

## **Childcare for Children with Disabilities**

When you are looking for childcare for a child who has special needs you need to consider how you present the situation to potential childcarers. Many people have preconceived ideas, which may be wrong or only partially right, about many conditions. Some conditions are rare, or may only be known by an out-dated label.

You do not want to waste your time with prejudiced people who will not entertain the idea of looking after your child, but it is worth thinking about how you introduce information about your child's special needs. Rather than focusing on the name of the condition, concentrate on what type of care you are looking for, what sort of approach, nature of activities, personal care, attitude and so on you expect from the childcarer. You are, after all, approaching people who are professional carers whose business it is to look after children.

### **Your Child's Needs**

- How much specialist care does your child need?
- Does the carer need training or particular equipment to cope?
- Does the carer need to be fit and strong to cope with an older child who needs lifting?
- Does your child need one-to-one care?
- Is it important that your child is with other children or is adult attention enough?
- Does your child need to be taken to regular hospital appointments, therapies, or special activities during your working hours?

Whatever your child's age, stage of development, and special needs, there are a number of general points to consider:

- A safe environment in the company of reliable people.
- A place where your child can feel happy and secure.
- Care that offers appropriate activities according to your child's needs and abilities, which are also enjoyable.
- A carer who sees the child rather than the disability, and will treat disabled children with affection, dignity and respect, without being patronising.

Your main choices are between childcare at home or elsewhere. Within these broad categories there are a number of options.

### **Care for Under Fives**

#### **Childminder**

A childminder is someone who cares for other people's children in her own home. She is often a mother herself, with experience rather than lengthy training in child-rearing. You can expect a home-from-home atmosphere.

Most people choose childminders on the basis of their human qualities: ideally someone who is kind, patient and motherly. You might also be looking for someone who has a disabled child herself, or shows a particular understanding and empathy for special needs.

Most Local Authorities will not allow discrimination and The National Childminding Association (NCMA) has an equal opportunities policy. However you will be looking for someone who will take your child because she wants to, not because policy says she has to.

Some Local Authorities provide voluntary training for childminders who want to care for children in need, and if she has chosen to take advantage of it you know that she is motivated. Some of these trained childminders are part of the Community Childcare Network. Local Authorities can pay for children in need to be looked after by them.

Your child's disability may mean that there is an entitlement to special help, such as the services of a community nurse who would come to your house. Is it possible to arrange for the nurse to attend at the childminder's? The childminder can borrow toys from a toy library in the same way you can.

Childminders looking after children under eight years of age are legally required to be registered with the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), who must inspect the premises, satisfy themselves that the childminders are suitable people, and set limits to the number of children they can have at one time. The registering process is mainly concerned with health and safety regulations rather than the competence of childminders.

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Come prepared with your list of questions, both generally about her methods and habits, and specifically about how she will cope with your child's disabilities. You will want to know:

- What she does with the children during the day, and what extra activities they take part in.
- What food she serves, and whether you need to supply anything for special dietary requirements.
- Her attitude to discipline.
- Whether she can physically manage your child as well as other children in her care.

It is important that you give her a detailed explanation of your child's special needs, and it may help to have your child with you -if not at the first interview, later on before you make up your mind.

Answer all her questions, and be frank about everything she needs to know. Has she had any training, beyond her local authority's approved childminder's pre-registration course? If she is willing to look after your child but doubts her own competency, it is possible for her to receive help. The National Childminding Association (NCMA) guidance is that she should receive: 'No less than a parent would have' - for instance, visits from a Health Visitor or community nurse for advice and support.

These are some further considerations:

- Some insurance policies stipulate that a childminder must not give any medication unless she has been trained by a medical practitioner - a doctor or a practice nurse. If necessary you could arrange for one of these to see your childminder, and to pay her for the time she takes to visit the surgery.
- Does she have the confidence and willingness to manage any difficulties - for instance, when intrusive medication is required (such as rectal diazepam, necessary when a child has fits)? How would she cope if your child has a fit?

As a parent you are the expert on your child's needs. You can tell a potential childminder that you are willing to give her all the guidance she needs.

She might welcome you offering to stay with your child for a day or two so she can see how you handle your child, and can ask any questions while you are around. If not, it might help to suggest a settling-in period, during which you bring your child for short periods so that she can see how she copes alone. The NCMA has developed a training pack which she might find useful.

### **Day Nurseries**

Private nurseries charge sufficient fees to cover their costs and make a profit. Most places in Local Authority nurseries are allocated to those children who are considered to be 'in need', although there are sometimes some full cost places available. Your child's disability may qualify for an "in need" place, full- or part-time, although in many areas these are allocated to children at risk from their parents.

Social workers make recommendations about who is 'in need'. Children with disabilities are entitled to support from a social worker. If you are not already in contact with a social worker you can refer yourself to your local Social Services department (address from the council offices).

If it is decided that you are entitled to a part-time place you may be able to pay for the extra time you need to cover the time you are at work.

Some parents have managed to get support towards attendance at a private nursery - the Local Authority pays for an extra helper for a few hours so the children can have some individual attention.

There have been several successful cases brought against private nurseries under the Disability Discrimination Act, where a child was refused a place or not allowed to continue when the disability became evident. In these cases the discrimination was clear-cut, when reasons such as 'other parents wouldn't like it' were given. The situation is more ambiguous when the 'discrimination' is put down to the need for extra supervision or equipment which would cost money.

Nursery costs vary from around £80 to £180 per week per child, depending on nursery and area.

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### **In Home Care**

Since April 2005 it has been possible to have "approved" in home care, under the Childcare Approval Scheme. The Childcare Approval Scheme allows childcare which doesn't have to be registered, such as an in-home carer or someone looking after over 8s, to be approved. Approved care will be eligible for the childcare element of tax credits, and if you have a childcare voucher scheme at your workplace up to £50 per week of vouchers will be Tax and National Insurance free.

The scheme replaces the unpopular Home Childminder Scheme, but if you have a home childminder registered under this scheme he or she will not have to be approved under the new scheme until his or her registration runs out, or April 2006.

To be approved, carers must have a childcare qualification, a first aid qualification and be police checked. There will be a £96 charge for approval which lasts a year.

For more information see <http://www.childcareapprovalscheme.co.uk/> or call Childcare Approval Service on 0845 767 8111

### **Care for School Age Children**

#### **Childminder**

Many children go to a childminder before and/or after school. This can be especially convenient if they already have children at your child's school. Childminders may well look after your children in the holidays as well, but if they are looking after pre-school children they may not have the space. (See above for detailed explanation of childminders.)

If a childminder looks after over 8s only, he/she does not have to register. If you want to be able to claim money for the childcare from tax credits or benefit from the tax free part of childcare vouchers, the childminder must be either registered, or approved under the Childcare Approval Scheme (see above).

#### **Out-of-School Clubs**

More and more out-of-school clubs are being opened, and many have facilities for disabled

children. You will need to visit the premises and explain your child's special needs. Sometimes they may be willing to have your child but have practical problems - access for wheelchairs, for instance. If access problems cannot be solved by simple measures such as using a different room, you could try working with the club to get a grant for the alteration, which would benefit future children, as well as your own. Kids' Clubs Network have produced a publication called *Opening up the Doors!*, which addresses these issues. It is available from Kids' Clubs Network (Trading) Ltd, Bellerive House, 3 Muirfield Crescent, London E14 9SZ. Tel: 020 7512 2112 £6.00 (£5.00 to Kids' Clubs Members) inc p&p.

#### **Holiday Provision**

Much of the information relating to out-of-school care can be applied to holidays as well. Some Local Authorities run school holiday playschemes and activities for children, particularly in the long summer holidays. These tend to be based in parks, adventure playgrounds and sports or leisure centres. Some schools, both mainstream and special schools, run playschemes. It is worth ensuring that potential organisers know the demand is there by contacting them well ahead of time. This is often only for part of the holidays and may not be 'care' but just a 'drop in' facility.

Voluntary organisations such as MENCAP run a variety of playschemes specifically for children with disabilities. These have similar limitations with regard to the times they are available. If you are arranging your working hours to take advantage of one of these often well-run schemes, you might be able to make a reciprocal arrangement with another working parent so neither of you has to restrict their working hours too much.

There are various local voluntary or Social Service projects which provide assistance for disabled children to attend mainstream provision. Such assistance might be particularly appropriate if you have other children and you want all of them to use the same scheme. These support projects are local and have a variety of arrangements and names.

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### Respite Care

You may qualify for respite care from your Social Services department. Normally this takes the form of occasional short breaks, when your child goes away to be looked after by someone else. Some parents have been successful in negotiating to have the time allocated to regular periods of a few hours which allow them to work. They argue that working is a break from their children and they want to spend the time they are not at work, especially holidays, with their children.

### Other Arrangements

There are Classroom Assistants, Learning Support Assistants or Welfare Assistants employed at primary schools and at special schools who may know your child and have experience in dealing with disabilities. They have been vetted by the Local Authority. One of them may like to earn some extra money by minding your children until you are able to collect them.

## General Considerations

### Emergency Care

The best childcare plans can collapse at short notice. The child or the childminder can be ill, the transport may be subject to industrial action. You might be needed at work for an emergency. Planning for an emergency can relieve some of the stress of combining working and caring. Any research you do before the event helps. Does a local nanny agency supply people for occasional days at short notice? Can you have a reciprocal agreement with a friend or neighbour about sharing childcare in an emergency? This is where back-up from friends and family comes in. You are entitled to some time off work for Emergency Family Leave if childcare arrangements unexpectedly break down. See Our Time Off factsheet for more information.

### Is the Childcare Working?

You will be checking on your child's well-being and general happiness as a guide to whether the childcare you have chosen is right. The obvious way is to ask the child directly. If your children are

young, or do not have speech, you will need to reassure yourself in other ways. You will be able to see their attitude when you drop them off or collect them, or when you leave the house or return. But even children who are generally content with their childcare may betray some anxiety when you leave, so you should look for other clues. Are they eating and sleeping well? Are they extra clingy, or particularly upset or fearful? If there are other children using the same childcare it pays to talk to them and their parents. Use your judgement, and where you can make a surprise visit. If you don't work full-time or have some holiday, see if you can involve yourself with the caregiver or nursery. Would your offer of help on an outing be welcome, for example?

**Waving *not* drowning, Working Families' practical guidebook for parents trying to combine paid work and caring for children with disabilities**  
£11.95 (discount price for parents of disabled children £2.99 single copy only) inc p&p.

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## Further Help

**Waving *not* drowning** – Working Families' project for parents of children with disabilities or special needs who work or wish to work offers a free newsletter and telephone help.

To get on the mailing list write to Janet Mearns at **Working Families** or ring the helpline.

**Special Needs Helpline:** questions about balancing work with caring call Janet Mearns on 020 7253 7243, Wednesdays to Fridays, 9.30 – 1.00 and 2.00 to 4.30pm.

**Freephone Helpline:** questions about your rights to work family friendly hours, to leave and to in-work benefits

Tel: 0800 013 0313 – calls are free

Visit [www.workingfamilies.org.uk](http://www.workingfamilies.org.uk) or leave your address on 020 7490 2414 – Working Families' 24-hour answerphone for **factsheets**, including **our Childcare factsheet**

For details of **local nurseries and childminders** visit [www.childcarelink.gov.uk](http://www.childcarelink.gov.uk), or ring 08000 96 02 96 for your local Children's Information Service.

The advice in this factsheet is correct as at April 2005. It may not be correct after that date.

*Working Families operates a complaints procedure to ensure any complaints are dealt with thoroughly and fairly. If you would like to have details of the procedure or to make a complaint please contact the Chief Executive at Working Families.*