

Preparing Baby for Child Care

Are you returning to work after being at home with your new baby for awhile? It is normal for parents to be a little worried about how baby will adjust to child care, but the fact is, there are many things you can do at home to make this transition easier for baby, your child care provider, and your family!

Make sure baby can take a bottle.

If you plan to breastfeed baby, give at least 1-2 bottles per day from the beginning. Some babies who are not used to the bottle will reject it when the time comes to begin child care. This can lead to baby being hungry, you needing to leave work to breastfeed, and it can be quite trying for the child care provider. If dad or another adult can feed baby with a bottle of breast milk on a regular basis, the transition to bottle feeding at child care will go much smoother.

Make sure baby can sleep in a portable crib.

Many child care facilities utilize portable cribs because they are recalled less often than standard cribs. Additionally, some licensed child care facilities are governed by strict safe sleep practices, and may not be allowed to swaddle, use a pacifier, put blankets in the crib, etc. It is also important to always put your baby to sleep flat on his/her back, which most child care facilities are required to do to reduce the risk of SIDS. By knowing this before your baby starts child care, you can make sure your baby is comfortable with the sleeping arrangements.

Make sure baby will accept other caregivers.

Some babies refuse to take a bottle or be held by anyone other than mom or dad. Other babies have a very difficult time being put down to sleep by anyone other than their primary caregiver. This can lead to a hungry, tired, emotional baby who just isn't happy at child care. There will always be an adjustment period for baby to feel comfortable with a new caregiver, but you can help by encouraging family members and friends to interact with baby and help feed, hold, and put baby to sleep. Easing baby into the idea that new routines aren't bad can be really helpful when it's time to begin child care.

Know your baby's schedule and cues.

Not all babies operate on a schedule. Many parents will feed baby when he/she is hungry or put him/her to sleep when tired, and thus have no idea how often baby eats or sleeps. For several weeks before child care begins, you might consider recording the approximate feeding and sleeping times. Some babies are like clockwork and others are not. Either way, it's helpful to share this information with your child care provider so he/she knows what to expect. It's also helpful to learn baby's cues and share them with his/her caregiver. Many babies suck on their fists when they are hungry. Other children pull on their ears when they are tired. The more information you can share with your child care provider, the better!

Make sure your baby can sleep through noise.

This one is especially important! You may be tempted to be quiet when your baby is asleep, but being able to sleep with background noise is a great skill to teach him/her. Baby will be able to sleep better in a child care environment, especially when it gets noisy. It benefits your family, too - baby will be well rested and happy at the end of the day! You can help baby learn to sleep with noise by talking with your family, vacuuming, listening to music, or watching television while he/she sleeps.

Help baby entertain himself/herself.

At home, you may be in the habit of constantly holding and playing with your baby. That's wonderful! Your baby most certainly benefits from all this positive interaction with you. However, it's also important to allow baby to check things out on his/her own without you or another caregiver right there with him/her. Of course, baby should never be left alone in a room at child care, but it's important to keep in mind that children outnumber adults at daycare and there will be times when your child care provider will be giving a bottle, changing a diaper, dealing with a boo-boo, making lunch, or otherwise occupied. If baby needs to be held all the time, it will be difficult for him/her to wait while other things are being taken care of. If baby feels comfortable entertaining himself/herself for a short period of time, he/she won't feel stressed when your child care provider is helping another child. The bonus for you is that you can put baby down to get some chores down around the house without worrying about him/her screaming! Ways to encourage this are singing while you hold baby, putting baby down with a toy or other interesting object, and continuing to sing as you gradually move away. This way, baby can still hear you and know that you are near.

Plan a goodbye routine.

This is useful for older babies, especially as they approach the separation anxiety phase. Baby may cry as you put him/her down and walk away, which is completely normal - and can be completely heart-breaking! Running out the door before he/she notices may actually make baby's separation anxiety worse, and hovering around may make it that much harder for him/her when you do leave. If you have a specific routine, it can make it easier because baby will know what to expect. You could hold baby while sharing information with your child care provider, give him/her a hug and a kiss before putting her down, - maybe with a preferred toy or book - and then say your goodbyes. It's important to say goodbye, and it's also important not to stick around once you do say goodbye. This way, baby knows that when you say goodbye, you leave. Hanging around because baby is upset may actually make him/her more likely to cry, if he/she thinks it will keep you there. Leaving as soon as baby is distracted by something without saying goodbye may make his/her separation anxiety worse, because he/she will know you could just disappear at any moment. Don't feel bad if baby cries as you walk out the door - this is completely normal and most child care providers expect it. Most of the time, babies calm down within minutes of their parents' departure. You can always call later to see how baby's day is going if you are worried about him/her.

While there will always be an adjustment period to child care, these tips can make the transition easier on everyone!