



# daycare dilemma

writer: celeste eustis

Choosing the right care to help your little sprout blossom.

*One year after Katrina, New Orleans faces a critical shortage in the quantity—and quality—of childcare facilities available to the community. **The hard reality is that readers who'll need daycare will need to jump on it now.** But as this article reveals, you can also take comfort in learning that when facilities do reopen, they'll do a better job at caring for your child than ever before.* —The editor

Sure, people have said that my husband and I made out like bandits in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. We had minimal damage to our home, and were able to make all of the repairs relatively quickly with very few uninsured losses. And we remained gainfully employed as both of our companies relocated us to Houston temporarily. Most happily of all, shortly after our return to New Orleans, we learned that I was pregnant and expecting our first child in late August 2006. We both felt so fortunate to have escaped the tragedy of Katrina without much difficulty.

The devil, as they say, is in the details.

Being somewhat nervous about my pregnancy, I decided to delay making any plans related to the child until after my ultrasound at 20 weeks. That delay was a mistake.

The day after my ultrasound, I began researching infant care facilities, along with other more exciting things like crib linens and rockers. I furnished my nursery in one week, but as my due date looms, I still have no day care in place. Oh, I've put my name on several waiting lists, but I should have done that the

day I found out I was pregnant, as most are a year long. For now, I have no idea who will care for my child in the interim. Apparently, I am not alone in this predicament.

People from Greater New Orleans can rebuild their houses, and should be able to find jobs, but what does that matter if we can't find someone to care for our children? Now more than ever, individuals and companies alike are facing this debilitating situation that can be called our "day care dilemma".

"After the need for housing, child care is the next most important thing on the agenda," said Judy Watts, executive director of the non-profit organization Agenda for Children. "Jobs are available, but employers can't get quality people."

According to Dayeela Daste of the Agenda for Children, there are several efforts under way to assist more daycare facilities with the re-opening process.

When asked by the director of a Wisconsin-based childcare center shortly after the storm what she wanted and needed most, Ms. Daste replied, "I want all of the things that make child care quality." Within weeks, the Wisconsin group had sent tractors of supplies and toys to dis-

**Katrina managed to wipe out  
85 % of our daycare facilities**

tribute to local daycare centers that were trying to re-open.

As these facilities reopen, there will be an added emphasis on standards of care. The overall quality of many of the pre-Katrina daycare programs was questionable. Of the 285 childcare facilities that were open at the time, only 18 were accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). That's not to say that all of the non-accredited programs were sub-par; NAEYC accreditation is optional in Louisiana. But accreditation provides a powerful tool through which early childhood professionals, families and others can evaluate programs by comparing them against professional standards.

The United Way's Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI) and Success By 6 are offering childcare providers grants to pay for supplies and resources if they participate in three information sessions. The sessions will teach program administrators how to improve their quality of the care and how to receive NAEYC accreditation.

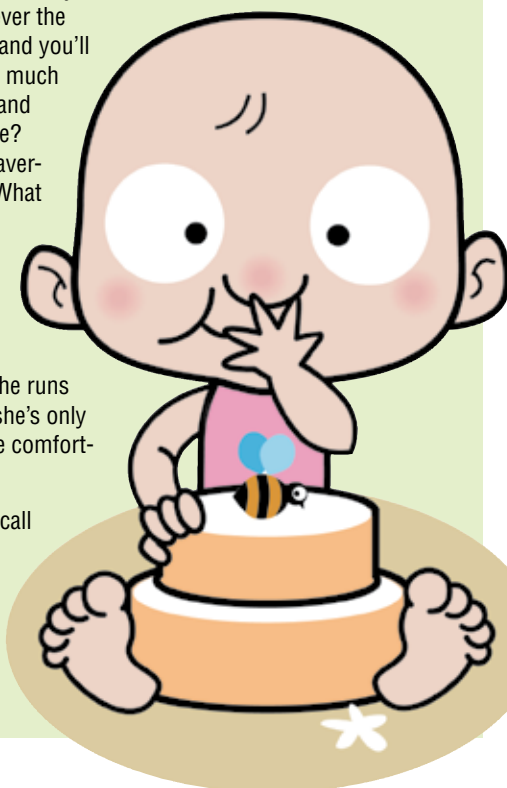
As an added benefit, Success By 6 will link all childcare providers that participate in these sessions to the Child Care Companion Project, which matches childcare providers in the Greater New Orleans area to organizations in other parts of the country that want to help them rebuild.

Child care providers may also be eligible for free courses through Louisiana Pathway Child Care Career Development System, a major initiative funded by the Department of Social Services to improve the quality of child care in Louisiana that consists of a training registry, a scholarship program, and career ladders

## a good fit

Finding a quality daycare center that has a spot for your child is half the battle. To be confident that it's a good fit, make sure to visit the facility or home-based provider in person, and ask lots of questions. Considerations:

1. **Proximity** to work or home, or along the way of your commute. Even just 10 minutes—one way—out of your way will add 40 minutes to your daily commute.
2. **Operating hours.** Some open early and close early; others limit the number of hours infants can be cared for each day. Some places might charge \$5 a minute or more for late pickup.
3. **Size.** How many babies are being cared for? Do they get stimulation, one-on-one attention? Centers often can care for more infants than a family setting, as they can dedicate more providers specifically to them.
4. **Group dynamics.** Wherever you're considering sending your baby, imagine him beyond his infant years as well: do you like how the toddlers and preschoolers at the daycare interact and are cared for? Are they well-mannered? Is there structured play and possibly learning? And do they look like they're having fun?
5. **Sick child policy.** There should be standards in place determining when a sick child can return to daycare (no fever for 24 hours, for example). Strict guidelines can be a pain in the neck for a busy working mom with an ill child; however, those same rules help keep junior healthy when he's at the daycare facility.
6. **Vacation/holiday schedule.** This is especially important if you're leaning toward a home-based childcare setting, when you'll most likely have to seek alternate care whenever the daycare mom takes a vacation or is ill (and you'll still be paying her for those days). How much vacation time does she take each year, and when will she let you know her schedule? How many sick days has she used, on average, over the past two or three years? What holidays will be observed?
7. **Travel/Field Trips.** Will your daycare facility ever take your child on a field trip, especially by car or van? If so, who drives? If you use a home-based provider, you'll want to know if she runs errands with the children, especially if she's only caring for a few, and determine if you're comfortable with that scenario.
8. **References.** Don't just get them—call them, too. Not just one, but two or three. Ask what they really like about the daycare facility or provider, and what they wish (if anything) were different.





for caregivers, administrators and trainers.

To expand further the childcare available to New Orleans employees, Ms. Daste and other workers and volunteers with Agenda for Children also are encouraging larger companies to start their own daycare programs and private schools and churches to open their existing child care programs to other community members.

“We need to make it the trend among companies and schools to get involved,” says Ms. Daste.

The efforts of the Louisiana Department of Social Services, the Louisiana Pathways Child Care Career Development System, Agenda for Children, and the United Way programs are only small pieces to the puzzle of rebuilding the childcare landscape in New Orleans. Quality and plentiful childcare is essential to the rebirth of a successful economy as a whole.

When my three-month maternity leave concludes, I’m confident that the childcare landscape will have already improved. I know that as the months go on, my options for quality daycare will increase, and my first born will be well cared for in a truly Greater New Orleans.

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*Celeste Eustis is commercial loan officer at Whitney National Bank. She and husband Curtis will have welcomed their baby to the world—and New Orleans—in August.*

### what’s open now?

A list of daycare facilities that have re-opened since Katrina can be found on the Louisiana Department of Social Services’ website [www.dss.state.la.us/departments/os/licensing/default.asp](http://www.dss.state.la.us/departments/os/licensing/default.asp)

A list of NAEYC-accredited programs can be found on its website [www.naeyc.org/accreditation/search/distance.asp](http://www.naeyc.org/accreditation/search/distance.asp)

Parents seeking childcare can also contact employees of Agenda for Children for assistance in finding out which childcare providers near their homes or workplaces have slots available for their children.

### what the state’s doing

Plans for the development of a state-wide quality control system—similar to the NAEYC accreditation program—for daycare providers in Louisiana are already in the works. Governor Blanco’s administration has garnered \$14.4 million in block grants to implement a Quality Rating System (QRS) for childcare centers.

This rating system will give parents more information when evaluating various facilities and also will make it more difficult for less-than-comprehensive child care facilities to succeed in the future.