

Planning Ahead for Backup Child Care

Most parents work hard to find good childcare, but even the best arrangements can hit snags. Your centre may close for vacation at a time when you have to work, or your provider may get sick or have a family emergency. Your child's school may close for teacher training or because of bad weather.

You may face additional challenges if many children in your community are affected by an unusual event such as a pandemic flu outbreak, school closure or teachers' strike, or a natural disaster. Events like these can keep many children home at the same time, which would increase the demand for backup childcare in the whole community. If your providers themselves develop flu, or must leave home because of a natural disaster or other emergency, they may be unavailable with little or no advance warning.

Your best safeguard is to plan ahead both for routine and unusual events that may affect your child's school or childcare arrangements. The following information will help you understand your backup childcare options and how to find them.

Thinking ahead

Thinking about backup options now, before the need arises, will make a surprise breakdown in your usual arrangement easier to handle.

- *Talk with family and friends about everyone's needs and schedules.* Planning ahead will make things easier when you do need backup care.
- *Understand your options at work.* Know in advance what your employer's policies are for time off, sick days, and leave, so you can save time and avoid confusion later.
- *Think about your child's needs.* Some children approach new situations with enthusiasm, while others may be fearful. If your child is most comfortable in a very small group, you might not want to use a large group setting at a childcare center for backup care.
- *Write down any backup needs that you know you will have -- school vacations, teacher training days, and provider vacation days -- in your calendar today.* No matter what kind of care you usually use, ask now about scheduled holidays and vacations. If your child is in school or attends an after-school program, check the calendar for vacation weeks, early-release days, Monday holidays, teacher training days, and the start and end of summer vacation.
- *Think about the different types of backup care you may need.* These may include sick-child care, school-holiday care, summer-program care, business-travel childcare, and overtime-work childcare. Consider whether you could use the same one or two people in each of these situations or whether you'll need more contacts. (If you'll need to use different people for each situation, you may need to spend more time planning for care.)

- *Stay up-to-date on events that may affect school or preschool closings.* Know how a school will notify parents about closings because of an unexpected event such as a snow day, flu outbreak, or natural disaster. Will it post the information on a school or community website or provide it on a recorded message at a certain telephone number? If so, bookmark the site or save the number. If the school will notify local media, know which radio or television stations will have news regarding closings. Even an hour of advance notice can make a big difference in finding good backup care.
- *Expect the unexpected.* No matter how carefully you organize, situations that require you to find backup care are bound to arise with little or no warning.

If you know in advance that you will need backup care that may be hard to find on a certain date, you may also want to talk with your manager about whether you could work on a flexible schedule that week. For example, if your child's school will close for a day for teacher training, could you work a compressed workweek that week (such as four 10-hour days instead of five 8-hour days) so you will have the day free to care for your child? Or could your manager suggest another option? A manager who knows of your needs far enough in advance -- usually, at least two weeks -- may be able to offer more flexibility than is normally available.

Backup care options and how to find them

You'll probably want to explore a range of options before you decide on your final backup plan. The following is a list of backup care options that are available in many communities. Although not every option is available for every situation or in every community, you may find several good options where you live. Use the Backup Childcare Organizer at the end of this article to organize your calls and information.

- *Informal care.* Neighbours, friends, evening babysitters, and relatives can be good sources of backup care. If paying them feels uncomfortable, think about trading services (i.e., they could care for your child in exchange for your help painting a room) or give them a gift.
- *Shared care.* Sometimes in-home providers (who provide care in a child's home) and the families they work for welcome the idea of taking care of another child for a short time. It can mean more income for the provider and company for a child who is usually home alone with a provider. If you have an in-home caregiver, she may know other providers who would make this kind of arrangement with you.
- *Family childcare and childcare centers.* Depending on their enrollment and licensing requirements, some family childcare providers and centres may offer backup care to extra children as part of their services. Other parents or providers at the centre your child usually attends can be good sources of information about services like these.
- *Backup (drop-in) childcare centers.* Search the Internet for "drop-in day care" or "drop-in childcare." The United Way may be able to tell you about non-profit groups that offer this

service. Some businesses have on-site centres for their employees and may make slots available to other parents.

- *Nanny agencies.* Although they can be expensive, agencies like these can sometimes send a provider to your home on short notice. If you employ an in-home provider through an agency, you may want to talk to the same agency about backup care. If you use another form of childcare, talk with friends who have used agencies or search the Internet or yellow pages (for "nanny service").
- *Backup childcare services.* Some communities have private backup childcare services that can send caregivers to children's homes for a day or a few days on short notice. If such a service exists in your community, you'll find it listed online or in the yellow pages (under "childcare"). These services generally require pre-registration, so you'll need to plan ahead if you want to use one.
- *Before- and after-school programs.* Many programs like these extend their operating hours to include school vacation weeks and Monday holidays. Some also provide care to children who don't ordinarily use the program. Providers at your local school program can be a good source of information about other programs in the area.
- *School vacation week programs.* Many community organizations like Boys and Girls Clubs (<http://www.bgca.org>), local Y's, art centres, and recreation departments offer programs designed to provide care during school vacation weeks. Museums, wildlife centres, and parks sometimes offer programs like these as well.

Sick-child care

If your child is mildly ill and can't attend her usual centre, family childcare, or school, but you can't stay home with her, you may be able to make an arrangement with a friend, relative, or your usual evening sitter. You may also want to explore the following options for sick-child care:

- *Home health care agencies.* Some home health care agencies can send a provider to your home on short notice to take care of a sick child. Since many agencies care primarily for adults, be sure to ask if the provider has experience with children. Search online or in the yellow pages (under "home health services").
- *Nanny agencies.* Some nanny agencies are willing to send a provider to your home as needed for sick-child care. If you employ a nanny through an agency, talk with him or her about backup care options for sick children. If you don't use a nanny, talk with any friends or relatives who do and get a recommendation for agencies you could ask about sick-child care.

Remember that group backup care settings won't be available in the case of a flu outbreak or other health-related situation. In a flu outbreak, the affected communities are likely to close all group settings to prevent the spread of an illness among other children.

Choosing care

You will want to use the same high standards when choosing backup care that you use when making decisions about your child's usual care. Make every effort to meet a backup provider or visit a backup centre ahead of time so that you and your child can get to know the provider and the space. Ask about licensing. Make sure you are satisfied that your child will be in a place that is safe, comfortable, and interesting. Check to see that it offers age-appropriate toys and activities, times for both rest and active play, and a provider who is nurturing and patient.

Keep in mind that many programs, centres, and agencies require pre-registration, and that some require an initial fee. While backup care is available, it may be expensive and it also takes advance planning to ensure it's there when you need it.

Organizing your information

When planning backup care, it's important to line up as many realistic options as possible. You may well find that on the day you really need it your first choice isn't available. Here are some ways to keep your information in order:

- *Make a file* marked "Backup Care" to organize forms, notices, and any other information you gather relating to backup care.
- *Use the Backup Child Care Organizer* (or your own version of it) to keep track of names, phone numbers, and other key information for your key backup care options, and keep it at the top of your file.
- *If you use a daily organizer (datebook, address book, paper or electronic organizer), make a section or folder tabbed "Backup Care"* as a way to keep names and phone numbers at your fingertips.
- *Use the Child Information Sheet* to share important information with a provider who isn't familiar with your child or her needs. Complete a form for each of your children, since they may have different backup providers. You may want to make copies of the form before you fill it out so you can update it easily as your child gets older and her needs change. Be sure to bring it with you if your backup arrangement is away from home or keep it on your refrigerator for a provider who will come to the house.

If you need more information on finding good childcare for children of any age, the program that provided this publication has other helpful resources.

Backup Childcare Organizer

Backup	Days and hours available	\$ per hour	Enrollment and registration requirements
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provider

Name:

Phone:

Address:

Email address:

Contact

person:

Name:

Phone:

Address:

Email address:

Contact

person:

Name:

Phone:

Address:

Email address:

Contact

person:

Name:

Phone:

Address:

Email address:

Contact

person:

Name of child: _____

Date of birth: _____

Special information:

(allergies, nap time, suggested foods, etc.)

Name(s) of parent(s): _____

Child's home address: _____

Home phone: _____

Emergency contact information:

Mother's work phone: _____

Mother's cell phone: _____

Father's work phone: _____

Father's cell phone: _____

Additional emergency contacts (if parents cannot be reached):

Name: _____

Telephone: _____ **Relationship to child:** _____

Name: _____

Telephone: _____ **Relationship to child:** _____

Name of child's pediatrician: _____

Office address: _____

Telephone: _____

Fire department: _____

Poison control: _____

Ambulance: _____

Police department: _____

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