



How to Choose the Best Preschool or Day Care For Your Child

One of a series of Parent Guides from

**THE
PARENT
INSTITUTE®**

Parent Guide

How to Choose the Best **Preschool or Day Care** For Your Child

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Introduction

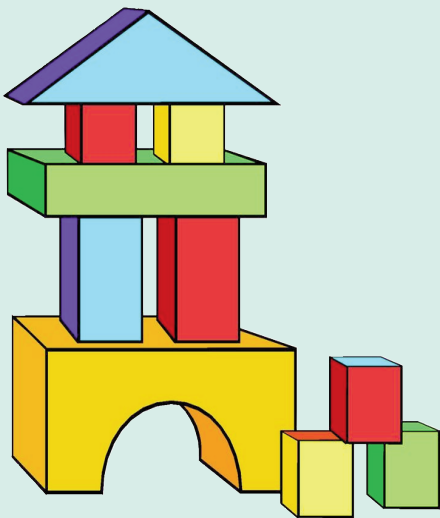
Placing your precious child in the daytime care of another person or school is certainly one of the most important choices you'll ever make. Whether you are looking for full time day care for an infant, or a twice-weekly morning preschool class for a three-year-old, you want care of the highest possible quality. Above all, you will want to know your child is safe, but you will also want him* to be happy, nurtured and educated in a way appropriate for his age and development.

After decades of research, experts now know it is hard to overstate the importance of giving children quality educational experiences long before they ever start formal schooling. In the first five years of a child's life children's brains are developing the internal organization and connections that lay the foundation for all future education. Choosing the right day care or preschool environment can significantly enhance what you are doing at home to help your child learn and pave the way for a lifetime of learning.

It's a tall order to make the right choice.

Fortunately, today you have many options for good care. Placing a child in a quality situation is critically important because those responsible for taking care of your child are helping to shape the experiences that allow the brain to develop. Research shows that the way adults interact with a child in the early years has a big impact on the child's emotional and intellectual development, the way the child learns, his learning abilities and how he will function as an adult. Choosing a good preschool or day care center requires care and research, but you can be confident that you will find a place where your child can thrive.

Most other parents you know will be making a similar decision at some point in the life of their infant, toddler or preschooler. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, a research arm of the U.S. Department of Education, more than eight out of 10 five-year-olds (84 percent) receive care from a person other than a parent. Even many of the youngest infants receive care from a person other than a parent. More than four out of 10 infants (45 percent) are receiving such care before they reach their first birthdays.



This Parent Guide will help you sort through the variety of day care and preschool options for children five years of age and younger and help you determine the best situation for your child. In these pages, you will find:

- Summaries of different types of care or preschools.
- How to find quality care or preschools.
- How to check the quality of day care centers or preschools.
- Suggestions on what to look for, depending on your child's age and the type of care or preschool you are considering.

Remember, you are the best judge of the right situation for your child!

**Each child is unique, so this publication alternates using masculine and feminine pronouns.*

Why enroll your child in day care or preschool?

Many parents enroll their children in preschool or day care because they work outside the home or they want to give their children an advantage in education. But there are many other benefits to day care or preschool as well. This is why even families with a stay-at-home parent or guardian often choose to enroll their children in programs outside the home, typically once the child reaches two to three years of age.

Benefits of day care or preschool include:

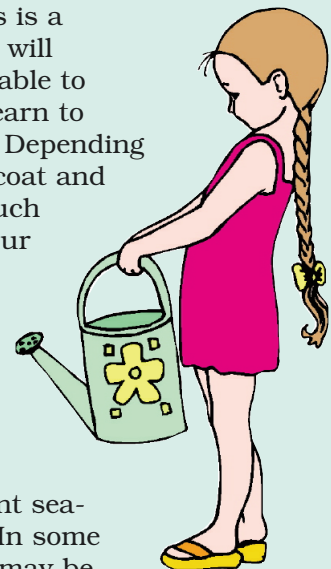
Definitions:

- **Day Care** - A program providing care and supervision for children from birth to school age during set hours and days of the week.
- **Preschool** - A program with specific goals and methods designed to enhance the educational development of children from three to five years old.

- **Bonding with other adults.** Your child's most important relationship with an adult is her relationship with you. But knowing she can also rely on other adults who love her and care for her, such as her day care provider or preschool teacher, increases her feelings of security, self-esteem and overall happiness.
- **Interacting with other children.** In all the years ahead, your child will likely be part of a classroom and will need to learn to work cooperatively with others. At day care or preschool, your child can lay the foundations for these future interactions. Each time she shares a toy

or waits as another child goes ahead of her in line for the slide or hugs a classmate who has a "boo-boo," she practices key social skills. As your child grows older, friends will become increasingly significant in her life. While it's not necessary to be the most popular kid in class, having a few friends to rely on will help your child to feel happy and successful in school and in life. As she gets older, she will continue to use these skills to make friends.

- **Becoming more self-reliant.** A good day care or preschool class is a community and everyone must pitch in. The teacher or provider will always be responsible for "classroom management" and be available to help. But there are many things your child will be expected to learn to do on her own to fulfill her part in helping the day go smoothly. Depending on her age, these may include picking up toys, hanging up her coat and backpack, passing out napkins for snack, or watering plants. Such responsibilities benefit everyone in the class, but they benefit your child most of all. Accomplishing tasks teaches her that she is a capable person and fosters feelings of self-worth.
- **Expanding your child's world.** While it is not necessary to introduce academics at the preschool level, your child's day care or preschool experience will certainly offer her many learning opportunities. Your child may visit new places such as a bakery on a field trip, talk about the weather and days of the week with her group, do art projects related to the different seasons, or be introduced to drama by acting out nursery rhymes. In some (but by no means all) day care or preschool settings, your child may be introduced to early academics, such as learning letters or numbers.



What type of day care or preschool setting would be best for your child?

To choose the best day care or preschool for your child, consider your family situation, your finances, your child's temperament and your goals and expectations for your child. You may have other individual considerations as well. Here is a listing of day care options most frequently chosen by parents, and an explanation of how they typically operate. You will probably find that at least one of them will work well for your child.

- **Commercial day care or preschool.** A commercial day care center or preschool typically offers a large facility with several different rooms and an outdoor play area. These centers are run by a director who often has specific training or experience in early childhood education. The director's staff may include certified teachers and assistants, trained day care workers, or a combination of these.

Some Advantages

- Many take children as young as six weeks old.
- They usually open quite early and close late.
- They usually have a wide variety of toys, crafts and activities to offer your child.

**Some Disadvantages**

- Center tuition can be expensive.
- Because of the large number of children, your child may not always receive as much individual attention as you would like.

- **Family day care homes.** Family day care homes are typically run by those who have chosen to, or who need to, be employed in their own homes. A family day care provider usually takes in up to five or six children of varying ages. These children may be in addition to the provider's own young children.

Some Advantages

- Offers a cozy atmosphere.
- It will provide an opportunity to form a strong bond to one special adult.
- Flexibility—you may find family day care providers much more willing to accommodate your schedule than the staff of a center can be. (Center staff are often required by company policy to charge parents extra if they are 15 minutes late, for example.)

**Some Disadvantages**

- They may not be licensed.
- The provider may have taken on more children than she can handle.
- You may have serious differences with the provider about discipline and other parenting issues.

- **In-home care.** Parents who choose care in their own homes often do so for one of two reasons:
 1. They have the financial resources to hire a qualified nanny.
 2. They have relatives, such as their own parents, who have agreed to care for the child during the day.

Some Advantages

- Will ease scheduling and increase the individual attention your child receives.
- You won't have to wake your child from a deep sleep so that he can make it to day care and you can make it to work.
- You won't have to panic if you get stuck in traffic at the end of the day because the day care center closes in five minutes and you're still half an hour away. All the while, your child is in his most familiar and comfortable setting—his home.

Some Disadvantages

- Your child may not learn as much about social interaction.
- Finding a qualified nanny can be difficult.
- Such nannies are in short supply and expensive.



Choosing care by a relative also has special concerns. Both you and the provider must take great pains to ensure that neither party feels taken advantage of by the other. If either of you does, hard feelings can result or important family relationships can be damaged.

- **Public day care or preschool.** Sometimes, families can be eligible to enroll their children in public programs that are funded by the government or the public school system. Head Start is an example of such a program. Typically, children with special needs, or those who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, are the primary candidates for public programs.

Some Advantages

- They are free to families who qualify.
- They are run by well organized, publicly accountable agencies.



Some Disadvantages

- Very specific criteria, such as a certain family income level, must be met before the child can be admitted. You may be disappointed if you feel a program is right for your child but your family or child does not meet the criteria.
- Because of eligibility restrictions there may not be as diverse a group of students with which your child can learn to interact.

- **Academically-oriented preschools.** These programs are typically chosen by parents whose children are at least three years of age and ready to begin a more structured learning program. An example of a preschool environment that offers (but does not insist on) early academics to children would be a Montessori preschool, modeled on the philosophies of the late Italian physician Maria Montessori. It is not uncommon for five-year-old graduates of Montessori and other similar child-interest, child-paced schools to be fluent readers and to be doing mathematics and other academic work several years above their grade level.

Some Advantages

- They often accelerate children's learning.
- They encourage children to be independent and self-reliant workers.



Some Disadvantages

- They are often more expensive.
- They may do less cooperative learning than other programs.
- They often require a five-day-a-week time commitment that may be too much for some children.
- Research shows that learning academics early does not mean that children will be ahead of their peers forever. By third grade, most other children will have "caught up" to those who began academics in preschool.

- **Developmental preschools.** These programs are for three- to five-year-old children. They typically meet in the morning hours only, anywhere from two to five days a week. They are often sponsored by religious organizations. The emphasis at these preschools is on social, emotional and physical development. Children may pick up academics indirectly, but they will not be formally taught at a developmental preschool. All learning is accomplished through play, art, music and movement.

Some Advantages

- Graduates usually emerge with strong social skills and many of the experiences they will need to succeed in kindergarten.
- The typically shorter hours each day suit some children better than a full day program.



Some Disadvantages

- The short operating hours of such preschools usually do not provide the day care coverage needed by most parents who work outside the home.
- They may not meet the needs of parents who believe their children are ready for academic work.
- Emphasis on groups can overshadow the individual attention kids need and crave.

How do I start my search for a quality day care or preschool?

Here are some good ways to search for quality day care or a preschool:

- Ask your friends and neighbors for their recommendations. They may have children currently enrolled or children who have just recently passed those years.
- Ask your pediatrician to direct you to appropriate facilities.
- Ask the principal at your local elementary school for recommendations.
- Your state or local government office of social services may be able to provide you with a list of care providers or preschools, or refer you to the appropriate agency responsible for regulating day care. The names of such offices will vary by state or region. You can start by calling the main government number of your state capital and asking them to refer you to the day care division of your state government.
- Explore the Internet. Often, going to the main Web site of a local or state government will lead you to links to the government's various agencies, including the day care agency.
- Contact the National Association for the Education of Young Children. This nonprofit group has as its mission to ensure that someday all young children will receive only the highest-quality care. To contact the NAEYC, go to www.naeyc.org.

Should I be concerned about whether a care provider or preschool is licensed or accredited?

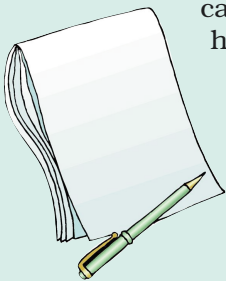
A licensed center or school has met state and/or local regulations for safety, cleanliness and other concerns. An accredited center or preschool has also met other standards of quality such as adequate facilities, qualified staff and an approved curriculum.

How can I narrow my search?

Once you have prepared a list of possible opportunities for your child, it is time to call each provider to ask some preliminary questions and to set up a time for an interview with those that appear promising.

Preliminary phone calls will save you time by eliminating those that do not have openings or do not seem to meet your needs. By setting up an interview time in advance, you can be assured that the director, or other staff member who meets with you, has adequate time to show you the facility and answer all your questions.

Even though you have set up your initial interview in advance, it is most important that the care provider you choose has a policy that allows parents to drop in, unannounced, at any time. And you should do that both before making a final decision and also at intervals once you have placed your child in a day care center or preschool. This helps you get a more accurate idea of what is happening during the time your child is away from you.



Day Care/Preschool Interview Form

Center or Preschool: _____

Name of staff member interviewed: _____

Title of staff member: _____

Address & Phone: _____

Email: _____

Website: _____

General:

- How long has the center or preschool been in operation? _____
- How many children does it serve? _____
- Is space available for my child? If not is there a waiting list and how does it work?

- What are the days and hours of operation? _____
- How flexible are drop-off and pickup times? _____
- Are there late pickup fees? _____
- What is the cost of care, when are bills sent and payment expected?

- Is financial aid available? _____
- What days are the center closed for holidays and other times?

- What are the policies on when and where children eat, drink, have diapers changed or use the bathroom? _____
- What general rules and regulations does the center have? _____
- Is the preschool or center currently licensed, accredited, and, if so, by which agencies or authorities? _____

Program:

- What is the educational philosophy? _____
- What curriculum is used with children during the day? _____
- What are the learning goals for children of various ages? _____
- What teaching methods are used? _____
- How are children grouped during the day? _____
- What would a typical day would be like for my child? _____
- Do children watch television during the day and, if so, what do they watch and for how long?

Safety:

- How does the center or preschool make sure all children are safe?

- Is there a sign-in/sign-out sheet? _____
- How are visitors monitored? _____
- What is the plan in the event of an emergency? _____
- How are children comforted when they need it? _____
- How often is the children's area, including the toys they play with, cleaned?

- How often do children play outside, where, and under what supervision?

- What are the policies on washing hands after diapering, after using the bathroom and before/after meals and snacks? _____

Staff:

- What training and experience does the staff have? _____
- What is the pay range for staff? _____
- Do staff receive benefits? _____
- How are potential staff members interviewed and screened? _____
- Typically how long does a staff member stay at the center or preschool?

- What is the child/caregiver ratio? _____
- How is discipline carried out? _____

Parents & Family:

- What are the policies on parents visiting the center or preschool, and are unannounced visit encouraged? _____
- What are parents expected to provide—such as birth certificate, doctor's information, immunization records, emergency contact information, food, snacks, a change of clothing, or other supplies? _____
- What else does the school or center expect from parents & families?

General comments and observations:

Did I make the right choice?

Remember, your own “feeling” about the preschool or center is important, too. Do the children look happy? Are they engaged in activities they seem to find interesting and fun? Does the teacher or provider seem to enjoy the company of the children?

Perhaps the best qualification for a day care center or preschool is that you feel completely comfortable leaving your child there. Everything may check out perfectly, but if you feel uneasy, it is best to keep looking.



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Family & Home Set

10 Great Ways to Teach Children Responsibility
25 Ways You Can Put the Power of Routines to Work for You and Your Child
52 Great Ways Families Can Spend Time Together

School Readiness—Set 1

Developmental Milestones for Preschool Children—Is My Child on Track?
Preparing Your Child for Reading Success—Birth to Age Five
How to Choose the Best Preschool or Day Care for Your Child

School Readiness—Set 2

Common Discipline Problems of Preschoolers and How to Deal With Them
37 Experiences Every Child Should Have Before Starting School
Getting Your Child Ready for Kindergarten

School Success—Set 1

The Road to Reading Success—Elementary School Years
Common Discipline Problems of Elementary School Children and How to Solve Them
31 Alternatives to Screen Time for Your Elementary School Child

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Give Your Child the Edge: Teachers' Top 10 Learning Secrets Parents Can Use
How to Help Children Do Their Best on Tests
Helping Children Get Organized for Homework and Schoolwork

School Success—Set 3

Help Your Child Develop Good Learning Styles
How to Instill the Character Traits of Success in Your Child
Seven Proven Ways to Motivate Children to Do Better in School

When There is a Problem—Set 1

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Help Your Child Deal With Peer Pressure
How to Help Your Struggling Student

Other Important Titles

Common Discipline Problems of Teenagers and How to Solve Them
What to Do If Your Child Has ADD/ADHD
Common Discipline Problems of Middle School Children and How to Solve Them
Making a Smooth Transition to Middle School

*For more information about these and other materials for
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