

Choosing an Agency-Registered Childminder: FAQs for Parents

What is an agency-registered childminder? How are they different from an Ofsted-registered childminder?

Until now all childminders have been required by law to register with Ofsted, the organisation which inspects and regulates early years and educational settings such as nurseries and schools. However, childminders now have another option – they can register with an agency. Agency-registered childminders will be inspected by their agency rather than by Ofsted, and the agency will also help resolve any complaints or concerns. Agencies are more than just inspection bodies though – they also provide childminders on their books with a whole package of benefits including regular training, continuous support and guidance, as well as other resources.

How can an agency inspect its own childminders – won't that lead to poorer-quality provision?

If anything, agency-registered childminders are subjected to a more rigorous process of inspection than those registered with Ofsted. Agencies are obliged to inspect their childminders once a year, whereas Ofsted-registered childminders typically go four or five years between inspections. In addition, agencies will support their childminders to boost the quality of their provision, providing improvement plans as part of the inspection, which they will check have been followed.

Parents will be able to read a childminder's inspection report on the agency web site, and the majority of agencies have said they will follow the Ofsted system of rating each childminder as outstanding, good, requires improvement or inadequate. The agency itself will be regularly inspected by Ofsted, and given an overall grade of 'effective' or 'ineffective'. The Ofsted inspection will include visits to a random sample of childminders to make sure the agency's assessments are well-founded.

Will it be more expensive to use an agency childminder?

Agencies have different business models. In some cases there is a nominal charge for parents on top of the childminder fee. Many are happy to pay for the additional benefits they receive, such as knowing their childminder is inspected on a more regular basis.

In other cases it is the childminder who pays the agency fees, and there is no cost to the parent apart from the usual childminder fee. Agency childminders do not necessarily charge above the market rate – many feel agency registration pays for itself as the training they receive would otherwise be very expensive.

What additional benefits can my family expect from using an agency-registered childminder?

Budget cuts mean most local authorities can now only help those childminders who have been poorly graded to improve their practice. However, all agency-registered childminders will be given support to improve, even if they have been rated good or outstanding. As part of their membership they will have access to the latest training courses, resources and information, and if they have a question or an area they would like help with, a support worker will always be available. Research has shown that childminders who are part of an improvement programme deliver better quality childcare, and taking part in specialised training at least twice a year is associated with higher overall quality.

Agency childminders are also part of a network and can call on their peers to provide emergency cover, for example if they are sick, or holiday cover. Agencies may provide drop-in sessions and activities which childminders can attend with the children they look after. Research has found that this kind of networking provides childminders with social and peer support, helping to counteract the isolation that some childminders can feel.

Some agencies also run nurseries, while others are closely linked with schools or have experience in providing childcare in the family home. They have the capability to offer flexible childcare packages geared to a family's specific needs, such as shift work cover, wraparound care, or a mixture of different types of childcare. This can be particularly helpful when parents are looking to access the government-funded 15 hours of childcare for three- and four-year-olds, which will soon increase to a 30-hour entitlement.

I don't want to go through a third party – won't an agency get in the way of the personal relationship I have with my childminder?

Although agency-registered childminders can call on extra support, they are still self-employed and independent. Agencies will not replace the one-on-one connection between parents and the childminder. While agencies can help match parents and childminders, childminders will still gain much of their work through word-of-mouth and recommendations from other parents, and parents will be able to approach potential childminders directly if they want to – they don't have to go through the agency.

How can an agency help me find a childminder?

An agency will have a number of childminders on its books, so they will provide one port of call when a parent or carer is looking for childcare. Rather than calling around and researching 20 or more childminders in one area, an agency can listen to a parent's requirements and make appropriate suggestions. Agencies often provide individual profile pages on the agency web site, which childminders keep updated with vacancies and other information, so parents can check out a number of options without going to lots of different web sites.