



California Department of  
Social Services



Child Care Advocate Program

## CHILD CARE CENTERS SELF-ASSESSMENT GUIDE

### HOW TO MAKE YOUR CHILD CARE CENTER A SAFER PLACE FOR CHILDREN



COMMUNITY CARE LICENSING DIVISION  
“Promoting Healthy, Safe and  
Supportive Community Care”

## **Security in Child Care Settings**

### **How To Make Your Child Care Center a Safer Place for Children**

Recent events have generated increasing questions about safety and security in child care centers, particularly in response to external threats. This guide is intended to assist you in considering how to make your child care center as safe as it can be.

While it is important to take security measures, it is also important that your center conveys an appropriate child care atmosphere. Any changes to increase security should be made in a way that reassures children and makes them feel comfortable.

This guide includes a review of licensing requirements related to security followed by options you may want to consider to make your child care center as safe as possible.

#### **Licensing Regulations Related to Security**

The key to security is preparedness. The best place to start is to be sure your center is already in compliance with existing licensing regulations that promote child security. Some of these licensing regulations are listed below with the regulation number in parentheses.

- **Criminal Record Clearances and Child Abuse Central Index Check (Section 101170)**

Criminal record clearances and child abuse central index checks ensure that individuals who have committed a crime or questionable act do not have access to children in care. Clearances are obtained from the California Department of Justice for California criminal convictions and arrests, and from the Federal Bureau of Investigation for federal convictions and convictions from other states. Both clearances are required for all staff and volunteers. Directors must be cleared before they begin operating a center. Staff and volunteers must submit their fingerprints for clearance before they start to work or have contact with children. Child abuse index checks are performed by the California Department of Justice and are required for all persons who care for children.

- **Disaster and Mass Casualty Plan (Section 101174)**

Child care centers are responsible for developing this plan to provide staff and children with instruction on fire safety and their duties and responsibilities in the event of an emergency. The plan identifies procedures for safe exiting,

transportation, and supervision of children during an evacuation or relocation to predetermined sites equipped to temporarily care for the children. The plan must be available at the child care site, and disaster drills for children and staff are required at least every six months. You may want to schedule more frequent drills, or include in your drills some of the other security recommendations included in this guide.

- **Fire Clearance (Section 101171)**

A fire clearance is mandatory, and must be obtained before a license can be issued. A new fire clearance is required when you change your capacity, enroll children who are non-ambulatory, or make physical alterations to your center.

- **Sign In and Sign Out (Section 101229.1)**

Anyone who drops off or picks up a child from the center must sign his or her full name and record the time of day the child is dropped off or picked up. The name of the person who picks up the child must be on file in the child's record. This ensures that the child leaves your center only with their parent or the parents' authorized representative.

- **Teacher-Child Ratio (Section 101216.3)**

Teacher-child ratios are required to ensure that there are sufficient teachers and other adults available to adequately supervise the children in care. These adults are also responsible for acting to protect the children in an emergency.

- **Telephones (Section 101224)**

A working telephone is required to maintain contact with sources outside the center as part of normal business operations, and in response to an emergency situation.

- **Responsibility for Providing Care and Supervision (Section 101229)**

You must provide care and supervision as necessary to meet the needs of the children in your care. Adequate staffing must be available at all times to ensure children are not left without supervision. In emergency situations, as part of care and supervision, staff are expected to take appropriate actions to implement the center's emergency plan and protect the children in care.

## OPTIONS FOR IMPROVING SECURITY

The following options are intended to supplement and build on the licensing regulations discussed above. These options are divided into low cost actions that could be taken immediately, and actions that could be taken as fiscal resources permit. A third section offers suggestions for working with parents and caretakers.

### **Actions That Can Be Taken Immediately:**

- ❖ **Contact your local law enforcement agency, inform them you are operating a child care center and request they perform a safety inspection of your facility.**

Law enforcement agencies are not always as aware of the location of child care centers as they are of school sites. This is true even if the child care center is located on a school site. Letting law enforcement know of your existence will help them respond to an emergency at your center. You may want to invite a local officer to your center to better acquaint them with the ages of children you serve and the number of children in your program. You can also ask them to perform a security inspection of your site. Law enforcement personnel can provide many useful ideas about how to make your center safer. Many law enforcement agencies may be willing to speak at a staff or parent meeting about security issues. In addition to contacting local law enforcement offices directly, you can request a security inspection by contacting the Governor's Office of Emergency Services, toll-free, at 1-888-SAFE-CA9. They will refer your request to a local law enforcement agency, and can provide you with information on security, crime prevention, 911 procedures, workplace safety, security at work, crime victim information and State of California emergency numbers.

- ❖ **Review your physical plant for security.**

Walk around the grounds of your center. Look for areas that could be a potential hiding place for an individual or a dangerous item. Do you have plants or shrubs that are overgrown so that a person could hide behind them? Do shrubs or plants block the view of the entrance or any other entry way to the child care site? Are there areas of the center not readily visible from other locations, or that are normally left vacant? Check out the playground. If you have a gate leading to the street or parking lot, is it secure?

- ❖ **Develop a system of code words/phrases to use among staff in announcing an emergency.**

Code words allow staff to communicate that a dangerous situation is occurring without informing the intruder or alarming children. This could allow you to remove a child or children from harm's way and give you time to make

an emergency phone call. It is important that all staff be made aware of these words/phrases so they can act immediately. This system must be practiced regularly.

❖ **Develop arrangements for mutual aid with other child care centers and local schools in your area.**

Child care centers in the same vicinity can be of great assistance because they know your particular situation better than most. Form a partnership with other programs, develop specific procedures to take in case of an emergency, and update mutual aid plans regularly. You may also contact the local schools in your area to discuss plans should an emergency occur.

❖ **Develop two relocation sites to be used in an emergency.**

Sometimes emergency situations may also impact your primary relocation site. A second site would allow you to remove staff and children to a safe area.

❖ **Develop a “Phone Tree” calling system among parents to be used in emergencies.**

This allows center staff to make only one or two phone calls to alert all parents of an emergency. You can practice this system by using it for non-emergency events like holiday celebrations.

**Actions You Can Take As Fiscally Feasible/Possible:**

❖ **Install buzzers/signals on doors and outside gates to alert staff when someone enters or leaves the center.**

Staff are not always able to observe entrances. A buzzer or other signal would help to ensure that they are more aware of people who enter or leave the child care center. The signal system should either be loud enough to be heard throughout the center or be connected to a room where there is always a staff person available to hear the signal.

❖ **Install security doors with coded buttons allowing only authorized entrance into the center.**

This would help to ensure that only authorized persons could enter the child care center. All parents and staff would need to know the code, as parents must be allowed by law to enter the program at any time unannounced. This system must be cleared by the licensing office and by the local fire department. You should inform these agencies of the code as well.

❖ **Install outside security cameras that transmit a picture into the office.**

This would allow staff to know who is about to enter the center. This system could be connected to a buzzer signal that would alert staff to check the picture as the person enters.

❖ **Issue pagers to parents to be used in emergencies.**

Parents could be contacted wherever they are in case of emergency or if the center is being evacuated. This system could also be used in non-emergency situations. Some parents may already have pagers that you could use to alert them.

❖ **Install panic buttons or intercoms in each room and in the office.**

This system would allow instant communication between various locations in the center and would trigger the action plan developed by staff and parents. The system should also identify which room needs assistance.

❖ **Install motion sensors with lights/buzzers on the outside of the building to alert staff of someone entering the facility.**

Staff should be available to monitor this system. Again, parents and authorized representatives must be allowed unannounced access, so this system could not restrict their access.

❖ **Install mirrors on the corners of the building to afford better visibility.**

This would allow staff to see who might be coming around the corner of the building without having to actually go around the corner. This could allow a few extra seconds in case of an emergency situation.

❖ **Issue photo identification badges with electronic codes to all authorized parents/adults and staff.**

This system would allow only those directly authorized by the program to gain entrance to the center. The licensing agency and the local fire marshal would have to approve this system as they, too, must have access to the center.

❖ **Have at least one cellular phone available in case of an emergency. If at all possible, a cellular phone in each classroom would be best.**

By having a cellular phone, or two, staff would be able to make an emergency call from any location in the center. The center director should designate who should have access to the phone(s) and ensure the phones are always in

working order. Emergency phone numbers should be programmed into the phone(s) as well.

❖ **Create a two-stage entrance into the center.**

Many centers have doors that enter from the outside directly into a space occupied by children. Redesigning the available space could increase security. This could be as easy as having all visitors pass through the Director's office on the way into their child's room. Staff in the office could then monitor who is entering. Another alternative would be a lobby where parents sign children in and out. A TV monitor could identify who is entering without limiting access.

❖ **Establish an Internet connection from the center.**

This allows parents to monitor their child's experience during the day. It could also be used to alert them if an emergency occurs. Community Care Licensing recently established guidelines for this type of system, so check with your licensing office prior to installation.

❖ **Give personal identification numbers (PIN) to parents wishing to sign their child in or out of the center.**

Some centers utilize automated systems as part of the sign-in/sign-out process. In these systems, parents enter an identification number into a computer system that stores a roster of children's names. The computer confirms the identification number, and notes date and time. If the PIN is accurate, the child is released to the person entering the PIN. Only the child's authorized representatives would have the PIN. Staff should not be allowed access to parents' numbers and they must be kept confidential. Check with your local licensing office prior to installing this system.

**Parents/Relatives**

Parents and other relatives are obviously as concerned as you and your staff for the safety of their children. They are your partners in providing a secure environment at the child care center. Parents want to know that their children are safe at all times. They also want their children to learn and have fun in the child care setting. Many parents might be familiar with some of the recommendations made above and can help you implement them. The better informed your parent community, the less chance that you may experience conflict when you implement any of these suggestions.

There may also be occasions when a parent or other relative can be the source of conflict or be a threat to the safety of the children in care. Two of the most common situations are:

- ❖ Centers sometimes report problems in responding to a parent who comes to pick up their child while inebriated or under the influence of drugs. Staff may believe the parent represents a potential danger in transporting or caring for their child. If this situation occurs, staff must make every effort to prevent the parent from taking the child. If the center is closing, this would include staff staying with the child and attempting to call another relative or adult who has been identified by the parent to assume responsibility for the child. If finding someone to stay with the child is impossible, local law enforcement should be immediately notified and provided with information including the address of the parent and the vehicle they are driving. The parent should be advised when bringing the child to care on any subsequent day that this situation will not be tolerated, and you are prepared to notify law enforcement again if the situation recurs.
- ❖ Occasionally, someone other than the parent, or authorized representative, attempts to remove the child from the center. On a few occasions, the person is the non-custodial parent who does not intend to return the child home. Centers must have procedures in place to ensure that only authorized representative may sign-out a child. If anyone else tries to sign-out a child, the parent must be notified immediately and law enforcement contacted if the individual persists.

The Child Care Advocate Program has developed this guide to assist the child care community in addressing issues we all wish we did not have to address. Unfortunately, child care programs have been impacted by outside threats/intruders. It is in everyone's best interest to be as well prepared as possible for any emergency we hope will never happen. You are encouraged to choose any one or combination of the above suggestions that you feel would best meet the needs of your program. If you need any assistance and/or further explanation please contact your local Child Care Advocate located in the licensing district office in your area.