

Child Care Professional

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The toughest boss

Children are among the toughest of bosses: their demands are unreasonable, they cry or scream when you show up late, and early on they have little or no control over their bodily functions. It takes a special kind of person to be a child care provider.

More than babysitting

Most everyone has babysat at one time or another, whether watching a younger sibling while one's parents are out or being paid to take care of the neighbor's kids after school. But moving from babysitting for extra cash and pursuing child care as a career is a big leap.

Being a child care provider means more than just making sure a child is clean and out of harm's way. Child care, which generally takes place at day care centers, nursery schools, preschools and in private homes (40 percent of child care providers are self-employed), involves the nurturing and teaching of children aged five and younger. In addition to preventing children from eating crayons and sticking their fingers in light sockets, child care professionals look after the emotional, intellectual and creative well-being of children. This means that they organize stimulating and interesting activities, manage creative play time, and supervise interaction with other children. Preschool teachers and day care personnel must be open-minded and learn to think like small children in order to keep them engaged--reason and traditional discipline techniques have a short shelf life with toddlers.

Caretakers also keep records of each child's progress and discuss the child's development and needs with the parents, who often feel left out of their children's day-to-day lives. It is a huge responsibility, as early childhood caregivers prepare children for the rigors of elementary school and, in most cases, help to shape a child's first memories. In addition, child care providers can often spot developmental problems or learning disabilities, which helps the parents adjust their child's schooling needs. Recent research continues to show that the early childhood years are the most crucial in a person's intellectual and emotional development.

A draining position

Child care also has a physical element that can be demanding. Those who care for children must be prepared to lift small children constantly, pick up toys and equipment, and engage in a number of physical activities ranging from singing and clapping hands to helping children clean and feed themselves. There is little or no time to sit down and rest. Preschool teachers and caretakers must be enthusiastic and alert, and they must be firm but caring. Their days can be long, especially at day care facilities that stay open later for working parents. The hours can extend from 7:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., with few or no breaks. Dedicated child care workers will also work unpaid hours planning curricula, open houses and fund-raisers. Turnover in the field tends to be high because of the long hours, low pay and poor benefits. However, people who work with children do so because they love them and enjoy being integral to their development.

Get that certification

Many states prefer that preschool teachers and child care workers have Child Development Associate (CDA) accreditation, which is offered by the Council for Early Childhood Professional Recognition. The CDA credential is recognized as a qualification for teachers and directors in 46 states and the District of Columbia. There are two ways to become CDA certified: either by direct application or by completing the Council's one-year training program. Direct application may be the best option for people who already have some background and experience in early childhood education, since the training program is intended for people with little or no childhood development education or experience. Some employers may not require the CDA credential, but may require secondary or postsecondary courses in child development and early childhood education.

Certain employers may require further certification. For example, Montessori preschool teachers must complete an additional year of training after receiving their bachelor's degree in early childhood education or a related field. Public schools require a bachelor's degree and state teacher certification.

Moving up

Many people start in child care at a relatively young age, usually at a day care center. With experience, preschool teachers and child care workers may advance to supervisory or administrative positions in large child care centers or preschools. These positions often require bachelor's or master's degrees. Many people choose to open their own day care centers, often working out of their homes. Other workers move on to work in resource and referral agencies, consulting with parents on available child services. Some workers become involved in policy or advocacy work related to child care and early childhood education. With a bachelor's degree, preschool teachers may become certified to teach in public schools at the kindergarten, elementary and secondary school levels.

Being a child care provider requires one to "see things differently every day, through the eyes of a child." The work is "never really a downer," those in the field tell us, as "children have a way of making your life look brighter and they can really make you laugh when you are down." "Working with the kids is so rewarding," says one assistant teacher. "You will learn so much." Children are "quick to let you know if you are doing your job well. I think it's the best feedback you can get."

On the other hand, child care is a very stressful job that "should not be taken lightly." Says one day care aide, "there are always variables that can throw your day into chaos." Small children "like to test the waters" to see "how far they can push you." That fact, combined with their "fearlessness of dangerous things like climbing or sticking their fingers in places they don't belong," often fill days with anxiety. The stress of child care is "definitely worth it," but the job is certainly "no bed of roses" and "patience is a must." Child care givers advise finding a hobby to help relieve stress, "such as running or karate." One caretaker offers the following advice: "Learn not to take life so seriously--kids don't and look at how much fun they have."

Flexible schedules; Working with children; High levels of personal satisfaction

Low starting pay; Enormous responsibility; Constant exposure to illness; High stress level;
Physical exertion; Nagging parents

Sensitive; Compassionate; Creative; Patient

Misanthropic; Rigid; Afraid of children

Average about 45 per week

Median salary for child care workers: \$16,320; Median salary for preschool teachers:
\$20,920; Potential for high-earnings with self-owned centers

High school diploma; Child Development Associate (CDA) accreditation