

Family child care setting best for kids

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Boston Globe

When it's time to decide on day care for our baby or toddler, most of us instinctively prefer a family child care setting over center-based care. The thought of putting an infant in someone else's home is far more appealing than even the cheeriest institution-like setting.

It is possible, of course, to find good care for infants and toddlers at a center, and parents who prefer that setting, for whatever reason, should seek it out. By and large, however, child-rearing professionals say that the best choice for children under 3 is good-quality family day care.

Their reason is simple: A home setting is where a child feels safest and most secure.

"Children get more of what they need developmentally in a good family setting," says developmental psychologist Alison Clarke-Stewart. A professor of psychology at the University of California/Irvine, she has been researching day care since 1970. A revised edition of her book, "Daycare," will be published next month by Harvard University Press.

"This is the primary socialization period," explains Sandra Gellert, family day care director at the Children's Foundation, a national child advocacy and training organization. "What kids need to learn at this age is how to interact with other people and who and what they are." If they aren't able to do that in their own homes, she says, the next best thing is someone else's.

The kind of interactions Gellert and Clarke-Stewart refer to include having one-to-one time with a caregiver who is loving, animated and involved with each child; having that same caregiver for a long time, even years; being the youngest child and the center of attention; becoming the oldest child and the one who helps amuse the baby or zip the toddler's jacket.

It's not impossible for these things to happen in a center setting, but it is less likely, according to these professionals. For instance, in centers, children generally are grouped by age, in the infant room, the 2-year-old room, and so on. They not only have a new caregiver with each move, but also must adjust to new children, leaving behind friends they've made.

There is an industrywide effort to move away from this kind of arbitrary age structure in centers, according to Nancy Lauter-Klatell, an associate professor of early childhood education at Wheelock College. But, she says, "It's a slow evolution." Lauter-Klatell specializes in infant-toddler child care.

This does not mean that any family day care is automatically better than any center. More than any other single factor, it is the quality of the caregiver that elevates a family day care from being just OK to being great, according to professionals.

"If you are choosing between a wonderful caregiver with six children and a not-so-good caregiver with three children, I would go with the wonderful one," says Clarke-Stewart.