



Penny Gerking is a Licensed Family Home Provider and owner/operator of Little Gerkin's Childcare in Auburn, NE.

Nebraska Can't Work Without Her

I always knew I wanted to work with children. I went to college to get my teaching degree and while I was there, I worked at the college daycare center. In fact, one of the babies I cared for then, I still keep in contact with. She's all grown up and having babies of her own now and we're friends. So I've been doing this work for decades!

In my senior year, I got pregnant and had a child of my own. I had to put her in daycare while I was doing my student teaching, which was really hard. So I decided to teach preschool a few hours a day and be home with my own baby the rest of the time. Then another parent asked me to watch their child as well, and two weeks later, another parent

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contacted me. That's how it started. I got licensed and started taking care of children full time as a business.

I'm proud of the quality of child care I provide as the only Step 5 program (the highest level of quality) in my county. I started working on my steps in 2018, and with support from Sixpence Early Learning Fund, I got to the top tier last year. The Sixpence coach observed me and gave me pointers. She brought me resources for the kids and information to share with parents. They provided a grant and stipends for professional development and helped me prepare portfolios on each of the children I care for. The portfolios show their learning and development and how I'm helping them to improve, as well as what I'm doing to communicate with parents.

Family child care is not just about the children. It's about the family. We're helping all of them, not just the kids who come in our door. Parents ask me for advice all the time and I

teach them. So, we're helping their parents, too. For example, I remember a family who had three boys in my care and mom would never tell those boys no. She didn't want them to cry. She didn't want them to hate her. I said, "That's one thing when he wants a piece of candy before dinner, but what will you tell him when he wants to drink before it's legal or to drive a car dangerously? What will you do when saying 'yes' makes him unsafe?"

One day, she came to pick up her son and he started to throw a tantrum on my floor because he wanted to get ice cream before dinner. I said, "Remember what we talked about? Getting upset and throwing a tantrum is just how toddlers express themselves. It's not hurting him and it's not hurting you." It took some time and modeling, but she was able to learn to set healthy boundaries and teach her boys how to wait and communicate.

Child care in your own home is a long day, but it's a good day. I care for seven children. Five of them arrive at 7:30 a.m. and the other two by 8 a.m. I feed them breakfast and afterward we go out the front door and around to the back, which is good practice because it's the same route we use for fire drills. They especially love the mud kitchen, where they can dig and push trucks and play with buckets and shovels.

After outside time, I get everybody unbundled and cleaned up. I have circle time twice a day; we read books or do math or science or sing. When the babies are napping, I do crafts with the toddlers and preschoolers. Then we have lunch and clean up. The older ones can do a lot for themselves and even help the younger ones, but there's also potty training toddlers, preparing bottles and changing diapers for babies and getting the toddlers down for a nap all at the same time.

Sometimes, I cook with the children. Teaching them math and nutrition and how to work together as we make something good to eat is an example of the important work we do to get children ready for school. If you ask preschool or kindergarten teachers about kids who have come from Little Gerkin's, they

will tell you [the students] have learned how to regulate their emotions. They've learned how to ask to join in. They've learned how to problem solve, clean up after themselves and be a good citizen. We are foundation builders for the education children get when they go to school, and if that foundation isn't strong, then children will struggle. That's why I think some of the extra funding that goes to schools and even preschool should come to infant and toddler care. This is where school begins.

After a snack, we go outside again. Parents pick up between 4 and 5. Each day is thoughtfully choreographed chaos—with lessons and activities planned, consistent routines and minute-to-minute personal interactions to care for each unique child. For me, of course, before I go to bed there's more clean-up and prep for the next day, not to mention getting up early for more meal prep and lesson set up. Even on the weekends, I'm getting lesson plans together and deep cleaning. It's a long day doing important work for low pay.

During COVID, we got help to pay for supplies and stabilize our income because the government said child care was important. It keeps the country working. Since then, the prices of everything have risen, but that funding has evaporated. On an income of maybe \$15 or \$16 an hour, it's hard for caregivers to provide for their own families. I've had to raise my rates, which passes the cost on to families. And child care is very hard to find because a lot of providers are like, "This is not worth it. I can't make ends meet with this." There has to be a way for government funding for education to include the earliest education, which is happening here in home-based child care.