

# Parent Pages

---

## Choosing a Child Care Center

Being part of a child care center can be a wonderful experience for both you and your child. Research shows that attending a high quality child care center can benefit a child's social, language, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development. Choosing a child care center is exciting, but can also be confusing. With care costing so much, you should expect to get the best quality care for the cost. When considering a specific child care center, be sure to arrange to have a tour of the center. During this tour, do not hesitate to ask questions about the center and their practices. Below are some specific things that you can look for in a child care center and some specific questions you can ask to get this information.

- Caregivers and teachers should be **trained or educated in early childhood education or development** and should be provided with **adequate compensation**.
  - *What educational background and training do the teachers have?*
  - *Do they regularly attend in-service trainings or workshops to enhance their skills?*
  - *Are teachers paid a living wage?*
- The child care center should follow **state licensing compliance** standards at a minimum. Registration and **accreditation with the National Association for the Education of Young Children** can signal compliance with a higher standard of care.
  - *Is the center licensed?*
  - *Is the center accredited by the NAEYC?*
- Staff **turnover should be minimal**. It should be expected that in a twelve month period the child remains with at least one of the same caregivers she began with. Do not hesitate to ask the child care center administration about turnover and expect a concrete answer. Lower turnover (the number of teachers who have left in a year divided by the total number of teachers) is better. A turnover rate of 50% or more is extremely high. A center with a lot of younger teachers, or those who are close to retirement, may experience higher turnover.
  - *What is the average annual teacher turnover rate for the past several years?*
- Similarly, your children will fare the best if they are able to interact with a **consistent set of caregivers throughout the day**. In most child care centers, two teachers work in a classroom at any given time. It is important, then, to find out how the center handles teacher breaks or absences. The more teachers who are assigned to a specific classroom, the more likely it is your child will interact with the same set of teachers throughout the day.
  - *What process does the center have to cover teacher absences or breaks?*
  - *How many teachers are assigned to a given classroom?*

- *How often are teachers or children moved into unfamiliar classrooms?*
- Smaller **teacher-child ratios** (how many teachers per children in the classroom) and appropriate **group sizes** (how many total children in the classroom) should be maintained in order to ensure that each child gets the individual attention he needs and that the classroom is not too chaotic and noisy. The recommended ratios and group sizes are:
  - Children aged 0-12 months: 1 teacher for every 3 children with a total of up to 6 children in a classroom
  - Children aged 12-30 months: 1 teacher for every 4 children, with a total of 8 up to children in a classroom
  - Children aged 31-36 months: 1 teacher for every 5 children, with a total of up to 10 children in a classroom
  - Children who are 3 years old: 1 teacher for every 7 children, with a total of up to 14 children in a classroom
  - Children who are 4-5 years old: 1 teacher for every 8 children, with a total of up to 16 children in a classroom
- A **clean, fun and safe environment** where children can be easily supervised, but still have the freedom to explore is important. Make sure to look for activity areas which incorporate various interests and encourage creative learning, such as areas for building blocks, arts and crafts, music, dress up, and books. Space for physical activities, either indoor or outdoor, is important as well.
  - *Does the center have a gym for indoor play and a space for outdoor play? If not, what arrangements are made to allow for physical play and how often do they occur?*
  - *Do the classrooms look safe, interesting and fun for children? Are there a variety of activities and toys available?*
- The child care teachers should be **warm and friendly**. The teachers should be care about the child and the parents. Ask to visit some classrooms and stay long enough to observe how the teachers act around the children, and with you.
  - *Do the teachers interact with children in a warm and loving way?*
  - *How do teachers communicate with parents about their children's daily activities? How often do parents meet with teachers? Are parents welcome in the classroom?*

Touring a center and asking questions such as these should give you a good sense of the quality of care that the center provides. While no center may be able to meet all of these standards, knowing what the key indicators of quality care are, and choosing a center that meets the criteria that are most important to you and your child will help you choose a center that can benefit your family for the long-term. The most important factor is your own personal feeling about the center and whether it meets your child's individual needs. While choosing a child care center can be daunting, it is an exciting process as well. Your child's experience in care can be enriching and lay the foundation for a lifetime of wonderful experiences, not only for the child but for your entire family.

Prepared by Maria Korjenevitch and Rachel Dunifon  
Department of Policy Analysis and Management  
at Cornell University.

Visit the *Parenting in Context* website at  
<http://www.parenting.cit.cornell.edu>

© 2010 Cornell Cooperative Extension



**Cornell University**  
**College of Human Ecology**

Cornell University offers equal program  
and employment opportunities.