by someone other than the parent for part of the day. Much of the research is conflicting but, in general, it is accepted that 'good quality' daycare outside the home can be comparable in benefit to the child with being cared for at home by the mother. The difficulty for parents who have to, or wish to, work outside the home is to find daycare that can be considered 'good quality'.

In a review of recent research, Scarr and Dunn, two psychologists interested in the area of sharing the care of
children, pointed out that one factor, common to all services considered 'good quality', was that the providers had all studied child development. This indeed does seem logical when one considers that the work is almost entirely concerned with facilitating child development in a safe, secure and stimulating environment.

Babies are born more competent and able than we at one time believed. They are already developed in many ways at birth with, for instance, the capacity to hear, see and differentiate some tastes. If we understand how the average child develops, we can be ready to help and encourage them at different stages. Being prepared makes the task both interesting and rewarding. It is in the early experiences that the foundations for future learning are laid. We must be ready to listen and respond to our children — whether they communicate with us physically, socially or verbally. We, as adults, are their guides in the early years. Play is children's way of learning, of testing the rules to help them gain control over their world. To paraphrase Jean Piaget, who spent his life studying young children, the more children see, hear and do the more they want to see, hear and do.

The young child is developing in a number of ways from the moment of birth. At different ages, various aspects of development will be more obvious and require more attention from adults. Let us take a closer look at some of these areas of development and see how they are influenced by the world around the child. Six different areas of development will be covered. Although discussed separately, these areas interact and some developments may happen at the same time and influence each other as overall development proceeds.

The six areas of development are:

- From rolling to running
- Making friends
- Listening and talking
- 'But why?'
- Why is it bold?
- 'I want it now!'

The Physical Self
The Social Self
The Language Self
The Thinking Self
The Moral Self
The Emotional Self
It is, perhaps, in the area of physical development that the most visible changes in the young child's life are observed — over a short five year span we witness the development from a seemingly helpless infant into a boisterous, curious and active child.

**The Baby:** At birth all the infant's senses are working to some degree. The baby can hear (a sense well developed even before birth). The baby can see, although up to about eight weeks only that seen at around ten inches is focused, with everything else a blur. Taste and smell are fairly well developed, with the baby showing a distinct preference for sweet over sour or bitter tastes. The newborn baby is also sensitive to touch and orientation. All the senses become more refined over the first couple of months of life.

Because babies are not mobile it is good to move them around to different parts of the room or building. They can be carried here and there. Despite the fact that babies sleep a great deal in the first months of life, one should develop the habit of pointing things out and naming them. When the baby is able to sit you can place him or her close to you as you work and talk about what you are doing. The baby may not understand your precise meaning but this is the beginning of communication and, without the experience, the baby may not be stimulated to interact with or observe the world.
Mobiles, texture blankets, soft cuddly toys and noisy, bright rattles are of value to the baby. Through the opportunity for exploration gained by reaching, pulling, pushing, shaking and mouthing they move on to the next phase in development.

**The Toddler:** At this stage the baby is mobile and this opens up a whole new world. Crawling, creeping and shuffling along on their bottoms, toddlers explore farther afield. They move under tables and may bump their heads! Their curiosity increases and they touch and look at things for long periods. Gradually the toddler stands and takes the first steps. This can happen anywhere between eleven and eighteen months on average.

Walking is a big breakthrough as it frees up both hands. This, of course, raises the issue of safety as the child will now pull at more things and open presses to see and play with whatever is inside. The areas of access to the child must be made safe and dangerous objects and substances removed from reach. It is also a time where children should be beginning to learn the meaning of the word ‘no!’

Toddlers need time to do things and to discover and understand the world. They are only learning to walk and so may dawdle and stop when out for a walk. Adults must allow them the time to stop and start even though this may be a frustration when, for instance, you are in a hurry. It is important to remember that the child is not dawdling to annoy you but rather to get a better view of some new part of the world, or simply to rest.

There are many toys that toddlers enjoy, such as stacking cups, shapes and blocks. However, it is often household objects such as saucepans, spoons, water and the like that keep the toddler busy.

**The Preschool Child:** By ‘preschool child’ we mean the child of three years to five years. By this stage children are refining their physical skills. This is true of their large motor skills such as running, hopping, skipping and for this reason opportunities to run, climb and slide are necessary. Fine manipulatory skills are also developing. Their grip has changed from the palmer, or full hand grasp, to the pincer grasp using finger and
thumb, and control is developing. Materials such as crayons, paintbrushes and pencils are helpful at this stage. Natural materials, such as sand, water, clay and playdough are also valuable with this age group as the child enjoys pouring, knocking, digging and so on.

The child's first attempts to understand the world occur through physical exploration of the immediate environment. Gradually, with the development of language, the child begins to use words to describe the world. This, in turn, assists the child in gaining some level of control over his or her world.

Making Friends

Humans are social beings and, generally speaking, enjoy the company of others. However, the skills necessary to form positive sound relationships are acquired only over
time. The young child seems to lack many of the basic social skills necessary to harmonious living.

**The Baby:** Babies are born equipped to evoke positive reactions from adults. Coming, as they do, all soft and cuddly, with a ready and winning smile, they seem to awake in us the desire to respond. Most psychologists agree that it is in the first years of life that the baby learns to trust, and so it is important that adults are trustworthy. For babies to develop trust the adults in their world need to be stable, secure and loving. One cannot spoil a very young baby with too much loving and cuddling.

At birth, it appears, babies are willing to trust all people with whom they have contact. By seven or eight months the baby may begin to show signs of responding differently to familiar and unfamiliar faces. At this age they begin to "make strange". This behaviour may last for a couple of months and may be more pronounced in one child than another. Where a baby has had experience of interacting with a number of adults from birth he or she can form a variety of attachments. These attachments do not weaken the intense relationship between the baby and the parents. The baby does not 'make strange' with familiar adults and may be less likely to where he or she has had contact with a number of different adults. For this reason parents intending to share the care of their child may feel that it is best, where possible, to introduce the baby to their carers before seven or eight months, in an effort to minimise the difficulties of separation, such as 'making strange'.

**The Toddler:** Socially, toddlers are still loners but like to be in the company of others. They are quite happy to play in the room if mother or other familiar persons are present but may become quite distressed if they find themselves suddenly alone or in the company of an unfamiliar adult. Toddlers like to feel part of the social group and may even join in laughter, appropriately, before they are able to talk or have learned the importance of waiting a turn or sharing.

Toddlers like to play alongside others – this is called parallel play – but they are still unable to play in any co-operative way. They cannot understand about sharing and waiting. At
this stage in development the child benefits from contact with other children as this affords greater variety in play opportunities which assists in the development of social skills, such as sharing. Very young children are not being selfish when they call everything ‘mine’ – they just do not understand the importance of sharing. In fact, to many children, possession is equivalent to ownership. For this reason, as children get older, sharing can be a source of much argument. You can encourage turn-taking, co-operation and sharing during the child’s day. Children do have to learn to share and adults should not avoid conflict situations but should rather be sensitive in handling them, and help the child acquire these important social skills.

The Preschool Child: By two and half to three years most children are moving into, and becoming part of, a wider social scene. They enjoy playing games together – social play – and are improving in areas of sharing and co-operation. However, there are many occasions of misunderstanding and adults must deal carefully with the child’s occasional possessiveness and unwillingness to share.

The preschool child – even more than the toddler – benefits from and enjoys the company of other children. Widening social horizons facilitate the development of those skills necessary to become a social being. Despite the preschool child’s apparent interest in independence, there are times when he or she may become what is called ‘clingy’. Suddenly, out of the blue it seems, the only person wanted is the mother or father. There may be a clear explanation for this, for example the arrival of a new baby, but the explanation may not always be so easy to find. In situations like this you have to ‘listen’, as it were, to your child’s behaviour and try to identify when they become particularly dependent. As they are still not very good at putting feelings into words and expressing their likes, dislikes and fears, it is usual that a change in behaviour in this way is their attempt to tell you something.
Even though babies don't talk, they love and need to be spoken and read to. Much language learning is, in the beginning, a matter of listening and most children understand a great deal more than they can say. Research has shown, again and again, that 'good' parents frequently speak to their children in a conversational way. They use short, simple, clear sentences and offer the child an opportunity to respond in their own way. Mind you, parents and children need their quiet times too!

The Baby: The first attempt at language is the cry. Over time, the cry reflex becomes differentiated so that a parent can tell
whether the baby means 'I'm hungry' or 'I'm tired'. Gradually the baby introduces a new sound, the 'coo'. Babies coo when content and this is an opportunity for parents to talk to their infants and to converse with them by responding to the coos.

By six or seven months, the baby begins the next stage in language development, the 'babble'. At this point one notices signs of imitation, babies changing the tone and speed of their babble in response to sounds heard. Even though the child is unable to form words and to converse in words with others, this is a good time for dialogue between the adult and child. These stages of prelinguistic development are common to all children.

**The Toddler:** Language begins slowly giving the child plenty of time to listen. When starting to use words the child utters single words such as 'dada', 'mama'. Indeed the 'words' they use may not sound like words but, being the consistent sound for a particular object or person, are recognised as words such as 'atie' for 'Katie'. By the age of one year the child may have a collection of such words. By the age of two years the child can put two words together to make a simple sentence such as 'allgone dada' or 'milk please'. For language to develop fluently, a child needs to hear others talk, needs to be spoken to and needs adults who will listen and respond appropriately. The importance of one-to-one conversations between adult and child cannot be overstressed. As children make their first attempts at sentences, it is necessary to give them time to express themselves. Don't become too concerned with pronunciation; after all it is the message that is most important. Encouraging the child's attempts at conversation and extending what the child says comes naturally to most parents. Thus when a child says 'Dada car' many parents will naturally respond with 'Yes, that is daddy's car'.

**The Preschool Child:** By the age of three children are using language, with action, to discover more about their world. They are now speaking in sentences and asking questions. Words have become tools for discovering more. They like to talk, they play with words, they make and repeat rhymes. This may be a trying time as children will repeat the same or similar questions again and again. In the main it is fair to say
that the preschool child lacks the guile to ask questions simply to irritate parents and so, one ought assume that the questions are genuine attempts to seek answers or to get attention. Nonetheless, a child also has to learn to listen, wait in turn and not interrupt at all times.

Books become particularly important at this stage. Earlier, one provides simple picture books as a source of general conversation. Now books are used to prompt storytelling; to pose and answer questions. If you have books in the house and are seen to read books, your children are more likely to pick up the habit. In this way they learn about words and reading because they want to – so much more readily and happily than if they feel they have to.

But Why?

Children think differently to adults. However, they have a lot in common with each other in their thinking skills. Research suggests that children progress from thinking about the world through action and experience to thinking in the abstract as in adult thought. The pattern of progress followed is always the same although the rate differs for different children.

The Baby: The baby's understanding of the world is acquired through the senses and movement. They touch, feel, mouth, push and pull. They stare and look from place to place, object to object. They explore their world in this way. As they develop, they need the opportunity to stare, to put things in their mouths, to pull and push things. Mobiles above their cots, push/pull toys, texture blankets, rattles and so on are recommended for this age group, because they give opportunities for learning about the world.

Thinking through Action: Babies have little experience on which to base thought and their first experiences are acquired through actions. Their thinking is based on sensation and physical activity and it is in this way that they develop their first impressions of the world. As the child moves into the first year, action becomes more purposeful and one can begin to see evidence of thought as the child,
for example, pauses before putting a block into a particular box.

**The Toddler:** Once the child has achieved mobility he or she has two free hands to explore the world. Here, if we observe carefully, we can see thinking in action - what might be called 'pensive exploration'. For instance, it is during this period of development that children engage in the repetition of actions such as taking off a saucepan lid, replacing it, removing it and so on. One of the most extraordinary aspects of children's behaviour is the length of time they will stay at an activity and the frequency with which they will repeat it. This is one way that their understanding of the world and their thinking about the world develops. During this period language is also developing and this allows one to 'hear', as well as 'see', children thinking.

**Thinking and Perception:** Perception involves all the senses and refers to the way in which we interpret the world, based on the information we get through our senses. By eighteen months to two years, the child's thinking of the world becomes increasingly dominated by their perception of the world. This is not always the best interpretation of the world! This is the period where, for instance, all men or women in white coats may be called a doctor or all animals with four legs are called dogs. During this period a tall thin glass half full of juice is considered to contain more than a wide, short glass with the same amount of juice. The child appears to be influenced by the height of the juice in the glass when deciding whether the glasses contain the same amount of juice or not.

**The Preschool Child:** It is at this stage that we meet the true scientist, the uninhibited philosopher. Experimentation and imitation combine to help the child achieve control over the world. Thinking is evident in their actions and their words - even though the thinking may be illogical. Their questions reflect their desire to understand and predict the world, 'Why?... Yes, but why?' One can see children searching for cause and effect, seeking the rules that make up the world. Their logic is weak however. For example, a child may say 'big ships float because they are big and small ones because they are small'. Sometimes, in their language or their questions,
we may catch a hint of anxiety or concern about some poorly understood point. For example, a child's concern to be out of the bath before the water goes out may reflect a fear that they, too, may go down the plug hole! No matter how illogical or foolish the child may appear, it is important that we first respect them and assume that their questions, statements and thoughts are serious attempts to understand the world.

Thinking and Experience: Gradually, by six or seven, children begin to recognise that perceptions can deceive and their thinking becomes more logical and based on their understanding of the world from experience. They become increasingly able, and anxious to predict what will happen. This is a period of thinking where rules become important and the world is governed in a very orderly and 'fair' way. For instance children will lay down very strict rules for winning in games and will often accept these with ease once they have been agreed.

Thinking in Abstract: It is not until children are about eleven or twelve that their thinking has become like adults' thinking. Their thoughts have a clear logic and they are now able to think about things outside their immediate experience. They can pose and solve problems and may enjoy solving difficult situations and debating issues.

If we listen to the actual language used by children, we can catch a glimpse of how they are thinking about the world. Instead of correcting their misinterpretations, we should direct them around their 'errors' in a careful and subtle way while respecting their efforts.

Why Is It Bold?
This aspect of self concerns the development of an understanding about right and wrong. Children are not born with this sense and it is only through experience and sensitive, consistent handling that they come to an awareness.

The Baby/the Toddler: In general the baby and the toddler are considered to be pre-moral with no understanding of right and wrong and a limited capacity to distinguish right from wrong. Despite this, mainly for reasons of safety, one does
have to set clear and unambiguous rules concerning what is and is not allowed. A small number of such rules is all that is necessary and if they are made clear, in action and in word, there will be less likelihood of confrontation and temper. A firm and consistent use of the word 'No!' and the immediate removal from the situation helps the child recognise that 'No!' means stop, don't or leave it alone. Many parents find it useful to accompany the order 'No!' with a distraction of some kind such as a toy.

The Preschool Child: The sense of what is right and what is wrong for the preschool child is governed more by the result of their actions than by the intention behind the particular action. So, for instance, 'it is wrong if I am punished' or 'it is wrong because it hurt' or 'the bigger the damage the worse the deed'. To many adults the preschool child may appear to
be bold on purpose. You explained yesterday that he should not take the biscuits out of the press and today he does it again! We expect a lot from children in terms of obedience, and it is valuable to remember that what we say at one point may be taken to relate to that situation only; the child is not yet able to generalise from today to tomorrow. When encouraging 'good' behaviour, for example, by praising the child, the praise must occur close to the appropriate behaviour for it to have maximum effect. Similarly, if we punish a child by withdrawing a privilege, for instance, it is important that this occurs immediately after the misbehaviour or the connection may not be made. This is particularly true with the younger child. Connections of cause and effect, so clear to the adult, may not be at all clear to the young preschool child.

In relation to learning right from wrong, it is now recognised that physical punishment – even a small slap – is of little value in the long run. It perpetuates the notion in the child’s mind that it is wrong because I have been slapped and may simply yield ‘good’ behaviour in the presence of the adult without any clear understanding of why. Furthermore, use of physical punishment ‘teaches’ the child that this is the method adults use to get their way. Slapping a four year old because she slapped her sister is confusing for the child. After all the child is only imitating your behaviour!

‘I Want It Now!’

As adults we lay a lot of emphasis on being well adapted and stable in our behaviour. As a result we expect our children to behave in a stable manner also. However, for young children, often unable to express their thoughts, concerns and fears, it is difficult not to get emotional, upset and to have a tantrum now and again.

The Baby: Studies of very young babies have indicated that, even very shortly after birth, they exhibit definite personality characteristics. Some babies are easy going and easy to handle, others are difficult and others are what has come to
be known as 'slow to warm up'. Very early on, then, in a relationship between parent and child, the baby's own personality has an influence on the quality of the interactions. With first babies it may be difficult for parents to establish a pattern with the child and it can be frustrating when one approach works today but fails to work tomorrow. It's as if the
child is behaving inconsistently simply to test the parent—but, of course this is not always the case.

The Toddler: Toddlers are easily upset and frustrated. They are not well equipped with the skills necessary to cope with minor frustrations. Their language is only developing and is not advanced enough to allow them express their needs, fears and desires. This is a period that may be quite difficult for parents and child alike and has been called the ‘terrible twos’. There are certain situations where tension is more likely to exist, for example, bedtime, meal time and toilet training. An awareness of this may lessen the likelihood of confrontation.

The Preschool Child: As children get older, adults may expect too much from them in terms of self control, particularly in new or frustrating situations. With the development of language as a means of expression, children’s temper tantrums and physical expressions of anger or fear decrease. Nonetheless, there will still be times when a child will not have the words to express their feelings and will resort to more ‘babyish’ behaviour.

Children at this age are seeking to understand and predict the world around them. Small changes can result in unpredictably large reactions – the night time story read slightly differently may lead to tears. During this period parents may begin to notice children developing fears and may become impatient with this. It is quite natural at this stage for fears to develop and for children to have nightmares. A sensitive, firm handling early can develop confidence and security in the child and assist them in overcoming these fears.

As children progress through the preschool years, they develop coping skills and resort less and less to the physical expression of frustration. We must help them in this by listening to them in their behaviour as well as their language and equipping them, where possible, with the language necessary to express and cope with the everyday frustrations facing a growing child.
Play and the Young Child

It is impossible to write about the development of young children without a reference to that most important aspect of their life – play. For the young child exploring, discovering and learning about the world occurs, in the main, through play. Detailed explanations about the world and how it works, even to an articulate preschool child, are little substitute for the opportunity to ask and try to answer questions oneself, through play. As adults we often trivialise play with such thoughtless comments as ‘Oh! go out and play for a while’ or ‘they’re only playing’. It is true that play may be used as a way to occupy children but it can also be complex, challenging and valuable to the child. As adults, we can provide the time, materials, space and encouragement for play. With groups of children it has been found that most challenging and complex play occurs where two children are playing near or with each other. Furthermore, complex play is encouraged where there is an interested adult available to the child.

Play develops through stages. At different ages children play with different toys and their style of play also varies with age. Play moves from the ‘isolate’ play of the young baby to ‘observer’ play, where the young child watches others and may play in like fashion but in isolation. As the child gets older, play style changes to ‘parallel’ play where the child wants to play alongside other children but is not playing with them in any co-operative way. This can be seen, for example, at water play where two children work away on two separate tasks and never seem to interact. Nevertheless, when one finishes up the other may soon follow suit. As the child approaches three years, a further shift in play style to include ‘social’ play can be seen. This may appear a misnomer initially as it can be fraught with such anti-social behaviours as grabbing toys or hitting out at other children! Social play involves two or more children. At this stage also, imaginative or pretend play may dominate the type of play observed. Here the child takes on familiar roles of mother, father and plays at ‘house’ or ‘shopping’.

Play is important to children as it helps them develop a number of important skills in an unpressurised way. It
assists concentration and helps the emergence of social skills such as sharing, co-operating, waiting and turn-taking. Play helps the child come to understand confusing, frightening or complex situations and this is particularly true of pretend play. Furthermore, play assists in language development, physical development and encourages the creative aspects of a child’s personality.

Given that play is of such enormous importance to the child, it is something about which parents have a keen interest. This interest may be exploited and parents may, unwittingly, find themselves providing toys which appear to be of clever design and educational benefit to the child. Many of these toys, however, appeal more to the adult than the child. Frequently one hears a parent bemoan the fact that their child played more with the box than the toy!

Here is not the place to discuss, in detail, the sorts of toys to provide for children of different ages, but some points may be of value: simple is often best, particularly with the younger child. Try to provide toys which demand action/doing on the part of the child rather than toys which have a limited scope. Be led by what the child expresses a spontaneous interest in – not ‘I want because X has’ or ‘because it looks good on TV’. It is not always the most expensive toy that is the most rewarding. Finally, children who play and benefit from play are rarely clean, tidy children! In order to explore, discover, invent and learn, children need a certain amount of freedom and this includes freedom from the worry of staying clean and tidy at all times. For an interesting book on play, toys and the young child you can read Play With a Purpose for Under-Sevens by E.M. Matterson. This is a paperback available in most larger bookshops and gives a very clear overview of this subject.

We hope this description of child development and play will be of benefit to you in your relationship and interactions with your children. We also hope it proves valuable to you in your efforts to select ‘good quality’ care for your children.
Childcare facilities for under fives have increased markedly in the past twentyfive years. This is largely due to the fact that many women are now continuing to work outside the home after they have children. Whether young children should be cared for exclusively by their parents is a subject about which almost everyone seems to hold strong, even passionate views. Some parents worry that children in nurseries or with childminders form closer relationships with their carers than they do with their parents. Many mothers find that life is more fulfilling if they have an opportunity to work outside the home, and feel that this leads to better relationships between them and their children. Others are unhappy to be separated from their children while they work outside the home. Some parents believe that children cared for outside the family become insecure and are more likely to develop problems as they get older.

When it comes to choosing care for children, still more opinions are expressed. It has been argued that babies and toddlers fare better with a childminder than in a nursery and that groupcare in a nursery setting offers more to older children and their parents. The situation would be easy if you could identify which of these views will help you predict what will be true for you and your child. But every child and parent is different, as is every childminder and nursery. Such arguments often generate 'more heat than light' and can leave many parents confused, underconfident and bereft of the kind of common sense that might help them make a sensible decision about what is best for them and their children.
The good news, however, is that there is an increasing number of parents who have travelled the often tortuous path of decision making, with the result that there is a growing body of experience from which newer parents can benefit. There is even more good news in that much, although not enough, research has been carried out, which highlights some elements of what has come to be known as ‘good quality childcare’.

We do not set out to tell you what decision you should make – whether mothers should go out to work or not – whether childminders or nurseries are better. Instead, we aim to clarify simply the issues which commonly cause concern to parents and to provide you with information, so that you can make your own decision about what is best for you and your child. In identifying the features of good quality childcare, we hope that you will feel better able to assess what is best for your children, which ideally will lead to better childcare provision in general. It is parents who are the best advocates for their children. The more informed parents are, the more confidently they can choose better quality childcare.

In this book we seek to restore self-confidence to parents who might have lost it in the welter of conflicting arguments. Hopefully it will also give new confidence to parents who might need it to embark on the quest to find the ideal situation for themselves and their children. As a parent you know your child better than anyone else. This ultimately places you in the best position to make a decision about what is right in your circumstances.

Options
Many of you reading this book will have already decided to share the care of your child and, if this is the first time you have made this decision, you are, no doubt, keen to discover what options are available to you. We will begin by introducing full daycare options and then turn our attention to services which provide care for part of the day.
Relatives: A popular option, which many Irish parents choose, is to share the care of their child with other members of the family. Your child's grandparents may be delighted to help out with the care of your child while you go out to work. Alternatively a sister, aunt, or less likely, a brother who is at home may offer to take on the responsibility.

Childminder: A childminder cares for children in her own home. Often childminders have children of their own and opt to care for one or more other children. Childminders in Ireland do not have to register and so there is no list of minders from which to select a sample in your area. The best way to find out about the availability of childminders is to ask other parents in your area. Alternatively you can advertise in the local newspaper or shops.

Nannies: 'Nanny' is the old fashioned term used to describe a childminder who goes to the child's home to provide care. Some nannies live-in and have responsibility for some household chores as well as childminding. As with childminders, there is no register of nannies available and again, word of mouth or advertising is the best method of finding nannies. There are some agencies which supply nannies.

Au Pairs: Au pairs provide care for children and do housework in return for accommodation, the opportunity to learn a language and a small wage. One can advertise for an au pair or contact the agencies which act for au pairs here in Ireland.

Nurseries: Nurseries provide full daycare for groups of children. In general, there is more than one adult, with some staff specialising in working with young children and babies and others working with the preschool children. While there is no comprehensive list of nurseries or creches, many have now joined the National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA) which can be contacted at NCNA, Carmichael House, North Brunswick Street, Dublin 7.

Workplace Nurseries: These are relatively new in Ireland. In the case of a workplace nursery, the company or firm usually provides the premises and otherwise the service is self-financing on the basis of fees paid by the parents.
Creches: The term 'creche' is often used interchangeably with 'nursery' and refers to group care for young children. It is more commonly associated with the care of infants. The term creche can also be used to refer to short-term care for children. For example, shopping centres, adult education centres and sports complexes are tending more and more to provide creches for children while their parents are using these various facilities.

Childminders, nannies and nurseries usually offer full day-care for children. However, some childminders and nannies are happy to provide care for part of each day or for two or three days a week depending on the working arrangements of parents. Some nurseries offer 'sessional care'. A session usually means a morning or afternoon and it is sometimes possible for a child to attend a nursery for some rather than all sessions.

Other part-time services include preschools and playgroups. These usually open only during the morning and cater for children of approximately three to five years of age.

Private Playgroups: As the name suggests, these are fee paying. The amount differs considerably from group to group. Playgroups emphasise the role of play in the social development of the young child.

Community Playgroups: Typically, these are run by parents themselves for their own children. One or more of the parents often act as playgroup leaders and undertake to run the playgroup each morning with the help of other parents who take turns on a rota basis.

The IPPA provides advice, support and training courses for those involved in running playgroups and can be contacted at 19 Wicklow Street, Dublin 2.

Kindergarten: Kindergarten literally means a 'child's garden' and is derived from a term used by Friedrich Froebel, a pioneer in child centred early education. The emphasis in the kindergarten approach is the nurturing of the child and the provision, by the adult, of a child oriented environment.
Montessori Preschools: Maria Montessori developed both a theory and method of early education. In Montessori preschools the role of the adult is to guide the child, at his or her own pace, through learning experiences using specially designed and graded equipment.

There is a wide variation among preschools which are called Montessori. In some, for example, the adult adheres closely to the original Montessori method and materials, while others are more loosely organised on the basis of the Montessori principles.

Afterschool Services: There is a growing demand for 'after-school' care for the young primary school child. Some parents have arrangements with childminders or nannies for their children to be collected from school and cared for until parents finish work and some nurseries provide an after-school service. In some areas voluntary organisations or local people organise after school activities for children. The best way to find out if such a service exists in your area is to look out for notices in local shops, churches and other central places.

A good way to start thinking about the various options is to examine the reasons why you feel you want to share the care of your child. You may want to provide your child with an opportunity to mix with other children. The most likely reason for your interest in daycare is that you go out to work. Because of this we will now turn our attention to the issues involved when both parents are working outside the home.

Parents Working Outside the Home - What Are the Effects on Children?
Since most men expect to have to find outside employment, the question of whether or not fathers should stay at home is not often seriously considered. However, the question of whether or not mothers should go out to work is one that has been hotly debated over the years. Some
mothers are extremely happy to be at home with their children. Others may feel bored or frustrated. Many mothers who return to work outside the home feel that they are missing important aspects of their children's development and find it difficult to part with the child every day. Many women are delighted to return to work and to 'get out of the house'. Still others work out of economic necessity and either accept this or find it difficult and pressurising.

Many mothers who go out to work tend to have a better self-image and feel more personally fulfilled than those who stay at home. There are probably several reasons for this, not least the fact that many mothers at home are often undervalued and financially dependent instead of being regarded as resourceful and creative managers of households.

For mothers who do go out to work a lot depends on the type of job they do. There is a world of difference between an interesting and rewarding career and spending part of every day feeling bored or harassed at work. The attitude of fathers and other family members is also important. While many fathers become more involved in family life and older children tend to do more housework when the mothers go to work, alas it is not the case in every home. Mothers who have the support and co-operation of their families are bound to feel happier going to work than those who are constantly tired simply because they have too much to do.

The degree of comfort mothers feel while working outside the home depends to a large extent on how well they feel their child is being cared for during the day. Being able to find, assess and choose good quality care is vital if you are to feel relaxed and happy with your decision. The effects on children of parents going out to work is also largely determined by the quality of care they receive during the day.
When you come to consider the effects of working outside the home on the relationship between you and your child, here are some of the questions you might consider:

- Do you want to go out to work or to be with your child at home? (Some parents may not feel that they have a choice.)
- Is the job you are doing likely to be interesting and satisfying enough?
• Will the housework be shared and will you have the support of your partner and family? If not, you may decide to go to work anyway, but it is important not to underestimate the effects of lack of co-operation.

• Can you find daycare that satisfies the child’s needs and your needs?

It is the answers to these kinds of questions that will give you some idea of the likely effects on your relationship with your child. If you are overtired, frustrated and generally unhappy it will affect your relationships with everybody around you including your child. If, on the other hand, you feel fulfilled; sure that your child is being well cared for in your absence and that you are not too tired to spend time playing and talking with him or her when you come home, then there is no reason why the relationship should suffer. Watch out that you do not overtire your child in an attempt to compensate for the time you have been away from him or her. Children, although they do not always seem to, need rest too!

Human beings are unique and complex. Circumstances vary from one situation to another and individuals may react differently. It is impossible to predict that the effects on children of both parents working outside the home will be the same for all families. Statements such as 'Mothers going out to work make children “independent”... “clingy” or... “aggressive”' may not hold any truth for your child. While children are individuals and can react differently, it is always interesting to look at research findings. One recent study carried out in Sweden showed that school children aged eight years who had experienced good quality daycare before they were a year old tended to be less anxious, more assertive and independent and did better in school subjects. It is your individual needs and circumstances, however, that have to be taken into account before coming to a conclusion about the probable effects of both parents going out to work.
Do Children Become More Attached to Their Carers Than to Their Parents?

Some parents worry that the carer will become emotionally over-involved with the child and that the child will become more closely attached to the carer than the parent. However, where the care provided is of good quality, this tends not to be the case. If your child likes and enjoys spending time with the carer, this should be seen as a positive development rather than a threat. Wanting to spend time with children and coping with their often unpredictable and impossible demands are basic requirements for being a good carer. Children usually respond well to their attention. No doubt there are unusual and extreme circumstances where a carer is unwilling to part with a child but, by and large, carers are not unhappy to see parents come at the end of what can often be a rewarding but exhausting day.

It is not only important for children to get on well with their carers but also that a good relationship exists between parents and carers. It is important that they work together for the child's benefit.

So the next time you hear 'There's no substitute for a mother's love' don't take it as a criticism of you because you've chosen to share the care of your child during the day. Remember by choosing daycare, your child will have an opportunity to form relationships with others. Daycare is neither a substitute nor a replacement for your love and attention. In forming new relationships your child will, naturally, be introduced to ideas and learning experiences by people outside the immediate family. While parents are usually impressed when, for example, their little girl or boy sings a nursery rhyme or Christmas carol they have not learned at home, it can also be a little disconcerting at first. It makes parents realise that their child has begun to learn from and be influenced by people outside as well as inside the family.
Do Children Get Enough Attention from Childminders or in the Nursery?

It is often assumed that children receive most attention at home and that when it comes to daycare, they are more likely to receive better attention from an individual childminder than in the group setting of a nursery. Neither of these assumptions is necessarily true. The simple fact is that some parents give their children more attention than others and the same is true of childminders and nursery staff.

A report recently published in Britain speculated that: 'First, the child of the eighties may be lonelier than in the past: families are smaller and it is more difficult for children to play with others in public places. Second, the greater pressure on parents and the increases in the numbers of families where both parents work may mean there is less time in the family to focus specifically on the development of the child. The stimulus provided in the nursery school or class or other educational setting can help to counter both these aspects of modern life.'

The real question is what kind, rather than how much attention children receive and how keenly it is focused on their individual needs. Even a busy household can be a very educational place for a child. It has been pointed out how even a simple task such as planning a shopping list can teach children lessons in coping with everyday life, such as the necessity to forward plan, equate what you buy with the amount of money you have and so on. Furthermore parents do not and could not spend all day every day giving their child their undivided attention. Children need and demand a lot of attention; the quality of the attention they receive is important.

Some parents feel that their children will receive more adult attention at a nursery where staff are there solely to work with the children, unlike at home where time must be given to making dinners, answering the phone, cutting the grass and other chores. Again it is the kind of attention that matters. Carers who spend much of their time tidying
shelves, straightening chairs and wiping tables, and who more often address the group as a whole rather than speaking to individual children, may seem like they are giving children a lot of attention where, in fact, direct contact time may be better. Children are more likely to benefit where carers stand back, observe carefully and give one-to-one attention that is tuned to each child's needs.

There are some indications that the larger the group, the more fragmented the attention is likely to be. A lot can depend on how the situation is organised. The layout and attitude in a nursery are important. Where children are encouraged to choose and return toys and equipment themselves, adults will have more time to engage in activities with children, without having to constantly take down or replace jigsaws and other toys. Where adults encourage children to wait until they are finished with one child before turning their attention to another, each child is more likely to have one-to-one attention in a calm atmosphere. These are, of course, goals that carers can work towards and with varying degrees of success depending on their own skill and the developmental stage and temperament of the children in the group.

Children too can behave differently in large groups by making more demands for attention from adults. Smaller groups offer more opportunities for one-to-one attention between
adults and children. However, simply because the opportunities are there does not mean they are used. Childminders are often in an ideal situation to give the child in their care close attention and, no doubt, this is the case with many. However, occasionally parents have been concerned that their child spends a large part of every day watching television or having an enforced rest period while the childminder gets on with her housework.

In summary, homes, childminders or nurseries do not in themselves guarantee the kind of attention that children need. It is generally accepted that smaller groups offer more opportunities for one-to-one attention for children and that younger children need more adult attention than three to five year olds, who are interested in other children as well as adults. (For detailed information on recommended ratios of adults to children see Chapter 4.) It is important that children get enough consistent attention to form stable relationships with their carers.

**Why Do Some Parents Feel Guilty About Sharing the Care of Their Child?**

Many parents who have opted for daycare for their children, harbour vague, or sometimes acute, feelings of guilt. Many of these feelings stem from concern about issues we have already discussed – the effects on children of both parents working outside the home, the attachments children do, or do not form to carers, and how much real attention children get while parents are absent.

Unlike other decisions about childrearing, sharing the care of your child is not one that can be based on the experience of previous generations. Most of today's adults were cared for at home mainly by their parents, until school age. To some extent it is the fear of the unknown in terms of the possible effects of opting for daycare that is at the root of many parents' anxieties.
The views of other family members, particularly those of your child's grandparents, may also give rise to feelings of guilt if these views are opposed to your own. It is a very unusual person who is unaffected by what these important members of the family think about such a fundamental issue.

You may also be faced with a child who does not settle easily with a carer. This can be very upsetting and, for this reason, it is well worth spending the time helping your child to get used to the new situation before you have to go back to work. Some children have no problem at first and later become unsettled. There is nothing surer to bring those vague feelings of guilt to the surface than your child asking you 'not to go to work today'. There can be many reasons for a child making this request. The child may be genuinely sick. Sometimes children simply want to see how the parent will react. It may be that they had fun with you at breakfast and want to continue spending time with you. Before jumping to the feeling of guilt at 'deserting your child' try to find the reason for the request - ask your child, talk to the carer - something may have changed in the situation about which she or he is unhappy.

Sharing the care of your child with others is obviously a serious decision. It is important that your decision is one with which you are comfortable. Feelings of guilt and anxiety may also arise about whether or not the childminder or nursery will take as good care of your child as you do at home. You may find yourself worrying about such things as 'Will she get on with the other children?' 'Will he get help to manage his buttons when he wants to go to the toilet?' 'Will he eat his lunch?' 'Is her cough worse since this morning?' It is almost impossible to avoid being anxious. Sometimes talking with other parents about their experiences with this or other carers will help you to deal with your concerns.
Conclusion

We hope that this discussion of some of the most common concerns surrounding daycare helps you identify issues about which you might be curious or anxious. Whatever decision you make regarding daycare, it is important to know what you think and feel about these issues. Good quality care – whether provided at home, with a childminder or in a nursery – is what young children need. Being honest with yourself and having the confidence to follow your own instincts is most likely to lead you to a decision with which you will be happy.
What is Good Quality Care?

The Irish Situation
At the time of writing this book, there are no regulations governing the standards of daycare in Ireland and therefore, anyone anywhere can set up a service for any number of children. Hopefully the impeding Child Care Bill (1988) will eventually lead to the regulation of daycare services and ensure that high standards are maintained. A report entitled 'Minimum Legal Requirements and Standards for Daycare Services for Children' was prepared at the request of the Minister for Health in 1985. To date the recommendations contained in this report have not become law.

As already mentioned, childminders, nurseries and creches are not obliged to register with any central body and hence there is no comprehensive list of daycare options in Ireland to which interested parents might refer. There are some voluntary organisations which provide support and advice to those involved in looking for and providing care for children. The National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA), for example, offers support and information to private nurseries throughout Ireland. The Irish Pre-School Playgroups Association (IPPA), although aimed at playgroups specifically, has devised guidelines for working with groups of young children and, as an organisation, has done much to raise childcare standards in this country. Barnardo's childcare organisation offers an advisory service on how to set up good quality nurseries and advises parents on how to choose care for the under fives. Barnardo's also offers information
and training seminars to childminders and those running nurseries and creches.

The burden for assessing and choosing good quality care lies squarely on the shoulders of parents. Suggesting that parents should choose 'good quality care' for their children is of little value unless we firstly define exactly what we mean and offer guidelines on how to go about finding it. It is only then that you will feel better equipped to find, assess and choose the best option for you and your child. Good quality care can be examined broadly in terms of the people who provide care, the place in which children are cared for, the toys and activities available for children and aspects of health and safety.

A. The People Who Care for Children

Undoubtedly the most essential ingredient of good quality care is the carer. Ideally the person to care for your child should have experience of taking responsibility for children. It is important too that carers actually like being with children. Young children are especially in need of love and affection and it is essential that carers really enjoy giving warm individual attention to the children in their care. You can judge this by observing how quickly, for example, a carer responds to calls for attention and how she reacts to children crying. Does she try to find the cause, comfort the child or leave children crying for what you consider to be too long? Touch is also extremely important for babies and small children. All children need a hug and a cuddle now and again. You need to be sure that the carer also sees the importance of this and is sensitive to the fact that some children like a lot of physical contact while others do not. Good carers understand that all children are different and therefore will have different needs. Being able to give children individual attention that is informed by a knowledge of the child's uniqueness is essential. This helps to foster feelings of security and happiness in the children in their care. Providing this type of attention depends on a good adult/child ratio; this is particularly crucial with babies.
Recognising the importance of closely observing children helps carers to be sensitive to their needs. The ability to stand back and observe often has to be learned. Inexperienced people, particularly (although not exclusively), can overcrowd children. A fine balance must be drawn between being available to care for and play with children while recognising the importance of not interfering when they need time to themselves.

Carers should have a good knowledge of child development and should be able to use this to meet the developmental needs of each child. Carers who have some understanding of the capabilities of each child are more likely to provide
appropriate toys, activities and attention, geared to meet the child's developmental needs. They will also have realistic expectations of how the children are likely to behave and thus will understand a two year old's temper tantrum or a three year old's difficulty with seeing the importance of sharing. Research findings from the USA and Britain have found that people who provide what is regarded as good quality care tend to be those who have a qualification in child development. In Ireland there is no requirement for adults providing preschool childcare to have any qualification, but many people are anxious to become trained; hence the proliferation of courses available. Some courses can be completed on a part-time basis while others require a full-time commitment. Courses vary considerably in length and quality and some cover a wider range of child related topics than others. Opportunities to work alongside trained carers form a part of some courses. It is useful to enquire which, if any, course has been completed by a potential carer and what areas of childcare studies the course covers. There is only one course in preschool care that receives recognition from the national validating body, the National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA). This is a two-year, full-time course run at the Dublin Institute of Technology, Cathal Brugha Street. The three-year Montessori AMI course in preschool education is recognised by the Department of Education for certain services.

The provision of good quality care is usually achieved through a combination of training, experience and personality. Very often the effects of their own experience of parenting play a vital role in how carers, in their turn, care for children. This is particularly apparent when it comes to setting limits and coping with children's behaviour. Setting clear limits and helping children to understand them is an intrinsic part of good quality care. Adult expectations of how a child should behave often vary. It is not essential that parents and carers have exactly the same expectations of a child. Rules that apply in a nursery or with a childminder may not apply in the child's own home. It is important, however, that children are given clear and consistent messages about what is expected from them in the different situations. Most children,
where the messages are clear and consistent, learn what is permissible in each situation and manage quite well once the differences are not too extreme.

You may, on the other hand, feel annoyed or upset if a carer allows your child to behave in ways you feel are inappropriate. Carers can also find it very frustrating if parents' attitudes to the child's behaviour are very different from their own, although they may never express this openly. To avoid tension, it is best, if possible, to choose someone or somewhere where the views on children's behaviour are compatible with your own.

B. Where Care Is Provided for Children

The place where children are cared for should, in some sense, be 'child oriented'. White carpets and precariously placed expensive ornaments in areas intended for children to play in are definitely bad signs. Children also need enough space to be able to play comfortably without overcrowding each other. Where children are cared for on a full day basis it is important that they have access to some outside play space. This may be difficult to organise in the centre of a city or town but an awareness on the part of carers will ensure that at some stage during the day children will get some fresh air and the opportunity to play in the open.

The place in which your child is cared for should also be safe and clean. There are many health and safety issues to be considered in the provision of childcare services and, since this has implications not just for the physical environment, but also for the attitude and practice of carers, we felt that the subject warranted a separate section (see pages 47–9).

Finally, an atmosphere that is warm and welcoming is very important. This characteristic of atmosphere is difficult to measure. It exists where children are at ease to play and be themselves whilst, at the same time, being cared for in a safe and stimulating environment. A homely atmosphere will help children feel relaxed and happy.
C. Activities, Toys and Equipment for Children

The term education is often used to refer to school based learning. However, it is a lifelong process, and education of a most vital kind occurs before children reach school age. For the young child, learning occurs through play and other everyday experiences.

Children at different stages of development have different needs when it comes to toys and activities. You don't need to know much about early education to judge if your child is bored by not having sufficiently challenging activities, or frustrated if pushed beyond his or her capabilities. Children also develop in a variety of ways - socially, emotionally, physically and so on. An important aspect of providing good quality care is to ensure that children have opportunities to engage in activities which stimulate these different areas of development. Let us take, for example, language development, which is a particularly important area for the growing child. Some activities are better than others for encouraging children's language.

Books and pictures obviously provide good language learning opportunities. When it comes to books, they need to be appropriate to the child's developmental stage. The very young child, for example, likes big, bright, simple pictures on pages that are thick enough to be turned easily. Older children enjoy more complicated illustrations and stories and can manage thin pages. Books, of course, are only valuable to children if they are encouraged to use them. One should set aside some part of the day for story time, if possible. It provides an opportunity for contact and communication between adults and children. In any day there are lots of other opportunities for language learning that arise - the weather can be described, outings planned and reviewed, and so on - all using language. Research shows that it is the one-to-one conversations, in which the adult expands and questions what the child says, that provide the best context for language development to take place. When carers and children are together it is important to take note of whether or not:
• The adults both talk and listen carefully to the children.
• There are 'real' conversations between adults and children, even the very young children, and not just language which consists largely of instructions and directions from adult to child.
• The adult gets the child's attention when speaking to him or her - this may mean bending down to the child's level.
• The language used is appropriate i.e. is not oversimple or too complicated.
• The children talk freely to the adults.
• The adults, when with a group of mixed ages, talk to the babies as well as the older children.
• The children talk to each other.

Other areas of children's development will be encouraged by different activities. Their physical development, for example, will be promoted by activities such as running, climbing and cycling. Games and toys involving building blocks, balls and jigsaws, which involve catching, grasping and placing pieces precisely together, will help them learn to use their hands more expertly and will eventually lead to their being able to hold a pencil and to write. Activities and toys which involve sharing and turn-taking help children to get along with others, thus encouraging the development of social skills.

Many activities help children develop skills in a number of areas of development simultaneously. Playing a game of shop, for example, may provide the child with opportunities to learn new words, develop skills in co-operating with others, find out how to count money and how it can be used, improve their manual dexterity by learning how to use a toy cash register, practise remembering a list of items, and so on.

The important point is that good quality care offers children more than simply being kept clean and safe. They need a variety of activities and playthings which will stimulate their interest and curiosity and aid healthy growth and development.
Toys and equipment need not be expensive. Some of the best activities for children involve the use of everyday household objects. It is adults rather than children who divide objects into playthings and non-playthings. To the child, most objects can be a source of interest and can be used as playthings. It is important that there are enough attractive playthings available and accessible.

Ensuring that toys are easily accessible to children can often be overlooked. Having toys on low shelves at the child's level enables older children to choose and return a particular plaything. Children usually need some help with this at first, but it is worth encouraging, as it fosters independence. Furthermore, it frees adults to give their attention to the children rather than spending a lot of time gathering and replacing toys. This is made easier if there is a sense of order to the way toys are laid out, with each toy having its own place, with perhaps 'easy' toys at one end of a shelf and more difficult ones at the other end. It is also helpful if similar toys are grouped together. Many carers, including parents, complain that children do not play with many of their toys. Sometimes this is the result of toys being tidied away into a large box making them virtually inaccessible to small children.
It is also important to remember that children sometimes need an adult’s help when exploring all the possibilities of a toy. In the end, it is what children do with toys that is more important than the toys themselves.

D. Health and Safety

It is obvious that, where children are being cared for, their health and safety should be ensured. If your child is being cared for at home, it may be relatively easy to ensure that this is the case. If you plan to leave your child at a nursery or with a childminder, it is important to check that good standards of health and safety are maintained. This has implications for the behaviour and attitudes of carers, the physical environment in which your child is cared for, the toys he or she uses and how activities are supervised. As such, health and safety are of prime importance in all the aspects of good quality care we have discussed. The following is a list of questions concerning health and safety. Some of these questions more obviously apply to nurseries while others apply to the home situation.

- Are plug covers used?
- Are stairs protected with stair-gates or guards?
- Is the cooker covered by a cooker guard?
- Is the kettle flex well out of children’s reach; is a cordless kettle used?
- Are child-proof locks used on doors and windows, where appropriate?
- Are there clear, safe, uncluttered areas for children to play?
- Are there fire or heater guards that are secure?
- Are there fire doors and fire exits where appropriate?
- Are fire extinguishers available and regularly serviced?
- Are there one or more fire blankets?
- What are the fire drill procedures? How regularly are they carried out?
• Are smoke alarms installed?
• Do toys and equipment have sharp edges, broken pieces, toxic paints or small parts accessible to small children who might swallow them?
• Are appropriate measures taken to avoid accidents?
• Are there unprotected sharp edges which might cause accidents?
• What is the procedure if/when an accident happens?
• Are toilets and changing areas adequate and near at hand?
• Is the standard of cleanliness acceptable? Children are quick to put things into their mouths, so cleanliness is not only important when it comes to floors and table tops, toys and equipment should also be clean. Cleanliness is particularly important where food is stored and prepared. Here are some questions you could keep in mind where bottle feeding, for instance, is concerned:
  • How are bottles stored?
  • How are bottles prepared?
  • Is there a sterilising unit?
  • If a bottle is dropped on the floor, what is the procedure?
  • Are bottles shared?
  • Do toddlers take bottles from babies for their own use?

Where cloths are used there ought to be a clear distinction between those for floors, surfaces and faces. Hair brushes and toothbrushes should not be shared. Where toothbrushes are used by more than one child, the risk of cross-infection is increased. Children should be encouraged to wash their hands after using the toilet and this habit is reinforced by children seeing adults washing their hands! Spills should be wiped up immediately to avoid slippery floors, and cleaning agents and other potentially dangerous materials should be in a locked cupboard. It is important
that there is appropriate attention given to maintaining a clean, ordered environment without creating an uncomfortable ‘clinical’ atmosphere. It is also important to bear in mind that the children being cared for by childminders and in nurseries are, in the main, healthy normal children. While it is advisable for adults to wear ‘sensible’ clothes there is, for example, no need to wear white coats.

**Conclusion**

Many people involved in the provision of daycare services for young children set themselves very high standards. However, there is the possibility that certain services are below acceptable standards. There may be too many children, too little space or a lack of sensitivity to the needs of children. Until such time as parents have access to minimum guidelines or standards, they must trust their own judgement. Hopefully this discussion on the main ingredients of good quality care will help inform that judgement. We now go on to examine in some detail the various options in sharing the care of your child. We outline the services and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each.
Having described what we mean by 'good quality' care, we will turn our attention in this chapter to the issues that you might consider when choosing one type of care arrangement over another; be it care with relatives, a childminder or in a nursery. There are some preliminary points to bear in mind which may have a strong influence on your decision. For example, do you require care for your child on a full or part-time basis. Perhaps you only need to make an arrangement for some days of the week and maybe this will vary from week to week depending on work arrangements. Alternatively, you may be involved in shift work and need someone to care for your child early in the morning or late at night. If you work long hours, it is important to take travel time to and from the carer into account, where appropriate, as it adds time onto your child's day away from home. Some carers will keep children until quite late. However, too long a day will leave your child very tired and will leave you with little or no time to spend together.

The costs of daycare vary widely and there are no incentives, such as tax relief on fees paid by parents to have their children cared for while they work.

How much money can you afford to pay? A survey of costs suggests that for 1990 the cost for one child for full day childminding is £40 per week on average; for the day nursery service it varies from around £35 per week, where parents supply food, nappies and so on, to £45 per week where everything is supplied. These figures can only be a rough guide because there is no fixed charge recommended and many arrangements take individual circumstances into account. As with any service, costs may be more
expensive and where you are sharing the care of more than one child, it can become very costly. There is no guarantee that the most expensive service is the best service.

Your child may have special needs due to a physical or mental handicap. He or she may have a visual or hearing problem. Any of these or other difficulties can have implications for the kind of care your child needs. Integrating children with special needs has been an important development in the changing of attitudes to various kinds of handicaps as well as benefiting the particular child.

You may wish to have your child cared for near your workplace so that you can see him or her during the day. Alternatively, because of transport or for other reasons, it may suit you better to have your child cared for in or near your own home.

What are priorities for one parent may not be so for others. Issues such as the above will determine the range and feasibility of the options you can consider. Each of the options you might choose will have its own implications.

Sharing Care with Relatives

Many parents opt to share the care of their children with their own parents, usually one or the other of the grandmothers. Sometimes the grandmother comes to the child's home but more often the reverse is the case. Some grandparents in Ireland live with their sons or daughters so no travelling is required. The arrangement with grandmothers can be very successful. Parents usually, and naturally, place more trust in their own parents than they would in a stranger. The familiarity in the relationship means that information about the child is passed easily from one to another.

Grandparents are often understanding and willing to be flexible when parents are late or delayed. They may also be prepared to bring children to and from school when the time comes. In addition, often no money changes hands which eases the financial burden on parents. Children too are often happy to stay with grandparents with whom they are already familiar. It is also beneficial for young children
to have opportunities to develop close relationships with members of their families from an older generation, and many children cherish the memories of such relationships into adulthood.

As against these advantages, difficulties can and do arise where relatives are concerned. Grandparents may have different priorities in childrearing to the parents which can lead to tension. It also has to be borne in mind that sometimes grandparents are not as physically capable of meeting the demands of young children as they once were. Furthermore, a child cared for in the home of a grandparent which is more adult orientated can also lead to some problems, for instance, a lack of opportunity for messy play.
Of course many of these points also apply where a child is cared for by other relatives. Some parents find it more difficult to discuss a difficulty with relatives than they would with someone with whom they have a more formal, "business-like" arrangement. In fact this is a good argument for having a short contract-type agreement, as it can avoid friction and this is clearly in the child's best interests. Having said all that, for many children and parents, the option of relatives providing care works out extremely well.

Childminders

Childminders are often parents themselves who choose to care for one or more other children in their own homes. Many parents, particularly of babies and toddlers, prefer the family atmosphere that a childminder can provide to the group setting in a nursery (although many nurseries do provide a family type atmosphere). There may not be as many opportunities for your child to meet other children of his or her own age, unless the childminder's children are of a similar age. There can be advantages and disadvantages to leaving your child with a childminder who has a child of similar age to yours. On the one hand this situation provides your child with a possible playmate. On the other, both children may have to compete for the adult's attention, which some childminders find difficult at times. Problems with jealousy and sharing adult attention are most pronounced where the children involved are infants or young toddlers. Older children may actually benefit if the childminder has a child of similar age. The older child, from about three onwards, particularly benefits from being with other children and some childminders will bring children to local playgroups or playschools, if the parents so wish.

Obviously, leaving your child with an experienced parent can have advantages, and some childminders have, in addition, completed courses in childcare or child development. It is often possible to find a childminder living in close proximity to you, perhaps even on the same road, and you may have some opportunity to see them with their own or other children. You may also have a chance to talk to other parents.
who have had their children cared for by a childminder living close by and see how their arrangements have worked out.

When choosing a childminder it is important to visit both with and without your child. The former allows you time to see how your child reacts in the situation and how the childminder responds to him or her. A visit without your child enables you to ask questions and discuss matters of importance to you. There are many questions you may wish to cover, for example:

1. How much experience has the childminder of caring for other people’s children? Does she have references from past parents? (Do follow these up.)
2. What does the childminder see as priorities in caring for children? Does she, for example, emphasise safety, tidiness, good behaviour and how do her priorities fit in with your own?
3. Has she any childcare qualifications?
4. Are there other children being cared for?
5. If so, how many and what are their ages?
6. How are new children helped to settle? First impressions can tell a lot! Are you and your child made to feel welcome when you first call? Some children settle into a new situation with no difficulty at all, others need a little time to adjust. It is important that you are made to feel that you can spend whatever time you feel is necessary with your child to help him or her settle. However the experienced childminder will also know when it is the parent, and not the child, who is having the problem, and should be able to tactfully suggest you leave for a short time! Is there thought put into helping children mix? Some children need encouragement to try out new activities. If you have the opportunity, watch how good the carer is at giving the child the encouragement that is sometimes needed.
7. Does the childminder keep records, for example a daily diary on the child? Many carers keep records. These provide a good way of discovering how your child has been getting on while you are not with him or her, how
their mood has been, what they have eaten that day and so on. Particularly with the first child you may be concerned that you will miss important steps in development such as the first step, or word. Sometimes parents ask carers to keep a diary. Can you have access to all records kept on your child?

8. Are safety and hygiene standards satisfactory? (See Chapter 4.)

9. What is the procedure if the child has an accident? Many childminders will ask you for your doctor’s name and address and will also want your permission to have your child brought to a doctor or nurse in an emergency. Most people providing daycare have access to a local doctor. Check that this is the case and get the name for your own information.

10. Is there another adult, a neighbour for instance, on hand who could help in an emergency?

11. Are you free to drop in to see your child at any time? If not, this is almost always a worrying feature and parents should think twice before agreeing to letting their child stay. Free access gives parents confidence in the service provided. It is, of course, understandable that childminders should have some control over parental visits, as they can be disruptive.

12. Is there a daily routine? A day with no variety is a dull day. While children need opportunities to run around, they also enjoy sitting quietly. There should be a balance in the daily programme. Ask the carer about the typical day. It is also possible to judge this by calling at different times during the day. Some carers operate a timetable although many do not stick rigidly to this, as the needs of small children can be unpredictable. On the other hand it is important that there are regular times for meals and snacks, physical exercise and so on, so that these do not get lost in a chaotic turmoil of events. It is important too that children are not forced to participate in the same activities all the time. In general, a daily programme is valuable for children as it gives them a sense of routine and stability.
13. What activities and toys are available, or do you need to bring some with your child?

14. What does the childminder allow and not allow the children to do? It is essential that children understand that there are clear limits set and that adults are consistent about getting the message across. Not all children are easy to manage and all children can be difficult in certain situations. The carer should be prepared to listen to you as a parent in relation to how you handle your child in a given situation. Openness in this area is to the benefit of all concerned.

15. How are difficult situations such as tantrums, biting and so on, handled?

16. During what hours is the childminder available?

17. How much does the childminder charge? Check what the arrangement is regarding payment if your child is sick and does not go to the childminder for example. Do costs include food and nappies, where applicable? Where two or more children are cared for from the one family costs are sometimes reduced.

18. What, if any, food is provided by the childminder? Are meals nutritionally balanced and is there enough variety, or is convenience food used more than you would like? It is good also to check where food is prepared, stored and heated and to ask about whether special diets can be catered for if this is relevant. At the end of the day parents should be given some indication of what their child has or has not eaten.

19. Adequate insurance cover for the services provided is essential. Cover should include public liability, fire and theft and employer’s liability if there is any other person employed (as would be the case in a nursery, for example). It is important that insurance covers such activities as outings and that those under eighteen years who might be helping out are also covered. Always ask about what exactly insurance covers.

20. Can you meet other parents, if any, whose children have been cared for by the childminder?
21. Would the childminder be willing to meet you from time to time to review how things are going? This is sometimes difficult at the rather rushed collecting time.

You may, of course, feel that some of these questions are more important than others and may order them differently. It is a good idea to make your own list of the questions you want answers to so that you do not come away having forgotten to ask something important. Remember that many childminders may be unused to being asked detailed questions by parents and so it is important to be tactful and bear this in mind. There will also be important points to observe rather than ask about when you visit. For example, how sensitive is the childminder to the children’s needs. You may also be able to form an impression about her sense of priorities. For example, does the provision of a warm, safe and stimulating environment in which your child can feel happy and secure figure high on her list or is she more interested in making parents feel happy? Who is more important to the childminder when you visit, you or your child? If you are considered more important you may not be told how the child really behaves when you are not there – whether there are tears, tantrums or if he or she was particularly quiet. It is also important when visiting to notice whether or not there is enough space for children to play comfortably.

Childminders, in their turn, will have questions they may ask you – for example:

1. During what hours do you want your child cared for?
2. What things would you prefer to do with your child yourself or are happy for the childminder to do, for instance:
   - Bathing your child.
   - Deciding or changing the amount or type of food.
   - Providing food and nappies.
   - Having birthday parties.
3. What is your child’s usual routine at home, for instance what times does he or she sleep?
4. What are your child’s likes and dislikes?
5. What is he or she able to do with regard to self help, toileting, feeding etc.?

6. What are your child's special words for toilet or bottle and other things?

7. Does your child usually 'make strange' and take time to settle in?

8. What do you allow and not allow your child to do?

9. Does he or she have a pet name?

10. What is your child's medical history and the name of your family doctor?

11. Who can be contacted in an emergency if you are not available?

12. Who will collect your child?

13. What kind of payment arrangements can be made, for example how much, how regularly (weekly, monthly) and what the payment will and will not cover?

If you are deciding to opt for a childminder you may like to invite her to your home so that she has an opportunity to see where your child spends most of his or her time.

**Nannies**

Some parents are more interested in having someone come to their home or stay in their home to provide care particularly where there is more than one child. Not having to get children up, dressed and organised each morning can have advantages for both children and parents. The benefits of children being cared for in their own homes are obvious when a child is not feeling well and you are not in a position to be able to stay at home. Many parents arrange that nannies do some housework as well as looking after the children. This can work out well but it is important to ensure that your children take priority. It can be tempting for a nanny to choose to do the housework rather than play with the child; after all you can often see a pile of finished ironing more readily than you will see the benefits of time spent with your child. Many of the questions already out-
lined for childminders with regard to experience, qualifications and so on, apply equally to the nanny and similarly you need to give as much information as possible about your child. It is also a good idea to get the names of people you can contact for references from a potential nanny. As with relatives and childminders, many nannies are willing to bring your older child to a local playgroup or school. As in any business arrangement, it is essential that there are clear lines of communication between parents and nanny as to role and expectations. A simple document or contract stating terms of employment can avoid a lot of misunderstanding later on. One area, for example, is the time of arrival in the morning, where a nanny is not living-in, and the notice required if the nanny cannot come to work. It is, perhaps, the biggest disadvantage of the nanny that you are dependent on her availability for you to be available to go to your work. Clear statements on points such as this make for a better caring arrangement.

Au Pairs
Since au pairs are really foreign nannies who live in, the questions and points raised above apply here. It is difficult to evaluate the quality of any training course they might have taken but talking around the subject can give you clues as to their interest. Au pairs may not be selected by agencies because they want to work with children and so there is no guarantee that they will care for your child to your satisfaction. Of particular importance with an au pair is that their fluency with your language is good enough for them to understand and converse with your child. Fluency in your language is particularly important with the very young child.

Nurseries
Good quality nurseries offer more than a minding service, usually providing a comprehensive daily timetable with a variety of activities planned to stimulate children's development. Indeed, some nurseries offer a structured preschool
session in the mornings for the 3-5 year olds. During this time the preschool child may be introduced to a variety of activities such as pre-reading, pre-writing and pre-number aimed at preparing children for school. Opportunities to socialise with other children and develop concentration skills are also emphasised.

Some nurseries may place greater emphasis on meeting the social and emotional needs of the children while others may focus more on their educational needs. Still others have a balanced approach in that they offer good quality early education in a caring and sensitive manner, without losing sight of the fact that they are dealing with small children.

The group care setting of a nursery can be particularly beneficial to the older child who enjoys playing with other children as well as having attention from adults. Nurseries, of course, cater for children from as young as three months. A good nursery will afford a variety of care appropriate to the different needs of the children. Some will employ staff for the different age groups and while the older children are at preschool there can be extra attention to the needs of the toddler and infant. In a nursery setting the infant needs very particular care and stimulation. Although they may all look alike, they are individuals with their own patterns of behaviour and their own needs! A good nursery reflects this and will not cater for too many infants. In a good quality service the adult/infant ratio will be good enough to allow for one to one interaction at least for a good portion of the day. Good quality nurseries also provide a routine, though less structured, for the toddlers in their care. At this stage what one should look for is that the nursery offers sufficient time, space and encouragement to the curious and exploring toddler.

Again many of the questions appropriate for childminders are relevant with regard to the nursery, particularly those regarding experience, qualifications, numbers of children and adults, insurance and daily routine. In addition there are some specific areas that are relevant to the nursery setting, such as:
1. Are the children grouped and if so, on what basis? Depending on the size of the nursery you may find that the children are divided into groups. Many nurseries group children according to age or stage of development, while others prefer a mixed age grouping system, more akin to a family situation. There are advantages to both systems. While the former does not allow for opportunities to mix with children of different ages, it does enable staff to concentrate more fully on meeting the needs of one particular age group, who are at a similar stage of development. The latter has the advantage of allowing contact with a wider age range, but can present problems when the three or four year old has his or her play almost constantly interrupted by a toddler. Mixed age groups can work well where there are enough adults. Alternatively, grouping children for part of the day with others at the same stage of development and mixing the groups for other activities, offers a good balance. While group activities allow children the opportunity to learn important skills such as turn-taking and sharing, very young children (especially under two and a half years old) are often not ready to conform to a group and even older children like to play on their own at times. Children forced to conform constantly as a group may become frustrated. Opportunities to work individually, as well as joining in group activities, should be provided during the day. Some nurseries offer supervised 'free play' to children which means that in general, children are free to choose their own activities. It is important to note whether or not the children receive enough guidance when necessary. For example a child may choose a jigsaw which is much too difficult for him or her to complete and will require help in making it and/or guidance in choosing another activity. Children approaching school-age may be expected to work to more of a routine.

2. How many adults care for the children? There should be enough adults to give adequate attention to the children in their care. The problem of course with giving clear cut recommendations about ratios of adults to children is how to define what constitutes 'adequate attention'. Children
are individuals and have different needs. Children also go through stages of needing more adult attention than at other times. It is generally accepted that babies need more adult attention than older children who are also interested in playing with other children and that children benefit more by being in smaller rather than larger groups. Certain activities such as outings may require a higher adult to child ratio. Having said all this, from the point of view of both parents and carer, we feel it is important to give some basic recommendations on ratios.

- For children aged below two years, there should be one adult to three children. One adult to two is ideal.
- Where children are aged between two and three years, there should be at least one adult to five.
- Children aged between three years to five years should have at least one adult to eight children. One adult to six preschool aged children is preferable.

There should always be another adult available, no matter how few or what age the children are, to help in an emergency or simply to lend a hand on busy days. In the nursery this may be the supervisor. It has been suggested that nurseries should have less than 20 per cent of the total number of children under two years of age and not more than 50 per cent of the total under three years.12

3. Do adults take responsibility for particular children and is there a high staff turnover? Daycare provides the child with an opportunity to widen his or her sphere of relationships outside the family circle and as such can be a very positive experience for the child. It is important that children are given an opportunity to form relationships which are of real value, particularly at times when the child is distressed and needs to be comforted by someone she knows and trusts. As we all know, children can become distressed quite easily and for very simple reasons such as having to wait for a favourite toy while another child
finishes playing with it. If the person caring for the child is constantly changing, it is difficult, if not impossible for real relationships to develop. Where there are a number of children being cared for by more than one adult, it is important that each carer take responsibility for particular children.

4. *Do adults have a common approach to setting limits on children's behaviour?* Where there is more than one adult working with your child it is important that they work well as a team. It will only lead to chaos and confusion if rules are set by different staff members. The only way to get a 'feel' for this is to observe the staff and talk to them as different situations arise. It is important, however, for adults to 'be themselves' with children and a variety of personalities is natural, in an atmosphere in which all are consistent about applying the agreed rules. Typical rules for children in a nursery might include (depending on the age of the children):

- Children are expected to replace toys after use.
- Standing on chairs and tables is not allowed.
- Children are expected to sit while eating.
- Aprons should be worn for messy activities such as painting, water play and playdough.
- Children are encouraged to wait until another child is finished with a toy before taking it.
- Children are expected to wait for the adult while another child has her attention (depending on the urgency of the need and the age of the child).
- Children are encouraged not to bring sweets and if they do, they are kept in a safe place until going home time or they are shared.

Adults with responsibility for children in the nursery may have corresponding rules for themselves such as:

- Adults should encourage children to replace toys after use.
- Adults should discourage children from standing on chairs and tables...

...and so on.
Other rules which help ensure sensitivity to children’s needs and a common approach might include:

- No smoking while children are present.
- The nursery is a place for children so adults’ attention should be given to children rather than to each other.
- Adults should both observe children and engage in activities with them.

There will, of course, be other rules which are concerned with health and safety.

When visiting a nursery as with a childminder you can observe how sensitive those in charge are to the needs of individual children. For instance some nurseries have a resting time during which all the children lie down or go to bed. This may or may not suit your child. Some children need less rest than others and can be upset if it is expected that they lie down for part of the day.

Other points to note include ease of access to the nursery and how space is used. Access should be considered in terms of ease of getting in or out of the building. For example, nurseries situated on other than the ground floor can mean climbing flights of steep steps which is difficult with a buggy and all the trappings of baby. It also has implications for a quick exit in case of a fire. In this regard infants and toddlers should be cared for on the ground floor.

There should be different areas for different kinds of activities in the nursery. How the space in a nursery is organised depends to some extent on how much there is available. Where space is restricted, layout is particularly important. Check for some of the following play areas when visiting a nursery.

- An area for ‘messy’ activities such as playdough, water play, painting, glueing, clay.
- A ‘home corner’ with dolls, child sized cooker, tea set etc.
- A book area where children can sit quietly. It is particularly nice if this area is carpeted.
- Floor space for children to work with larger equipment for example, model garage, farm animals, building blocks.
- Space for tables and chairs for other sit-down activities such as jigsaws, picture dominoes and so forth.
- An open space for more physical activities indoors or outdoors.
- A quiet area for resting. Young children commonly need to sleep or rest for a period during the day.

Nurseries will differ in their use of space. The important point is that there are designated areas for different types of activities and that children are not, for example, trying to play quietly or read while others are bumping into them on tricycles. Play areas for children should also have sufficient natural light. Children often like to have their 'own space' in which items they might bring to the nursery can be kept until going home time. It can also be a place to store things that the child has done during the day, such as paintings, that they would like to bring home.

Make sure you get a 'tour' of the nursery on your visit. If you are planning to have your child attend a nursery it is likely that you will be asked the same kind of questions as the childminder would ask. The more information you can give the nursery about your child the better for everyone.

**Conclusion**

At this stage we hope you will have a better idea about how to weigh up the various options of care available to you. The options we discussed – relatives, childminders, nannies, au pairs and nurseries – are the most common full time services used when sharing the care of a child. The general principles of good quality care, discussed in Chapter 4, together with the specific ways in which you can assess each option, are designed to help you make a choice as to what type of arrangement will be most suitable for you and your child.

Whatever arrangement you choose it is important that it works in the best possible way and it is to this matter we now turn our attention in the next chapter.
Making the Arrangement Work

Having made the decision as to which type of daycare you would like for your child, you must try to make the arrangement a success. A successful arrangement is one that leaves you relaxed and comfortable and ensures that your child is secure, safe and happy. Particularly with the young child, it is important that there is not a lot of changing of carers and that the choice made is as near final as possible. This involves a lot of preparatory work as we have outlined in the last two chapters. As with any successful arrangement, its success involves a certain amount of effort on everyone's part.

When making your final choice there are practical issues which must be considered. You may find the 'perfect' childminder or nursery in terms of attitude, attention to health and so on, but, if you have a long distance to travel or your choice is beyond what you can afford, you may have to look again.

Broadly speaking, making a childcare arrangement work involves communication and preparation.

Communication

Good relationships are the cornerstone of good quality care. A sound relationship, based on trust and continuity, is essential between child and carer. This allows the child to form attachments which are of real value.
Good communication is most important between the carer and the child. Effective, sensitive communication often involves bending down to the child's level and making sure you have his or her full attention. Shouting across a room can be ineffective and is also often ignored by the child; it leads to a noisy atmosphere and offers bad example to the child.

We have already noted the importance of the parent-carer relationship to the overall success of any daycare arrangement. Carers need to know if your child has had a restless night, suffered a loss or achieved a particular success. You need to know how settled your child has been, what they have eaten and, in the case of the very young child, how they have slept and some information about the nappy
pattern for the day. Creating good lines of communication by, for example, the use of a diary or daily record sheet may be useful. Where a young child is being toilet trained or is just learning to feed him or herself, it allows both you and the carer to record progress and to handle the child in a consistent and similar manner. It is also necessary to have a clear system for notification about any change in the usual routine. You need to know, in time, if the nursery will be closed or the childminder will be unavailable – it is not always easy to make alternative arrangements. In turn, it will help the nursery staff or the childminder if you let them know of your holiday arrangements.

Successful daycare should also strive to achieve a balance between openness and confidentiality. You should feel that you are getting adequate and accurate information about your child and his or her progress in general. It is of no value to be always told everything is fine, with no detail. At the same time you should feel free to discuss any issue of relevance in the knowledge that it will be treated with respect and in confidence. Where there may be a difficulty – a very shy child, a child slow to talk – carers, because of their experience, may be in a good position to identify such problems and assist in seeking help if necessary.

For the safety of all children, carers and indeed all those in close contact with children, should be observant and vigilant. If someone at the nursery or a childminder asks how your child got a bruise or cut, the chances are that all parents are asked this in the same circumstances. Parents should also be sure that any injury sustained by the child in the care of others is satisfactorily explained.

Some opportunity for participation in decision making, however little, makes for good relations and increases your confidence in the service and its influence on your child. The issue of ‘who decides what’ for your child may be a source of difficulty in any childcare situation. On points of general routine it is clear that the carer has the responsibility and expertise for making decisions but do you feel you can have an input if you wish? Look at the following situations as a short exercise in this regard.
Can you influence policy on safety, discipline?
Can you make suggestions about toys, routine, books?

Who decides when you are called?
Who decides when the doctor is called?

Do you provide the food?
Do you influence decisions about diet, sweets, drinks?
Are your suggestions welcomed or ignored?

Some of these points may seem trivial, particularly if the service is convenient and your child seems happy; none-theless, they are worth considering.

It has been noted, both in Ireland and elsewhere, that daycare arrangements with a contract element, however simple, offer a security and stability from which parents, children and carers alike derive benefit. From time to time problems can and do occur. They can arise over issues such as:

- Misunderstandings about payment.
- Varying approaches to discipline.
- Disagreements about, for example, amount of TV viewing or sweets.
- Collection of children.
- Arrangements if carer is not available.

A contract will indicate the hours the service covers. This is a particularly important area – even where a service is open for nine or ten hours a day, you must consider the needs of your child. Spending over eight hours in the care of others, on a daily or regular basis, leaves little opportunity for good quality contact between you and your child. Good quality contact is important and is not something that can be scheduled. So it is important to have enough contact time to allow it to happen.
The subject of hours also highlights the issue of collecting children. While there is an understandable temptation to hurry the child at collection, particularly if you have had a long and tiring day, it is always good to allow time for an activity to be finished, put away or, indeed, shown to you and explained. The carer may have given a lot of encouragement to the children to help them understand the importance of tidying away activities before doing anything else. The value to your child is increased if you are seen to respect this. Although young children have a poor concept of time and cannot read the clock, they learn quickly when to expect to be collected. If you are going to be later or earlier than usual do tell them. Late collection of children can create tension between carer and parent and it is useful to indicate clearly what is to happen should this occur. Just because a child is cared for in a person’s own home, for instance, does not mean that parents can come late without warning. Carers are workers too, with a life of their own outside working hours! Some services institute a system of additional charge where parents are late collecting children.

A contract will also clarify points not always made clear initially. To take an example – what happens when your child is ill? A sick child is one of the concerns parents have with regard to daycare. On the one hand there may be anxiety about the possibility of cross-infection, where other children are also cared for, and on the other hand concern about the care of the sick child. In a good quality service you will find simple rules employed to avoid cross-infection such as clearly separated changing areas. When a child is very sick it is generally best cared for in the home. Keeping aside some leave time at work to allow you be at home with a sick child is advisable. Payment for the daycare service if your child is absent is something that a service should be clear about one way or the other.

**Preparation**

In preparing for daycare it is usually a good idea to ‘try out’ the service for a short period before returning to work. This allows both you and your child to get used to the new
situation. Generally it is best to try this out when you are still based at home. If you are employing a nanny to come to your house you can take the opportunity to leave the house for a time and to treat the arrangement as if it were the real arrangement. If you have chosen a nursery or a childminder in her own home you can build up to leaving the child for the full day over a week – leaving the child for an hour or two the first day and so on. This period helps identify things you might not have thought of and it may show up points of misunderstanding which can be dealt with while you are still at home. It also helps on practical issues such as what clothes to provide – it is surprising the number of children who are dressed in impractical clothes when it comes to playing comfortably, especially with messy activities. With younger children it is important to leave a complete change of clothes available.

This short ‘try out’ period also highlights how your child feels which cannot be predicted in advance. Trust your ‘sixth sense’. If at the initial stages of an arrangement you are confident of your choice, the usual emotions of loneliness and concern can be handled. If, however, something is nagging – no matter how inexplicable – the arrangement may not work. It is, for instance, usual to feel some jealousy towards the carer who will see a lot of your child and may be the first to note such developments as the first step or the first word. However, you should not feel that the carer is taking on your role to the point where you are ill at ease with the situation. You are sharing the care of your child not completely handing it over to another.

The first separation may be difficult for you and your child. You may find no difficulty with separation but it is useful to be aware of the fact that it may happen. Generally, a sensitive carer will facilitate separation so that you and your child can come for short periods to begin with and gradually lengthen these, allowing you to leave for a short time, so that the break is not too sudden for either your child or yourself. It is important for you to remember that once you say goodbye you should go, even if it is only to stand outside the door. Make sure your child hears the goodbye and try to select a moment when your child is
settled and ready, otherwise you are creating confusion. This is particularly important with the older child.

Sometimes the separation problem is that of the parent rather than the child! No matter how convinced you are that it is right and sensible, that while you work, your child attends daycare, or is cared for at home by a childminder, you may still experience difficulty at the first separation. The young child, in the first months of life, may not show that he or she clearly distinguishes familiar from unfamiliar adults and if placed with a trusted adult the child usually reacts in a happy, trusting manner.

Difficulties at separation can arise at different stages in the child's development so that all of a sudden s/he will show reluctance to separate. This may be for a variety of reasons and it is advised that you handle it with sensitivity and
respect while not allowing yourself become manipulated by your child.

Parental involvement with daycare has been identified as a feature of preschool provision likely to yield beneficial outcomes for children. This research was concerned with daycare provided at a centre rather than in the child’s home. The involvement of both mothers and fathers is to be encouraged although active involvement is difficult where both parents work full time outside the home. There are advantages to parental involvement. For instance, it is important for your child to feel that you are concerned about him or her when you are not present and you need to feel happy with what is happening to your child while with the carer. It is good for you and the carer to have similar expectations in terms of child behaviour and development. This is best achieved by close co-operation so that both carer and parent work together in the best interests of the child. When, for example, opportunities such as outings or social events arise in a nursery, it is worth making the effort to take part. Research has shown that the relationship between the carer and parent – particularly the mother – is an important factor in the success of daycare. Where a parent is unhappy or does not relate well to the carer, the child may pick this up and be unsettled or unhappy.

Your child should enjoy the day with the childminder, the nursery or whatever caring arrangement you have chosen. You will often have to rely on the carer to tell you how the day has been for your child but children are quick to show their feelings, their happiness, their fears or their unhappiness in their behaviour. The preschool child may not be able to put his or her feelings into words very well so it is important to be observant of your child’s behaviour and mood and to listen carefully to what s/he says. Any change of behaviour or mood should be noted. In this way you can pick up any signs of unhappiness or unease at an early stage. Above all else daycare for your child is about stability of and trust in the service. It is about your child’s happiness and well-being and your comfort and confidence. Careful preparation will help the arrangement work to the best benefit of all involved.
There is ample evidence that parents in Ireland, in line with those in other European countries, are increasingly seeking reliable, stable daycare for their young children. The reasons for this change in childrearing practice are varied but it is a trend that is likely to continue, given the evidence from these other countries. In the absence of sufficient legislation, registration or guidelines for the delivery of childcare services, this book should have assisted you in your search for good quality daycare. We have not intended to direct you, as parents, to select one particular type of daycare over the next but, rather, have presented in as clear and concise a form as possible the points you should consider when making this important decision. We have also answered some of the questions and worries you might have. You are the one making the selection, you and your child are the ones who will be most affected.

Unlike other aspects of childrearing there is no folk history of daycare as we now understand it. The present generation of parents is breaking new ground and has very little expertise from which to draw. For this reason it is a decision that can be difficult to make and one that is not always easy to evaluate. This is all the more worrying because it is a decision that you, as parents, are making on behalf of your children and one which will influence their development. Each of us comes to the topic with points of view that will direct our decision, and seeking a definitive guide to what is best is simply not possible.

Good quality daycare depends on a number of factors. It is not enough to like children and have a bit of spare time.
Having an awareness of the process of child development, the carer will be in a position to identify and provide for the different needs of your child. They will stimulate, talk to, play with and listen to your child rather than simply mind him or her.

When looking for good quality daycare identify your own priorities and expectations. Use this book as a prompt for the questions you want answered. Ultimately you and your child must be happy with your decision. If you have any doubts or anxieties your child will pick them up and this, in turn, affects his or her happiness with the arrangement. Being confident about your choice is most important to the success of that choice.
Appendix I

Useful Addresses

An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta,
7 Merrion Square, Dublin 2

Barnardo's Training and Information Service (for those involved with young children),
244 Harold's Cross Road, Dublin 6W

Cherish,
2 Pembroke Street, Dublin 2

Council for the Status of Women,
64 Lower Mount Street, Dublin 2

Department of Health,
Hawkins House, Hawkins Street, Dublin 2

Dublin Institute of Technology,
Cathal Brugha Street, Dublin 1

Employment Equality Agency,
36 Upper Mount Street, Dublin 2

Federation of Services for Unmarried Parents,
35 Upper Rathmines Road, Dublin 6

Gingerbread,
12 Wicklow Street, Dublin 2

Irish Association of Careworkers,
PO Box 1729, Dublin 3
Iri sh Pre-School Playgroups Association (IPPA),
19 Wicklow Street, Dublin 2

Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
(ISPCC),
20 Molesworth Street, Dublin 2

Irish Sudden Infant Death Association,
13 Christ Church Place, Dublin 8

Montessori College,
8 Newtown Avenue, Blackrock, Co. Dublin

National Advisory Service (for those wishing to start
a nursery or creche),
Barnardo's Under Fives Project,
Main Street, Mulhuddart, Dublin 15

National Childminding Association of Ireland,
64 Lower Mount Street, Dublin 2

National Children's Nurseries Association,
Carmichael House, North Brunswick Street, Dublin 7

OMEP (World Organisation for Early Childhood Education),
PO Box 2227, Dublin 1

Parents Under Stress,
Carmichael House, North Brunswick Street, Dublin 7

Review of Education and Development of the Young
(READY),
c/o 244 Harold's Cross Road, Dublin 6W

St Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland,
16 Adelaide Street, Dún Laoghaire, Co. Dublin

Toy Library Association of Ireland,
c/o 244 Harold's Cross Road, Dublin 6W
Appendix II

Books to Read


Mother Care/Other Care: The Childcare Dilemma for Women and Children, Sandra Scarr and Judy Dunn, Pelican Books, 1984.
Appendix III

Training and Qualifications

There are various training courses available in the area of childcare. Some require a full-time commitment, others are part-time. Course fees also vary. Some courses are more widely recognised than others.

Some of the courses available include:

- National Certificate in Pre-school Care, which has external validation from the National Council for Educational Awards. This is a two year, full time course in early childhood care and education run at the Dublin Institute of Technology, Cathal Brugha Street, Dublin 1. It is proposed to offer a diploma in early childhood care and education from September 1991.

- Montessori full time diploma courses (AMI) which have recognition from the International Montessori Association.

- Various Montessori courses full-time, part-time or correspondence courses, the best known of which are those offered by St Nicholas Montessori College, Dún Laoghaire, Co. Dublin.

- Courses run by the Irish Pre-School Playgroups Association, particularly for parents intending to open their own preschool playgroup.

- IPPA courses for those already involved with playgroups.

- Family Daycare/Childminding course. This is a part time course launched in 1989 being offered at the Dublin Institute of Technology, Cathal Brugha Street, Dublin 1.
Various courses in childcare in local Vocational Education Committee (VEC) colleges.

Barnardo's Childcare Agency runs courses, seminars and workshops for nursery staff, childminders, parents and playgroup leaders and advises those wishing to start a nursery or creche.

Childcare courses run by private groups.

Seminars, workshops and short courses for daycare workers are held frequently, usually outside work hours.
Appendix IV

Courses in Child Development (for Parents)

Courses designed to provide training in childcare and early education all contain sections on child development, as do courses in psychology, medicine and other subjects. For the parent who simply wishes to find out more about child development, there are a number of options open, depending on where you live. These include:

(a) Colleges and Universities: Extramural courses on child development and related issues are often offered at universities, colleges (such as Cathal Brugha Street, Dublin) and VECs.

(b) Barnardo's Training and Information Service organises and runs courses on child development and related issues on request for groups in Dublin and from around the country. These courses are designed specifically to meet the needs of parents and others interested in children. Barnardo's can provide a purpose built mobile training centre in which courses can be held in the absence of a suitable local venue such as a college, school or community centre.

(c) The Irish Pre-School Playgroups Association (IPPA) runs courses around the country in various centres including local VEC schools and colleges. Although these courses are designed with the needs of those wishing to become involved in running their own playgroups in mind, they are attended by many parents and childminders who find them very worthwhile in that they offer a lot of information on the value of play and on appropriate play activities for young children.
(d) The Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) also offers lecture series from time to time on child development and related issues. Lecture series have been provided to groups of parents on request which concentrate on those issues parents themselves identify as being important.

(e) Other groups such as the Catholic Social Services Conference (CSSC) and the St Vincent de Paul Society organise parenting and personal development courses in local communities, which often contain sections on child development and parenting. These may be available in your area.

Other private groups advertise courses in local papers.
References


12. This ratio suggestion was given in the May 1989 Personnel Management Factsheet 17 (ed. Clare Hogg).


CHILD CARE IN IRELAND

A PARENT'S GUIDE
MADELEINE CLARKE AND NOIRIN HAYES

With an ever-increasing number of mothers working outside the home in Ireland, good quality childcare has become an urgent requirement.

This book is about the concerns and anxieties parents can have in choosing to share the care of their child with someone else. It begins by looking at the needs of children and how these differ throughout the stages of early development. It goes on to define what exactly is 'good quality' care for children and describes various options outlining the advantages and disadvantages of each. Guidelines are offered on how to find and choose arrangements that suit different children and parents. Finally, the issue of how to make arrangements work on an ongoing basis is discussed.

This welcome guide focuses specifically on the Irish situation and, with the help of information and questions, assists parents as they make this important choice for their children.

The Authors

Madeleine Clarke is a psychologist and project leader at Barnardos Childcare Agency. Noirin Hayes is a psychologist and lectures at the Dublin Institute of Technology, Cathal Brugha Street. She is also the mother of three young children. Both have a specialised interest in early childhood care and education.

Gill and Macmillan