

General Childminding information:

Choosing childcare is a bewildering business. How do you find a care provider who combines convenience with consistency and affordability with flexibility? The answer, for the parents of more than 300,000 children in England and Wales, is registered child minding.

There are more than 72,400 registered child minders in England and Wales. They are able to care for up to as many as 434,000 children collectively at any one time.

Registered child minders are professional daycarers who work in their own homes to provide care and education for other people's children in a family setting. Unlike nannies and au pairs they must be registered under the 1989 Children Act by Ofsted in England, or by CSIW in Wales. Registered child minders are regularly inspected to ensure they are maintaining high standards.

Registered child minders are self-employed and take care of their own tax and national insurance. They are not "employed" by parents but negotiate a contract for their service for which they charge a fee.

Peace of mind

Child minders work in their own homes providing quality daycare for nearby families. Unlike nannies and *au pairs*, they must be registered. The registration process is wide-ranging and rigorous, involving verification of references, a health check, and a police check on the would-be child minder and every other adult in their household. The prospective child minder's home is inspected too, to ensure it is a safe, suitable environment for children.

Child minders in England are registered to care for up to six children under eight, including their own children. No more than three should be under five. Most child minders in England are registered to care for only one baby under 1, although Ofsted will amend the registration of child minders who are able to demonstrate that they can care for more than one baby at once. These strictly enforced limits create ample opportunities for individual attention, one of the most important benefits of registered child minding.

Child minders in Wales

Many child minders offer out-of-school care to over 8s too. This unique age-integrated care provides enhanced learning opportunities and enables brothers and sisters of different ages to be looked after together. It is not uncommon for children to stay with the same child minder from babyhood to secondary school, benefiting from a level of continuity unrivalled by any other form of childcare.

Because child minders look after only small groups of children, their daily routine is very adaptable. Individual dietary requirements, sleeping patterns or homework projects can be catered for with ease. Their flexibility makes child minders ideal care providers for children whose parents work shifts as, unlike most nurseries, child minders' homes are often open outside of standard office hours.

Closer to home

Being cared for by a child minder gives youngsters the opportunity to learn from real life experiences. Everyday activities, like shopping trips, school runs, family mealtimes and visits to the park, teach children valuable life skills that they might not acquire so readily in center-based care.

These activities also educate children about their local environment. With child minders working in every region and in all walks of life, most families are able to find one who lives in, or close to, their own neighborhood.

Professional training

Child minders now have a wide range of training opportunities open to them and you may want to ask your child minder about the training they have taken.

All new child minders in England have been required to take a child minding training course, ideally before completing their registration, but certainly within six months of gaining their registration certificate, to meet one of the 14 National Standards for Child minding.

In Wales, all prospective child minders have to take Introducing Child minding Practice (ICP) before they complete their registration with the Care Standards Inspectorate for Wales (CSIW).

Many child minders have now taken the Introducing Child minding Practice course, which was developed by the National Child minding Association in partnership with CACHE, the Council for Awards in Children's Care and Education. This award is the first step in the CACHE Certificate of Child minding Practice (CCP) which you can read more about here.

Quality assurance

NCMA Quality First

NCMA Quality First is a quality assurance scheme designed especially for individual registered child minders. It has been developed with the support of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and is the only nationally-recognised scheme of its kind. *NCMA Quality First* meets the Government's standards for quality assurance schemes - it has been endorsed by Investors in Children.

Registered childminders involved with *NCMA Quality First* are taking part in a scheme which recognises their high standards in childminding practice.

If you'd like more information about *NCMA Quality First*, visit the website at www.ncmaqualityfirst.co.uk.

Children come first networks

Approved childminding networks are another initiative from NCMA. These regional networks of specially recruited, trained and assessed childminders are now springing up all over England and Wales, providing families with a quality-assured childcare service. Some network child minders undertake additional training so they can care for children "in need" (disabled children and those with social problems). Others become "accredited" to provide home based education to 3 and 4 year-olds, offering families a home-based alternative to nursery care.

Accredited child minders are recognised by the Nursery Education Grant scheme and, like nurseries, may be inspected by Ofsted in England and Estyn in Wales. The service accredited child minders provide is particularly valuable in highly populated areas where there aren't enough nursery places, and in rural areas, where the nearest centre-based care may be many miles away.

The Government has backed the development of these *Children come first* networks and has made funding available to local Early Years Childcare and Development Partnerships to encourage them to develop 450 new *Children come first* child minding networks by 2004.

Registered child minders and the National Childcare Strategy

The Government has recognised the vital role that child minders play in the care and education of children. Registered child minders are at the heart of the Government's National Childcare Strategy - an imaginative and wide-ranging programme that aims to meet the needs of children and their families.