

Don't Expect, Inspect

By Linda Tilly

President Ronald Reagan said, "You don't always get what you expect, but you do get what you INSPECT." Thank goodness our state inspects all restaurants, nursing homes, hospitals, and even places like hair salons and barbershops. It is important that we have trained experts to look for things that the average citizen likely would not notice. Those inspections keep us safe and healthy.

Lots of parents are surprised to know that many, perhaps most, child care programs are not inspected for health and safety. Over the past ten years the number of child care programs licensed and inspected by the Department of Human Resources (DHR), the state agency that oversees child care, has decreased dramatically. At the same time unlicensed/uninspected care has increased as have the number of children in Alabama and the percent of mothers in the workforce. Only DHR licensed programs are regularly and fully inspected. We expect that all children should be in safe and healthy places, but how can we know if we don't inspect?

Inspection should be the norm. Just as we inspect all nursing homes to ensure the health and safety of our vulnerable older citizens, we should inspect the places where our other vulnerable population, young children, spend much of their time.

Since state law doesn't require licensing and the regular inspection that accompanies licensing for all child care, some communities are taking a different approach. In Mobile County, Dr. Bert Eichold, Director of the Mobile County Health Department, worked to ensure that the Health Department would regularly inspect all child care in the county whether licensed by DHR or not. After finding some 58 children being cared for by a couple of adults in one situation and another with carpets dirty from nasty diapers, towels covering wet spots, and no sprinkler system in event of fire, he worked with child care providers, children's advocates including VOICES for Alabama's Children, pastors, and other community leaders to develop a county ordinance that required health department inspections of all child care four times a year. Now parents in Mobile County can expect that their children are in safe and healthy places. Jefferson County is also exploring the possibility of enacting a county regulation for inspection by the Health Department of all child care centers.

In other parts of the state, parents have no way to really know how safe an unlicensed child care facility is. Are there enough adults for the number of children? Is the classroom or play space arranged to reduce the chance of serious accidents? Are diaper changing areas cleaned and maintained properly to avoid illness? Is there adequate space for active play where kids get exercise? Are foods wholesome, healthy and prepared properly? Does the staff have appropriate training and experience for dealing with challenging situations that can arise? Have they had criminal background checks?

These are serious questions that parents can't answer for themselves, but that can make the difference between a safe and healthy facility and one that represents real risks to our kids. Even good, conscientious providers sometimes can't identify or correct all the issues without some professional help and advice. Clean, attractive facilities can have hidden risks to the untrained eye. That's where qualified inspectors come in. Their job is not to shut down the facility, but to help providers meet minimum standards. Inspectors come with a checklist to make sure nothing is overlooked. Thorough inspection of child care requires special expertise and training as well as access to confidential records on staff health and immunizations records as well as criminal background checks, which aren't even required in unlicensed care.

Until inspection of child care is universal parents can ask lots of questions – and resources and check lists are available. The Family Guidance Center in Montgomery is a great resource. VOICES also has a check list that parents can print from our website, www.alavoices.org. But the only sure way for parents to know that their young children are in quality, safe environments is to ensure that all child care is inspected by trained professionals. All children deserve a safe and healthy place to spend the day. And families deserve to be confident that their child care meets those standards. Inspection is crucial to providing the healthy and safe places we expect for all children.

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