

Day Care Contract

Contributed by Fiona H Lohrenz
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A vital aspect of your day care business is having a foolproof, comprehensive contract in place. I can't stress enough the importance of spending some time on this crucial document. Believe me when I tell you that a well crafted contract can save you from much potential grief and gnashing of teeth (I speak from painful experience!!).

{bot_wrgoogle}Essentially your day care contract sets out your terms, conditions, policies, rules and procedures and, quite simply, should indicate to all parents who you are, what you do, how you do it, what your expectations are in terms of their behavior and how you deal with complaints and transgressions. There should be no gray areas, nothing left to chance or misinterpretation.

So, I hear you holler - what should be in this epic tome and how do I even get started! Well, as it happens I have more than a few years of operational experience in this madcap world of day cares and, through much trial, error and ongoing learning have a pretty good idea of the stuff that you need to address. Allow me to give you a few tips and pointers but I'll leave you to do the work of fleshing it out and personalizing your own contract….what?? You don't get off scott free y'know….now get those pencils out!!

It's usually a good idea to start at the beginning so here you could wax lyrical about your ethos and mission statement. Try and incorporate every aspect of a child starting in your day care i.e. what enrollment forms are required, the specific hours/days that care is required, necessary supplies, whether or not you institute a trial period (unfortunately, not everyone adjusts for various reasons) and detail your termination policy (if you kick my dog on the way in you're outta here!!). Incredibly important stuff yet often glossed over are your opening hours, holiday closures, maximum numbers catered, staff to child ratios, license and insurance details. Sticking to some of the nitty, gritty minutiae you could then launch into your payment policy. Spell it out: how much, when due, what's covered, non-attendance and holiday situations (everyone needs a holiday but what happens regarding payment??), how and who to pay (you'd be amazed!), your hard line on late fees (this can be the single most destructive aspect of any day care/parent relationship, should be consistently enforced and clearer than clear), your rate increase policy and the reservations/deposits procedure.

Next up I have a general section where I ramble on about the different rooms, programs enacted, beg that toys from home stay at home, information on meals, diaper changing routine and detail a little about my drop off/pick up/settling in procedures (dropping a child off down the chimney is not really encouraged!). My behavior policy is included where I make it very clear exactly what I do in specific situations and….what I don't do (tying a child to a tree is not really an option!). The toilet training policy emphasizes the importance of parent and provider working together and it's helpful to detail your requirements in terms of clothing etc (it's all very well to have a child run around au naturel at home but when you have vast quantities of toilet training toddlers….well, think about it!!).

A HUGE area of recurring problems and issues is that of illness. Set down stringent guidelines for your health and illness policy so that there is no doubt as to what your actions will be given specific symptoms and signs. Ultimately, you cannot have a contagious child in your day care and a sick child should be at home….period. The sign over my door does not say Doctor's Surgery. Inform parents when you will call them and that you expect the child to be collected within a specific time frame. Following on from this you can explain your medication administration policy (both prescribed and non prescribed) which will incorporate the necessary forms.

Communication with parents is vital so let them know your preferred method i.e. informal, verbal report in the evening, individual report sheets or a little daily journal. Reassure them though that, while you may be busy they can also make an appointment to meet with you for a more in-depth discussion should the need arise. Scheduling annual parent/teacher meetings is another effective method of ensuring that everyone is up to date and on the same page.

So, there you have it! The day care contract or parent handbook in a nutshell….grin. Admittedly there is a lot to consider and quite frankly, this is an organic document that will evolve with your business. Stuff will happen and you will amend your paperwork accordingly. However, I hope that my pointers go some way towards getting you on the road to (even thinking) about formulating your contract.

Fiona Lohrenz drew on her 10 years experience of running a day care to found ChildCareOnly.com and produce a 'How to Start a Day Care Business' DVD guide: www.startchildcare.com Fiona can be reached at her website: <http://www.childcareonly.com>