

Child Care – Do you really know the risks?

According to health club industry statistics, over half of all health clubs (excluding circuit training facilities) provide day care service for their members. Although we readily use the term “day care” we really are referring to “child sitting” when describing this service. Day Care Centers are typically subject to strict operational and educational protocols associated with feeding and care of children over several hours whereas health clubs are designed to take care of kids on a very limited and short term basis. The biggest difference between the two models is that with child sitting, the member parent is present at all times within the facility. However, just because the parent is nearby in the event of an emergency, does not lessen the responsibility of a child while they are in custody and care of our staff.

Many child sitting areas within clubs are nothing more than a converted room or area to stick the kids in while the parent works out. Electrical wall sockets are standardized instead of elevated, door knobs are not child proofed, the television set is placed on top of a table instead of permanently mounted to a wall, toys are scattered and are not segmented by appropriate age group, and kids bring in their own snacks. Does this sound like your child sitting area?

Once you have made the decision to offer child sitting services to your members, there are several risk management steps you should consider before diving into the glamorous profession of baby sitting other people’s kids.

- 1) **Space Design:** Unless you are an architect or you have hired one and if you are of the male gender, don’t design your child sitting area. Ask a few of your “mommy” members for advice. Be sure that the children’s area is located near the front entrance and completely away from the workout floor. Kids should NEVER be allowed in the workout area even if accompanied by the parent. Tables, cabinets, and chairs should have smooth and rounded edges. Electrical outlets should be placed out of reach of all toddlers and have safety plates installed. All areas should be visible from any point within the room.
- 2) **Staffing:** You should conduct a background check on all employees who will have contact with children. You can obtain this information through your local Sherriff’s department. When interviewing for this position, which you will do often, ask yourself the question; “Would I let this person baby sit my own child?”
- 3) **Digital Surveillance Cameras:** Camera systems are highly recommended. Whenever a child is injured, there is typically no possible defense. However, if we are able to view the actual injury taking place, it removes all doubt and clearly shows responsibility. Even if it is “our fault”, we can quickly determine the potential negligence and settle cases much more efficiently if we have the hard evidence.
- 4) **Waivers:** As I stated above, there is usually no defense when a child is injured. However, a well written waiver and parent/guardian release form acts as an effective deterrent and in many jurisdictions can be upheld.

- 5) **Policies and Age Limitations:** As with your regular club policies and guidelines, you should have specific policies designated for the operation of your child sitting business. Your policies and guidelines should outline the age limitations, illness disclosure, no diaper changing, no snacks allowed (keep in mind that some kids are allergic to chocolate) and that you have the right to refuse service to any unruly or high maintenance child. Put these procedures in writing and post them next to your child sitting sign in sheet. If you are going to allow infants, you should have at least two employees during all hours that infant care is offered. One designated for the babies and the other(s) for the rest of kids.
- 6) **Toys and Climbing Apparatus:** If you have a toy or “piece” of toy (like a Lego) that can fit through the inside of a toilet paper roll, then get it out of the child sitting area. If it can fit inside the roll, it will fit inside the kid’s throat. I am a big believer in keeping the kids feet on the ground. The second they “climb” anything...even a three foot plastic slide, they will fall...and usually on the arm of a toddler.
- 7) **Profit Center or Loss Leader?:** Just know that you will probably not make money in child sitting. Will you get enough “additional” mommy members to make up for the added expense? If not, save the money and add a stretching room. If you have child sitting, make it the safest, cleanest, and most fun facility in the county. Then hope you or your manager doesn’t have to fill in to watch Junior when your baby sitting employee calls in sick.