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PARENTING RESOURCE

How to Choose Quality Child Care

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What are the hallmarks of quality child care? How do you select a good caregiver? ZERO TO THREE has established some basic principles—discussed below—which define quality care for infants and toddlers.



More and more infants and toddlers are spending time each day in some type of child care setting. All children—especially infants and toddlers—need a child care setting where they can thrive with caregivers who understand how to promote their healthy growth and development. Young children need a schedule that is responsive to their needs, including appropriate stimulation and time to rest. They need to be talked to and played with. They need love and attention. And they need the opportunity to form the kind of comfortable, secure relationship with a caregiver that will nurture their healthy emotional development.

A Good Caregiver...

Is Loving and Responsive



One who hugs, rocks, cuddles, seeks eye contact and enjoys the child...who responds to the baby's smiles and emerging skills and interests...who finds ways to expand upon children's play to help them learn new skills... who is sociable and interested in children. One who talks with the baby about what they do and see... a playful partner who introduces new ideas, objects and games...who supports children in building relationships with other children and adults.

Respects the baby's individuality

One who understands and nurtures babies' development...who recognizes the baby's personal rhythms, style, strengths, and limitations...and tunes into these when planning the pace and time for eating, sleeping and playing...one who is comfortable accommodating to children's special needs or conditions.

Provides a stimulating and child-friendly environment

An area that is clean and safe so babies can explore their surroundings...filled with interesting and stimulating things to explore...set up to promote learning through free play...changed regularly to accommodate the needs of growing infants and toddlers...organized to have distinct eating and diapering areas and set up to be comfortable and practical for adults, allowing them to focus on the children.

What to Look for in a Child Care Program

Because the way children are treated by caregiving adults shapes their development in important ways, it is crucial to find a child care professional who both understands and nurtures children's learning through the everyday moments they share. For example, does the caregiver talk to your baby during a diaper change, comfort or sing to her if she is protesting? Or is the diaper change conducted silently, with little attention paid to the child's experience? Responding to children, even when they are too young to understand the meaning of our words, lets them know that their feelings and experiences are important and respected.

If at all possible, before making your program choice, observe caregivers interacting with children during the day. Parents can learn a lot about a program simply by watching. Here are some specific criteria to look for and ask about when visiting a child care program:

- What training do staff members have in infant-toddler development?
- Do caregivers speak to the children, even babies? Do they sing and read to the children?
- Do they answer children's questions patiently? Do they ask children questions?
- Is each baby allowed to eat and sleep according to their own rhythms, and not based on a schedule imposed by the caregiver?
- For toddlers, is a daily schedule posted, using pictures and visuals, so that children can anticipate what will happen next?
- Are toys and materials well organized so that children can choose what interests them?
- Are caregivers able to accommodate the special needs of children?
- Does the environment accommodate the special needs of children?
- Do caregivers respect the language, culture, and values of families in the program?

- How does the caregiver feel about discipline? Weaning? Toilet training? Feeding? Do the caregiver's beliefs match your own?
- Does the caregiver handle conflicts without losing patience, shaming a child, or frequently displaying anger?
- Does the caregiver seem to enjoy children?
- Are you welcome to drop in at any time?
- Would your child feel good about coming here? Would you feel good about leaving your child here?
- Is the environment sanitary and safe?
- Is the setting appealing with comfortable lighting and an acceptable noise level?

Licensing Issues

Each state has different licensing requirements for programs and providers. Listed below are some initial questions to ask when selecting a child care program. For more information on licensure, you can visit Child Care Aware® of America.

- Is the child care program licensed by the state or local government?
- Is the child care program accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children or the National Association of Family Child Care?
- Are the caregivers certified by the Council for Early Childhood Professional Recognition with a Child Development Associates degree credential for infant-toddler caregivers?
- Do caregivers possess an equivalent credential that addresses comparable competencies (such as an associate's or bachelor's degree)?
- Is there a primary caregiver for my child?
- Are the ratios and group size appropriate for my child's age?

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