



CHOOSING AN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

Introduction

The pre-school years are a time of rapid growth and development for your child. There will be new idea to explore, skills to master, and many new people to meet. A good early childhood program should nurture your child's development on all levels.

There are many different kinds or early childhood programs. Day care centers offer a full day of car, nursery schools and Head Start centers offer part-day programs. Some places involve parents in major decision-making. Others expect only minimal involvement.

As a parent, you are the best judge of which specific program is the most appropriate for your child. We hope the guidelines in this booklet will help you to make an informal choice.

KNOW YOUR OPTIONS

The first step in finding a quality early childhood program is to explore what options are available. Your child care resource and referral agency can provide you with listings of all the licensed nursery schools and centers in your area.*

The counselors can help you sort through some of the basic criteria involved in your choice:

- ❖ What hours of care each program offers
- ❖ What age groups they accept
- ❖ What fees are involved
- ❖ Whether the program is licensed

After you have gathered this preliminary information, it is important for you to consider your personal priorities. Thinking about your expectations and your child's needs will help you to ask specific questions when you begin to contact local centers. For instance:

- ❖ Do you have strong feelings about a particular educational philosophy?
- ❖ Do you, as a parent, want to be involved in the decision-making process of the program?
- ❖ Is it important that the center be in your immediate neighborhood?

You may eliminate some programs by asking questions over the phone. However, it is essential to visit any centers you might consider.

* See enclosed listings.

PLAN YOUR VISIT (S)

You will need to make an appointment if you wish to observe at a center. In order to get an accurate picture of the program, you need to plan on spending a few hours there. It may be time-consuming for a week or two, but it will be time well spent if your child care arrangements go smoothly later on.

Your visit should include time to:

- Observe in the classroom your child would attend
- Tour the entire facility
- Talk in depth with the director

Ask if you can speak with the director after you have had an opportunity to observe in the classroom. This will give you a context in which to ask specific questions about the program and teachers.

THE VISIT

Observe in the Classroom Your Child Would Attend

As you enter the room, what are your immediate impressions? Pay attention to your senses. What your eyes see, what your ears hear, what you feel about that room is probably very similar to what your child would experience.

Notice the mood of the room. Is there a happy hum of activity? Whose voices do you hear most clearly? What is being said?

Scan the room with your eyes. Do you see a variety of colors and textures? Is the room light and well-ventilated? Do you see children's work displayed on the walls? Is the furniture—tables, chairs, shelves—the appropriate size for young children?

As you settle back into your role as observer, try to be as inconspicuous as possible, so you can judge classroom life as it usually unfolds. Since you will only have a limited time to observe, it is important to know what to look for.

Look at Materials/Room Arrangements

The set-up of the room will tell you a great deal about the program and the teachers. Young children learn through their interactions with materials and people. When early childhood professionals refer to the “reading and math readiness activities” which go on in pre-school, they are referring to this interactive process.

The actual quality of the materials will vary greatly from center to center. It is not necessary for equipment to be new and shiny. Some of the best early childhood materials are made by teachers and children.

What matters most is:

- The variety of materials available
- Their **accessibility** to children
- The **teacher's role** in encouraging their use

A well-organized pre-school classroom should include:

Arts Activities

(paint, crayons, glue, paper, scissors, etc.)

Young children get great pleasure from creating their own works of art. They also develop skills by using these materials. Painting, drawing, gluing and cutting help children to develop the fine motor coordination later needed for writing. Recognizing colors, contrasts and shapes, lays the foundation for recognizing letters and words (reading readiness).

Block Area

(wooden blocks, cardboard blocks, cars, trucks, etc.)

Young children delight in constructing buildings, towers, cities—whole words of play. As they do so, they learn important facts about how things fit together, and gain skills and insights necessary to their later work in .

Manipulative Toys

(Puzzles, Legos, Tinker toys, etc.)

These materials challenge children to sort, match and fit things together. In doing so, they learn how to organize several parts into something whole (math and reading readiness).

Non-structured Materials

(Sand, water, play dough, clay)

Young children need to experiment with materials they can mold and change. As they sift, pour, squeeze and poke, they make discoveries about the physical properties of these materials (math and science and readiness).

Dress-up Area

(grown-up clothes, hats, household items, stuffed animals, dolls, etc.)

Pre-schoolers need the opportunity to try on various roles, explore their fantasies, create their own dramas. In doing so, they play out conflicts, experiment with relationship, seek resolutions (dramatic play).

Book Area(s)

(picture books and a comfortable place to sit)

Young children need time to explore the world of books-by themselves as well as with teachers. Through such exploration, they learn about people, places and ideas, which exist outside of their immediate environment (reading readiness).

Space for Movement/Music

Small bodies need to stretch, move and dance. These activities help them to learn rhythm, balance and the possibilities of their own bodies. Children enjoy listening to music and creating their own.

These materials offer a great deal of potential for learning and growth. However, it is the teachers who will set the tone for how materials are used.

TEACHER/CHILD INTERACTION

Look at the Teacher's Role With Materials

Young children learn best in an environment where they get encouragement and support. It is essential that their teachers encourage their curiosity, and support their efforts to learn new skills. As you watch the children engaging in activities, pay close attention to the role of the teachers.

Do the teachers:

- Give children a choice about what activities to pursue?
- Assist them in getting the materials they need?
- Encourage children to explore the materials in their own way, at their own pace?
- Acknowledge and support the differing abilities and skills of each child?
- Present ideas and concepts in a way that is understandable to young children?

Do they:

- Give boys and girls the same opportunities for participation in activities?
- React enthusiastically to children's discoveries and accomplishments?
- Encourage children to do their own problem-solving?
- Offer appropriate guidance when asked?
- Participate in activities with the children??

Look at the Teacher's Role in Group Management

Pre-school children need assistance in learning to balance their individual needs with the needs of the group. In order to do this, they must have teachers who are skilled in nurturing this process. A good teacher can do this in a variety of ways, by:

- Having realistic expectations of young children
- Setting limits that are consistent and appropriate
- Treating children's bodies with respect
- Valuing the individuality of each child
- Planning structured and non-in structured activities.

It is only when a child feels cherished as an individual, that she/he can comfortably conform to the needs of the group.

Observe Key Interactions

The average pre-school day includes many interactions in which the teacher's group management skills play an important role. During your visit, you are likely to observe some of the following:

Arrival/Departure

Coming and going from the program confronts young children with issues of separation.

Notice if teachers:

- Are available to give a warm greeting to arriving children.
- Support children and parents in saying goodbye to each other and/or to the center.
- Help children to find a place within a group.

Snacks/Meals

Eating times should be pleasant and give children an opportunity for social interaction.

Notice if:

- Children are involved in setting up, serving, and cleaning up.
- Teachers sit among the children.
- Social conversation is encouraged.

Group Time

Meetings, stories, "show and tell" provide an opportunity for children to be together as a group.

Notice:

- Whether the teachers encourage everyone's participation.
- How the respond to children who find it hard to be in the group.

- Whether the stories, games and songs that are presented seem to be enjoyed by the children.

Disputes/Aggressiveness

Teachers must often act as arbiters when young children have disagreements. While it is important that the adults set limits on hurtful behavior, it is also important that children not be treated harshly or humiliated.

Notice if teachers:

- Intervene when necessary.
- Listen to the children's explanation of the incident.
- Help the aggressor as well as the victim to work out the dispute.

Consoling/Comforting

Early childhood is a time when hurt feelings and hurt knees occur frequently. It is important that children receive prompt and gentle comfort when needed.

Notice if teachers:

- Respond quickly to a child who is hurt or unhappy.
- Provide physical comfort when needed.
- Listen sympathetically to child's feelings.

Taking Care of Bodily Needs

Group life usually means that eating, drinking, toileting and resting are done at specified times. However, it is often difficult for young children to conform to these schedules.

Notice if teachers:

- Allow children to go to the toilet whenever they need to.
- Assist children in dressing and undressing if necessary.
- Handle toileting accidents in a calm and supportive way.

Rest Time

It is unlikely that you will be observing at rest time, so it is important that you ask about these routines.

Find out:

- How long children are expected to rest or nap.
- What happens if a child cannot sleep.
- Whether children may have stuffed animals, blankets, etc. for comfort at rest time.

GETTING THE FULL PICTURE

Check on the License

Each state has its own specific regulations regarding the licensing of early childhood programs. While a license does not guarantee that a program is of the highest quality it should at least mean that minimum standards are being met. If a program is licensed, the license should be prominently displayed. If you do not see it, make sure to ask if program is licensed. If it isn't, find out why.

Licensing deals with such issues as:

Staff/child ratios-the number of children per adult in the room.

Maximum group size.

The training and educational qualifications of the teaching staff and the director.

Space and ventilation.

Safety of the physical plant-fire inspection, sanitation, and other health requirements.

Tour the Entire Facility

Take a look at all the classrooms, offices, the kitchen, and any outdoor spaces used by the program. Check on the cleanliness of bathroom and kitchen facilities.

Talk in Depth with the Director

It is important that you feel comfortable with the director, because she/he has overall responsibility for the program.

You will probably have specific questions to ask based on your classroom observations. Use this opportunity to find out anything about the program and philosophy that is still not clear to you. Do not hesitate to ask any question that is on your mind.

In order to make a good decision, you need the fullest possible picture of what your child's daily routine would be like.

* See enclosed licensing information.

Find Out:

- Whether the teacher you observed will be your child's teacher.
- The maximum number of children in each group.
- The staff/child ratio for each group.
- Where and how often the children play outdoors.
- The center's policy about illness.
- The center's calendar for the year.

It is also very important to ask what kind of input you would have in matters affecting your child.

Find Out:

If there are parent meetings and parent/teacher conferences.

If parents have input in planning the program.

If you are welcome to spend time in the classroom whenever you can.

Find out what fees you are expected to pay, and when they are due. Payment policies differ from center to center. You may be asked to pay each week, each month, by semester, or in some other incremental amounts. Fees vary greatly from center to center. If the program receives a subsidy or has a scholarship fund, it may offer a sliding scale of fees related to family income. Since payroll is the greatest expense in an early childhood program, variations in fees often reflect variations in teacher salary levels and staffing patterns.

MAKING A DECISION

The single most important factor to consider is how you felt about the teaching staff. The facilities and materials of the program are far less important than the quality of care your child will receive. You do not have to do objective in your assessment. You are the best judge of what your own child needs. **TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS!**

As you add up all the information you have gathered, what is the sum of the parts? No center is perfect in all ways, but it is essential to choose a place where you feel your child will be respected and cherished.

HELPING YOUR CHILD GET STARTED

Early childhood programs have different policies about how to handle the adjustment period. Some ask parents to stay with the child for the first day, others ask parents to be available for several days. Regardless of the program's general policy, it is important for you to consider the needs of your particular child. Make sure to talk with the teacher about how you want to handle your child's adjustment to the center.

Some general guidelines are:

- Talk with your child about the kinds of activities she/he will be doing at the center.
- Plan on spending some time at the program with your child. If you cannot make yourself available, ask another trusted adult grandmother, babysitter or friend to stay with your child.

When you and the teacher agree that your child is ready to stay on her/his own:

- Make sure the center knows where you can be reached.
- Tell your child and the teacher exactly when you will return. Since young children cannot tell time, it is helpful to give your child a concrete guideline, such as "after your snack," "when you come back from the park," etc.
- Say goodbye directly to your child—never sneak out while your child is involved in play.

PARENT/TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

It is essential for you and your child's teacher to develop a relationship of mutual respect and open communication. Caring for young children is very demanding for both parents and teachers. Each needs the support of the other. There are several ways in which you can contribute to making the relationship a good one.

- Stick to the agreements you make about arrival and pick-up times.
- Allow a few minutes in your schedule to settle your child into the program each morning—and to help your child separate from the center at the day's end.
- Attend parent meetings.
- Keep the teacher informed about your child's ups and downs and any events in your family which might affect his/her behavior.
- Schedule periodic conferences with the teacher.
- If you have a concern, bring it up with the teacher promptly and specifically.
- Ask if you can contribute anything to the classroom. There are few things that cannot be put to use in an early childhood program.
- Offer to help out in the room if have a free morning or afternoon.