

Individual attention cited as plus of home-based care

The downside: Homes of providers aren't checked by licensing officials unless a complaint is lodged.

By Shirley L. Smith
STAFF WRITER

The last thing Sheila Akins wants to worry about at work is whether her 2-year-old son is being cared for properly.

That's why the Lawrenceville woman chose a family day-care home, she said.

When Drew was 8 weeks old, she placed him in a day-care center but quickly became dissatisfied with the amount of attention he was getting. Then she found Candy Studdard, a Gwinnett family day-care provider.

"My son gets 100 percent more attention with Candy because she has less kids," said Mrs. Akins, pointing out that Drew was in a nursery with 26 other children and a limited staff.

"At least once or twice a month I had to either go home or leave work early because my son was sick," she said. "He's much healthier and happier in family day care."

Smaller group sizes and more individual attention are two of the reasons some parents prefer family day-care homes over center-based care.

There are more than 6,000 registered family day homes in Georgia and countless other "underground" home-care providers who aren't registered with the Georgia Department of Human Resources (DHR).

In Georgia, family day-care providers may care for three to six children in their homes, not including their own children. They may also care for two additional children 3 and older for two hours daily, said Jo Cato, director of Child Care Licensing for DHR.

But concerns over child abuse and neglect have led some parents to select day-care centers instead of family day homes, said Joyce Burnett-Hull of the state Department of Family and Children Services (DFACS).

The state inspects family day-care homes only when there is a complaint, Ms. Cato said. And

Is family day care right for your kids?

Questions parents should ask when considering family day care

- ▶ Do you feel good in the provider's home?
- ▶ Do the children seem to be enjoying themselves?
- ▶ Is the provider warm and caring with children?
- ▶ Does the caregiver appear to handle children comfortably?
- ▶ Do you feel comfortable with the way the provider handles discipline, toilet procedures/diapering, a hurt or unhappy child?
- ▶ Does the caregiver pay attention to and respond to the emotional and physical needs of each child?
- ▶ Does the provider attend training courses or belong to a family day-care association?
- ▶ Is the level of activity suitable for your child?
- ▶ Does the schedule include active and quiet play?
- ▶ Are there sufficient toys and equipment for a variety of play experiences? Are there small and large toys for pretend and group play? Are the toys and other equipment in good repair?
- ▶ Does the provider take children out while running errands? Is the provider's transportation safe?
- ▶ What meals are served?
- ▶ Do children have to eat everything on their plates? May they have seconds?
- ▶ Is food held out as a reward or punishment?
- ▶ Is the provider in a child-care food program, which sets standards for meals and reimburses the provider for meal costs?
- ▶ Is the group size within the limit set by the state?
- ▶ Does the provider have additional help?
- ▶ Are you comfortable with the cleanliness of the house?
- ▶ Have sufficient safety measures been taken? Are vents and fireplaces screened off? Are unused electrical outlets capped? Are stairs adequately guarded in homes with infants and toddlers? Does the provider have a fire extinguisher, smoke detector and a fire plan? Is the yard safe from traffic and other hazards?

family-care providers are only required to register with the state, which means they don't have to undergo the same scrutiny as day-care centers.

Family day-care providers are required only to fill out an application with DHR and submit to a criminal background check. They are given a checklist of health and safety measures, but their homes aren't checked by child-care licensing officials unless there is complaint lodged against them.

In some counties, there are certain zoning requirements for family day-care homes.

Parents interested in family day care should ask prospective providers if they participate in the federally funded food program, which reimburses providers for food costs when they agree to serve nutritionally balanced meals.

Participants are required to

attend three nutritional training workshops a year.

The food program not only compensates for the state's non-regulation of family day-care homes by requiring the provider's home to be checked three times a year by food program inspectors, it helps providers keep operating costs down.

Providers are reimbursed about \$53.60 per child monthly.

LaDoris Davis, who has cared for children in her south DeKalb home for nine years, said the reimbursements for food costs allow her to charge parents \$60 to \$65 a week — which is lower than the average weekly rate for center-based care.

Along with lower rates, Ms. Davis says, she offers the children in her home more personal care.

"They have more freedom, more one-on-one [attention]," she said.



JONATHAN NEWTON / Staff

She's tempted to go on welfare, says single parent Carole Strong, because she earns too little to afford child care and too much to get government subsidies. Her children (from left) are Kayla Strong, 1, Regis Ward, 9, and Akira Strong, 5.

Child care stymies working poor

By Shirley L. Smith
STAFF WRITER

Carole Strong said she never thought she would consider quitting her job to go on welfare, but the 32-year-old DeKalb County resident is afraid she might be forced to do so.

With a salary of \$20,950 and three children who need child care, Ms. Strong said it doesn't pay to work.

"If I was not working I would do better, but I try to work and set a good example for my daughters," said Ms. Strong, a single mother. "It seems like the ones that don't try to get out and get a job are doing better than I am."

Although Georgia's child care rates are low compared to other states, officials say affordable child care remains largely inaccessible by the working poor.

These parents are caught in a Catch-22 situation, said Joyce Burnett-Hull, a senior case worker supervisor at the DeKalb County Department of Family and Children Services.

They don't make enough to pay for child care, but they earn too much to qualify for government subsidies, Ms. Burnett-Hull explained.

Ms. Strong said she is fortunate to have found a family day care provider who only charges her \$65 a week for her three children. She said she would rather have her children in a day care center, but can't afford the price.

Little cost difference exists any more between family day care providers and day care, according to Pam Sturgess, director of Child Care Solutions, a nonprofit child care referral agency. But family day care providers tend to be more flexible with their rates and sensitive to the needs of parents, she said.

The average cost of child care in metro Atlanta is \$79 a week for one child in a day

care center and \$71 a week for family day care, according to Ruth Anne Foote of Child Care Solutions.

In DeKalb, rates are a little cheaper. Family day care averages about \$60 or \$65 a week while day care center fees run about \$75 a week, Ms. Burnett-Hull said.

These rates are low compared to those of some other states. "In Boston, the rate is an average \$200 a week for infant care at homes or centers," Ms. Foote said.

Terri Wilchester, 24, said she could not pay the \$72.50 a week it costs to send her

daughter to a day care center without the assistance of her boyfriend, who helps with bills. The Chamblee resident makes \$257 a week working at Winn-Dixie, but she said she cannot get public assistance: "They say I make too much money."

Ms. Foote and many of her counterparts agree that more government subsidies are needed to help parents like Ms. Strong and Ms. Wilchester. "Child care is a problem for any parent making under \$30,000 a year," Ms. Foote said.

More than 60 percent of the parents who call Child Care Solutions have an annual family income of less than \$20,000, the agency reports.

Child Care Solutions has limited funding to help these families, but money is given only to parents who are enrolled in a job training program or to families in a crisis situation.

DFCS also provides limited subsidies to low-income parents. The department pays for child care for children up to 13 years old and for children older than 13 who have medically documented special needs or who are under court supervision, Ms. Burnett-Hull said.

DFCS reimburses the child care provider on a monthly basis. If the cost exceeds the maximum that DFCS can pay, the parent must pay the difference.

Currently, DFCS serves 1,300 DeKalb parents, but hundreds of people are on a waiting list, Ms. Burnett-Hull said.

To qualify for DFCS subsidies, parents must be residents of Georgia whose incomes fall within guidelines. They also must be enrolled in a job training program or as full-time students or must be employed for 20 hours a week, Ms. Burnett-Hull said.

Preference goes to people already enrolled in other government programs such as Aid to Families With Dependent Children or the Positive Employment and the Community Help Program (PEACH). Families with children considered physically or mentally challenged also are given priority. Parents making the transition from welfare to self-sufficiency also are eligible for the program for one year.

Parents who are not on welfare or who have children with special needs are usually the first to be put on the waiting list, Ms. Burnett-Hull said.

"We have seen child care being the number one barrier with people obtaining and maintaining employment," Ms. Burnett-Hull said.

Child care costs also make it difficult, if not impossible, for teenage mothers to continue their educations. Officials say it's harder for minors to get welfare because most live with their parents.

"It's hard to go to work everyday, try to maintain clothes . . . and pay for the extra expenses [to meet] the child's needs, plus transportation," said Lucille Fannin, a family day care provider who serves many teenage mothers, "even if you're home with mama."