
Childcare Center Startup Checklist

[Your Name / Center Name]

68 Items Across 6 Phases

Phase Overview

#	Phase	Timeline	Items
1	Research & Planning	6-12 months before opening	10
2	Legal & Business Setup	4-6 months before opening	10
3	Facility Setup	2-4 months before opening	12
4	Operations Setup	1-2 months before opening	12
5	Staffing & Marketing	1-2 months before opening	13
6	Opening & First 90 Days	After opening	11

1 Research & Planning

Timeline: 6-12 months before opening

- 1 Decide on program type: center-based, home-based, or faith-based
- 2 Research your state's licensing requirements (requirements vary significantly by state)
- 3 Attend a pre-licensing orientation or info session (offered free by most state licensing agencies)
- 4 Choose a business structure: sole proprietorship, LLC, S-corp, or nonprofit
- 5 Write a business plan covering: mission, target market, services, pricing, financial projections, marketing
- 6 Identify your target age groups and capacity (infants, toddlers, preschool, school-age)
- 7 Research local market: competitor rates, demand, demographics, underserved age groups

- 8 Calculate startup costs: typically \$10,000-50,000 for home-based, \$50,000-500,000+ for center-based
- 9 Explore funding sources: personal savings, SBA loans (7(a) or microloan), USDA rural development, state small business grants, Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) startup grants
- 10 Determine if zoning permits childcare use at your intended location

2 Legal & Business Setup

Timeline: 4-6 months before opening

- 11 Register business name with your state's Secretary of State
- 12 Obtain EIN (Employer Identification Number) from IRS (free, online at irs.gov)
- 13 Open a business bank account (separate from personal)
- 14 Secure insurance: general liability (\$1M-\$2M coverage typical), property insurance, workers' compensation (required once you have employees), professional liability/abuse & molestation coverage, vehicle insurance (if transporting children)
- 15 Consult with an accountant about tax obligations (quarterly estimated taxes, payroll taxes)
- 16 Consult with an attorney about business structure and liability protection
- 17 Submit childcare licensing application to your state licensing agency
- 18 Complete required background checks for all owners/operators (state criminal, FBI fingerprint, sex offender registry, child abuse registry)
- 19 Complete required pre-service training hours (varies by state: typically 20-40 hours covering child development, health & safety, nutrition, mandated reporting)
- 20 Obtain any required local business permits or licenses

3 Facility Setup

Timeline: 2-4 months before opening

- 21 Secure a location (if center-based): verify zoning, adequate square footage (most states require 35 sq ft indoor per child), outdoor play space requirements
- 22 Renovate/prepare space to meet licensing requirements
- 23 Install required safety equipment: smoke detectors in every room, carbon monoxide detectors, fire extinguishers, outlet covers, cabinet locks, stair gates
- 24 Pass fire inspection (schedule through local fire marshal)
- 25 Pass health/sanitation inspection (schedule through local health department)
- 26 Set up classrooms by age group with age-appropriate furniture, materials, and equipment

- 27 Ensure bathroom facilities meet code (child-sized fixtures or step stools, ratio of toilets to children)
- 28 Set up food preparation area meeting health code requirements
- 29 Install or verify fencing for outdoor play area (minimum 4 feet in most states, with self-latching gate)
- 30 Install age-appropriate outdoor play equipment on proper safety surfacing (CPSC compliant)
- 31 Post required signage: evacuation routes, emergency numbers, handwashing procedures, license (once received)
- 32 Set up a secure entry system

4 Operations Setup

Timeline: 1-2 months before opening

- 33 Create Family Handbook
- 34 Create Staff Handbook
- 35 Set tuition rates based on market research and budget projections
- 36 Create enrollment forms and packet
- 37 Write emergency preparedness plan
- 38 Choose and set up childcare management software (attendance, billing, parent communication)
- 39 Set up billing and payment processing system
- 40 Apply for CACFP participation through your state agency
- 41 Create daily schedules and curriculum plans by age group
- 42 Establish meal/snack menus meeting nutritional guidelines
- 43 Set up record-keeping systems (child files, staff files, attendance, incident reports, medication logs)
- 44 Establish cleaning and sanitization schedules and procedures

5 Staffing & Marketing

Timeline: 1-2 months before opening

- 45 Determine staffing needs based on planned enrollment and required ratios
- 46 Write job descriptions for each role (director, lead teacher, assistant teacher, cook, etc.)
- 47 Post job listings on childcare-specific job boards, local colleges with ECE programs, and general sites

- 48 Interview and hire staff
- 49 Complete background checks for all staff before they begin working with children
- 50 Verify staff credentials and certifications (CPR, First Aid, education requirements)
- 51 Conduct staff orientation covering: policies, emergency procedures, daily routines, mandated reporting
- 52 Create a website and Google Business Profile listing
- 53 Create social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram)
- 54 Design and distribute marketing materials (flyers, business cards)
- 55 List on childcare referral agencies (Child Care Aware, state CCR&R)
- 56 Hold an open house or community event before opening
- 57 Begin accepting enrollment (aim for 50-75% capacity before opening)

6 Opening & First 90 Days

Timeline: After opening

- 58 Conduct a "soft opening" with staggered enrollment (add a few children at a time over 1-2 weeks)
- 59 Run all required drills in first week: fire, severe weather, lockdown
- 60 Establish daily opening and closing routines
- 61 Schedule initial parent-teacher conferences within first month
- 62 Prepare for first licensing inspection (typically within 30-90 days of opening)
- 63 Review and adjust staff schedules based on actual enrollment patterns
- 64 Begin tracking financial performance against your budget
- 65 Collect parent feedback and address concerns promptly
- 66 Apply for NAEYC accreditation if desired (can begin the self-study process once operational)
- 67 Review and update emergency plan based on actual drill results
- 68 Begin building relationships with local pediatricians, schools, and community organizations for referrals