

Facts about the Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential and Process



What Is a CDA?

CDA stands for Child Development Associate. This is a person who has successfully completed the CDA assessment process and has been awarded the CDA Credential. A person with a CDA Credential has demonstrated the ability to meet the specific needs of children, work with parents and other adults, and promote and nurture children's social, emotional, physical, and intellectual growth in a child development program. The CDA has shown competence in the ability to meet the CDA Competency Goals through work in a center-based, home visitor, family child care, bilingual, or special education setting (Council for Professional Recognition 2006).

When and how did it all begin?

The Child Development Associate (CDA) National Credentialing Program began in 1971 through the cooperative efforts of the federal government and the early childhood care and education profession in response to concern about the quality of child care in this country. Throughout the 1960s, a dramatic increase occurred in the number of children in care programs as many mothers entered the workforce, but there was no deliberate and organized effort to keep track of the quality of care that these children were receiving. The quality of care became increasingly important as major research studies at the time indicated how critical the care children receive in the early years is to their subsequent development. The purpose of the program was to assess

and credential early childhood care and education professionals on the basis of performance. The program was funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children and Families.

For the first ten years, the CDA program was directed by a coalition of early childhood professional associations, including Bank Street College of Education in New York City. In 1979, the program added Competency Standards and assessment requirements to the system so that candidates in bilingual programs could also be assessed.

At first, the program assessed only workers in center-based preschool programs that served preschool children ages three through five. Between 1985 and 1989, the CDA assessment system was expanded to include caregivers in home visitor and family child care programs and infant/toddler center-based programs.

In the spring of 1985, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) began managing the CDA program. NAEYC set up a separate entity within its organization, called the Council for Professional Recognition, to administer the program nationally. The Council took on complete responsibility for the program beginning in the fall of 1985. As the result of three years of study and review, the Council developed the procedures for assessment and national standards for the delivery of CDA training as we know them today. The Council continues to conduct research on the effectiveness, relevance, and affordability of the credentialing program, periodically making revisions, most recently in 2006 (Council for Professional Recognition 2006).

How many people have the CDA Credential?

Since 1975, the total number of caregivers who have achieved the CDA Credential is over 200,000. As a result of an increased demand for trained and qualified staff by employers in both the public and private sector, well over 15,000 child care providers apply for the CDA Credential each year. In addition, forty-nine states plus the District of Columbia include the CDA Credential as part of their child care licensing regulations (Bailey 2004).

Who earns a CDA?

More than half of CDAs are between the ages of twenty-six and forty, with an increasing number of CDAs over the age of forty. The majority of people who have earned a CDA are female (Bailey 2004).

Why Is Getting a CDA Important?

Working through the CDA process can be worthwhile and rewarding. In so doing, you can accomplish these goals:

- Earn a nationally recognized credential
- Evaluate your own work as it compares with national standards, and improve on your skills
- Receive one-on-one advice, support, and feedback from early childhood professionals who have knowledge of child development and experience working with young children
- Improve upon your existing skills to the benefit of yourself and the young children in your care

(Council for Professional Recognition 2006)

Who Can Apply for a CDA?

Early childhood care and education workers who are in center-based child care, family child care, or home visitor programs can be evaluated by the Council. These workers need to have some education and experience in early child care and meet several specific requirements:

- Be eighteen years of age or older.
- Hold a high school diploma or GED.
- Have 480 hours of experience working with young children within the past five years.
- Have 120 clock hours of formal child care education within the past five years. It is important to note that the Council will consider waiving certain eligibility requirements if the candidate provides a written explanation, along with documentation that supports the request. Such requests need to be sent to the Council before you submit the CDA application. A Waiver Request form is provided in *The CDA Assessment System and Competency Standards* book in the application packet. The Council will notify the candidate whether the waiver has been granted.

(Council for Professional Recognition 2006)

What Kind of Formal Child Care Education Is Needed?

The 120 clock hours of formal child care education must include at least ten hours in each of the following subject areas:

- Planning a safe, healthy environment, including safety, first aid, health, nutrition, space planning, materials and equipment
- Steps to enhance children’s physical and intellectual development, for example, large- and small-muscle, language, discovery, art, and music activities
- Positive ways to support children’s social and emotional development through self-esteem, independence, self-control, and socialization
- Strategies to establish productive relationships with families through parent or guardian involvement, home visits, conferences, or referrals
- Strategies to manage an effective program operation, including planning, record keeping, and reporting
- Maintaining a commitment to professionalism, for example, through learning about advocacy, ethical practices, workforce issues, or professional associations
- Observing and recording children’s behavior, learning tools, and strategies for objective information collection
- Principles of child growth and development, for example, studying developmental milestones from birth through age five or cultural influences on development

The training can be for college credit or for no credit. Formal courses that cover the above topics might have titles such as these:

- Child Growth and Development
- Health, Safety, and Nutrition in Early Childhood Programs
- Guidance Techniques for Early Childhood
- Introduction to the Early Childhood Profession
- Emerging Literacy in Young Children
- Early Childhood Curriculum

You may need to look at a college or agency catalog description for a specific course to see what topics it covers. These hours of training must be obtained from an organization or agency that has expertise in training early childhood teachers, including any of these:

- Four-year colleges and universities
- Two-year junior and community colleges
- Technical and vocational schools
- Resource and referral agencies

- Early childhood education or child care programs that provide training, such as family services, school districts, Head Start, or employer-sponsored in-service training
- Programs offered by the state or federal government or by branches of the U.S. military services

Please note that training obtained at conferences or from individual consultants is not accepted by the Council. A candidate may acquire the 120 clock hours of training from one single training program or from a combination of programs. Most CDAs receive their training through credit courses or continuing education units (CEUs). On its Web site (www.cdacouncil.org), the Council provides a National Directory of Early Childhood Preparation Institutions listed by state to which you can refer (Council for Professional Recognition 2006).

Is Financial Assistance Available to Help Pay for Your Training?

Some state and local organizations offer financial assistance for training, as well as for the CDA assessment fees. For example, some states participate in the Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) Early Childhood Project. This program, which originated in North Carolina, provides scholarships for course work in early childhood education so child care providers can work to increase their compensation. You can visit the Child Care Services Association Web site at www.childcareservices.org/ps/teach.html to learn more about the T.E.A.C.H. program and to see a listing of participating states. Be sure to inquire through your employer or local early childhood professional association for more information about financial assistance. You may also be able to find free or low-cost training through your local resource and referral agency (Council for Professional Recognition 2006).

Do You Have to Provide Some Kind of Proof That You Had This Training?

Each agency or organization providing the training must provide proof of your education by means of a letter, certificate, or transcript. Break down the 120 hours into the required subject areas on the Direct Assessment Application form. See appendix A on page 179 for a listing of the CDA subject areas, along with examples

of training or course topics that would be covered under each of them (Council for Professional Recognition 2006).

Are There Different Types of CDA Endorsements?

You may choose from several different CDA endorsements, each in a different setting:

- Center-based infant/toddler
- Center-based preschool
- Family child care
- Home visitor
- Bilingual
- Special education

This choice depends on your specific experience with young children in whichever of the categories you are currently working and where you can be observed functioning as a lead teacher. Although you may not currently hold a lead teacher position at your place of employment, during the advisor's observation, you will need to temporarily assume this role.

You may not choose a setting in which you hope or intend to work in the future. For example, if you are working with infants and toddlers in a center-based program, you may not apply for a Center-Based Preschool Credential because you plan to move into a classroom of older children in the near future. You must first acquire a Center-Based Infant/Toddler Credential because this is the setting in which you currently work and where you will be observed for your CDA. You may, at a later date, work toward a Second Setting Credential for Center-Based Preschool once you have accumulated 480 hours of experience with children in that age group (Council for Professional Recognition 2006).

What do these settings look like?

Center-based preschool setting This is a state-licensed child development center where a provider works with a group of at least eight children. All of the children in the group are ages three through five years. Also, the entire center-based program needs to have at least ten children enrolled with at least two caregivers working in the center with the children on a regular basis.

Center-based infant/toddler setting This is a licensed child development center where a provider works as a primary caregiver with a group of at least three children ages birth through thirty-six months. Also, the entire center-based program needs to have at



Center-based programs can include nursery schools, child care, Head Start, lab schools, child development programs, or parent cooperatives. They can be full-time or part-time operations and have structured or unstructured schedules. These programs can be in universities, in public schools, churches, or privately owned and operated. Programs that meet the CDA requirements for a center-based setting can be nonprofit or for-profit (Council for Professional Recognition 2006).

least ten children enrolled with at least two caregivers working in the center with the children on a regular basis.

Family child care setting This is a family child care home where a provider works with at least two children, ages five years old or younger. These children are not to be related to the candidate by either blood or marriage. This child care home must meet minimum state and/or local regulations, unless it is located where there is no regulation of family child care.

Home visitor setting This is a program of home visits to families with young children ages birth through five years. Its main focus is providing support and education to parents, helping them meet the needs of their growing children.

Bilingual setting This is a child development center with specific goals for supporting bilingual development in children. In this setting, two languages are consistently used and family involvement is encouraged to attain the program's bilingual goals.

Special education setting This is a child development setting that serves children with moderate to severe special needs. Setting criteria will be the same as for center-based preschool, center-based infant/toddler, or family child care, based on the children's ages and the type of program.

The CDA Process

There are six stages in the CDA process. The first two stages—*inquiry* and *documentation collection*—need to be completed before you send in your application to the Council.

I. Inquiry

During this stage, you check the eligibility requirements and make sure you meet them and that you can be observed in an eligible setting. This first stage is also when you decide in which of the settings the assessment will take place (center-based preschool, center-based infant/toddler, or family child care). This choice is based on the setting in which you can be observed in a lead teaching capacity. Remember that you need to choose the setting in which you have your experience and in which you are currently working, *not* a setting in which you plan to work in the future.

When the setting has been determined, you can send away for a packet of application materials. This can be done by contacting the Council for Professional Recognition at 800-424-4310



Contact the Council (800-424-4310, www.cdacouncil.org) for more information on home-visitor setting, bilingual setting, or special education setting.



In any of these settings, a candidate may either be employed or working as a volunteer.



or ordering online from its Web site at www.cdacouncil.org. The cost of the application packet as of 2008 is \$18, plus shipping and handling. This price is subject to change, so check with the Council prior to ordering. Tell them which packet you want (center-based preschool, center-based infant/toddler, or family child care). When you receive the application packet, it will contain the following materials:

- Two books outlining the Assessment System and the Competency Standards. (These books are different colors, depending on the specific setting. The book for family child care is blue, the center-based preschool book is green, and the center-based infant/toddler book is yellow.)
- A stack of Parent Opinion Questionnaires that you will distribute and have returned to you in sealed envelopes
- Direct Assessment Application form
- CDA Assessment Observation Instrument

As a CDA candidate, you will be assessed on the basis of the Council's national standards. They are the criteria used to evaluate a caregiver's performance with children and families. The Competency Standards are divided into six Competency Goals. Each is a general goal statement for caregiver behavior for any of the settings.

The six Competency Goals are then defined in greater detail by thirteen Functional Areas. These Functional Areas describe more specifically the functions a caregiver must perform to meet the criteria of each Competency Goal and will vary according to a candidate's particular child care setting and/or the age groupings of the children.

These are the six Competency Goals:

Competency Goal I: To establish and maintain a safe, healthy, learning environment.

Competency Goal II: To advance physical and intellectual competence.

Competency Goal III: To support social and emotional development and to provide positive guidance.

Competency Goal IV: To establish positive and productive relationships with families.

Competency Goal V: To ensure a well-run, purposeful program responsive to participant needs.

Competency Goal VI: To maintain a commitment to professionalism.

(Council for Professional Recognition 2006).

2. Collection of documentation

During this stage of the process, you begin to assemble your Professional Resource File, which includes a collection of resource materials, an autobiography, and written examples of your competence relating to each of the six CDA Competency Goals. You will also distribute and collect Parent Opinion Questionnaires to determine the parents' opinions of your work with young children (Council for Professional Recognition 2006).

Also during this second stage, you connect with an advisor. The advisor is the person who comes to observe you at work and who completes the CDA Assessment Observation Instrument.

Often, when a candidate obtains required training through an early childhood education program at a college, university, or training agency, an instructor will also serve as the CDA advisor. If, however, you are not in such a program, it will be up to you to locate a CDA advisor.

You may locate an advisor of your choosing who meets the required criteria, or the Council will provide, upon request, a listing of registered advisors in your particular state. The CDA advisor has to be qualified in these ways:

- Able to relate to people of various ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds
- Knowledgeable about national, state, and local requirements and standards for child care programs serving children from birth through five years old
- Familiar with the center where you will be observed (or if you are working in family child care, familiar with family child care) and the needs of the families and children in the community

Additional Requirements

There are additional requirements for the advisor, depending on which type of CDA you are earning. The advisor needs to meet the requirements listed in your *CDA Assessment System and Competency Standards* book in appendix C, Advisor Eligibility Requirements:

Center-Based Preschool

Option 1

- A bachelor of arts, bachelor of science, or advanced degree in early childhood education/child development or home economics/child development from an accredited college or university. The

degree must have included twelve semester hours covering the education of children from birth through five years old.

- Two years of experience in a child care setting, serving children from birth through five years old. One year of that time needs to have been spent working directly with children as a caregiver, teacher, child life worker, or social worker, or in a similar role.
- The prospective advisor also needs to have been responsible for the professional growth of another adult for one year.

Option 2

- An associate's or two-year degree in early childhood education/child development, home economics/child development from an accredited college or university. The degree must have included twelve semester hours covering the education of children from birth through five years old.
- Four years of experience in a child care setting in a program serving children from birth through five years old. Two years of that time needs to have been spent working directly with children as a caregiver, teacher, child life worker, or social worker, or in a similar role.
- The prospective advisor also needs to have been responsible for the professional growth of another adult for two years.

Option 3

- An active CDA Credential.
- Twelve semester hours of study in early childhood education or child development at an accredited college or university, covering children from birth through five years old.
- Six years of experience in a child care setting in a program serving children from birth through five years old. Four years of that time needs to have been spent working directly with children as a caregiver, teacher, child life worker, or social worker, or in a similar role.
- The prospective advisor also needs to have been responsible for the professional growth of another adult for two years.

Center-Based Infant/Toddler

Option 1

- A bachelor of arts, bachelor of science, or advanced degree in early childhood education/child development or in home economics/child development from an accredited college or university. The degree must have included twelve semester hours covering children from birth through five years old.
- Two years of experience in a child care setting serving children from birth through three years old. One year of that time needs to have been spent working directly with children as a caregiver, teacher, child life worker, or social worker, or in a similar role.

- One year of responsibility for the professional growth of another adult.

Option 2

- An associate's or two-year degree in early childhood education/child development or home economics/child development from an accredited college or university. The degree must have included twelve semester hours covering children from birth through five years old.
- Four years of experience in a child care setting serving children from birth through three years old. Two years of that time needs to have been spent working directly with children as a caregiver, teacher, child life worker, or social worker, or in a similar role.
- Two years of responsibility for the professional growth of another adult.

Option 3

- An active CDA Credential.
- Twelve semester hours of study in early childhood education or child development at an accredited college or university covering children from birth through five years old.
- Six years of experience in a child care setting in a program serving children from birth through three years old, including experience working directly with children as a caregiver, teacher, or child life worker, or in a similar role.
- Two years of responsibility for the professional growth of another adult.

Family Child Care

Option 1

- A bachelor of arts, bachelor of science, or advanced degree in early childhood education/child development or in home economics/child development from an accredited college or university. The degree must have included twelve semester hours covering children from birth through five years old, with two courses on infant/toddler development.
- Two years of experience in a child care setting serving children from birth through five years old. One year of that time needs to have been spent working directly with children in the same age range as the children in your home, as a caregiver, teacher, child life worker, or social worker, or in a similar role.
- The prospective advisor also needs to have been responsible for the professional growth of another adult for one year or have held a leadership position in a child care organization.

- Experience in a family child care setting as a provider, trainer, or parent.

Option 2

- An associate's or two-year degree in early childhood education/child development or home economics/child development from an accredited college or university. The degree must have included twelve semester hours covering children from birth through five years old, with two courses on infant/toddler development.
- Four years of experience in a child care setting in a program serving children from birth through five years old, including experience working directly with children in the same age range as the children in your home, as a caregiver, teacher, child life worker, or social worker, or in a similar role.
- The prospective advisor also needs to have been responsible for the professional growth of another adult or have held a leadership position in a child care organization.

Option 3

- An active CDA Credential.
 - Twelve semester hours of study in early childhood education or child development at an accredited college or university covering children from birth through five years old.
 - Six years of experience in a child care setting in a program serving children from birth through five years old, including experience working directly with children in the same age range as the children in your home, as a caregiver, teacher, child life worker, or social worker, or in a similar role.
 - The prospective advisor also needs to have been responsible for the professional growth of another adult or have held a leadership position in a child care organization.
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Keep in mind that your choice of an advisor could present a conflict of interest. For the advisor to conduct an objective and credible assessment observation, you need to choose someone who meets certain additional requirements:

- The advisor must not be working as a co-teacher with you on a daily basis with the same group of children.
- The advisor must not be a relative of a child in your care at any time during the assessment process.
- The advisor must not be related by blood or marriage or other legal relationship to you.

Having a good CDA advisor is important. If at all possible, locate an advisor who will agree to spend some time with you during the CDA process, rather than merely conducting the final assessment observation. Ideally, the advisor you choose will be your mentor. She will be there to answer your questions, look over your Professional Resource File, proofread your Competency Goal Statements and autobiography, give you valuable tips, help prepare your setting so it meets Council standards, and intercede for you, if necessary.

Your advisor is the person in your corner, your cheerleader throughout this process. She should take the job seriously and consider your success in getting a CDA Credential her responsibility and a direct reflection on herself. If you feel your advisor is anything less, look for another!

3. Application

If you work in a center, you, your advisor, and your center director will fill out the Direct Assessment Application form. This application form will be sent to the Council, along with documentation of the 120 hours of training, and the application fee, which is \$325 as of 2008. This fee may change so be sure to check in your application packet for any updates (Council for Professional Recognition 2006).

After you send in your application to the Council, three stages in the CDA process remain to be completed:

4. Verification visit by the Council representative

After the Council receives the completed application form and verifies your eligibility, it will assign a specially trained early childhood professional to meet with you. This Council representative will call to set up an appointment for a verification visit.

The meeting place can be decided between you and the Council representative. If you are in a center-based program, the verification visit can be, but does not have to be, conducted in your place of employment. A quiet place is preferable, such as a public library or somewhere on a college campus where a private room with a door and adult chairs and tables is available. If you are a family child care provider, the verification visit may not be conducted in your home or in any other private home.

During this meeting, the Council representative will give you a written, sixty-question, multiple-choice exam called the Early Childhood Studies Review. This test measures your knowledge of good practices in early childhood education. Your performance on



You will need to have your Professional Resource File completed before the Council representative's visit.



this exam is only one part of the documentation that the Council considers in its decision to award the CDA Credential. You will not receive your grade for this exam.

The Council representative will also give you an oral interview. During this interview, you should demonstrate your expertise in several early childhood situations. Additionally, the representative will check your Professional Resource File to see whether it is accurate and complete.

At the conclusion of the visit, the representative will collect several things from you:

- The CDA Assessment Observation Instrument booklet that your advisor completed, which must be in a sealed envelope
- The completed Parent Opinion Questionnaires, also in a sealed envelope
- Copies of your Competency Goals and Statements (the six essays)
- A copy of your autobiography

The documentation items must be prepared/collected/compiled *within six months* of submitting the application form. All of these items, along with your answer sheet from the Early Childhood Studies Review and the results of the oral interview, will be sent by the Council representative to the Council in Washington, DC, where they will be evaluated.

The Council schedules verification visits four times a year. Before preparing the documentation items as listed above, you should decide in which quarter you want to have a verification visit scheduled and then be sure to submit the application form by the deadline for that quarter.

Application Deadline	Time of Verification Visit
December 1	1st quarter January, February, March
March 1	2nd quarter April, May, June
June 1	3rd quarter July, August, September
September 1	4th quarter October, November, December

A possible alternative to the traditional verification visit is the online assessment option. Online assessment is not a replacement for the CDA process. You need to produce the same, required

documentation (Professional Resource File, Competency Goal Statements, and completed Parent Opinion Questionnaires) and will still be observed by a CDA advisor. The difference is the option of submitting a preliminary registration and application online and then completing the Early Childhood Studies Review exam and the oral interview online. The CDA advisor and your director (if you are in a center-based program) will be asked for online input, which can cause delays, depending on how prompt these persons are in responding to the e-mail prompts provided by the Council. Also, the required documentation (Professional Resource File, Competency Goal Statements, and Parent Opinion Questionnaires) will still need to be reviewed and evaluated by a Council representative. Therefore, the actual time savings offered by the online assessment option could be minimal.

There are additional considerations to think about before choosing the online assessment option. Completing the Early Childhood Studies Review exam online is fine if you work well alone. If not, you may benefit from having a Council representative there in person, in case you need some clarification. During the oral interview, if you are not responding correctly to a particular scenario, the Council representative can provide prompts to help you. You are on your own if this assessment is done online.

The online assessment has no application deadlines to meet and can give you more flexibility and control over the process, in some respects. The quarterly deadlines (see page 14) for the traditional method are actually beneficial to many candidates, helping them stay on task and motivated toward completion. This is important, since some of the candidate's documentation and the CDA Assessment Observation Instrument that the advisor completes expire after six months. Having a set time frame in which to complete the CDA process is a real plus for those who tend to procrastinate.

5. Credential award

A Council committee looks over the materials sent to them by the Council representative. Because quite a few components compose the CDA assessment—including the acquired training, Early Childhood Studies Review exam, assessment observation, oral interview, Professional Resource File, Competency Goal Statements, and other items—the committee's decision is not based on only one component but on all of these components taken as a whole. If everything meets with the Council's approval, the credential is awarded and is sent to the new CDA.

If the Council committee determines, for one reason or another, that you do not qualify for a credential, you will be notified and informed of appeal procedures and other options of what to do next. All information about CDA candidates is confidential. The Council will not release assessment information to anyone without your permission (Council for Professional Recognition 2006).

6. Credential renewal

A CDA Credential is valid for three years. After that, you may renew it for five-year periods. To do that you will need to order a renewal packet. This can be ordered from the Council for \$13, plus shipping and handling. This price may be subject to change, so please check with the Council prior to ordering. A CDA may renew her credential only for the original setting, age-level endorsement, and specialization (Council for Professional Recognition 2006).

The following chapters include step-by-step instructions for assembling your Professional Resource File and writing the Competency Goal Statements. You will learn how to prepare for the assessment observation by your CDA advisor and the verification visit with the CDA representative. You will find the help you need, specific to your particular age-level endorsement and setting, in chapter 3 for center-based preschool, chapter 4 for center-based infant/toddler, or chapter 5 for family child care.