

CHOOSING THE RIGHT CHILD CARE PROVIDER FOR YOUR FAMILY

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When you decide it is time for your child to attend an early learning center, the process of selecting the right one can be incredibly difficult and sometimes stressful. Many parents struggle with choices such as whom to trust, what type of care environment is best, where the care-giver should be located (near work or near home?), how much they can afford to spend, and how many days per week their child should attend. The answers to these questions are not always easy ones to determine but armed with some guidance for where to begin, what to look for, and which questions you should ask will make the process much easier and stress free! As both a care-giver AND a parent with a child in a child care center, I have been on both sides of the process and I hope this advice helps make the process fun and easy for you!

Where to Start

First, decide what type of early learning environment is best for your child. Consider these questions before you do your research:

- Do you want a relative or neighbor to take care of your child?
- Do you prefer home-based or center-based child care?
- For what hours and days do you need child care?
- Where would the most convenient location be?

Next, do your homework. The Internet is a wonderful resource and a great place to begin your research on early learning centers. You can find out a lot about a facility by visiting their website. Use the web to narrow your search by selecting programs and facilities that match your geographic needs, offer age appropriate programs for your child, and implement curricula or teaching philosophies you agree with. Once you determine the short list of 3 -5 centers you want to consider you should definitely make sure to visit each of them in person.

Third, go touring. The web is a great preview but visiting is essential to understanding the true environment and feel of a program in order to determine if it's the right fit for your child. When you go on a tour you want to have a list of questions with you to make sure you fully assess the environment and to help you compare and contrast if you visit several providers. Whenever possible, try to take your child with you as you tour. This will give you a chance to see how your child interacts and responds to the care-giver(s) and setting.

Key Questions to Ask and What to Look For:

Classrooms

- Is there a variety of learning materials that will interest your child as well as challenge them as they develop through their milestones?
- Are the materials that are available accessible by the children in the classroom?
- Are the children encouraged to work alone and in small groups?
- Are the learning centers or play areas well defined?
- Is the classroom welcoming and warm?
- Do the children seem engaged, happy and interested in what they are doing?

Programs & Policies

- What programs are offered?
- Does the center follow a specific curriculum? Is it written and can you see it in action?
- Does the center have an open door policy? i.e. can you just drop in at anytime to see how your child is doing?
- Does the program provide a daily schedule that provides a consistent routine for the children? Does the daily schedule allow for adequate outdoor and gross motor/exercise time? What would a typical day be like for my child?
- What are your policies regarding discipline? Naps? Mealtimes? Medications? Illness? Changing schedules? Vacations?
- Are parent references available upon request?
- What are your rates?

Staff

- Are the care givers First Aid/CPR certified?
- What qualifications and/or educational achievements do they have?
- How often is staff training provided?
- What are the center's ratios and do they follow or exceed the state ratios?
- Do the teachers interact with the children in a caring and respectful way?

Health and Safety

- Is the center licensed?
- What precautions are in place to ensure safety on the playground?
- Does the facility have an established emergency plan?
- Is the center clean, neat and organized?
- Do you feel comfortable with the center, Director, and teachers?

During your visit you should be provided with information that you can take home with you. This information should all be explained to you before you leave and you should be given ample opportunities to ask questions. You may want to ask for references from current or former parents too. Don't forget to ask about how involved you can be as parent, or if you can volunteer in classrooms to read stories or help in other ways. Being part of your child's education is a key element to their success so ensure this is an option if this is something you are interested in doing.

These questions may seem like a lot, however, if you are completely comfortable with the questions you asked, the choice you have made, and all of your questions have been answered, chances are that your child will be just as comfortable and will make an easy transition into a child care setting. The key is to be prepared, have questions ready, and to ask as many questions as possible. If you leave a tour feeling good about the facility, the programs, and most importantly, the staff, then you know you have made the right choice! Good luck and have fun!