

What Is Child Care?

The law defines child care as:

- three or more unrelated children under 13 years of age receiving care from a non-relative
- on a regular basis, of at least once a week
- for more than four hours per day but less than 24 hours.

It is only when all of these conditions exist that regulation is required. The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services is responsible for regulating child care. This is done through the Division of Child Development. The purpose of regulation is to protect the well-being of children while they are away from their parents. The law defining child care is in the North Carolina General Statutes, Article 7, Chapter 110.

The North Carolina Child Care Commission is responsible for adopting rules to carry out the law. Some counties and cities in North Carolina also have local zoning requirements for child care programs.

Star Rated Licenses

Centers and homes that are meeting the minimum licensing requirements will receive a one star license. Programs that choose to voluntarily meet higher standards can apply for a two through five star license. The number of stars a program earns is based upon the education levels their staff meet and the program standards met by the program.

Family Child Care Homes

A family child care home is licensed to care for five or fewer preschool age children, and an additional three school age children. This includes preschoolers living in the home but the provider's own school-age children are not counted (Individuals caring for one or two children are exempt from being licensed.) Licenses are issued to family child care home providers who meet the following requirements:

- Home providers must be 21 years old with at least a high school education or its equivalent, and mentally and emotionally capable of caring for children.

- He or she must undergo a criminal records background check.
- All household members over age 15 who are present in family child care homes when children are in care must also undergo a criminal records background check.
- All family child care home providers must have training in CPR each year and in ITS-SIDS and first aid every three years. They also must complete a minimum number of training hours annually.

All family child care homes must meet basic health and safety standards. Providers must maintain verification of children's immunization and health status. They must provide developmentally appropriate toys and activities, as well as nutritious meals and snacks for the children in care.

Child Care Centers

Licensing as a center is required when six or more children are cared for in a residence or when three or more children are in care in a building other than a residence. Religious-sponsored programs are exempt from some of the regulations described below if they choose not to be licensed. Programs that operate for less than four consecutive months, such as summer camps, are exempt from licensing. Child care centers may voluntarily meet higher standards and receive a license with a higher rating. Centers will be visited at least annually to make sure they are following the law and to receive technical assistance from child care consultants.

Licensed centers must meet requirements in the following areas.

Staff

The administrator of a child care center must be at least 21, and have at least a North Carolina Early Childhood Administration Credential or its equivalent. Lead teachers in a child care center must be at least 18 and have at least a North Carolina Early Childhood Credential or its equivalent. If administrators and lead teachers do not meet this requirement, they must begin credential coursework within six months of being hired. Staff younger than 18 years of age must work under the direct supervision of staff 21 years of age or older. All staff must complete a minimum number of training hours annually including ITS-SIDS training for any caregiver that works with infants 12 months of age or younger. All staff must also undergo a criminal records background check.

Ratios

Ratios are the number of staff required to supervise a certain number of children. Group size is the maximum number of children in one group. Ratios and group sizes for licensure are shown below and must be posted in each classroom.

Age	Teacher : Child Ratio	Maximum Group Size
0-12 months	1:5	10
12-24 months	1:6	12
2 years old	1:10	20
3 years old	1:15	25
4 years old	1:20	25
School age	1:25	25

Small centers in a residence that are licensed for six to twelve children may keep up to three additional school-age children, depending on the ages of the other children in care. When the group has children of different ages, staff-child ratios and group size must be met for the youngest child in the group.

Space and Equipment

To meet licensing requirements, there must be at least 25 square feet per child indoors and 75 square feet per child outdoors. Outdoor play space must be fenced. Indoor equipment must be clean, safe, well maintained, and developmentally appropriate. Outdoor equipment and furnishings must be child size, sturdy, and free of hazards that could injure children.

Curriculum

The Division of Child Development does not promote or require any specific curriculum over another. Child care programs choose the type of curriculum appropriate for the ages of the children enrolled. Activity plans must be available to parents and must show a balance of active and quiet activities. Rooms must be arranged to encourage children to explore and use materials on their own.

Health and Safety

Children must be immunized on schedule. Each licensed center must ensure the health and safety of children by sanitizing areas and equipment used by children. Meals and snacks must be nutritious, and children must have portions large enough to satisfy their hunger. Food must be offered at least once every four hours. Local health, building, and fire inspectors visit licensed programs to make sure standards are met. All children must be allowed to play outdoors each day (weather permitting) and must have space and time provided for rest.