

MYTH BUSTING CHILDMINDER AGENCIES

Introduced by the Department for Education in 2013, childminder agencies are organisations that register childminders and provide them with training, advice, administrative support and marketing to families.

As childminder agencies are relatively new in the childcare sector, there are some uncertainties about how they run whilst continuing to provide quality child care for families across the country.

Here, we dispel the top myths around childminder agencies.

Myth: Childminder agency fees are too high for what they provide.

Truth: Although agencies will charge much more than the £35 that Ofsted charge as a registration fee, they offer a lot more than simple registration. Agencies provide not only your registration and inspection, but ongoing training, guidance, and administration and marketing support. Agencies will set their fees at a rate that directly reflects the service that they provide.

Myth: Experienced, quality childminders don't need the help of an agency.

Truth: While many seasoned childminders have a strong clientele and experience to run an independent business, many still welcome an agency because of the support it offers, such as a network of likeminded people, ongoing training and professional development opportunities.

Myth: Childminder agencies are run by unqualified people.

Truth: Those applying to register as a childminder agency will be required to demonstrate to Ofsted their suitability to run an agency. These registration requirements will include specific information about the nature of the services offered by the agency and the childminders they work with. The nominated head of the agency must have knowledge of the EYFS and able to demonstrate that staff members have the appropriate knowledge and qualifications to carry out their role.

Myth: Childminders will lose their grading by registering with an agency.

Truth: All agencies will grade their childminders according to their own quality assessment framework and rating scale. While this will not be the traditional Ofsted rating, there will still be a grade assigned to each childminder in a similar fashion. Childminders who were previously registered with Ofsted will also keep their inspection history with Ofsted.

Myth: Eventually agencies will take over and all childminders will be forced to join one.

Truth: This is simply not the case. Joining an agency is voluntary, and there are no current plans to eliminate Ofsted's role of registering childminders.

Myth: The introduction of agencies will result in a drop in the quality of care for children.

Truth: On the contrary, agencies are expected to improve the quality of childcare. Under the existing Ofsted inspection framework, an Ofsted-registered childminder might only receive an inspection visit once every three or four years. Agencies will have much more contact with their childminders, including regular home visits and annual quality assurance checks. They will provide much more active training, inspection and quality improvement services.

Myth: There is a safeguarding risk if Ofsted isn't individually inspecting childminders.

Truth: Agencies will have to carry out the same checks that Ofsted currently undertakes in order to register potential childminders, including enhanced DBS checks as well as health and local authority suitability checks.

Myth: Childminders risk being affected if the agency gets a bad Ofsted rating.

Truth: Childminders are free to choose which agency they join and if they are unhappy with an agency they will be able to leave and join another agency or register with Ofsted. Since agency-registered childminders themselves won't have an Ofsted rating, a poor grading will not be a direct reflection on the quality of care provided by a childminder. It is in the best interest of agencies to maintain an effective rating in order to retain its childminders. Agency childminders will receive a grading from the agency which will be a reflection of their own quality regardless of the grade of the agency.

Myth: Agencies will increase childcare costs to parents.

Truth: It is up to the agency to determine their business model – some may charge a fee to parents while others may not. Some parents may be open to paying a 'finder's fee' to an agency if it means easy and quick access to a quality child provider.

In most cases, agencies will actually help offset some of the costs currently held by independent childminders. The cost of setting up as a childminder can be upwards of £800. Agencies can help childminders spread the costs of set-up and offer financial savings in areas such as training, group activities and shared resources, therefore giving childminders the opportunity to maintain competitive rates.