

Children's Services Council of St. Lucie County

Choosing Quality Child Care

Begin by visiting several early care and learning programs. On each visit, think about your first impression and:

1. Look

- Does the place look safe for your child?
- Do the caregivers/teachers enjoy talking and playing with children?
- Do they talk with each child at the child's eye level?
- Are there plenty of toys and learning materials within the child's reach?

2. Listen

- What does the child care setting sound like?
- Do the children sound happy and involved?
- What about the teacher's voices? Do they seem cheerful and patient?
- A place that's too quiet may mean not enough activity.
- A place that's too noisy may mean there is a lack of control.

3. Count

Count the number of children in the group, then count the number of staff members caring for them. Obviously, the fewer the number of children to each adult, the more attention your child will receive. A small number of children per adult is most important for babies and younger children.

4. Ask

It's very important that the adults who care for your children have the knowledge and experience to give them quality care. Ask about the background and experience of all staff, including the program director, caregivers, teachers and any other adults who will have contact with your child in the home or center.

5. Be Informed

Find out about efforts in your community to improve the quality of child care. Is your caregiver/provider involved in the activities to improve quality?

6. Choose

Consider your options: child care centers, family child care homes, Head Start, Pre-Kindergarten Early Intervention, school-age programs and Summer Camps.

7. Call

Before making a final decision on a program, call to find out if that center has had any violations and, if so, what they are.

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Child Care Checklist

Basics

- License is displayed.
- Required staffing ratios are met.
- Written policies are available (including discipline policy).
- Group size is small enough to allow individual attention.
- The hours meet my needs.

Physical Facility

- The room is bright, cheerful and clean.
- Enough space is provided for activities.
- Children get things themselves.
- There are enough toys, paints, books, etc. for all children.
- Equipment (chairs, tables, sinks, toilets) is all child size and in good condition.

Staff

- Caregivers have worked here for a year or more.
- Caregivers appear to enjoy what they do.
- Positive discipline techniques are used.
- Children are treated as individuals.
- Caregivers comfort the children when needed.

Parental Involvement

- Parents may make surprise visits (open-door policy).
- Lines of communication between parents and staff are open.
- Parent participation is encouraged.
- Parents are notified if accidents occur.

Program

- Daily schedule is posted.
- Quiet and active play are balanced.
- Activities are age-appropriate and address the children's needs (physical, emotional, social and developmental).
- A variety of music is played during the day.
- The children have opportunities to be read to during each day.
- Rest/nap policy is reasonable.

Health and Safety

- Emergency contacts are kept on file.
- Staff members have CPR/First Aid training.
- Staff observes safe hygiene (wash hands before and after diapering each child and wiping faces).
- Staff members change gloves after each diaper change.
- Diaper changing pads are non-absorbent.
- Infants/toddlers are able to explore the environment safely.

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Training/Credentials

- ❑ Staff members have participated in more than the required minimum training.
- ❑ Lead teachers have a college degree in early childhood education or CDA Credential.
- ❑ Family child care providers have NAFDC (National Association for Family Child Care) or CDA.

General Impression

- ❑ Children seem happy here.
- ❑ I would feel comfortable leaving my child here.
- ❑ I would be happy here as a child.
- ❑ There is a calm and nurturing environment at this facility.

How To Recognize Quality Child Care

So you have decided on a short list of potential child care providers for your child and have made appointments to visit them. What do you do next? How do you know which provider seems to be the best fit for you and your child and feel confident about the quality of the program? Here are some questions you should keep in mind as you evaluate each provider. It's best to take notes during each visit and then look back over them before deciding which provider should take care of your child.

When you walk into a quality program, you should see a warm, home-like setting. It should be a responsive environment set up to allow the child to independently explore, discover and play. It should also enable the staff to focus on prime times, those moments of one-to-one learning that lie at the heart of healthy development. You don't want to see someone rushing through diapering or wake-up, or hurriedly consoling a child in distress to get back to teaching or managing the children. That would indicate upside down priorities.

Quality happens when the environment is planned to support all the care and learning that should take place. The setting should be furnished, equipped and organized so that your child knows he is the number one priority and he feels like this is a special place just for him.

- What is the adult to child ratio?
- Is the provider licensed? Do they have any additional credentials?
- What is the education and experience of the director, teachers and support staff?
- Does the provider take advantage of educational and developmental opportunities?
- Does the provider have many long-term employees or is there a high turnover?
- Is the environment clean, cheerful and interesting, yet not over-stimulating? Does it give you a homelike feeling or is it very formal?
- Are there separate areas for diapering, sleeping, resting and exploring?
- Is there ample support available for parents from the staff and what form of communication takes place between caregivers and parents?

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- Does the program offer a phase-in period of adjustment upon enrollment? If so, what is the period of time?
- When parents want to talk with caregivers, is the provider receptive to phone calls or will an answering machine typically pick up the call?
- Are caregivers patient with parents who find it difficult to separate?
- Will mothers wanting to breastfeed be encouraged and welcomed?
- How many different people will be directly involved with the child throughout the day?
- Do caregivers seem to enjoy being with the children? Do they hold, rock, cuddle, talk and sing to the children while you are visiting?
- Have all the people who will be at the home or center had a police background screening for criminal activity?

This article is provided by Child Care Resource Network.