

# Short breaks and childcare: questions to ask before placing your child



Leaving your child in someone else's care is a big decision. When you are putting your faith and trust in people you don't know, it makes sense to put a lot of effort into getting it right. It helps to be clear about what you are looking for and what you can expect; if everyone has a good understanding of the task, arrangements are less likely to break down. Here are some ideas to help you think through whether a setting is right for you and your child. Factsheet 8a gives tips about getting the right kind of short break.

- TIP!** **Don't rely on leaflets and brochures;** they rarely reflect what it's like to use a service. Keep an open mind. Don't rule anything in or out until you've seen for yourself. Trust your own judgement.
- TIP!** **Make lots of visits and take your child.** Visit at different times of the day and when other children are about. Short visits give everyone a chance to get to know each other without feeling overwhelmed.
- TIP!** **Have at least the same expectations of the setting as you have of yourself.** Challenge any practice that's less favourable to your child there than at home. You can influence why and how things are done. Do you know who to talk to if you have any concerns?
- TIP!** **Get your child to think about what's important to them.** Often things that seem insignificant to adults make a big difference to a child. Will your child still get to football club, or Brownies if they are staying away?
- TIP!** **What does your child have in common with the other children?** Do they have similar needs or interests? Is your child likely to feel vulnerable or frustrated around these children?
- TIP!** **Ask other children and young people** what they like about the place and what they don't like. Are they involved in planning activities? Can they choose to opt out? Do they know who to tell if they are upset or worried? Are problems sorted out? Are they able to contact their parents whenever they wish?
- TIP!** **Ask children, parents and paid workers the same questions.** You may get different responses. Whose perspective matters more? Good policies are great but what happens in practice is more important. Observe what really goes on.
- TIP!** **What sort of carers are you looking for?** Is their age or gender important? Does your child need someone to make decisions for them, to support them to make their own choices, or just a friend?
- TIP!** **Have carers been given enough training?** If not, who will organise this? Are carers allowed to lift? Give medication? Are they insured?

- TIP!** **Do carers have experience?** Until you have struggled with a wheelchair or the time it takes to communicate a simple message, it is hard to appreciate what you are taking on.
- TIP!** **Is the setting homely, bright and cheery?** Are the toys and equipment clean and well maintained? Is it accessible? Secure enough for runners? Do carers eat with the children?
- TIP!** **Can your child expect to see the same carers each time?** Is there a relaxed and happy atmosphere? Are children included in conversations?
- TIP!** **How much information is collected** about your child's likes and dislikes, routines, communication and medical needs? How is this recorded and shared? Can you see a sample care plan? Does it tell you:
- **In what ways children are supported** to do as much as they can for themselves, but not be left to struggle when they can't manage?
  - **How children are encouraged to make choices** about how they spend their time, what they wear and eat?
  - **How physiotherapy, toileting or behaviour programmes are put in place**, monitored and reviewed?
  - **What happens if a child is upset** or distressed and how the setting adapts their response to match each child's needs?
  - **How well activities are planned?** What's in place to support a child if things don't go as expected?
- TIP!** **Does what is written down fit with what you see** happening when you visit and what others tell you?
- TIP!** **If your child is likely to stay overnight** you will want to ask about these arrangements. Do children have their own bedroom space? Can they bring their own things and put up posters? When children share a room are they matched sensitively? What safeguards are in place should your child wake or need help in the night?
- TIP!** **Some issues will feel more relevant to your child than others** and for most things there is no one approach that is right for everyone. The best you can do is ask about what matters to you, and check that a setting really does what it says before you decide to leave your child there.
- TIP!** **Always be prepared to keep checking that everything is going OK.** Listen to what your child tells you or shows you through their behaviour. Be alert to a potential problem if your child becomes unusually tearful, withdrawn or angry and seems reluctant to be left.
- TIP!** **Finally, accept that there will be hiccups from time to time.** Even when everything is going well and you think you've got it all sorted, organised care can still fall apart in the blink of an eye. Try to have a fall back plan for emergencies.
- TIP!** **Contact a Family** can provide more comprehensive advice. See: A Guide to Assessments and Services in England and Wales. [www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk), freephone: 0808 808 3555 (Monday to Friday 10am to 4pm).