

## Before and After Care: What Matters Most

By Heather L. Grocott

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In today's society, children of all ages spend much of their time in school, child care settings, or before and after care programs. Although some parents can work from home and others are able to stay at home with their children, more and more families seek outside care for their children during the work week. It is a question that haunts the average American family during the last days of summer: where will my child be before and after school?

The before and after school care "industry" is one that I was never familiar with myself until I began working in such programs. As a child I went to school on a bus, and came home from school on a bus with at least one parent home awaiting my arrival. Today's school busses more often start and end their days in the parking lots of before and after school programs and the number of bus stops throughout local neighborhoods has dwindled.

As parents, we want to see that our children are always nurtured, cared for, educated, and enjoying life. We hold high expectations for whoever comes into contact with our children. And, quite frankly, we *should* hold these expectations. But how do we ensure our expectations are met when it comes to before and after school care?

It is important for all parents seeking before and after school programs to know more than the cost of the program and what the facility "looks like" on a tour. We first notice the cleanliness of the building, the appearance of the furnishings, and the personality of the staff. But it is what lies beneath the surface that we must carefully evaluate and truly take into great consideration. What do we really **look for** in choosing the best program for our children?

As someone who works in this field, I feel that it is important to share with families what their child will actually experience on a daily basis within their before and/or after school care program. When the child walks in the door, what happens? Is there a routine? Is there a sign-in system? Is there an option to have a snack? Is there an option for children to work on homework, with qualified teachers to help them? First and foremost, it is imperative for children to have options.

High quality before and after care programs acknowledge how children develop and realize that it is important for children to have options and make appropriate choices for their own well-being. This is particularly important in a “care” setting, as the child is not actually in school. Age appropriate, safe, and interesting options must be available to children in such settings. Children shouldn’t be **required** to participate in activities, but should be able to choose from 3 or 4 different options.

Next, what type of activities are taking place within the environment? Is everyone sitting at a table, or are there a variety of choices such as areas (indoors and out) for physical movement, quiet relaxation, and creativity? It is great for programs to offer different games and art supplies, but what else is available for children? Will your child be able to have a quiet space for homework? An area to play sports? An area to explore their creativity and individual interests?

As you visit different programs notice an area for parent communication. If you pick your child up at closing, how do you learn about your child’s day at the program? Is there an updated newsletter that goes home each week? Can you learn information from a website or through social networking? Does the program send information home to families via e-mail? It is also nice for a program to host events within the center as well as participate in events throughout the community.

During your visit, remember that program directors and administrators will highlight all of the excellent aspects of their program. Notice whether or not they speak to your child (if he or she is visiting with you), and if they ask your child to participate in an activity. Do not hesitate to ask questions, and notice how they are answered. Is your question really answered, or are you given information to redirect your thinking? When you leave the facility, do you drive home with a complete vision of what your child will experience within the program, or a vague explanation?

There are many before and after school care options available to parents; the key to evaluating them is to dig deeper and ask the teachers a LOT of questions. If you find a quality program it will not only provide a safe place for your child to go after school but also help to further develop his/her academic and social skills. Parents, make sure to do your homework!

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