



Berrien County

A partner of the
Early Childhood Investment Corporation

A Guide to Finding Quality Child Care

Great Start Collaborative

The Great Start Collaborative of Berrien County is a partnership of community leaders, business owners, charitable and faith-based organizations, health and human service agencies, educators, and parents. It is committed to establishing and maintaining a network of county-wide supports and services that work together to achieve better results for young children and families.



The Collaborative

- Engages community partners in the planning and coordination of services.
- Addresses the factors that influence a child's readiness for school and life.
- Promotes community awareness of early childhood issues.
- Advocates for quality early childhood programs and services.

Our goal is that every child in Berrien County is safe, healthy, and eager to succeed in school and life.

For more information on the Great Start Collaborative, please contact Amanda Williamson, Director at 269-471-7725 x 1270 or amanda.williamson@uwsm.org.

How Can You Get Involved? Join the Parent Coalition

The Parent Coalition is a group of volunteer parents who serve as a "voice" for parents in their community. These parents assist in building public support for early childhood as an investment, support and participate in the assessment and strategic planning work of the Great Start Collaborative, and strengthen the commitment of parents in the community, on behalf of young children. For more information, contact Amy Mitchell, Parent Liaison at amymitchell4gsc@gmail.com.

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library is a program supported by United Way of Southwest Michigan that gives free books to children of Berrien and Cass County ages birth to five. Each month a new, carefully selected book will be mailed in your child's name directly to your home. Dolly Parton's Imagination Library is a free gift to your children! All you have to do is read to your children. To sign up, call 269-982-1700 or find the registration form at www.uwsm.org.





Great Start CONNECT

Who is Great Start CONNECT for?

It's for you – families looking for licensed child care and early childhood programs!

How do I find Great Start CONNECT?

You can search for licensed child care on Great Start CONNECT at www.greatstartforkids.org.

What can Great Start CONNECT do?

Plenty! You can search for child care and access this database 24 hours, seven days a week. Great Start CONNECT provides parents with the opportunity to quickly and conveniently search for and contact child care providers who match their needs. Families can also use Great Start CONNECT to find community resources and supports through their local Great Start Collaborative and their Great Start Regional Child Care Resource Center.

What if I don't have Internet?

Simply call 1-800-343-3470 to get connected to the Great Start Regional Child Care Resource Center near you. The resource center can assist you in searching for licensed child care and early learning programs.

Five Steps to Choosing Quality Child Care

1. Start Early

Start looking as far in advance as you can. No matter what type of care you are considering – a child care center or care in someone else’s home – finding the right child care option can take some time.

2. Make the Call

Begin your search by contacting your local experts – Child Care Resources. Child Care Resources can give you the facts about child care – what to look for, what things to consider and how to make the best choice for you and your child. In addition to what is in this packet, make sure to ask them these things:

- What are the licensing requirements in my area?
- How can I get information about complaints and licensing violations?
- Are there any child care financial assistance programs that my family qualifies for?

3. Visit and Ask Questions

Make sure you visit the child care options you are considering. Find out the five key indicators of quality:

- **Adult to Child Ratio:** Ask how many children there are for each adult. The fewer the children for each adult, the better for your child. You want your child to get plenty of attention. The younger your child, the more important this is. Babies need an adult to child ration of no more than 1:4 (one adult for four infants); while four-year-olds can do well with a ration of 1:10 (one adult for ten children).
- **Group Size:** Find out how many children are in the group. The smaller the group, the better. Imagine a group of twenty-five two-year-olds with five adults, compared to a group of ten with two adults. Both groups have the same adult to child ratio. Which would be calmer and safer? Which would be more like a family?
- **Caregiver Qualifications:** Ask about the caregivers’ training and education. Caregivers with degrees and/or special training in working with children will be better able to help your child learn. Are the caregivers involved in activities to improve their skills? Do they attend classes and workshops
- **Turnover:** Check how long caregivers have been at the center or providing care in their homes. It’s best if children stay with the same caregiver at least a year. Caregivers who come and go make it hard on your child. Getting used to new caregivers takes time and energy that could be spent on learning new things.



- Accreditation: Find out if the child care provider has been accredited by a national organization. Providers that are accredited have met voluntary standards for child care that are higher than most state licensing requirements. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) are the two largest organizations that accredit child care programs.

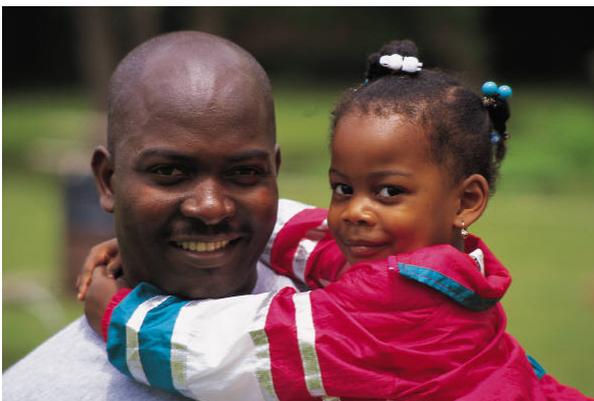
4. **Make a Choice**

Think about what you saw at each visit, and make the best choice for your child and family. Don't forget to use your intuition and pay attention to your "gut" feeling – if you felt great about a facility, use it! Drop by unannounced to make sure you are comfortable with your decision and that the indicators of quality are consistently being followed.

5. **Stay Involved**

The work isn't over when you find good care for your child. You and your child's caregiver are partners now. Here are some ways to be involved:

- Have parent-caregiver meetings regularly, and ask questions.
- Offer to volunteer time when needed, like participating in clean-up-days or fixing broken toys.
- Be there for your child's birthday party.
- Visit your child at child care and read a book aloud.
- Join in special events, like field trips, Career Day, or holiday celebrations.
- Even if you cannot get time off from work during the day, you can still check in at drop-off and pick-up times. Ask the caregiver how things are going and how your child is doing.
- Visiting and participating in events at your child's provider sends a strong message. It tells your child and your child's caregiver that you think what your child is doing and learning is important.
- Find out more about efforts in your community to improve the quality of child care. Is your caregiver involved? How can you get involved?



Dealing with Working Parents Guilt

Is Working Parents Guilt Telling You Something?

Sometimes guilt can be a warning signal that you need to make a change in your life. Are you unhappy with your child care provider? Is your boss making it hard for you to balance? Do you need to ask your spouse for more help around the house? If you see a red flag, fix it. Even if you can't correct it right away, resolving to do so can dispel the guilt. Once you make a plan to have a better work-life balance in two or three years, it's easier to brush off the pangs of guilt.

Write Down the Reasons You Work

We all work for different reasons: We love our jobs. We need the money. We don't want to risk dropping out of a competitive field when new positions are scarce. We realize we'd be miserable as stay-at-home parents and would make our children unhappy. We want to set an example of a successful, independent wage-earner. Write down your own motivations. Once you've reassured yourself that you are doing what you need to do, then simply let go of the guilt. Trust yourself and the choices you've made for your family. But keep the list. When guilt arises again – and it will – pull it out to refresh your memory.

Stay Away From People Who Make You Feel Guilty

You know you shouldn't pause to chat with the neighbor who once said, "I could never let someone else raise my child" – so stop doing it!

Consider the Source

When you do face an anti-working parent comment, try to remember that we all speak from our own perspective, based on our own experiences.

Play Hooky

Declare one weekend day errand-free and spend it with your child. If your child is little, indulge in activities that don't fit elsewhere in the week. If your child is bigger, let him choose the agenda. You can also take the opportunity to assess whether you'd be happier working less, or not at all. More likely, you'll reaffirm the life choices you've made.

Remember That All Parents Have Challenges

When you're feeling work-family conflict, it's easy to idealize the life you would have as a stay-at-home parent. The reality is that stay-at-home parents can have as much stress as working parents, if not more, depending on the age, temperament and number of kids. Go ahead; relish your solo commute to work or that quiet cup of coffee at your desk. If you were at home full time, you might be lucky to shower in private.

Acknowledge the Loss

That said, it's a simple fact of physics that a working parent isn't going to witness every single minute of their children's day. It's okay to be sad about missing out on the sweet moments and the fun. If you let yourself mourn the things you're giving up by working, it may be easier for you to enjoy the things you're gaining. It's no use pretending there aren't tradeoffs.

Bear in Mind that Life Changes

The choices you've made about work may seem like forever now, but who knows what the future holds. Keep your mind open to the possibility that your personal and family dynamics may shift. Revisit your work-life balance periodically to make sure it still meets your needs.

