

Choosing High-Quality Child Care

When exploring child care options, it can be difficult to know what qualities, features and accreditations to look for. While there is no singular “best” child care program, the intention of this guide is to highlight some indicators of quality in the field of early childhood education and empower you to make a decision that works well for your family.

Qualities in a Caregiver

It is important to feel comfortable with the people who will be taking care of your child. The qualities that comprise an ideal caregiver will be different for every family, but we have listed a few common considerations below. Further guidance can be found at the [National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\) website](#).

- Engages in warm, friendly conversations with children and encourages and recognizes children’s work and accomplishments
- Possesses educational qualifications and specialized knowledge about young children and early childhood development
- Provides consistency in caregivers assigned to your child to allow for relationships to form
- Displays respect for children’s needs

Classroom Settings and Procedures

Classroom settings are important for the safety and development of children. Here, we have listed some common attributes to look for. [Environmental Rating Scales](#) also provide more insight on designing safe and engaging learning spaces.

- Consistent schedules and routines
- Health practices observed, like hand washing and health protocols
- Child appropriate furnishings, such as hand-washing sinks, child-size chairs and tables, and cots, cribs, beds or sleeping pads
- Appropriate group sizes and ratios of teaching staff to children (e.g., one staff member for every four infants, six toddlers, or 10 children ages 4 and up)

Carnegie Mellon University

Human Resources

Curricular Features

Every family has different priorities when it comes to educating their child, and there are a variety of options that cater to different styles. Below we have listed some common indicators of a quality curriculum.

- Children are encouraged to play and work together.
- The curriculum addresses all aspects of child development rather than focusing on just one area.
- Activities are designed to help children get better at reasoning, solving problems, getting along with others, using language and developing other skills.
- Aligns with clear and robust learning standards or guidelines, such as the [PA Early Learning Standards](#).
- For more information, refer to [NAEYC's articles on curriculum development](#).

Family Engagement

How centers engage with families can be just as important as how they engage with children. Common considerations include the following:

- Clear and regular communication to families about program updates, policies and procedures such as the program's philosophy and curriculum goals, guidance and discipline, and health and safety procedures.
- Families receive information about their child's development and learning on a regular basis, including through meetings or conferences and clear two-way communication about a child's daily needs and activities.
- Activities that help bring families together and build community and engagement.
- Open door policies encourage parents to join the classroom or drop in whenever they are able. (Please note that the health and safety protocols enacted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic may prevent this in some cases.)
- [Trying Together's Family Engagement Toolkit](#) outlines expected family engagement practices for care providers.

Logistical Considerations

- **Location** — Is the child care provider at a location that is convenient for you or a family member to conduct timely drop off and pick-up without impacting your work schedule?
- **Time** — Do the hours offered by the program align with the coverage you need? Is there flexibility around attendance that allows you to take time away from the center for trips or family leave?
- **Transportation** — If you will be using public transportation, is the center located on or near a bus route? Does the program provide any transportation? (Note: this may be more common for before or after care programs, as they may have centers along the typical school bus route.)

Carnegie Mellon University

Human Resources

Licensing and Accreditation

All states have regulations or licensing standards that child care providers must meet in order to legally operate in the state, as well a system to rate programs on the quality of their care. The list below encompasses systems and standards relevant to child care in Pennsylvania.

- [Pennsylvania Department of Human Services \(DHS\)](#) — This governing body oversees the licensing of child care providers, both in-home and center based. Licensing ensures that providers meet requirements meant to keep children and families safe. Child care providers are not permitted to operate without a license.
- [Keystone STARS](#) — STARS (Standards, Training/Professional Development, Assistance, Resources, and Supports) is a rating system that promotes quality improvement in early learning and development programs and school-age child care. This is a voluntary program intended to help parents compare program features based on a four-star rating system.
- [The National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\)](#) — This national organization promotes a comprehensive set of standards for high quality early childhood education. Programs with this accreditation have demonstrated to a high degree that they provide a safe and healthy environment for children, have teachers who are well-trained, have access to excellent teaching materials, and work with a curriculum that is challenging and developmentally appropriate.

Family Values and Needs

Beyond all of the recommendations listed above, families will need to consider whether each program will fit with their own personal goals, values and needs.

- **Religious considerations** — Is your preference to find a program that provides a religious education component? Is the presence of religion something you specifically want to avoid?
- **Dietary needs and restrictions** — Does the program provide food? If so, what is the process for accommodations? What are the systems, policies and guidelines related to food allergies? (For example, many programs are “nut-free.”)
- **Children with disabilities** — It is important to discuss your child’s needs with your provider, as well as the plan for implementing or coordinating any required accommodations, modifications or support services.
- **Educational philosophies** — There are a variety of philosophies and approaches that may guide how a program views early education, such as the Reggio Emilia Approach, Montessori, Waldorf, Social Constructivism, and Developmentally Appropriate Practice. It can be worthwhile to ask about a program’s philosophy and see if it aligns to your family’s values.

Resources for Finding and Comparing Child Care: [Compass](#)

[Find Allegheny Child Care Tool](#)

Carnegie Mellon University

Human Resources