

Choosing a day care is the easy part

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Guest Columnist

COLUMBIA, SC *David Hechler covered two of the three murder trials of Gail Cutro, and spent 50 hours interviewing her in prison, where she is serving a life sentence for the 1993 deaths of two infants in the Irmo day care she and her husband operated. You can find more information about Mr. Hechler and his book, *In Good Hands*, at davidhechler.com.*

You finally found a day care for your infant son. (Or you chose a program for your disabled daughter. Or you moved your mother into a nursing home.) It wasn't easy. You visited the place, interviewed the caregivers, checked online for complaints and infractions. You even called references. Everything looked good, and now you can finally relax with the knowledge that your loved one will be safe.

This is dangerous thinking.

It's not that you did a bad job. It's that you think the job is over. That was only Step One. After you make the choice is when the real work begins. Or should. What you can learn about a day care before you choose one can't compare to what you can learn after. If you are paying attention.

That's the key to Step Two: Are you paying attention? Are you actively monitoring the care your child is receiving, or are you assuming everything is fine because you know he's in good hands? Or maybe you're confident that the government is watching *for* you.

This is a mistake. When Minneapolis' *Star Tribune* spent nearly all of 2012 examining the safety of day care in Minnesota, it found that there had been a spike in deaths in the previous five years, yet government regulators hadn't even

noticed. And it sometimes took those regulators years to shut down unsafe operations, the newspaper reported.

Another problem was the attitude of parents, who “sometimes turn a blind eye to problems, and often direct their anger at regulators, not the provider, when a day care is shut down.” All too often they supported caregivers who didn’t merit their trust. “Loyalty blinded parents to serious problems,” the paper concluded.

Parents ought to be supportive of caregivers, of course, but they must be clear about where their loyalties lie. The children are the ones who deserve and need their protection, not the caregivers. That’s why parents need to learn to think like investigators.

Don’t misunderstand: Thinking like an investigator does not mean challenging everything the caregiver says. It means observing carefully and asking questions. It means dropping in unannounced from time to time, and communicating with other parents to learn what they have seen.

Parents need to listen to what their children tell them, and look for changes in their behavior that could indicate problems. For children who are too young to speak, parents will be more dependent on their own observations and on other parents whose children at the day care are older.

Sometimes the biggest challenge is changing providers. It’s not like calling a new electrician because you were dissatisfied with the work of the last one. This is a more important relationship, and a much more personal one. Some parents feel as though they’re firing a friend.

Opting to change is almost always inconvenient as well. You’ll have to take time off from work to interview caregivers. And the alternatives may be more expensive and farther away than what you had.

Another impediment is more subtle. Some parents feel that a move is justified only if they have proof that the caregiver crossed a line — as if it required a criminal offense. The truth is that you don’t need to prove anything, and it doesn’t need to come across as a termination.

If you want to make a change because something about the place doesn’t feel right, that’s enough. If you feel that you need to explain, do so in a way that’s

easy. Your daughter isn't happy. The mix of kids makes her uncomfortable. You're carpooling with a friend who uses a different place. The excuse isn't important.

What matters is taking in the information, processing it and making a change if that's what is best for your child. You know how you'll feel if your gut tells you something is wrong, but you ignore the signals only to find that your gut was right.

This is one lesson that nobody wants to learn the hard way.