

HOW TO FIND THE RIGHT CHILD CARE?



Staff photo by DON HEMZEL

Michelle Lovett and her wife, Michelle, play with their 13-month-old son, Connor, at World Elementary & Small World Country Day School in Nashua last month.

Making the right choice

By ANDREA BUSHEE
Telegraph Staff

For parents, finding the right child-care setting often means finding the wrong one first.

Michelle Lovett of Merrimack thought she found the right child-care center after her son, Connor, was born. It was close to where she works in Billerica, Mass., so she could nurse him on her breaks, and the staff-to-child ratio was 1 to 3.

But she soon started to see things that bothered her, such as older children playing in the same area where infants were being cared for, and a worker lift and toss a baby into the air.

What Lovett wanted is what most parents say they look for in a day care program: a safe, healthy environment that would eventually prepare her child for school.

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For records of every program in the Nashua area, go to www.nashuatelegraph.com/childcare.

Parents like Lovett typically say they want nurturing, loving caregivers to watch their children who have some type of child-care education.

Lovett took her son, who is now 1, out of the first center and placed him in the World Elementary & Small World Country Day School in Nashua. When she visited the Nashua center, she said, she made sure to ask very specific questions.

All the things that bothered her about her former day care center, she asked

about at the new center.

Trial and error seems to be a shared method of finding the right day care among Nashua-area parents. Even with the aid of referral services or online guides to finding the right setting, parents often end up figuring out the best place for their child after several tries.

Lovett used an online guide to find the first center, before deciding to place him at Small World where her two older daughters went to school, despite the fact it was less convenient.

"I could really see a difference in his contentedness when I would come and get him," she said.

The staff is older and more experienced at Small World and it is cleaner, she said, which are important factors to her. She pays \$1,075 a month to have her son at Small World; the other center was

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ABOUT THE SERIES-DAY 4

Child care has become a costly necessity of life as more and more children are being cared for by someone other than their parents or relatives. Yet not all child-care centers are as safe as they seem. In a four-part series, The Telegraph examines the records of every child-care program in the area, how the state inspects providers, the growing cost of care and how parents can make informed decisions about who watches their children. At www.nashuatelegraph.com/childcare, parents can search for violations at any day-care program in the area.

Inside: How to find the right child care program for your kid.



Staff photo by DON HEMZEL

A teacher at Small World Country Day School plays with one of her students recently.

Parents | Some find places through trial and error

even more expensive, she said. A Telegraph review of the records of every licensed child-care center and home provider in the Nashua area over a three-year period revealed, like most programs, Small World meets the state's expectations. It had only one critical violation during a 3-1/2 year period from January 2003 until the present.

But not all centers fared so well. In fact, 111 of the 188 programs still had at least one critical violation. Eleven programs had at least nine critical violations. A critical violation means a program has broken a rule that the state considers vital to protecting the health and safety of children.

The full records of every program in the Nashua area, including details on critical violations, can be found at www.nashuatelegraph.com/childcare.

Small World runs an impressive program — going as far as teaching technology, physical education and music to young children.

However, the records show it hasn't been problem-free. For instance, on a field trip in 2005, two children didn't have a

booster seat for the ride. Experts urge parents not to judge a center on one violation, but rather to bring up a violation in conversation when evaluating a program.

The National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies recently surveyed about 600 parents on the topic of child care and found parents' largest concerns included quality and cost.

About 63 percent of children younger than five are in some type of child-care setting every week, the study found.

But not all people choose a center that's on the beaten path. Nashua resident Maureen Patt chose a small, license-exempt home program where the provider agreed to follow her infant Makenna's feeding and napping schedule.

"I wanted someone with a similar outlook," she said. Patt, a teacher, heard about the service from her colleagues. The continuity — a provider who cares only for teachers' kids — makes Patt feel assured when she leaves Makenna there.

"My child's smiling every day when I drop her off and pick her up."

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Home providers can be exempt from a state license if they care for no more than three children other than their own.

In New Hampshire, licensed providers are required to have training in CPR and first aid, as well as background checks on themselves and all employees. They are also required to receive a certain amount of early childhood education each year, but not all child-care workers or home providers are required to be accredited.

What parents want often takes some time to find. Here's what some parents said they were looking for in a child-care program.

■ Karah Spence of Hollis: Liked teachers to get down to a child's level when interacting with them.

■ Donna Nicolosi of Hudson: Wanted a center that makes facility security a priority.

■ Brian and Janet Moses of Merrimack: Found a provider who shares their outlook on discipline and has a "no-nonsense attitude."

Lynne Walters of Nashua went through 8 in-home day care centers with her older children, who are now in their teens and twenties, before she found the Adult Learning Center in Nashua.

Many of the providers were not paying enough attention to her children, she said. So she decided to call the city of Nashua and ask for a licensed provider, and they gave her the name of the Adult Learning Center.

"I never looked elsewhere," she said.

Child after child, she remained faithful to the center. Walters took custody of her nephew, Matthew when he was just days old. He is now 4 and has been going to the center since he was 6 weeks.

She feels they help her nephew with development and she gets what she pays for at the center.

Her praise is well-founded. The Telegraph's analysis of area child care records show the Adult Learning Center's Lake Street facility has had no critical violations since January 2003.

"The staff there is wonderful," she said.

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Who Is Watching Your Child?

N.H. CHILD CARE PROGRAM DESCRIPTIONS

FAMILY CHILD CARE HOME: A child-care program operated in a home in which the provider resides. In a family child-care home one provider may care for a maximum of six preschool children plus up to three children who are enrolled in a full-day school program. The number of children younger than 36 months of age and 24 months of age that may be cared for is limited.

FAMILY GROUP CHILD CARE HOME: A child-care program operated in a home in which the provider resides. In a family group child-care home one provider and one family child-care worker or assistant may care for seven to 12 preschool children plus up to five children enrolled in a full-day school program. The number of children younger than 36 months of age that may be cared for is limited.

GROUP CHILD CARE CENTER: A center-based child-care program that cares for one to more children ages 3-5 years of age, up to four of whom may be younger than 3 years of age, plus five children enrolled in a full-day school program.

CHILD CARE NURSERY: A center-based child-care program that cares for five or more infants and toddlers under three years of age.

PRESCHOOL PROGRAM: A center-based child-care program that provides care and a structured program for children 3 years of age and older who are not attending a full-day school program. Any child-care center calling itself a nursery school, kindergarten, learning center or child development program must meet preschool program requirements for curriculum. Preschool programs can care for children up to five hours per day.

SCHOOL-AGE PROGRAM: A family or family group child-care program that elects to care for six or more school-age children who are enrolled in a full-day school program, or a center-based child-care program that cares for six or more children ages 4 years and 8 months of age or older who are enrolled in a kindergarten program or full-day school program. School-age programs can care for children up to five hours before or after school and all day during school vacations.

NIGHT CARE PROGRAM: A center-based, family, or family group child-care program that provides care during the evening or nighttime hours between 7 p.m. and 6 a.m. The type of center-based family will determine the limits on ages and numbers of children or family group child-care program license issued.

RESIDENTIAL CHILD CARE PROGRAM: A residential child-care

program that provides 24-hour care for six or more children unrelated to the operator of the program and apart from the parents. Residential child-care programs are required to have a quality field program Director and may be licensed as a group child-care home, child-care institution, or independent living home.

LICENSING EXEMPTIONS: License-exempt providers are not licensed or regulated by the Bureau of Child Care Licensing. If they are caring for a child who is receiving state scholarship they are required to have a background check that includes a criminal record and DDVT criminal registry check. License-exempt providers who are linked to their Child Care Resource and Referral Agency may have met additional requirements to be listed as referral.

The following types of child care are not required to be licensed by the Bureau of Child Care Licensing:

- Kindergartens, nursery schools, or any other daytime programs operated by a public or private elementary or secondary school system or institution of higher learning.
- Programs offering instruction to children, including but not limited to athletics, crafts, music, or drama, the purpose of which is the teaching of a skill.
- Private homes in which any number of the provider's own children, whether related biologically or through adoption, and up to three additional children, are cared for regularly for any part of the day, but less than 24 hours, unless the caregiver elects to comply with the provisions of this chapter and be licensed.
- Child-care services offered in conjunction with religious services attended by the child or offered solely for the purpose of religious instruction.
- Facilities operated as a complimentary and limited service for the benefit of the general public in conjunction with a shopping center, mall area, bowling alley or other similar operation where the parents or custodians of the serviced children are at the premises or in the immediate vicinity and are readily available.
- Municipal recreation programs, including after-school and summer recreation programs.
- Private homes in which the only children in care are the provider's own children, children related to the provider and children residing with the provider.

Courtesy of the state Bureau of Child Care Licensing

World Elementary and
Small World Country Day School

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