The Top Ten Things to Consider

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The Top Ten Things to Consider When Choosing a Child Care Center

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Parents lead pretty hectic lives these days. They are expected to do so much: juggle multiple jobs, cart kids to and from school and child care, maintain a social life, and keep up with children's soccer schedules (if you have older children). They are expected to pack their children healthy lunches, take their turn driving in the neighborhood carpool, have family dinner on the table by 6, limit screen time, drink eight glasses of water per day, make sure the laundry is done so everyone can find clean socks in the morning, exercise daily, and get enough sleep….blah, blah, blah!

Parents are expected to do it all, know everything about everything, and always, ALWAYS make the best choices for their children.

For many new parents, the thought of choosing the right child care or pre-school for their child can be one of the most stressful decisions they face. Worry about finding the best environment with loving caregivers can cause them to lose sleep. **We've all heard the horror stories. No parent wants to be guilty of learning that the child care program they spent so much time choosing for their child is on the news for some sort of horrifying incident.**

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All parents want their child in the best learning environment, but **how do they know which is best?** The problem is that with so many things clamoring for their attention, most parents have no idea what to look for in a child care program. They look at the location and the rates, and make a decision based on those two factors alone. **This is such a huge mistake.**

Parents should pay close attention to the QUALITY of any child care center they are considering. While they will want to find a center that is close to home or work, location and convenience should not be more important than the quality of the environment and caregivers. **A high quality child care program provides a safe and nurturing place for children to play and grow through activities that help children develop physical, social emotional, and intellectual skills.**

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More and more, research tells us that our children's healthy development depends on safe and positive experiences during the first few years of life. If you are a parent who works or attends school or training during these early years, **choosing quality child care is one of the most important decisions you will ever make for your child.**

According to research from the American Academy of Pediatrics, children who attend high-quality programs demonstrate better skills in math, language, and cognition; are better at developing interpersonal relationships; and have better behavioral self-regulation than children who attend lower quality programs. **So it's not enough to be average. The research says in order for children to be successful, they need to be in programs with exceptional standards and staff.**

It is important for parents to personally visit and tour any potential child care center to make sure that they are enrolling in a quality program that meshes well with their family's lifestyle and philosophies.

This guide gives parents 10 things to consider when looking for a quality early childhood program. We've provided several questions to ask in each category. Of course, you don't have to ask ALL the questions we've suggested, but these might serve as a prompt for you to ask the things that are most important to you.

1 Reputation & Qualifications

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It is important to know that you are choosing a reputable school without excessive safety violations. Some of these questions can be answered with a simple online search. Find their website, read about the program's history and philosophies. Also look up any state inspection reports. The best schools will have been in business for several years and have references or positive reviews online. An accreditation such as one from "NAC" is a reliable sign of a high-quality center. Quality programs will know and follow state mandated teacher to child ratios to keep children safe and give them the best care. The smaller the ratio, the more one-on-one care for your child. If you feel overwhelmed by the number of children in the center, your child probably will too, so move on. If everything seems to check out, set up a tour.

Questions to Consider

How long has the center been in business?

What are the teacher/student ratios in the various age groups?

Is the center licensed and/or accredited?

How many children does the facility serve/licensed capacity?

Do you have space for my child/is there a waiting list (how long is it)?

2 Safety & Security

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Assess the overall safety of the center. Make some observations during your visit and ask lots of questions. If you notice any glaring safety concerns, chances are it's been that way for a while, and there are lots more hidden problems. Ask about safe sleep practices for infants, emergency policies, and about how teachers transition from the playground to another classroom. All of these things will help you to assess the level of safety and security this program upholds.

Questions to Consider

Are indoor and outdoor play areas childproofed and safe?

Do equipment and toys seem to be in good repair? (Indoor and outdoor)

Are children ever left unattended?

Are doors secure so strangers can't just walk in?

What is your release policy? Who may pick up my child?

Do you have emergency plans in place for fires, earth quakes, intruders, tornados and other emergencies?

How do teachers account for all children when transitioning from the playground to the classroom?

3 Staffing

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Caregiving staff should be friendly and warm and have some level of education or training. Better schools will require all caregivers and teachers to meet minimum educational qualifications, such as teachers should have a minimum of a two-year degree in child development or related field. Ongoing training in early childhood development should be regularly provided for all staff, and CPR & first aid certifications should be kept up to date. Also, a center with good staff benefits is less likely to have high staff turnover rates, which means your child's caregivers will be more consistent.

Questions to Consider

Are your caregivers trained in first aid/CPR?

How do you screen staff? Do you conduct background checks on all your employees?

What are the staff's credentials and training?

What type of child development training do you require, if any?

How many full-time caregivers do you have? Part-time?

Which teachers/staff will be interacting with my child on a daily basis? Can I meet them?

Do staff members get breaks during the day?

Do you offer your staff any benefits (health insurance/ holiday vacation time?)

4 Education & Activities

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Even though your child's day may look like a really long play date to the untrained eye, it truly is much more than that. Children are learning and doing the hard work of building brain connections through interacting with their environments and peers. A good child care center will have a well thought out daily schedule with a variety of activities. When staff spend time carefully planning activities and preparing the environment, your child will be set up for a the best possible outcome, and develop a love for lifelong learning. Television and other forms of screen time should be extremely limited (or eliminated) from the daily plan. Children's basic daily needs, such as napping, potty training and snack times should be built into the schedule, as well as plenty of time for outdoor play.

Questions to Consider

What will the group size be of my child's class?

Are your toys and activities age appropriate?

What will my child's activities be on any given day?

Can I see the planned daily schedule?

What role does technology play in the classroom?

Any extra classes like dance, music, martial arts, language, etc?

What is the nap schedule? Where do children sleep?

What are expectations around potty training and diapers?

What opportunities are available for indoor/outdoor play?

Do you go on outings/field trips/neighborhood walks?

5 Discipline Philosophies

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Teachers in an early childhood program should be well educated and experienced in positive discipline techniques and classroom management styles. Teachers should be modeling the type of language and phrases to help children work out their differences with their peers. During your visit, you should notice calm tones and see teachers and caregivers getting on the children's level when talking to them. The use of time-outs should be kept to a minimum. Be sure to learn more about the center's philosophies and discipline techniques while visiting the center. They may even have some tips and tricks to share with you that you can try at home.

Questions to Consider

How do you discipline children?

How do you comfort children?

How do you handle teasing, bullying and inappropriate group behavior among the children?

6 Fees, Payments and Other Policies

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A good child care center will follow the rules and regulations set forth by their licensing and/or accrediting agencies. Centers are happy to do this to ensure the safety of the children and the quality of the program. Just like the child care center follows rules, they will also have firm policies in place that they expect parents to follow. Some of the typical policies centers have include daily operating hours, pick up and drop off times, payment policies, and when children are too sick to attend. A good center will enforce these policies in order to maintain the quality of the environment for the staff and the children. Be sure you understand what these policies are, so you don't ask your center to open early for you, waive late payment fees or accept a child to sick to attend. Just remember firm policies are in place for the betterment of the center as a whole.

Questions to Consider

What are the fees/tuition?

Do your offer scholarships or sibling discounts?

Are there fees for late pick-ups/ late payments?

When is payment due, and how do you bill us? When and how should we make our payments?

Do I pay when my child is absent due to illness or vacation?

What are your hours? (does this fit into my work schedule?)

What are the drop off and pick up policies, and is there a formal late pick up policy? How flexible are you with pick up/ drop off times?

Are there any days/weeks that the child care center is closed? (Holidays, vacations, breaks)

7 Health & Wellness

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All child care centers and preschools will have some sort of health and wellness policies. It is very important that you understand them to avoid misunderstandings in the future. You should know when it is ok for your child to return to daycare after an illness. Most centers will want your child to be at least 24 hours symptom free (some more) before returning to care. This is to protect the health and well-being of the other children enrolled. While it may be inconvenient to miss another day, remember that they ask other children to stay out when they are sick to protect YOUR child. Ask about tuition and payment expectations during times of illness, so you have a clear understanding right from the start.

Questions to Consider

Must all children be immunized in order to enroll?

What will happen if my child becomes sick while in care?

How will I be notified if there is a contagious illness going around the center?

What measures do you take to prevent the spread of illness in the center?

What is your policy about administering Medicine?

How often to caregivers wash their hands?

8 Parent Communication

The better the relationship you have with your child's teachers and center staff, the better your experience will be. Knowing how the center will be communicating important information to you is critical for a stress-free relationship. Does the center use a high-tech parent communication app to communicate to you information about your child's day, or do they use paper daily sheets? How will you be notified about center events, parent teacher conferences, or school breaks? If you're thinking you will get an email, but the school posts all information on a parent bulletin-board, you might miss out on a lot.

Questions to Consider

Do you encourage parent visits?

What do you expect from me as a parent? Is there a parent code of conduct?

How do you communicate with parents? (is there a regular newsletter or notice board? Daily reports, email, etc)

Do you hold or encourage regular parent teacher conferences?

Can I bring my child for a pre-enrollment visit?

9 Food & Supplies

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While all centers will be furnished with toys, furniture and basic art materials, parents are usually expected to supply things specific to your child. Find out what is expected of you and make sure your child has those things. It makes it very difficult for center staff to provide the best care for your child if they don't have extra clothes available when your child has an accident, or if they don't have boots and mittens for going outdoors on a cold day. If you are expected to provide a lunch, is there a nutritional guideline that you should be following? Do parents take turns bringing in snack for the class? Be sure to get all of the info about what you should supply and do your best to stay on top of it!

Questions to Consider

Who supplies diapers?

What supplies would I need to bring for my child?

Are healthy meals and snacks provided?

What types of snacks and/or meals do you serve?

Can you have a sample menu?

Should I or Can I bring food for my child? Are there any food restrictions? (i.e. Peanut Free)

How often does the menu change?

What if kids are still hungry after finishing lunch?

How is breastmilk/formula stored?

10 Other Things to Consider

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The truth is, there are so many things to consider when choosing the best child care option for your family that we couldn't possibly list them all. But when you visit a couple of schools, you should be able to notice an overall "vibe." Do you feel good about what you are seeing, and hearing, and feeling while visiting? If you do, your child will likely thrive in this environment. If you notice any red flags, or feel uneasy for some reason, this might not be the place for you. Ask yourself these questions to help you determine the best place for your child.

Questions to Consider

Do the staff and children seem happy and engaged?

Are crying children being attended to by staff?

Does the daycare center seem clean and pleasant?

Will you feel at ease knowing your child is in this setting, when you are apart from your child?

Can they provide you with a list of references (with phone numbers)?

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There are certainly many other aspects that you could consider when choosing a child care program for your child, and we hope this list of questions has helped you become more aware of what you should be looking for when evaluating the quality of a potential program. But in the end, your parental instinct, your “mommy/daddy-radar,” will let you know if this is the right program for you. Each center is unique, and offers a different environment and varied benefits. Use the questions provided in this guide to learn more about your options, and then make an overall judgement to choose the program that is best for your family.

This FREE Guide has been provided to you by Children’s Safari Learning Center

To schedule your tour with us please call 480-621-4031

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