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Day care decision: NO CHILD'S PLAY

Choosing the right provider can be difficult when weighing safety, quality and education concerns

by Lisa Renze-Rhodes

A lost Christmas. A missed birthday. The parents of 22-month-old Juan Carlos Cardenas continue to mourn their son, Carmel attorney Stephen Wagner says, following his death in February 2012 while under the supervision of church day care workers at Praise Fellowship Assembly of God on Indianapolis' Westside. "It's not like getting yourself

in an accident and doing therapy and getting better," Wagner says of the emotional trauma experienced by his clients, Juan Cardenas and Maricela Serna. "It's a horrible tragedy and they are still dealing with it."

Following the Marion County coroner's ruling that the toddler died in an accidental drowning in the church's baptismal font, the parents

filed a wrongful death lawsuit against Indiana District Assemblies of God, the church's governing body, and the case remains in mediation, according to court documents. But regardless of that suit's outcome — and despite the state's decision to shut down the registered child care ministry — Wagner says much more needs to be done to tighten Indiana's child care regulations, which only require faith-based centers to register and meet basic health and safety needs.

"These registered ministries are not held to the same requirements under state law and there's no good reason for it," Wagner says, adding that Juan's parents believe their little boy's death could have been prevented. "The [state's] refusal to require a church day care to meet

1, all workers in home, center and ministry child care settings must undergo federal criminal background checks. The law requires all providers to be compliant within one year. Bill co-sponsor Rep. Vanessa Summers, D-Indianapolis, says she hopes it's a move toward safer care for children. "This is a pretty good, big first step," she says. "We still want to go back and try to get child care ministries up to par with child care home [providers] and child care centers. We'll just keep working."

Recognizing a critical need for good child care, United Way of Central Indiana launched its Kids Need Quality campaign in January. The TV and radio spots — one of which features a young child giving voice to being left alone in front of a TV for hours unattended — are designed to grab parents' attention and reinforce the importance of finding good care, says Ted Maple, United Way's director of education. "There's such a huge gap in care and I don't think parents get that," he says, adding that the varying array of providers can have a dizzying effect on those unfamiliar with the system.

State officials agree that parents must wade through a complex system of laws as they work to find a safe place for their child. "Every parent wants the best for their child," says Melanie Brizzi, child care administrator for the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration. But with the state's current configuration

"It's a horrible tragedy."

Carmel attorney Stephen Wagner

the same requirements as a licensed facility is unconscionable," he says. "I hope that common sense will eventually rule in the legislature."

With Juan's death in the unlicensed church day care, and at least six other Indiana children — including one in Carmel and one in Brownsburg — dying in unlicensed child care homes since 2009, according to court documents and coroner reports, state lawmakers recently took steps to make improvements in child care. Starting July



Photos courtesy of The Indianapolis Star and WTHR | Toddler Juan Carlos Cardenas accidentally drowned in 2012 at a church day care in Indianapolis. His father, Juan Cardenas, visits his grave.

of licensed day care centers, licensed home providers, registered ministries and unlicensed caregivers, she acknowledges it can be tough for any parent to muddle through. "We have a very complicated system — you can't tell just by looking if your facility is licensed or registered, or not," she says. "Even if you get to that point, what does it mean?"

Local experts like Brizzi say it's vital for parents to check a provider's licensing and accreditation before hiring, and she says the state's Paths to Quality rating system is a good place to start. Indiana's five-year-old program ranked 12th among all states for meeting program requirements and oversight on center-based care, according to a 2013 report by Child Care Aware of America, a nonprofit that advocates for quality child care nationwide and provides licensing, cost and local agency referral information to parents. However, in the same report, the CCA gave Indiana a failing grade for home-based care due to the number

of kids allowed in unlicensed child care settings.

In Indiana, Brizzi says 2,305 child care providers are enrolled in Paths to Quality, which represents 88 percent of the state's licensed day care centers; 61 percent of licensed home day care providers; and 11 percent of registered ministries. Licensure is required in Indiana for homes or centers where providers care for more than six unrelated children for at least four hours per day on 10 consecutive days in one calendar year. However, the state only requires faith-based facilities to register.

Though voluntary, Indiana's PTQ encourages participating providers to complete all four levels of education and training to demonstrate an ongoing commitment to children's health, well-being and safety. "That's the point of Paths to Quality," Brizzi says. "Parents can look and have an easily identifiable system."

Day Nursery Association COO Marsha Hearn Lindsey says her agency takes the need for quality

Taking the path to quality

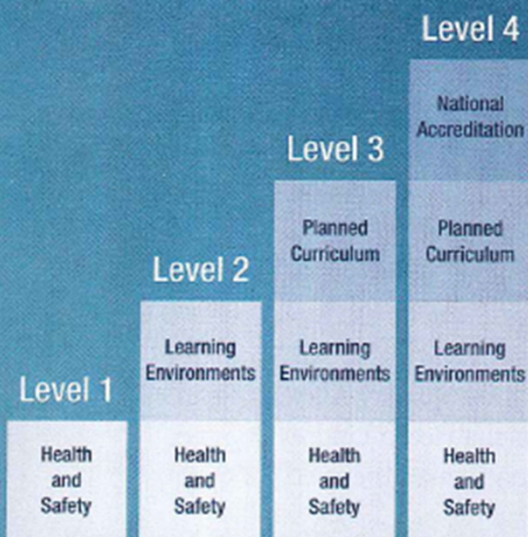
The Indiana Family and Social Services Administration says its Path to Quality rating system gives parents a tool to use when seeking quality care for their children. Each level builds upon the previous one, as the provider achieves higher standards of quality.

Level 1 PTQ providers must be licensed, which means they've met all health and safety standards, such as child to caregiver ratios.

Level 2 providers must be licensed and provide a learning environment with a daily schedule of planned activities for children.

Level 3 providers must be licensed, provide a learning environment, and develop a planned curriculum.

Level 4 providers must be licensed, provide a learning environment with a planned curriculum, and achieve national accreditation.



Source: in.gov/fssa/pathstoquality

child care seriously by requiring its providers to receive extensive training, as evidenced by the association's seven day care centers in the Indianapolis area that have achieved a PTQ Level 4, including accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. "It is serious work," Hearn Lindsey says. "These children can't talk for themselves, usually. They can't let you know what's going on." The centers' PTQ and NAEYC accreditations — NAEYC offers rigorous accreditation programs for child care centers, preschools and prekindergartens throughout the U.S. — assure parents that their children are being cared for in a healthy, safe and educational environment, she says. In a recent online poll of nearly 2,700 Angie's List members, 63 percent of the respondents who said they used child care also said they checked licensing or accreditation before hiring their provider.

That's where Eliza Stephenson of Geist started when she found A-rated Kelley's Exclusive Child Care on the Northeastside, praising the center for its quality, professional care. But Stephenson says "a gut feeling" ultimately helped her decide to place her two children there. "You can check all the boxes and have a facility still not be what you want for your child," she says. "I looked at three, but the minute I looked at Kelley's, I knew that's where I wanted my children."

Stephenson says she researched and asked plenty of questions, including about the individualized care provided for each child. In her family's case, Stephenson says they prefer the kids not have juice, so the center's owner, Gail Kelley, makes sure to not serve them any. That type of attention to detail, along with an instinct, sealed the deal for Stephenson, who pays an estimated \$540 per week for both children.

According to a recent Angie's List survey of more than a dozen child care center providers in Indianapolis, Fishers, Carmel, Avon and Greenwood, the average cost to care for infants is about \$280 per week; \$242 per week to care for toddlers; and \$216 per week to care for 2- to 5-year-olds.

Kelley, whose center is Level 3 rated on Paths to Quality, agrees that the state's rating system is a good place for parents to start. But she cautions that parents shouldn't rely on just one measure when considering their family's needs. Kelley says along with checking licensure, references and health and safety records, parents should make multiple unannounced site visits to providers until they're comfortable with their choice. "The key is to pop in unannounced," she says. "Everybody can make it look good for a scheduled visit. Popping in gives you a chance to see the environment in a very real way."

Photos by Brandon Smith | Sara McHenry, a child care provider at Day Nursery in the Mapleton-Fall Creek neighborhood, teaches children about geography, while 3-year-old Andrew Veatch enjoys a snack.

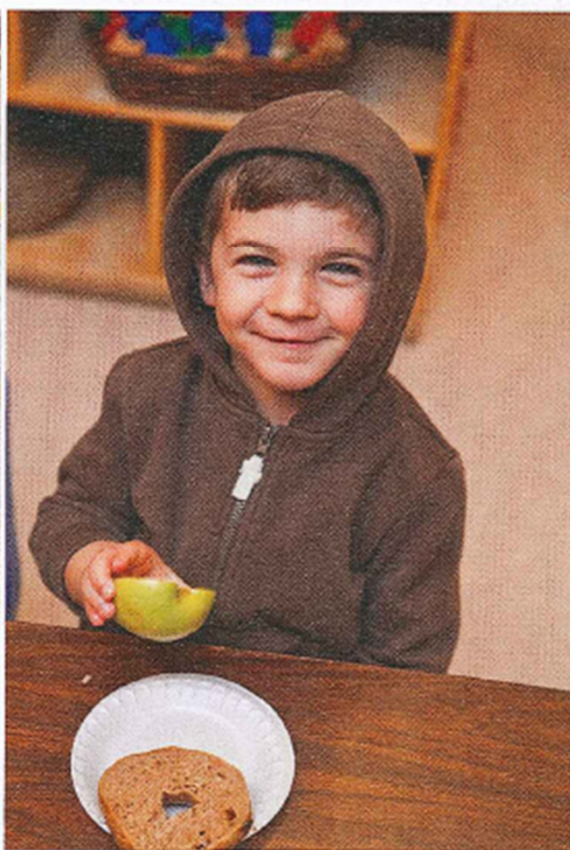




Photo by Brandon Smith | The Learning House owner Lindsey Pointer (center) listens along with her home day care children as Cathy Scheib, a librarian at the Indianapolis Public Library, shares a story.

She also says parents should take note of how many adults are available for the number of children enrolled. Kelley, who cares for newborns to age 4, says she believes a ratio of 3 children to 1 adult is

“The key is to pop in unannounced.”

Indianapolis child care center owner Gail Kelley

most effective. Additionally, parents should inspect a facility's cleanliness and its resources — for instance, are the toys in good shape and are there plenty to go around? Ultimately, Kelley says, it's about parents trusting their instincts. “It's going to come down to a feeling,” she says.

While Brizzi advocates the state's PTQ rating system, she doesn't discount a parent's gut feeling. “As a parent, you should always trust your gut — I don't think you can diminish the importance of that, particularly after you've done your homework,” she says. “If you've done all your research and it looks good on paper, but something still just doesn't feel right, trust your instincts.”

Clear communication and parental involvement are the cornerstones on which Lindsey Pointer says she operates her home day care, The Learning House, located in the Chapel Hill neighborhood on Indianapolis' Westside. As a licensed, Level 3 PTQ home provider, Pointer says she welcomes parents to visit anytime. “I just welcome my parents

in," she says. "Having that dialogue, asking about the traditions and routines that are in place in a household — I want to honor those."

Pointer, who started her home day care in 2009, says she currently cares for five children and charges \$115 to \$130 per child per week. Her advice to parents? Allow yourself plenty of time to consider every option.

"I encourage anyone who comes to my door to take time with that decision," she says. "Your conscience and your heart will let you know that it's the right place."

Some parents find that right place is at home, with care provided by a nanny. That's what Castleton member Shannon Woller chose as her best option after the birth of her second son in March. That's largely due, Woller says, to the freedom of scheduling, and what she considers a reasonable fee of about \$275-\$290 a week per child. "I thought it was too expensive," says Woller, who found her nanny through Care.com. "But once you have two kids in daycare, it's so expensive anyway. My boys are both asleep when I leave for work in the morning so they don't have to be wrestled out of their beds." And children can't go to a day care center when they're ill, she says, so having a home care provides flexibility. "Nannies come when they are sick." ☞



Check your provider's licensing and accreditation with our online tool at angieslist.com/childcare

What to ask

In addition to reading reviews on Angie's List, local experts and highly rated providers recommend asking the following questions when interviewing potential child care providers:

What is the adult to child ratio?
The fewer children per adult, the better.

What are the caregiver's qualifications?
Ask about licensing, ongoing training and education.

What's the turnover in staff/teacher positions? Caregivers who come and go make it hard on your child.

Are they accredited? If not, ask whether they plan to pursue.

How do they discipline the children?
Make sure it's consistent with the methods you use at home.

What precautions ensure safe play and other equipment? In Indiana, a licensed facility must meet basic health and safety standards to be operational.

What's the date of the caregiver(s) CPR certification? Check to see if it's current.

Has every adult in the day care passed a federal criminal background check?
Providers have until July 1, 2014, to comply with a new law requiring it.



Photo by Brandon Smith