

# Children's Services Council of St. Lucie County

## Choosing the Best Program For Your Child

Let's face it, choosing the right program for your children is not an easy task. You want it to be an environment that provides your children with the best possible foundation for success throughout their education. In our community, you will find many philosophies, facilities and styles of teaching. The following information should help you choose the program that can best meet your family's needs.

Many early learning settings have a very structured program and routine. These programs follow their schedules closely. An example of their daily schedule would be story time, craft time, free play and outdoor play. Other programs focus more on free play and have very little organized activity. Still other programs strive to have children in charge of their own learning. Activities are based on the teaching of daily life skills through the use of tools and such things as food preparation. Many pre-kindergarten programs focus on children's early literacy and math skills.

Although there are many types of programs, what matters most is what goes on inside the classroom. Look for programs that set up an environment in which children learn through play while having fun. Quality settings provide the opportunity for children to play with other children and be a part of a group. It gives them the chance to explore and do new things independently of their parents. They can use their minds to learn about shapes and colors and the world around them. They can learn to cut and paste and build with blocks, and when they are ready, they will begin to recognize numbers and letters.

It is important to keep in mind that choosing the right program for your children means choosing the one that best meets their needs. This does not necessarily mean choosing the same program that was best for siblings, neighbors or close friends. References from relatives and friends can be valuable, but remember to keep each child's personality and individual characteristics in mind.

As a parent, think of the areas in which your children need to grow, and how a program might help them in ways in which you are unable. Start by calling the program to set up an appointment to visit. You may take some programs off your list based on their response when you call. If possible, make your first visit without the company of your children. Later, when you have narrowed your list, make another appointment for a visit and take your children along to observe their reactions and interactions.

When you visit, spend an entire class time there to get a true feel for the program. The teachers should be excited about their job and offer guidance to the children. They should be alert and tuned into the children to prevent most problems before they occur. Classroom rules should be in place, and when children forget, the teacher should gently remind them of the boundaries.

Outdoor playtime is just as important as what goes on inside the classroom. Children need plenty of time to run around, jump, climb, swing, hop and throw. The classroom and playground should be clean, safe and free of litter. Toys should not be broken.

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Activities should be age-appropriate. Using worksheets and assigning homework for preschoolers are not appropriate teaching methods. Arts and crafts materials should be available to the children so they can explore and create their own art. Art projects should be open-ended and not teacher perfected. Classroom and group sizes are also very important. Your children may be overwhelmed in a large group. Notice the temperature, the lighting and the noise level.

When selecting a program for your children, you should be comfortable with the philosophy, the teacher and the director. Place yourself in the position of your children and ask yourself this question, "Would I be happy here?" Keep in mind that the most important thing a program can do for children is to make them feel good about themselves.

Once you have made your decision, remember that your children may need some time to adjust. It often takes two to three weeks or longer. Your children will be able to sense any uncertainty you may be having, so it is important to feel confident with your decision. Also, remember to reevaluate the program regularly. Your children's needs may change and there may also be changes in the staff that can influence what is best for your children.

Choosing the right program for your children will be one of the most rewarding experiences you and your children will ever have. When you take the time to choose carefully, your children will be happy and so will you.

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