

You Have Options for Child Care



Whether you're a new parent or caregiver, adopting, or expecting, it's never too early to start planning for child care. DCF is here to help you get started. The first step is choosing which type of care best fits your family's needs. Think about what you want from your child care provider. Think about your child's needs. Then, look at the different types of child care available to you in your area. In Wisconsin, you have options—and they all look a bit different.

What are the different types of child care in Wisconsin?

Not all child care is the same. Different providers offer different standards for care. Some are licensed. Others are certified or operated by schools. Knowing the difference is important because they all have their unique benefits. The key is deciding what type of care best fits you and your child's needs.

How are licensed, certified, and unlicensed care different?

- **Licensed:** Licensed care providers meet health and safety standards set by DCF. They are regulated and monitored on a regular basis. A provider must be licensed if they care for four or more unrelated children under the age of 7. It's the law.
- **Certified:** Certification is not legally required. It is a voluntary form of regulation. This is for providers who care for three or less unrelated children under the age of 7.
- **Legal Unlicensed:** Legal unlicensed care can only be allowed for up to three children. DCF does not monitor this type of care. Quality is evaluated by the parents alone.

Here are the most common types of child care in Wisconsin

1. Family Child Care Centers

This type of care is for smaller groups of children in a home setting. Typically, there are only one or two care providers. Depending on the number of children, they may be licensed or certified.

Benefits of family child care programs

- The home-like setting is appealing
- Providers care for up to eight children
- May have more flexible hours
- Legally required to be regulated to meet health and safety standards if they care for four or more children under the age of 7

2. Group Child Care Centers, School-Age Programs, and Day Camps

These types of programs care for more children. Typically, kids are grouped by age in a group setting. They have a larger number of staff and a dedicated director. A license is usually required.

Benefits of group child care centers, school-age programs, and day camps

- Opportunities to learn and socialize with more kids around their age
- More staff is present to teach and interact with kids
- Can offer a larger variety of activities and opportunities for children
- Legally required to be regulated to meet health and safety standards if they care for four or more children under the age of 7

3. School, Community-Based Child Care, or 4-Year-Old Kindergarten

School districts throughout Wisconsin offer free 4K or 4K Community Approach education to 4-year-olds. Programs are typically offered at the school or a community site. Some school districts offer tuition-collecting child care to children of any age. These programs may choose to be monitored by DCF, but this is not a requirement.

Benefits of school, community-based child care, or 4-year-old kindergarten

- Many offer “wraparound” care to extend the hours of care available for families
- Fewer transitions during the day, allowing children to stay in one place for 4K and child care
- Enables children to attend a familiar facility with consistent routines and expectations
- Easier transitions for 3-year-olds entering 4K

4. Services for Young Children with Developmental Delays or Disabilities

Early intervention (Birth to 3) program may be offered in the home or at a child care program. Upon the child’s third birthday, they can transition from Birth to 3 into Early Childhood Special Education services provided by the local school district. These services will be offered in a child care program or in a school-based prekindergarten setting.

Benefits of services for young children with developmental delays or disabilities

- Ensures that every child, despite developmental delays or disabilities, has the right to quality child care services
- Allows children with delays and suspected or diagnosed disabilities to receive services in the environment where they learn and receive care



Wisconsin Department of
Children and Families

Find your regulated, quality-rated care options through the Child Care Finder at childcarefinder.wisconsin.gov.

The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families is your trusted source for child care information, resources, and support!

The Department of Children and Families is an equal opportunity employer and service provider. If you have a disability and need to access services, receive information in an alternate format, or need information translated to another language, please call the Division of Early Care and Education at 608-422-6002. Individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing, deaf-blind or speech disabled can use the free Wisconsin Relay service by dialing 711 to contact the department.