

**Choosing
Childcare in
Northern Ireland
A First Time
Parent's Guide**

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Introduction

Choosing childcare is a tricky task...



Recently we asked parents about their first experience of choosing childcare.

Our motivation for doing so was to understand the decisions parents in Northern Ireland make when choosing formal childcare.

We wanted to identify the factors which are important to families and tailor the help we provide to parents during this time.

Our findings showed that looking for childcare can be overwhelming and stressful. The lack of knowledge and information available contributed to the stress many parents experienced.

At Employers For Childcare our aim is to support parents, we provide advice and information on childcare, working rights and family benefits.

However, our research showed that we could do more to support parents who are looking for childcare for the first time.

To address this we have developed this five part guide to help you find and choose a suitable childcare provider for your little one.

Contents

Part 1	What types of childcare are available?	4
<hr/>		
Part 2	Where to look for childcare?	8
<hr/>		
Part 3	What is quality childcare?	11
<hr/>		
Part 4	Top tips on choosing childcare	17
<hr/>		
Part 5	Claiming help with the cost of childcare	22
<hr/>		
	Contact Us	28

Part 1

What types of childcare are available?

Various types of childcare exist, including individual childminders, day nurseries, playgroups, approved home childcarers and out of school clubs.

This section provides an overview of the different types of available childcare to help you decide which type is best for your family.

Childminder

Registered childminders are self-employed carers based in their own home. They must be registered with their local Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT).

Once registered, annual inspections are carried out by the HSCT. For new applicants references and health checks are required, as are police checks on all individuals in the household over the age of 10.

Registered childminders can be registered to care for up to 6 children between the ages of 0 – 12 years of age (this number includes their own children).

As childminders are self-employed they set their own rates, usually paid on an hourly basis, according to the service they provide and at a rate negotiated with the parent.

Check with NICMA (Northern Ireland Childminding Association) for the current average hourly rate for Northern Ireland.

A childminder is ideal if:

- You want your child to be cared for in a home environment with a single carer.
- You have children of different ages and want them to be cared for together.
- You want childcare that offers continuity from the newborn to afterschool stages.
- You need flexible childcare because you work irregular hours which don't correspond to a normal 7.30am – 6pm nursery day.

Day Nursery

Day Nurseries are usually privately owned businesses, offering a structured approach to childcare.

They must be registered with the HSCT and once registered are inspected annually.

Day Nurseries must follow staff to child ratios as set out by the HSCT (see Part 3) and can accept children as young as 6 weeks old.

A Day Nursery is ideal if:

- You want your child to mix with lots of other children.
- You need somewhere that is open practically all year round.
- You need reassurance that there will always be someone there to care for your child - even if someone is off sick (i.e if a childminder is sick you will need to source other arrangements at short notice).

Part 1

Nannies and Approved Home Childcarers

Nannies - Nannies are employed by you to care for children, usually in your home. They fit in with unusual working hours, and work part-time or even live in.

Nannies are not required to be registered with the HSCT and as such you will not be eligible for help with the cost of your childcare if you choose a Nanny.

Wages are set by you as you employ the Nanny, this means also paying their tax and National Insurance Contributions, as well as statutory payments such as sick pay or maternity pay.

Approved Home Childcarers – Approved Home Childcarers are essentially nannies who have voluntarily chosen to become 'approved' by the HSCT.

This means that they are interviewed by the HSCT, have completed background and police checks, have a childcare qualification (or relevant training) and have an up-to-date first aid certificate. Once they are approved by the HSCT you will be eligible to claim help with your childcare bill.

Approved Home Childcarers can be employed by parents or you can use Employers For Childcare's Approved Home Childcare service.

By using our service we take the responsibility of employing the childcarer, removing the responsibility from you. We charge an hourly fee for our carers, call 0800 028 3008 for more information.

An Approved Home Childcarer is ideal if:

- You need someone to fit around your routine and lifestyle.
- You want control over how your child is cared for.
- You prefer your child to be cared for in your home.
- You live in a location where it doesn't suit to travel to a childcare setting.

Out of school Clubs

Out of School Clubs are for children to attend before and after school and during school holidays.

There are three types:

- Breakfast Clubs - open in the morning before school.
- After School Clubs - open after school until around 6pm.
- Holiday Schemes - open during the holidays with varying opening hours.

Clubs can be run by schools, private businesses or community groups.

An Out of School Club is ideal if:

- You need childcare to wrap around the school day.
- You need somewhere to take your child when you have to be at work early.
- You want your child to socialise with other children.

Playgroup

Playgroups provide childcare and early education for children from 2 years to 5 years.

They are not typically classed as 'childcare' in the traditional sense as they usually only offer sessions which last from 2½ hours to 4 hours during term time, either every day or a few days each week.

Playgroups are required to have a staff to child ratio of 1:8.

Playgroups are ideal if:

- You do not require full day care or have other childcare arrangements to wrap around the playgroup session.
- You would like your child to socialise with other children.

Pre-school

Pre-schools provide care for children in their pre-school year.

They are usually part of a nursery complex in primary schools and offer free pre-school education places. Children in their pre-school year are entitled to a free pre-school education place for 12½ hours per week during term time.

Parents must apply for a place in their chosen setting. Most free pre-school places are in primary school nursery complexes, however some private day nurseries also offer them.

Pre-school providers do not usually class themselves as childcare providers, however many parents use the free places as childcare.

For more information see our factsheet (<http://vouchers.employersforchildcare.org/media/free-preschool-places-4.pdf>).

Part 2

Where to look for childcare?

Once you have decided on the best type of childcare for your family you can begin looking for local providers.

There are a number of resources that parents can use to look for childcare, the main sources are listed as follows...

Family Support NI

Family Support NI was created to be a comprehensive database of family support and childcare services across Northern Ireland.

It has a dedicated Childcare Search which allows you to search for various types of childcare in your local area.

You can view the results in an online list, on a map or download into a spreadsheet.

Family Support NI is updated regularly and should feature all registered childcare providers in Northern Ireland – it is the only search facility which will

have, as close to possible, a full list of existing providers.

www.familysupportni.gov.uk

NICMA

NICMA (Northern Ireland Childminding Association) is a membership organisation for childminders.

Registered childminders can choose to become a member of NICMA.

NICMA has a search facility on their website which you can use to look for local childminders, however their lists will only contain childminders who are their members.

www.nicma.org.uk



Part 2

Employers For Childcare

Employers For Childcare's website also contains a Childcare Search facility. Childcare providers register on a voluntary basis to promote their facilities.

Updated yearly, this search facility gives more detail about each childcare provider than other websites; this information is provided by the childcare provider themselves.

Employers For Childcare also offers childcare to parents through the Approved Home Childcare service.

The childcare is provided in the family home through a qualified and trained childcarer who is matched to the family according to their specific needs.

If you are interested in using an Approved Home Childcarer and do not want the responsibility of employing a carer yourself Employers For Childcare can help.

www.employersforchildcare.org

For more information on our services or to speak to one of our Advisors about your childcare options, please call **0800 028 3008**

Early Years Teams

In Northern Ireland all childcare providers are registered by the Early Years Teams within the Health and Social Care Trusts, they are responsible for the registration, inspection, monitoring and support of childcare providers.

There are 14 Early Years Teams spread across the six Health and Social Care Trusts.

The Early Years Teams can provide you with lists of childcare providers in your area, you can also request a copy of the inspection reports of specific childcare providers.

For more information and details of your local Early Years team see:

www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/early-years-teams

Part 3

What is quality childcare?

In Northern Ireland childcare providers are required to register with the Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs)¹.

HSCTs are responsible for registering and inspecting childcare against the requirements set out in the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

¹ Providers operating day care services, used by children aged under twelve and open for more than two hours a day are required to register with the Health and Social Care Trusts. Day care services include facilities such as day nurseries, playgroups, out of school clubs, holiday schemes and crèches. People who run these schemes are required to register whether or not they receive payment. Childminders who look after children aged under twelve for more than two hours a day in a private house for reward are also required to register. Nannies who look after children in their own homes are not required to register. These rules are set out in the Children (NI) Order 1995.

Part 3

In 2012 the 'Minimum Standards For Childminding and Day Care for Children Under Age 12' were launched.

The Minimum Standards clarify the requirements in the Children Order and set out the minimum standard of care which all day care providers and childminders must offer in order to pass an inspection and be registered with a HSCT.

The Minimum Standards set the benchmark which childcare providers are measured against.

As a parent, you can be assured that any registered childcare provider you visit meets the Minimum Standards and has been approved to provide childcare in Northern Ireland by the HSCTs.

It is illegal for a childcare provider to operate without registration.

There are a number of unregistered childcare providers operating across Northern Ireland.

It is inadvisable to use an unregistered childcare provider because you cannot have the same level of assurance that the provider will provide quality, safe childcare for your child as you can with a registered provider.

What are the Minimum Standards?

It may be useful for you as a parent to know the standard that childcare providers are measured against. **There are 16 minimum standards that registered providers must adhere to, they are grouped under 5 headings:**

1. Quality of Care

2. Quality of Staffing, Management and Leadership

3. Quality of the Physical Environment

4. Quality of Monitoring and Evaluation

5. Policies and Procedures

The following section summarises the Minimum Standards...

Section 1

Quality of Care

Section 1 deals with all aspects of care that children receive in childcare settings.

Quality care is influenced by many factors, some are measurable, such as room size and food and drink, others such as ethos of care, development and play are not easily measured but are essential aspects of quality care.

There are nine standards in this section, they aim to reassure parents that their children are receiving quality care in a safe environment.

Standard 1: *Safeguarding and Child Protection* - Children are safeguarded through systems and practices that are consistent with the Regional Child Protection Policies and Procedures.

For example, staff are trained on the signs and symptoms of child abuse and have regular safeguarding children training (every three years).

Standard 2: *Care, Development and Play* - Children's wellbeing is promoted and their care, developmental and play needs are met.

A broad range of play and other activities is provided to develop children's physical, social, emotional and intellectual abilities.

Standard 3: *Children's Health and Wellbeing* - The overall health and wellbeing of the child is promoted and safeguarded.

For example, premises are clean and good hygiene is practiced, at least one member of staff has paediatric first aid training and all grounds and buildings are smoke free.

Standard 4: *Health and Safety in the Setting* - Children's safety is promoted at all times ensuring that proper precautions are taken to prevent accidents and minimise risks to them.

For example, a fire safety risk assessment has been carried out and outside play areas are supervised and secure.

Standard 5: *Food and Drink* - Children are provided with a wide variety of nutritious foods and drinks that will contribute to their health, growth and development.

Standard 6: *Promoting Positive Behaviour* - There is consistency in the use of positive strategies to establish acceptable patterns of behaviour and to promote children's wellbeing, self-esteem and development.

For example, parents should be informed regularly about the child's development and behaviour.

Standard 7: *Working in Partnership with Parents* - Providers work in partnership with parents to meet the needs of children both individually and as a group.

For example, information is provided to parents about the child's day.

Standard 8: *Equality* - The setting actively promotes equality of opportunity and inclusion for all children and their parents, and staff positively value diversity.

Standard 9: *Additional Needs* - The inclusion, welfare and development of children who have additional needs are actively promoted, based on appropriate assessment.

Part 3

Section 2

Quality of Staffing, Management and Leadership

This section focuses on the quality of staffing, management and leadership in childcare settings:

Standard 10: *Management and Monitoring Arrangements* -

There are effective and efficient management and monitoring arrangements in the setting to support the work of staff and the care of children.

Standard 11: *Organisation of the Setting* - Adult:child ratios, space and resources are organised to meet the children's needs effectively and to comply with the stipulations on the Registration Certificate. This standard sets out the qualifications staff employed in childcare settings should hold as well as the staff to child ratios in the various setting types.

Standard 12: *Suitable Person* -

Those working with children in either a paid or voluntary capacity, or who have substantial access to them, are suitable individuals to do so.

For example, staff should be Access NI checked and have appropriate skills and knowledge.

Section 3

Quality of the Physical Environment

Section 3 sets out the expected standard of a childcare setting's environment, in terms of space, as well as expectations of indoor and outdoor play areas, toilet facilities, the kitchen or food preparation area and staff facilities.

Standard 13: *Equipment* -

Sufficient furniture, play equipment and materials are provided. These are appropriate for their purpose and help create an accessible and stimulating environment.

Standard 14: *Physical Environment* -

The premises are safe, secure and suitable for their purpose and meet relevant statutory requirements.

Section 4

Quality of Monitoring & Evaluation

Section 4 sets the requirements for record keeping and documentation and identifies notifiable incidents. These include records of any accidents or incidents which happen in the setting or any complaints received.

Standard 15: *Documentation* -

Records are managed in accordance with legislative requirements and the setting's records management policy.

Standard 16: *Complaints* -

All complaints are taken seriously and dealt with promptly and effectively. The complaints policy should be publicised to parents.

Section 5

Policies and Procedures

The final section sets out all the policies and procedures a childcare setting should have to ensure the smooth running of the setting and compliance with best practice guidance. A childcare setting should have the following policies and procedures in place:

Accidents – Prevention, Reporting, Recording and Notification	Managing Emergencies
Additional Needs	Menu Planning
CCTV	Mobile Phones
Complaints	Parents' Access to Records
Confidentiality	Participation
Consent	Photography and Videography
Data Protection	Play
Equality	Provision of Food and Drink
First Aid	Reporting Adverse and Untoward Incidents
Infection Prevention and Control	Safeguarding and Child Protection
Intimate/Personal Care	Security of the Setting
Maintenance and Replacement of Play Equipment	Smoking
Management of Medicines	Social Networking
Management of Records	Transport for Service Users – Provision and Use
Management of Risks Associated with the Care of Individual Service Users	Whistle Blowing
Managing Aggression and Challenging Behaviour – including bullying	

Part 3

The following policies are required by all providers with the exception of childminders (unless they employ an assistant):

1. Absence of the Manager

2. Allegations against Staff

3. Staffing

Behaviour and Conduct	Clothing /Uniform
Discipline	Grievance
Induction	Meetings
Records	Recruitment
Rotas	Supervision and Appraisal
Training and Development	

It is important to remember that these are the policies that all providers are expected to have in order to meet the Minimum Standards. Settings can add additional policies as required.

Using the Minimum Standards

As a parent it is not necessary to have a good understanding of the Minimum Standards, but it can be useful to recognise the standards which childcare providers are expected to meet.

This overview of the standards can also help you to judge which of the childcare providers you visit exceed the minimum standards required of them.

For parents who have never used childcare before, using the Minimum Standards can help give an idea of what to expect when visiting childcare settings, you can also ask to see any of the policies listed in Section 5, to gain an understanding of the childcare provider's stance on a particular topic.

Finally, the Minimum Standards can give peace of mind.

All registered providers are required to meet this standard of care, giving you assurance that your child is being cared for in a setting which is approved by the HSCT's standards.

To download the full **Minimum Standards** see the Childcare Partnerships' website here:

www.childcarepartnerships-ni.org/childcare/minimum-standards

Part 4

Top tips for choosing childcare

Choosing childcare is a big step for you and your family.

Here are our top tips to help you when choosing a childcare setting...

1

Take your time to do background research

There are a range of different childcare options available, such as childminders, day nurseries, playgroups or approved home childcarers. Take your time and go through the various options. This can help you to decide which type of childcare you are happier with, for example:

- If you would prefer your child to be cared for in a home environment perhaps a childminder is the best option.
- If you prefer a more structured and social environment perhaps a day nursery would be beneficial.
- If you would prefer your child to be cared for in his/her own home consider an Approved Home Childcarer.

Once you have narrowed down the type of care you are looking for there are a number of ways to begin your childcare search, such as looking around your local area to see what is available or through word of mouth.

You can also avail of online resources such as the Family Support NI website which lists all of the registered childcare providers in Northern Ireland. You can search in your area and find information and contact details for the available settings (see Part 2).

Some providers, particularly day nurseries, will have websites which you can visit for more information and they may also use social media, such as Facebook or Twitter.

Using these resources you can find out more about the type of care provided and the facilities offered.

The Early Years Teams within the Health and Social Care Trusts are responsible for registering and inspecting childcare in Northern Ireland. They can also provide you with lists of childcare providers in your area.

You can also request copies of individual provider's inspection reports from your local Early Years Team.

2

Visit potential childcare providers

Once you have created a list of potential providers arrange a visit with each of them. If possible take your child with you as this helps you to see how the staff interact with him/her and if they are comfortable in the setting.

It can be beneficial to visit when other children are there so that you can see whether your child is calm, content and stimulated in the surroundings.

Look around...

When you are at the setting take note of your surroundings, for example:

- Was it easy to access the building and are there security measures in place so that only parents and staff can gain access? What procedures do they have in place for visitors?
- Are the children in the setting happy and content?
- What types of toys and games are available?

- How do the staff interact with the children, are they attentive to their needs?
- How do the children interact with each other?
- How is behaviour managed?
- Are the facilities clean and tidy?

Ask questions...

Don't worry about asking questions when you visit a childcare setting, it can be useful to find out about the activities your child will be involved in or how children are encouraged to behave for example.

You can also ask to see the setting's registration certificate or the range of policies they adhere to. Every childcare provider must have a range of policies on a number of issues, for example on child protection, equality measures and safeguarding. You may find it useful to read the policies in place before choosing the provider.

It can be useful to ask about the childcare provider's routine or the food and drink that will be provided to your child. It is also important to discover how they will communicate your child's progress to you and what they do in an emergency situation.

Choosing a childcare provider who you trust to care for your child is an important decision so do not be afraid to ask questions about aspects of care that are important to you and your child.

Good quality childcare providers will be happy to answer all your questions and provide you with the necessary information to reassure you that they are the best choice for your child.

Part 4

3

Always take up references

Even when a childcare provider is registered you should always check references for your own peace of mind.

Some providers will have testimonials from parents who have used their services.

If possible talk to other parents who use the setting you are interested in to find out their experiences, this can help you to assess if the setting is right for your child.

Some parents will also look at comments on social media about particular providers, however these types of references or opinions should be treated with caution.

It is always best to talk to someone who you can rely on and trust their opinion.

4

Don't let cost prevent you from exploring an option

Childcare can be expensive, depending on the type of care you require. However, don't let cost prevent you from exploring an option.

There is help available with the cost of registered childcare, the two main forms are through the Childcare Voucher scheme and the Childcare Element of Working Tax Credit.

There is also specific help available for childcare for disabled children, student parents and children in their pre-school year. For more information see Part 5 - Claiming help with the cost of childcare.

You can also contact our dedicated Family Benefits Advice Team which offers free, confidential advice and information on all family benefits and entitlements, including help with the cost of childcare.

Our Advisors can carry out a 'better off calculation' to help you work out what type of childcare support you are entitled to and which type of support is better for your family.

Contact our Family Benefits Advice Team on **Freephone 0800 028 3008**

5

Plan ahead

Think about possible changes in your circumstances and childcare needs and plan to ensure stability and continuity.

Don't agree to arrangements you won't be able to keep. You need to be honest about your hours and other requirements so that your childcare provider knows what to expect.

Always read over the service contract in detail before signing!

6

Always trust your own feelings about your childcare

In our research one of the most important factors for parents when choosing a childcare provider was their own personal instinct about the setting. You know your child best!

Choosing a childcare provider is a huge decision, it is important that you receive the reassurance you need that the setting is right for your child.

Whether it is taking a friend or family member with you on a second visit to a setting or requesting a 'settling in' period, asking for more information or requesting an inspection report from the Early Years Team, do what is necessary to put your mind at ease.

Part 5

Claiming help with the cost of childcare

There is help available with the cost of childcare, however it can be difficult to navigate what is available and which type is the best form of help for your family.

1. Existing help

There are two main forms of help with the childcare bill:

Childcare Vouchers

What are Childcare Vouchers?

The Childcare Voucher scheme is offered through employers as a benefit to staff.

The majority of schemes operate through a 'salary sacrifice' agreement, meaning that you choose to sacrifice a certain amount of your gross salary each month and this amount is converted to Childcare Vouchers.

The maximum you can sacrifice each month is £243 (per parent).

How much can I save?

The scheme is beneficial because the amount you sacrifice each month is tax and National Insurance Contribution free, saving you £77.76 each month or £933 per year.

As both parents can join the scheme there are annual savings of over £1,860 to be made.

How does it work?

Advise your employer that you wish to join the scheme. Once it has been set up, your employer will take the amount you sacrifice each month (or week) from your salary and transfer it to a Childcare Voucher Provider.

The Childcare Voucher Provider will credit the Vouchers to your online Childcare Voucher Account.

Just like internet banking you should be able to check the balance of your account 24/7 and make payments to your chosen childcare provider.

Childcare Vouchers are easy to use. Once they are set up the vouchers will be deducted from your salary every month and the amount will be credited to your Childcare Voucher Account.

Voucher accounts are flexible, you can choose to save the money in your account or pay it to multiple registered providers.

Note: Some Childcare Voucher Providers will place an expiry date on Childcare Vouchers, it is worth checking this before saving Vouchers in your account for a long period of time.

It is at the company's discretion to add expiry dates, not all do, for example Employers For Childcare Vouchers have no expiry date so you can keep them in your Childcare Voucher account for as long as you need to.

Part 5

The Childcare Element of Working Tax Credit

What is the Childcare Element of Working Tax Credit?

Some families are entitled to Tax Credits which supplement their income.

There are two types of Tax Credits – Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit. Parents eligible for Working Tax Credit can get help with up to 70% of their childcare costs.

How much can I save?

Families can claim up to 70% of their childcare costs, however this is subject to a maximum limit; if you pay childcare for:

- 1 child - the maximum childcare cost you can claim is £175 a week
- 2 or more children - the maximum cost you can claim is £300 a week

This means that the maximum help you can get for your childcare through Tax Credits is £122.50 a week for 1 child or £210 a week for 2 or more children. However the actual amount you will receive depends on your income.

How does it work?

When you apply for Tax Credits you must fill out an application form which you can obtain by contacting the Tax Credit Helpline on 0345 300 3900.

This form will ask a number of questions, for example, about your family circumstances, income and childcare costs.

The Tax Credit Office will assess your claim and send you an entitlement letter detailing the elements and payments you are eligible for.

You will receive any entitlement to Child and/or Working Tax Credit in the same payment. This will be paid directly into your bank, building society, Post Office or National Savings account.

Each year the Tax Credit Office will write to you asking you to check the information they have about you, confirm your income and renew your claim.

Childcare Vouchers v Tax Credits

Usually you will be better off claiming either the Childcare Element of Working Tax Credit or Childcare Vouchers. Very few people can benefit from claiming both at the same time.

See our factsheet (<http://vouchers.employersforchildcare.org/media/tax-credits-vs-childcare-vouchers-2.pdf>) for more information or phone our Family Benefits Advice Team on **Freephone 0800 028 3008**

Note: Childcare Vouchers and Tax Credits are the two main forms of help. There is also specific help for students, families with disabled children and children in their pre-school year. Phone our helpline on **Freephone 0800 028 3008** for more information.

2. Changes are coming!

There are a series of changes to childcare support expected over the coming years:

Tax-Free Childcare

From next year a new form of help with the cost of childcare will be available.

Tax-Free Childcare is a completely new scheme, it enables families to save up to 20% of their childcare costs.

The maximum amount you can receive is £2,000 per year (when you spend £10,000 on childcare).

For a family to be eligible, both parents will have to be in employment, working over 16 hours a week, earning a minimum of £115.20 per week and not more than £100,000 per year.

Self-employed parents will also be eligible to join.

The scheme will be available to parents of children up to the age of 12 (or age 16 for children with disabilities). Tax-Free Childcare will begin to roll out in early 2017, families with younger children will be eligible to join first.

Childcare Vouchers

The Childcare Voucher scheme will close to new entrants in April 2018.

At this point only those parents who are members of the scheme will be able to continue using it.

It is important that anyone who will be better off on Childcare Vouchers is a member of the scheme at this time or they will miss out on greater savings.

Universal Credit

Universal Credit is a new benefit which will replace 6 existing benefits, including Tax Credits.

From 2017 Universal Credit will begin to roll out across Northern Ireland, the details of which are still being finalised.

Childcare support under Universal Credit will increase to cover up to 85% of childcare costs for working parents.

Still confused? We can help!

We have a dedicated Family Benefits Advice Team which offers free, confidential advice and information on all family benefits and entitlements, including help with the cost of childcare. Our Advisors can carry out a 'better off' calculation to help you work out what type of childcare support you are entitled to and which type of support is better for your family.

*Contact our Family
Benefits Advice Team
on **0800 028 3008**
or **028 9267 8200***

And finally...

We hope this guide was useful in helping you to choose childcare for your little one.

If you have any more questions or would like to talk over your decision with one of our specialist Advisors do not hesitate to get in touch on the phone numbers opposite.

We also have a range of other resources and information for parents on our website, see:

employersfor**childcare.org**

Employers For Childcare

Employers For Childcare

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