

Licensed Child Care vs. Unlicensed Child Care - What's the Difference?

Parents want the best for their children. Selecting an early learning program can be overwhelming. Many parents searching for child care want to know, "What's the difference between a licensed and an unlicensed child care program?" The following is some information to offer some clarification.

Licensed Child Care

Licensed child care programs are licensed and monitored by the NC Division of Child Development. They are required to meet health and safety standards, programming standards, and training standards which include CPR and First Aid. All employees of licensed centers and all household members (age 16 or older) of a licensed family child care home are required to submit a criminal background check. Licensed early learning professionals are also required to attend early childhood training annually. (Some licensed church-based programs are exempt from training.) Licensed care may be found in private or non-profit child care centers, church-based centers, school-based preschools, afterschool or summer programs, family child care homes or school-age programs in other organizations (ex. YMCA). Different rules and regulations apply to each. A licensed early learning program will have its star-rated license (1-5 stars) prominently displayed for parents to see.

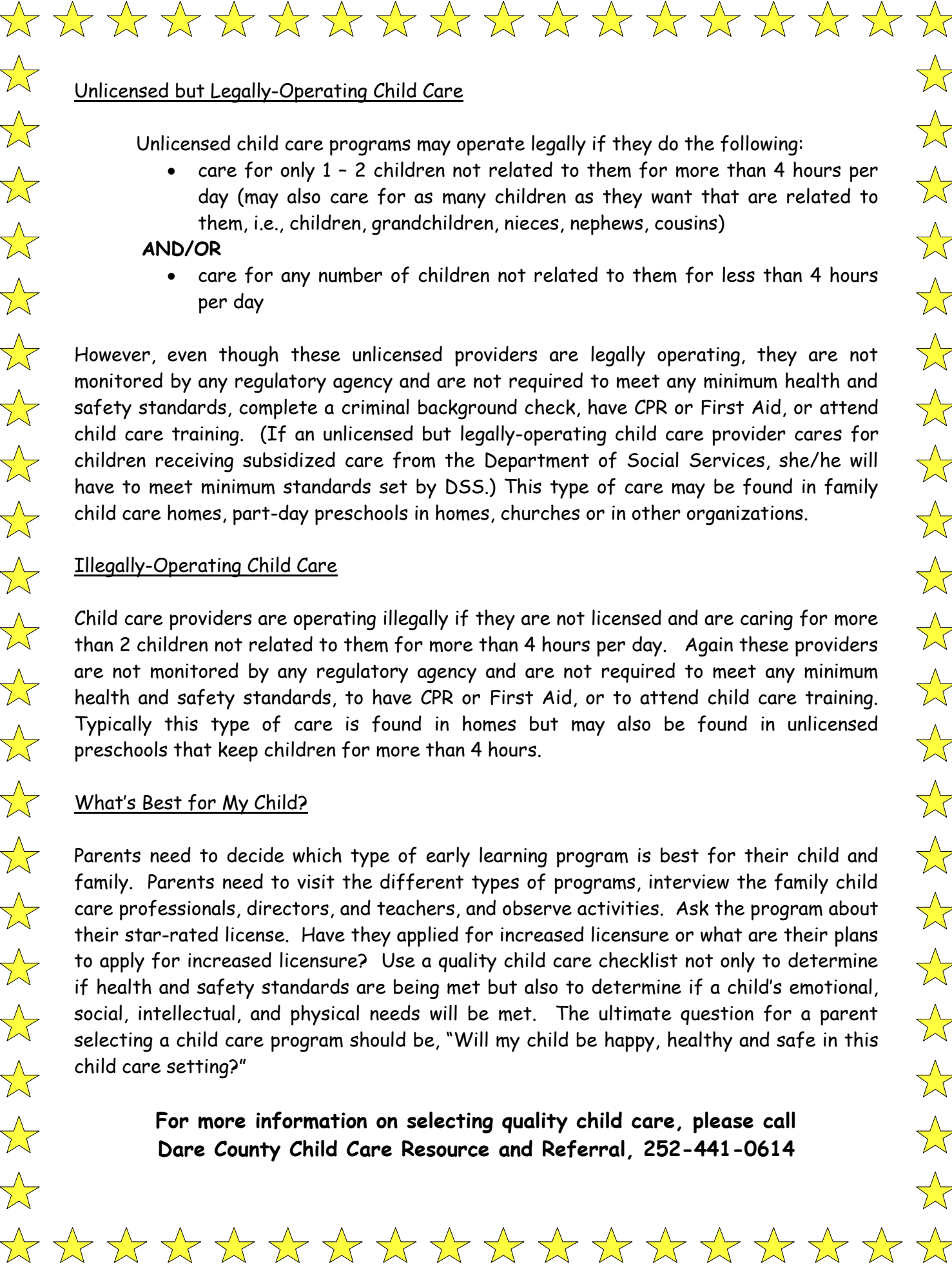
Below is a copy of a Sample Star Rated License.

The image shows a sample star-rated license for ABC Child Care Center. The license is issued by the State of North Carolina, Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Child Development. It features a three-star rating (three red stars and two white stars). The license includes the following information:

- Staff Education:** 4 out of 7 points
- Program Standards:** 4 out of 7 points
- Quality Point:** 1 out of 1 point
- Total:** 9 out of 15 points
- ID Number:** 92999999
- Type of Facility:** Center
- Issued to:** CHILD CARE, SUZIE
- Age Range:** 0 - 12 years
- Capacity:** 1st shift: 50; 2nd shift: 0; 3rd shift: 0
- Effective Date:** July 1, 2007
- Restrictions:** Daytime care only; Children in care on ground level only

Four red callout boxes provide additional context:

- Top-left: Shows the number of stars earned (shaded) out of the number of stars possible (blank)
- Top-right: Shows the name and physical location of the program
- Bottom-left: Shows how many points the program earned in each of the two components
- Bottom-right: Shows basic licensing information such as number of children allowed, ages allowed and any restrictions



Unlicensed but Legally-Operating Child Care

Unlicensed child care programs may operate legally if they do the following:

- care for only 1 - 2 children not related to them for more than 4 hours per day (may also care for as many children as they want that are related to them, i.e., children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, cousins)

AND/OR

- care for any number of children not related to them for less than 4 hours per day

However, even though these unlicensed providers are legally operating, they are not monitored by any regulatory agency and are not required to meet any minimum health and safety standards, complete a criminal background check, have CPR or First Aid, or attend child care training. (If an unlicensed but legally-operating child care provider cares for children receiving subsidized care from the Department of Social Services, she/he will have to meet minimum standards set by DSS.) This type of care may be found in family child care homes, part-day preschools in homes, churches or in other organizations.

Illegally-Operating Child Care

Child care providers are operating illegally if they are not licensed and are caring for more than 2 children not related to them for more than 4 hours per day. Again these providers are not monitored by any regulatory agency and are not required to meet any minimum health and safety standards, to have CPR or First Aid, or to attend child care training. Typically this type of care is found in homes but may also be found in unlicensed preschools that keep children for more than 4 hours.

What's Best for My Child?

Parents need to decide which type of early learning program is best for their child and family. Parents need to visit the different types of programs, interview the family child care professionals, directors, and teachers, and observe activities. Ask the program about their star-rated license. Have they applied for increased licensure or what are their plans to apply for increased licensure? Use a quality child care checklist not only to determine if health and safety standards are being met but also to determine if a child's emotional, social, intellectual, and physical needs will be met. The ultimate question for a parent selecting a child care program should be, "Will my child be happy, healthy and safe in this child care setting?"

**For more information on selecting quality child care, please call
Dare County Child Care Resource and Referral, 252-441-0614**