

Parents Rely on a Range of Options for Early Learning and Care

Choices allow parents to meet individual needs

Finding a child care program that is affordable, safe, and developmentally appropriate is critical for children and families alike. Children [experience both short- and long-term benefits](#) from high-quality early learning, which sets them up for success as they enter school and beyond. And for a growing number of families, child care is an economic necessity while they work or attend school. As families navigate their unique circumstances, choice in, and access to, child care settings is imperative.

Early childhood education (ECE) is an umbrella term used to describe the care, education, and developmental support of children from birth through age five. People may use different phrases — including daycare, early learning, child care, preschool or pre-k — to describe various settings, programs, and opportunities that support young children, but the commonly made distinction between ‘care’ and ‘education’ in early childhood is a false one. Since children are born learning, anywhere kids are receiving care is a place for learning, regardless of the physical location or what it is technically called. High-quality early childhood education can occur in any number of settings, including publicly- or privately-funded classrooms, in-home settings, and care provided by trusted individual caregivers.



This resource is meant to provide a broad overview of the settings where children go while they are not in the care of their parent(s) or guardian(s) before they enter the traditional K-12 school system. The settings outlined here are not mutually-exclusive as families often rely on numerous options for child care, pieced together, to meet their individual needs. This diverse landscape of opportunities is often referred to as a mixed-delivery system since there are numerous programs and funding sources that work together to care for children.

Child Care Settings¹

Center-Based Care

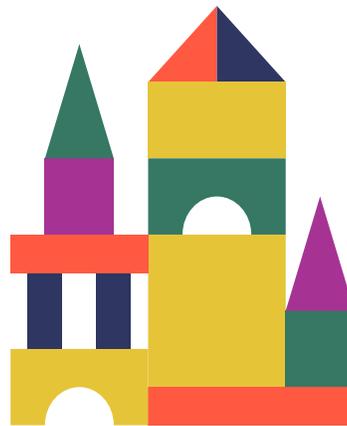
- Child care centers
- On-site care (at or near a workplace)
- Faith-based programs
- Preschool
- Pre-k
- Nursery school



Home-Based Care

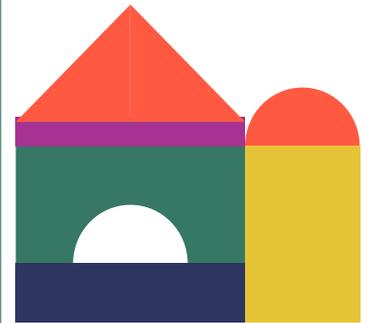
Family Child Care

- Family Child Care Homes



Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care

- Relative
- Non-relative
 - ◊ Nanny / Nanny-share / Au pair
 - ◊ Babysitter



¹ NOTE: Child care settings are licensed, regulated, and funded in various ways based on numerous factors including what funding they receive from federal, state, and local sources. While licensing and regulation requirements vary by state, any provider that receives federal funding must follow basic health and safety requirements to be eligible for those federal funds. Though licensing and regulations do not guarantee quality of care, they can set minimum standards to ensure programs are monitored. In order to collect information for families about quality and aid providers in enhancing quality, states may design and implement their own [Quality Rating and Improvement Systems](#) (QRIS). To learn more about how specific programs are supported by federal funding visit our website: www.ffyf.org.



Types of Early Learning and Care Explained^{2,3}

This section offers FFYF’s definitions of early learning and care settings and may not be exhaustive. Given the nature of the mixed-delivery system, some of these definitions may differ slightly from state or local understandings.

Center-Based Care

Center-based care generally offers classroom-like settings that group children by age to better meet their developmental needs and provide structures that support growth. Center-based care is often what people mean when they refer to “child care” or “day care”. While “day care” is a commonly used term, it does not accurately reflect any specific type of care, and thus it is not included in the graphic on the previous page. Based on the state and locality in which these programs operate, there are various program structures, funding sources, and regulations that centers must meet. More common examples of center-based care are discussed below and on the next page.

▮ Child Care Centers

Centers often operate in commercial buildings, care for more children than other settings, and operate during standard work hours. Child care centers will often care for children in classrooms, with a structured routine, where children are grouped by age to meet children’s developmental needs. Licensing requirements vary by state, but child care centers usually have health and safety standards they must follow. Child care centers are primarily funded through parent payments, although low-income families may receive [subsidies](#). Families may choose this type of care because of the classroom-like structure, the additional adult support, and the various resources centers can provide including equipment, supplies, and activities.

▮ On-site Child Care

Recognizing the importance of child care for employees, some employers offer child care at, or near, their worksite. Most often considered a child care center, these providers may care for children in classroom-type settings grouped by child age. In some cases, such as at a hospital, on-site child care can provide care for families that need non-standard hour care, including overnight or weekend hours. Families may choose this setting as it matches the hours they work, is subsidized by their employer, and/or is convenient to their office location.

▮ Faith-based Programs

Some center-based care may be run through a faith-based organization. Additionally, faith-based organizations may fill critical gaps in child care arrangements by offering child care during school breaks, before and after other providers’ hours, or for short periods during the day. Families may choose this care because of the flexibility, lower cost, and/or because they trust the providers.

² This resource outlines various child care settings for young children, yet the struggle to find high-quality and affordable care does not stop once children enter school. Families with older, school-aged children often need before- and after-school care as well as care options for school vacations.

³ This resource uses information from Homegrown Child Care, [childcare.gov](#), [winnie.com](#), and the Omidyar Network to guide our understanding and definitions of various child care settings. To learn more about care settings and find additional resources, visit their websites.

Center-Based Care (continued)

◆ Preschool and Pre-k

Preschool and pre-k programs support children between ages three and five. These programs usually have a focus on school readiness and may only be open during the school year and for part or all of the school day. Preschool and pre-k programs can occur in various settings such as schools, places of worship, nonprofit organizations, and child care centers. Often these programs are funded by states, cities, or school districts, though some programs may charge parents. Depending on state rules, these programs may or may not be required to be licensed. Families often choose this type of program to help their children prepare for school, but may not need full-day, full-year care as some programs operate on a school year calendar.

● Nursery Schools

Nursery schools are a common term for a classroom-type setting for children ages three to five. Similar to preschool and pre-k programs, nursery schools may only offer care for part of the day and part of the year. These programs generally have a focus on school readiness and may take place in various settings.

Head Start and Early Head Start

[Head Start and Early Head Start](#) are vital **programs** that support young children and their families. Using federal funds, Head Start and Early Head Start deliver comprehensive early learning, health, nutrition, and family support services to children ages birth through five and their families. The services are offered at no cost to families and may take place in any number of settings including center- or home-based. While Head Start and Early Head Start may operate stand alone programs in school-, home-, or center-based settings, funding from Head Start and Early Head Start may also go to support children in settings that receive numerous funding streams. Therefore, Head Start and Early Head Start may be considered an ECE program, rather than setting, which is why it does not appear in the graphic above. Head Start and Early Head Start programs are required to meet robust federal requirements and may also be subject to additional state requirements. Families may choose Head Start programs because of the high-quality, comprehensive services they offer children.

Home-Based Care ⁴

Many children across the country are cared for in a residential building -- whether that is in a caregivers' home or the child's home. In this document, we outline two primary kinds of home-based care: family child care homes and family, friend, and neighbor care. Families may choose this type of care for various reasons such as they know and trust the caregiver, the shared cultural values, the flexibility in scheduling, and/or the often less-than-average cost.

◆ Family Child Care Homes

Family child care homes, also known as licensed child care homes, licensed group family child care homes, legally exempt or license-exempt homes, certified child care homes, or registered child care homes, generally care for small groups of children in a residential building and usually operate as a business. Family child care providers are primarily funded through parent payments, although low-income families may receive [subsidies](#) to cover some or all of the cost they would otherwise pay. While licensing standards and regulations vary by state, many family child care providers are required to meet basic health and safety standards, and educators often have specific training requirements. Family child care providers may operate independently or as part of shared resource networks that provide additional administrative and quality supports for individual providers. Families may choose this type of care because family child care can offer a smaller, more family-like environment, and/or be culturally responsive. Additionally, family child care homes often provide more affordable care with flexible hours during "non-standard" night and weekend hours, which can be an important consideration for shift-workers.

⁴ Head Start programs can also be in "Home-Based" settings.

Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care

Family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care is a broad term for care that is provided in the child or caregiver's home by someone who is a relative, friend, neighbor, babysitter, or nanny. These providers are generally exempt from licensing and other regulations because they care for a small number of children and, if they are paid, families usually pay them directly. Families may choose this type of care for various reasons such as they know and trust the caregiver, the shared cultural values, the flexibility in scheduling, and/or the often less-than-average cost.

● Relative Caregivers

Many children are cared for by a relative, including grandparents. While some relatives may not view themselves as providers, they are important caregivers for young children. Often, relatives are not licensed or regulated, though requirements vary by state. Families may choose this type of care for various reasons such as they know and trust the caregiver, the flexibility in scheduling, and/or shared cultural values.

● Non-Relative Caregivers

Neighbors and friends who offer care for young children in their community are generally considered non-relative caregivers. Like relative caregivers, many are not licensed or regulated, though requirements vary by state. Families may choose this type of care for various reasons such as they know and trust the caregiver, the flexibility in scheduling, and/or shared cultural values. Additional kinds of FFN care by non-relative caregivers are outlined below.



▮ Nanny / Nanny-share / Au Pair

While nannies often care for a child daily, this is considered another type of FFN care because they are not typically regulated by the state. Nannies provide individual care for families in their homes. In a nanny-share, multiple families may hire a single nanny to care for multiple children. This is often done in one of the families' homes and provides children with social interaction as well as lower costs than a dedicated nanny. Au pairs generally come from a foreign country and live with the family that they provide care for. Parents provide au pairs with room, board, and a stipend in return for child care. Families may choose these caregivers because they know and trust the caregiver, the increased social interaction, the flexibility in scheduling, and the cost.

■ Babysitter

Babysitters are another type of FFN care. While babysitters may care for children regularly, they often provide care on an hourly or as-needed basis and can fill in gaps in care while parents work or go out.