

RECENT INCIDENTS AT DAY-CARE CENTERS SHINE LIGHT ON CHILD SAFETY ISSUES

By Laura Braddick • June 28, 2011



Erica Wade, preschool two teacher, applies sunscreen to Gabriella, 4, before she plays on the playground at The Goddard School in Kennesaw. (Photo by Jon-Michael Sullivan)

MARIETTA - The death of an infant left in a hot van by day-care workers in Jonesboro, along with a startling incident recently in Cobb County, have some parents thinking more carefully about the safety of their children when left with other caregivers.

Bright from the Start, Georgia's agency for monitoring child care centers, has more than 430 licensed daycare operators in Cobb County.

But the imposing question parents are asking after the Jonesboro tragedy, and the recent incident in Cobb in which an infant was left alone in a daycare after it closed, is: How do you know if a day care center is safe?

Last month, an infant died after being left in a hot car for five hours by her cousin, Jennifer Peacock, at Kennesaw's Ivy Hall Day Care where she worked.

Peacock has been charged with second-degree cruelty to children and involuntary manslaughter.

Prior to that in Cobb, the owner of River Oaks Day Care in Mableton left an infant inside a crib after she locked up the door and left the property.

The infant was unharmed and the child's mother said she would not be pressing charges.

Parents such as Karen Backus, of Kennesaw, said as a mother of two, stories like these are scary.

"I don't care who it is, anytime you're leaving them with somebody other than yourself there's always a fear," she said. "I've always had a good experience with the providers here. I've been fortunate."

When Backus began looking for a day-care center for her 5-month-old daughter, Ava, she kept her eye out for safety concerns when viewing in-home daycares and traditional facilities.

“I looked at the doors and how parents or anybody would gain access,” she said. “I also looked around to see if the kids would be able to leave the safe areas.”

Backus ended up choosing a licensed in-home daycare because she felt a connection with the provider along with a safe environment.

“I think communication with the provider is critical,” she said of finding a daycare that is safe and comfortable. “It’s important in establishing a trust with them, but it’s also a two-way street.”

In order to operate a day-care facility, a license must be obtained through Bright from the Start.

Individuals applying for the license must complete 20 hours of training and submit a criminal background check.

In-home day care providers can keep no more than six children for pay, not including children that live in the home. Exceptions can be made if some children are over a certain age.

Daycare centers must satisfy specific ratios of caregivers to children depending on the age groups.

Applying for a license can take three to six months to complete and once it is issued, state inspectors visit the property twice a year. More inspections may be required depending on if any infractions are found and their severity.

After investigating a violation, follow up actions range from implementing an improvement plan to an enforcement fine or revocation the program’s license, said spokesperson Stacy Moore.

According to the agency’s website, in the last six months three separate daycare licenses belonging to Bertha Williams of Austell, Bridgette Williams of Marietta and Shonticia Odom of Austell were revoked, suspending their operations.

Moore said the organization was not sure how many major incidents at Cobb daycares have been investigated in the last year because the organization recently moved offices.

Mary Thompson, a licensed in-home day-care provider in Kennesaw with more than 30 years of experience, said passing state inspections is not enough when selecting the right child-care provider for families.

“The state is not there every day,” Thompson said. “They come in once or twice a year and often what they are concerned about I often think ‘My goodness...’”

Thompson said she was cited once because her refrigerator temperature was four degrees colder than what was considered ideal.

“At the same time I’m surprised at what it takes to shut someone down,” she said, referencing the day care facility in Jonesboro, Marlo’s Magnificent Early Learning Center, was cited by the state after a toddler’s death this month for falsifying paperwork accounting for children entering and exiting a vehicle for a field trip in October.

Marnie Stevens, director of the Goddard School of Kennesaw, agreed state oversight is not sufficient information in choosing a daycare.

“The state checking up is not a lot of accountability,” she said. “A school should have a concrete system that they keep up daily.”

Stevens said parents looking for a safe facility should look for a place that has a daily quality assurance program such as Goddard’s.

“Our quality assurance program has guidelines on everything from hand-washing to curriculum to field trips,” she said. “It’s very specific for steps taken in each program.”

Whether searching for in-home day cares or traditional facilities, Thompson said the most important thing parents and guardians should do is check the references.

“Insist on many references,” she said. “They don’t know it, but I quiz people on my references. I put people on the list with wrong phone numbers. I ask ‘Did you talk to Jane? I miss her kids so much.’ If they say yes, I know they’re lying.”

Many people don’t take enough time in not only checking references, but researching facilities in general, Thompson said.

“Go sit in the parking lot. Watch what types of adults are picking up the children, so you can get an idea,” she said.

Thompson said it’s a good idea to ask questions that are both obvious and not so obvious.

“Make sure there’s good supervision,” she said. “Ask them ‘While you’re cooking lunch, who’s tending to the children?’”

Kennesaw resident Ann Pegram’s twin sons stayed with Thompson and now her daughter Sophie stays with her each day.

“Since she is a licensed provider, I could look up on the website and see her inspections,” Pegram said. “Plus all of her experience put me at ease.”