



Shalicia Jackson is a Licensed Family Child Care Provider and Owner/Operator of Modern Early Learning Academy in Winston-Salem, North Carolina

North Carolina Can't Work Without Her

"At the end of the day, I am both the CEO and the janitor for my business. I'm also the cook, the curriculum specialist, and the tax preparer. I have a master's degree and run a five-star program, but after all the expenses I average about \$14 an hour." – Shalicia Jackson

I opened my family child care home, the Modern Early Learning Academy, in March 2022, so I am fairly new at this. I started my program after I relocated to Winston-Salem (Forsyth County) and was hit with not being able to find child care. I was a licensed social worker with a bachelor's degree in early childhood education and a master's degree in social work. I worked as an early childhood outreach mental health consultant, going from center to center helping them identify

appropriate interventions for children's mental health. But when I moved here, I couldn't find child care for my own son. Not just quality child care, but no child care at all! What was I going to do? I don't have any family in North Carolina. I was so stressed then, just like the parents who call me these days looking for a slot. So I thought, I'm just going to convert my child's playroom into a business and use my background to care for my own child and other people's children. That's how I got started.

The orientation process and meeting the education requirements to be a licensed caregiver was easy for me because of my training and degrees. But navigating the systems to meet the zoning requirements and satisfy the county and state regulations was hard. You really have to be resourceful because there is no built-in support for that process. I sent a lot of emails and made phone call after phone call just to get some clarification of how things are supposed to work. Finally, I stumbled across the [Childcare Resource Center](#) for the county and, just by luck, I got connected to someone who was managing a startup grant for family child care home providers.

She's my hidden angel; without her I wouldn't have known half this stuff. The startup grant paid for some of the equipment I needed—tables and chairs, manipulatives, scissors, crayons, and a laptop. But more importantly, she pointed out that I needed to register my business with the deeds office and explained the county ordinance around fencing, which was the reason the zoning office wouldn't approve me. I had to dig into my savings to find \$5,000 for the fence, which a lot of providers wouldn't have, but I was able to fence my entire backyard and cross that hurdle to get licensed.

I posted [my business on Facebook](#) and the calls started coming in. I was immediately full, and now I have over 40 children on my waiting list. What parents like about my program is that it's nature-based, centered around an apple tree and a garden. We do a lot of garden-to-table activities that give kids an opportunity to connect with nature and learn important life skills like responsibility, teamwork, and problem solving. I'm also really committed to serving children from different socio-economic backgrounds and to creating an inclusive environment based on evidence-based practices for positive social interactions, self-regulation, and conscious discipline.

Really what every parent, no matter their circumstances, is looking for is quality, affordability, and accessibility. Right now all but one of the seven children in my program are African American. I have one toddler, two 3-year-olds, two 4-year-olds (including my

own), and two school-age kids who are with me for the summer, but their parents are really a wide range. I have a child whose mom works for the school district and a child whose dad travels internationally for work and speaks three languages. I have a dad who's the CEO of a big company and a single mom who is the janitor at the same company. I have a registered nurse and a FedEx truck driver among my parents. Every one of them needs to work and needs to know their child is safe and learning.

Although I started out looking for a solution to my own child care needs, I'm still working to make child care sustainable as a business. I worry all the time about being in compliance with every regulation.



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My day starts at 5:30 a.m. with me walking around my home making sure the right things are plugged in, the front porch is swept, toys are organized, fruit is washed, food is prepared. Sometimes I have to run to Walmart to grab a gallon of milk. Then I have children all day, and after they leave, I have to do the dishes, sanitize the toys, sweep and mop floors, answer emails and calls from families.

Recently I started participating in the CACFP food program, which I've calculated pays about 85 percent of my expenses for snacks and meals when I go grocery shopping locally. It helps, but the rest comes out of my pocket, and it also requires additional paperwork and monitoring time for which I'm not compensated. Also, I'm not able to claim meal reimbursements for my own son, which doesn't seem fair because of course you still have to feed your own child when he's part of your program. In addition, I am qualified as a Smart Start provider and a few of the children I care for qualify for subsidies, so I keep track of all that.

At the end of the day, I am both the CEO and the janitor for my business. I'm also the cook, the curriculum specialist, and the tax preparer. I have a master's degree and run a five-star program, but the finances are pretty eye opening. It would help if they raised the child to teacher ratio in North Carolina to eight children from birth to 5. That way I'd have three more paying slots, which would really reduce the financial strain. Right now with just four paying slots, after all the expenses I average about \$14 an hour. My husband and I have cut back to one car, which helps, and I'm on his health insurance. Without that, there's no way I'd be able to sustain my business.

This is definitely the most challenging and the most rewarding career choice I've ever made. It's a huge blessing and an honor to nurture and provide care that helps other families. I know the kids in my program are happy and growing physically and emotionally. But it is stressful to have to give up so much of your own home for your business and always be worrying about whether you're in compliance. I haven't had any violations or deficiencies, but I'm still always a little panicky about it. I love this work and I'm in it for the long haul, but family child care and self-care need to be aligned somehow. I see that a lot of providers who've been doing this for decades are getting ready to retire and I would really like to see more people my age come into the field. For that to happen, we need resources, a living wage, and supportive connection with each other.