

State begins free service for parents seeking child care

By [Christopher Quinn](#)

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For Lisa Perry Smith, volunteer work helping parents find quality child care began with a phone call that every mother dreads.

“Mrs. Smith, I’m sorry, but Jonathan has been hurt,” a child care worker said of Smith’s son three years ago.



John Spink/ jspink@ajc.com

Lisa Perry-Smith reads with her children Kris Smith (left) and Jonathan Smith at their home in Acworth.

An undisciplined child had crushed 4-year-old Jonathan’s finger in a door. There were anxious hours with him in the hospital, followed by a determination to make a difference. Smith has since worked with state and nonprofit agencies to strengthen qualifications and standards for child care in Georgia and even testified before Congress about it.

Smith’s and others’ efforts pay off Monday when Georgia opens a free service to help parents find quality, affordable child care. The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning and the nonprofit Quality Care for Children have bilingual staff to answer questions and a statewide database of information to refer licensed child care providers.

Finding child care is one of the most wrenching problems a parent faces, said Pam Tatum, CEO of Quality Care for Children.

“In order to make the best decision for the child and family, they need information,” she said.

As Smith did, many rely on word-of-mouth and try to find a balance of affordability, quality and convenience.

Smith said she had few information resources when she was looking for care.

“You feel so hopeless and helpless,” she recalled.

Tatum said her staff has information such as checklists of what to look for in child care and information on Georgia’s 8,400 providers, including those that offer nontraditional hours of care.

“We’ll provide them with the tools,” she said.

Each care center on the referral list has been inspected by state workers and has earned a license by meeting standards. And each child care worker must meet requirements, also set by the state.

The referral program is being paid for by a \$500,000 federal grant.

Holly Robinson, commissioner of the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, said starting the service has been a goal of hers since she took over in 2007.

“This has been a lot of months of work and research,” she said.

“Now, families will have just one phone number to call, and the information they will be getting will be consistent and reliable.”

For information, call 1-877-255-42-5437 from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. or go to www.allgakids.org.