

Child Care Center Management Software Buying Guide

by Roger Neugebauer

As computers become more commonplace in early childhood settings, purchasing software to assist with administrative tasks has shifted from being a luxury or a novelty to being the norm. Before long, nearly all centers will take advantage of the powers of computers to ease their administrative burdens. A director at the point of purchasing center management software is faced with a wide range of choices (see "Product Descriptions" below). This guide is designed to help directors with this crucial decision.

5 Key Questions

In comparing software packages, there are five key questions you will need to have answered:

•Does it meet my needs?

Don't be swayed by a package of bells and whistles. Determine what you want a software package to do for you and find out which programs can meet these needs.

•Is it easy to use?

Is it easy to install and understand?

Can you enter information without a lot of tedious steps? Can a non-nerd learn it and use it?

•Is it flexible?

Can you add new reports and new fields within reports? Can you make changes yourself, or do you have to pay the vendor to do it?

•What if I need help?

If you have a problem or a question, is there someone out there who can rescue you? How much does it cost to take advantage of this support?

•Is it guaranteed?

If it doesn't meet your needs, does the vendor offer a money back guarantee?

There are three ways you can get these questions answered. The first way is to ask the salesperson. The second is to give a software package you are seriously considering a test drive. Most vendors now offer demo packages that allow you to see the program in action. This gives you a firm idea of how the program works.

However, these demos usually come with a small amount of data entered, and won't give you the feel for what it's like to work with your entire customer base. Therefore, you should never buy any package without talking to current users of the product.

Ask the vendor to supply you with a complete list of users in your community. (Don't be satisfied with a short list of the vendor's two or three most satisfied users.) Call them up and grill them for their answers to the five key questions.

Macintosh or IBM?

In the past, a key decision about hardware was whether to go with a Macintosh or an IBM-type computer. Typically, you went with a Macintosh if you were most interested in graphically oriented functions, such as producing a newsletter or a brochure. A Macintosh was also a prime choice if ease of use was an important issue.

If you wanted to use a computer primarily for detailed data work, storing data on customers, main-

taining financial records, projecting budgets, or analyzing cash flow needs, an IBM-type computer was the way to go. If price was a major consideration, with all the competition in the IBM side of the industry, this was clearly the way to go.

Today, however, factors have leveled out a bit. Prices on Macintosh computers have dropped significantly so that, in all but the most powerful computers, Macintosh and IBM-type computers are relatively competitive. In addition, IBM-type computers have also become easier to use and better oriented to graphics applications. The key difference today is that there are vastly more applications available for IBM-type computers.

Your Ideal System

As a result, you need to test out the choices on the salesroom floor and see what feels best to you. Give careful consideration to the following four types of systems:

Entry level IBM-type computer. If you direct a small center with a tight budget, you should be able to buy a very satisfactory IBM-type computer for around \$1,000. This system should include a computer with a 486 processor, a 200 megabyte hard drive, 8 megabytes of memory, a 14" VGA color monitor, and a respectable inkjet printer.

High level IBM-type computer. If you direct a large center or a number of centers, you may need a powerful computer. For between \$2,000 and \$2,500, you can purchase a powerful (though not top of the line) computer with a pentium processor, a 1.2 gigabyte hard drive, 16 megabytes of memory, a 15" SVGA color monitor, and a respectable laser printer. (Note: For an up-to-date review of pentium computers, see the June 25, 1996

issue of *PC Magazine*.)

Entry level Macintosh computer. With recent price cuts, you should be able to purchase a worthy Macintosh computer for less than \$1,500. This computer would come equipped with a fast processor, 750 megabyte hard drive, 8 megabytes of active memory, a 14" VGA color monitor, and an inkjet printer.

High level Macintosh computer. A larger organization would undoubtedly be able to afford, and benefit from, a more powerful Macintosh computer — which in 1996 means a well equipped Power PC (a Macintosh computer which can also run IBM programs). For under \$2,500, you should be able to purchase one with a very fast processor, a 1.2 gigabyte hard drive, a 15" SVGA color monitor, and a laser printer.

Other Features

No matter what system you end up with, there are a number of other features you may want to seriously consider. Many systems today come equipped with a pointing device (such as a mouse) and a fax/modem (for communicating over telephone lines). These are features you will want to have.

Another "extra" you must have is a method of backing up so you can save all your records in case your computer malfunctions. The most common form of back up is a tape drive that can be installed in your computer. A new option worth considering is a ZIP drive — a disk not much bigger than a standard floppy disk that enables you to store up to 100 megabytes of data.

What About a Laptop?

Until recently, laptop computers were luxury items for business executives who needed a computer on the road. Today, however, laptop

computers have become so advanced, and their prices have dropped so much, that they are a viable replacement for a desktop computer. The screens on many laptops are now much larger and easier to view (especially if you buy one with an *active matrix* display) than earlier versions. And most laptops can pack as much power and speed as you will need. If you travel often, or work at home regularly, a laptop may be just the ticket.

On the con side, keyboards are still a problem, as they are still much smaller than desktop varieties and take some getting used to. Also, because of their compact size, the angle of vision in viewing the screen is more limited than with a desktop where the monitor is higher up and can be rotated to meet your needs. If you spend many hours a day at a computer, a laptop could cause you more discomfort than a desktop.

What About Operating Systems?

With all the hype over the introduction of Windows 95, one would think that this is the state-of-the-art operating system. Windows 95, however, was an attempt to emulate the ease of use and flexibility of Macintosh computers. So if ease of use is critical to you, a Macintosh may still be state of the art for you.

If you are committed to going the IBM route, Windows 95 is not necessarily a requirement. Many programs written for the first IBM operating system, DOS, are still fine programs and will operate well on the low priced, powerful computers that are now available. Most DOS programs will operate in a Windows environment, although they may not be able to take advantage of all Windows features.

However, with Windows 95 being so popular, most vendors of standard software are designing their programs to work best in a Windows 95 environment. You may want to go with a Windows 95 system so you can run other programs, such as word processing and newsletter publishing, in their latest incarnations.

Product Descriptions

The following are descriptions of 18 center management software products currently available. While we have made every effort to search out all products on the market, we may have unintentionally missed some. All information about each product has been provided entirely by the vendors. *Child Care Information Exchange* does not endorse any of these products and has not attempted to verify the accuracy of their statements.

These products are grouped into three categories based upon the number of years which they have been on the market. Within each category, products are listed alphabetically. Those with advertisements in this issue have a circle number at the end of their listing. By circling these numbers on the Product Inquiry Card near the back of this issue, you can request free information about these products.

More Than 10 Years on Sale

■ CCM-Turbo/CCM-Turbo Plus

At the forefront of technology for over 11 years, the first to offer a Windows™ center management package, Personalized Software is now the first center management system available on the World Wide Web. Visit our web site at www.ccmturbo.com and discover for yourself why CCM-Turbo Plus is "simply the best!"

Operates on DOS and Windows.

Personalized Software, Inc.
PO Box 359
Phoenix, OR 97535
(800) 553-2312

Circle 20 on Product Inquiry Card

■ Childcare Management Services, Inc. — MAGGEY

Included in MAGGEY's master module are accounts receivable, client/child data files, immunization reports, and more. Timeclock, USDA food program, payroll, accounting, and corporate reporting modules are also available. MAGGEY is the most flexible management software available. 1-800 technical support. Childcare Management Services has been assisting owners and directors since 1983.

Operates on DOS 3.0 or higher.
Childcare Management Services, Inc.
299 South Park Avenue, Suite 2
Tucson, AZ 85719
(800) 462-4439 / (520) 624-1169

Circle 21 on Product Inquiry Card

■ EZ-CARE

What's the real difference between all these products? They all claim to be easy, flexible, and powerful — they're not! EZ-CARE is still the only product where screens, reports, and files can be changed to meet your unique needs. Doesn't your business deserve the best? Call for a free preview disk.

Operates on DOS and Windows.

SofterWare Inc.
540 Pennsylvania Avenue, #200
Fort Washington, PA 19034
(800) 220-4111

Circle 60 on Product Inquiry Card

■ Ezsoft

Ezsoft provides an expandable DOS based system to accommodate the needs of all sizes of centers from a small single school operation to a large multi-school operation. The system offers full inte-

gration, via modular construction, to payroll, general ledger, accounts payable, and accounts receivable functions.

Operates on DOS.

Ezsoft Corporation
PO Box 1200
Rowlett, TX 75030
(800) 346-9949

■ KidsCare

The first Windows-based center management system. Unlike every other Windows product, KidsCare offers a complete solution available now with a proven record of helping single and multi-site centers enhance their administration. Version 3.0 includes everything you need to analyze center profitability, project future enrollment, increase revenue, and minimize staffing costs.

Operates on Windows.
SofterWare Inc.
540 Pennsylvania Avenue, #200
Fort Washington, PA 19034
(800) 836-3575

Circle 36 on Product Inquiry Card

■ MacCARE

MacCARE is designed for people who "know nothing about computers." No computer experience is necessary to manage child and family information, accounts receivable, scheduling, attendance, and more. One comprehensive and cost effective system does it all. Save over 30% by ordering now!

Operates on Macintosh.

SofterWare Inc.
540 Pennsylvania Avenue, #200
Fort Washington, PA 19034
(800) 220-4111

5 to 10 Years on Sale

■ Child Care Management Software by UniPAX

Child Care Management Software by UniPAX is the affordable, quality, easy-

to-use software solution for child care management. Available for almost all computer systems. A proven leader in rate and scheduling flexibility. Just point and click on our picture bar! Affiliated with Paxon, providing outstanding customer support since 1978.

Operates on DOS, Windows, and Macintosh.

UniPAX
923 Country Club Road, Suite 250
Eugene, OR 97401
(800) 267-3996

Circle 66 on Product Inquiry Card

■ CHILD CARE 2000

CHILD CARE 2000 is proud to lead this industry in management performance and capabilities. Quick and easy-to-use menus, friendly 800# support, automatic analysis and calculations, and hundreds of standard reports, coupled with user-defined tracking, provide every user with the perfect combination of simplicity and flexibility in one comprehensive system.

Operates on DOS.

Care Software Systems
PO Box 1530
Dublin, OH 43017
(800) 875-5002 / (614) 793-2000

Circle 8 on Product Inquiry Card

■ Hunter Systems

Hunter Systems has provided management software for private schools and child care centers since 1986. Our fully integrated modules handle child/family records, billing, accounting, and payroll functions. Toll-free support. Training services.

Operates on DOS and Windows.

Hunter Systems
100 Century Park South, Suite 206
Birmingham, AL 35226
(800) 326-0527

■ PoseyDMS

PoseyDMS is a complete accounts receivable system which includes daily, weekly, bi-monthly, monthly, and calendar scheduled billing, discounts for early payments, and billing statements. DMS also tracks state requirements including shots and food programs. Posey Computing Systems is noted for focusing on customer support. Operates on DOS and Windows.

Posey Computing Systems
2828 Lakeview Lane
Granite Shoals, TX 78654
(800) 475-1089

■ Private Advantage

Combines ease of use with flexibility and many "industry only" features. The program delivers what large, small, and multi-site centers need. For those centers who only need the basics, we offer a "Light" version at an inexpensive price. Compared with other programs, Private Advantage simply does more.

Operates on DOS, Windows, and Macintosh.

Mount Taylor Programs
716 College Avenue, #B
Santa Rosa, CA 95404
(800) 238-7015

Circle 22 on Product Inquiry Card

■ School Partner

Nine modules provide a complete system for K through 12th grades, plus. The modules include: school basics, attendance, billing/receivables, class loading, grades and report cards, library, general ledger, accounts payable, and payroll.

Operates on DOS and Windows.

Summit Systems, Inc.
16 Berry Hill Road, #121
Columbia, SC 29210-6433
(800) 228-5857

■ Shelby Systems

This system was developed to meet the growing needs of the child care industry. Care was taken to include the

details that are specific to these organizations — like records, billing, reporting, pick-up security, and an interface to word processing. At the same time, we include flexibility to meet your needs.

Operates on DOS.

Shelby Systems, Inc.
65 Germantown Court, Suite 303
Cordova, TN 38018
(800) 877-0222

Less Than 5 Years on Sale

■ CareTec Software

CareTec offers an affordable management system for child care professionals. We also offer automated attendance collection and will soon be shipping other exciting tools. We are committed to providing reliable tools that are easy to use, affordable, and backed by friendly technical support.

Operates on Windows.

CareTec Software
1000 B Gault Avenue South
Fort Payne, AL 35967
(800) 690-3303

■ DATACARE

DATACARE™ for Windows is a powerful, user-friendly program designed to save time and money, speed up and simplify management tasks, and increase productivity. Features include: child/staff database and scheduling, easy billing/accounts receivable, prospect management, versatile reports/forms, automatic backup/restore, and more. Free multimedia demo disk available.

Operates on Windows.

RPM Software
405 Boyle Street, Suite 7-C
Dunmore, PA 18512-2039
(800) 252-4776

■ Office Center

Our customers love us! Office Center is the system of choice for experts and

novice computer users alike. Easy to use, powerful, flexible, and affordable. Friendly, free technical support, payment plans, and money back guarantee have made Office Center the fastest growing management system in America. Call for free demos. Operates on DOS and Windows.

Emerging Technologies
PO Box 1539
Mt. Shasta, CA 96067
(800) 729-4445

Circle 33 on Product Inquiry Card

■ THE PRE-SCHOOL PARTNER

If the lack of time, personnel, and/or financial resources are affecting your center's management responsibilities, then THE PRE-SCHOOL PARTNER is your answer. Designed specifically for preschool centers, the registration, billing, collections, and USDA meal programs provide you with simple, effective organization. Call for your free demo disk today.

Operates on DOS and Windows.
ON-Q Software, Inc.
13861 SW 11th Street
Miami, FL 33184
(800) 553-2862

■ ProCare Management Software

With 11 years of programming experience and thousands of users, find out why ProCare is the director's choice. Call for a free demonstration package and mention this Buyer's Guide. You'll be entered in a drawing for a free ProCare Management Program (\$950 value) to be given away October 1.

Operates on DOS or Windows.

ProCare Management Software —
Professional Solutions
240 East Hersey, Suite 10
Ashland, OR 97520
(800) 338-3884

Circle 30 on Product Inquiry Card