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What to Look For

It is very important for parents to visit potential child care programs before making a decision about child care. Programs vary widely in quality, environment and how they address children's developmental needs. You should see the program for yourself and meet the person(s) who will be caring for your child before you choose care.

There are many factors involved in choosing the right child care situation – and much of it is subjective. After all, one family's dream situation is another family's biggest challenge.

Some factors, though, are objective; they are the characteristics that make a safe, stimulating and nurturing environment for your child. Although some of the following factors apply mainly to child care center programs other can be adapted to any child care situation.

Characteristics of a quality child care program:

The Classroom or Play-space:

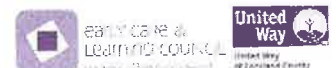
Set up so that children can explore freely and safely. The room has the following features:

- Toys, art materials, cubbies, books, etc., are all within the reach of little hands.
- Furniture (and ideally bathrooms) are child-sized.
- The room has adequate space where children can spread out and play on the floor.
- There are cozy corners for snuggling, reading, listening to music, etc.
- The classroom is inclusive of children with any special needs.

Teachers/Providers:

- Are attentive to children, carefully supervising them and quickly responding to the needs in a positive, loving way.
- Set limits about behavior that they convey clearly to the children.
- Encourage children to talk to each other – both to solidify friendships and work out disagreements.
- Are prepared to step in, if necessary, so that aggressive behavior does not escalate.
- Help the children get the most out of their play experiences by asking questions about what they are doing, offering encouragement, and redirecting children as needed.

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- Have training in child development and update their training periodically.
- Always show a respectful attitude towards the children, parents and each other.

Child/Provider Relationship:

The children remain with a primary caregiver for a long time so that a strong child/teacher relationship is developed. The provider gets to know each child's learning style, needs, and cues, and is able to respond to each child in a satisfying way. Providers are affectionate with children, offering hugs, pats and encouraging words as needed.

Activities:

Just right for the ages of the children: challenging enough to allow children the opportunity to master something they first find difficult, but not so challenging that children are continually frustrated. Toys and learning areas (e.g., the block corner) are designed to encourage children to try out different kinds of activities. In addition to focusing on learning areas, activities sometimes relate to themes such as the seasons, holidays, health, family, feelings, etc. Circle time is age appropriate: toddlers participate with songs, finger plays, etc.

Child Development:

Providers understand different ages and stages and handle children accordingly (e.g., teachers create environments where they can direct children to positive activities and minimize conflict). In addition, teachers encourage children frequently and offer opportunities to develop confidence and independence (e.g., toddlers work on dressing and feeding themselves; older children get help writing their names).

Safety:

Look around to make sure that precautions are being taken:

- Outlets are covered.
- Wires or cords are out of reach.
- Bookshelves and other furniture are secured to walls and floors.
- Cleaning products are out of reach and locked.
- Furniture is child-friendly (no sharp edges, rough surfaces or pointy corners).
- If there is a pool outside, it is protected by a sturdy fence with a locked gate.
- Does the provider (or anyone else in the home) smoke?
- Are there pets in the home or classroom? Are they kept apart from the children?

- Are smoke detectors located throughout the home, including children's sleep and play areas, and the kitchen and garage? Are there fire extinguishers located in several locations (but out of the children's reach)? Is there a fire evacuation plan?
- Is positive identification required for all adults who pick up children? What is the identification policy?

Cleanliness:

Surfaces and toys are frequently washed and disinfected, frequent hand washing is required and there are clear procedures for safe diapering and diaper disposal.

Health:

Do the teachers and the director hold current CPR and first aid training certificates? What is the provider's sick care policy? Is it clear which illnesses and symptoms require you to keep your child home and when you will be notified to pick up your sick child?

Schedule:

Teachers plan so that there is time for free play, group play, individual play, structured activities, outdoor time and quiet time. Time periods are appropriate to the age of the child: not too long that children become restless and bored – and not too short that they get interrupted in a chosen activity. Teachers leave adequate time for transition between activities so that children do not feel rushed and give warnings before changing activities.

Accreditation:

To find out whether a program is accredited, parents can check:
The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), for child care centers.
The National AfterSchool Association (NAA), for school age care programs.
National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC), for home-based programs.

Reading:

Teachers read to the children, both individually and in groups, pausing to ask questions along the way like, "What do you think happens now?" They encourage children to discuss the story afterwards and relate it to events in their own lives. Books are sturdy, age-appropriate, free of stereotypes and expose children to new ideas and situations.

Parental Communication:

Teachers communicate freely and often with parents, both at drop-off and pickup, in conversations and in notes and with occasional conferences. Parents feel free to visit the classroom or volunteer in the classroom. Parents feel they are partners with the provider – working together for their child's healthy growth and development.

Outdoor Space:

Outdoor play equipment is safe and age appropriate. Smaller children are separated from bigger children (who may be unintentionally rough or intimidating). The area is fenced-in with child safety locks on gates.

Continuity of Care:

Children stay with their groups as they advance from one level to another (e.g., toddler to preschooler). Children are introduced to new teachers and classrooms slowly to give them a chance to adapt comfortably.