

## Finding Sites for Child Care Centers

Child care providers in many communities are finding that “affordable” space for housing child care centers is no longer available in school classrooms or church buildings. This requires them to seek space in other types of buildings that may not be as suitable or easily remodeled to meet the many State and local regulations controlling child care.

Whether you are looking at sites yourself, or have a commercial real estate agent looking for you, the following information may be useful.

### Zoning

Cities and counties have zoning laws that specify what types of uses are permitted and not permitted in different areas. Types of zones include residential (from very dense, like multi-family dwellings, to least dense, like single-family residences or estates), commercial, industrial, office park, etc. Child care centers may be permitted, required to obtain a conditional use permit (involving fees and a public hearing), or not permitted, in each type of zone. It is important to talk with the local planning department to identify where child care centers may be located, at least before you make any financial commitment on a property.

### Buildings, Lot and Location Requirements

A child care facility requires ground floor building space and outdoor space, preferably adjacent. Outdoor space must be sufficient for both playground and parking needs. One experienced source suggests a minimum of a one-acre lot to accommodate a center with its required playground and parking space.

Both indoor and outdoor play space must be available. California regulations require a minimum of 35 square feet of **indoor play space** per child, exclusive of bathrooms, kitchens, offices, hallways, storage cabinets and rooms, etc. It is estimated that at least double that amount is needed, to include all necessary spaces.

**Outdoor play space:** State Licensing requires 75 square feet per child. Licensing waivers can be obtained under certain circumstances, to use less, for example, by having two preschool-age groups share a playground by different hours of use.<sup>1</sup> Infant/toddler playground space needs to be separate and developed to meet the different developmental needs of this age.

Though it is possible to locate a center above the ground floor, emergency exiting requirements are very complex and expensive, such as having an additional exterior stairwell dedicated for child care center use. (State Fire Marshal Code) Roof-top playgrounds have been developed but are not ideal environments since natural features (trees, sand, and grass) are very difficult to include.

**Parking:** Each city and county specifies parking requirements for different uses in their ordinances. In addition to parking for child care staff, short-term parking for parents dropping off and picking up children should be provided. However, it should be noted that this should

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<sup>1</sup> There have been cases where waivers were approved by Community Care Licensing, in areas where no outdoor playground space was available, to share another center’s playground or use a nearby park if facilities were suitable for the ages served and a higher level of supervision was provided. However, these are undesirable alternatives which may not be approved by a local Licensing office.

vary depending on the type of program provided. A part-day-only “preschool” where all children attend from 9:00-11:30, for example, will have a much higher, short-term parking need than a full-day program, where parents drop off and pick up children over a two- to three-hour period, at the beginning and end of the day.

Child care in a housing development may be able to use parking which is vacated by residents who leave to work during the day. Child care in office parks/commercial areas may have less parking impact from parents who work onsite and/or who use public transit.

**Other Considerations:** There should not be excessive noise or hazardous conditions within close vicinity (vehicle exhaust, hazardous materials), both for safety reasons and attractiveness to potential users. Sites adjacent to a freeway would be questionable, as would buildings in some industrial/manufacturing areas. Local planning or fire departments have information on businesses that have permits for hazardous materials on site.

### **Physical Plant Criteria for Licensing Of Child Care Centers**

The following more specific information on State Licensing requirements was provided by Jim Hopper, Child Care Licensing Advocate, Community Care Licensing, California Dept. of Social Services, (408) 277-2051 6/98

1. All Child Care Centers are classified as “E” occupancies for zoning and fire clearance purposes.
2. All Child Care Centers are required to secure a Fire Clearance from the local Fire Marshal.
3. Thirty-five square feet of useable play space shall be available for each child in care, assuming full capacity matching the licensed capacity. This excludes kitchens, hallways, bathrooms, and other non-play areas.
4. Seventy-five (75) square feet of outdoor play space shall be available for each child.
5. The Center shall be fully furnished inside and out before a license can be granted.
6. A fence at least four (4) feet in height shall surround the outside play area.
7. Incinerators, air conditioning or heating equipment, water heaters, or fuse boxes must be inaccessible to children.
8. Storage space for children’s clothing and belongings shall be made available.
9. Storage space for napping equipment shall be made available.
10. Drinking water shall be available for children inside and outside in the play yard.
11. One toilet and one handwashing fixture shall be maintained for every 15 children.
  - a) Urinals are allowed at the ratio of two toilets for every urinal.

- b) Handwashing facilities shall not be required to deliver hot water.
12. There shall be one toilet and handwashing fixture, separate from the above, for use by children who become ill during the day.
  13. All play equipment shall be age appropriate and in good repair.
  14. Temperature in the center shall be maintained between 68 and 85 degrees Fahrenheit.
  15. Hot water temperature shall be maintained to remain between 105 and 120 degrees Fahrenheit.
  16. The inaccessibility of pools, wading pools, hot tubs, spas, fishponds or similar bodies of water shall be ensured.
  17. Food preparation areas shall be separate from children's play areas, napping areas, or passageways.

#### **Infant Care Centers – Additional Criteria**

1. Infant sleeping area shall not be included in the square footage calculations for play space. A four- (4) foot moveable wall or partition can be used to maintain separation.
2. Infant changing tables shall have a one-inch thick, covered with washable vinyl or plastic pad and have a three (3) inch raised side. The table must be within arms reach of a sink and not be located in the kitchen area.
3. There shall be one handwashing sink to every 15 children and one potty-chair or combination of potty-chairs and toilets to every five children being toilet trained.
4. A standard-size, six-year crib or porta-crib shall be provided for each infant who is unable to climb out of a crib. Placement of such shall not hinder entrance or exiting to and from the napping area.
5. Only dispenser soap and paper towels shall be used for handwashing.
6. Thirty-five (35) square feet of useable indoor play area and seventy-five (75) square feet of outdoor play area shall be available for each infant.