

Montana Childcare Business Connect Mentorship FAQs

1. What is the mentorship program?

The mentorship program offered by Montana CBC will pair experienced small business leaders with new or expanding child care businesses to offer a one-year, guided process to a successful business launch. The program targets child care businesses that are in the early stages of development and operation – anywhere from concept to the first year of operations. Existing child care businesses that are moving from family/group to center, or centers planning to significantly expand enrollment are also eligible to apply.

The mentorship functions as a hybrid business incubator/professional development program, providing new business owners with in-depth information on the fundamentals of child care business operations – budgets, staffing, risk management, policies and procedures, facilities, and more. Participants will receive monthly training, and work with their mentors over 12 months to develop business plans, financial projections, policy manuals, and similar business documents that form the foundation of successful child care businesses. Proteges will receive Early Childhood Practitioner Registry credits, mini-grants for their businesses upon successful completion, and monthly learning resources. Mentors will receive ECP credits (if applicable) and quarterly stipends.

Participation is limited to no more than 20 business owners, so applicants are encouraged to apply early!

2. I opened my new childcare business a few months ago – can I still apply?

Yes! The mentorship program is designed to support new businesses in getting the doors open and surviving the challenging first year of operations. If you are within the first 12 months of starting your new business, you are eligible to apply.

3. I have been operating a center-based childcare for 3 years, but I have an opportunity to move to a bigger building and double my enrollment. Is this mentorship an option for me?

Yes! The mentorship program wants to help childcare businesses start and expand. While some smaller expansions may not be right for the mentorship program, we welcome applicants who are about to launch a big growth phase. What “significant expansion” looks like varies from business to business – it could be opening a second site, growing enrollment by 50% or more, or adding on a major new line of services (adding infant-toddler care, for example, incorporating a formal preschool, partnering with a school district for afterschool care). If you aren’t certain that your business fits the mentorship model, please email us at connect@zerotofive.org.

4. I have been working on my business plan for months and I am ready to open my doors soon – can I still apply?

Absolutely. The mentorship is a structured, 12-month program that covers the fundamentals of childcare business operation. However, we know that our proteges will be in many different stages of operation, and we encourage that. If you have recently opened your childcare (within the last 12 months) or if you are planning to open soon, this mentorship is for you. We do not ask that our participants complete the program before starting their businesses – you know when you are ready to open your doors, and we are here to help you with the critical planning and start-up operations!

5. I don't have a written business plan yet. Can I still apply for the mentorship?

You can. We encourage (but do not require) applicants to submit something that helps us understand your business model. This can be a short or even draft business plan, a one-page summary of your business with basic information (e.g., planned enrollment, program structure, location, etc.), an executive summary from a grant application, or any similar information that tells us what you are planning to do or are currently doing. During the mentorship program, proteges will work with their mentors to develop or update a business plan, so if you don't have one yet, that's ok. All information submitted with your application will be kept confidential.

6. Our community group has been working to solve childcare shortages – can the mentorship program help us?

That depends. Montana Childcare Business Connect offers a Community Capacity Building program to help communities come together and tackle child care shortages in their areas. For communities that are in the early planning or problem-solving stages, the Capacity Building program is probably the best tool to support your work. However, if your group has determined the solution to your local needs, and decided that opening a new child care or expanding an existing program is the right next step, then the Program Director or childcare owner is encouraged to apply for the mentorship to help get that business going! If you aren't certain which of our program strategies is best for you, please reach out at connect@zerotofive.org.

7. I am a childcare owner, and I am really struggling with hiring. Can the mentorship program help me?

Probably not. The mentorship program is designed as more of a comprehensive business incubator than a tool to solve one or two challenging aspects of operations. If you are an experienced business owner who is facing struggles with some clearly identified needs, then our Targeted Technical Assistance is probably the best option for you. Reach out to our [Senior Childcare Business Advisor](#) for more information on how we can help you. You can also check out our [website](#) for a variety of upcoming and on-demand trainings.

8. The mentorship program has a lot of training – am I required to attend them all?

Yes. Proteges are expected to attend monthly training sessions; mentors are strongly encouraged but not required to attend. ECP credit will be given for training sessions. In addition, mentors and protégés are expected to meet at least once per month (virtually or in person) to work on self-identified business development goals. Proteges who successfully complete the program will receive two mini-grants to support their business growth.

9. What are the qualifications to be a mentor?

Mentors should be experienced small business owners – individuals who have started and operated businesses of their own and know the challenges that owners face every day. Ideally, mentors will be experienced in childcare business operations, or in businesses that work with children regularly (e.g., preschools, afterschool programs, indoor playgrounds, youth activities and classes). However, we know that many small business owners have a lot to offer, regardless of their industry. Therefore, if you are a business owner that wants to help others, we encourage you to consider applying, even if your background isn't in childcare. We ask our mentors to commit to the full 12-month program and plan to dedicate at least 4-5 hours per month to their protégé. In addition, mentors are expected to attend a live kickoff event and a live celebration event at the end. Mentors will be required to complete training prior to working with a protégé and submit monthly documentation for reporting purposes. Mentors will receive a small quarterly stipend and ECP credit for all trainings attended.

10. I would like to be a mentor, but I am not sure that I would be able to answer all of my protégé's questions – what should I do?

Mentors are not expected to be experts in all areas of childcare operations! The mentorship program will provide monthly trainings with subject matter experts on each topic. Good mentors will function more like guides, helping their proteges build their own skills, guide them through problem-solving, and working side-by-side to implement strategies to overcome challenges. Good mentors are skilled at active listening, reflective questioning, and constructive feedback. Mentors will receive training prior to working with proteges and will also have ongoing support just for mentors throughout the program.

If you have a desire to help a childcare business get started and successfully grow, consider applying to be a mentor. If you have questions, please reach out at connect@zerotofive.org.

11. I have operated small businesses for 30 years, but they aren't childcare businesses. Would I still be a good mentor?

Yes! While some proteges may prefer a mentor with specific childcare business, other proteges do best with people who bring new perspectives to the relationship. The mentorship program is structured to ensure that proteges walk away with the knowledge they need to be successful business owners – by offering monthly targeted training from subject matter experts, we allow our mentors to focus on problem-solving and feedback, rather than teaching their protégés. We want our mentors to serve as guides to new business owners, facilitating their protégé's own learning and growth through questions and conversations, not instruction. If you are open to guiding a new business, brainstorming, giving feedback, being a curious co-learner, and dedicating your time to a new business owner, then you have the skills to be a great mentor. [Apply here!](#)