



Quality child care benefits the whole community

**By Durham Connects
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Finding quality child care is major a concern for new parents. But the quality, availability and affordability of child care is also a reflection of our community.

If we can care for our children while development is at its most fragile, then perhaps we can build a stronger, more secure community. Leaving ones child with strangers can be a stressful and costly proposition. There is a lot at stake. Scientists now know that the early weeks and months of a child's developing brain architecture sets the foundation for future development and success. Studies show that early investment in children has lasting returns -- from graduation rates, to job placement. It is for this reason that quality early child care is getting a lot of attention from parents and politicians.

Fortunately, Durham County has some excellent resources for parents looking to find the right child-care provider for them. Child Care Services Association (CCSA) is a nonprofit agency that specializes in cross-matching parent needs with agency profiles. Its services are free to Durham County residents, and counseling is available either by phone or in-person.

Parents can start by calling or visiting the Web site for information (for the address, see the information box). CCSA can make provider referrals by type (such as a large center or a home day care) by ZIP code, age groups, hours of operation or by the state's star rating system.

The star rating system was devised by the North Carolina Division of Child Development as an easy way for parents to gauge the quality of a child-care provider.

"It's important for parents to understand what quality looks like. CCSA can provide education on regulations and provide tools such as quality checklists," said Vivian Eto, CCSA Director of Family Support. "Our job is to refer families to the highest quality child care possible. We refer parents to 3-, 4- and 5-star providers only." CCSA also provides technical assistance and training to child-care providers to raise their star rating.

CCSA can provide enhanced services to some families eligible by income, language barrier or by having a child with special needs. Special services include visiting child care programs in-person with the parents and checking vacancies.

Of course finding the right child-care provider and paying for it are two separate issues. CCSA can help parents find the best provider within their budget. The group strives to educate parents about child-care tax credits, discounts, scholarships and sliding scale fees. They can also work with families who are eligible to receive vouchers or subsidized child care.

DACCA

Durham's Alliance for Child Care Access (DACCA) assists in providing subsidized quality child care for low income families. DACCA is a collaborative of four agencies which include: Durham County Department of Social Services, Durham's Partnership for Children, Child Care Services Association and Operation Breakthrough. The mission is to provide access to quality child care for low income families through the shared resources of partner agencies.

To be eligible, families must be low income with children between the ages of 0-12 who live in Durham County or meet other special circumstances.

To get started families may submit a simple screening form on the Department of Social Services Web site. The address is: director@dss.co.durham.nc.us.

Applications are taken at 1201 S. Briggs Avenue, Suite 100, Durham, NC 27703 560-8300 from 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. Appointments usually last about one hour.

Applicants should bring:

- * Social Security numbers and dates of birth for children
- * Verification of income
- * Verification of employment, education, or training schedule.

Duke University resources

Duke University and the Medical Center employ more than 30,000 people, many of whom are parents. Duke has invested significantly in ensuring high-quality child care for its employees. It has created the Duke Child Care Partnership, which provided a \$200,000 donation to CCSA to fund grants to area child-care centers for improving the quality of child care or expanding space for infants and toddlers. The Web site explains, "In exchange for this financial support, Duke faculty, staff and students receive priority for vacant spaces at these facilities when they become available."

While Duke employees may receive preferential placement, the Web site listings are free and open to the public and offer a wealth of information for parents looking to screen centers.

Duke Care Connection is another resource open to the public. It lists home-based agencies that have provided information to Duke but are open to the public. The search function also allows parents to search by ZIP code, age range, star ratings and fee range. Duke does operate its own Bright Horizons child-care center on campus called Duke Children's Campus. The 5-star rated center is only available for Duke employees, faculty, staff and students and typically has a lengthy waiting list.

Whatever parents decide, experts agree it is best to start the search early. Eto notes that there are fewer spaces for infants and toddlers than older children and they fill up fast. It is best for parents to select and apply to child-care centers before the need is urgent. Being on several waiting lists will then assure that at least one opening will be available when you're ready.

Durham Connects is a collaboration of the Durham Family Initiative, itself a partnership of the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University and the Center for Child and Family Health, and the Durham County Health Department. It is funded by The Duke Endowment. For more information, please visit www.durhamconnects.org or call (919) 668-3279.

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