

# Tips on inspecting, choosing your child's daycare

By **Nikki Peterson**

Choosing a daycare for your children is one of the most important decisions working parents make. Among the many considerations for selecting the best daycare for your family, health and safety deserve to be at the top of the list.

RiverStone Health sanitarians inspect licensed daycare centers throughout Yellowstone County for health and safety. The standards we apply in our inspections are set by state law. Daycare licenses are issued by the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services.

Montana law requires daycare operators with three or more children in care to be registered or licensed through the Early Childhood and Family Support Division of the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services. Daycares must be registered as either a family daycare home, a group daycare home or licensed as a daycare center.

In Yellowstone County, the Board of Health also requires drop-in daycare centers to register and undergo inspection.

I encourage parents to be sure that the daycare facility they select for their children is registered or licensed so the operators know what health and safety standards they must meet to protect children in their care. Here are some of the key things inspectors check for:

- Adequate child-to-staff ratio.
- Proper disposal of diapers and other waste.
- Clean bathrooms.
- Safe water temperatures at hand-washing sinks to avoid scalding little hands.
- Laundry procedures that prevent contamination.
- Clean, safe cribs, playpens and infant play equipment.
- Crib sheets and linens always changed between infants.
- All children's toys sanitized at least weekly.
- Any toy that ends up in a child's mouth sanitized immediately afterward.
- Food for children cooked properly and kept hot enough or cold enough to prevent foodborne illness.
- Nutritious menus.
- Safety of outdoor play equipment, swimming and wading pools.
- Immunization records for children and staff.

With the help of the public health vaccine manager, we make sure all children and the staff working in the daycare have received the recommended immunizations to prevent measles, chickenpox, whooping cough, tetanus and other diseases.

Professional sanitarians inspect daycares thoroughly, but infrequently. State law requires only one routine inspection a year. Additional inspections are made only based on complaints. It is up to parents to look carefully when choosing daycare and to keep an eye on the home or facility where they place their children. Here are some tips:

**Take a tour.** Is the daycare clean? Does the staff interact with children like they would a member of their own family? Is the environment fun, entertaining and educational? Do the children get adequate rest as well as active play? Are there enough staff members watching over children?

**Ask questions.** What is the daycare's illness policy? How do they handle a child's allergies, medications or other special needs? Are staff members certified in CPR and first aid? Are staff members immunized to protect children from illness? Ask about the caregivers' education and training. Ask other parents about their experience with the daycare.

**Stop by unannounced.** See what and how is your child is doing during the day. Volunteer a few hours a month if possible. Join your child for lunch, on a field trip for birthday treats or ask to read a short book to his or her class.

If you have concerns about a daycare, call the state licensing agency at 406-444-1958 or Environmental Health Services at RiverStone Health at 406-256-2770.

*Nikki Peterson is a registered sanitarian at RiverStone Health in Billings.*