

Tips for Choosing an Early Care and Education Program



*Part of the HIP on Health Series
by Charlotte M. Hendricks
Illustrations by Nic Frising
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Locating an Early Care and Education (ECE) Program

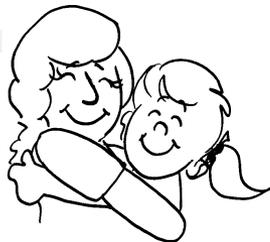
Many high quality programs have waiting lists, so begin your search early. Call the local experts --- your child care resource and referral (CCR&R) center. You can locate the CCR&R for your area by visiting www.ChildCareAware.org

CCR&Rs can give you facts about early care and education (ECE) programs and can provide a list of child care options in your area that may meet your needs.

Families can call the CCR&R and give the criteria that are important to them, such as licensing or accreditation, location, hours of operation, and ages of children accepted (infants through school age). The CCR&R can provide a computerized search for programs that meet these criteria. Many CCR&Rs also have internet referral options where families can fill out their criteria online, and then see a list of programs meeting these requirements.

You may also inquire about child care financial assistance programs available to qualifying families.

The following pages provide guidance for selecting a quality ECE program for your child. Websites with additional recommendations are listed on the last page.



For other checklists and resources, please visit additional websites such as these:

Healthy Kids, Healthy Care

<http://www.healthykids.us/>

National Resource Center for Health & Safety in Childcare
nrc.uchsc.edu/RESOURCES/ParentsGuide.pdf

American Academy of Pediatrics

www.healthychildcare.org/section_parentsFAQ.cfm

Child Care Aware

www.childcareaware.org

5 Steps to Choosing Quality Childcare

www.childcareaware.org/en/5steps

National Association for Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies
http://www.naccrra.org/parent/quality_indicators.php

13 indicators of quality childcare

aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/ccquality%2Dind02/

National Association for Family Childcare

www.nafcc.org/documents/NAFCCconsumer.pdf

National Network for Childcare

www.nncc.org/Choose.Quality.Care/ingredients.html

CHIPR Health and Safety Training

www.childhealthonline.org

HIP on Health Parent Information

www.childhealthonline.org

Healthy CHILDCare magazine

www.healthychild.net/

National Program for Playground Safety

www.uni.edu/playground/

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Follow-up

The work isn't over when you find good care for your child. You and your child's teacher are now partners. Regular sharing of information is important.

- Expect the teacher to greet you and your child each day. You should provide the teacher with necessary information, such as whether your child has eaten breakfast, or if the child will be picked up by a different person that day.
- Establish a routine for drop-off. The teacher should make your child feel welcome, and after good-bye kisses, immediately involve your child in an activity to make the daily transition easier.
- When you pick up your child, the teacher should be able to provide information about your child's day. With infants, this should include a written report (how much the infant ate, diaper changes, naptime).
- Children may have different teachers for morning and afternoon. Do teachers have a notebook or other system to share information and assure continuity of quality care?

Caring for children is rewarding, but it also is hard work. Here are some ways families can be involved and help the teacher provide the best possible care.

- Attend parent-teacher meetings and ask questions
- Offer to volunteer time when needed, like participating in clean-up days or repairing furniture or broken toys.
- Participate in field trips or class parties.
- Occasionally visit your child at child care. Offer to read a book aloud.



Quality Indicators

Your CCR&R representative cannot make recommendations about specific early care and education programs. However, you can ask questions about indicators of quality, such as licensing.

ECE programs can become licensed if they meet the minimum standards for healthy and safe care. Licensing requirements are specific for each state, and some states have different levels of licensing. Your CCR&R representative can inform you about licensing requirements and provide you with a list of ECE programs that are licensed.

Some ECE providers also choose to become accredited. This is a voluntary process in which programs show that they meet a higher standard of care and quality. National accreditation is determined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) or the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC).

Some states also have a quality rating program, but this varies from state to state. Your local CCR&R representative should be able to provide this information and identify programs with a quality rating.



First Impressions

You may need to visit several different ECE programs, either centers-based or family child care homes, before choosing the right one for your family. Call the program director and schedule an appointment

- Look around as you walk in.
- Are the entrances clean and free of clutter?
- Take a deep breath. Does it smell clean?
- Do you see laughing, caring, sharing, and generally happy children?
- What's your overall feeling about the program? Usually, your first instinct is the one to follow.

Ask to visit the nursery or classroom where your child would be placed. Be aware that the teacher may not have time to talk with you at this time; her primary responsibility is to care for the children. Observe teachers and caregivers as they interact with the children and with each other.



Family Involvement

Forming positive relationships between the teacher and the family, as well between the teacher and the child, is essential to providing quality care. A parent or family member must feel free to discuss any concerns with the teacher. Families want to know what happens in the day to day occurrences in the life of their child. And, parents want to know that their child is important to the teacher.

- Does the program have an "open door" policy so families are welcome to drop by and visit at any time?
- Are families encouraged to participate in program planning and events? Do you see other families visiting or involved with children?
- Will you be regularly informed of your child's progress and daycare experiences?
- Will you be immediately notified if your child becomes ill or injured or if a problem arises?
- Are program policies and procedures available to you in writing?



Program and Curriculum

- Do teachers read stories to the children? Is TV-time kept to a minimum, and then only for educational programs and with supervision?
- Does the program or curriculum reflect a sensitivity and respect for those from diverse ethnic and cultural groups?
- Are there daily opportunities for creative and free play? Are there plenty of play and educational materials?
- Is there a balance between quiet and active, large and small group activities? Are there daily opportunities for outdoor or very active play?
- Is there an organized program or daily schedule? Is there supervised rest time?
- Do the activities promote growth in different areas of development including, physical growth, social skills, emotional growth, verbal skills, cognitive ability and creativity?
- Are children allowed to play outdoors every day, weather permitting? Are children allowed to get dirty? Are all children actively involved in some type of play?



Caregivers and Teachers

- How many children are in the nursery or classroom? The smaller the group, the better.
- Is there a sufficient number of adults to meet the needs of all children in the classroom? Recommended ratios for adults to children are 1:3 for infants; 1:4 for young toddlers; and 1:5 for preschool age children. Ratios required for licensing may vary among states.
- Do teachers provide individual attention to each child? Do they quickly respond to children's needs, such as questions or crying?
- Do they treat children with respect, flexibility and patience? Are they warm and caring, meeting both developmental and emotional needs?
- Do they appear to be culturally sensitive and accepting of differences in ethnic backgrounds and customs?
- How is good behavior encouraged?
- If discipline and guidance are needed, do teachers use positive guidance and teach social skills (instead of criticizing or punishing)? Spanking and other forms of physical punishment should never be used in ECE programs.



Staff Qualifications

You may ask specific questions about the teacher qualifications, such as:

- Does the program director have a degree in a child-related field?
- What are the educational backgrounds of teachers (i.e., associate or bachelor degree)?
- Do teachers participate in additional training activities, classes, or workshops throughout the year?
- Do teachers have experience working with children of different ages? How long have they been at the center? If choosing a home provider, how long has she been providing care in her home?
- Children form attachments and need consistency. Is there a low turn-over in staffing?
- Have all teachers gone through a background check?



Meal Time and Snack Time

Many ECE programs provide meals and snacks for children; however, some programs require that the family provide the food.

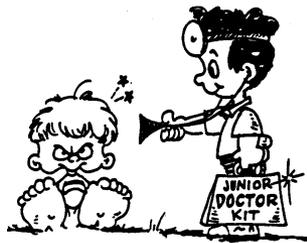
- If the ECE program provides the food, it is nutritious? Is it prepared in a way to appeal to children?
- If families provide the food, are children allowed to share foods? Is it assured that every child has food, even if the family occasionally forgets to send the meal or snack?
- Are foods handled in a sanitary manner? Are hot foods kept hot, and cold foods kept cold, both during preparation and storage?
- Are teachers aware of potential choking hazards with food? Do they take measures to prevent choking (i.e., cutting food into small pieces)?
- Are all teachers aware of food allergies that each child may have? What measures are taken to prevent food allergic reactions? For example, do they provide a “peanut-free environment” if a child has a severe peanut allergy?
- Do children and adults wash hands before and after meals?
- Are infants always held for bottle feeding? (Bottles should never be propped.)
- Are children encouraged, but not forced, to eat during meals and snack times?



Safety Measures

Child safety must be a priority. You expect that the teacher will supervise each child, but children are curious and very fast! It seems that if you turn your back for just a second, a child can get into something. Therefore, it is essential that the ECE environment be free of potential hazards.

- Are pathways clear and uncluttered? Are exits clearly marked?
- Are doors free of pinch points? If windows can be opened, are there measures to prevent children from falling out?
- Is furniture sturdy and in good repair? Are shelves securely bolted to the wall?
- Are art supplies and other materials non-toxic?
- Are toys age-appropriate and in good condition?
- Are potentially toxic substances (cleaning supplies, medications) out of reach in locked cabinets? Are adults' purses or backpacks (which may contain dangerous items) inaccessible to children?
- Are toilets appropriately sized for children? Can children easily and safely access hand washing sinks? Is the hot tap water temperature 120 degrees F or lower?
- Look for water hazards, such as buckets of water, wading pools, or swimming pools. What measures are taken to prevent access?
- Are children protected from over exposure to the sun and weather (too hot or too cold)?



Facility

During your visit, request a tour of the entire facility and look for the following:

- Are the entrances and hallways clean and uncluttered?
- Are classrooms airy, well-lit, and attractive?
- Do nurseries have safe individual cribs for infants?
- Are diapering areas clean and located in areas separate from play areas?
- Are classrooms furnished with child-sized furniture for toddlers and preschoolers?
- Are toys and materials plentiful, age appropriate, and in good repair?

Visit the outside play area.

- Is there an enclosed (fenced) area large enough for children to play freely?
- Are there trees or other shade structures?
- Is the playground equipment safe and age appropriate? Is there soft surfacing under and around equipment?
- Are teachers actively involved in children's play, instead of sitting on a bench?



Security and Emergency Measures

When you arrive at the ECE program for the first time, you should expect the teacher to greet you politely, and then to ask who you are and why you are there. Security of the children is essential.

- Do they maintain accurate records of who is allowed to drop-off or pick-up each child?
- Do teachers require photo identification before releasing children to an unfamiliar person?
- How do they know if someone enters the building?
- Do they regularly update emergency contact information for each child, including home, work, and cell phone numbers?
- Do they have, and are teachers familiar with, an emergency plan if a child is injured, sick, or lost?

Find out their policy and procedures for emergency situations.

- Do they practice emergency procedures for specific events, such as fire, tornado, earthquake, emergency evacuation, or other disaster?
- Do they have a plan and supplies, and can they continue to provide care for children if parents are unable to pick them up (i.e., roads closed due to weather, evacuation to a safe shelter, etc.)



Health, Sanitation, and Disease Prevention

Children are exposed to germs every day, and everywhere. Door knobs, grocery cart handles, and other children all have germs. However, there are many ways to prevent spread of germs in the ECE environment.

- Do teachers and children wash their hands several times throughout the day?
- Are soap, running water, and disposable towels or air dryer easily accessible?
- Are toileting and diapering facilities cleaned and sanitized regularly?
- Are all enrolled children up-to-date on required immunizations?
- What are the policy and procedure regarding attendance of ill children? What is the policy regarding teachers and illness?
- What are the policy and procedure regarding administration of medication to children?
- Are allergies and other special health considerations well known by all caregivers, including new and/or part time people?
- Do they clean and sanitize furniture, toys, and other surfaces daily? Are mouthed toys and items sanitized after each child's use?
- Are cleaning materials available for use, but safely out of children's reach?
- Do children have individual cots or cribs?

